
Preface: Hesitations

But in this quest for absolute meaning, Frenhofer has succeeded only in obscuring his idea and erasing from the canvas any human form, disfiguring it into a chaos of colors, tones, hesitating nuances, a kind of shapeless fog.

(Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*)

Balzac's Frenhofer, the painter from *The Unknown Masterpiece* to whose figure Giorgio Agamben refers in the epigram above, seems to be losing his idea in "hesitating nuances", thus showing that he is not really anxious about the loss. He paints what Agamben sees as "the precarious significance of human action in the interval between what is no longer and what is not yet" (Agamben 1999: 112). What is thus precariously significant is the present, something which we call "now", and which is in fact never present. We cherish the present also because it signifies "what is", because it testifies to being present whose precariousness frequently goes unnoticed and which seems to be one of those things which go without questioning. We can lose things, but the loss is seen as becoming absent of present.

This book looks at what can be termed the *anxiety of loss* from the perspective of the culture of production, of "our" culture in which gain, increase, growth, development or expansion are seen and encouraged as assuredly positive categories. I pair this anxiety with precarity, "an inelegant neologism coined by English speakers to translate the French *precarité*" (Neilson and Rositter: 1). This term is now frequently used with reference to, very generally, the uncertainty of employment, recently involving numerous groups of people of different classes, sexes, professions or ethnicities. What is understood by precarization of labour is not only the ease with which people lose jobs, but first of all its normalization within the neoliberal economies which translate it into a necessity comparable to the structural necessity of unemployment in capitalist economy in general. Though various

states officially struggle with unemployment, precarization of work rhetorically masks it and translates into a normal state of things within the fluid and flexible society. Therefore, precarity is understood a projection of fluid life on work, a transition of the flexibility of life into the flexibility of labour, which thus begins to constitute a unity of some sort of normalcy. In this way flexibility, as it were, hides the rigidity of the demands of the capitalist production, the Fordist mechanization and rhythmicization of work and seems to be meeting the social expectations of broadening the sphere of freedoms and independence from others. Precarization, writes Isabell Lorey referring to the Frassanito Network,

symbolizes a contested field: a field in which the attempt to start a new cycle of exploitation also meets desires and subjective behaviors which express the refusal of the old, so-called fordist regime of labor and the search for another, better, we can even say flexible life (Lorey 2015: 10).

This flexibility of life, paralleled with the flexibility of labour, is a reflection of what some theoreticians of postmodernity see as a schism with modernity along with its insistence on order and organization, and thus also a schism with organized capitalism which gave way to a “disorganized society and a disorganized capitalism” (Bauman 1992a: 47). However, though labour has only to some extent ceased to be measured by the hands of the factory clocks, the flexibility thus produced is frequently seen as a transformation of the postmodern subject into an agent, an actively mobile individual with a seeming infinity of choices ahead of him or her. This mobility, however, can be practiced only at the cost of loss of stability and security which is ascribed to others, to those who still have it, even if those others are few or simply imagined.

Flexibilization also involves destabilization of places, the places of work and the places of dwelling. It demands the ability to change places, a transition from a sedentary life to a nomadism of sorts which I will discuss in more detail later. From the perspective of modernity, this different placement of the subject is disorienting, linked with loss in the topographical sense, and the questions of “where am I?” and “where am I to go?” cannot be answered by means of any reliable self-guidance. The precarized are strangers to where they are, and it is in this sense that we may talk about some sort of “touristification of everyday life” and about what Bauman calls *the tourist syndrome*. (Franklin 2003: 206). The tourism of the precarized consists, according to Bauman, in “not belonging to the place”, and the metaphor of tourism is applicable mainly to the impermanence of positions which one can take, to the experience of “being in a place temporarily and knowing it” (Franklin 2003: 207). This condition

is shared with the modality of ordinary daily life, with the way we are all ‘inserted’ in the company of others everywhere—in places where we live or work; not only during the summer holidays, but seven days a week, all year round, year by year. It is that characteristic of contemporary life to which I primarily refer when speaking of *the tourist syndrome*. (Franklin 2003: 207)

