

Writing as Praxis: A Neo-Marxist and Lacanian Understanding of the Creative Writing
Process as Representation of Man's Drive Toward Coherence

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ABSTRACT

In the following thesis, I am going to examine the creative writing process. And I am going to try and show that as a praxis, it allows for a type of reimagining of one's relationship to one's conditions of existence. As I show, writers of imaginative literature have articulated a way of theorizing creative writing that is very similar to the ways in which some classical and neo-Marxists, as well as Lacanian, critics and theorists have done so. By showing the connections among these various schools of thought, I hope to bridge somewhat the gap that has emerged between creative writing studies as a discipline and literary criticism. I truly believe the potential benefits that might result for literary criticism include not only opening-up the discipline to unexplored areas of research, but also strengthening the rigor and integrity of its analytical quality insights.

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DEDICATED TO
Every friendly listener

"Art too is just a way of living, and however one lives, one can, without knowing, prepare for it; in everything real one is closer to it, more its neighbor, than in the unreal half-artistic professions, which, while they pretend to be close to art, in practice deny and attack the existence of all art - as, for example, all of journalism does and almost all criticism and three quarters of what is called (and wants to be called) literature."

—Rainer Maria Rilke, From "Letter Ten" of *Letters to a Young Poet* (1908)

"The fact is that today, in a sense, 'the big Other no longer exists'—however, in WHAT sense? In a way, with the big Other, it is the same as with God according to Lacan (it is not that God is dead today—God was dead from the very beginning, only that He didn't know it . . .): It never existed in the first place, i.e., the inexistence of the 'big Other' is ultimately equivalent to the fact that the big Other is the symbolic order, the order of symbolic fictions which operate at a level different from direct material causality. (In this sense, the only subject for whom the big Other does exist is the psychotic, the one who attributes to words direct material efficiency.) In short, the 'inexistence of the big Other' is strictly correlative to the notion of belief, of symbolic trust, credence, of taking what others' say 'at their word's value.'"

—Slavoj Žižek, From, *Psychoanalytic Review* (2004)

"Really good fiction could have as a dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. . . . [The writer's job is to give] CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the man being. . . . Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human* being."

—David Foster Wallace, From "Letter to Larry McCaffery" in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993)

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Evidence can be found in letters, diaries, audio-interviews, and transcripts of notable authors that attests to a certain tradition of the creative writing process that treats it as an ethical practice. This tradition is what Henry James calls “the art of living,” and its value to many creative writers’ everyday lived-experiences not only is exemplified by their lives, but also, as one critic explains of James in an introduction to *The American*, is often figured in the characters a writer creates:

It is not . . . the word for itself that [James] is after, but the special quality of a character, a place, a social situation, or a tone of speech and feeling, that individualize it and make[s] it live. . . . It is not the average surface facts of human nature that interest him, the gross welter of passion and instincts seeking to satisfy themselves in the world of material stimuli; it is rather human beings as spiritual entities striving to realize themselves in the realm of ideals [James’ main characters] are consciously planning a game in which the pieces are spiritual values, making every move with scrupulous regard for the rules, and striving in this game to make the highest possible score not in competition with the other players but in concert with them. For the object of the game is not to beat someone else, still less to win by cheating; the stakes of the game are beautiful human

relations, and the highest score goes to the player who best succeeds in maintaining such relations. (Beach vi-vii)

Consider this quote and perhaps allow yourself a moment to imagine the day-to-day life of James, his habits and refined idiosyncrasies. I ask you this assuming the majority of my readers will be from the field of literary criticism. With this in mind, I fear there is a gap that exists between creative writing as an artistic discipline and literary criticism as a critical discipline. I fear the critic is perhaps unconscious of the existence of this gap, but understandably so. For very good reasons, critics believe the author to be “dead,” and literary criticism is first and foremost concerned with *the reader*, the reading process, and the socio-historical conditions from which a work of literature emerges. The actual process of writing literature—producing a text that might lead to an aesthetic experience—is rarely discussed in criticism. In sum, even though literary criticism involves interpretation and critical analysis, and the practice and study of creative writing deals with producing literary texts, the gap between the two is not only unnecessary but also counterproductive.

Even though in recent decades, creative writing has established its own place in academia alongside literary criticism, I believe the two disciplines remain separated in three key areas: 1) creative writing as a discipline places greater value on the *aesthetic*¹ than does literary criticism, 2) creative writing as a discipline approaches the question of authorial agency differently than do critics, and 3) creative writing as a discipline differs

¹ In my thesis, I deal with not only the *aesthetic*, which is a form of knowledge (as defined by the Lacanian theorist Geoff Boucher in the following paragraph) but also *aesthetic convention*, which is a set of traditional practices (i.e., a relation of structures within literary texts that allow for aesthetic creation, for instance—the awareness of *form fitting function*) that is studied by sociology of art experts, among others. The latter I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

from literary criticism in the way in which it confronts the troubled relationship between the symbolic imagination and the Real. I will attempt to come to terms with each of these differences over the course of my thesis.

My ultimate goal is to move toward a way of articulating what the experience of literary production is like from the writerly perspective. For I truly believe that bridging the gap between the two disciplines requires examining creative writing as a *praxis*—that is, as both an ideology and a practice. The knowledge produced by the creative writing praxis is a form of “anthropocentric knowledge” that Geoff Boucher identifies with the *aesthetic*: “that is, a body of subject-centered representations lacking a functional significance that is in a constant, that is, historical tension with the ideological field from which it emerges” (31). I have settled on this definition for one major reason; namely, for its adaptive qualities across various fields of critical thought. Though neo-Marxist theory provides me with an analytic-framework for discussing creative writing as a praxis, *functional-reductionist models*² limit one’s attempt to expand this discussion of praxis into other areas. So, in order to enrich the current discussion and engage each of the three areas of the gap in question, I have integrated Lacanian psychoanalysis into later portions of my thesis.

Now, before turning to neo-Marxism and its treatment of ideology, I must provide some background information from two fields outside of the humanities: *the sociology of art* and *ethology*. Although each of these two fields study very different aspects of humanity, their respective inquiries into art share important similarities. I then conclude

² Functional-reductionists models assume the analytical position that all phenomena, including mental phenomena, are reducible to the language of the physical.

this chapter with a discussion of an essay by T.S. Eliot on *literary tradition* and *artistic conformity*.

Research in Creative Writing in the Soft Sciences

There has been a lot of work conducted in the sociology of art, or the study of art and cultural production, that has examined the role of art and artists in relation to the production of culture (Born 171). I am primarily concerned with three, interrelated aspects of this research: the specificity of the aesthetic; literary writers as constituting an in-group with a certain set of traditions; and creative writing as an ethical practice.

In general, sociology of art specialists want to know how culture is produced and reproduced within society, as well as the role artistic production plays in this process. Sociologists of art primarily view artistic production as a social *practice* that shares institutional ties. That is to say, as a practice, art imitates social and traditional conventions; and therefore, art functions as a social reminder to individuals as to who they are, what shared understandings constitute their cultural identity, and why this identity is unique from other cultural groups. On the other hand, to study art specifically in terms of the *aesthetic* is arguably problematic, according to sociologists of art, as well as literary critics. Therefore, scholars in both fields have long-been attempting to demarcate themselves from any idealistic approach to art in favor of academic integrity and analytic rigor.

Georgina Born, a specialist in the sociology of art, credits the work of Janet Wolff as having “laid the groundwork” for what Wolff calls “a *sociological aesthetics*.” Building on not only sociology, but philosophy and art history as well, Wolff’s interdisciplinary approach engages “the *challenge* of theorizing the specificity of art”

(175, emphasis my own) in a way that does not deal with the aesthetic directly, for reasons I have explained. Rather, she deals with *aesthetic conventions*. As Born makes clear, “Wolff argues productively that if ‘the sociology of art is the study of the practices and institutions of artistic production’, then this ‘necessarily involves the study of *aesthetic conventions*’” (175). *Aesthetic conventions*—i.e., techniques, style, etc.—are codified into knowledge, and are essentially passed down either directly through teachings or indirectly through artistic *tradition*.

