Absent Causality and Shocking Connections: The Question of Revolutionary Reading in Louis Althusser and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*

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On November 16, 1980, a shocked, agitated, and confused Louis Althusser ran into the courtyard of the École normale supérieure in Paris proclaiming that he had strangled his wife to death while massaging her neck. Even though he immediately took responsibility for Hélène's killing, his motives remained elusive to his colleagues, to himself, and to the police investigation that quickly ensued. In light of his obviously impaired psychiatric state and the absence of a cause for the murder, doctors declared him mentally unfit to stand trial. His case was thus declared a juridical *non-lieu*, and he was, for the French state, no longer a subject capable of acquittal or conviction. Accordingly, he remained unread.

Following his release from the psychiatric hospital at Sainte-Anne, Althusser spent his remaining seven years attempting to (re)compose his subjectivity by writing two versions of his autobiography under the titles *The Facts* (*Les Faits*) and *The Future Lasts Forever* (*L'Avenir dure Longtemps*). In the latter text, Althusser frames his narrative around the event of the murder, and he provides a critique of the assumption that he "benefited from being declared unfit to plead" (*Future* 13). For he claims that, regardless of how he is judged by the reader, it can "only help him live" to be read (*Future* 286). Additionally, he recounts the transformations in his thinking that led him to formulate his late philosophy of aleatory materialism—the philosophy wherein history is a "process without subjects," an effect of encounters without cause (Althusser, "Lenin" 122).

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Many scholars have cited the murder to discredit Althusser's structural-Marxist philosophy of aleatory materialism; in particular, the strongest attacks have focused on his philosophy of the subject. Critics of post-structuralism, non-dialectical Marxism, and psychoanalysis have argued that when the subject is construed as a non-agent of contingent or structural encounters, it is impossible to adhere to a system of ethics or effect political change.[1] While I believe that Althusser largely fails to explicitly refute this contention in *The Future Lasts Forever*, it is not the purpose of this essay to investigate that text or to determine his culpability in the murder. Instead, I cite Althusser's wish to have his life restored through being read in order to make the following claim: the foundational principle of Althusser's philosophy of aleatory materialism is that, in a contingent world detached from transcendent causes, subjective and political necessity can only be grasped as an effect of reading itself.[2] For Althusser, then, it is impossible to divorce the question of reading from the question of life.

In *The Book of Daniel* (1971), E.L. Doctorow delicately weaves together these same questions of reading, historical causality, semiotic indeterminacy, and political action into a nearly impenetrable web of theoretical, historical, and narrative connections. Doctorow's meta-fictional novel is based on Daniel Lewin's attempt to determine his role within the story of his parents' electrocution and the political failures of the Old Left. His deceased parents are Rochelle and Paul Isaacson—Doctorow's fictionalized versions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg—who were executed in 1953 for allegedly sharing the secret of the atomic bomb with the Soviets. Like Althusser, Lewin is only tangentially concerned with the question of how culpability factors into history, life, and politics; he is primarily interested in locating the source from which to tell his life story and transform it into something that is both readable and meaningful.

In rejection of the Cold War narrative that has seemingly scripted his life, Daniel searches for solace in the pages of his own writing. At the same time, he seeks complete ownership of his narrative and also distance from it as something he can write away. Consequently, his own position within the novel oscillates between author and critic, prophet and historian, subject and object. With the change in each of these roles, the form of his writing within the novel changes as well. At times, it is his dissertation; at others, it is his poetry, political commentary, fiction, and—most importantly—his calling.

Just as Althusser's life was constituted by contradictions—for he was a member of the French Communist Party and an unorthodox theorist of Marxism, a self-proclaimed scientist of analysis and a self-effacing intellectual fraud, a materialist theorist of history and a philosopher of structural contingency, a critic of human agency and an advocate for social change—Daniel is unable to narrate his politics and his own subjectivity consistently. As a result, he struggles throughout the novel to determine his role within his family, his role within history, and his destiny. He cannot find a cause for his parents' execution, a cause for their political affinities, a cause for political action in the face of the failures of the Old Left, or a cause for his

own desires and life choices. He is paralyzed by his lack of understanding and his inability to read what it is that he knows.

Yet, it is with the threat of mass annihilation and the responsibility to redeem, re-script, and re-envisage history and the subject's role within it that the novel begins and ends. Daniel utilizes a variety of reading methods throughout the text to ascertain what this role consists of, but they each prove to be symptomatic of the failure of any methodology to adequately explain the importance of the subject for history and history for the subject. The primary existential problem of Daniel's life is thus the primary problematic of Althusser's philosophy and of his wife's murder: For what does one act?