The loss of the security of position is accompanied by the loss of any clearly defined task of the travel, of a point of destination which might eventually end the journey. Bauman wrote about the rise of the postmodern subjectivity in terms of movement from pilgrimage to tourism, the movement which also involved a radical disruption of the idea of time which, no longer guiding us to a single destiny, became fragmented by only too many points of destination. The result of this change was “the *fragmentation* of time into *episodes*, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self-contained. Time is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools” (Bauman 1996, 25). Thus lost in fragments, we feel that we are not responsible for the fragmentation of the world, simultaneously feeling that the unity, which is not there, has been lost.

The absence of responsibility for things falling apart may come from another uncertainty, from the uncertainty of our ethical judgements which can no longer rely on the authority of a moral code or system coming from elsewhere, from the outside of the individuals orphaned from the care of the modernist fathers. “Modernity was”, writes Bauman,

among other things, a gigantic exercise in abolishing individual responsibility other than that measured by the criteria of instrumental rationality and practical achievement. The authorship of moral rules and the responsibility for their promotion was shifted to a supra-individual level [...] The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfil them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice. (Bauman 1992a: xxii)

This loneliness, however, is experienced within a community or a society in which others make equally lonely moral choices, and the lack of any authoritarian ethical guidance necessitates an ethics of cohabitation capable of doing without the choices of who we live with and care for. We do not choose our “others”, and the very idea of otherness may be an instance of moral exclusion. Though there are those who believe that they can make decisions as to who should live near them and who should not, this kind of thinking, as Judith Butler notices, “presupposes a disavowal of an irreducible fact of politics: the vulnerability to destruction by others that follows from a condition of precarity in all modes of political and social interdependency” (Butler 2012: 148). This leads Butler to a broad existential

allegation of *all of us* being precarious (I will take up this point again in the discussion of Guy Standing's idea of the precariat in the final chapter), and to a statement which reads precarity as epistemologically crucial in seeing *how we are* rather than *what we are*: "Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency" (Butler 2012: 148).

Gerald Raunig defines precarity as "not-auto-determined" insecurity in all areas of life and work ("la inseguridad no-autodeterminada de todas las áreas de la vida y del trabajo." Raunig 2004: 3). What he thus suggests is that there may exist some kind of auto-determined or self-determined insecurity in life and work, an insecurity which may be controlled, wanted, perhaps desired. This kind of insecurity would be a matter of choice, perhaps the choice of dangerous or adventurous life in which contingency is an accepted and normalized. Such a possibility seems to be lying behind Quentin Meillassoux' idea of absolute contingency which I discuss in the first chapter. However, if "the precarized mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear" (Standing 2011: 20), then the autodetermination may take up violent forms of action which Guy Standing envisions in his *The Precariat. The New Dandereous Class*. "There is a danger", he writes, "that, unless the precariat is understood, its emergence could lead society towards a politics of inferno" (Standing 2011: vii). What follows is an attempt at such an understanding, though an attempt which goes a little beyond Standing's approach to precariat as a class and precarity as a complex of traps into which people, especially today's youth, are drifting (Cf. Standing 2011: 67). The traps are there, but it is also us who have set them, and a significant aspect of this setting is the *power of loss* which, in its various aspects, is responsible for the presence of precarity and precariousness in our lives. The power of loss is inscribed in Michel Foucault's notion of "power/knowledge", and it is the ways in which this power was and is exercised by means of techniques and tactics which this book also addresses. These ways, whose very brief map I am hesitantly trying to draft, are inevitably using precarity and precariousness as, sometimes misleading, orientation points.

