

The Writer's Fugue:
*Musicalization, Trauma and Subjectivity
in the Literature of Modernity*

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Thesis submitted to the University of Technology,
Sydney for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
2006

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my family for the support and encouragement given to this project. To my father Emeritus Professor Malcolm Skilbeck, my step-mother Dr Helen Connell, my mother Elizabeth Skilbeck, my children Max and Ella, my sisters Clare, Lucy and Brigit Skilbeck; and to Mr Philip Mann for consultation on German translation. I am very grateful for his advice and guidance to Mr Martin Harrison, my supervisor for this thesis, at the University of Technology, Sydney. My acknowledgements are also due to Mr Noel Sanders for supervision in the first year; and to Dr Catherine Cole, Dr Debra Adelaide and staff in the Department of Writing, Journalism and Social Inquiry for supporting this research. I am grateful to Professor Andrew Jakubowicz, Associate Professor Heather Goodall, and Dr Paul Gillen for the opportunity to teach and extend the scope of my research in relevant fields of Social Inquiry. I acknowledge with thanks the University of Technology, Sydney for supporting this research including the award of the UTS Doctoral Award for three years and funding for overseas conferences, Culture and the Unconscious 1 and 2. I also acknowledge with appreciation the now-rather-distant foundations for this research journey at my *alma mater* Birkbeck College, University of London, where I undertook a Bachelors honours degree in Philosophy, and especially acknowledge Professor David Hamlyn, in kindling an enduring interest in Greek philosophy, phenomenology, and philosophy of mind. My thanks also to Ms Renata Atkin for help with formatting the text.

Abstract

This interdisciplinary inquiry utilises the contested context of ‘subjectivity’ as a frame for seeking to analyse and understand the process of writing as creative art. The main problem investigated involves the construction of the subject in language and the construction of subjectivity in the literature of modernity. The heuristic vehicle chosen for exploring dichotomies in discourse around cultural, social and literary constructions of the subject, is the fugue – a cultural figure with dual-meanings.

The musical fugue is a polyphonic, contrapuntal social musical form that develops from one or two melodic subject lines or themes, played in numerous variations by several ‘voices’, implying rule-governed turn-taking dialogic communication. In direct contrast, the psychogenic fugue is a ‘mysterious’ condition of dissociation involving an individual subject losing awareness of self-identity, wandering off on a solitary journey of temporary amnesia. The classic musical fugue form has been converted into a rhetorical, symbolic and above all creative figure by self-consciously inventive literary authors in musicalized works derived from their author’s own experiences of trauma. Examples analysed here are De Quincey’s *Dream-Fugue*, Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the ‘Sirens’ section in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Celan’s *Todesfuge* and Plath’s *Little Fugue*.

This fugal analysis contextualises these intermedial works alongside wider parallels of musicology and current research in scientific medical discourse on the psychogenic fugue. Through this inter-disciplinary phenomenological inquiry emerges a fresh approach: the cultural construction of subjectivity in innovative forms of writing herein referred to as the ‘writer’s fugue’ and ‘the fugal modality of writing’. Bringing together distinctive discourses from the arts, medical science, psychoanalysis and poststructuralist linguistic theory suggests new meanings may be wrought concerning the construction/ deconstruction/ reconstruction/ structuration/ and post-structuration of what is herein termed the ‘fugal’ subject in the language and literature of modernity. These meanings provide a basis for a continuing inquiry not only into subjectivity but also into the creative process.

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