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Custer's Ideological Fantasy

William Heyen contrasts two cultures in his book of poems *Crazy Horse in Stillness* (1996), through his portrayal of Crazy Horse (1849-1877), Lakota warrior, and General Armstrong Custer (1839-1876), leader of the United States' Seventh Cavalry. Heyen's Custer, a cultural hero, sees himself as the instrument of manifest destiny, of American expansionist freedom, and thus finds it possible and necessary to repress feelings of guilt and feelings of emotional connection to the culture it is his duty to annihilate. Crazy Horse is portrayed as more open to his feelings and dream visions, and could be said to represent a sentimental culture - where sentimentality is defined as that which is characterized by feeling at least as much as reason. Custer's culture is in the grip of an ideology of Logos, of reason, which is sustained and propelled by an ideological fantasy that symptomatically reveals its own unconscious desire - to come to terms with its other, sentimentality. Today, the United States and Western civilization still operate within an ideology of Logos, and therefore, for the contemporary writer invested in developing a sociological poetics, confronting the Real of this cultural desire may inform aesthetic decisions and literary taste.

Slavoj Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, shows that ideology is not just a false consciousness, a mask hiding reality underneath, but rather a kind of reality wherein subjects must turn a blind eye to the contradictions within the ideology in order to maintain and reproduce it. To demonstrate the mindset of the subjects of ideology within this basic definition, Žižek quotes Marx: 'They do not know it, but they are doing it' (Žižek 1999: 28). Žižek outlines critic Peter Sloterdijk's formulation of cynically driven ideology as a consciousness that 'recognizes, […] takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but […] still finds reasons to retain the mask' (Žižek 1999: 29). He describes the cynical mindset with a twist on Marx's statement: 'They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it' (Žižek 1999: 29).

Žižek complicates Sloterdijk's notion of cynical ideology by exploring the deeper level of ideological fantasy, which he defines as 'the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself' (Žižek 1999: 30). Returning to Marx's syllogism, he argues that the illusion of ideology rests not in the knowing, but in the doing:

> What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is

> therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy. (Žižek 1999: 32-33)

Žižek uses the language of psychoanalysis, pointing to the notion that ideological fantasy masks a subconscious desire. In keeping with Freud's and Marx's homologous techniques of analyzing symptoms in order to pinpoint a pathological imbalance, and with Lacan's theory that '*the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed in the dream*' (Žižek 1999: 47), Žižek asserts that 'the only way to break free from the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream' (1999: 48).

Heyen's Custer is often confronted with twinges of foreboding, disturbing feelings he shrugs off in order to maintain the ideological fantasy that sustains his violent actions in the real world. In 'Buffalo Dusk', Custer finds a frozen buffalo corpse and has a momentary waking vision:

> For a moment, the creature shuddered, &, but no,
> he'd only imagined. Even for an instant,
> behemoth could not reawaken into its dream
> of a thousand generations. Later,
> Custer kept looking back at it until
> dusk's red sunlight fell behind it
> as though from one dead star onto another. (Heyen 1996: 94)

The vision of the shuddering buffalo comes just after Custer places his lips over the animal's nostril and runs his bare hands over its side in an attempt to resurrect it (Heyen 1996: 93). This uncharacteristic, unreasoned act of compassion is not in line with Custer's ideology; one might say he is letting his subconscious guide his actions in this moment. He sees the dead buffalo shudder, but the '&' that might have led him to his subconscious desire is cut off immediately by the ideology of reason: 'but no,/he'd only imagined…'. Custer represses his vision and resorts to ideological fantasy in order to keep from waking into the Real of his desire.

Custer's backward looks show he is disturbed by his momentary departure from the ideology of reason. This is because his unconscious has given him a glimpse of the pathological imbalance inherent in his ideology. The imagery of red dusk and dead stars points to a lingering guilt that the man carries, repressed, for the blood he has spilled and the mass death he has caused. Custer walks away from his vision in order to sustain and reproduce the ideological fantasy that enables him to kill and, in so doing, achieve cultural fame.

