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HJEAS

Homi Bhabha

The words "Orient" and "Occident" originate simply in the Latin words for sun rising (*oriens*) and sun setting (*occidens*). In his path-breaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said shows how a massive and ancient discursive regime took these essentially mobile positions and fixed them in relation to an imaginary centre in Europe. The "Orient" became an object which could be known by a European subject as it could not know itself. This line of argument effectively founded a new area in textual and cultural studies, that of post-colonial theory.

Said's work has been criticised and complemented by Homi Bhabha in a series of widely influential essays, most of which are collected in *The Location of Culture* (1994). This volume introduces a crucial and necessary reservation against Said, that in Said's account "There is always . . . the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser."¹ Bhabha proposes that the effort of Orientalising must always fail since the colonial subject is constructed in "a repertoire of conflictual positions"; these render him or her "the site of both fixity and fantasy" ("Difference" 204) in a process which cannot but be uneven, divided, incomplete.

Bhabha discusses a number of mechanisms which threaten colonial domination, including fetishism, sly civility, paranoia. In showing that the subject of colonialism is always resistant, never simply in place, he draws on a number of arguments whose content is psychoanalytic. However, Bhabha goes beyond this initial response to Said to work out a theoretical position of his own based in the notion of "hybridity" and relying heavily on the ideas of Jacques Derrida. Currently, this notion is proving to be enormously influential and it is this I want to engage with, especially since it provides a way to consider the wider opposition between Derrida and Lacan.

Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*Location* 4). Hybridity can have at least three meanings—In terms of biology, ethnicity and culture. In its etymology it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, *hybrida*, and this genetic component provides the first meaning. A second definition of hybridity might be understood to mean an individual "having access to two or more ethnic identities." In fact, Bhabha develops his notion of hybridity from Mikhail Bakhtin, who uses it to discriminate texts with a

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"single voice" (lyrical poems) from those with a "double voice" (such as novels, whose narrator cites characters speaking in their own voice—these texts are hybridic).

Something that makes me reticent about Bhabha's position is already evident here: an assumed opposition between hybridity and the non-hybridic. For Bhabha the non-hybridic has two related features. One is a commitment to "unitary" or "originary" identity, identity as "presence," identity therefore represented by the supposedly transcendental ego. Well set out by Descartes, this notion of the subject supposes that thinking is to be equated with being and that its very essence is an undivided, self-controlling self-consciousness: what Bhabha refers to as "the 'individual'" that is the support for the "universalist aspiration" of "civil society" (*Location* 10).

Second, Bhabha believes this Cartesian concept of subjectivity is at the very centre of a Western, Eurocentric definition of culture, and necessary support for it. He avoids the risk of essentialism by arguing that it is the enemy who claims essence, unity and singleness of identity—everything that may be mobilised against such an idea of unity counts as radical. An intervention, Bhabha argues, is progressive if it "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (37). Hybridity is ontologically prior to any notion of unity or identity and therefore always liable to surface within in. "The colonial presence," Bhabha says, "is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (107).

It should be clear from this that Bhabha's opposition between identity and hybridity corresponds to and extends Derrida's contrast between presence and difference, and, as we shall see, is liable to some of the same criticisms. In his 1968 essay "Différance" Derrida explains difference by saying what it is not: ". . . it governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority . . . there is no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom . . ." (123).

In Derrida's account presence is constituted by the effect of immediacy in time or punctuality in space—presence seems to be entirely at one with itself. But whenever or however an effect of presence is produced, it is possible to relativise and unsettle it by referring to the difference from which it arises and on which it relies. Bhabha's hybridity is Derridean difference applied to colonialist texts—the presence of a dominant meaning in a dominant culture can be put in question by referring to the hybridity or difference from which it emerges.

Because it is modelled on Derridean difference, Bhabha's hybridity is advocated as a position or effect in between existing positions. Bhabha's term "interstices"² means to respond to Derrida's account of difference as spatial differentiation. What articulates cultural differences is defined as "'in-between' spaces" (*Location* 1, 2, 38), "interstices" in which "domains of difference" may "overlap" (2), an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (4).

Lacan contra Bhabha

Problems follow for Bhabha, as they do for Derrida, from the presence/difference opposition. I am not sure Derrida offers an adequate account of presence; in space it appears as spatial identity, in time it appears as a making present, in discourse it is ensured by the privileging of one side of a binary which thus aims to efface its denigrated other. Presence, like metaphysics, is inescapable; what gives it substance, what are its conditions of existence, Derrida leaves uncertain. Presence, one might conclude, exists only to vanish into difference.

These difficulties carry over into Homi Bhabha. Like Derrida he refuses a notion of subjectivity which would explain, substantiate and make sense of the identity hybridity undermines. When he describes identity as single and unitary (and always a source of oppression), he omits to distinguish between different kinds and possibilities of identity. He presumes that all versions of identity claim to be absolute and originary as though the only notion of identity around was that of the Cartesian or "transcendental" ego.

