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## **Ideology and Subjectivity in Wordsworth, Althusser and Žižek**

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*'All its reality is external to it'* (Althusser)

This essay examines how Louis Althusser, William Wordsworth and Slavoj Žižek present and ground the relationship between subjectivity and ideology. I will begin by providing a précis of Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" (1971) and then demonstrate how his theory offers a critical framework and methodology for analysing and assessing Wordsworth's poetry in relation to subjectivity and ideology. However, I will argue that Althusser's process of interpellation, envisioned as a consistent ideological process that constructs subjectivity as seamless and whole, is limiting and insufficient. This is manifest in the poetry of Wordsworth who presents subjectivity not as a unified entity, but as inherently divided. Wordsworth's idea of his subjectivity as divided between two consciousnesses is complemented by Žižek's "The Spectre of Ideology" (1991), which both develops and departs from Althusserian theory. Ultimately, whilst I argue that it is not possible for subjects to exist in, or even conceive of a non-ideological reality, I will suggest that Wordsworth's theory of poetics offers a viable and insightful method for ideological critique through subjective inquiry in line with Žižek's thought.

Although Althusser's definition of ideology, 'the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group', is in line with Karl Marx, Althusser delineates the limitations of Marx's account of ideology (107). Althusser argues that the substructure and superstructure model, as 'a spatial metaphor', remains a 'descriptive' theory, which requires further development (90, 91). Althusser sets out a structural materialist theoretical framework and through this, he identifies the flaws in Marx's conception of ideology 'as a pure illusion', arguing that this insinuates a negativity, which would suggest that '[a]ll its reality is external to it' (108). Indeed, in *The German Ideology*, ideology is presented as functioning through a mode of alienation, whereby individuals are abstracted from the material socio-historical conditions of society, the effect of which sees 'phantoms formed in the human brain' (Marx and Engels 69). This, Althusser argues, 'is not Marxist'

(107); it suggests that ideology is ahistorical, in the sense that ideology lacks and is absent of history. To Althusser, that '*ideology has no history*' is a positive condition. He draws on the Freudian concept of the 'unconscious' showing ideology as a structure which is 'eternal [...], not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omnipresent, transhistorical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history' (109). Althusser erects 'a theory of ideology in general' by displaying its '*omni-historical reality*', a postulation which bolsters his arguments that '*[i]deology has a material existence*' and that 'there is no ideology except by subjects and for subjects' (107-8, 112, 115).

Althusser places emphasis on the dialectical relationship between ideology and the construction of subjectivity, showing that the existence of ideology depends on a process of 'interpellation' (118). As a twofold process, this 'transforms' individuals into and 'recruits' them to perform ideology in material practices (118). Moreover 'these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of *an ideological apparatus*' (114). As such, 'there is no practise except by and in ideology' and 'there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects' (115). Althusser supplements what was described in *The German Ideology* as 'illusions of consciousness' (Marx and Engels 60) with 'the imaginary relation of [...] individuals to the real relations in which they live' (Althusser 111). The use of the terms 'the imaginary' and 'the real' here draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis (Boucher 32). I will expand on the influence of Jacques Lacan on Althusser later in this essay, but for now it suffices to state that, Althusser appropriates the Lacanian concept of 'the imaginary' to emphasise its material existence in reality, replacing what Marx claimed as an immaterial 'illusion'. Althusser elaborates on 'the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology' (118). It is through this that social alienation arises as individuals are interpellated into subjects who consequentially maintain the very conditions of their own alienation.

Subjectivity and the experience of alienation are central to Wordsworth's poetry. In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth describes the 'steep and lofty cliffs, / That on a wild secluded scene impress / Thought of more deep seclusion' (5-7). Wordsworth's encounter with nature as vast, unruly and untouched has an alienating effect, which enables him to connect with a purer, more natural state of consciousness, which transcends the ordinary experience of everyday life in society. Wordsworth describes that 'the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened' (37-41). Wordsworth as subject evades his position in space and time, 'the breadth of this corporeal frame / ... / Almost suspended' and 'become[s] a living soul' (43-6). Jonathan Culler's theory of lyric coincides with such an atemporality of the 'poetic event' (197): '[t]he poem is the occasion' of an 'atemporal' condition (218, 228). Like Culler, David Duff argues that the poetic 'I' transcends the framework of the poem through the 'spontaneity, imagination, and self-expression', which Duff identifies as generic of Romantic poetry (137). Indeed, Wordsworth's theory of poetic seems to support these understandings. In his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", Wordsworth describes 'poetry [as] the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity [...] contemplates till [...] an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind' (514). Wordsworth sees that poetry is an individual, subjective mode of expression, but also, and more importantly, that poetry represents an expression of atemporal subjectivity itself.