In contrast, Heyen's Crazy Horse embraces his vision of the dead buffalo, illustrating his sense of connection to his subconscious, and his textual position as the foil for Custer's ideological imbalance:

> **Where the Herds Are Born**
>
> As Crazy Horse walked to the dead buffalo,
> its eye, the one facing him, palpitated,
> & kept growing. He came to that eye
> higher than his head, nothing else there
> to break the moonlit horizon, that eye's
>
> pupil a door through which he walked.
> Inside, riversource, a story. He tried,

later, to remember what he'd seen or done,
or what had been done to him, but couldn't,
but believed that eye in his breast from then on. (Heyen 1996: 88)

Unlike Custer, Crazy Horse follows the '&' of his dead buffalo vision into the doorway of his subconscious dream world. He has a spiritual-emotional experience that does not register in his conscious memory, but which leaves him a changed man. Where Custer suppresses his vision and is subsequently haunted by it, Crazy Horse follows his waking dream to 'riversource, a story', and afterward consciously believes that he carries the vision, symbolized by buffalo eye, inside his body. The tone of Crazy Horse's buffalo dream is empowerment through spiritual-emotional experience, whereas Custer's is guilt by way of suppressed desire and retreat into ideological fantasy.

As warriors, Crazy Horse and Custer both kill, but Crazy Horse is a different kind of warrior from Custer. More than his fellow Lakota, he seeks visions, constantly striving, through these experiences, to expand his understanding of self in relation to 'the Great Mystery'.

Trance

He wanted nothing, except that, but what was it,
but no matter. When he fingered hailstones onto his chest,
his nipples filled & tightened. The Oglala language
sputtered a few last syllables behind his eyes,
& then that, but what was it, but no matter. . . .

Part of his horse as he rode, part of the air, invisible. . . .

Later, he remembered the riding toward, the arrival
wherein challenge-cries & death rattles
& the snortings of horses all threaded the shawl
of the Great Mystery of the single word of being, & he
wanted nothing, except that, but what of that other

part of it, the falling out of it? Because of that,

he would not celebrate with the others, would not
talk around the fire, describe, explain, boast,
but took himself away. Alone under the sky
of yellow wolf-howl & scents of green smoke,
this Crazy Horse, the Strange One, slept himself awake. (Heyen 1996: 128)

For Crazy Horse, battle is a spiritual-emotional experience, much like a dream state. The poem begins the moment before his 'trance' begins. Once in trance, he is not thinking in the rational sense, as signified by the trailing off of words - representing linear thought - into white space. When language returns, after the battle, and Crazy Horse recalls the memory of the experience, he feels he has approached the Great Mystery of being.

What bothers Crazy Horse is the 'falling out of it', 'it' being a pronoun with another ambiguous pronoun, 'that', as antecedent. He is not interested in reasoning out the answer to 'what was it', moving on instead to the heart of experience itself. Implicitly, that which Heyen's Crazy Horse desires is beyond the reach of language, is the kind of pure spiritual-emotional experience characterized by the absence of language. In an attempt to return to 'it', he shuns social celebration in order to 'sleep himself awake'. Crazy Horse displays

an unusual (even for the Lakota) degree of confrontation with the Real of his desire, by an engagement with the dream. In the moment of doing, Crazy Horse's actions are in line with the Real of his desire, and accordingly, he is not portrayed as a character suffering from repressed desire. Rather, he continually seeks the object of his desire (which cannot be grasped and held, but only approached) through action, attempting to sleep 'himself awake' through spiritual-emotional experiences such as battle.

Custer's approach to war is very different.