Now I would invoke Lacan's notion of the imaginary to sanction the view that some provisional identity is necessary for the subject, that the ego must maintain for itself some permanence, some identity, some unity, some presence, some fixity of position. Failing to take this possibility on board, Bhabha is forced into a binary opposition between the full subject or no subject at all—an opposition which he articulates as that between the full subject and difference.

Bhabha has engaged in an act of inversion, not deconstruction. In seeking to undermine the Cartesian ego, he falls into the contrary error of privileging difference. In fact, he invites us to try to live in difference, in a state of pure hybridity, actually in the "interstices." We are told to pose the question of community "from the interstitial perspective" (*Location 3*) and invited "to inhabit an intervening space (7). I invite you to hesitate before trying this, for the experience is not at all unfamiliar, for it is the experience of psychosis. The sad old man with dirty clothes and wild hair who mutters incoherently to himself on the corner of the street has fallen into the gaps coherent identity would conceal—he indeed inhabits a space, an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications."

If Bhabha's work is flawed in the ways I suggest, why is it so widely celebrated? What (one might ask) is the nature of "the desire for Bhabha"? I would suggest that his writing makes available for the reader especially two forms of fantasy satisfaction. The first may be characterised as a structure of abreaction. Thus the reader who sympathises with Bhabha and identifies with his position is afforded an identity which is definitely *not* racist, not bigoted, not that of someone whose mind is closed out of fear of the other. This idealised self-image goes along with a self-congratulatory compassion for the victim of racism, which, as we know from Freud, is a form of sadism.

The second fantasy satisfaction for Bhabha-readers ensues (I would suggest) from the pleasure of mastery, when the readers identify themselves as subjects supposed to be able to remain sure of themselves even when confronted with the appearance of difference on all sides. A more abrasive way of putting this would be to point out that we can only enjoy inhabiting interstices between meaning if someone else is doing it for us.

Lacan contra Derrida

In these criticisms of Bhabha in relation to the Lacanian imaginary, a larger encounter is already developing, one whose importance in contemporary theory makes it important to explore much more explicitly, that between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. At stake is the question of the subject.

The trajectories of Lacan and Derrida run alongside each other in that both reject a notion of the transcendental subject, both confront the implication pressing in on all Western writers this century that subjectivity is ineluctably entrained in language, is indeed an effect of discourse.

For Lacan "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalisation of his desire" (*Écrits* 104)—the speaking subject appears only to disappear into the defiles of the signifier, the language appropriated by all speaking subjects but which belongs to none of them. Being is characterised by "the particularity" (286) of need, the particularity of the infant before he or she enters the universality of the signifier, the shared order of language. Once we do, the subject can identify itself only by losing itself there "like an object" (86).

A similar drama is played out according to Derrida in "The Violence of the Letter," but in terms of naming, the possibility and impossibility of a proper name, and "the play of difference" most signally realised in writing. The proper name "as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being" (*Of Grammatology* 109) has never *been*, Derrida argues, for it is erased in a system, obliterated from the moment which brings a "classificatory difference into play" (109). This is also the moment from which "there is a 'subject'" (108). So for Derrida, in a phrasing subsequent to that of Lacan just cited but one which recalls it, "the death of absolutely proper naming, recognising in a language the other as pure other, invoking it as what it is, is the death of the pure idiom reserved for the unique" (110).

Both Lacan and Derrida insist that any particularity of the subject, whatever might contribute to the presence of a unique being, is cancelled by its necessity to emerge on the universalising, classificatory grounds of language. But while Derrida begins with a subject *already* foreseen from the side of language, a subject as a proper name, Lacan starts with a "particularity" which precedes language altogether. How can this be?

At this juncture we come up against the Darwinian heritage of psychoanalysis. For Freud "the finding of a [psychic] object is always a re-finding" (*On Sexuality* 145); after the Oedipal transition the subject tries to

refind in its objects of desire the pleasures it experienced in direct and unmediated form as an infant. For Lacan, scandalously, there is indeed a pre-linguistic self, the particular materiality of the body as shaped by its place in the family. The subject is defined by the attempt to refind this self within culture and language. Lacan offers to theorise this mysterious crossing of the frontier through the distinctions between need, demand and desire, the concept of *objet petit a*, and the opposition between Being and Meaning.

The pre-linguistic exists at the level of need. In the register of demand the Other is addressed as being able to satisfy needs; but the attempt to hold the sign onto a particular object is doomed to failure since it initiates full entry into the generality of language where demand gives way to desire. The object of desire (different for each of us) emerges in the place of the subject's particularity which has dropped out of the real with the entry into language; *objet petit a* is a trace of that self retained on the side of discourse.

