

# Towards a framework for reading U.S. American literary expression in terms of conditions, values, and emotions related to work

Autor(en): **Kovach, Elizabeth**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **40 (2021)**

PDF erstellt am: **27.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-977034>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# Towards a Framework for Reading U.S. American Literary Expression in Terms of Conditions, Values, and Emotions Related to Work

Elizabeth Kovach

While it is routine for literary scholars to interpret texts in terms of the social, political, and economic conditions surrounding their formation, little attention has expressly been paid to work as a decisive contextual category. Yet the conditions, values, and emotions surrounding working lives at any given time in history impress upon literary expression in critical ways, and literary expression can also impact the constitution of and attitudes about waged work in return. In this chapter, I explore how the relationship between the conditions, values, and emotions surrounding work, on the one hand, and literary expression, on the other hand, can be described. I draw upon three concrete examples of literary-critical scholarship that have explored this relationship with regard to specific moments in U.S. American literary history: Cindy Weinstein's examination of 19<sup>th</sup>-century allegory as a site of anxiety over rapidly changing labor conditions; Nicholas Bromell's study of antebellum writers' concern with mental vs. physical labor; and Jasper Bernes's identification of a link between post-WWII poetic expression and transformations in labor management from the 1970s onward. These approaches are synthesized into a framework for understanding U.S. American literary expression from a neglected perspective—in terms of conditions, values, and emotions related to work.

Keywords: work ethics, work values, U.S. American literature, antebellum literature, post-Fordism

## Introduction: Locating Points of Influence Between Work and Literary Expression

Regardless of whether work appears as a subject matter under close scrutiny, every literary text has been shaped by specific conditions of production, cultural values, and attitudes related to work at the time of its composition. And literary expression holds the potential to affect these conditions, values, and emotions in return. This chapter is concerned with how to describe such a relationship of mutual constitution beyond mere generalizations. The most obvious resource for such an endeavor is Marxist literary theory, and I will begin by discussing the Marxist-critical concepts of base and superstructure, which offer a broad framework for understanding how work, a core component of the economic base, and literary expression, a cultural activity associated with the superstructure, are comprehended as shaping one another. These concepts are not to be misconceived as two distinct, hierarchically arranged entities. Rather, my discussion underscores how they are conceived of as enfolded into one another. Literature as a social phenomenon illustrates such entanglement, as it exists as both an economic commodity within the base and a potential (re)configuration of expressive possibility on the level of superstructure.

After exploring these general premises, I turn to examples of scholarship in which constitutive relationships between U.S. American conditions, cultural values, and personal emotions related to work and literary expression have been documented. I draw upon three unique studies. First, Cindy Weinstein's *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (1995) forges a link between allegorical tales of the time and the culture's angst surrounding mechanized labor. Second, Nicholas K. Bromell's *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (1993) discusses how writing first became professionalized and appeared as a subject of self-reflection in relation to broader transformations in work and social class within literary texts of the antebellum period. Third, Jasper Bernes's *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017) suggests that avant-garde art and writing in the U.S. of the 1950s and 60s was not only formed in relation to labor conditions of the time, but that it also paved the way for political critiques of and an eventual transformation of these conditions. These studies identify different vectors of influence. Weinstein discusses how cultural anxieties related to work influenced literary expression. Bromell focuses on how work as the subject matter of literature impacts the work of its very writing. And Bernes traces a path in which literary expression

affected management practices and workplace cultures. I conclude by naming three points of influence as a framework for conducting further research on the complex relationship between conditions, values, and emotions surrounding work and literary expression.