Genealogy is the methodology that Daniel turns to in order to answer this question. This methodology, however, leads him to a series of seeming dead ends and tautologies. He thus fails to ascertain a cause for his existence and to discover how he might be able to actively shape the world. I will argue in this essay that the methodology of reading that would enable Daniel to locate his own subjective necessity is precisely the methodology of reading that Althusser fails to explicitly articulate in his own autobiography. This methodology, which I will refer to as an immanentist method for reading absent causes, is the same one Althusser developed with Étienne Balibar in his earlier text, *Reading 'Capital.'*

An immanentist method for reading absent causes affirms necessity as the immediate effect of contingency and not as its *a priori* or causal condition. In so doing, this methodology enables a reader (which I define broadly as anyone who considers the stakes of meaning) to draw on inadequate encounters between texts and readers as the necessary conditions of possibility for thinking and producing more adequate worlds. For our purposes, I will argue that this method provides a way to reformulate not only the meaning and value of Daniel's life, but also the supposed political limitations of postmodernity in general. I will make this case by examining Daniel's genealogical method and then by turning to Althusser's writings on the biblical Daniel. In so doing, I will demonstrate how Daniel Lewin serves as a postmodern figure that—like the biblical Daniel—cannot find a method to comprehend his own knowledge. While my examination of Doctorow's text will focus primarily on the character of Daniel Lewin, I will also consider the political implications of the reading strategies employed by other characters in the text.

II. Althusser's Guilty Reading

In *Reading 'Capital'*, Althusser outlines a methodology of reading that does not stand in contradiction to the philosophy of aleatory materialism as he defines it at the end of his life. Interestingly, this is precisely the methodology that he fails to spell out in the conclusion of his autobiography, but that he asserts will "help [him] live" and give meaning to his life (*Future* 286). In other words, this is the methodology which

he leaves to the reader to discover in order to determine *necessity* in a world where the categories of guilt, innocence, responsibility, etc. are determined to be little more than a "well-spring" of contingent, ambivalent forces without predetermined cause. This is the same task of Daniel's text/life, but unlike Daniel, Althusser does not turn to the genealogical method for the answer.

While Althusser does not claim to have produced this methodology himself, he articulates explicitly the way that its creator, Karl Marx, put it to work in producing his own concept of labor-power. He claims that Marx was able to produce the concept of labor-power only by carefully studying the classical economic concept of labor. Particularly, Marx read into the concept of labor and in so doing discovered what it was lacking—a concomitant concept of labor-power. Althusser thus reads into Marx's reading and thereby produces his own theory of reading that seeks to expose "*a certain relation of necessity*…between the visible and the invisible" (*Reading* 26). For Althusser, there is never an outside to the text, only an inner darkness that is present, yet blinding. The limit to the text is the text itself; the limit to the world is the world itself.

Althusser also contends that a stable subject does not perform the act of reading. In the case of Marx, Althusser argues that we should not read his vision of the invisible in such a way that simply positions him as an attentive reader. Instead, Marx *produces* a new, and what Althusser calls, "informed gaze," which is "itself produced by a reflection of the 'change of terrain' on the exercise of vision, in which Marx pictures the transformation of the problematic" (*Reading* 27). The implications of Marx's "sighting" show us that he as reader was not a free willing subject that simply changed points of view, but rather a reader thus transformed on a new terrain by the act of reading itself.

Althusser explains this method in both psychoanalytic and "scientific" terms. His method is psychoanalytic in that it is based on a notion that the unconscious produces blind spots in a text. The precondition of a productive and hence "scientific" reading of the text is to approach these blind spots as "symptoms." His science of reading, then, seeks to locate where blindness occurs not in order to uncover an underlying *a priori* form of sight, but rather to produce different visions, each conceptual in its own right. These new visions, with new readings, extend *ad infinitum* as do signifiers in the signifying chain of the unconscious. Locating symptoms and hence producing new ones in each subsequent reading brings us no closer to the unconscious though. It does, however, like psychoanalysis, show us the excess of what is said. From what is said, we can see what is not said, which produces the symptom-as-answer of the necessary problematic to work through.

One could argue not only that Althusser's individual readings are symptomatic in themselves, but also that his entire theory of reading is symptomatic of the historical process of production's dependency on an immanent ontology. That is, by repudiating the genesis, completion, or teleology of any text and thus maintaining the necessity of engaging previous readers' "symptoms," Althusser reveals a neces-

sary dependency on the "symptom" itself—not as a hindrance, but as a necessity for *any* real knowledge production process. Reading cannot discover the truth of an already whole object. Instead, reading is itself a process of production—a process that reads history's always changing traces and produces new ones in its wake, thereby producing an object of reading that did not exist before it was read, thereby producing a world that did not exist before it was read. The fact that a *new* world is produced in writing and reading is precisely what Daniel Lewin cannot understand in his own autobiographical assessment of history in which he attempts to write himself away through mastering knowledge of his past.