> **Custer Describes His Mind**
>
> When I become engaged in a battle
> and a great emergency arises,
> everything that I ever heard or studied
> focuses in my mind, as if the scene
>
> lay under a magnifying glass….
> My mind works instantaneously but
> always with everything I have known
> brought to bear on the situation. (Heyen 1996: 103)

This is a snapshot of what Custer knows in the moment of doing, the moment that, according to Žižek, ideological fantasy works to support. In the heat of battle, Custer feels none of the twinges that might alert him to the weak point of his ideology and allow him to awaken into the Real of his desire. *Everything* he ever heard or studied becomes a support of this moment, including the moments in which he has experienced, and overcome, doubt or hesitation. In the midst of a violent reality created by his culture's ideology, his actions appear natural, his worldview seamless.

But even if Custer were to experience doubt in the moment of battle, this would not, in Žižek's view, lead him away from the grip of his ideology:

> What distinguishes this Pascalian 'custom' from insipid behaviourist wisdom ('the content of your belief is conditioned by your factual behaviour') is the paradoxical status of a *belief before belief*: by following a custom, the subject believes without knowing it, so that the final conversion is merely a formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed. In other words, what the behaviourist reading of Pascalian 'custom' misses is the crucial fact that the external custom is always a material support for the subject's unconscious. (Žižek 1999: 40)

In the moment of doing, Custer has a cerebral experience, a feeling of being separated from the moment by a magnifying glass, showing that he has already made the final conversion, wherein he consciously recognizes and experiences the superiority of reason. A deeper, Žižekian reading would emphasize the unconscious belief that brought Custer into position as the executor of Manifest Destiny. Through his actions, he has already accepted the ideology that structures his social reality, and repressed the unconscious desire that might allow him to awake into the Real of his desire, which would subvert his culture's ideology, and the reality it has created.

Žižek defines the symptom as 'a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation', and states that 'the Marxian procedure of "criticism of ideology" […] consists in determining a point of breakdown *heterogeneous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve

its closure, its accomplished form' (Žižek 1999: 21). In a criticism of the ideology of Freedom, the Marxist tack is to identify the lack of freedom that makes possible freedoms of speech, press, commerce, etc.; namely, the exploitation of human labourers that is a systemic necessity within capitalism (1999: 21). These social realities, heterogeneous to the ideal of Freedom, are necessary to the function of capitalism, and embody the point of breakdown in the system that underlies the ideology.

In the case of Custer as portrayed in *Crazy Horse in Stillness*, the symptom of an ideology of Logos is a repression of sentimentality as expressed through the subconscious or visionary dream-state. It follows that the repression of sentimentality is the point of breakdown heterogeneous to the ideology of reason, and is at the same time necessary for the ideology to achieve its closure and hegemony. Heyen portrays Crazy Horse as the subject of a culture that works outside this ideology, embracing spiritual-emotional experience and using it as a form of empowerment. To Custer, Crazy Horse and his people represent the sentimental, the very underbelly of his own ideology, which he must repress in himself in order to maintain and perpetuate his own illusory perception of the world. The extermination of Crazy Horse's people is therefore analogous to a violent repression of sentimentality, the pathological symptom inherent to the ideological hegemony of Logos. Both actions are necessary for the maintenance of Custer's ideological fantasy, which is also that of the dominant paradigm in the society he represents.

If Lacan is correct that 'the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed in the dream', then following the symptom of the fantasy inherent to the functioning of an ideology of Logos should lead to the discovery of the ideology's unconscious desire. If Custer had not suppressed his vision of the buffalo, where would it have led him? Presumably, like Crazy Horse, he would have had a spiritual-emotional experience. The fantasy Custer maintains by repressing this impulse is the inferiority of sentimentality, the very notion necessary to ensure the superiority of reason. The unconscious desire inhered in this fantasy is that experience which would result from a refusal to awaken from the spiritual-emotional dream state - that is, an experience characterized by the absence of logical thought.