### Considering Work and Literary Expression in Terms of Base and Superstructure

From a Marxist-critical perspective, it is generally accepted that the forms of work that exist at a given historical time and place play a role in the shape and character of literary expression. Such influence is never direct, but a fundamental premise of Marxist thought is that the economic “base,” which in capitalism includes the activities of and social relations formed by waged work, is a horizon in relation to which a “superstructure” consisting of political, legal, ideological, and cultural activities emerges.<sup>1</sup> Marx describes this relationship in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (7) as one in which “[t]he mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.” The “general process” through which social consciousness arises is thus one that is vitally shaped by the conditions of economic production at any given place and time. Literature is one among many expressive forms of social consciousness, or what Terry Eagleton has called the “ideology of the age,” which is always contingent upon the economy’s state and stage of development (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 6). The base (which includes work) and superstructure (which includes literary expression) emerge in tandem with one another in a relationship of mutual conditioning.

It would be too simple to say that literature can be deciphered through the lens of economic relations. Such an assumption distorts Marx’s characterization of the base–superstructure relation, in which the paths of influence flow back and forth rather than merely in one direction. Raymond Williams has for this reason dissuaded from using the terms base and superstructure altogether to avoid thinking about two distinct fields. Williams instead favors the notion of “overdetermination,” the “determination by multiple factors” to explain economic and socio-cultural phenomena (*Marxism and Literature* 83). Literary and other forms

---

<sup>1</sup> The proceeding points related to the notions of “base” and “superstructure” are a summary of those made in my article “Collapsing the Economic and Creative Values of Contemporary Literature in Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*” (see Kovach).

of artistic and social expression do not merely reflect economic relations but can also actively shape these relations in their entangled emergence.

From this Marxist-critical perspective, writers of literature do not create their work in a void but are rather “producers,” a term that Eagleton borrows from Walter Benjamin’s talk “The Author as Producer” delivered in 1934 at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism. Such a name emphasizes the author as “a worker rooted in a particular history with particular materials at his disposal” (Eagleton 64). In *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (57), Daniel Hartley offers a similar term: that of the author as “configurer,” whose “labour is determined and determinate, since it is limited both by the type of social content available and the sedimented paradigms which the configurer inherits from the tradition.” The author works with historically determined “content available” and “sedimented paradigms” that are inextricable from the economic forces of their times.

The base/superstructure relation, as well as the notion of the writer as a producer, offer a set of premises for thinking about the relationship between conditions, values, and emotions surrounding work and literary expression. For one thing, the premise of base and superstructure in Marxist theory is that the forms of work that exist at a given historical moment and the values surrounding them play a role in delimiting processes of literary configuration. This is to say that all kinds of work within a given economy and the work of writing are, from a Marxist standpoint, inherently tied to one another, even in literary texts that do not explicitly deal with work on a thematic level. Secondly, the writer acts both as a worker in the sense of being someone who, if working within the publishing industry, produces commodities with market value, and as a configurer who potentially impacts thought, expression, and action. In the latter role, the work of writing does not designate waged labor but rather work in terms of intellectual contribution and the reinforcement or disruption of prevalent ideologies—the manifold social and political potentials of literary configuration.

### Literary-Critical Studies of the Relationship Between Work and Literary Expression

The Marxist-theoretical premises sketched above establish a general framework for thinking about the relationship between work and literature as well as the salaried and figurative meanings of what could be called “the work of writing.” For Marxist literary critics, these premises

are meant to apply to all forms of literary expression and to function as lenses through which literary analysis takes place. When we are confronted with literary texts that overtly thematize the activities, emotions, and values surrounding specific forms of work, however, such premises are not merely applicable. Rather, they are engrained within and expressed by the literary texts themselves.