Precarity sometimes seems to be a less general term than *precariousness*, though the relationship between the two is both obvious and complex. For Judith Butler, precarity is a political issue:

Precarity only makes sense if we are able to identify bodily dependency and need, hunger and the need for shelter, the vulnerability to injury and destruction, forms of social trust that let us live and thrive, and the passions linked to our very persistence as clearly political issues. (Butler 2012: 147)

Precariousness, on the other hand, is ontological, though the ontology which is involved in it is social rather than the one which lays "claim to a description of fundamental structures of being":

Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality-including language, work, and desire—that make possible the body’s persisting and flourishing. The more or less existential conception of “precariousness” is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of “precarity”. (Butler 2009a: 3)

Precariousness and precarity cannot really be untangled, and what ties or tangles them is the inevitability of epistemological positioning of the subject, of his or her apprehension of the “socially and politically articulated forces”, in which articulation he or she partakes. The need for existential security is paired with epistemological security, and the two are as it were driven by the negativity of loss—loss of life, loss of sense, loss of meaning, getting lost. What I have called the power of loss does not have any headquarters, and its traces can be followed only with a certain uncertainty, hesitantly.

It is for this reason that this book is in a sense a hesitant book. It is also uncertain. Its hesitations result from the precarious nature of certainty itself, of the precariousness of confidence which, as we know, can always be lost. It approaches certainty with caution, wavering over making choices or certain decisions. In philological terms this book follows Nietzsche’s lesson of “slow reading”, of “that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow” (Nietzsche 1997: 5). What is involved in this kind of reading is a delay of the accomplishment of the task, of the revelation or knowledge resulting from it, a delay of its final achievement. This delay itself involves precariousness which is partly brought in to the title of this book by the word “precarity”. I will, I promise that I will, slowly arrive at the vicinities of precarity in the course of this text though, at the same time I will, after Nietzsche, go aside and take time, attempting, also at the same time, not to quite lose it.

Slow reading, we may say, delays capitalization, the potential gains resulting from the work of reading. This work, the work of reading, hides a number of concerns which can be ascribed to work in general. The very idea of gaining from reading, of, however spiritual, enrichment of one’s life through reading, translates slow and hesitant reading into a waste of time, into loss which can be avoided if the work of reading is done more speedily. The economy of slow reading is not governed by optimization of gain because the object to be gained is, through hesitation, different from itself, postponed in the movement of the Derridean *différance* which disables appropriation through delay. I make this recourse to Derrida here, at the beginning, because thinking about loss and uncertainty, as it seems, is *visibly* inscribed in his texts through writing under erasure (*sous rature*),

in crossing out what seems to have been written thus radically translating words into traces of already gone, or escaped, meanings.

For Derrida, reading is a kind of tracing in which the reader inevitably remains behind the object in a slow movement of constant hesitation. Simon Critchley, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, rightly called Derrida's deconstruction a "philosophy of hesitation":

[...] *deconstruction is a 'philosophy' of hesitation*, although it must be understood that such hesitation is not arbitrary, contingent, or indeterminate, but rather, a rigorous, strictly determinate hesitation: the 'experience' of undecidability. (Critchley 1999: 42)

The inverted commas of this "'experience' of undecidability" translate undecidability into an untranslatable term, they expose its untranslatability into the present. This is also the case of *différance* whose pure and simple presence Derrida himself undermines by crossing out the existential verb "to be": "Now if *différance*is (and I also cross out the 'is') what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone" (Derrida 1982: 6). Derrida's writing *sous rature* posits both reading and writing as a precarious activity, as a slow work uncertain of its effects or results in which hesitation is not a means leading to a decision or a conclusion, but a realization of impermanence which Critchley calls the 'experience' of undecidability. This experience may be tentatively called ontological, though it in fact questions ontology as the study of the nature of being. The experience of undecidability, and in fact the experience of undecidability of being, questions the purely metaphysical status of ontology and brings in, inevitably, the question of ethics, of choice hidden in the very notion of hesitation. This ethical dimension, however, is not, as in Kant, prior to ontology. Neither can it be, according to Critchley, simply done: "One must not simply 'do' ethics in the usual sense of the word; one must first engage in a deconstructive analysis of 'l'ethicité de l'ethique' or, in Nietzschean terms, a calling into question of the value of values" (Critchley 1982: 16). This questioning, or calling into question, is precarious because it involves loss of values without a promise that the questioned will be reevaluated. This uncertainty as to their return results in the work of the genitive case which, especially in Derrida, seems to be always at hand. For what is brought forth in the calling into question of the value of values is, as in the case of 'l'ethicité de l'ethique', exactly the value of value, which genitive usage, however paradoxically, makes value thinkable only from its own outside which is also value.

