

Ye sons of Britain.
Who once were free.
Ye now are slaves to factory.
Those who walk the path of mole.
Expect in time to kill thy soul.

(Donovan, *Celtic Rock*).

If loss, mourning, and absence set the imaginary act in motion and permanently fuel it as much as they menace and undermine it, it is also undeniable that the fetish of the work of art is erected in disavowal of this mobilizing affliction.

(Julia Kristeva, “On the Melancholic Imaginary”).

Nietzsche’s herd are happy because they do not know either the past or the future. This is so due to their absolute forgetfulness. They cannot communicate this to the curious man who also wants to forget, but cannot, because his inquiry turns out to be a complete failure:

‘Why do you not talk to me about your happiness and only gaze at me?’ The beast wants to answer, too, and say: ‘That comes about because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say.’ But by then the beast has already forgotten this reply and remains silent, so that the man keeps on wondering about it. (Nietzsche 2010: 1).

The herd do not care about history, though they do not know about it, and in fact live in an absolute present. Since they do not have clocks, the beasts cannot order their time, and the way they live, *how* they live, may be called absolute

contingency, though, of course, they do not know about it. The curious man, on the other hand, is the owner of history: “History belongs, above all, to the active and powerful man”, to the creature who fights battles, who needs other exemplary men as teachers and comforters, and “cannot find them among his contemporary companions” (Nietzsche 2010: 2). Yet, for some reason, the man finds what he owns oppressive, and finds the ways of the herd emancipatory: “For the man says, ‘I remember,’ and envies the beast” (Nietzsche 2010: 1).

The curious man in Nietzsche’s text is, among others, Friedrich Schiller, and his way of appropriating history is “the way history belonged to Schiller” for whom in historians’ work “one phenomenon after another begins to liberate itself from blind contingency and lawless freedom and to become joined as a coordinated link into a harmonious totality, *which, of course, is present only in its depiction*”. The elimination of the contingent by history thus diminishes its scope, makes it pictographic and makes the hidden desire not to remember invisible, hides it in books whose scholarly authors are like exhausted hens who “can only cackle more than before, because they lay more eggs”. These eggs, however, diminish in size, they become “constantly smaller (although books have become constantly thicker)” (Nietzsche 2010: 7). The problem is thus that of making contingency perceptible through a liberation of “the plastic force of life” which the “excess of history has seized” (Nietzsche 2010: 10), perhaps by way of laying fewer eggs, though bigger ones, extending beyond the simple facticity of the pictographic sequence of “nows” so as to emancipate life from its absorption into events. I will return to the idea of plastic force of life in the discussion of Catherine Malabou’s neuronal idea of plasticity later on, now concentrating mostly on the ways in which contingency may be dealt with in terms of the poetical, the realm which both escapes historical ordering and attempts to, paradoxically, extend history so as to diminish its seizing grasp.

In a book which partly deals with diminution — *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* — Simon Critchley looks at emancipatory potential of artistic creation through Wallace Stevens’s vision of poetry in which he finds a potential for bringing contingency to the sphere of perceptibility. “Poetry”, he writes,

permits us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictionality or contingency of the world. The world is what you make of it. Its fact is a *factum*: a deed, an act, an artifice. Such is the critical task of poetry, which we might think of in Kantian terms as analogous to the Copernican turn. (Critchley 2004: 232–233).

The identification of contingency with fictionality, and the simultaneous positioning of fiction as *factum*, is indeed comparable to the Copernican revolution which, in fact, did not change the reality of the world, but revealed the misleading nature of its perception. What is offered along with the “factisation” of the

contingency/fiction pair is the possibility of fictionalization of what, so far, was perceived as factual and stable. The “how” of such a fictionalization pointed to by Wallace Stevens is *belief*. For Stevens, fictionalization is possible through a willing belief in “a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly” (Stevens 1955: 513, quoted in Critchley 2004: 233). Stevens, and Critchley after him, are implicitly addressing the romantic idea of “suspension of disbelief” which, for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was constitutive of moments of poetic faith. This faith, when transformed into a state of permanence, undermines the stability of its allegedly non-fictional basis, of transcendence, of the possibility of divine creation as the foundation of all values:

Thus, on the one hand, poetry can bring us to this exquisite truth, namely that fiction is the truth of truth, a view that leads neither to an antirealism, linguistic idealism, relativism or even cynicism, and that does not exclude questions of truth. I would claim, rather grandly, that the critical function of poetry is the acceptance of existence in a world without God, that is, without transcendent or cognitive guarantees for our values, which of course leads not to the suspension of the question of value but rather to its exacerbation. (Critchley 2004: 233)

Such an exacerbation of the question of value may have a therapeutic effect in which the replacement of the Supreme Being with “supreme fiction” would constitute a critical revelation of the fictionality of the fictional and, as Critchley puts it, could “therapeutically produce this fiction as a *factum*, ‘the exquisite environment of fact’” (Critchley 2004: 234). The realization of facticity of fiction, and thus also of contingency of facticity, posits one in a world in which uncertainty does not stand in opposition to any absolute certainty of the permanence of being. The blurring effect of poetic expression was dear not only to the ideology of romanticism in which the non-human, metaphysically rooted order of truth was suspended as incredible. It also became an irreducible part of the epistemology of disbelief in which the createdness of reality was put forward as its inevitable aestheticity which, in turn, revealed the naturally creative potential of human beings and the natural status of, generally, *poiesis*.

Life and art are thus perceived as not quite separable, and what is inevitable in life is what Jacques Rancière sees as the “partition of the sensible” in which art does not simply transform messages, but partitions spaces and times defining ways of being together or apart, though the togetherness and apartness thus constituted are quite provisional and depend on particular regimes which govern both our creation and perception of the world. The relationship between “being apart” and “being together” is, according to Rancière, paradoxical because the former as it

were grows out of the latter. “The paradoxical relationship between the ‘apart’ and the ‘together’ is also a paradoxical relationship between the present and the future. The artwork is the people to come and it is a monument to its expectation, a monument to its absence” (Rancière 2009: 59). One of the key terms Rancière makes use of in order to grasp this paradox is *dissensus*, “an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all” (Rancière 2009: 48–49). Dissensus demonstrates the gap within the sensible, though without a plan to bridge this gap. It is “being together apart” (Rancière 2009: 51)—the idea inspired by a poem by *Mallarmé*—a sensation which necessitates politics to configure this seemingly dual space and to make the dissensus manifest. Politics, for Rancière, is an organizing intervention into the complexity of the sensible, and thus is inextricably interwoven with aesthetics. “Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable”, writes Rancière introducing his 8th thesis on politics in which he claims that “the essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one” (Rancière 2010: 37).

The manifestation of this dissensual duality, of the “being together apart” of politics and aesthetics does not split them apart, which splitting is involved in the idea of *consensus*. The political can only exist in the “unsplit” duality of dissensus, while consensus is in fact the end of politics and the beginning of the police. Politics, in Rancière’s view, stands in distinct opposition to the police which partitions and distributes the sensible on the principle of “the absence of void and of supplement” (Rancière 2010: 36). The police fills in the political, makes it into a whole, into a single organism leaving no space to any voids thus subjecting the world to presence without supplement, the kind of presence which, for Derrida, was through and through metaphysical. Rancière’s police has the power to reduce this void to nothing, to somehow relegate the aesthetic from the political. The void, read as an absence or presence, may be conceptualized as loss of presence which simultaneously threatens that presence. Rancière illustrates his idea of void with those critiques of democracy which discredit it by way of reducing “the constitutive ‘nothing’ of the political people to the surfeit (*trop-plein*) of the greedy masses and the ignorant populace” (Rancière 2010: 34).