This is a dynamic that Weinstein addresses in her book *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. Focusing primarily on the work and reception of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Henry Adams, Weinstein forges a link between allegorical tales of the time and the culture's angst surrounding mechanized labor (5), contending that allegorical figures that displayed one-dimensional "flatness" in terms of character tapped into anxieties related to "changing relations between labor and agency" (6). Weinstein positions allegory as a literary form that was configured in relation to the horizon of discourses surrounding work. One example Weinstein provides is the character John A. B. C. Smith of Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839), who fascinates the story's narrator for his gentlemanliness and flawless physical appearance: "There was a primness, not to say stiffness, in his carriage—a degree of measured and, if I may so express it, of rectangular precision attending his every movement" (81). In his first encounter with Smith, the narrator finds that Smith is only interested in discussing one subject, namely, "the rapid march of mechanical invention. Indeed, lead him where I would, this was a point to which he invariably came back" (Poe 82). Haunted by the uncanny degree of perfection that Smith displays, the narrator makes efforts to better understand the man. He ultimately learns that Smith's body had been mangled in a battle with Native Americans, and virtually all of his component parts—hair, scalp, teeth, tongue, chest, and appendages—have been manufactured and screwed into place. As a perverse form of "self-made" man who has purchased his own body parts, Smith is "a product of labor in a market economy," a mechanized man made by an industry and society built on the destruction of native peoples and territory (Weinstein 1). As Weinstein demonstrates throughout the course of her book, Smith is just one of many allegorical characters of the time who "registered a critical cultural moment in which relations between labor, bodies, and agency were being (re)invented, renegotiated, and reproduced" (10). Such characters mirrored what people feared about these changing relations: loss of agency within the market economy and the prospect that new divisions in labor would produce mechanized lives marked by flat, undeveloped, and unfulfilled

character. Weinstein's study thus situates 19<sup>th</sup>-century allegory as a literary form whose development stood in direct relation to conditions and emotions surrounding working lives within the industrializing economy. The use of a specific literary device, that of allegory, is attendant to historical conditions and emotions surrounding work.

Weinstein also cites a wealth of reviews that praised literary works that did not employ allegory, succeeded in thorough "development of character," and were thus "insulated from difficult questions having to do with labor and character" (32–33). Flat allegorical characters such as Poe's John A. B. C. Smith, on the other hand, were largely disdained by critics for raising "many of the most difficult and challenging issues being faced by 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans: the problematic status of agency, the reconstruction of the body [through mechanized labor], and the changing nature of work" (Weinstein 42). Allegorical characters

inflict[ed] severe damage on one of that culture's most powerful organizing myths—the work ethic. [...] They suggested that work, far from inspiring laborers to greater economic and moral heights, was merely an exercise in mechanical repetition that had a corrosive effect on the work ethic's fundamental belief in individual progress through work. (Weinstein 10)

Weinstein's research on 19<sup>th</sup>-century allegory thus also draws a link between work ethics of the time and the reception of a specific literary form. That a literary device such as allegory conjured emotions surrounding changing working conditions of the time offers a powerful instance in which work and the values and ethics surrounding it play vital roles in configuring specific forms and styles of literary expression.

In addition to her claims about 19<sup>th</sup>-century allegory as "a literary mode that foregrounded its relation to labor" in terms of characters personifying the costs of new work conditions, Weinstein observes "authorial signs which made visible the author's work of representation" (5). In other words, she finds that not just "the allegory of labor" but also the "labor of allegory" played a significant role in the way literary expression functioned as a discourse about work (Weinstein 5). The "labor of allegory" refers to both stylistic markers of strain on the part of the author to find the right modes and styles of expression and the "labor" required of readers when confronted by complex, difficult texts that are laborious to read. Weinstein quotes a critical review of Melville's adventure novel *Mardi* (1849) to illustrate this kind of labor and its reception. The reviewer states that in *Mardi* one finds "an effort constantly at fine writing, [and] a sacrifice of natural ease to artificial witticism" (qtd. in Weinstein 13). This type of criticism against works of

literature that did not exhibit “natural ease” was, according to Weinstein’s findings, prevalent in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: “literary reviews of the period [...] often valorized those texts that most successfully camouflaged the labor that went into their making” (32). A text like *Mardi*, with its fragmented structure and philosophical forays, did little to mask the author’s own “effort.”