Perhaps what is unique about *artistic tradition* is that it becomes its own institution over time. That is to say, artistic tradition complicates not only the relationships among artists, but also the theoretical distinction between practice and ideology. This complicating effect is taken up somewhat by sociologist of art Thomas Osborne, who is one of few scholars from his field to deal with the aesthetic, which he identifies as an *ethical* practice, “‘a positive practice of enlightenment’” (qtd. in Born 176). Born argues that for Osborne:

Art provides a model of freedom; in artistic practice “the creativity of what is new and the production of autonomy take on an exemplary importance precisely in so far as those are the problems that *intrinsically confront all artists* in so far as *they are artists as opposed to anything else* . . . (176, emphasis my own)

In other words, Osborne suggests that there exist a commonality among traditional views of aesthetic production that encourages breaking from convention. He is aware that conforming to an artistic tradition that celebrates *autonomy* and *the new* appears paradoxical. Yet, Osborne argues intriguingly against this paradox, so long as one

accepts that there is a universal consensus among artists who self identify as *artists as opposed to anything else* that the production of the *aesthetic* is an “*ethical practice of enlightenment*” (qtd. by Born 176).

Despite Osborne’s attempts to break from functional reductionism by placing “the aesthetic at the core” of his social theory of practice, Born criticizes Osborne because his “ethical defense of art’s autonomy” detaches the aesthetic ”from its existence as a critical element in the expressive and material labours of cultural production” (176). In other words, as a social scientist, Born expects her colleague’s methodology to be empirical, and she revises Osborne’s aesthetic-centric approach to studying artistic practice by calling for a socio-historical analysis of:

The conditions of autonomy and the new, [for,] . . . what these terms mean in any culture or era can correct the problematic assumption that these qualities are invariant or intrinsic to art per se . . . [and this socio-historical analysis] would concern itself with the changing substance of aesthetic consciousness and practice and with the *productivity* of the aesthetic.

(176)

I agree with Born that a rigorous, synchronic investigation into the socio-historical conditions of autonomy and the new may provide an essential framework for measuring changes in aesthetic conventions. However, I am not fully convinced that “change” is an intrinsic quality to art, rather than a provision based on tradition. For, if the production of the aesthetic involves an ethical practice, as Osborne argues, then in addition to “change,” one must also be equally concerned with artistic conformity to tradition.

Thus, I turn now to the field of ethology, in which Ellen Dissanayake suggests that art is not a practice but rather “a behavior” (73). Even before developing a word that distinguishes *art* as a separate “thing,” cultures throughout history are known to have had dancing, singing, and other performances, usually centered on ritualistic ceremonies. Such behaviors function in order to strengthen communal ties, boost the morale of community members, and offer ceremonial occasions for individuals to decorate their bodies with paint, bones, feathers, and other material objects. By turning material objects into decorative pieces, human beings have attempted for thousands of years to enhance social and religious ceremonies with special meanings, a behavior that Dissanayake has called “*making something special*” (73-75). After some critical backlash by colleagues over the vagueness of her phrasing, Dissanayake now describes this behavior as *artifying* (75). Regardless, the point that Dissanayake raises is that early man exhibited a predisposition to artify, or *make special*, certain ceremonies; therefore, the “behavior” to artify is not only linked to ritualistic practice, but also has even, throughout the history of our species, “conferred an adaptive advantage” (73).

Now, our species’ “predisposition to *artify*,” Dissanayake explains, “joined other simple but essential predispositions such as a need/liking/regard for tasty and nourishing food, sex, babies, being warm, and secure, being respected and liked, or doing useful work” (75). There are also higher levels of predispositions, “what evolutionists call ‘proximate’ . . . predispositions,” that further bridge the proximity between the biological and the psychological—i.e., the material and the ideal. Such proximate predispositions “ultimately lead us to do things . . . that contribute . . . to their practitioners’ survival and reproductive success” (75). Along with the inclusion of *artifying*, such proximate

predispositions include, though not exhaustively: “the narrative impulse, empathy and the imagining of other minds and experiences, and the projection of other worlds or alternative ways of arranging this one” (Connor, qtd. by Dissanayake, 75).

In addition to this distinction between predispositions and proximate predispositions, Dissanayake also marks a clear distinction between individuals—that is, between *artifiers* and a more skillful order that she calls *artistes*:

‘Artistes’ are jugglers, funambulists, conjurors, tap dancers, ventriloquists, poodle trainers, and crooners—in other words, highly trained, specialized performers. Not everyone can do [what they can do] . . . Artifiers, unlike artistes, may be children, the mentally ill, and rank amateurs. Most ritual/religious artifications are deeply serious, although ritual performances may also entertain. The artistes just mentioned do make ordinary things extraordinary and may thereby gain experiences of Belonging, Meaning, Competence, and Elaboration. . . . [The difference is] that they use skill (the original meaning of the word ‘art’) in order to entertain, amuse, and astonish people. (78)

What I infer from Dissanayake’s passage is that this distinction between *artistes* and *artifiers* became necessary partly because our species takes ritual and ceremonies very seriously. In my thesis, I adopt the implications behind Dissanayake’s term “artistes” for my own, *capable writers*, in order to distinguish between literary writers that see themselves as being more seriously motivated toward, and capable of achieving, aesthetic production, than non-literary writers, writers of popular fiction, and entertainers. *Seriousness* is key, for I believe we are dealing with an ideological understanding of the

creative writing process, which I explain, using Althusser. This *serious motivation* behind a capable writer's aesthetic production is essential to my Lacanian argument that what separates a capable writer, as an *artiste*, from *artifiers* is that their *desire* to write is replaced by a *drive* to write.

This distinction between *capable* and *non-capable writers* is not meant to set up a smug nomenclature, but to clarify certain categories that Born and other social and literary critics might otherwise dismiss as idealistic assumptions. At the same time, however, I intend also to link *capable writers* to those serious artists self-identify as *artists as opposed to anything else*—i.e., individuals who are serious about their ideology. Taken together, Osborne's view of the aesthetic as an "ethical practice" and Dissanayake's behaviorist depiction of art "as artification" suggest that in addition to aesthetic innovation—Born's belief in inevitable *change* among aesthetic techniques employed by capable writers over time and across cultures—one might also anticipate an equally important degree of *conformity* to tradition.

Artistic Conformity and the Genius of T.S. Eliot

That capable writers view themselves as members of a diachronic in-group lead T.S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921) to attempt to articulate not only such a tradition (what he calls the *Ideal order*), but also the impact this tradition should have on literary criticism. For Eliot, what the critic does not fully understand is the impact dead poets have on contemporary poets and how an artist goes about creating something new despite this influence. Accordingly, Eliot states that if critics believe "the only form of tradition, of handing down, consists in the poet following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its

successes, [then that] ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged.” His reasoning is as follows:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance [than one generation to the next]. It cannot be inherited . . . you must obtain it by great labor. [This labor] involves in the first place, the historical sense . . . [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels [i.e., *drives*] a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (538)

As both a capable writer and a critic, Eliot has gotten into trouble with more recent literary critics. When he shifts into the second person, it becomes unclear whether he is speaking as a critic or a writer and whether he is addressing critics only, writers only, or both. However, despite this and other valid critiques, I believe that what Eliot is essentially saying deals specifically with artistic knowledge from a capable writer’s perspective. The historical sense, he maintains, is both “timeless” and “temporal,” but also “the timeless and of the temporal together,” and it is this interdependence that makes a capable writer *traditional*, or “most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (538). For Eliot, the work of such writers constitutes the *Ideal order*.

Furthermore, just as Osborne has argued that artistic change and conformity to tradition are not as paradoxical as one might think, Eliot argues that in order to create something new (i.e., an aesthetic text), one must “conform” oneself, one’s practices, and

one's way of life to the tradition established by the Ideal order. Like capable writers before him,³ Eliot believes that to do so, a writer must adopt a way of life such that *art* becomes both its central theme and one's ethical practice (i.e., the *art of living*). And Eliot believes that such a principle is not merely an aesthetic principle, but a historical principle as well (541).

Perhaps sensing that critics might dismiss his argument as entirely idealistic, Eliot clarified in his "impersonal theory of poetic [or artistic] criticism" that the process he describes involving both autonomy and conformity represents a writerly perspective of literary production that focuses on the *creative writing process* rather than an intentionist focus on the poet him/herself. Despite adhering to the New Critics of his time, Eliot's "impersonal theory" appears to devalue idealistic agency of the individual mind as the source of active intelligence in favor of a deterministic insistence on the *creative process*, as the material practice responsible for literary production.

However, one could argue that Eliot actually strikes a unique balance between the *ideal* and the *material*; he writes:

The mind of the poet . . . may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself, but, the more perfect [or capable] the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the [traditional] passions which are its material. . . . For it is not the "greatness," the intensity, of the [lived] emotions, the components, but the

³ Such writers that I know for certain to have expressed this view include Henry James, Herman Melville, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse, David Foster Wallace, John Gardner, and several others, only to name a few.

intensity of the *artistic process*, the pressure [from traditional knowledge], so to speak, under which the fusion [between autonomy and conformity] takes place that counts. (540, emphasis my own)

Though in the eyes of a critic, Eliot's rhetoric may suffer from a reliance on false dichotomies and the use of logo-centric language (e.g., "the *more perfect* the artist . . ."), I do not accept that he is entirely wrong, especially given that Eliot's focus is not on the self-identifying poet, but is instead on the material process of creative writing as a praxis.