Masses stand in opposition to the order of political civilization, they threaten it by their very existence whose presence is a reminder of the possibility of being lost, a remainder which Oscar Wilde, for example, saw as redundant to the existence of the ideally aesthetic state of Individualism which he envisioned in his *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. What he termed “the poor” are posited outside the

political “Humanity” as a constitutive nothing of the pure physical force which they could provide:

These are the poor, and amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilisation, or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy of life. From their collective force Humanity gains much in material prosperity. But it is only the material result that it gains, and the man who is poor is in himself absolutely of no importance. He is merely the infinitesimal atom of a force that, so far from regarding him, crushes him: indeed, prefers him crushed, as in that case he is far more obedient. (Wilde 1999: 3)

Wilde’s aesthetic project moves in the direction of what, in Rancière’s terms, could be seen as voiding the aesthetic from the political, of splitting the “being together apart”, and thus towards purely aesthetic organization of space which would be void of labour and thus, in a sense, void of both the precariat and of precariousness. What lurks in Wilde’s vision is the end of politics, the end which, for Rancière, “is the ever-present” shore of politics (*le bord de la politique*),

itself an activity that is always of the moment and provisional. The expressions ‘return of politics’ and ‘end of politics’ encapsulate two symmetrical interpretations that both produce the same effect: an effacing of the concept of politics itself and the precariousness that is one of its essential elements. (Rancière 2010: 43)

In Wilde, the effacement of politics and precariousness is thinkable on two conditions. The first one is the conversion of private property into public wealth which goes hand in hand with substitution of competition with co-operation so as to “insure the material well-being of each member of the community” and thus “give Life its proper basis and its proper environment” (Wilde 1999: 3). The second condition which Wilde demands for the “full development of Life” is what he calls Individualism: “At present”, he writes,

in consequence of the existence of private property, a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure. (Wilde 1999: 3)

In order that Individualism becomes possible to all, private property should be abolished along with the “Tyrrany of want” which compels the poor to do unpleasant things, “to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them” (Wilde 1999: 3). As regards the richer ones, the abolition of private property would be also liberating as it would free them of the fear of loss which forces them to do equally unpleasant things:

In fact, property is really a nuisance. Some years ago people went about the country saying that property has duties. They said it so often and so tediously that, at last, the Church has begun to say it. One hears it now from every pulpit. It is perfectly true. Property not merely has duties, but has so many duties that its possession to any large extent is a bore. It involves endless claims upon one, endless attention to business, endless bother. If property had simply pleasures, we could stand it; but its duties make it unbearable. (Wilde 1999: 3)

Pleasures are, of course, a highly nonspecific term though one which quite clearly shows that Wilde's project was a projection of an aesthetic milieu without a regime, a transition to aestheticised work undertaken freely, and in fact performed without any definite task. Rancière's "surfeit of greedy masses and the ignorant populace" (Rancière 2010: 34) becomes here as it were absorbed into the aesthetic without the political, thus dismantling the dissensual "being together apart" into an apolitical utopia without precarization, without "habituation to *expecting* a life of unstable labour and unstable living". If, moreover, "precaritisation is about loss of control over time and the development and use of one's capabilities" (Standing 2014a), then Wilde's world of pleasure is an ideally unprecarized one, a vision of a cohabitation of classless individuals untied by no obligation or responsibility.

Wilde's answer to the question of "how?" is "aesthetically!"—the solution strongly, though less radically, inscribed in at least a part of British nineteenth-century social thinking as a way to beautify the ugly Victorian life. Before Wilde, William Morris pursued the idea of aestheticization of England, though his vision of beauty concerned adorning and ornamentation which he saw as extensions of some natural drive:

Everything that was made by man was adorned by man, just as everything made by Nature is adorned by her. The craftsman, as he fashioned the thing he had under his hand, ornamented it so naturally and so entirely without conscious effort, that it is often difficult to distinguish where the mere utilitarian part of his ended and the ornamental began. (Morris 1993: 301)

Morris saw the capitalist world of production as full of what he termed "useless toil", the term which he used in a way reminiscent of Marx's notion of alienated labour. Pleasure as a task of work appears in his proposal of lesser arts as the task of "worthy work", the kind of work which also offers leisure as a space of living rather than, again as in Marx, reproduction of labour power:

Thus worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill. All other work but this is worthless; it is slaves' work - mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil. (Morris 1993: 297)

In *News from Nowhere*, a fictional report from Utopia (which Guy Standing evokes in *The Precariat*) Morris uses the term “work-pleasure” as a dissensual kind of activity which, unlike in Wilde, does not dissolve into the singularity of aesthetic pleasure:

The art of work-pleasure, as one ought to call it, of which I am now speaking, sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible overwork, to do the best they could with the work at hand. (Morris 1993: 160)

Hence Morris’s redefinition of wealth which in “Useful Work and Useless Toil” is not associated with richness, but rather with the way in we furnish our milieu. Through work-pleasure, “one and all of us” ought to “be wealthy, to be well furnished with the good things which our victory over Nature has won for us” (Morris 1993: 293).¹

Guy Standing calls William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* a visionary book which envisions a world in which

people would be unstressed, working on their enthusiasms and being inspired to reproduce nature, thriving in association with their neighbours. None of them foresaw the insatiable drive for consumption and endless growth set by a commodifying market system. (Standing 2011: 161)

Relating Morris’s critique of Victorian industrialism to the possibility of changing the attitude to labour within the precarized contemporary politics of employment, Standing formulates a demand for a different attitude to labour and leisure, an attitude which seems to be a proposal of splitting the two into two independent kinds of activity. What must be done, he claims, is finding some ways for all of us “to have more time for work that is not labour and for leisure that is not play” (Standing 2011: 161). This litotetic revision of the concepts of labour and play seems to be a gesture towards a critique of the traditional, perhaps fordist, division of lifetime into two almost mutually exclusive domains. What reverberates here seems to be the idea of organised leisure and rational recreation which, in Victorian England, was at least partly inspired by the idea of disciplining play by way of projecting some aspects of the work discipline upon the “free time” of workers. As Peter Bailey notices in his *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*,

¹I discuss William Morris’s ideas on labour and aesthetics more extensively in my *Labours of the Mind. Labour in The Culture of Production*.

Viewed from above, leisure constituted a problem whose solution required the building of a new social conformity — a play discipline to complement the work discipline that was the principal means of social control in an industrial capitalist society. (Bailey 1978: 5)

Disciplined leisure was to be an extension of the factory, a space that complicated the very idea of labour which began to embrace some kind of work outside the workplaces not only as a recreational kind of activity, but also as a work of one's moral edification and participation in the life of the community. Various "garden city" projects which flourished in England throughout the nineteenth century after Robert Owen's New Lanark (e.g. Saltaire, Bournville, Port Sunlight) were not only plans to move industry out of the cities, but also social projects aiming at de-alienation of labour whose task was also, in the light of Marx's view on alienation, to de-alienate man from man, to bring the species life back to its non-alienated togetherness now reduced only to "the means of individual life".²

In England, the garden city de-alienation was a reaction to the failures of the 19th-century industrial city which alienated man from almost everything, and which alienation Charles Dickens, for instance, reflected in his *Hard Times* through the imagery of Coketown—the city whose monotonous repetitiveness covered all aspects of individuality:

It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (Dickens 2001: 16)

Dickens's Coketown is an effect of work and of mass production and it is made up of facts and hard work. It was a triumph of fact and factory, and you "saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful" (Dickens 2001: 16). *Life is work* in Coketown, be it the hard physical work of the workers, or the work of the useful fact-teaching education. Coketown is a space which habituates alienation, which confines the subject to work for the sake of an economy which leaves no space for nature or art, for Morris's "lesser arts" enabling a creative or imaginary escape from the fordist repetitiveness through the already mentioned realization of the facticity of fiction. Symptoms of "coming to life" from this stupor are momentarily detected and repressed, as in the case of Mrs. Gradgrind who was