As Weinstein demonstrates, the majority of 19<sup>th</sup>-century critics championed literature that masked signs of work and enabled unstrained reading experiences precisely because of fears and anxieties surrounding work at the time. Their critiques also stemmed in part from preconceived notions about the role that literature should play in life. One such notion was that reading literature should be a form of leisure—an escape from rather than confrontation with discourses and experiences of work. It was precisely during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that leisure developed both as a concept and industry in its own right. Divisions in labor and strenuous conditions in factories posed major challenges to a work ethic driven by the idea that the workplace was a realm in which one could develop and fulfill one’s character, skills, and potential. In response, leisure took on much greater significance. It was broadly encouraged by employers to promote not just workers’ well-being and productivity but to also, as Weinstein claims, “fulfill those ideological duties that could no longer be effectively administered by work” (14). The disdain of critics for characters like John A. B. C. Smith and the arduous prose of Melville stemmed from what these forms exposed and critiqued in relation to work. As Weinstein puts it, “[t]he developing literary marketplace was formulating an aesthetic ideology in keeping with the ideology of the marketplace”—an ideology that favored the erasure rather than display of signs of work (33). I would stress, however, that it is unlikely that Poe and Melville inadvertently failed to meet the aesthetic proclivities of the critical mainstream. Rather, these authors formulated their fictions in ways that purposefully conflicted with the “aesthetic ideology” of the time. Presenting flat figures as allegories for the consequences of new working conditions and constructing difficult prose that put the work of the author on display and required effort on the part of readers were ideological statements in their own rights.

This idea relates to an argument presented by Bromell, whose study of antebellum fictions of work identifies a dialectical relationship between writing about work and the work of writing. In his book, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*, Bromell, like Weinstein, covers a period of U.S. American history, 1830–1860, during which a “rapidly industrializing economy was dramatically changing the nature of



work many persons performed” (18). The economy produced a need for cash to buy goods, which led people to stop producing items for their own household use and sell them on the market instead. New England artisans and farm owners left their workshops and fields to become wage earners. Young women also left farms to meet the rising demand for mill workers. All of these economic developments “increased demand for legal, financial, and technical expertise, which led to the rapid rise of professions and a professional class” (Bromell 18). The expansion of markets also generated “wider demand for the printed word and [made] it possible for men and women who did not have an independent means to write for a living” (Bromell 18). It was thus at this moment in U.S. history that the figure of writer as a waged professional worker in Marx’s sense came into full being. This means that writing as a profession developed just as many other forms of professional work were created, and just as the activities and very meaning of work underwent drastic change across socio-economic classes.

These revolutions in work forged new class divisions. Industrialization and an ever-expanding global market diminished populations of middle-class artisans, craftsmen, and farming communities, while the number of manual, waged factory workers surged. At the same time, the rise of a professional, white-collar class generated various new forms of mental labor. Bromell thus finds that “during the antebellum period work was understood primarily by way of a distinction between manual and mental labor, which in turn rested upon an assumed dichotomy of mind (and soul) and body” (7). This growing distinction was a source of anxiety that motivated various social movements and experiments amongst intellectuals. In *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau searches for a way of living that unites manual with mental labor, body and mind. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1841 lecture “Man the Reformer,” delivered to the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association of Boston, discusses the importance of mental laborers’ sensitivity to and experience of manual labor, stating with regard to writers of literature: “Better that the book should not be quite so good, and the bookmaker [the writer] abler and better, and not himself often a ludicrous contrast to all that he has written” (5).<sup>2</sup> Several utopian communities inspired by the ideas of

---

<sup>2</sup> Emerson’s concern over the increasingly stark division between mental and manual labor is most fundamentally a concern about the exploitative effects of global capital: “[...] it is only necessary to ask a few questions as to the progress of the articles of commerce from the fields where they grew, to our houses, to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities. How many articles of daily consumption are furnished us from the West Indies; [...] no article passes into our ships