The genitive case also governs the use of the word "loss". I have already listed at least three uses of it above: "loss of life, loss of sense, loss of meaning". There is, of course, an infinity of other possible examples, but one on which it seems worth

concentrating is that of the *loss of loss*, the seeming paradox which, however, is not quite unthinkable. I inquire into this possibility first in a brief discussion of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, a book about, among others, those who once had nothing to lose. I then return to loss of loss in a few places, particularly in the context of Hegel's dialectical negation of negation.

This book is also, very generally, devoted to social and political interdependencies of life and work, the interdependencies in which the ideas of loss and deprivation are the founding incentives of the precariousness of the position and of the status of human subject. Life and work are rather vague categories, and the senses in which I will be using them throughout the text are both intuitive and contextual, they will be only hinted at with a certain uncertainty so as to demarcate the discursive places and spaces in which they, frequently implicitly, situate themselves within the network of the various practices and activities which one may call her or his life.

The "her" or "his", as gendered possessive pronouns, particularizes life as something which cannot be simply generalized into a "life in itself". One crucial property of life seems to be its belonging to someone, to a creature, to a man or a beast with whom this life is tied in an inextricable network. Being a property, in this sense, seems to be the only certain property of what is called "life". Life divorced from its bearers or owners, life in itself, may be thought about only as an eternal kind of life about which one can say, or think, more or less nothing. This kind of life escapes any precariousness and in fact stands in opposition to any creaturely life which must be left behind in the manner John Bunyan's pilgrim steps beyond his home and commences his way to the Celestial City:

Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children, perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the Man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on, crying Life! Life! Eternal Life! So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain. (Bunyan 1999: 11–12)

Looking back to the place left behind may petrify, turn into a pillar of salt. The story of Lot and his wife to which Bunyan seems to be alluding here is also the story of history, of life being historical, to whose idea Bunyan's Christian chooses to be deaf. For Bunyan, leaving even one foot in the past means to remain in the Sodom of history. Life in itself must break with history without any nostalgia for something **lost**. Lot, as we know, did not look back, mainly pursuing the future salvation in the way Bunyan's Christian pursues the eternity of the Celestial City. Lot's wife did look back and died, perhaps in the way Bunyan's Christian's "Wife and Children" are, for him, dead and gone—the past to which he will never return.

This, perhaps dead, life of Christian's wife and children, the fatherless life which can be lost, is the life which seems to possess certain, however uncertain

they may be, properties. This life is itself also, as I have already noted, a kind of property about which we can only allege that it has some sense or meaning in itself, but which is also a part of what we call “us”, a part so inseparable that the loss of one can only take place at the cost of the loss of the other. Life by itself, just like life in itself, has sense only as elements of a certain bewitching grammar which calls nonexistent objects to existence. In the case of the object called “life” one’s claim, or statement, expressing its existence may be a strongly, and systematically, misleading expression¹—an expression whose meaning may not really have a referent. The reason why we “cannot talk about the meaning of life”, writes Terry Eagleton in his book about, among others, Monty Python,

is that there is no such thing as life? Are we not, as Wittgenstein might say, bewitched here by our grammar, which can generate the word ‘life’ in the singular just as it can the word ‘tomato’? Perhaps we have the word ‘life’ only because our language is intrinsically reifying [...]. How on earth could everything that falls under the heading of human life, from childbirth to clog dancing, be thought to stack up to a single meaning? Isn’t this exactly the delusion of the paranoid, for whom everything is supposed to be ominously resonant of everything else, bound together in an oppressively translucent whole? (Eagleton 2007: 135)

The reifying power of language makes life into a whole which can be squeezed into an autobiographical or biographical narrative, into a book outside of which, or beyond which, there lies what we may call, tracing Derrida, the danger of the supplement, the proof that the life that we are having is never complete and finished. Hence the precariousness of the “I” which, or who, when speaking, is also the “I” who is the object of the speech. As Jeremy Tambling puts it in his essay on waste and wisdom, “the ‘I’ speaking is separate from, and additional to, the supplement of, the ‘I’ who is spoken of, so that the self is always attended by that which is other to it” (Tambling 2008: 40).