Theodor Adorno however argues that in poetry, 'the "I" creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation. Its pure subjectivity, the aspect that appears seamless and harmonious, bears witness to its opposite, to suffering in an existence alien to the subject' (41). In Althusserian terms, Wordsworth's presentation of the poetic subject in a state of alienation, encountering its pure state, its 'living soul', epitomises the way that 'men make

themselves an alienated (= imaginary) representation of their conditions of existence because these conditions of existence are themselves alienating' (Althusser 111). Indeed, in "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth's appreciation of nature emerges from 'the language of the sense, through instinctive, natural impulses (108-9). Yet this marks a poetic retreat, occasioned by the 'joyless daylight' and 'fever of the world' which '[h]ave hung upon the beatings of [his] heart' (54-6). That poetry is subjective and individual, therefore non-social, that it could '[escape] from the weight of material existence [...] is itself social in nature' (Adorno 39). The non-social entails social recognition, which is neglected by both Culler and Duff, who seem to be among the scholars which Jerome McGann criticises as demonstrating 'an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations' (1). Applying Althusserian theory to poetics, poetry is 'a substructure of the ideological instance' (Boucher 36). The ('real') processes of poetic production are concealed and replaced with a ('imaginary') representation of a poetic subject who is independent and acts freely. The poetic subject is necessarily decentred to the poetic Subject. Read in this way, Wordsworth's encounter with '[a] motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things' marks not a transcendence of the self, but its alienated condition (103-5).

Indeed, McGann argues that Wordsworth exemplifies the reflexes of Romantic ideology in poetic form. Through a process of 'displacement', the material conditions of socio-historical reality are concealed in a 'spiritual economy', which Wordsworth uses as his poetic framework (84, 88). McGann's notion of 'displacement' draws on the Freudian conception '[d]isplacement of accent' in dream-work (Freud 188). In this twofold process, 'a latent element is replaced [...] by something more remote – that is, by an allusion' and 'the psychological accent is shifted from an important element on to another which is unimportant, so that the dream appears differently centred and strange' (Freud 187-8). Freud's description of the effect of displacement in dreams – it 'produc[es] a strange and misleading condensation,

by disregarding all the thoughts that were in the centre of the latent thought process and by creating ambiguous substitutes for the deepest and chronologically most remote of those thoughts' – lays grounds for how McGann analyses Wordsworth's poetic project as ideological (Freud 208). His conception of a pure consciousness, from which 'elevated thoughts' and 'primal sympathy' emerge, according to McGann, is the consciousness identified in *The German Ideology* ("Tintern Abbey" 95, "Intimations" 186). The poem is alienated from a concrete position in material socio-historical reality and relocated within 'an immaterial plane of reality, the landscape of Wordsworth's emotional needs' (McGann 87). Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" includes the date of its composition in the full title, but Wordsworth does not explicitly mention the historical context in the poem itself, which, McGann suggests, reflects Wordsworth's political despair following the upheaval of the French Revolution, particularly during the summer of 1793, when Paris was engulfed in 'The Terror' (85-6). According to McGann, the socio-historical realities of the conflict are displaced into the personal and subjective realm yet rather than showcasing the endurance of pure consciousness, as Wordsworth intended, the displacement reveals Wordsworth's own 'imprisonment' within ideology (91). His vision of pure consciousness is thus exposed as illusory, and his sense of transcendence unattainable.