It is important to note that one of Eliot's major influences was the British philosopher F.H. Bradley.⁴ Bradley (1846-1924) was a notable Hegelian and idealist who challenged what many empiricists found to be a foundational aspect of epistemology: *infallibilism*. Infallibilism is the idea that what one *believes* to be true (i.e., a *true belief*) cannot rationally be doubted as constituting one's *knowledge*. In Eliot's essay, we find a similar sort of balance between idealism and materialism, or at least we find that such a balance is necessary if a writer hopes to explain his own perspective of the creative writing process and of aesthetic value in such a way that critics might understand it. Such an attempt represents the true genius of Eliot: that by balancing the idealism of his *Ideal order* with the materialist directive of his impersonal aesthetic theory of art, he seeks out the site at which, "art may be said [critically] to approach the condition of science" (539). This balance is one that I will attempt to pursue in the chapters that follow, and I hope to do so by negotiating between neo-Marxist materialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

⁴ It was Bradley on whom Eliot spent five years writing and completing his dissertation, though he never went back to Harvard to defend it.

Chapter II

NEO-MARXIST APPROACH TO IDEOLOGY

In 2005, writer David Foster Wallace addressed recent graduates of Kenyon College in a commencement speech entitled “This is Water.” In it, Wallace attempted to explain the academic cliché regarding critical thinking. In his view, the goal of a liberal arts education is to teach students “how to think,” or how to think *critically*. This *learning how to think critically* is a matter of agency, “of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self” (para. 5). The alternative to critical thinking is what Wallace calls “default thinking”—that is, “blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up” (para. 5). The “real significant education in thinking,” Wallace argues, “isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about,” so that any critical thinker, including a litany of critics, makes choices as to what and how he or she will be critical. Wallace asserts that if “your total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing, I’d ask you . . . to bracket for just a few minutes your skepticism about the value of the totally obvious” (para. 3).

I have chosen to introduce this chapter on ideology with Wallace because his speech is concerned with the nature and the limit of processing critical-thoughts. He

concludes his speech with what many critically-minded readers might perceive to be a very bold, though idealistic assertion:

In day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.⁵ On one level, we all know this stuff already. It’s been [traditionally] codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story . . .

(para. 26)

On another level, though, critics are also critical of this “compulsion,” what we might see as Wallace’s idealism. We might say that he is assuming a “capital T truth” about reality, but in saying this, perhaps we have missed his main point, which is not about “the so-called virtues.” For Wallace, “the only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide *how* to think,” and this choice is central to the critical process: “[Choosing how to think] is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t. You get to decide what to worship” (para. 28). In other words, having an ideology is unavoidable, but as critical

⁵ Examples here include the worship of *power* (which Wallace believes leaves one “feeling weak and afraid”), *money and things* (which will leave you with the feeling of never having enough), *intellect* or *being seen as smart* (in which “you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out”), and one’s own *sexual allure* (which will leave one feeling ugly). I make note of these examples of worship because they are not “sinful” objects of worship, according to Wallace, but are “unconscious. They are default settings” (para. 26-27).

thinkers, we get to decide our ideologies.

Ideology in Classical Marxism

Before I move on to Louis Althusser's neo-Marxists approach to ideology, I must briefly address the debate between Hegelian phenomenology and classical Marxism.⁶ As most critics know, the materialist dialectic of Marx emerged from Hegel's own idealist notion of the dialectic. According to neo-Marxist William Dowling, Hegel sought "Revelation in its immanent form, History discovering its own meaning from the inside, humanity grasping itself not as the arbitrary creation of some absent sky deity but as the Spirit gradually becoming manifest to itself" (45). However, Marx scorned all merely moral impulses, including Hegel's idealism. What he attempted to conceive from Hegel's system was a genuine, or material, dialectic, the "central object" of which was to:

Abolish the idealism of Hegel's system and replace it with an analysis of humanity and the world firmly grounded in the impersonal and material laws of historical development, a kind of immanent reasoning that did not depend on any notion of Spirit to explain the unfolding of human history as an intelligible process. (Downing 46)

What for Hegel is the *World of Spirit* becomes for Marx *the economic*—that is, a competitive "level of existence where human life and Necessity . . . impinge directly on each other" (46). The problem for Marx was that his scorn for religiosity resulted in a problematic conceptualization of ideology as simply false-consciousness. This error

⁶ This debate is difficult, one in which the Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek has recalled in retrospect "Hegel was the first post-Marxist" (4). Žižek goes on to explain in a video lecture entitled "The Limits of Hegel" given at the European Graduate School that what Hegel, at the time, lacked was a comprehensive understanding of the capitalist system, which of course Marx articulates after Hegel's death. If only Hegel had this understanding, then neo-Marxism perhaps would have been known simply as Hegelian philosophy.

would not be corrected until much later by Louis Althusser.

To put it simply, *ideology*, as Yale Professor of literature Paul Fry explains, “is essentially the belief that perspective is [lower-case “t”] truth. This is to say, that the way in which things appear from the material and economically-grounded standpoint of my own consciousness is not just the way they appear to me, but the way they actually are” (“Lecture 17”). One might say that ideology is important to Marxist criticism because it allows Marxists a means for talking about the many ways in which the capitalist system constitutes a structure of dominance. However, the ways in which critics within the Marxist tradition have defined ideology, as well as how they believe ideology works within the superstructure, is and has been heavily contested. According to Fry, this “disagreement . . . has to do with whether or not ideology ought properly to be ascribed to conscious as well as to unconscious preconceptions about the world” (Fry, “Lecture 17”).

Now, according to Marxist philosophy, in order for any system to assure its own survival, it must reproduce itself. One way classical Marxists argue that capitalism reproduces itself is that those individuals in power consciously institutionalize certain ideologies that successfully maintain the overall economic structure. Or as Fry explains: “the idea that the various premises on which bourgeois, middle class, existence is based . . . is ‘ideological’ insofar as it is supposed to be valid and equally the case for all in all circumstances at all historical times . . .” (Fry, “Lecture 17”). Now in general, Marxist critics and theorists have believed that ideology is the symbolic representation of the real conditions of existence for ably individuals within that system—a manifestation of an individual’s relationships to the fundamental elements in the superstructure that make up the real conditions of his or existence. For classical Marxists, individuals in power utilize

their authority inside the superstructure in order to control what ideologies are made available, consciously limiting available ideologies to only those that promote a sense of *false consciousness* in the imaginations of individuals being exploited. As a result, despite being exploited by a system, such subjects are unconscious of the fact that they are playing a participatory role in ensuring the system continues to survive.

However, the view from false consciousness is a negative position that provides theorists with only half of the answer and begs the following question: In evaluating another's ideology, does one not assume that one has a privileged position? In other words, can the classical Marxist theorist evaluate another's systems of beliefs, values, and cultural practices in an ideological way, and in doing so, determine whether or not any such system accurately describe one's relationship to the actual conditions of one's existence? Simply saying that *ideology exists* does not explain how ideology is historically determined (a requirement in the case of dialectical-materialist model). The problem with traditional Marxism was a question of *how*. That is, how is an individual shaped by an economic totality he or she can never escape capable of bringing about a revolution? Attempting to solve this contradiction has led neo-Marxist thinkers to conclusions that have reshaped how we think about reality.

Ideology in Neo-Marxism

Despite being problematic, the view of ideology as merely false consciousness played an enormous role in how classic Marxist theory "picture[d] the totality itself." For as mentioned above, "conceived in materialist terms[,] the totality does not leave room for one to get outside it to attain to a 'positive' view of what it is like and thus to arrive at a teleological account through which to triumph over rival teleologies like Christian

Providence” (Dowling 52). Dowling sums up this problem as follows:

Where as a Hegelian I was in some sense the Spirit immanent in history, I am as a Marxist inside and wholly determined by the totality, and as an aspect of the totality, have no chance whatever of getting outside to view the end or meaning of the process of which I am a part. (Dowling 52-53)

Therefore, if one is going at least to begin to allow for agency within the superstructure,⁷ one must allow for a process of moving from false consciousness to a “real” consciousness that offers its subject a more psychologically stable understanding of one’s relationship to the mode of production. And Althusser does so by freeing ideology from classic Marxism by positing that ideology itself is: 1) inherent to an individual (un)consciousness and 2) exists in our material practices.