The precariousness of the subject consists here in the futility of the work of putting the two together, of unifying them so that nothing is lost or wasted. This anxiety of waste is read by Tambling in relation to Bataille’s treatment of excess in “restricted economy” whose calculating rationality “only functions by putting things outside itself, as disgusting, or filthy, as dirty, as matter out of place, the abject, or mess” (Tambling: 40). Bataille’s restricted economy, unlike general economy, is the economy of exchange in which excess is treated either as waste to

¹An example of a systematically misleading expression which Gilbert Ryle gives in his known essay concerns cows: “carnivorous cows do not exist.” However, against the grain of the declared nonexistence, they are as it were called to being by the very declaration. (Cf. Ryle 1932: 144–145).

be disposed of, or as a space to be accommodated for the purposes of exchange. The restricted economy constitutes only a part of general economy, though one within which the reality of capitalism is seen as the only thinkable, or conceivable one. Economic science, which is in fact limited to restricted economy, “merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its objects to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man” (Bataille, 1988: 23). The economic man is thus bound to be a whole man from whose perspective the very idea of unusable excess, of an idea of excess which is not reducible to nothing or transformable into a commodity is the source of anxiety, of the anxiety which speaks through various aspects of what can be termed “precarization”. For the economic man, and more broadly for the “economic mankind” (Bataille, 1988: 22), loss with no return is not a property of life and falls out of the sphere of its vital interest and interests. If wealth is lost, this loss is seen as a catastrophe of sorts, though one which is inevitable and which in fact can be seen as a desperate investment in the future:

We know cases where wealth has had to be destroyed (coffee thrown into the sea), but these scandals cannot reasonably be offered as examples to follow. They are the acknowledgment of an impotence, and no one could find in them the image and essence of wealth. Indeed, involuntary destruction (such as the disposal of coffee overboard) has in every case the meaning of failure; it is experienced as a misfortune; in no way can it be presented as desirable. And yet it is the type of operation without which there is no solution. (Bataille, 1988: 22)

This implicit reference to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, an event which, at least partly, contributed to the future growth of American independence, economy and wealth, testifies to the functional nature of loss and excess in restricted economy. What the anxiety of loss with no return simultaneously records, however, is the possibility of there being an expenditure without return, of an ethics of gift left behind in, for Bataille somehow forgotten and repressed, the general economy whose return, or return to which, he envisions as kind of Copernican turn inscribed within the excess’s having been doomed to destruction:

Changing from the perspectives of restrictive economy to those of general economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking—and of ethics. If a part of wealth (subject to a rough estimate) is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even inescapable, to surrender commodities without return. (Bataille, 1988: 25)

What Bataille thus envisions is a radical revaluation and re-reading of the notion of loss, of losing and being lost, the notion, and idea, which, as I will more extensively argue later, is the predicament upon whose various aspects and embodiments precariousness and precarity are “founded”, even though the stability

of foundations (in general) is itself questioned within the network of the precarious which as it were entangles our lives, or even haunts them, as an only vaguely representable milieu.

One thus may talk about loss in terms of spectrality and conceive of this spectre of loss as of a spectre without origin. The spectre's lack of identity, the impossibility of being sure whose or "what's" spectre or ghost is haunting us, posits us within an even more uncertain situation than in being haunted by slightly more strongly identifiable spectres like the ones which can be endowed with some proper name. But even those ones, like the spectres of Marx in Derrida's well known book, are always already plural and, in their vagueness, are inevitably "*Plus d'un*"—more than one and no more one (Derrida 2006: 2).