McGann's delineation of displacement pertains to Althusser's theory of ideology, whereby 'the imaginary' distorts 'the real' through abstracting the material socio-historical conditions of reality. To McGann and Althusser, this is a complete and successful process since it conceals, even 'annihilates' as McGann claims, material tensions, conflicts or inconsistencies in socio-historical reality, by presenting the illusion of society and subjectivity as whole and unified (90). In "Intimations" childhood, presented as the closest reference point to a pure state of nature, is described by Wordsworth as 'that imperial palace' (85). Wordsworth demonstrates the disparity between childhood as experienced at the time

and as remembered later in life. He seeks to revitalise the sense of immortal freedom in childhood, but charts how this leads him to be '[h]aunted for ever by the eternal mind' (114). Wordsworth shows the experience of childhood as mediated, shaped and limited by adult memory. Whilst Wordsworth is showing the mind constructing the reality through perception, he also shows awareness of the wider social forces which have constructed these perceptions. The 'imperial palace' metaphor emphasises that these ideals of childhood and pure consciousness are constructed fictions, which displace the real, material conditions. His reflections on memory reveal a subject who cannot be fully reconciled with the symbolic structures through which it attempts to understand itself. Metaphor, itself a literary form which enacts the process of displacement, demonstrates how meaning is not inherent but is relative and mediated. Although McGann seeks to highlight the inconsistencies of Romantic ideology that are overlooked by critics who demonstrate what he claims to be an as 'uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations', he implicates himself in this category (Wolfson 430). McGann does not simply undermine but wholly overlooks the subtleties within Wordsworth's poetry which show the poetic subject not as a seamless, unified whole but as marked by a fundamental sense of self-division.

McGann's oversight demonstrates that an understanding of subjectivity based purely on relations to hegemonic ideological structures is a limiting and reductive model, and thus this implicates Althusserian too. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Althusser draws on Lacanian psychoanalytical theory and extends it to his understanding of ideology, using it to bolster his theory of interpellation. Adrian Johnston explains that Lacan divides reality into three orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The real represents a kind of void, but one that is a positive condition; it is the difference within the self that constitutes the self. While the symbolic does not create the real, as the real precedes the symbolic, the real can only be understood through the symbolic framework. However, the symbolic can never fully

encapsulate the real, leaving a persistent gap between the two. The imaginary seeks to bridge this gap but inevitably fails, as the incompleteness of the symbolic order is itself the void that defines the real. Althusser claims ideology is ‘the imaginary relation of [...] individuals to the real relations in which they live’ (111). The ‘imaginary relation’ denotes the illusion that abstracts the concrete material socio-historical conditions of reality and the ‘real relation’ refers to the material class formations based on modes of production. However, Althusser does not include the symbolic order (Boucher 32). That his ideological state apparatuses represent the symbolic order perhaps is implicit but still Althusser’s appropriation of Lacanian ideas as the framework of his theory of interpellation reveals the oversights and misrepresentations which limit and undermine his understanding of the relation between ideology and subjectivity. Significantly, Althusser presents interpellation as a complete process whereby individuals are seamlessly transformed into ideological subjects, but this neglects the inherent failures of the symbolic to fully capture the real and of the imaginary to fill this gap (Boucher 33).

Žižek demonstrates an understanding of ideology and subjectivity which both develops and departs from Althusserian theory. This is seen in the way Žižek shows subjectivity as operating on two levels: the real/symbolic plane, where the subject enters the symbolic order and the symbolic/imaginary plane, where the subject is given an individual identity (Boucher 33). Žižek highlights that while the subject exists prior to ideology, it is upon entering the symbolic order that the subject is ideologically shaped. Žižek argues that ideology is neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’ but instead constitutes the framework through which reality is perceived (61). It functions as a ‘spectral’ force that attempts to fill the inherent lack in the symbolic order yet necessarily fails, as the real resists full incorporation into the symbolic (74). Thus, for Žižek, there is an inherent gap between ideology and the subject, one which is a positive condition; it is an excess of the subject. That there is a part of the

subject which cannot be accounted for in the symbolic order makes for inherent internal inconsistencies and tensions, yet these are also reflective of those within ideology itself; the failure of ideology is that it does not, indeed cannot include ‘the pre-ideological ‘kernel’’, the subject (74). Unlike Althusser, who positions his critique within a theoretical-material framework, Žižek argues that ideological critique must acknowledge its embeddedness within ideology itself. To be ‘non-ideological’ is still ideological (60); an ‘extra-ideological reality’ cannot be reached (74). Žižek instead shifts the focus of critique from uncovering ideology as a false illusion to examining how ideology structures cannot fully account for subjectivity. Accordingly, the subject’s excess, the real, offers a site for critical engagement, by highlighting the constitutive gaps in ideology.