To elaborate, Althusser’s first point, as he explains in “Ideological State Apparatuses” (1981), is that: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1264). Again, this view of ideology differs from the one offered by classical Marxists because it holds that a worldview is not the representation of the *world as it is* (i.e., man’s *actual* position to the real world), but is in fact a representation of one’s *relationship to the world*, one’s *experience* in that world. Assuming that experience is detached from the Real, one can only attempt to get at the Real via one’s symbolic imagination (i.e., language, worldview, narratives, etc.).

Althusser goes on to say that individuals create—sometimes, elaborate—symbolic representations that make evident how they imagine their relation to the real conditions of existence. For, “it is this relation which is at the center of every ideological, i.e.

⁷ What Althusser calls *relative* autonomy.

imaginary, representation of the real world” (1265). Ideology necessitates an imagined point-in-reference for the individual to imagine himself as a concrete subject of ideology, for it is because ideology is imagined that individuals need a transposition of their imagined real conditions of existence. Depending on the “category” (i.e., type of person) that one individual identifies as one’s self-to-be, it is when interacting with others that one’s “*ideology hails or, interpellates*” one into existence as a “*concrete subject*” (1269).

Furthermore, Althusser argues, it is this imaginary relation that:

Contains the “cause” which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. . . . [and that] it is the *imaginary nature of this relation* which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we [the observer] can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology. (1265)

Althusser’s first point might explain better how the literary critic and the capable writer each imagines literature, as well as the gap that I believe separates them. If the creative writing praxis is an ideology, then writing represents a capable writer’s imaginary relationship to his or her real conditions of existence—that is, what he or she perceives as distorted, or real (i.e., as opposed to Real): the perceived contradictions inherent in reality. Understandably so, this ideological view of creative writing as praxis is perhaps problematic for the critic who assumes Cleanth Brooks’ traditional credo that literature is no surrogate for religion. Both views represent ideology; however, according to my understanding of Althusser’s first principle, both views must be considered by the critic in order for a critical analysis to be *truly critical* (i.e., free of *blind spots*).

To elaborate, Althusser points out that classical Marxists “*took literally the thesis* [regarding ideology] *which they presuppose*, and on which they depend, i.e. that what is reflected in the imaginary representation of the world found in an ideology is the conditions of existence of men, i.e., their real world” (1265, emphasis my own). In other words, Althusser identified a “blind spot” in classical Marxism revealing how by repressing their own susceptibility to ideology, classical Marxists failed to understand that ideology is not a condition affecting only a group of individuals who unknowingly have fallen under the idealistic spell of false consciousness, but is rather an aspect of our very imaginations that plays an integral part in our individual experience. This had a tremendous impact on Marxist analysis; for if everyone, including the Marxist critic and theorist, experiences reality through an ideological lens, then the rules of analysis must change. The Marxist theorist and critic must take into account his or her own ideology when interpreting another’s ideology, if he or she intends to understand the other’s ideology and its function in the superstructure. In other words, to critically analyze another subject, the social or literary critic must observe himself⁸ *observing* the subject in order to interpret the subject’s beliefs, values, and practices. Let me conclude my analysis of Althusser’s first principles regarding ideology by pointing out that this self-critical approach to analyzing literature and literary production (i.e., art in general) has already been posed in a field outside of literary criticism—the sociology of art.⁹

⁸ That is, to observe the critic’s *own* beliefs, values, and practices.

⁹ Born points out that in order to address certain tensions, a perhaps mutual antagonism, between the sociology of art and the humanities, her colleague David Inglis calls for a “reflexive approach that would ‘sociologically analyze the nature of one’s sociological analysis of art’ by recognizing its own social conditions of possibility and operation.” However to be fair, Born shoots down this notion, finding it not only “difficult to see how such an involuted response can generate analyses more attuned to the substantive nature of the subject matter of the sociology of art,” but ultimately basing her judgment on the fact that “the

Key to understanding the creative writing process as a praxis is Althusser's second principle regarding ideology, which holds that "Ideology has a material existence" (1265). But, he argues, ideology's material existence "always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (1266). In other words, if ideology *represents* the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence, then it is through an individual's practices that ideology is *represented*.

Here, Althusser is arguing that because the superstructure precedes us, there are social formations that emerge as a result of historical processes within the deeper structure. Within the superstructure, there are a number of mutually reinforcing structural formations, what Althusser identifies as *Ideological State Apparatuses*. These are "state" apparatuses because they exist in a variety of formations in order to ensure that the capitalist system perpetuates itself. Although such processes result in social and economic inequalities, the system *needs* these inequalities in order to function; therefore, these inequalities are systemic—built into the system itself. Following with this understanding of Ideological State Apparatuses, neo-Marxists Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar formulated a materialist view of literature, asserting that "literature does not 'fall from the heavens,' the product of a mysterious 'creation,' but is the product of social practice (rather of a *particular* social practice) . . . 'the product of reflection'—and necessarily then a materialist process 'of a given society'" (44). Althusser goes on to argue that:

field has not seen much movement on these matters in the last two decades" (174). Thus, whether Born is most driven by the scarcity of support for Inglis' idea, or her personal belief that it would not add any substance to the field is up to the reader.

The ideological representation of ideology is itself forced to recognize that every 'subject' endowed with a 'consciousness' and believing in the 'ideas' that his 'consciousness' inspires in him and freely accepts, must 'act according to his ideas,' must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. (1266)

In other words, it is because a subject's actions are in accordance with the ideology that he or she accepts that ideology has a material existence. Furthermore, it is because ideology "[exists] in a material ideological apparatus, [and thereby prescribes] material practices governed by material ritual, [that] practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his beliefs" (1267). Therefore, it is not only ideas that cause, for example, Buddhist monks to identify themselves *as* monks, but also their practices. Whereas ideas alone might leave these monks feeling unsatisfied, according to Althusser, they are not fully satisfied—nor fully connected to their imagined conditions of the real—until they commit themselves to practicing mantras and other rituals that Buddhist's ideas have inspired. In doing so, the monks' ideology, therefore, exists in their material actions. However, it is while one is in the presence of others, whom one either *mutually recognizes* or *misrecognizes* as concrete subjects in relation to one's own ideology, that ideology functions in an apparatus, "in the material forms of existence [i.e., practices] of that [ideology that one is] functioning" (1268-9). Thus, if a monk's ideological practice is performed in the company of others and is recognized by other monks, or misrecognized by non-monks, then the monk is thereby hailed into existence (i.e., *interpellated*).

Likewise, if one who self-identifies as a writer and an artiste recognizes in the symbolic representations of other such writers from the same tradition (e.g., Eliot's Ideal order) a certain attitude toward the function of the aesthetic, and so hail the practitioner into existence as a concrete subject, then the creative writing praxis is a material ritual associated with a specific ideology of aesthetic creation. Thus, the creative writing process is a material ritual—one that has been prescribed in a sense by tradition—allowing one to represent his or her imagined condition of existence. And because the creative writer's ideology involves literary production, the capable writer imagines that his or her interaction with literature to be a unique condition of real existence.

Therefore, if when reading a literary text, the capable writer recognizes what he or she believes to be the achievement of the aesthetic, then in the moment of this recognition, the writer becomes aware that he or she is being hailed into the company of a fellow capable writer. Likewise, if when writing, the same capable writer determines that through his practice he has achieved the aesthetic, then in that imagining moment of mutual recognition, the writer becomes aware that he or she has hailed the tradition of capable writers into his or her own company, and thereby the writer imagines interacting with them, the intended readers whom he or she has been meaning to address (and does address, according to Eliot, in achieving the aesthetic). On the other hand, the same scenario might be one of misrecognition. For example, if when reading or writing, the same capable writer recognizes that either the text's writer, or him/herself while writing, has misrecognized the aesthetic, then either way, the capable writer is hailed into existence by the presence of a fraud, either him/herself as writer or the writer he or she reads. Thus, saying "I'm a capable writer" is perhaps like saying "I'm a monk"—both

utterances announce a certain adherence to a set of ideas and practices, which together constitute *praxis*.

But how does one interpellate oneself into being? In other words, how and by whom is it that writers, self-identifying as capable writers, are being hailed into existence? This question is answered perhaps in part by Žižek, who explains that the process of interpellation is one through which not only individuals become concrete subjects, but subjects become individuals in the realm of the Symbolic. This Lacanian process is called ideological interpellation. However, before I can explain this process, I must briefly discuss in the following chapter the different understandings of aesthetic knowledge between Althusser and Lacan.