Spectral uncertainty is thus one more "property of life", both certain and uncertain, a property which, like life, cannot be protected by a "now" which testifies to its simple presence. We only precariously can learn to live because "life" is suspended between life and a step beyond it. If learning to live always "remains to be done", writes Derrida,

it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost [*s'entretenir de quelque fantome*]. So it would be necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, is not. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is never present as such. (Derrida 2006: xvii)

The "when" of the precariousness of life (one of the "wh-" words to which I do not devote any separate space in what follows, treating it as enveloping all the other "whs" addressed in the ensuing chapters) is inscribed in the very idea of the spectral presence of life as "a time without tutelary present" (Derrida 2006: xvii). Such unprotected presence is haunted by the uncertain spirits of the past and the equally uncertain spirits of the future, even though the past seems to be more factitious and factual through the illusion of its historical fixedness. Prediction and forecasting, on the other hand, take over the present in the future and factualize it into more or less firm and assured passage in which "when" seems to be a yardstick enabling an easy temporal orientation. Yet, as Marcel Proust noticed, "[t]here are optical errors in time as there are in space" (Proust 1949: 246), and what the very idea of "when" problematizes is the possibility of loss in oblivion, of losing time against which Proust tries to struggle by means of work which misleadingly promises a new beginning, a new life to make up for the already lost time:

If the fact remains that it is time that gradually brings oblivion, oblivion does not fail to alter profoundly our notion of time. [...] The persistence in myself of an old

tendency to work, to make up for lost time, to change my way of life, or rather to begin to live gave me the illusion that I was still as young as in the past (Proust 1949: 246).

Proust's "work" mimes what has been lost, simulates the past by way of reproducing and foregrounding illusory objects in the way *trompe l'oeil* illusionism seemingly locates some of them outside the painting, thus substituting "the intractable opacity of Presence" (Pierre Charpentrat in Baudrillard 1990: 61). Proust's reproduced youth is thus not quite regained, but it functions as a repetition in which what has been lost is posited as more real than what it used to be. "The figures in *trompe l'oeil*", writes Baudrillard, "appear suddenly, with lustrous exactitude, as though denuded of the aura of meaning and bathed in ether. Pure appearances, they have the irony of too much reality" (Baudrillard 1990: 61).

The irony of too much reality is also hidden in the seductive belief in history's power to reproduce facts and bring them to the present, though marked with the "when" of their having taken place glued to them in the form of dates or spans of time. This "when" protects facts or events from loss in the flow of time, in the vague imprecision of the unmarked. This rendering of past into present is achieved by overdrawing, by an exaggerated exactitude whose effect is what Baudrillard calls absolute repression: "Absolute repression: by giving you *a little too much* one takes away everything. Beware of what has been so well "rendered", when it is being returned to you without you ever having given it!" (Baudrillard 1990: 30).

Also our historical orientation is rendered by "whens" in the manner geographical orientation depends on the names of places. In Heidegger, the "whens" are sequences of "nows" of the measured time, and I will spend some time on this measuring in the due course. Places seem to be playing the role of time in space, and names are given to places exactly as "too much", and their repressive function is distinctly visible in the case of colonial discourse in which history's role of the "eye of the world" is that of seeing only its own productions. José Rabasa reads historization as parallel to territorialization:

History, "the eye of the world", on the ideological level defines the national character of the territories depicted. History thus naturalizes particular national formations and institutionalizes forgetfulness of earlier territorializations in the perception of the world. (Rabasa 1993: 192).

Institutionalization of forgetfulness, however, also projects its effects to the level of epistemology and is thus largely constitutive of the epistemological security of the subject by way of making it possible to speak of life in terms of the present. This presence, so patiently constructed by the work of history, is an object whose factuality is constantly undermined by the constitutive outside of the

forgotten which contaminates it with the suspicion of being illusory. This work of self-fashioning translates the teleological object of its desire into illusion. “The repeated acts of self-fashioning”, writes Stephen Greenblatt referring to Gilles Deleuze,

are never absolutely identical. [...] We can only speak of repetition by reference to the difference or change that it causes in the mind that contemplates it. The result is that the objects of desire, at first so clearly defined, so avidly pursued, gradually lose their sharp outlines and become more and more like mirages (Greenblatt 1980: 217)