This is where we can return to the question of guilt in Althusser's autobiography in relation to his own immanentist methodology of reading absent causes. Althusser knows that desire is a wellspring of meaning and that no action results from a pure motive or desire with an *a priori* meaning. Still, he asks the reader to judge his guilt or innocence with regard to his wife's murder in order to help him live. He does so without explaining what methodology would make this pursuit meaningful. In *Reading 'Capital'*, however, he explains that his methodology is not about *determining* guilt at all. Rather, *it is itself a guilty method*.

That is, while he argues that it is necessary to read *Capital* "to the letter," he also tells us that literal readings are impossible (*Reading* 13). Therefore, each reading is guilty—guilty of searching for clues, which, one could argue, are not really there. Readers, then, are guilty of both producing meaning within the text being read and attributing the produced meaning to that text. However, Althusser points to the necessity of this endeavor and demands that readers…

> …take responsibility for [their] crime as a 'justified crime' and defend it by proving its necessity. It is therefore a special reading which exculpates itself as a reading by posing every guilty reading the very question that unmasks its innocence, the mere question of its innocence: *what is it to read?* (*Reading* 15)

By taking "responsibility for [the] crime" of reading, one commits to producing knowledge that is useful for the problematics of the present. In effect, when one reads in a guilty manner, they commit to shaping what we know and how we know it not merely for the present, but for the future as well.

III. Daniel's Genealogical Method

As the son of the Isaacsons who were electrocuted for a crime that they may or may not have committed Daniel Lewin serves as both the inheritor of their sins, and as the source that can ultimately reveal whether their fate was warranted. However, his knowledge of their guilt or innocence is not only speculative; it is also somewhat meaningless to him as he is a subject of the post-nuclear, postmodern generation for whom the categories of responsibility, innocence, and duty have become vacuous.

He thus seeks to cynically separate himself from the Old Left whom, he believes, have failed to effect meaningful change precisely because of their teleological belief in the future. Simultaneously, however, he remains equally suspicious of the New Left whose ahistorical worldview and tactics of figuring meaning through spectacles of images seems naïve. In turn, he retreats to solitary, scholarly pursuits in order to make sense of himself in a world in which he feels completely disconnected and inextricably bound.

In Daniel Lewin's narrative, we see the same problems emerge that affected the biblical Daniel's book. For they both serve as witnesses to histories with effects so profound that they affect entire nations, and they are also both incapable of comprehending what it is that they see. They both have prophetic vision, and they are both blind to the meaning of their prophecies. They both occupy varying narrative positions in their texts, and they both cannot find a structure for their narratives that is loyal to its chronology. Finally, and most importantly, they both predict an End to History, and they both believe that it is their responsibility to determine its meaning.

As this is "his" book, though, Daniel Lewin must determine what role he, as a subject, plays in the history of postmodernism. He must also determine if the world is worth saving, and how to construct political commitments in the wake of atrocities committed in the name of politics—namely, his parents' execution. Accordingly, he faces the same task as Althusser: to produce a theory of the subject within a world where effects are powerful, but origins are absent. Similarly, in determining who/what "authors" history and bears responsibility for it, he is faced with the problem of differentiating the subject and object of history. While he fails to detail explicitly an ontology of the postmodern that would account for peoples' actions and commitments, Daniel's philosophy of history is inherent in the formal structure of Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*—the book that literally "contains" both Daniel Lewin's book and fragments from the biblical Book of Daniel, which precedes and follows Lewin's text.

The method Daniel turns to in order to redeem history not guided by cause and his own role within it is genealogy. The question of genealogy surrounds Daniel's text thematically, formally, and repetitiously. In the first sense, Daniel's story is vaguely connected by a series of narratives that are at once implicated in other narratives and incomplete in their own tellings. For instance, Daniel oscillates between different narrative subject-positions to tell a story that is at times fully autobiographical and at others a master narrative (Marxism, Freudianism, Patriotism, etc.) completely detached from his life. He also traces the questions of history and belief back to the Old Testament and to the biblical Daniel's quest to understand the knowledge bestowed upon him. Finally, Daniel's book is a family genealogy, as well as a genealogy of the American Left.

Formally, Daniel's book is preceded by a series of epigraphs beginning with a passage from the biblical Book of Daniel and followed by a biblical passage from that same book. The question of the limits of narrative is, therefore, not only built into the conflicting and overlapping discourses that structure Daniel's own story; his

story is also literally surrounded by a series of fragments that are linearly arranged but un-narrativized in any connected manner. There are three different endings to Doctorow's novel and the last concludes with a biblical passage. These biblical fragments seemingly connect the various narrative threads surrounding and located within Daniel's text in that they are derived from the same source. However, disconnected from each other and de-contextualized from their biblical source, these fragments engender varying positions on transcendence and human agency.