Chapter III

AESTHETIC: FUNCTION OF TOTALITY vs. ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

Like any material formulation analyzed under the empirical and materialist model of neo-Marxism, according to Althusser's analytical approach to art, aesthetic production is necessarily reducible to a particular function within the superstructure. The same is true for science: it is a material practice with a specific function. However, if both art and science are material practices, then Althusser's second proposition—that ideology has a material existence—poses an important question: Which aspects of material existence are ideological, and which are not? For Althusser, the answer lies in how such material practices function inside the superstructure.

I turn now to a 1966 letter from Althusser to a longtime acquaintance, Andre Daspre, in which Althusser distinguishes the *peculiarity of art* from the *domain of science*. Whereas the purpose of science is to replace ignorance with knowledge, Althusser argues that:

Art (I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level) does not give us a *knowledge* in the *strict sense*, it therefore does not replace knowledge (in the modern sense: scientific knowledge), but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain *special relationship* with knowledge. This relationship is not one of identity but one of difference. . . . [The peculiarity of art] is to ‘make us see,’ ‘perceive,’ ‘feel,’ (but not

know) something which *alludes* to reality. (para. 4)

For example, a novel invokes in us emotions with what we were familiar prior to reading the novel, and it is because we must use our own knowledge and emotion to “see” the emotion in the novel (i.e., something “other” than ourselves) that Althusser believes art constitutes a special relationship with knowledge. Thus, what we *see* in an artistic production is what Althusser, in quoting Spinoza, calls “conclusions without premises.” Science, on the other hand, “makes us penetrate into the mechanism which produces the ‘conclusions’ out of the premises” (para.7). Therefore, science identifies for us empirical knowledge that replaces our assumption-based knowledge.¹⁰ And again, this is an important distinction for Althusser, as he explains to his friend:

This distinction [between *identity* and *difference*] enables us to understand that art does not deal with a reality *peculiar to itself*, with a *peculiar domain* of reality in which it has a monopoly (as you tend to imply when you write that ‘with art, knowledge becomes human’, that the object of art is ‘the individual’), whereas science deals with a *different domain* of reality (say, in *opposition* to ‘lived experience’ and the ‘individual’) [Therefore,] a novel on the ‘cult’, however profound, may draw attention to its ‘lived’ effects, but *cannot give an understanding of it*; it may put the question of the ‘cult’ on the agenda, but it cannot *define the means* which will make it possible to remedy these effects. . . . (para. 7)

Mostly I agree with Althusser’s view of ideology. However, I disagree with his assessment that art “cannot *define the means* which will make it possible to remedy” the

¹⁰ Althusser does not clarify what *new* knowledge is, nor what the *old* knowledge was. Therefore, I am assuming the terms “empirical” and “assumption-based” for reference.

effects of “lived-experience,” and therefore, cannot be identified as knowledge. I believe he is making a couple of assumptions. First, he implies that knowledge can be identified only if it is expressed empirically. And secondly, he assumes that what a capable writer of “authentic literature” deals with during literary production is something that *can be* reconciled, and eventually *will* be reconciled, once the critic directs his critical attention to the writer’s work.

Even though he is doubtful of artistic knowledge, Althusser cannot dismiss entirely the possibility that art might eventually be identified as knowledge. For he concludes his letter:

Now I believe that the only way we can hope to reach a real knowledge of art, to go deeper into the specificity of the work of art, to know the mechanisms which produce the “aesthetic effect,” is precisely to spend a long time and pay the greatest attention to the “*basic principles of Marxism*” (para. 12)

In insisting upon the need for academic rigor, Althusser fears that critics will rush to conclusions in order to discover not knowledge of art but an ideology of art. But what his commentary also “implies,” according to neo-Marxist film scholar Barbara Kilinger, is Althusser’s openness to the possibility of “a class of texts with a slightly superior epistemology” in which the writer detaches himself from ideology, and even objectifies ideology in the process (77). That is, in using Althusser’s “Letter on Art” as the basis for the “critical praxis” she uses to classify an aesthetic category of politically “progressive” films, Kilinger observes:

For Althusser, the most emphatic aspect of art to be addressed . . . is its essential, definitive epistemology. Art . . . is neither ‘knowledge in the strictest sense’ or unadulterated ideology; rather, it provides a particularly valuable epistemological halfway house between the two [and is] a special perceptual agency that performs a quasiepistemic function: it literally makes a spectacle of ideology, and in so doing, elucidates, even materially objectifies, the presence and activity of ideology. (77)

Aesthetic and the Ethical

Now, as previously stated, many sociologists of art as well as scholars in other fields have argued against reductionist models of art for the sole reason that forming a definition for the aesthetic requires a substantial degree of agency that is severely limited under functional reductionist logic. As Osborne argued, art is not so much an object of production, but is rather an *ethical practice* that produces artistic objects. Recently, ethics has once again emerged as a concern for social scientists and critical theorists. Even in literary criticism, ethics is emerging in conversations among scholars regarding contemporary works that encourage “fresh forms of critical engagement;” for example, in an article on David Foster Wallace’s contemporary novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), critic Adam Kelly calls to the attention of his fellow critics the idea that the ethical challenge posed by Wallace is addressed to critics:

Whereas the rise of theory was initially viewed as the conclusive destruction of intention, the final nail in the coffin of Barthes’s dead author, here intention is birthed again to co-exist with theory, resulting in fresh forms of critical engagement. . . . When theory was at its zenith in

the academy, what a writer thought he or she was doing in their fiction was not a decisive factor for critics; but when major writers become willing to engage the discourses of theory itself—to speak the language of the critic, and challenge that language on its own turf—it is impossible not to take note. (para. 10)

I would argue that what a capable writer has traditionally “thought he or she was doing in their fiction,” regardless the state of theory in the academy, has traditionally been to produce an aesthetic experience. Furthermore, what Kelly sees as being “impossible to take note” is perhaps that the aesthetical components in a text like *Infinite Jest* just so happens to align with the discourses of literary theory. Yet, Kelly calls to the attention of his fellow critics the notion that the ethical challenge posed by Wallace suggests that it derives from the author’s ideological knowledge of creative writing as a praxis.

Now, as Althusser argues of the materiality of ideology in his essay on state apparatuses (if my paraphrase is accurate), the ideal understandings of an individual reflect that which he believes “ought to exist in his actions” (1267) and are an internalization of the *obviousness* that his or her ideology has imposed as an *obviousness* (such that discursive fields of idioms and prayers become gestures of recognition and recursive rituals within his ideology) (1270). Furthermore, the *obviousness* of the same individual measures the value of his or her own ideas and practices *negatively* against the practices and ideas of other ideologies (1267). Thus, while the external world shapes the internal world of a subject, the internal world of the subject (once having internalized/imagined the real conditions of the external world) begins shaping an imaginative negotiation with the external world. The vast, external world includes

individual objects like people, novels, etc., as well as objects that are linked inside of structures; whereas people are of cultures, novels are of traditions. And so, within the concrete subject's mind, dialectical tensions build between the *world-perceived*—that is, the world *as one finds it*—and the *world-imagined*—that is, the world *as one would like it to become*. This relation I identify as the symptom of psychic suffering, and it is the role of ideology to help one resolve such contradictions, if possible.

For, it is through ideology that we negotiate with the *world-perceived*. I speak here specifically of what cognitive-anthropologists describe as the *over-learning* of cultural and social prescriptions. Over-learning emerges by way of *over-determinism*. This is to say, that cultural models, once internalized, set up cognitive boundaries that require an extraordinary display of agency on the part of the individual to deviate beyond them. In other words, as cognitive anthropologist Douglas Holland's phrases it, "impressions of the world are constructed out of numerous and varied perceptions and self-states" that are not only socially constructed—*shaped*, rather—and linguistically determined, but ones that also can be produced by "the creative and imaginative capacities of individuals" (Holland 542). But again, other than Althusser's notion of *relative autonomy*, how does one explain such capacities within the superstructure in a way that does not deny the individual of agency?