²"In alienating (1) nature from man, and (2) man from himself, his own active function, his life activity, alienated labor also alienates the species from him; it makes species life the means of individual life" (Marx 1967: 289).

mostly busy being ill and taking pills, and was forced to practice “fact” by Mr. Gradgrind:

Mrs. Gradgrind, a little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surpassing feebleness, mental and bodily; who was always taking physic without any effect, and who, whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her. (Dickens 2001: 11)

Though happy from the perspective of the Benthamite utilitarianism, and seemingly dead from the perspective the garden city ideals, Dickens’s model industrial city does contain, at least rhetorically, some life in it. The paradox of Coketown is that the monotonous repetitiveness of the industrial city constructed in order to obediently serve the demands of capitalist economy is as if it were animated by somehow notorious comparisons to some living creatures:

[I]t was a town of unnatural red and black like *the painted face of a savage*. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable *serpents of smoke* trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of *an elephant in a state of melancholy madness*. (Dickens 2001: 16)

Though Victorian England saw itself as a civilization which had already conquered all kinds of wildness and made nature “polished and oiled up”, Dickens’s city is still, at least metaphorically, populated with savages, serpents and elephants. Though the monotony of its rhythms and architecture seem to be leaving no space for any deregulatory difference and change, what lurks within its smokes is some rebellious spirit of the memory of the wild, a pre-industrial spirit of nature whose conquest has not managed to eliminate it. This trace of irrationality within otherwise perfectly rational space, of the melancholy madness within the obedient and fully controlled mechanical body of Coketown brings a hope of the possibility of breaking the rationally-technological chains of Gradgrind’s enslaving “facts”. As Tamara Ketabgian notices, if

for most literary critics, the machine in *Hard Times* embodies soulless rationalism and deadening regularity, it also serves as a figure of paradox, representing powerfully charged forms of affect, irrationality, and irregularity. Indeed, *Hard Times* infuses the most docile and automatic acts of its engines with a sense of extremity so pronounced as to excite suspicion. (Ketabgian 2011: 48)

The machinery of Coketown seems to be working independently of human wills and wishes, and it not only mechanizes the citizens, but also kills those who are mad enough to oppose its well lubricated movements. The death of its working

class hero, Stephen Blackpool, who is as it were devoured by a mineshaft, is the death which is inflicted by the indifference of the machine. Simultaneously, however, this indifference is associated with savagery and insanity, with the melancholy madness of the elephant-machine. What seems to be lurking in this almost absolute docility and automation is a protest, a slave revolution of sorts which Ketabgian reads in the light of the idea of “Asiatic despotism” which is hidden in the figure of “an elephant in a state of melancholy madness” used by Dickens a few times in his novel. Discussing Charles Knight’s *The Elephant, Principally Viewed in Relation to Man* (1844) she writes:

Period accounts celebrate the elephant for its “sagacity, obedience, and docility”. Renowned for its loyalty and geniality, the pachyderm displayed “a regularity of disposition which seems almost mechanical”. Expanding on this comparison, Charles Knight claims it is easy to “convert ... the unwieldy force of the huge quadruped into a machine nearly as precise and obedient as one of those many ingenious inventions of modern times”. Yet as Knight shows, this near-mechanical obedience is no natural instinct but rather the result of “a steady application of mild coercion”. Indeed, the elephant’s docility belongs to an Eastern context that is highly disciplinary. “Associated with human slaves in administering to the pomp of Asiatic despotism, the elephant”, Knight assures us, “is not only reconciled to captivity, but is proud and satisfied”. However, when we learn that the obedience of this powerful creature “cannot exist but in connexion with despotic power”, its satisfied docility seems far more suspect. (Ketabgian 2011: 59)

What is evoked alongside the image of “Asiatic despotism” is also the image of “Asiatic servility” in which incessant, monotonous work is not felt as oppressive due to the constant operation of despotic power. The Asiatic obedience “cannot exist but in connexion with despotic power” (Knight 1844: 205). Elephants and the subjects to despotic Maharajas, which and whom British colonialism is to lead to British democracy, are, regardless of the pride and satisfaction from their slavish standings, also potentially capable of a rebellion. “In many early Victorian accounts”, writes Ketabgian,

the elephant’s notorious “Asiatic servility” is marred only by its capacity for murderous vengeance. Anecdotes paint a creature that, beneath its patient and dependable exterior, remains “mindful of injuries” and keenly sensitive to “injudicious punishment”. For when it erupted, the elephant’s rage was violent, irrational, and most resistant to interpretation. These disorders were a staple of the popular press, which sensationalized them as unpredictable outbursts of passion. (Ketabgian 2011: 59)

In *Hard Times* Stephen Blackpool’s resistance to industrial enslavement is also resistance to be like an elephant or an Asian worker. The Benthamite human participants in the works of the industrial machinery, on the other hand, are

themselves “slaves to factory” who, like Knight’s elephants, are in their own eyes “proud and satisfied”. They are slaves who enslave.

Blackpool’s death in the mineshaft can thus be read as a suicide of sorts, a death of a rebellious slave inflicted by the enslaved machinery and those reduced to mechanical patterns. Blackpool fails to restructure the rigid architecture of Coketown whose victory seems to be the mark of the inevitability of the eternal return of the monotonous sameness. Dickens, in a way, stops short of projecting a hope for a better future.

As if supplementing this lack, three years after the publication of Dickens’s novel a parodic sequel to it appears. The sequel, “*Hard Times Refinished*” by Charles Diggins (1857), changes the ending of the story. It is no longer Blackpool who falls prey to the industrial machine, but Mr. Bounderby, the owner of the mill:

The melancholy-mad elephants occupied a good deal of room [...] [T]he building that contained them seemed insufficient space for them to wheeze and squeeze, to groan and moan, and mutter and splutter in. It required the greatest precaution, on the part of Mr. Bounderby, to step over the foaming cylinders, exhausted receivers, cranks, levers, and what not. ... Bounderby fell back. Into what? Into the clutches of the melancholy-mad elephants. The fly-wheel caught him. Whirr! Burr! Whiz! Fiz! Round and round he went! He was a self-made man, but he had not made himself of sufficiently strong materials to resist the influence of the melancholy-mad elephants. (Diggins 1971: 312–13, quoted after Ketabgian 2011: 47)

The melancholy-mad elephants in Dickens may also figure as a fracture within the fordist regime, within what Gerald Raunig calls “the omnipresent *dispositif* of discipline and surveillance that constitutes the subjects as cogs in the fordist social machine” (Raunig 2010: 10–11). The disciplinary regularity of factory labour could awaken the “animal” in man and, as Ketabgian notices, some “early Victorian critics such as Gaskell and Faucher argued that the regularity of factory work actually contributed to an explosion of irregular desires and habits” (Ketabgian 201: 79). These desires and habits could be often expressed in what Gaskell called “the delirium of intoxication”, in excessive drinking which, paradoxically, was seen as regular and routine as the work itself: “Dependent on each other, these two activities alternate regularly, so that the habitual pursuit of drink itself gains an aura of the routinized, mechanical labor that accompanies it” (Ketabgian 201: 79). What was seen as dangerous was only epitomized in drinking, and Dickens’s comparison of the steam engine to a melancholy mad elephant allies it with the monster of the proletariat, with the potential anger of the enslaved creature “that his contemporaries viewed with a sense of wonder and an awareness, however veiled, of constant possible danger” (Ketabgian 201: 58).