At the end of his own book, Daniel Lewin seemingly gives up his scholarly pursuits as he leaves behind his desk at the Columbia University library and walks outside where there is a protest happening. In abandoning his book, he writes: "DANIEL'S BOOK: A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women's Anatomy, Children's Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology, and Thermal Pollution" (Doctorow 302). The words that follow his partially submitted, hedonistic life-text are the last words of Doctorow's *Daniel* as well. Like the first epigraph, these words come directly from the biblical Book of Daniel: *"But though, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end…Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end"* (Doctorow 303).

Even though Daniel is critical of transcendence throughout his text, the genealogies he traces reveal that discourses of transcendence (i.e., religious traditions, notions of political liberation, etc.) are inescapable in the material world. Consequently, in discovering that his genealogical method has failed to produce a theory of the subject in history that would provide him a *tabula rasa* to cleanse himself of the familial, spiritual, and political genealogies that find connection in his body, he decides that the closest thing to liberation from these connections is partial submission to them. He thus decides that his attempt to find a way to act in spite of these contingencies is futile; he joins the "revolutionary" movement of which he is critical, and he lets the bible have the first and the last word.

Literary critics Virginia Carmichael and T.V. Reed also argue that *Daniel* is a book of genealogy. In different ways, Reed and Carmichael's treatment of *Daniel*'s end(s) imply the same conclusion. For Carmichael, Daniel's partially submitted life story is one of both fidelity and abandon: he must go on living, but abandon his search for a way to be an agent of history free from the confines of transcendence and postmodernity. However, she fails to explain what the utility of his book is at all except that its conclusion allows for a different beginning. In a sense, what she is arguing is that the exercise of writing it was therapeutic enough to sublimate the neuroses that led to its writing. For Reed, on the other hand, this final ending leaves both Daniel and the reader duped. He writes: "We have been 'liberated' by coercion, by a story we are in but try to pretend we are authoring…This knowledge is liberating, but in and of itself it leaves things largely unchanged" (Reed 302).

What Carmichael finds liberating about Daniel's narrative is that he leaves his genealogies incomplete. This interests her not because his task has been altogether

futile, but rather because he abandons mastery and steps out of the library to connect with what contingency has made possible—a radical politics located within the genealogy of his book, but discontinuous with the traditions he seeks to abandon. For Reed, on the other hand, it is not a matter of contingency that is at stake in *Daniel*, it is the *necessity* of acting within the discontinuous and contingent. My reading is more closely aligned with Reed's in that I believe what is at stake in *Daniel* is the question of the subject's necessity in the face of contingency. As I argued before, this is the same question at the core of Althusser's philosophy of aleatory materialism.

While I agree with Reed and Carmichael that *Daniel* is a book of radical genealogy, what I glean from the genealogical structure(s) of the text is not a celebration of genealogical production at all. Daniel himself states this most clearly when he argues that "what is most monstrous is sequence" itself (Doctorow 245). By surrounding Daniel Lewin's genealogical text with fragments from the biblical Book of Daniel, and by containing all of this text in his own novel (which is itself a pastiche of what it "contains"), Doctorow elucidates two distinct, yet inextricably linked concepts: first, what is monstrous about sequence is that it is repetitious; second, it is impossible to contain meaning. Sequence is monstrous for the sheer fact that there is no repetition without a difference. This is why it so difficult for Daniel to ascertain the meaning of the political, familial, and spiritual genealogies that he traces. Accordingly, the monstrosity of sequence for Daniel is not about the persistence of an origin at all. Instead, the limit of Daniel's genealogies is that once he has created a series of sequences and has made connections between the events, stories, and fantasies that inhabit his life, he finds that meaning neither inheres in these sequences, nor can it be contained by them.

Because the *production* of genealogical sequence is the necessary precondition for locating meaning, and meaning does not pre-exist in sequence per se, Daniel must find an additional method for *reading* his genealogies. This method must neither foreclose the possibility for future connections nor prohibit the opportunity to determine his personal necessity. In positioning his narratives in relation to a world with meaning always already in flux, in the end, his book is nothing more than the biblical book of Daniel if he cannot read the connections he makes with it.