The title of this book also, though indirectly, recalls a mirage. It very distantly, and also indirectly, refers to a book in which certainty and uncertainty are put into an unresolved play of impossible answers to “Wh-questions”.² The book in question is Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris*, a seemingly science-fiction story which questions the ontological certainty of posing such questions through making certain things uncertain, including the epistemological certainty of the position of the reader. The reader of this book is never certain whether what he or she is facing is *Solaris* or Solaris, the book written by Lem in 1961, or the something which is called Solaris, and which appears in the story as ungraspable by human attempts at conceptualizing and explaining the world. Both Solaris and *Solaris*, almost exactly as in Greenblatt, constantly lose the outlines and, in the process of reading, become more and more like mirages.

The text which the title of this book calls in more directly is Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s reading of Lem’s novel titled “The Book is the Alien: On Certain and Uncertain Readings of Lem’s *Solaris*”. In this article Csicsery-Ronay reads the travel of humans to a distant planetary “object” mainly as a quest for “Contact” with something alien accompanied by the desire to bring that something into the sphere, or possession, of human knowledge. Neither the Solarists nor the readers learn what exactly Solaris is, and yet the effort, or work, of the expedition to Solaris is not seen as wasted. The expedition should not be read in terms of loss because it “apparently paid off after all. [...] Man has placed one foot beyond his

²“Wh-questions” are enquiries which demand more illustrative or informative answers than “yes” or “no”. Questions of this kind, in English, are introduced by means of such words as *what, who, why, where, when, how*, the words which assume the existence of objects or situations about which they ask or enquire. Guy Standing lists almost a full inventory of “Wh-questions” in his *The Precariat*. “This book is about a new group in the world, a class-in-the-making. It sets out to answer five questions: What is it? Why should we care about its growth? Why is it growing? Who is entering it? And where is the precariat taking us?” (Standing 2011: vii). The titles of the subsequent chapters of this book follow this pattern, though the answers to the questions are much less certain.

human limits, albeit into a mysterious and undefined dimension. It is an apocalypse, of sorts. Therefore man's knowledge is not limited to himself and his creation" (Csicsery-Ronay: 10).

Placing one foot beyond human limits is an ambivalent kind of success because the new space thus opened lies beyond the measures of human economy. The expedition "paid off" not through gain, but through a loss of the "what" of identity which is accompanied by the questioning of both "where" and "when". Though expressed spatially, the movement, or step, beyond is also a temporal approach of the uncertainty of the future which may be a promise of a possible expansion and domestication (the *oikos* of economy), but which may also be an exposition to an unpromising threat of the indefinite which is hostile to the security of one's epistemological position. The *step beyond* is thus, perhaps as in Blanchot, simultaneously a *step not/beyond* (*pas au-delà*), a passage "that does not belong to duration, repeats itself endlessly, and that separates us ... from any appropriateness as from any I, subject of a Law" (Blanchot 1992: 105). The loss of "what" is thus tied to the loss of "where", with a precarious kind of disorientation as regards any durable allocation of things in places.

At the same time, however, one of our feet in Csicsery-Ronay's reading of Lem remains "in place", within a certain location which promises certainty. In Lem's novel one of such seemingly certain and stable places is the spaceship from whose board people try to step toward the uncertain something which they call Solaris. The spaceship figures them as a product of advanced technology, an effect of the work of generations, of those who live, and lived, on a planet called the Earth. Stepping out from the Earth, perhaps only with one foot, they do not quite go beyond it. Their step is in fact directed towards an effect of their own work, towards Solaris to which they had given that designation and thus conceptualized into a category. The expedition is going to verify the "real" existence of this, only partly identified object, simultaneously inquiring into its alleged properties by way of observation and exploration. The technological means to achieve this task, the tool, is the spaceship which carries the name of the task of the mission: "Solaris". What this conflation of the means of communication with its task reveals is the paradox inherent in the treatment of means of communication solely as means, the paradox which Blanchot sees as a strategy productive of our belief that we can face reality without mediation:

The means of communication—language, culture, imaginative power—by never being taken as more than means, wear out and lose their mediating force. We believe we know things immediately, without images and without words, and in reality we are dealing with no more than an insistent prolixity that says and shows nothing. (Blanchot 1987: 14)

We cannot really step beyond the labours of our minds, and the beyond is in a way haunting our lives as something which is both desired and unattainable. Though the final, or ultimate, stepping beyond is always already a lost kind of game, the fact that we undertake it results in the precariousness of loss, of losing something which, paradoxically, has not been gained or achieved. Loss can thus be read as a deprivation of what we have failed to achieve, simultaneously positing the achievement as a task which is responsible for the projection of mirages of permanence upon life and things. It is the fear of this transience which, along with the awareness of mortality is, for Zygmunt Bauman, “the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. It makes permanence into a task, into a paramount task ... and so it makes culture, that huge and never stopping factory of permanence” (Bauman 1992b: 4).

The paradox of the idea of permanence is that, as a task of work, it does not wholly apply to us, its producers or builders. We are alienated from the effects of our own building, the predicament which Martin Heidegger tried to overcome by way of ontologizing this activity (I will devote some time to Heidegger’s “building-being” later, in the discussions of his “poetically dwelling” man). This alienation of labour seems to be leaving permanence somewhere else, in the products which do not belong to us. For Karl Marx alienation of labour consists in the double gesture of objectification and externalization:

The product of labor is labor embodied and made objective in a thing. It is the objectification of labor. The realization of labor is its objectification. In the viewpoint of political economy this realization of labor appears as the diminution of the worker, the objectification as the loss of and subservience to the object, and the appropriation as alienation [Entfremdung], as externalization [Entausserung]. (Marx 1967: 288)

Marx’s diminution of the worker is associated with loss which consists in objectification, in the production of estranged objects. The “diminished” little people are thus constructing, or building, an estranged space to which they do not belong thus becoming impermanent denizens in it. This “denizenship” is what Guy Standing ascribes to the precariat whom the state gradually deprives of the rights of citizens. What he suggests in *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* is a compromise of sorts, the acceptance of the flexibility of work “in return of basic economic security as a right” (Cf. Standing 2014b: 183). This idea of little for little people seems to be a good beginning of what he announced earlier as “a mildly utopian agenda and strategy” (Standing 2011: 7), yet there seems to be a little more

left to be done as not to leave the basics exclusively in the hands of econometrics³ calculations.

In what follows, I will, hesitantly, address certain, sometimes seemingly highly abstract questions of what Judith Butler sees as a possible “release from precarity” and “a possibility of a livable life” (Butler 2011b), the questions hidden in various philosophical discourses on uncertainty in the context(s) of the quite ephemeral idea of loss whose ontological grounding does not seem to be highly certain, perhaps due to its inherently economic grounding which as it were “economystifies” reality transforming it not so much into Bunyan’s vanity fair, but into a market. What we are left with, writes Jean-Pierre Dupuy, are “[m]en and women in positions of power who, by prostrating themselves before a phantasm, transform it into something real and, at the same time, endow it with extraordinary power” (Dupuy 2014: x). What powers this power, as I argue more or less explicitly throughout these pages, is loss, the loss of Paradise being, of course, one of the most uncertain of its beginnings. What is inscribed in this first, or originary, loss are, as we all remember, work and labour—men’s work of production and women’s painful labour of childbearing—two kinds of activity performed under the sign of death, of our perishability which, earlier, before the loss, seems to have been unknown.

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³The term “econometrics” (*ekonometria*) was first used by Paweł Ciompa in 1910 (*Zarys ekonometrii i teoria buchalteryi*. Lwów: Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Szkoły Handlowej), though in the sense of “accountancy-administration” (*rachunkowość zarządcza*), an activity more closely related to measuring gains and losses than in contemporary econometrics whose task it is to give “empirical content to economic relations” (*Wikipedia*) and, perhaps, to thus prove economy’s empirical existence.



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