

## Reflection Statement

The dynamic relationship between context, author, and text is of fundamental concern to any critic intending to analyse a literary work in any capacity; yet beyond this solely academic perspective, this connection can reveal with startling lucidity the foundational similarities which link writers of seeming contextual disparity to both one another, and ourselves. It is this dual intention which drives my Major Work '*Perhaps a lunatic*'. Within, I aim to investigate the universally corruptive influence of institutional power, utilising the fictocritical form to interweave critical response exploring the socio-political pressures of certain literary works (namely *Inferno*<sup>1</sup> and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*<sup>2</sup>) with a more intimate (and imaginative) exploration of a singular experience in our own contemporary setting.

Within the university setting of my Major Work, I have aspired to portray a convincingly real transformation of my protagonist; from a figure who has lost a sense of worth or drive; to a figure who finds purpose through desperation and hope; and who finally embraces a deranged comfort in his self-perceived failure. It is in his appearance as well as his internal monologue that this evolution is most recognisable – layered in “dirt and filth which had not been washed off in weeks”<sup>3</sup>, before his transformation “from despair, to standing on the brink of a professional Renaissance”<sup>4</sup>. The microcosm of the literary world I have created does not aspire to brush the magnitude of *Inferno* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in its scope, but draws upon the fundamental universality of the aforementioned issue of institutional power in degrading social and intellectual freedoms to explore the concept I have envisioned with intertextual pertinence. I symbolically reflect this through the mirroring of my own protagonist with the

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<sup>1</sup> Alighieri, D. (1320) *Inferno*. Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<sup>2</sup> Orwell, G. (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

<sup>3</sup> Major Work, pg. 3

<sup>4</sup> Major Work, pg. 14

authors who have inspired him; “An apparition of other men flickered in the distorted glass – he could see the beaked nose of a Florentine author, the smirk-sneer of another. Others, consumptive; jowly; austere; intense. They all shared his haunting, contemplative stare.”<sup>5</sup> In these figures, he sees himself – the same concerns which have driven them to create their thematically diverse landscapes now empower my protagonist. This juxtaposition of the drastically diverse physical features with the shared ‘haunted’ gaze is illustrative of the universal dissatisfactions which unite them, despite their contextual disparities. As my protagonist begins to lose his grasp upon reality, the fictional worlds of *Inferno* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fuse with his external perspective – “The corners of the room were fading from his vision, blending to the peeling floral wallpaper with twisting, sinister vines of cobweb and dust. He couldn’t see the separation of one wall from another; he was dizzy, exhausted, bound, euphoric.” Emblematic not only of the mental toll the conflict has had upon his psyche, but also of the concerns of Dante and Orwell with which he aligns himself, this passage simultaneously explores insanity and captivity with sanity and freedom; harkening back to Orwell’s notion of ‘Doublethink’.

How our perception of the world and its iniquities might be shaped by the insidious political forces of our time has long been a consideration brewing at the back of my mind. It was only in my reading of *Inferno* for the Extension 1 module ‘Texts, Culture and Value’ and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for the ‘Reimagined Worlds’ elective, however, that I first considered the relationship the past might have with this present concern. This concept guided my research into New Historicist literary theory; “a shift from the ‘artificial’ toward the ‘empirical’... presented as ‘evidence’”<sup>6</sup> best describes the relationship New Historicists try to find between

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<sup>5</sup> Major Work, pg. 2-3

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, C. Greenblatt, S. (2001) *Practicing New Historicism*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 25

literature and its context. I employed these concepts within my own major work through the juxtaposition of Machiavelli's *The Prince* with Dante's *Inferno* – the objective position within *The Prince* formed the 'artificial' lens through which I could view the 'empirical' text, *Inferno*. It was with this perspective that I aligned my initial notion of the "political sphere as an avenue for the exercise of social control"<sup>7</sup>, educated through the collected theories of social theorist Michel Foucault. The nature in which the "classical order<sup>8</sup>... governs the theories of discourse"<sup>9</sup> typifies the relationship I have aspired to highlight between political friction and literary inspiration. Assimilating Foucault's social theories with my understanding of New Historicism has led me to produce such thesis within my critical essays as "Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (1320) embodies the ultimate expression of his numerous dissatisfactions and anxieties, birthed from the instability that had shattered the fragile political atmosphere of Florence."<sup>10</sup> Further, an understanding of societies as being "made up not of isolated elements... but of organic structures"<sup>11</sup> helped me to recognise the relationship between the individual and the institutions which influence them – exemplified through Orwell's own concern for the destruction of meaning in language, "The obliteration of meaning and individuality within the state [which] in turn led to a monopolisation of historical fact"<sup>12</sup>.

The interplay between these works and my own creative fragments relied upon the subversion of the fictocritical form to suit my unique purpose – to create a text in which the critical content informs the creative elements of my piece, in contrast to the typical fashion of the mode, wherein the creative narrative supplements the critical discourse. It was with this

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<sup>7</sup> Sheridan, A. (1980) *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, Tavistock Publications, p. 64

<sup>8</sup> Referring to archaic/traditional political structures.

<sup>9</sup> Sheridan, A. (1980) *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, Tavistock Publications, p. 65

<sup>10</sup> Major Work, pg.