I would argue here that Daniel's conundrum results from following a model of genealogy not unlike that elaborated by Michel Foucault. For Foucault, genealogy is at odds with interpretation. Foucault writes:

> The isolation of different points of emergence does not conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning; rather, they result from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and systematic reversals. If interpretation were the slow exposure of meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. (151)

Even though Foucault also explains that "the role of genealogy is to record history" so that concepts, which have been made transcendental, appear "as events on the stage of historical processes," he never really explains at what point analysis should

intervene in the genealogical process or how this analysis might differ from an *a posteriori* method of interpretation (Foucault 152). On the one hand, I suppose that we can read his lack of discussion on this matter as evidence of his preference for a methodology of continual analysis to one of interpretation. On the other hand, if one were to simply engage in a continual analysis in the process of the genealogical recording, one would not be afforded the opportunity of hindsight to interpret the writing of that genealogy, as well as its silences and exclusions.

This is precisely the problem that Daniel is unable to circumvent when he walks away from his genealogies and closes his book. To merely point to the genealogical, non-teleological structure of *Daniel* as indicative of the book's sacred message—namely, that the ceaseless production of genealogical narratives is the only way that truth (a concept more or less equated with genealogy) will be recognized—does nothing to provide a method of reading these genealogies that would be capable of producing a real transformation in his life. As Daniel is aware of his own status as an effect of history in a world without cause, origin, or inherent meaning, he does not know how to prove his own political necessity if he cannot understand the transformative potentials of his visions.

In his writings on aleatory materialism and in his autobiography, Althusser describes quite aptly why the biblical Daniel fails to understand his own visions. Althusser's critiques could also easily be applied to the genealogies Daniel Lewin composes and to the knowledge he disavows. In "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," Althusser elaborates how his own materialism of the encounter fits into Spinozist ontology, and how it is from this ontology that we can understand Daniel's conundrum. He describes Spinoza's ontology in the following way:

> [It is] a strange theory, which people tend to present as a theory of knowledge… [However] *the imagination is not by any means a faculty, but, fundamentally, only the only world itself in its 'giveness'*. With this slide [*glissement*], Spinoza not only turns his back on all theories of knowledge, but also clears a path for the recognition of the 'world' as that-beyond-which-there-is-nothing, not even a theory of nature—for the recognition of the 'world' as a unique totality that is *not totalized, but experienced in its dispersion*, and experienced as the 'give' into which we are 'thrown' and on the basis of which we forge all our illusions [*fabricae*]… (179)

Althusser extends his elaboration of Spinoza's critique of knowledge in order to elucidate the biblical Daniel's relationship to knowledge. He writes:

> But the theory of the imaginary as a world allows Spinoza to think the 'singular essence' of the third kind which finds its representation *par excellence* in the history of an individual or a people, such as Moses or the Jewish people. The fact that it is necessary means simply that it has been accomplished, but everything in it could have swung the other way, depending on the encounter or non-encounter of Moses and God, or the encounter of the comprehension or non-comprehension of the prophets. The proof is that it was necessary to explain to the prophets the meaning of what they reported of their conversations with God!—with the following limit-situation, of nothingness itself,

> which was Daniel's: you could explain everything to him for as long as you liked, he never understood a thing. A proof by nothingness of nothingness itself, as a limit-situation. ("Underground" 179)

This relates to Daniel Lewin insofar as he employs the genealogical to prove to himself that his life has a value greater than being merely one link in a chain of contingent events. However, while he has an (imperfect) epistemology for making these connections, he lacks an ontology that would give meaning to his being or to his knowledge. In turn, he reads according to a theory of knowledge that fails to recognize what Spinoza made clear—the fact that anything is necessary and meaningful means simply that it has been accomplished, that it is directly lived, and that it is; one need not understand it for it to be necessary and hence always already beyond nothingness.[3] What he overlooks most of all is the fact that to be necessary does not necessarily mean to be adequate.

In *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser translates the limit-situation of Daniel's (mis)comprehension of nothingness into a theory of ideology. Althusser writes:

> What I discovered in Spinoza (as well as the well-known Appendix to Tractus Book I) was a formidable theory of religious ideology, an 'apparatus of thought' which turns the world upside down and takes causes as ends; the whole elaborated in terms of its relationship to social subjectivity. What a 'cleansing' operation it proved to be!...I was absolutely fascinated by [Spinoza's] theory of the prophets, which reinforced my view that Spinoza had attained an incredible understanding of the nature of ideology. Everyone knows, of course, that the prophets climbed mountains to hear the word of God. What they actually heard was the din of thunder and lightning together with a few words, which they took back, *without having understood them*, to the people awaiting them on the plains. The extraordinary thing is that the people themselves, with their self-consciousness and knowledge, then explained to these deaf, blind prophets the meaning of God's message! They explained it to all of them, except that idiot Daniel who not only failed to understand what God said to him (the lot of all prophets) but even the explanation provided for him! This simply proves that ideology can, in certain cases, and maybe naturally does, remain totally impenetrable to those subjected to it. (217)

Like the biblical prophets, Daniel Lewin perceives the world through what Spinoza calls "parables and allegories, and clothed spiritual truths in bodily forms" (Spinoza par. 121). Unlike the biblical prophets, Daniel tries to compose his prophecies through discourses of reason as he does not believe in the certitude of his prophecies by morality alone. Yet, the discourses of reason that Daniel turns to—political science, psychoanalysis, journalism, etc.—remain useful to him only for his composition, but not for his comprehension of his composition.