Organized leisure, which was a part of the organization of space and time in garden city projects, was also a way to the already mentioned moral edification of the “operatives”. A significant element of this edification was the aesthetic watchword of “beauty”, of spiritual uplifting replacing, among others, the dangerous uplifting by means of the use and abuse of spirits. William Morris’s idea of “lesser arts” (only briefly discussed above) went hand in hand with John Ruskin’s claim that “beautiful art can only be produced by people who have beautiful things about them, and leisure to look at them” (Ruskin 1964: 224). In Port Sunlight, the garden city designed by William Lever for his soap factory workers, there was no pub, and the walking promenade led directly to the Lady Lever Art Gallery displaying, among others, paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood whose preoccupation with living within beautiful milieus was what they shared with Ruskin, claiming that “in spite of material progress, the world was getting steadily uglier” (MacLeod 1969: 342). Echoes of Dickens’s Coketown clearly sound in Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* where he hears the call to make work a process of individual edification rather than that of production through the noise of the industrial city:

The great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages. And all the evil to which that cry is urging our myriads can be met only in one way: not by teaching or reaching, for to teach them is but to show them their misery, and to preach to them, if we do nothing more than preach, is to mock at it. It can be met only by a right understanding on the part of all classes, of what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy. (Ruskin 1925: 151)

Thus not simply to work, but “*how* to work?” is, for Ruskin, the basic question to which the general answer cannot be easily formulated, though the word “aesthetically” seems to be a closely related one. The marriage of economy and aesthetics, though aesthetics of some lesser kind, an aesthetics for artisans and craftsmen, is a pair in which the questions of “*how*?” and “*what*?” meet in a relationship which in Raymond Williams is reflected in the dialectical relationship between the country and the city. This relationship is projected upon the garden city projects, like Port Sunlight, as a network of links of the factory, the house and the garden within a singular dwelling space in which cultivation of life and cultivation of nature go hand in hand as a kind of work which makes one happy. Though pursuit of happiness is also the task of Bentham’s utilitarianism, its control by the state is unthinkable to Ruskin because happiness is largely an organic predisposition whose expression is beauty. Beauty and happiness are

interchangeable terms, and some kind of aesthetic activity is not only discernible in the organic creation, but it is also an expression of moral dispositions:

Throughout the whole of the organic creation every being in a perfect state exhibits certain appearances or evidences of happiness; and is in its nature, its desires, its modes of nourishment, habitation, and death, illustrative or expressive of certain moral dispositions or principles. Now, first, in the keenness of the sympathy which we feel in the happiness, real or apparent, of all organic beings, and which, as we shall presently see, invariably prompts us, from the joy we have in it, to look upon those as most lovely which are most happy. (Ruskin 2013: 24)

This conflation of the aesthetic with the organic makes all of nature artistically predisposed, and Oscar Wilde's project of the aesthetic society discussed above seems to be drawing at least from some of Ruskin's ideas. Wilde detested physical toil and slog and saw the possibility of handing it over to machines:

There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure, and many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities, and should be regarded as such. To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours, on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine. (Wilde 1999: 15)

For Ruskin, all work can be dignifying, given that what we do and how we work agrees with our mental capacities and interests. As organically motivated, the pleasure which work gives comes naturally from within and cannot be taught through any advice or instruction. If for Wilde the leading watchword was the modernist, however vague demand of "art for art's sake", for Ruskin it was "work for work's sake", an fitting kind of occupation for everybody which cannot be simply taught through guidance or instruction:

We think too much in our benevolent efforts, more multiplied and more vain day by day, of bettering men by giving them advice and instruction. There are few who will take either; the chief thing they need is occupation. I do not mean work in the sense of bread. I mean work in the sense of mental interest; for those who either are placed above the necessity of labor for their bread, or who will not work although they should. (Ruskin 2013: 146–147)

Aesthetic education is not really needed, though in the part of his *The True and the Beautiful in Nature* devoted to architecture he comes out with the idea of some basic kind of education or training. Architecture, the art of building, is for the dwelling creature like man a necessity, and we can make architects of ourselves

only by a dint of effort. Since our living space should be pleasing, the “good art” of architecture can be achieved by way of following some prototype of Freud’s pleasure principle, though one following not so much drives as some basic rules which are easier than the rules of language:

All good art has the capacity of pleasing: if people will attend to it; there is no law against its pleasing; but on the contrary, something wrong either in the spectator or the art when it ceases to please. “But what are we to do? We cannot make architects of ourselves.” Pardon me, you can and you ought. Architecture is an art for all men to learn, because all are concerned with it; and it is so simple, that there is no excuse for not being acquainted with its primary rules, any more than for ignorance of grammar or spelling, which are both of them far more difficult sciences. (Ruskin 2013: 130)

Here Ruskin’s answer to the question of “how?” is “pleasingly”, and to please oneself one need not so much create art as enjoy it. Thus despite his claim that advice and instruction in this respect are not highly useful, Ruskin did teach art to workers at the Working Men’s College in London (alongside Dante Gabriel Rossetti), though the teaching was not a practically oriented one. Kristin Mahoney summarizes the educational agenda of the College in a compact statement saying that “Ruskin and the Christian Socialist founders of the school were essentially telling working men that they might be compensated for the lack in their everyday existence by receiving an education without use value” (Mahoney 2010: 231).

This kind of education can be seen as useless only if lack is treated as a purely negative category, as something lost which, through education, might be regained and the empty space of the lack filled with an achievement. The teaching agenda of the Working Men’s College, however, pursued a more complex treatment of lack and loss so as to transgress the simple duality of loss and profit. As J.N. Langley (of the Wolverhampton Working Men’s College) wrote in *Working Men’s College Magazine* in 1859: “We do not see that our lessons [...] will help you to get higher wages or in any way raise your value in the labor market. [...] We do not profess to make you a more perfect or useful machine. There is surely something better and nobler for you and for me to think about than the everlasting seesaw of Profit and Loss” (Langley 1859: 137–138, I quote after Mahoney 2010: 225).

This something better and nobler was, as Mahoney phrases it, the cultivation of “a sense of infinite lack” (Mahoney 2010: 225), a sense of unfulfilled desire whose accomplishment was from the start posited as impossible. Such a cultivation of “unfulfillment”, in fact of uselessness, may well be called a cultivation of precariousness, of the uncertainty of the effect in which “how” takes place of the utilitarian “what” of the object. Positing precariousness as a kind of taking pleasure

in desiring rather than in its consummation was not seen as a distraction of the normal, of a brief escape from the real to the unreal world of the aesthetic. “For both Ruskin and Rossetti”, Mahoney argues, “the goal of both art and education was not to provide distracting forms of pleasure. They encouraged their students to concentrate on limitations, dissatisfaction, and frustration” (Mahoney 2010: 232). However sadistic the above may sound, this educational project of pursuing pleasure in infinite lack and in what seems to be the opposite of pleasure was not an apotheosis of pain, but rather a way of revealing the ideology of the governing economy of gain as the only thinkable source of pleasure. What seems to be at stake was the idea of aesthetic dwelling in the world, the question of what Martin Heidegger, much later, saw as the poetic dwelling of man, the question which I will address in more detail later in this chapter.