French philosopher Charles Fourier pursued unions between mental and physical exertion, intellectual and material production. Among these were Brook Farm, founded in Massachusetts in 1841, of which Nathaniel Hawthorne was a founding member. Hawthorne chronicled the community's failure to supplement the demands of a self-sustaining farm with intellectual pursuits in a fictional account of his experience, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). In 1830s New York, there was even an active Society for the Promotion of Manual Labor in Literary Institutions, whose First Annual Report included accounts of how "manual labor could help those who worked with their minds live better lives and think better thoughts" (Bromell 16). In each of these examples, we find white, middle-class intellectuals and writers acutely concerned with and interested in actively overriding their distance from a manual-laboring class.

Such distance between the mental and manual laboring classes induced anxiety amongst those on the side of accumulation in large part because of the exploitations that such divisions of labor entailed. Melville's short stories "Bartleby" (1853) and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855), as Bromell points out, are iconic portrayals of such anxieties surrounding the labor exploitations and class divisions that new kinds of work forged. Bartleby's work as a copyist—the work of writing devoid of intellectual engagement—turns him into a robot-like being, and his refusal to work exposes the dependency of his employer, a lawyer, on him. In "Tartarus," a middle-class business owner decides to visit a paper mill to see where the envelopes, upon which his business had become increasingly dependent, are produced. He is shaken by the misery readable in the pale faces of row upon row of laboring "girls," who "did not seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels" (Melville 278). Watching the machinery spew out its final product, he thinks:

It was very curious. Looking at that blank paper continually dropping, dropping, dropping, my mind ran on in wonderings of those strange uses to which those thousand sheets eventually would be put. All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things—sermons, lawyers' briefs,

---

which has not been fraudulently cheapened. [...] The abolitionist has shown us our dreadful debt to the southern negro. In the island of Cuba, in addition to the ordinary abominations of slavery, it appears, only men are bought for the plantations, and one dies in ten every year, of these miserable bachelors, to yield us sugar. [...] The sins of our trade belong to no class, to no individual. One plucks, one distributes, one eats [...] yet none feels himself accountable. He did not create the abuse; he cannot alter it" (3).

physicians' prescriptions, love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death warrants, and so on, without end. (Melville 284)

While Melville does not include the writing of literature in his listing, he clearly draws attention to the story's own material production and the labor that made its circulation possible. As Bromell argues, the work of writing in both "Bartleby" and "Tartarus" is framed as "a privilege that requires the exploitation of others. Both stories suggest that writing takes place in a realm that is independent of, though covertly dependent on, the manual labor of others" (Bromell 74). Melville draws attention to his position as a writer, who is a part of the rapidly expanding white-collar professional class that is fully implicated in the dynamics of accumulation and dispossession portrayed in his stories.

This self-reflexive dimension of the story is, according to Bromell, consistently central to antebellum fictions of work. Bromell asserts that his investigation of various literary texts, ranging from slave narratives to bourgeois domestic fiction, reveals how:

[...] a writer's encounter with work as a subject seems to turn the writer back on himself or herself, to lead the writer into an exploration of the nature of his or her writerly work. That exploration, in turn, returns to the subject of work and informs the way it is represented. At the same time, [...] the writer's understanding that writing is work, and the writer's engagement in the dialectical relation between representations of work and making those representations, can have the effect of shaping the writer's actual work practice—why or how she writes. That is, a considerable part of both the content and the form of some literary works can be understood best as the outcome of a writer's negotiations with the relation between writerly work and other kinds of work. (179)

Bromell describes a process in which writing about work forces the simultaneous consideration of the work of writing that brings it into being. Writing about work and the work of writing engage in a dialectic of mutual constitution. This generates a unique relationship between content and form: in fictions about work, form cannot merely be regarded as a compositional technique employed to convey a given subject matter. It is content in its own right and shaped by the subject matter it communicates. It pertains specifically to the work of the writer—to the immediate work of literary configuration.