Daniel Lewin understands what the biblical Daniel does not: that his visions are ideology-effects and that they are not causally driven. This is why he rejects a methodology that searches for causes and why he employs the genealogical method to elucidate encounters between the ideologies that traverse and intersect his family, his politics, and his life. In fact, his understanding of ideology is not that different from

that of Althusser.[4] With regard to Althusser's reading of the biblical Daniel, Vittorio Morfino writes:

> This prophetic knowledge is not, therefore, taken as a sign of destiny or fate. It is instead seen as the effect of an encounter between imaginaries that take hold, sometimes despite the prophet himself, taking hold even when (as in Daniel's case) there is a total inability of the prophet to understand the sense or meaning that emerges from the encounter. (par. 31)

Daniel Lewin's genealogies enable him to recognize himself for what he is—a figure of the intersection and encounter of ideologies. Yet, while he understands himself as such, he cannot escape ideology because he is incapable of comprehending the visions that are—in a sense—so clear to him. What he is lacking is a method for reading his genealogies that would not seek to escape ideology, but would instead expose "*a certain relation of necessity*…between the visible and the invisible" in a world where ideology is inescapable (Althusser, *Reading* 26). Without this method, he fails to locate his own necessity or arrive at an understanding of how his knowledge could be put to use for political purposes despite its ideological underpinnings and lack of fully determinable sense. In other words, he does not understand that the visions that constitute him are necessary and are useful despite their ideological underpinnings. In the same manner that Althusser describes the biblical Daniel as a figure who "proves that ideology can, in certain cases, and maybe naturally does, remain totally impenetrable to those subjected to it," Daniel Lewin cannot *fully* implicate himself within, and hence penetrate, the world that he knows is always already ideological. His genealogies serve as mirrors of ideology in which he thinks he sees himself very clearly, but he cannot subject himself to these visions—a subjection that would, ultimately, render him a subject. Accordingly, he foregoes the opportunity to interpret his discoveries—an interpretation that would enable him to produce more adequate visions of history and the future.

V. Daniel's Shocked and Guilty Readers

Throughout the novel, Daniel alleges that those around him—his parents, his sister, his wife, and even himself—are guilty of reading in uninformed and uncritical ways. The most poignant example of the question of guilty reading in *Daniel* is the death by suicide of his younger sister Susan due to a "failure of analysis" (Doctorow 301). Susan's history of reading stretches back to the time when, as children, they go to visit their parents in prison. On the way to their visit, Susan asserts that her parents are dead. When questioned on how she has arrived at this conclusion, Susan explains that she has learned how to read, is a good reader, and can read everything (Doctorow 239). In fact, in the text, the Isaacsons are not yet dead and Susan has not yet learned to read in the literal sense, but this scene illustrates a method of reading that largely comes to script her life and also continually bothers Daniel because she "sound[s]

so sure of herself" (Doctorow 239). This method is constituted by a pragmatics of intuition, but also by a failure of analysis—a failure that is surely not only her own.

Throughout the novel, Susan maintains a fidelity to the innocence of her parents and an intuitive knowledge of the world's injustice. Unlike Daniel, though, she finds herself clinging to belief in the transcendental certitude of categories such as guilt, responsibility, and duty. Daniel's social investment is sustained by maintaining the indetermination of these categories. At one point, Susan derides Daniel for failing to attach his name to their parents' posthumous political foundation; in so doing, she composes a letter to him which states that she is "writing [him] out of [her mind]," and that he "no longer exist[s]" (Doctorow 77). Daniel later comments, "There is some evidence that she was driven finally to eradicate him from her consciousness by the radical means of eradicating her consciousness" (Doctorow 82). The eradication of her consciousness, I would argue, is symptomatic of the fact that she reads as a starfish.

Susan's death by a "failure of analysis" occurs in "Book Three: Starfish"—a book whose namesake inadvertently calls attention to Susan's method of reading, which is indistinguishable from her way of living (Doctorow 301). As a species, starfish exhibit a superficial radial symmetry, which means that there is only one plane in which symmetry exists. As a radially symmetrical being, Susan reads the world on a singular plane of absolute meaning; she can neither tolerate contradictions nor read in a way that is asymmetrical with her being.