Ruskin’s and Rossetti’s education through lack, through awakening to “perpetual quest and unending exertion” and “a desire for culture that might be perfected rather than satisfied” was, interestingly, quite successful in terms of attendance by students who despite the fact that that Ruskin himself found them useless:

Ruskin and Rossetti’s art classes, for which about fifty students registered each term, were the most popular at the school, and, according to Ruskin, they were also the most “useless”. The uselessness of these courses constituted an implicit criticism of vocational or utilitarian systems of art education that sought to endow their pupils with skills that might be employed in designing for manufacturers. (Mahoney 2010: 226–227)

The uselessness of the courses was an implicit statement of there being a possibility of different attitudes to productivity and work than those demanded by the capitalist culture of production, an attempt at finding ways to act without the promise of completion. It was not simply a passive acceptance of the precariousness of one’s position, but a conscious construction of an uncertain and precarious milieu without the anxiety of loss, the latter having been as it were posited as continuous lack in whose construction both the students and the teachers were all taking part.³

³Perhaps it was for this reason that the regularity and rhythm of the industrial production were not a significant part of the disciplinary system at the Working Men’s College. There was a space in it for a high degree of indiscipline, also on the part of teachers. “Rossetti’s Bohemian ways”, for instance, “could become irritating at times, as Ruskin himself discovered. Regularity was not one of Rossetti’s strong points. [...] The Suggestion Book contains an entry for 1857 – ‘Suggested that Mr. Rossetti attend regularly.’ And in the same year there was another suggestion [...] ‘that Mr. Rossetti’s Drawing Room be papered or

Writing in the twenty first century, in the context of precarization of labour, Guy Standing seems to be somehow nostalgically drawing from the British aestheticism of the nineteenth century, though in *The Precariat* he refers only to William Morris. In the chapter arguing for rescuing work from jobs and labour he uses William Morris's critique of the idea of goodness of all labour as a starting point in his argument for the necessity of enriching the concept of work:

We must find ways of enabling all of us to have more time for work that is not labour and for leisure that is not play. Unless we insist on a *richer concept of work*, we will continue to be led by the folly of measuring a person's worth by the job they are doing and by the folly that job generation is the mark of a successful economy. (Standing 2011: 161, italics mine)

Though the British social thinkers of the nineteenth century underestimated the commodifying power of capitalism's market system, the idea of lack discussed above quite evidently was a significant hint pointing to the necessity of rethinking work and labour, of enriching the concept of work by way of drawing it out of the factory and extending to the space of the garden, for example. William Lever, the already mentioned owner and designer of Port Sunlight, perhaps unphilosophically expressed the necessity of access to the space of a garden as a work of moral transformation: "Surround a home with slums and you produce moral and physical weeds and stinging nettles. Surround a home with a garden and you produce the moral and physical beauty and strength of the flower and oak" (Lever 1910: 5). Since home in various garden city projects was an extension of the factory, the "econo-aesthetic" space thus created constituted a kind of return to the sense of economy hidden in the etymology of the word, to "household management" (*oikos nemein*) in which domesticity was open both to nature and to the demands of productivity. The opening was constituted by the inevitable lack, by the lack of the "finishedness" or "finishness" of being, the idea which I will discuss shortly bringing in Jean-Luc Nancy's critique of sovereignty.

Thinking about Guy Standing's "richer concept of work", it is tempting to rethink the Ruskinian "lack" seen as the unaccomplished effect of work in terms the identification of lack with loss, the identification which translates lack into the work of mourning after the lost object. The enrichment might consist in embracing unproductive work not so much as useless toil, but as a useful kind of loss in which lack is not necessarily the source of precariousness and disappointment. The

(Footnote 3 continued)

coloured a green or some other quiet colour, as the present red colour hurts the eyes of the students" (Harrison 2013: 68).

paradox of the “deceitful” translation of lack into loss is, as Slavoj Žižek claims reading Kant’s reading of the melancholic, that it “enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss” (Žižek 2000: 660). What is constructed through loss is thus not lack of an object, but a sublimated kind of object which has never been there, an object which “is *nothing but* the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself” (Žižek 2000: 660).

Though, probably, not informed by Kant’s ideas on melancholy, the nineteenth-century aestheticians’ openness to lack was in fact a critique of the illusion of private property seen, still after John Locke, as extension of person, an extension which consisted in annexation achieved through the labour of hands. Loss of property, as a result, was in Locke a loss of a part of one’s person which, or who, was thus becoming as it were incomplete, deprived and lacking. John Locke’s approach to property is worth having a brief look at here, as some of its aspects are still strongly present in thinking about property in general, and in the context of aesthetic work and uselessness it may be quite revealing. Locke’s theory of property bears not only “on the on-going philosophical debate over equality, property rights, freedom, and the legitimacy of government powers of taxation, regulation and redistribution” (Widerquist 2000: 4)—problems relevant to thinking about precarity and precarisation—but also, though implicitly, raises the question of finitude and completeness, which, as I will try to show, are constitutive of inferiority through lack, seeing it be either as originary or as secondarily acquired through loss.

Locke theorized private property in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) some time after the restoration of monarchy in England. The text was published anonymously, perhaps for the reason that it not only criticized monarchy through a critique of patriarchy, but also because by bringing the original appropriation to the level of an individual it undermined the position of the monarch as the proprietor of the state and the disposer of all possessions. It should be noted, however, that Locke concentrated on what may be called original appropriation, and for this reason had to go beyond seventeenth-century British reality in which, at least as regards the British Isles, the land was already largely allotted and enclosed. This seems to be the reason why he decided to reach to some time and space from before appropriation, to the very beginning of property. The phrasing which he uses in the book with reference this beginning clearly alludes to the beginning of the Book of Genesis, though instead of informing the reader about what God created, he writes about what there was: “Thus in the beginning all the world was America” (Locke 1977: §49). America figures in Locke’s construct as a primordial

land from before any divisions, as a prelapsarian space upon which everything is, as yet, common, though awaiting appropriation. It also seems to be a land from before the creation of Man, as those who inhabit it are not fully human:

The fruit, or venison, which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no enclosure, and is still a tenant in common, must be his, and so his, i.e. a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do him any good for the support of his life. (Locke 1977: §26)

This image of the tenants in the American common is, of course, not an exact vision of the Garden of Eden. Rather, as Barbara Arneil claims, it figures to the English readers as “a two sided Genesis, a place to find both the origins of their past and the promise of their future” (Arneil 1998: 2). As tenants, the wild Indians only occupy the land being neither permanent citizens nor denizens of any state or the city. Moreover, knowing no enclosure, they cannot lead any kind of sedentary life. They are, importantly for my discussion of Heidegger’s idea of dwelling later on in this chapter, not builders, and Locke clearly constructs the Indian denizens as consumers, as eaters of the fruit and venison which they do not produce. Locke’s Indians are thus defined by a pure kind of lack, by an absence which is not attached to loss, as in the world of common, or shared, foods the idea of loss is hardly thinkable. What belongs to Indians, or rather what **is theirs**, is what they eat, and it seems that Locke consciously does not use an expression hinting at any kind of appropriation in this context. Indians are one with what nourishes them, the nourishment being “so Indians”, that it is inseparable from their lives, while it is only life, the support of life, which legitimizes its consumption. What makes Indians inferior to man is the lack of any permanent property. This lack becomes clearly discernible when Locke’s remarks on Indians are read through the mechanism of the rise of private property which he presents in the next paragraph of the essay:

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a “property” in his own “person”. This nobody has any right to but himself. The “labour” of his body and the “work” of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this “labour” being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others. (Locke 1977: §27)

What Locke seems to be suggesting here is a transformation of being into having through labour. The transformation is gradual, and in its first stage it

involves the possession of one's own person. Read as a sort of identity, the person seems to be a pure individuality, a blank space in obvious ways reminiscent of the *tabula rasa* upon which the developments in one's property (and one's properties) will be narrated. One may also read Locke's "person" as a predisposition to be oneself, a conscious and self-aware being capable of accumulating knowledge and thus enlarging its scope, though always remaining, repeatably, itself even if some aspects of the enlargement are forgotten.⁴ Interestingly, however, in his *Essay* he does not write about "having" a person, and one may think about the possibility that he uses the word "property" in the sense of "characteristic feature". There is thus no man without properties which are posited as the possession of one's "person". What then is put in motion are two subsequent conditions of "acquiring" property, the first of them being the possession of labour and work which are defined as "properly his". To this mixture of person and labour is added the third element, a mixture of labour and the effect of labour which consists in removal of a produced or created something from the state of nature, which something (nature mixed with labour) is annexed to the already existing mixture of person and labour. The result of this mixing is not only the unquestionable property of the labourer, but also an unalienable unity of person, labour and property whose disruption is offence and transgression of the law which should protect this unity and the solidity of its construction. Locke's annexation of nature by labour as appropriation is radically different from the consumptive "being his" of an Indian's fruit and venison where the unity seems to be formed through interiorisation and absorption, through eating which, of course, itself leaves no permanent effects and which results in loss of that which nourishes.