To answer this question of agency inside the superstructure, the Lacanian theorist Geoff Boucher critiques Althusser's inconsistent use of ideology when discussing art:

Through its conception of the relative autonomy of the 'structural instances' of economics, politics and ideology (and therefore aesthetics), not only did Structural Marxism make possible 'regional theories' of

different social practices, it also stipulated a strict conception of the ‘specificity of the aesthetic,’ based on its functional difference and historical distinctness from the political and the ideological. . . . By contrast with politics and ideology, which had social functions, art emerged through ‘internal distantiation’ from ideology and consisted of a sort of knowledge (knowledge of ideology) rather than a sort of functionality. (30)

In distinguishing between the *political* and the *ideological*, Boucher notes that: “Where politics meant the reproduction (and transformation) of the unity of the social totality . . . ideology meant the reproduction (and transformation) of the social subjectivity of human agents performing functional roles” (30). Therefore, despite Althusser’s genuine attempt to understand how subjects might possess “relative autonomy” during moments of instantaneous ‘spontaneity,’ which for a writer translates to instances of creativity, artwork produced under the Althusserian model of the superstructure-as-totality are returned “from its hard-won autonomy to being merely a supplement to politics” (30). Now to qualify the Lacanian perspective, I should point out that Žižek states in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, that Lacan has been reproached often for his absolutism, specifically “that he does not take into account the objective world, that he limits his theory to the interplay of subject and language.” However, he goes on to explain that Lacan believed that “not only does the world—as a given whole of objects—not exist, but that neither do language and subject exist” (72).

Boucher extends on work by Žižek that applies Lacanian insights to Althusser’s aesthetic theory. Boucher explains how effectively Žižek “reverses Althusser’s formula

of the interpellation of individuals into subjects to suggest that ideology really interpellates *subjects* into *individuals*” (33):

The Lacanian interpretation of Althusser . . . involves two significant rectifications to the concept of ideological interpellation. 1.) Žižek effectively reverses Althusser’s formula of the interpellation of individuals into subjects to suggest that ideology really interpellates *subjects* into individuals . . . Where the ego belongs to the register of the Imaginary, the subject belongs to the Symbolic . . . [and] 2.) Subjectivation also involves what might be called the interpellation of *human bodies* into *subjects*. When the body is subjected to the Symbolic Order, Its linear, instinctual satisfactions are warped into the rotary motion of the drives. . . . Where the subject belongs to the register of the Symbolic, then the drives (and enjoyment they afford) belong to the register of the Real. (33)

Boucher contributes to Žižek’s work by arguing for a “dual perspective” analysis that dissects the social formation in two: one part being a “structural framework”—an heterogeneous functional ensemble of structural instances,” and the other, “ethical life”—an homogeneous intersubjective totality of social practices” that competes alongside what Marxists call the superstructure (30). Given Althusser’s view that *ideology is mutual recognition*, “provided that we consider mutual recognition not from the structural framework perspective of the ideological interpellation of subjects, but from the ethical life perspectives of ideology as the lived experience of social agents involved in struggles around social practices,” Boucher develops a definition for the specificity of the aesthetic that finally allows for agency: “an anthropocentric form of

knowledge—that is, a body of subject-centered representations lacking a functional significance that is in a constant, that is, historical tension with the ideological field from which it emerges” (31).

Comparing Boucher’s definition of the aesthetic with the contents of Althusser’s “Letter on Art,” perhaps Althusser’s functional reductionist assumptions led him to respond to his friend’s humanistic idealism¹¹ too hastily. According to Boucher, the aesthetic *is* a form of knowledge, but one that is anthropocentric (i.e., about and for human beings). Also, the representations are subject-centered—i.e., dealing specifically with a subject’s reality, which, despite Althusser’s claim otherwise, is perhaps “a reality peculiar to itself.” Furthermore, in the case of critical attacks on Eliot’s “historio-aesthetic principle,” which links aesthetic tensions to tradition, one might infer that Boucher the historio-ideological field which the tensions producing the aesthetic emerge is perhaps linked to artistic conformity to a tradition that encourages autonomy.

Ultimately, if ideology is to move beyond what we know of false consciousness, offering us more than simple fantasies, then ethical life is one possible praxis among others that inspires in us ethical practices. (What Rilke means when he says it is essential for the writer to find out what makes him experience life, and to then build one’s life around this way of being.) Thus, in the case of literary production, perhaps one might understand the capable writer’s praxis as a centralized component of the writer’s “ethical life.” Thus, while Althusser’s re-conceptualization of ideology laid the necessary groundwork for theorists and critics to move beyond the inherent contradictions found in classical Marxism, the materialist model he developed is limited in its dealing with the

¹¹ Examples of which include: “‘with art, knowledge becomes human,’ that the object of art is ‘the individual,’” etc.

implications of how such ideologies might also produce knowledge. However, Lacanian theory has led thinkers to arrive at certain conclusions regarding subjective experience, as well as notions regarding artistic production, that I believe align directly with what certain writers have been saying for centuries about art, its “truth” and possibilities.

Chapter IV

THE HUMAN IMPULSE TOWARD COHERENCE

To better understand the Lacanian critique of Althusser, the basis from which Boucher derives his non-reductionist “ethical life” model, I turn now to Boucher’s predecessor, Žižek. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek deals with what he calls the Althusser-Lacan debate—one that he says is more-far reaching than the popular Habermas-Foucault debate over the subject. Whereas with Habermas, Žižek writes:

We have the ethics of the unbroken communication, the Ideal of the universal . . . with Foucault, we have a turn against that universalist ethics which results in a kind of aestheticization of ethics: each subject must, without any support from universal rules, build his own mode of self-mastery . . . invent himself, so to speak . . . find his own particular art of living. (2)

Žižek states that despite this dispute over universality, Habermas and Foucault are essentially “two sides of the same coin” in that they both conceive the “subject as the power of self-mediating and harmonizing the antagonistic forces, as a way of mastering the ‘use of pleasures’ through a restoration of the image of self” (2). And in regards to the ethical, Žižek explains::

The subject as such is constituted through a certain misrecognition: the process of ideological interpellation through which the subject

‘recognizes’ itself as the addressee in the calling up of the ideological cause implies necessarily a certain short circuit, an illusion of the type ‘I was already there’ (3)

This “ethics of alienation in the symbolic ‘process without subject,’” as Žižek calls Althusser’s attitude, is contrasted by Lacan’s implied ethics of “separation.” Žižek writes:

The famous Lacanian motto not to give way on one’s desire—is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire. To come to terms with this surplus (or, more precisely, leftover) means to acknowledge a fundamental deadlock (‘antagonism’), a kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution. (3)

There are two things I need to point out about this quote. First, notice that Lacan does not disagree necessarily with Althusser that we as subjects are separated from the Real, but he does draw attention to an important factor with his view that the “surplus” suggests the absolute *irreconcilability* of some antagonisms. Secondly, motivated by whatever reason, the aesthetic writer attempts to represent these antagonisms symbolically via the creative writing praxis, but as Žižek points out, addressing the “surplus” in this way is an impossible task because such antagonisms resist symbolic integration-dissolution. Therefore, by attempting to come to terms with this surplus via an ideological praxis, the capable writer appears not to acknowledge this fundamental deadlock. If so, then the capable writer has “given way on his or her desire,” as Lacan states in the above quote, and by doing so, has obliterated “the distance separating the

Real from its symbolization.” In other words, during his attempt at achieving his or her ideological notion of the aesthetic, perhaps at some point the capable writer’s historically and socially contingent *desire* is replaced by an ethical *drive* to write. For, according to Žižek, *drives* differ from *desire* in that the former are “the repulsive private rituals (sniffing one’s own sweat, sticking one’s finger into one’s nose, etc.) that bring us intense satisfaction without our being aware of it-or, insofar as we are aware of it, without our being about to do anything to prevent it.” The effects of the Real are naturally “traumatic”; one’s imagining of the conditions of the Real is doomed to closing-up in a post-analytic state called "subject destitution" (i.e., the end of analysis, when one no longer is capable of the desire to construct fantasy/narratives that stabilizes us) unless he or she intervenes, retroactively in his or her own self-defense. Thus, one must continue analyzing in spite of the *irreconcilable*, in an attempt to sublimate it, which is “ultimately” Žižek says “what art and religion is about” (“Love beyond Law,” www.lacan.com).