What infuriates and repulses Daniel about Susan is that she "sound[s] so sure of herself" because she says so much (Doctorow 239). At the same time, he is drawn to her for her radical self-sufficiency. He states, "This is undoubtedly because modern man can conceive of nothing more frightening than the self-sufficiency of being of the beautiful Starfish: he mistakes it for death" (Doctorow 250). Daniel reads Susan's politics as symptomatic of a failure of analysis but never explains what kind of analysis her life is lacking. Instead, he merely misreads the surplus of her unanalyzed thought as a lack and not as a potentiality of meaning. In the same way that it is difficult to understand that the fragmentation of starfish produces new life instead of death, Daniel cannot recognize that the fragmentation of knowledge produces leads instead of dead ends. In failing to elaborate whose responsibility it is to analyze Susan or what kind of analysis is adequate for her historical condition as a Starfish, he overlooks a connection he himself makes but is absent from his discourse. That is, by calling attention to the fact that modern man mistakes for death the self-sufficiency of the beautiful Starfish because he "can conceive of nothing more frightening," Daniel unconsciously points to one of the key symptoms of radical thought: namely, the inability to produce a figure of the "free radical" that is not mistaken for the "martyr"—the political figure of death.

Susan here serves as the limit to the political concept of the free radical. Much like a free radical of electricity, she is highly reactive and is capable, like the martyr, of showing the true power of the death drive as a power immanent to life.[5] Indeed,

the text begins with her failed suicide attempt and ends when another attempt is successful. However, unlike the martyr whose value is constituted by making the final connection (death), the free radical must maintain the potential of future connections to ensure her own significance. Unfortunately, maintaining this potential is what diffuses it as well. Here, Daniel describes this impotence of the free radical as such:

> With each cycle of radical thought there is a stage of genuine creative excitement during which the connections are made. The radical discovers connections between available data and the root responsibility. Finally he connects everything. At this point he begins to lose his following. It is not that he has incorrectly connected everything, it is that he has connected everything. Nothing is left outside the connections. At this point society becomes bored with the radical. Fully connected in his characterization it has achieved the counter-insurgent rationale to destroy him. (Doctorow 140)

In order for Susan to maintain her significance, she would need to be able to both make social, political, and knowledge connections, and also have a community on whom she could depend to absorb some of the emotional effects of those connections. Instead of absorbing the effects of these connections, she was given shock therapy to eradicate her consciousness altogether.

Throughout *Daniel*, motifs of shock and electricity circulate and call attention to the ideological, material, and ethical problems associated with different characters' reading strategies. As his narrative begins, Daniel is sitting in the library at Columbia University writing his dissertation. The electrical light in the library allows him vision to write, but that vision becomes unruly; his dissertation grows out of control, changing forms, authors, and time periods as he makes more and more connections with the past, present, and future. As Daniel's text becomes ever more uncontrollable, its connections and electrical motifs become increasingly more dangerous—not only for the bodies they harm in his text, but also for the readers that he interpellates along the way.

For instance, Daniel's text is interspersed with various notes to the reader accusing her of reading in an elementary manner by judging Daniel for his crassness of form and material: "If it is that elementary, then reader, I am reading you. And together we may rend our clothes in the morning" (Doctorow 54). Further, after he essentially rapes his wife, Daniel burns her with the car cigarette lighter and asks the reader: "Do you believe it? Shall I continue? Do you want to know the effect of three concentric circles of heating element glowing orange in a black night of rain upon the tender white girlflesh of my wife's ass? Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?" (Doctorow 60). This line of questioning continues to the point at which the reader and the executioner are virtually indistinguishable. Daniel tells the reader that it is really "YOUR CAREER IN ELECTRICITY" and he proceeds to ask if we think he can do the electrocution because he "know[s] there is a you. There has always been a you. YOU: I will show you that I can do [it]" (Doctorow 295-297). The you to whom he refers is the reader and by acting as "the monstrous

reader[s] who go on from one word to the next," we make no connections of our own and serve merely as the conduits for the electrical connections that Daniel has exposed to be so dangerous.

Finally, Daniel explains, "Electricity flows in circuits. If the circuit is open or incomplete electricity cannot flow" (Doctorow 297). Thought, like electricity, requires a resistance to closure; however, the *power* of thought lies in its connections and one must give up their resistances to make those connections possible. What *Daniel* reveals is that the revolutionary power of thought lies in allowing oneself to be shocked by that which it engages; accordingly, reading is fundamentally a risky endeavor. Electricity thus functions here as a metaphor for thought and its inescapable dialectical relationship between resistance and complicity.