The third study I wish to highlight does not deal with immediate acts of composition but rather with the effects that literary expression can have on worlds of work. Bernes, namely, posits in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017) that avant-garde art in the U.S. of the 1950s

and 60s was not only formed in relation to work-related conditions and concerns of the time, but that it also paved the way for political critiques of and an eventual transformation of these conditions and concerns. Thus while Bromell focuses on the way content and form—i.e., stories about work and the work of writing—undergo a process of mutual constitution during that act of literary configuration and Weinstein offers a perspective on how literary fictions of work are shaped, both thematically and formally, by attitudes and ethics surrounding work, Bernes elaborates how literature related to work can play a role in refiguring work conditions themselves.

Bernes traces connections between the spirits, sentiments, and vocabularies of art and poetry, expressions of worker discontent, and eventual changes in the management and conditions of work that took place throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As he writes, “[w]hen workers began to critique, in large numbers, the alienation, monotony, and authoritarianism of the workplace, they did so, in part, through the use of aesthetic categories, concepts, and ideologies” (9). One major theme amongst U.S. American (as well as European) avant-garde artists and writers of the 1950s and 60s was, as Bernes chronicles, that of participation (10). Participatory art upheld ideals related to collaboration and the creativity of the audience. Such ideals were, as Bernes suggests, reactions to the hierarchical, top-down structures of both blue and white-collar work at the time. They encouraged flat structures and creative input, unlike what was demanded by the majority of workplace managers at the time. This theme, as Bernes points out, also permeated “literature and literary theory of the 1960s. Particularly notable here are theories of the “writerly” (*scriptible*) or “open” text, to borrow Roland Barthes’s characterization” (Bernes 14). In *S/Z*, Barthes declares: “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (qtd. in Bernes 14). Here we find “the work of writing” pertaining not merely to the writer but most importantly to the reader, who joins the writer in the work of literature, producing the meaning of a given text as part of an endless and variable collaboration and process of production. Input is supplied from both sides rather than in a unidirectional manner; it is thus easy to see how such artistic and theoretical impulses implicitly rebelled against political and economic structures of authority. They move against notions of the mechanical worker, the docile political subject, and the passive consumer—figures of anxiety that, as we have seen, have permeated U.S. American cultural life since the economy’s industrialization in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Bernes notes that the kinds of implicit critiques of work conditions and values to be found in art and theory of the 1960s were formed simultaneously with the onset of lower profits in U.S. American industry. Citing economist Robert Brenner's 2016 book *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, Bernes stresses that, contrary to the popular belief that the postwar economy first slowed with the 1973 oil crisis, inflation, and recession, the economy had actually begun to slow as early as 1965, when low-priced German and Japanese goods entered the global market (Bernes 16). Companies responded by demanding that workers move faster and more intensely without pay raises and, as the crisis continued into the 1970s, by "beginning to attack wages and defang the unions that were reluctantly pushed into the fray by an increasingly combative workforce" (Bernes 16). When workers pushed back, it became increasingly difficult for management to revert to methods of simply exerting more pressure and maintaining the hierarchical structures put in place since the industrial period. A transformation was in order, which, as Bernes writes, is predominantly referred to as the period of:

[...] "post-Fordism" (a term meant to emphasize both its difference from and continuity with Fordist and Taylorist methods), or alternatively "neoliberalism," "flexible accumulation," and "postindustrial society," where each of these terms stresses different aspects of transformation. What matters for my argument is that [...] aspects of the artistic critique, such as the critique of work from the standpoint of participation, became essential parts of the restructuring undertaken by capitalists to improve profitability. (17)<sup>3</sup>

With the onset of post-Fordism, company management responded to worker complaints by introducing flatter hierarchies, encouraging employees to play less one-sided and more multifaceted roles in developing company ideas and cultures, increasing opportunities for participation, allowing more flexible work hours, etc. Such qualitative changes aimed to quiet worker complaints, while they did little to decrease exploitative conditions, under the guise of offering employees new flexibility and opportunities for participation. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello succinctly state in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999) that the "themes" that were first generated within artistic circles and transferred into worker complaints were appropriated by corporate management