To elaborate, irreconcilability in Lacanian psychoanalysis “goes a decisive step further than the usual ‘post-Marxist’ anti-essentialism [that affirms] the irreducible plurality of particular struggles” (Žižek, 3). In other words, because antagonisms in post-Marxism are socio-historically contingent, it is via dialectical materialism that all antagonisms within the super structure can inevitably be reconciled. Some issues might be resolved as a secondary issue under one or more other issues that are more immediate, complex, or popular social concerns and thereby stand a better chance of reconciliation. However, Žižek is more pessimistic and argues against *reconciliation* from a Hegelian perspective. Whereas Marxist dialectics requires that everything within the totality be

functionally reducible, Žižek argues—in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*—that:

The most consistent model of such an acknowledgement of antagonism is offered by Hegelian dialectics: far from being a story of its progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts—‘absolute knowledge’ denotes a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity. In other words, Hegelian ‘reconciliation’ is not a ‘panlogistic’ sublation of all reality in the Concept but a final consent to the fact that the Concept itself is ‘not-all’ (to use this Lacanian term). (6)

In other words, there are certain antagonisms that man, regardless of his self-identity, must come to acknowledge as inevitably irreconcilable. The example of such irreconcilable antagonisms Žižek offers is the Freudian notion of the “death drive,” which Žižek describes as “not a biological fact”—as neo-Marxists conceptualize it—“but a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking,” which Žižek identifies as “self-preservation, accordance between man and his milieu” (4). From this perspective, Žižek argues:

The ‘death drive,’ this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines *la condition humaine* as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to overcome, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it. (5)

Perhaps Žižek’s example of the death drive, more than any other, explains the

connection that capable writers find between irreconcilable antagonisms and aesthetic experience: because these antagonisms are irreconcilable, they motivate aesthetic production so that the praxis of literary writers involves a struggle toward articulating some sense of co-existence with what they ultimately know to be irreconcilable, the “impossible Thing” (Žižek 71). This is to say, without death we would only be capable of formulating simple meanings relating to our most immediate experience. However, because death is always in the distance, hanging just above our heads in some respects, and because we are only capable of conceptualizing it as an irreconcilable state that is essentially negative to our Being, are we capable of imagining much richer and complex meanings. This is perhaps what Cormac McCarthy means when he says that all great books deal with life and death. That is to say, the aesthetic must deal with either *comedy* or *tragedy*, and has since the ancient Greeks. Death or tragedy, for the reasons just described; comedy or life as constituted by those ideological practices, those rituals (satisfying or not) that we commit ourselves to in order to live meaningful, well-adjusted lives prior to our own, inevitable death.

Neo-Marxist Fredric Jameson’s idea of *ideological closure* suggests a similar conclusion. Developed from Althusser’s reworking of ideology, Jameson’s view of closure:

Is the approximation of some truth about the totality that, given the limitations always imposed by the historical process, stands in for the deeper truth it exists to deny. As creatures of the economic systems that enclose them, human beings are forever denied the means of understanding their plight [as both oppressor and oppressed] . . . and yet

there remains a drive toward some form of the *comprehensibility* that alone makes existence tolerable. So it is that in the name of comprehensibility the collective mind invents systems (religions, philosophies, mythologies) that allow it to attain to some notion of coherence. (53-54, emphasis my own)

This notion of “comprehensibility” is raised also in Hegel’s understanding of *reconciliation*, which as Žižek points out in the video-lecture “The Limits of Hegel,” is even further pessimistic than some may believe. That is to say, Hegel’s notion of reconciliation is “more pessimist than just [that the] collective subject will swallow all of reality” because the closest we will actually ever get to doing so is during cases of “total loss” (Žižek).

The practice or product that results from one’s need for ideological closure comes in the form of one’s *strategy of containment*. Jameson applies this concept of containment to literature and other works of art, not only “in the way they incorporate ideology into themselves,” but also “in the way the formal unity displayed by works of art represent structural limitations and ideological closure on the aesthetic level, the attempt of art as such to shut out or deny the intolerable reality of History” (Dowling, 54). And within the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jameson’s notion of containment shares one of several other connections with critic and writer John Gardner’s view of *moral fiction*.

In his book, *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner echo’s Eliot’s Ideal Order in that he links “legitimate literature” to a tradition “as old as the hills, drawn from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and the rest, and standard in Western civilization down through the

eighteenth century” (5). This “traditional” view of art (specifically of literature) is, according to Gardner, as follows:

[T]hat true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. . . . Like legitimate art, legitimate criticism is a tragi-comic holding action against entropy. . . . Art [and criticism, thereafter] rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness. (5)

By “what is necessary to humanness,” I take it that Gardner means whatever ensures that human beings remain “well-adjusted” (as Wallace puts it) in the face of the irreconcilable. In other words, Gardner makes a strong connection here between aesthetic writing and its fight against “entropy.” This correlation not only reminds us of Dissanayake’s view of artification as a *proximate predisposition*, but does so in a manner reminiscent of Jameson’s own moral concerns with history and *reification*. Whereas *entropy* entails a breaking down of systems into states of disrepair, reification, as explained by Dowling, is a process that neo-Marxists believe traces “the total transformation of the world into a sphere where relations among rational or conscious beings altogether cease and there are left only relations among things” (26-27). Jameson’s “impassioned moral concern . . . arises from a terrible sense that this same process of reification is now working its ultimate deformation on humanity as a whole” (Dowling, 27). Seeing a need to prevent such a case from happening is precisely why capable writers like Eliot and Gardner find tradition so alluring—the ideal notion that there is some truth to be found in “the old ways.”

A further notable connection is that both Jameson and Gardner insist that humans are driven toward attaining some notion of coherence. Again, Jameson takes his view of

containment from Althusser's understanding that ideology is both imaginary and necessary (an integral part of experience). For Jameson, the painful is the human is History, and it is perhaps this view that Garner believes art addresses. The purpose of art, (or more specifically, *moral fiction*) for Gardner is a phenomenological purpose rather than a reducible function, which he explains as follows:

The tensions we find resolved *or at least defined and dramatized* [i.e., identified] in art are the objective release of tensions in the life of the artist. . . . Art begins in a wound, an imperfection—a wound inherent in the nature of life itself—and is an attempt to heal it. It is the pain of the wound that impels the artist to do his work, and it is the universality¹² of *woundness* in the human condition[,] which makes the work of art significant as medicine or distraction. (180-181, emphasis my own)

Perhaps in anticipation of literary critics who do not self-identify as aesthetic writers, Gardner qualifies his view that “art begins in a wound” as *not* to propose that *art is sick*, as Freud suggested. On the contrary, *man is sick* (according to Hegel) in that he will ultimately succumb to the disease, *death*. This “sickness” is symptomatic, which according to Žižek, is “strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus” (Žižek 21). And yet despite man's sickness, Gardner argues that art is healthy: “The chief quality that distinguishes great art . . . is its sanity, the good sense and efficient energy with which it goes after what is really there [i.e., the Real] and feels significant” (178).

¹² The universality of the subject is not only important for thinkers like Foucault and Lacan (what is discussed in the following chapter), but also, as Gardner notes here, to the capable writer of moral fiction. I mean, who is the *intended reader*, other than the *universal subject*? I find this question to be a very profound thought; though I am unaware if it is or is not original.

There are two final connections that I hope to establish between Gardner and literary theory. The first is that in addition to Althusser's mere acknowledgement of art as *perceiving* or *seeing* (i.e., alluding to) reality, Gardner believes the "true artist's purpose, and the purpose of the true critic after him, is to show [i.e., identify] what is *healthy*, in other words, *sane*, in human seeing, thinking, and feeling, and to point out what is not" (179, emphasis partially my own). Furthermore, Gardner's view of a creative writer's purpose—which he attempts to connect, despite the gap, with the purpose of the "good critic"—does not stray too far from Jameson's own emphasis on *symptomatic analysis*, a mode of interpretation that reveals of literature the following: "(1) the specific ways in which they [Authors] deny or repress History, and (2) what, once brought up out of the nether darknesss into the light of rational scrutiny, the History thus denied or repressed looks like" (Dowling, 78).

I would argue that together, Jameson and Gardner, offer an understanding of *woundness*—especially in light of Gardner's characterization of it as a universal¹³—that is perhaps what is known in post-Marxism as an "inner-worldly event," that is "something acknowledged as such by society in its collective life" (Dowling, 33). Both Jameson and Gardner acknowledge the immeasurable weight of this condition of *woundness*, and each man (respective of his discipline) embodies a method of dealing with it: Jameson, through critical interpretation; Gardner, through aesthetic production.¹⁴ However, what distinguishes Jameson's critical approach from Gardner's aesthetic

¹³ Again, from the writerly perspective, the relationship between a *capable writer* and his/her *intended reader* is perhaps that of the *subject* to the *universal subject*.

¹⁴ One is correct to point out that Gardner is also a critic. But I would advise one to recall Osborne's claim (c.f., Ch. 1) that what makes individuals artists is that *they are artists as opposed to anything else*.

approach to literature can be seen respectively as the difference between two stages of the psychoanalytic process, “*interpretation of symptoms*” and “*going through fantasy*”¹⁵ (Žižek 74). While, Jameson’s view of art was shaped in part by his admiration of “Freud’s profound insight into the very nature and necessity of interpretation itself, into that permanent condition of our conscious being that makes an inquiry into ‘meaning’ not only natural but unavoidable” (Dowling 36), Gardner’s view of art was shaped by his belief not only that the creative writing process is a praxis, but also that the product of that praxis (i.e., moral fiction) has throughout literary tradition held firmly against entropy. Additionally, Lacan’s two stages of analysis offers insight into the motive behind aesthetic production, perhaps the most distinguishing factor separating the critic from the writer.