Whether Locke's Indians possess their persons is not quite clear, and the reason why they are surely counted as "inferior creatures" is that they do not "have" labour and thus remain in common. For, according to Locke, though God did create the world as common and "gave the world to men in common", his plans for the future were different, and the gift was meant to be used "for their benefit and greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it" (Locke 1977: §34). The world was thus not meant to be eaten, but to be profitably used to men's convenience, eating remaining the necessary evil which men did share with all the

⁴Locke explains various aspects of remaining the same in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in the chapter entitled "Of Identity and Diversity". His short definition of "person", which he complicates later in the text, says that a person is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it". (Locke 1975: §9).

inferior creatures. What this economic God created and gave us was thus something as yet unfinished, something lacking, which was to be completed by the work of men whose task is to cultivate it. In this respect Locke seems quite clear, though he leaves some space for the possibility of it being otherwise: “[I]t cannot be supposed that God meant it [the world] should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational (and labour was to be his title to it)” (Locke 1977: §34). God surely may have meant that the world should always remain common and uncultivated, that he created all of us Indians, and that Leonard Cohen’s beautiful losers, having no idea of loss, are those who perfectly well fit the mimetic demand of our having been created in his image. Perhaps we, as his images, only lack God’s infinite perfection in which there is no space, or time, for loss. If loss can be read as a mark of decomposed finitude, lack is its opening. Perhaps lack without loss is, as in Meillassoux, the “after” of finitude, the finitude of Locke’s property being only its own, inherent, mystification.

Industriousness and rationality are, in Locke, two human properties which are prerequisites of appropriation, and the answer to the “how?” (which Locke reads as God’s plan) is an instruction that we should live laboriously. On top of this he also clearly characterizes those who have the title to property, though it is not easy to say who they might be. All that we learn is that, except for Indians, he excludes all those who are non-industrious and unreasonable, and to whom the common was actually given by God can only be a matter of speculative judgement. What lurks in Locke is the Calvinist idea of predestination in which the uncertainty of having been elected went hand in hand with search for some visible marks of belonging to God’s tribe. The spirit of capitalism, which is of course the lesson of Max Weber, was born out of this dilemma: “The question, Am I one of the elect? must sooner or later have arisen for every believer and have forced all other interests into the background. And how can I be sure of this state of grace?” (Weber 2001: 65). Though, as Weber claims, for Calvin himself this was not a problem, and he was certain of his own salvation, the precariousness of the situation of others consisted in the necessity of their reliance on “the knowledge that God has chosen” and “on that implicit trust in Christ which is the result of true faith” (Weber 2001: 65). This attitude, according to Weber, was impossible for the “mass of ordinary men” for whom recognizability of the state of grace (*certitudo salutis*) “became of absolutely dominant importance” (Weber 2001: 66). Locke’s appropriation by labour at its initial, original stage “where there is enough” is a way in which the industriousness and rationality of the labourer are revealed, made visible through property which thus functions as a sign, or a mark, of belonging—as a visible link with the sacred.

Locke's project is thus not only a justification and defence of the well-being of the English plantations in America, though, as Barbara Arneil shows in her *John Locke and America. A Defense of English Colonialism* this was his crucial and significant intension. If earlier, before Locke, ownership of land was defined solely by occupation, the positioning of labour as the instituting factor of appropriation in fact deprived Indians of any rights to have land. This new definition of labour, according to Arneil, was created as a political demand:

A new definition of property, which would allow the English to supersede the rights claimed by occupation was needed. The *Two Treatises of Government* provided the answer. Labour, rather than, would begin property, and those who tilled, enclosed, and cultivated the soil would be its owners. England superseded the right of occupation by the Amerindians by virtue of their specific form of labour. Suddenly a whole continent was open to English colonization, and agrarian labour became the basis of both English colonial claims and Locke's *Two Treatises*. (Arneil 1998: 18)

However, making property into a visible mark of the rational and industrious whom God had elected, Locke made a gesture toward a sort of divination of economy, toward giving it to the governance of the invisible hand of God. Quentin Skinner rightly reads Locke's *Two Treatises* as the "classic text of radical Calvinist politics" (Skinner 1978: 239), though its political rootedness in the British colonial project invites a reading in which the outward success of the appropriator is directed from within by the industriousness and reason ascribed to Englishness,⁵

⁵Though only implicitly marked in Locke, Englishness seen as an additional mark of belonging to the visible church, the theme upon which I will not extensively elaborate here, is also discernible in various writings in which English reason and industriousness are shown as exceeding the same qualities in others, not only in Indians. The lack of predispositions to work was projected upon numerous other colonized people and peoples, and J.M. Coetzee's essay on laziness in South Africa insightfully discusses the significance of "its power to scandalize" which is still present in various discourses and is "as radical today as it ever was" (Coetzee 1988: 34). The lack of predispositions to reasonably act, also as radical today as it ever was, was projected not only on "savages", but also on England's neighbours by Locke's almost contemporary radical thinker John Milton who, in *Areopagitica*, traced the origins of English reason back to the Persian wisdom and found English wit natural, as contrasted with the artificiality of the work of the French. Milton's *Areopagitica* was written as a speech addressed the English Parliament in 1644. Meant as a defense of freedom of speech, the text argued that reason was the only tool to be used in choosing between good and evil, and thus between good and evil books. The British kind of reason, as described by Milton, seems to be of some special quality: "Lords and Commons of England, consider what nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors: a nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious, and piercing spirit; acute to invent, subtile and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to. Therefore the studies of learning in her deepest sciences have been so ancient, and so eminent among us, that writers

which enabled the distinction between colonization through conquest versus colonization “through labour or peaceful settlement”, the latter being seen as the English way which stood in seemingly sharp contrast to the methods of the Spanish *conquistadores*:

For the English reader, conquest was considered to be the Spanish form of both converting the natives and extinguishing their land title. The English explorers, in their attempts to both denounce Spanish methods of conversion and encourage English colonization, chose to reject conquest by emphasizing the peacefulness of English methods of conversion and proprietorship instead. (Arneil 1998: 78)

This image of colonization through peaceful means could be called a colonization through economy. This image conceals the violence involved in colonization and as it were exculpates colonizers who are posited as guiltless possessors of land and settles as they do not dispossess Indians who only occupy the land⁶ and thus are only moved farther away by the natural growth of English wealth and richness. In this respect Locke also uses the argument of the natural fitness of the peaceful method of colonization to the English character of “our people”:

There are but two ways of growing Rich, either Conquest, or Commerce [...] no Body is vain enough to entertain a Thought of our reaping the Profits of the World

(Footnote 5 continued)

of good antiquity and ablest judgment have been persuaded that even the school of Pythagoras, and the Persian wisdom, took beginning from the old philosophy of this island. And that wise and civil Roman, Julius Agricola, who governed once here for Caesar, preferred the natural wits of Britain before the laboured studies of the French” (Milton 1918: 50). I owe the incentive to read *Areopagitica* to discussions and talks with Francis Barker, and to his *The Tremulous Private Body, Essays on Subjection* (Barker 1984).