---

<sup>3</sup> In his tracing of this history, Bernes draws upon the work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (who coined the term of the "artistic critique" within this historical context), David Harvey, Harry Braverman, and Alan Liu, among others.

discourses in an effort to placate unhappy workers; in doing so, they were absorbed by and used to strengthen the “forces whose destruction they were intended to hasten” (97). The results of this transformation, which have continued to develop into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in both white and blue-collar industries, have thus not resulted in structural power on the side of the worker (in terms of union strength, wage increases, lower working hours) but have rather paved the way for forms of flexibility and participation that involve an increase in pressure and working time to fulfill a company’s ideological demands and qualitative values.

This development shows that artistic discourses—which included those produced within the realms of literature and literary theory—generated sentiments that carried over into the realm of labor and eventually arrived within the discourses of management itself. Artistic expression played an indirect role in changing the horizon of work conditions and values to which it responded. It is interesting to note that, as the accounts of Bernes and others emphasize, when the vocabularies of 1960s avant-gardes made their way into management vocabularies of the later 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the critical potential of the artistic critique lost sway. That is, the re-appropriation of artistically generated values by capitalists enervated the strategies of avant-gardes.

The ways in which literature is influenced by work and vice versa are, of course, not universal over time but contingent upon countless factors ranging from the cultural status and popularity of literature, the background of the writer (in terms of race, class, gender, ability, education), and the phase or type of capitalistic (re)production (agrarian, domestic, industrial, postindustrial, immaterial) one examines. Nonetheless, I will venture a set of concluding points that can hopefully serve as a framework for thinking about the relationship between work and literary expression in future research.

### Conclusion: Points of Orientation for Further Research

The Marxist-critical concepts of base and superstructure offer a useful backdrop for thinking about a general reciprocity between literary expression and work. The relations of production that comprise the base and the socio-cultural activities and forms of expression that make up the superstructure include, respectively, all forms of work and literary expression. By thinking about the base and superstructure as part of a continuous horizon of expressive, social, economic, and political possibility, we establish a model in which one is not secondary to the

other; rather, both are engaged in a relationship of mutual constitution. The author of published writing is both a worker who produces value and a “configurer” of expressive possibility and thought, to borrow Hartley’s term. These general premises establish an overall perspective on the relationship between work and literary expression.

Weinstein’s study of the use and reception of allegory in 19<sup>th</sup>–century U.S. American fiction demonstrates how emotions and ethics related to work influenced literary expression of the time. Allegorical characters in literature that exhibited a flatness of personality tapped into prevalent fears about the effects of mechanized labor on workers’ personal development and health. Literary critics’ distaste for the use of allegory in literature, as well as for writing styles that demanded a high degree of engagement and effort on the part of the reader, was also related to work. Allegorical characters’ flatness, often a result of their repetitive professions, threw a core U.S. American belief—that hard work led to individual development—into question. At the same time, literature that demanded a high degree of engagement and effort on the part of the readers was disdained for its blatant display of the effort of writing. Such labors were to be hidden from view—much like the shiny products of industrialization that do not betray the conditions under which they came about.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, U.S. American attitudes surrounding the masking and display of work have changed considerably. For those of the white-collar class, for instance, it has become not merely acceptable but also expected in many contexts to put one’s engagement with work on display—in the form of putting in extra hours, showing dedication to and enthusiasm for the job, answering emails around the clock, participating in company social gatherings, etc. The current ideology is thus not characterized by an emphasis on the erasure but rather the display of the signs of one’s work. If one accepts the hypothesis that such norms coincide with patterns in literary expression, one could begin to read literary history in a new light. For instance, works of postmodernist metafiction have, since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, been dedicated to, and critically celebrated for, exposing the mechanisms of their making, putting the work of the author on display, and demanding an effort on the part of the reader. Changes in the reception of such a literary form, I would posit, are significantly impacted by the kinds of work and work ethics that are dominant at the time of their configuration. That is, the ways in which an author chooses to present the work of writing can be interpreted in relation to the normative values surrounding work of the time.