Even though throughout his text Daniel repeatedly calls attention to the fact that his narrative is total and incomplete, omniscient and deficient, sacred and cursed, he never truly examines his own reading strategy. Instead, he cynically dismisses the category of evaluation and he deems guilty those whose reading strategy is evaluative. For instance, he routinely ridicules the question of his parents' guilt by making a mockery of any such attempt: "*The Isaacsons are arrested for conspiring to give the secret of television to the Soviet Union...*" (Doctorow 117). As a result, he replaces the question of his parent's guilt with the meta-question of guilt in general so as to ask: How are analyses guilty and who is guilty of making them?

Daniel tries to justify his existence in his own way—by reading himself into and writing himself out of the world. For he views innocence—not guilt—as complicity (Doctorow 225). However, his methodology of reading is not merely anti-status quo: he mistakes the innocence of responsibly reading the world and positioning oneself within its reproductive power relations for the guilt of the act of reading itself. For he states, "It is complicity in the system to be appalled with the moral structure of the system" (Doctorow 226). His method thus requires that he implicate himself in the system so as to render himself less complicit in it, not to wrench himself away from it. At first glance, his method looks nearly identical to Althusser's immanentist method of reading for absent causes. Upon further inspection, though, one can see that Daniel's method differs radically from that of Althusser because Daniel seeks to absolve himself of *analyzing* his own reading by simply locating his method in the ideological world. Daniel does not grasp what is most important to Althusser: the fact that reading is not merely reproductive of ideological conditions of existence; it is transformative as well.[6] In short, Daniel is cynical.

Daniel's prophetic visions illustrate remarkably well how reading is able to locate the invisible connections of past and present, discourse and silence. But the primary symptom of Daniel's readings is that even while he dismisses the question of his parents' guilt, he mistakes his knowledge of the absence of transcendent causes for an underlying *a priori* form of sight capable of reading hidden content. He thus reads others' methods as symptomatic of a lack of understanding of transcendence and he utilizes his own guilty reading as the proper form to illustrate their symptoms. In so

doing, though, he is unable to recognize that even though he is a guilty reader, his reading is *not guilty enough* to produce a true transgression.

At the end of his story that he partially submits and walks away from, he fails to interpret his genealogies. As a result of this failure, he foregoes the reading process that Althusser maintains can "only help [him] live" (*Future* 286). Accordingly, he fails to notice the transgressive conclusion that his symptom makes possible and that Althusser's philosophy of revolutionary reading makes clear: *To have an absent cause does not mean to lack a purpose necessarily.*

Notes

1. For further elaboration of Althusser's notion of history as a process without subjects, see Poster, "Althusser on History Without Man"; Smith, "Althusser and the Overdetermined Self" and "Althusser's Marxism without a Knowing Subject." Some of the works most critical of Althusser's thought include: Judt, "Louis Althusser, The Paris Strangler"; Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*; Sayer, "Science as Critique: Marx versus Althusser"; Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*.

2. By necessity, I refer to the Althusserian notion that necessity is an *effect* of contingency—or rather, a contingency affirmed as necessary. As both the subject and the political are produced in the act of becoming necessary, I am using the terms "subjective necessity" and "political necessity" somewhat interchangeably. In other words, because neither subjective necessity nor political necessity precede the contingencies that produce them, the subject cannot be the cause of politics and politics cannot be that which solely determines the subject. Yet, I will argue, following Althusser, that it is the effect of reading that produces the *necessity* of both politics and the subject.

3. For more information on the relationship between ontology and epistemology in Spinoza, see Deleuze.

4. While Foucault and Althusser clearly had many philosophical differences—especially regarding Marxism and the study of history—I would like to argue also that the differences between their philosophies of the subject and ideology are not nearly as antithetical as contemporary critics tend to present them. Regarding Foucault's purported disavowal of all (and specifically Althusserian) concepts of ideology, Warren Montag points out that "Althusser's central thesis (ideology interpellates individuals as subjects) only takes on its full meaning in relation to what we might call Foucault's reading of the materiality of ideology, a notion re-written as the 'physical order' of the disciplines" (75). Montag further argues that "it was Foucault who argued that, if we can consider the individual as subject 'the fictitious atom of an ideological representation of society, we must regard that fiction correlatively as 'a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called discipline' (*Discipline and Punish* 194) (75). For further elaboration on the similarities between Foucault and Althusser's concepts of ideology, discipline, materiality, history, and the body, see Montag, "'The Soul is the Prison of the Body': Althusser and Foucault, 1970-1975."

5. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud elucidates the role of the death drive as always already operating within the reality principle and the pleasure principle. He claims that the life and death instincts are immanent to each other.

6. For a detailed account of the evolution of Althusser's concept of reproduction, see Vatter. See also Warren Montag's response to Vatter's essay, "Politics: Transcendent or Immanent?".

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