⁶Much later, Alexis de Tocqueville used the argument of Indians’ occupation of land in the first volume of his *Democracy in America* (1835) “Although the vast country which we have been describing was inhabited by many indigenous tribes, it may justly be said at the time of its discovery by Europeans to have formed one great desert. *The Indians occupied without possessing* it. It is by agricultural labor that man appropriates the soil, and the early inhabitants of North America lived by the produce of the chase. Their implacable prejudices, their uncontrolled passions, their vices, and still more perhaps their savage virtues, consigned them to inevitable destruction. The ruin of these nations began from the day when Europeans landed on their shores; it has proceeded ever since, and we are now witnessing the completion of it. They seem to have been placed by Providence amidst the riches of the New World to enjoy them for a season, and then surrender them. Those coasts, so admirably adapted for commerce and industry; those wide and deep rivers; that inexhaustible valley of the Mississippi; the whole continent, in short, seemed prepared to be the abode of a great nation, yet unborn” (Tocqueville 1946: 27, italic added).

with our Swords, and making tie Spoil [...] of Vanquished Nations. Commerce therefore is the only way left to us ... for this the advantages of our Situation, as well as the Industry and Inclination of our People...do *Naturally fit us*. (Locke 1991: 222–223, I quote after Arneil 1998: 106, italics added)

What figures as “commerce” in the above quotation is the equivalent of peaceful colonization which supplements the model (or original) appropriation of land with the possibility of exchange by means of money (he writes about it in *Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest and Raising the Value of Money*). What is thus created may be called a prototype of market economy in which the whole space, in this case America, becomes a market space, the *space of economy* which seems to complete God’s plan of giving land to the use of the industrious and rational. This transition may well be read as a kind of double mystification, the covering of violence with peace, and the one which Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls “economystification”, the covering of the sacred with the alleged rationality of economy (Dupuy 2014: 34).

Dupuy, together with Paul Dumouchel expressed this idea in a statement which rephrased von Clausewitz’s formula of war, and claimed that economy may be seen as continuation of the sacred by entirely other means: “[E]conomic activity represents a continuation of the sacred: like the sacred, it blocks violence through violence, only the means are altogether different” (Dupuy 2014: 13). Those different means are somehow, perhaps prophetically, inscribed in Locke’s vision of America as a transition of what was into what is. If, for Locke, in the beginning the whole world was America, now we may say, at least with some accuracy, that the whole world is America, a global village of sorts in which lack and abundance are simultaneous, where there is not enough and there is too much at the same time, a paradox whose regulation is sometimes envisioned as the impossible task of economy.

This, however imaginary, movement from America to America, perhaps symbolic of the difficulty of our eventual “stepping beyond” discussed earlier, shows that the emancipatory potential of creation with which this chapter begins may be misleading. Locke’s appropriation seen as creation of ourselves, of in fact building ourselves, also involves at least a touch of the aesthetic which is visible, for example, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of America from before colonization (cf. footnote above) which he could not have seen, but which he introduces to the text as an invitation to create an image of a beautiful world to become a new home for a new people: “Those coasts”, he writes, “so admirably adapted for commerce and industry; those wide and deep rivers; that inexhaustible valley of the Mississippi; the whole continent, in short, seemed prepared to be the abode of a great nation, yet unborn” (Tocqueville 1946: 27).

This beautiful “abode”, a place of residence, a house or a home is inscribed within the landscape as a potential for the future, as a natural kernel which is ready for, firstly, annexation by labour, and then by extension whose consequence will be building, an architectural act of creation which, as in Ruskin, may be “good art” which does not alienate the creator from the object. What is thus drawn as a horizon of human activity is an aesthetic kind of dwelling, a poetic kind of dwelling which brings us back to the theme of creativity and its links with life and being, with being-in-the world which seems to be, through and through, a Heideggerian theme.

Commenting on *Hölderlin's poetic statement saying* that “poetically man dwells” (*dichterish wohnt der Mensch*) Martin Heidegger has formulated the suspicion that being and creativity are interwoven in a texture whose authorship is responsive rather than reflective. What precedes human activity is the inscription of language in the world which constitutes an encouragement to act by way of appealing to respond: “Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal” (Heidegger 2001: 214). The appeal of language, of the arche-speech of the world, is not a simple appellation of an identifiable historical predecessor, but a yet uncertain and originary call of the poetic which only later may become “unpoetic”:

“Poetically man dwells”. Do *we* dwell poetically? Presumably we dwell altogether unpoetically. If that is so, does it give the lie to the poet’s words; are they untrue? No. The truth of his utterance is confirmed in the most unearthly way. For dwelling can be unpoetic only because it is in essence poetic. (Heidegger 2001: 225)

It is the loss of this essence which makes human dwelling unpoetic. In Heidegger, we become losers of the poetic in the world whose unpoeticity “derives from a curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating” (Heidegger 2001: 226), that is to say from finitude, from the very possibility of quantification. The degree of poeticity seems to be increasing in Heidegger with the decrease of calculation, evaluation and predictability. One of the crucial aspects of poetic dwelling is what he sees as openness and readiness for the unforeseen, the lack of the present reminiscent of the lack “taught” by John Ruskin discussed above:

The more poetic a poet is — the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying — the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening, and the further what he says is from the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness. (Heidegger 2001: 214)

Heidegger re-reads here the Greek idea of *poiesis* whose function, in this re-reading, is not an unveiling which leads to presence, but rather an act in which

uncertainty is brought to the fore “as a principle of origination” which only later, reinforced by *technē*, can be brought “into presence as an act” (Whitehead 2003). The originary uncertainty of poetic dwelling questions the security of the dwelling place, of broadly understood home which turns out to be an inevitably haunted place, a place which is open to the contingent spirit of the undecidability of language, of its always provisional status. Calling language “the house of Being” Heidegger simultaneously points to the provisional nature of this “abode” which figures as a place of transition not only for ourselves, but also for “what is”:

Language is the precinct (*templum*) that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying, nor is it merely something that has the character of sign or cipher. It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word “well”, through the word “woods”, even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language. (Heidegger 2001: 129)

The house of language is a precarious dwelling place through which we “go” rather than what we sedentarily occupy. The poetic dwelling in language is insecure. It seems to be a homeless kind of dwelling which, as Kevin E. McHugh notices, constitutes a crucial aspects of Heidegger’s project:

Heidegger believed that a sense of “homelessness” and insecurity is an inescapable feature of the modern condition, signalled by *Gestell*, technological objectification, in which the world shows up as resource. To dwell, according to Heidegger, carries with it involvement and engagement in place, contentment and familiarity, and caring for place. (McHugh 2007: 259)

This paradoxical homelessness of dwelling is intriguing in Heidegger, and it surely is an inspiration for “dazzling insights about the modern human condition”, as McHugh claims. On the other hand, it does not seem, as he also claims, to be quite useless, or “stunned in terms of contributing to meaningful collective action in the arena of public life” (McHugh 2007: 273). Heidegger’s thinking of home and homelessness puts in question, and perhaps in a way also “precarizes”, the alleged security of possessing a place to live, of not being homeless. Such a precarization, I think importantly, reorients the acuity of the arena of public life along with the seemingly plain question of the shortage of houses (*die Wohnungsnot*): “However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *real plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses” (Heidegger 2001: 159). *Die Wohnungsnot* is not simply an economic problem for Heidegger, a problem which can be “taken care of” through some political, or collective action directed towards an improvement of the economic

situation or position. What promises a change seems to be an indirect action, a detour through apprehension of the “poetic” ambivalence of the **plight** of dwelling along with its originarily irreducible linkage not only to risk and danger, but also to duty and obligation:

The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man’s homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling. (Heidegger 2001: 159)

A significant facet of this summons seems to be lying in the giving of thought to homelessness, the intellectual activity which Heidegger underlines in his text and one which must also be read as a political gesture or action. What is involved in the plight of dwelling is also an openness to contingency, an openness which demands the acceptance of the insecure position of “unshieldedness” which Heidegger problematizes and exposes in his reading of Rilke’s *Briefe aus Muzot* as a paradoxical foundation of security: “[...] our unshieldedness, outside all protection, grants us a safety” (Heidegger 2001: 159).