As Heyen represents it through Custer, the ideology of Logos lacks, and wants to come to terms with its Other, with sentimentality. This is a paradox, because in doing so, the system's illusory nature would be revealed, its power stripped. The fantasy of sentimental inferiority is necessary to the maintenance and reproduction of Logos as a ruling ideology. In the first place, Logos only understands sentimentality in as much as the subject can identify its Other, and use it as a mask for its own inherent lack of closure. In desiring a conversation with its Other, Logos in effect desires its own demise. For Custer, coming to terms with the Real of his desire would require him to acknowledge guilt and cease the very behavior that lends him his cultural status, something his ego does not allow. This desire to reconcile with the Other must be violently suppressed if the ideology supporting this character's reality is to be maintained and reproduced.

Through the figures of Custer and Crazy Horse, Heyen establishes a dialectic conversation of sorts between Logos and sentimentality, both indirectly throughout the book, and directly once the characters have both perished and entered a state of pure being:

Tarot

> Crazy Horse shuffled & offered the deck to Custer
> to cut. Light circled, stars im- & ex-
> ploded in their chests in this vastness of afterworld
> in which they were particles in an eye-mote
> of the Great Mystery fulfilled. The deck
> glittered transparently with hanged men, hermits,
> lovers whose stories are still being played out
> elsewhere. You suspect the rest: Custer cut,
> the Other began laying cards out on Time's table,
> the cosmos trembled like a newborn at the nipple
> when mother caresses its head, & milk first flows. (Heyen 1996: 254)

Here, the Sublime object of desire finds embodiment. Relieved of flesh, Heyen's Custer and Crazy Horse are like gods, a piece of the 'Great Mystery fulfilled', dealing out fate to the living. There is a sense of rightness as desire is fulfilled on a plane beyond corporeal and cultural limits. One experiences, simultaneously, the displeasure of realizing the Great Mystery is not entirely fulfilled, and the pleasure at coming a step closer to understanding the vastness of that mystery. This combination of sentiments is, by Kantian definition, precisely the feeling of the Sublime (Žižek 1999: 203).

In 'Tarot', the speaker confesses Crazy Horse's relationship as 'Other' to the subject, who is Custer, revealing the truth of its own ideological premise. *Crazy Horse in Stillness* is written within the paradigm of Logos, and the construction of Crazy Horse as character is enacted through this lens. While Heyen may appear to establish Crazy Horse and Custer as equal and autonomous subjects in dialectical conversation, ultimately the received hierarchy of Western subject and Native object is maintained. The contrast between Crazy Horse and Custer is therefore more telling of Western culture than it is of any Native American culture, especially the Lakota.

A Žižekian reading of Heyen's *Crazy Horse in Stillness* shows that American culture, and by extension any logocentric culture, desires a conversation with its object, sentimentality. Confronting the antagonistic Real of this desire, announced through Heyen's text, can enable the writer to break free from the power of her culture's ideological dream, and thus inform creative writing practice and pedagogy. In his comparative treatise, which positions the American writing workshop in conversation with Australian creative writing programs, Paul Dawson states:

> A sociological poetics would thus require a recognition that *aesthetic* or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or *political* choice: the choice to employ social languages and the ideologies they embody in certain ways, and hence the choice to position a literary work in relation to these languages, as an active intervention in the ideological work they perform. (Dawson 2005: 211)

According to Dawson, a poetics concerned with literature's relationship to society would find politics and ideology relevant to every aesthetic decision. The idea of establishing a dialectic exchange between sentimentality and Logos could therefore be applicable to matters of craft in every genre.

For the fiction writer, engagement with sentimentality entails first wrestling for a definition of the term. John Gardner, whose texts on craft are commonly recommended to American MFA students, claims that sentimentality, along

with frigidity and mannerism, is a fault, not of technique, but of the soul (Gardner 1991: 115). He does not specify exactly what fault this might be, but does provide a definition of the term:

> Sentimentality, in all its forms, is the attempt to get some effect without providing due cause. (I take it for granted that the reader understands the difference between *sentiment* in fiction, that is, emotion or feeling, and *sentimentality*, emotion or feeling that rings false, usually because achieved by some form of cheating or exaggeration. Without sentiment, fiction is worthless. Sentimentality, on the other hand, can make mush of the finest characters, actions, and ideas.) The theory of fiction as a vivid, uninterrupted dream in the reader's mind logically requires an assertion that legitimate cause in fiction can be of only one kind: drama; that is, character in action. (Gardner 1991: 115)

Sentimentality is predicated on a lack of dramatic cause for emotional provocation in the reader. Sentiment is the desired response in a reader, but sentimentality amounts to a failure to achieve it. *Logically*, drama is the only legitimate means toward the desired end of evoking sentiment in a reader.