<sup>11</sup> Sheridan, A. (1980) *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, Tavistock Publications, p. 65

<sup>12</sup> Major Work, pg. 6

structural intention in mind I explored the “intertextual collage”<sup>13</sup> within fictocritical texts such as Noel King’s *My Life Without Steve: Postmodernism, Ficto-criticism, and the Paraliterary* and Stephen Muecke’s *The Fall: Fictocritical Writing*<sup>14</sup>. The strength of the fictocritical form lies in its rejection of concrete boundaries between any mode, or even theory; a form which is “still in the process of becoming.”<sup>15</sup> This notion lent itself nicely to my aforementioned fusing of New Historicist theory with the social theories of Michel Foucault; “bringing together fragments of available cultural discourses”<sup>16</sup> so that I might develop new insight into my original concern. In similar fashion to how Margaret Atwood has constructed her novel *Hag-Seed*<sup>17</sup> using *The Tempest*<sup>18</sup> (a relationship studied for the Advanced English module ‘Textual Conversations’), I have made copious use of intertextual allusions to *Inferno* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* within my creative sections, with a dual intention in mind; first, to create an engaging narrative with contemporary relevance; and more crucially, to deconstruct the intrinsic nature of these texts in the emotional capacity that only imaginative writing can aspire to do. “It is real. More than real. Hyper-real.”<sup>19</sup>, echoing the notion of the simulacrum<sup>20</sup> in Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*<sup>21</sup>, delineates the nature of representation within art and how it might influence our own external ‘reality’. Constructing my literary world with the third-person limited perspective enables me to blur the distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ in similar fashion, the gradual mental degradation of my protagonist mirroring the protagonist of *Hag-Seed*; “Bea stood in the hallway. That liminal space. *Purgatorio*”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> King, N. (1994) *My Life Without Steve: Postmodernism, Ficto-criticism, and the Paraliterary*, Southern Review, p. 272

<sup>14</sup> Muecke, S. (2010) *The Fall: Fictocritical Writing*, Flinders University

<sup>15</sup> King, N. (1994) *My Life Without Steve: Postmodernism, Ficto-criticism, and the Paraliterary*, Southern Review, p. 270

<sup>16</sup> King, N. (1994) *My Life Without Steve: Postmodernism, Ficto-criticism, and the Paraliterary*, Southern Review, p. 272

<sup>17</sup> Atwood, M. (2016). *Hag-Seed*, Hogarth

<sup>18</sup> Shakespeare, W. (1611). *The Tempest*.

<sup>19</sup> Atwood, M. (2016) *Hag-Seed*, Hogarth, p. 139

<sup>20</sup> An image or representation of someone or something.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (1983). *Simulacra and Simulation*.

<sup>22</sup> Major Work, pg. 23

In my Major Work, I quote Flannery O’Conner as saying “Everywhere I go, I’m asked if I think the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them. There’s many a best-seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.” It is this statement which I feel encapsulates the relevance of *Perhaps a lunatic* to our own contemporary condition. While the critical analysis within my piece is intended to convey the universality of my concept, it is ultimately the creative writing which highlights the true intention of my work; to expose reductive and repressive academic attitudes within *our* context. In this instance of intellectual subjugation – “The issue is with the idea itself, Professor. It’s entirely unfashionable.”<sup>23</sup> – I hope to have evoked within my audience not purely pity, but as an extension of this, outrage. The parallels between my work and the current socio-political events are not insignificant; recent headlines such as “UTS loses application to appeal against reinstatement of academic sacked for not publishing enough research”<sup>24</sup> (July 9, 2020) and “Critical test of academic freedom for Australian universities”<sup>25</sup> (August 4, 2020) serve to highlight the continued relevance of my Major Work to the academic landscape. With this in mind, my intended audience is predominantly younger academics concerned with issues of social justice in the intellectual sphere, and less significantly, readers who are purely interested in works which concern themselves with drastic manipulation of form to inspire profound post-modern thought. As such, I would seek to have my work published in the literary journal *Overland*, a journal which describes itself as ‘Australia’s only radical literary magazine’<sup>26</sup> with a ‘mission to foster new, original, and progressive writing’<sup>27</sup> – a fitting setting for my piece, which is itself ‘radical’ in both form and content.

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<sup>23</sup> Major Work, pg. 10

<sup>24</sup> Patty, A. *UTS loses application to appeal against reinstatement of academic sacked for not publishing enough research*. The Sydney Morning Herald. July 9, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Pearson, E. *Critical test of academic freedom for Australian universities*. The Sydney Morning Herald. August 4, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Arauen, E. Dunk, J. *About Overland*. Overland. 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Arauen, E. Dunk, J. *About Overland*. Overland. 2020.

While Joseph's mental deterioration invites a disheartening reading, the cohesion I have created between my critical pieces and the creative story should be a revelation to the astute reader. Neither *Inferno* nor *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are completely devoid of hope; the flicker of repentance, of liberation, is what drives an audience to continue reading, to consider the nature of the dystopia which has been fashioned. Conflicting positions should, in our modern society, be a source for creative discourse; yet instead they have become a far more insidious tool in the hands of those with power. It is this reality which Dante and Orwell rejected and critiqued, the loss of artistic integrity, taken by the authority so that dissent might be silenced. And as I'm certain Joseph would have you believe:

“Perhaps a lunatic was simply a minority of one.” – George Orwell

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