Safety and unshieldedness seem to be mutually exclusive, and the “meaningful collective action in the arena of public life” for whose impossibility McHugh blames Heidegger results from the impossibility of taking a side, of assuming one’s either/or position. Rilke’s poem exposes this impossibility as a transformation, or conversion, “into the Open”:

[...] in the end,
it is our unshieldedness on which we depend,
and that, when we saw it threaten, we turned it
so into the Open that, in widest orbit somewhere,
where the Law touches us, we may affirm it.
(*Briefe aus Muzot* lines 12–16, quoted in Heidegger 2001: 97).

Taking a meaningful action against unshieldedness would mean, as it seems, shielding oneself, or “homing”, within a space without an outside so as to minimize the humiliation of being exposed to the Open. This in fact would be an avoidance of having to host the Open. In Heidegger’s reading, on the other hand, the conversion to the Open “consists in our having seen *unshieldedness* as what is threatening us” (Heidegger 2001: 119), which “having seen” may be viewed as an awareness of the possibility that it is not the outside which is really threatening, but

the absence of the shield, the absence of the imaginary protection associated with the equally imaginary fixity of the shielded inside, of the secure enclosure within a home.

Heidegger's insights into dwelling and protective "shieldedness" constitute a vivid example of his more general attempts at reorienting the topography of human being in the world, traditionally based on the idea of singularity—the singularity of place extended to the absolute singularity of the individual and the singularity of his or her identity. Barbara Bolt in her reading of Heidegger simply, and I think rightly, notices that the philosopher's vital concern was the alleged human separateness from the world: "By placing human beings in the midst of other beings and entities in the world Heidegger challenged the prevailing view that human beings were somehow separate from the world in which they lived" (Bolt 2011: 3). What she calls "the 'there' of our world" is a complex space/place which inevitably escapes the homogenizing ideological practices of the global culture, though it provides "a set of possibilities and limitations that structure our lives" (Bolt 2011: 17). To poetically dwell does not mean to submerge in a purely aesthetic pleasure of creation. The idea also generates a politically engaged way of bringing "thereness" into the public/social sphere of an economy in which the very idea of individual singularity is problematized by way of questioning its centrality and stability through too strong an attachment to "hereness". Dwelling is a way of journeying in which individual property, the privacy of property, is posited away from one's easy reach. In his reading of Heidegger's reading of Holderlin's "The Ister," Stanley Cavell takes up the image of the river as a representation of the simultaneity of place and movement:

The river poetizes the human being because, in providing "the unity of locality and journeying" [...], it conceals and reveals Dasein's being and becoming 'homely,' homelike, I would say homebound. Thoreau's word for maintaining something like this unity is sojourning, living each day, everywhere and nowhere, as a task. (Cavell 2000: 42, quotation from Heidegger 1996a: v)

The unity of place and movement, of locality and journeying was in various ways explored by Thoreau, and his idea of sauntering could also be attached to sojourning. For Thoreau, this unity was a political project of changing the life of quiet desperation into something more authentic. Cavell's reading of Thoreau into Heidegger's project of dwelling clearly indicates the relevance of re-thinking the place of places in terms of the possibilities of their spatial, but also temporal, repositioning from "here" and "now" to the spheres of "there" and "then".

If man dwells poetically, then it is, perhaps first of all, language, or the word, which constitutes the space of this dwelling. In his "Letter on 'Humanism'",

Heidegger finds “the word” to be responsible for the construction of a space, or a region, for dwelling: “The word names the open region in which the human being dwells [...] The abode of the human being contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to the human being in his essence” (Heidegger 1998: 269). The repositioning of place resides, as Rudi Vesker notices, in the use of the word “abode” (*éthos*) which

is rendered by Heidegger as *Aufenthalt*, which can mean both ‘residence’ (hence: abode), but also something like ‘delay.’ One could say that the *Halt* in *Aufenthalt* is both what holds you and what holds you up. Heidegger is usually understood, and perhaps understood himself, as pointing to the first of these meanings (the abode contains and preserves), but if one reads him with Foucault’s archaeology in the back of one’s mind, there seems in principle room for the second meaning too. (Vesker 2000: 144)

This other meaning of abode may be seen as an opening of human poetical dwelling to the future, to the contingencies which inevitably delay the finitude and the “homeliness” of one’s home and thus also delay the possibility of its appropriation.

Heidegger’s poetical dwelling is, in a sense, dwelling with literature, an inevitable coexistence with the surplus of meaning which, as surplus, may be unwelcome as too much, as an excess which transgresses the boundaries of the homely. The Platonic quarrel between poetry and philosophy, which was already ancient for Plato himself (“there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry”, Plato: 607b), is an expression of anxieties accompanying the “wordy” nature of various expressions of truth and the philosophical belief in the certainty of truth itself which Plato wanted to assure by preventing the free circulation of the words of poets, of the abused words which obstruct the circulation of knowledge. Poetry weakens the strength of truth and in fact expresses our desire not so much to oppose that truth as to posit ourselves as victims of the system founded on truth. Plato’s project, Thomas Gould notices, is the “project of making sure *that we are always intelligent and strong*”, and it is “constantly endangered by a pernicious, soft desire to see ourselves as victims” (Gould: 216). What grants the security of subjects’ position in the Platonic state is a certain blindness to poetry, to Heidegger’s poetic dwelling. This security is also granted by the illusion of certainty whose “intelligence and strength” offer an outline of an equally illusory image of power. Using the image of the book of the world, of world as book, one might say that Plato’s system of truth guards against overreading, against the insecurity of overinterpretation and its threat to the *readerly* order of things.

The fear the *readerly*, of overreading is, for Stanley Cavell, inscribed within a general fear of “reading as such”:

In my experience people worried about reading in, or overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, or reading as such, as if afraid that texts — like people, like times and places — mean things and moreover mean more than you know. ... Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread. (Cavell 1981: 35)

Here Cavell brings in another book metaphor, the metaphor of life as book, a book which we would rather underread than overread, thus making underreading a significant property of life. Political, social, religious and economic systems within which we live might aptly be called schools of underreading which, in fact after Plato, make “knowability”, familiarity and certainty into unquestionable values of life, into properties without which life seems to be somehow improper. Over reading, on the other hand, spoils life with a “taint of uncanniness” awakened by scepticism whose threat, as Colin Davis notices, “resides in the prospect that, at any moment, our most cherished certainties (about life, ourselves, or those we love) might collapse, leaving us knowing far less than we thought” (Davis 2010: 140). This “far less than we thought” may be the “very little, almost nothing” of Simon Critchley’s. This “less” may be figured as lack, and thus invite further readings and rereadings, a kind of work which is uncertain of being accomplished. It may also figure as loss, and thus trigger attempts at regaining things taken away, attempts to recapture something which should be there so as to meet the demand of unity and completeness.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-658-13414-3>

Precarity and Loss

On Certain and Uncertain Properties of Life and Work

Rachwał, T.

2017, XXI, 125 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-13414-3