Lacan would represent the subject with a Venn diagram in which Being and Meaning necessarily exclude each other. Within the circle of Being the pre-linguistic self is at one but has no meaning; within the Other the subject has meaning but is not fully itself. It is consistent with Lacan's other theorisations that part of the subject's Being reappears within the Other as the unconscious.

Thus deriving its identity from a mediation of the real, the Lacanian subject is defined by limitations and attributes, individuated by its desire to refind its particular self. If you embrace the view that the subject is constructed as an effect of discourse, you are faced with the question, "Why do I seek myself in these signifiers and not others?" Lacan has an answer to this—Derrida does not. As Peter Dews points out, he "offers no alternative between the illusory immediacy of speech and the endless delay of writing" (98).

For Derrida, situated in the register of philosophy, subjectivity is always already produced and effaced in writing; presence has never been, or been only as immediately erased in difference; there are no structures of the subject; there is strictly no subject, for subjectivity is conceived only from the side of language, as it were, from the point of view of the shared social possession of language. In contrast, appearing within the discourse of psychoanalysis, Lacan's teaching promises to comprehend the subject in the real, at the level of need, as being, and also the subject within meaning, an effect of discourse. Perhaps; but as I shall suggest, Derrida can come back against Lacan.

Derrida contra Lacan (and back again)

In 1988 Derrida rejects even Heidegger's radically displaced version of subjectivity on the grounds that it "occupies a place analogous to that of the transcendental subject" ("Eating Well" 273). Derrida concedes that the Lacanian subject does not have "the traits of the classical subject" but

affirms that it remains "indispensable to the economy of the Lacanian theory" and is also "a correlate of the law" (256). What Derrida opposes is subjects with predicates, the traditional view that subjects are to be defined through an enumeration of "the essential predicates of which all subjects are the subject." He continues:

While these predicates are as numerous and diverse as the type or order of subjects dictates, they are all in fact ordered around being-present [*étant-présent*]: present to self—which implies therefore a certain interpretation of temporality; identity top position, positionality, property, personality, ego, consciousness, will, intentionality, freedom, humanity, etc. (274)

That is: commit yourself to a definition of the subject and you are necessarily committed to an essence (however decentred you may claim it to be), committed to an epistemology, an ontology and a theory of law; you have closed off historical possibilities of what it might be to be human.

There is, however, a Derridean subject and it does have something very like attributes. As we learn from *The Gift of Death* my identity is that of "an irreducibly different singularity" (45) since no one can die in the place of another; on me is laid "the absolute responsibility of my actions" (60), and I appear to myself in a secrecy through which I have a "structure of invisible interiority" (109). My obligation to be open to the other can be assessed in the contrast between my self-interested acts of calculation for which I know and determine the consequences and my responsibility for an alterity whose consequences I cannot know and cannot calculate.

It would be a Lacanian question to inquire what kind of subject is being assumed which could know and discriminate between calculation and responsibility without fantasy and self-deception. In *The Gift of Death* Derrida asserts that absolute responsibility means I must always make the sacrifice of Abraham because in fulfilling responsibility to those close to me I give up "my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows (without mentioning the animals . . .)" (69). Lacan writes of "the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in the mistrust he has learned to practise against the traps of self-love" (*Écrits* 165). Can Derrida uphold his distinction between calculation and alterity by ensuring the absence from calculation of any self-deception which would undermine its supposedly clear-sighted self-interest? Can his idea of responsibility for everything (including the animals) truly take place without any touch of self-flattering megalomania?

Bracketing the subject, assuming the subject only as it appears within language, Derrida envisages the possibility of a transformation of discourse without end rather as Marxism affirms the transformation of society towards a classless utopia. In the same team with Derrida here we can line up Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Richard Rorty. Lacan, in contrast, derives the identity of the speaking subject from a nature and a

need which resists absolute transformation because it dictates the shape of our desire.

Whatever future changes society and discourse may approach, Lacan in contrast would continue to return us to an anti-Utopian conclusion. It can never finally come right, neither in a communist future which promises the rendering of objective realisation as free choice, nor in a world in which the Cartesian ego has vanished into wall-to-wall hybridity. No one will ever elude that constitutive either/or between Being and Meaning in which the real and the rational necessarily exclude each other. Choose Being and you fall into non-meaning; choose Meaning and you get it, but only because your Being is eclipsed by its disappearance into the field of the signifier (it is, as Lacan says brutally, "*Your money or your life!*" *Four Fundamental Concepts* 212). There is indeed a Lacanian subject but it is impossible.⁴

NOTES

¹ Bhabha, "Difference," 200. This essay is not reprinted in *The Location of Culture*.

² "Interstice" is borrowed from Levinas, see *Location*, 15 and 258.

³ "If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realisation of the subject, the unconscious" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 211).

⁴ I am very grateful to Routledge for their permission to reprint in this essay some paragraphs that first appeared in Antony Easthope, "Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity," in *Textual Practice* 12.2 (1998).

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