Wordsworth’s poetic subject can be understood as a site of tension and conflict as seen in his 1805 *Prelude*, where he speaks of his fractured subjectivity:

A tranquillizing spirit presses now  
 On my corporeal frame: so wide appears  
 The vacancy between me and those days,  
 Which yet have such self-presence in my mind  
 That, sometimes, when I think of it, I seem  
 Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself  
 And of some other Being. (2:27-33)

Thomas Casalapsi identifies this as ‘the joint presence of a past self and a current self’ whose relation paradoxically bends on both ‘unbridgeable difference and inescapable contact’ (23). In “Intimations”, Wordsworth describes that ‘[t]he things which [he] ha[s] seen [he] now can see no more’ (9). On the level of Wordsworth as subject, this demonstrates the irreconcilable tensions and conflicts between his past and present selves, yet on the level of Wordsworth as poet, this shows how his past self is present in the poem through its absence in the present self. In his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”, Wordsworth claims that ‘there is no object standing

between the Poet and the image of things' (538). This does not reveal, as McGann suggests, the displacement of material socio-historical tensions and conflicts into a poetic form of harmony. Instead, Wordsworth demonstrates that poetic harmony is constructed by the poet because the poem is *his* 'image of things'. By complementing Wordsworth's poetics with Žižek's understanding of the subject, it becomes clear how disunity subsists in the form of the poem. Wordsworth represents 'the subject's experience of its own subjectivity' and characterises this with a fundamental and inherent lack (Quinney 324, Bedsole 434). What Wordsworth refers to in his *Prelude* as 'vacancy' is this excess of the 'real' subject, the 'other Being' who necessarily antagonises the 'symbolic' self; the 'imaginary' poet attempts to use the 'symbolic' poem to capture the 'real' experience yet necessarily fails.

Žižek claims that the '*place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality*' (70). When Wordsworth writes, in "Intimations", '[w]e will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind', his poetry is taking up this very place that Žižek describes, examining subjectivity through its absence as a form of ideological critique (184-5). While a non-ideological reality is an impossibility, the interplay between subjectivity and artistic production, as illustrated in Wordsworth's work, offers a constructive way to interrogate ideology. In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth sees, in 'gleams of half-extinguished thought' and 'recognitions dim and faint', that '[t]he picture of the mind revives again' (58-9, 61); he recognises that an understanding of subjectivity can be found in those vague, ill-defined and incomprehensible parts of oneself. Wordsworth describes the 'aching joys' and 'dizzy raptures' of his youth, which 'are now no more' (83-5). Happiness is marked by pain and disorientation, as captured in the intense yearning he recalls experiencing:

[t]he sounding cataract  
 Haunted [him] like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to [him]  
 An appetite' (76-80).

The impulses of 'passion' and 'appetite' that the natural world stimulated to the young Wordsworth seems to reflect a past desire for unity and wholeness; this looking outwards for internal satisfaction indicates the ideological reflexes of his consciousness. Whilst Wordsworth grieves for his younger self, he transforms pain into hope; 'for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense' (87-8). It is by turning inwards and examining the fractures within consciousness that he reveals the contradictions that ideology functions to conceal. Wordsworth's stoical reflection lies in a recognition of loss, which then can be seen as excess, as the 'real' subject.

Ultimately, Wordsworth's exploration of his fragmented subjectivity divided between two consciousnesses is complemented greatly by Žižek's work, whose development and criticism of Althusser's theory reveals the constitutive tensions within both subjectivity and ideology. Although Althusser's theory of interpellation informs an understanding of the subject as ideological, his framework, centred on material ideological structures, is insufficient. Wordsworth's divided subjectivity as represented in his poetry reveals the impossibility of ideological closure. The poetic imagination is itself a form of excess, an 'overflow of powerful feelings'. Whilst it does not offer an escape from ideology, it allows for a clearer vision; '[t]hough inland far we be, / Our souls have sight of that immortal sea' ("Intimations" 167-168).

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