Gardner's definition of sentimentality contrasts with the one set forth in this essay, where sentimentality is defined as that which is characterized by feeling at least as much as reason. A slippery relationship exists between these seemingly disparate meanings of the same word. The definition set forth here is a slight variation on Merriam-Webster's definition 1b: 'resulting from feeling rather than reason or thought'. 'Rather than' has been replaced with 'at least as much as' in recognition of the nature of ideology, which, as a Žižekian reading of Heyen demonstrates, is threatened with annihilation by the prospect of a *balance* between itself and its Other.

Gardner's pejorative notion of sentimentality - the attempt to get some effect without providing due cause through dramatic events - corresponds with definitions of the word that focus on affectation, such as the following in a handbook of literary terms:

> A literary work that tries to convey the finer emotions but fails to provide sufficient grounds within the work for them. In a typical sentimental plot, human conflicts are resolved not through the inner workings and interactions of the force in conflict - say, two friends in love with the same woman - but through the invocation of a standard emotion external to the plot - in this case, fraternal devotion - one putatively honored by the characters, the author, and the reader-audience. The real ingredients of the conflict - the rivalry of desires - is never authentically engaged. Instead, it is dissipated by an assertion of conventional sentiment. For this reason, many writers and critics have found something false about sentimentality. Poet Wallace Stevens remarked, 'Sentimentality is the failure of feeling,' and novelist D.H. Lawrence said, 'Sentimentalism is the working off on yourself of feelings you haven't really got'. (Kennedy, Gioia, and Bauerlein 2005: 138)

In traditional fiction, feeling in the reader stems from the conflict. The writer should not import a 'standard emotion' such as fraternal devotion, and assume the reader will feel the pain of two brothers torn apart despite their natural love for one another. Rather, the 'rivalry of desires' would be the point of highest

dramatic tension. If the writer engages these 'real ingredients of the conflict', she will have a higher chance of success.

Affectation, presumption, cheating - these are things the fiction writer would, logically, want to avoid. But what of the unstable ground between contrasting definitions of sentimentality? Might one inform the other in ways that are hard to see?

A specific example of the way this unstable relationship informs pedagogy involves the notion of psychic distance, commonly discussed in terms of point of view. Gardner defines psychic distance as 'the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story' (Gardner 1991: 111). Burroway and Weinberg, whose textbook *Writing Fiction* is also widely used in American MFA programs, use the roughly analogous term 'authorial distance', which they defines as 'the degree to which we as readers feel on the one hand intimacy and identification with, or on the other hand detachment and alienation from, the characters in a story' (Burroway and Weinberg 2003: 287). For Burroway and Weinberg, the defining relationship is between reader and character; for Gardner it is between reader and events. Minor differences in terminology and definition notwithstanding (though they are not without implication), both seem to be talking about the same phenomenon.

Gardner's and Burroway and Weinberg's chapters on point of view diverge in terms of stylistic preference. Burroway and Weinberg seem comfortable with a tight, limited third-person perspective, while Gardner points out what he sees as the limitations of this point of view:

> The third-person-subjective point of view has its uses, but it also has severe limits, so that something is wrong when it becomes the dominant point of view in fiction, as it has been for years in the United States. […] It locks the reader inside the character's mind (even more so than Henry James' 'center of consciousness,' where we have an interpreting narrator), however limited that mind may be, so that when the character's judgments are mistaken or inadequate, the reader's more correct judgments must come from a cool withdrawal. (Gardner 1991: 156)

For Gardner, psychic distance operates paradoxically. It is harder for the reader to relate to a character when the distance is too little, because in the absence of any narrative mediation of the character's thoughts, the reader may feel jilted upon realizing the limitations of the mind in which she is traveling.