Bromell's study of the self-reflexive nature of literature about work in the antebellum period focuses less on a horizon of cultural norms related to work and more on acts of artistic creation. He observes how the subject of work causes the work of its very writing to become a theme in itself. That is, when writers scrutinize labor within their narratives, writing as a form of work appears as a self-conscious theme. This is a strong hypothesis worth exploring in literature beyond the antebellum period. Do literary texts that actively negotiate the meanings and values of work on the level of story always implicitly negotiate the meanings and values of the work of writing? If so, two levels of meaning and expression take form in relation to one another and must be analyzed in conjunction. And various further questions arise within this context—for instance, what moral or social tensions arise out of aesthetically beautiful language and harrowing work portrayed or avant-garde narratives of working-class lives? How is alienated labor placed in relation with the craft of writing that gives it expression? Are challenges to dominant values surrounding work performed through the subversion of specific narrative, stylistic, and genre conventions associated with the privileged class? My proposal is thus to explore more extensively the relationship between work conditions, ethics, values, and emotions portrayed on the level of story and the aesthetic means by which these are communicated. The nature of this relation ranges from one of mutual reinforcement to antagonism. It can be one of closeness or space between kinds of work and work-related values depicted and the work of writing that is put on display—between the social positions, identities, values, and emotions of workers described and those of the authorial instances giving them expression.

Lastly, Bernes's work is arguably the most ambitious study cited, as an effort to describe the effect that cultural concepts and narratives had on relations of production. His tracing of the ways in which literary expression, theory, and art of the 1950s and 60s produced a constellation of ideas and expressive possibilities that played a role in transforming management styles and workplace cultures from the 1970s onwards is also the least transferable of procedures to other periods of literary history. The narrative he presents describes a moment in which the relationship between work and literary expression was fundamentally altered. When the world of work absorbed the very techniques and vocabularies that artists used to rebel against it, artistic discourses lost autonomy and political efficacy. The divide between life and art, work and creative expression, or base and superstructure shortened to an unprecedented degree, perhaps fully dissolved. This historical shift, the onset of the postmodern era, must therefore be taken into account when



discussing the relationship between conditions, values, and emotions surrounding work and literary expression. As this and the aforementioned points of orientation for exploring this relationship indicate, the opportunities for further research on the matter abound.

## References

- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. 1970. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." *Understanding Brecht*. 1966. London: Verso, 2003.
- Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.
- Bernes, Jasper. *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. 1999. London and New York: Verso, 2007.
- Bromell, Nicholas K. *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. 1976. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Man the Reformer*. Boston: Abel Heywood, 1843.
- Hartley, Daniel. *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. London: Blackwell, 1989.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. 1852. New York: Penguin Classics, 1983.
- Kovach, Elizabeth. "Collapsing the Economic and Creative Values of Contemporary Literature in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*." *The Value of Literature*. Ed. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning. Tübingen: Narr, 2021. 185–200.
- Liu, Alan. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. 1859. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
- . "Theories of Surplus Value." *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 31, Marx 1861–63*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010. 7–580.
- Melville, Herman. "Bartleby." *Billy Budd and Other Stories*. 1853. Ed. Frederick Busch. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. 1–46.
- . "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." *Billy Budd and Other Stories*. 1855. Ed. Frederick Busch. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. 261–86.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man That Was Used Up." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. 1839. Ed. David Galloway. London: Penguin Books, 2003. 79–89.

- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*. 1854. Third Norton Critical Edition. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008.
- Weinstein, Cindy. *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. 1977. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.