Jameson, an *interpreter of symptoms*, believes it to be his job to locate in literature ways in which writers “deny or repress History” (78)—to thereby *reconcile* the socio-historical contradictions therein. Obviously, without the task of *reconciliation*, a critics job becomes pointless—a lesson learned throughout the tradition of Marxists criticism, and one that initially motivated Jameson (to his credit) to establish a method of *symptomatic readings* in the first place. I agree with Boucher’s qualification that Jameson

¹⁵ Fantasy, or *fundamental fantasy* (Kantian), is explained by Žižek from a positive view (Kant) and a negative view (philosopher, Daniel Dennett). 1) Kant’s view is that fantasy is “the inter-passive Other Scene of freedom, of the spontaneous free agent, the Scene in which the free agent is turned into a lifeless puppet at the mercy of the perverse God. The lesson of it, of course, is that there is no active free agent without this fantasmatic support, without this Other Scene in which he is totally manipulated by the Other.” 2) From Dennet’s perspective, Žižek writes: “The ontological paradox, scandal even, of fantasy resides in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’: Of course, fantasy is by definition not ‘objective’ (in the naive sense of ‘existing’ independently of the subject’s perceptions); however, it is also not ‘subjective’ (in the sense of being reducible to the subject’s consciously experienced intuitions). Fantasy rather belongs to the ‘bizarre category of the objectively subjective—the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem that way to you’ (Dennett, 1991, p. 132)” (“Psychoanalysis and Cyberspace,” Žižek 824-825)

is unique among functional reductionists, as his emphasis on *mediation*¹⁶ represents a *less* reductionist view than does traditional Marxism or even the idea of *causality* as posited by Althusser.¹⁷ Jameson's use of mediation is "the most sophisticated post-Althusserian literary criticism"; however he (Boucher) goes on to say that Jameson's work "tends to regress to functional reductionism with the claim that the artwork is all about cultural de-programming and reprogramming" (30). Therefore, in addition to the critic's assumption that during literary production, the capable writer is unconscious even to himself of the contradictions that limit his work to socio-historical contingency, perhaps the critic might also consider that the writer is attempting to interpellate him/herself into a co-existence with the irreconcilable (i.e., the uncertainty of death, the prospect of life-long loneliness, chronic dystopia and suicide, etc).

Something the writer does represses perhaps is that his desire to write has along the way been replaced by a drive to write, or as Lacan says: the capable writer "loves his symptom more than himself" (74). Otherwise, why would one not renounce one's symptom even after completing one's interpretation? Gardner suggests that by *going through fantasy*, what motivates literary production is not what the writer represses, but rather what he knows is ultimately irreconcilable. According to Gardner, however

¹⁶ That is, "the demonstration that all levels of the superstructure are only superficially different reflections of the same essence"—and asserts "an underlying *identity* between any two levels of the superstructure, and further assumes that anyone can . . . be 'folded into' the next, and all ultimately into the economic. Thus both the political system and the legal system of a society are not merely illusory reflections of its relations of production, for instance, but each system is ultimately identical with the other and both with the economic in which they have the real source of their unreal existence." Of course the problem for those posing an ideological knowledge of art is that it "means in an even more conclusive sense that art and literature have no life of their own" (Downing, 65)

¹⁷ But only if one believes the superstructure to be the totality of experience. I believe it merely operates inside of reality and will expand *causality* in a moment to include those things (i.e., the death drive) that are to be a *structural causality*—the aesthetic.

psychotic (c.f., Dennett, footnote 15) this process of going through fantasy might appear to be, by creating a “vivid, uninterrupted dream” a writer, like the dead Nordic heroes at the imaginary battle of Ragnarok, must “fight these monsters as long as possible, and then we move on” (Gardner, 10). And according to a fundamental notion of Lacan: “in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality: [fantasy] is the support that gives consistency to what we call ‘reality’” (qtd. in Žižek 44). Thus, “dealing” with a wound, whether it is the prospect of death, trauma, or heartbreak, is an ongoing process, at the end of which only an “*attempt*” can be made “to heal it” (181). This attempt—or *struggle*, to use a Marxist term—toward healing is what perhaps motivates *a moral writer’s aesthetic*.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

Perhaps ultimately what I'm suggesting is a combination of Jameson's idea of *symptomatic reading* and Foucault's notion of archaeology, save that for the latter, the archaeologist is a capable writer, and the item discovered is located in other examples of an attempt to create the aesthetic. Like those scholars working in the field of the sociological study of art (c.f., Chapter 2), Foucault suggests in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that any analysis of art should not only be concerned with its cultural production, but also with the creative writing praxis:

Whether space, distance, depth, colour . . . were not considered, named, enunciated, and conceptualized in a discursive practice; and whether the knowledge that this discursive practice gives rise to was not embodied perhaps in theories and speculations . . . forms of teaching and codes of practice, but also *in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter*, so that [the creative praxis] might be seen as being shot through—and independently of scientific knowledge and philosophical themes—with the positivity of a knowledge" (Foucault, 193-194).

In this light, those techniques, gestures, and process that a capable writer hopes to identify in the works of other capable writers is an artistic form knowledge that is anthropocentric, and that emerges from the tensions of the aesthetic tradition. That is to

say, in reading aesthetic text a capable writer believes him/herself to be able, part of the time, not only to *perceive* but also to understand (i.e., recognize) a domain of knowledge, shared mutually among creative writers.

Capable writers reading the texts of other such literary writers are seeking perhaps to make visible the hidden rhetorical methods employed by the dead writer of an aesthetic text that in turn provide its reader with insights into ethical practices. Thus, the writer is seeking the technical elements within the structure of the text (rhetoric, craft, etc.) that makes the production of the aesthetic possible. A capable writer reads the works by those dead writers of previous generations not only to reproduce (i.e., imitate) the same aesthetic technique in his or her own writing, but also to understand the means defined in aesthetic texts necessary for one to break from tradition. And in breaking away, one is able and create a *new* specific category of the aesthetic experience for future generations. Thus, perhaps this process further substantiates Osborne's "paradox" that by conforming to an artistic tradition, an artist finds autonomy.

But unlike other skills, discovering this artistic knowledge through creative praxis provides a literary writer with the tools he believes are necessary in order to begin healing the wounds of the irreconcilable, just as discovering biblical knowledge provides a Christian with rituals, such as prayer, in order to attempt the same feat. This sense of discovery is different from that of the literary critic, who I fear represses the aesthetic as a form of knowledge. But as a praxis, the creative writing process that Gardner, Eliot, Wallace, and other such writers describe shows how artistic knowledge is incorporated into one's ethical life. In other words, the process allows a subject to imagine himself—during the moments of literary creation—and reexamine himself and his actions—during

the moments in which he revises his written paroles. Thus, the writer's experience is made material through the *act* of writing and in the draft he produces. Likewise, in the revising stage, his or her experience is materialized via his or her intellectual labor, and then, internalized in a way that the writer can reevaluate (*reimagine*) the conditions that led to his unconscious and violent actions. Thus, it becomes possible for an individual to express in the creative writing process an ideology that he might use to negotiate with the *world-perceived* and thereby imagine himself going through a fantasmatic process of dealing with the same set of irreconcilable antagonisms (i.e., fear of death, loneliness, grief, etc.) that have plagued the writers before him.

As a praxis, perhaps the creative writing process allows for a sense of self-discovery, or—as Marx called—“self-realization,” and provides the writer imaginative truths that he or she believes may provide our species with a moral sensibility, the morale to survive. And yet “fiction,” Gardner states, “seeks out . . . a poetic kind of truth, universals not easily translatable into moral codes. . . . The writer who can't distinguish truth from a peanut-butter sandwich can never write good fiction. What he affirms [readers] deny, throwing away his book in indignation” (79). A capable writer perhaps imagines one of many truths, but does so in a way that might be *universally imagined*—that is, his imaginative representation of his imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence that might carry over to the imagination of a *reader* (i.e., the *universal subject*, for Lacan, and *other capable writers*, for the writer in question). However, if no audience accompanies him during the writing process, then the writer has *failed*, as Althusser might say, to “*act* according to his ideas” and according to the practices governed by the rituals within his ideology. If a writer does not act accordingly to his

ideology—“if he does not do so,” Althusser states—then the ideology reifies in him: “that [action is] wicked” (1266). Perhaps, the most notable of texts of serious literature contain for their readers many hard-won “truths,” discovered by the author search for an aesthetic that governs his practices in his life’s search for coherence.

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