Cool withdrawal is the desired effect when constructing an unreliable narrator, and Gardner admits as much (1991: 156). 'But even when the fiction is benevolent,' he asserts, 'the third-person-subjective point of view can achieve little grandeur. It thrives on intimacy and something like gossip. It peeks through a keyhole, never walks through an open field' (1991: 157). Gardner goes on to extol the omniscient point of view for its ability to vary psychic distance. A lens capable of rolling out for a long shot and also moving in close enables variety and creates a less 'claustrophobic' texture for the reader (1991: 157). It may be, however, that Gardner's 'reader' is not a universal phenomenon, but rather a reader who shares his particular, ideologically informed sensibilities:

> The noblest writers, like Isak Dinesen and Leo Tolstoy, rise above the pettiness and unseemly familiarity of third person subjective […] by means of the authorial-omniscient point of

> view. In the authorial omniscient, the writer speaks as, in effect, God. (Gardner 1991: 157)

Gardner equates nobility with Godliness. He characterizes the familiarity of close psychic distance as 'petty', 'unseemly', 'something like gossip', all of these judgmental and loaded descriptors. One might question whether nobility and grandeur are universal goals for writers, and in fact a comparison between Gardner and Burroway shows that they are not.

Burroway emphasizes the positive attributes of third-person-subjective point of view, saying, 'The advantage of the limited omniscient voice its immediacy' (Burroway and Weinberg 2003: 258). For Burroway, the familiarity of a close authorial distance is not petty or unseemly. Recalling that. in *Writing Fiction*, the focus of authorial distance is the relationship between reader and *character*, a difference between her and Gardner's aesthetic tastes begins to emerge. Burroway includes the following quote from Toni Morrison:

> There should be the illusion that it's the character's point of view, when in fact it isn't; it's really the narrator who is there but who doesn't make herself … known in that role … What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along. (cited Burroway and Weinberg 2003: 259)

Asking the reader to participate as he goes along, to *be* that character, means diminished authorial distance. For Morrison, the less distance the better.

This stylistic preference, shared by Morrison and Burroway, would fit neatly into Gardner's definition of the term sentimental. For him, emotion or feeling in this texture would be likely to ring false since the style is based on a supposition that the intimacy associated with diminished authorial distance is an attribute, that 'the reader' is interested in participating as he goes along rather than watching from a distance. This reader must be different from Gardner's reader, for whom, *logically*, the only legitimate cause for emotional response in traditional fiction is character in action. This predilection toward drama as the emotive catalyst explains why, for Gardner, psychic distance is defined as a relationship between reader and *events*.

The slippage in our chain of signifiers and its potential consequences of readership now become evident. Any emotion the cause of which has not been dramatized might fit within the definition of sentimental that focuses on affectation, and yet, in Morrison's and Burroway's preferred style, any number of emotions might be the result of events not dramatized. If the reader is being asked to participate, he is, in effect, being asked to feel what the character is feeling, regardless of the cause. Perhaps the thesis that 'the reader' will *only* feel emotions stemming from dramatic events is not universally true. And yet today, writing within an ideology of Logos, the received wisdom is that sentiment must be *properly* earned; sentiment for sentiment's sake earns only the pejorative label sentimental - because it is characterized by feeling at least as much as by reason.

Since opinions about psychic distance are a matter of stylistic taste, choices concerning psychic/authorial distance intersect with questions of style and intended audience. If Dawson is correct that '*aesthetic* or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or *political* choice', then tracing stylistic preferences to their ideological origins might enable writers to discover the fantasies structuring the reality of creative

writing pedagogy. Once those fantasies are unveiled, the writer will be better prepared to confront the political implications of her aesthetic choices, to do what she is knowing in the practice of her art.

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