The Hardest Task: Work and the Modernist Novel

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> Ah, you authors, you men of letters, can work anywhere…with a few sheets of paper and a pocket inkstand you can settle yourself where you please—the grass, the moss, the bank of a stream becomes your study—it is very convenient for you.
>
> —Charles Paul de Kock. *The Gogo Family*

Lawrence writing *The Rainbow* for the seventh time, Joyce's schemas, Faulkner writing *As I Lay Dying* while working the night shift as a power plant stoker, Beckett's diminishing word count.[1] Earning a room by one's wits, touching friends for a bit of money, whoring for the magazines, going years without writing a single page. Contrary to Paul de Kock's M. Marmodin—who only interests himself in scientific inquiry—novelists portray their work as anything but convenient. Virginia Woolf speaks of the "horrid labour that it needs to make an orderly and expressed work of art" (*Moments of Being* 75). The phrase "work of art" is instructive: faced with an industrial ideology of productive work and progress, the modernist novelist invested in an alternative ideology of intellectual labor and social action in order to achieve a life supported by creative work. This essay provides a survey of novelists discussing work. By no means exhaustive, this approach nevertheless highlights a larger preoccupation with ideologies of work during the first half of the 20th century. The designation of the "modernist" novelist is, of course, one that arrived after the fact, yet the essay contends that writers who made significant innovations to the novel shared similar attitudes towards the work of writing. Through the critique of industrial ideologies of work, writers were able to reclaim the work of writing as an active form of cultural influence.

The question is one of how the writer may avoid the paralysis of the priesthood or the boredom of a clerkship or the inertia of the manual laborer by seeking an alternative career of creative work. An attention to the rhetoric surrounding the work of the novelist shows it to be a strategy for legitimizing both the novel as a work of art and the act of writing artistic novels as a productive mode of contributing to society. This tension between work and art is the fundamental problematic in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. As Woolf explains, the writer requires a room, a personal space in which to cultivate imagination. At the same time, the writer is to earn this room by her "wits"; thus, the freedom provided by the room is quickly constrained to a process of work to sustain this very freedom. The cycle becomes one of working for the freedom to work in freedom. This attention to the material conditions of the writer is instructive for understanding her larger position in society: the room for Woolf is no escape from the world, no monastic cell of tranquility, but instead the grounds from which to "live in the presence of reality" and contribute to "the good of the world at large" (144). In this sense, an attention to the work of writing novels cuts against the rhetoric of individual genius, the artist in exile, and the autonomous masterpiece, and resituates the novelist in a network of other writers, intellectuals, publishers, and a reading public.

A modernist ideology of creative work and intellectual labor that privileges writing as a social act remains instructive for our own times, and in particular, for the contemporary debate on the future of the humanities in research universities. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, intellectual laborers who seek to make meaningful contributions to the world have filled more and more rooms. The 1960s in particular saw a wave of student, worker and political activists who challenged capitalism's incessant productivism in the name of social justice and the right to more fulfilling forms of work. In the 21st century, a new crisis of global economic precarity threatens the economy of intellectual labor. The need to justify one's work in terms of practical, tangible, and material terms has become more pressing. Such pressure leads to new narratives of the difficulties and trials of academic work in terms of emotional and financial duress. A more practical response has been the push for humanities to create more concrete projects, whether digital, interdisciplinary, studio workshops, academic journals, film projects, or otherwise. While such legitimizing narratives serve to challenge engrained stereotypes, the fate of intellectual labor will ultimately rest on its ability to insist on the social and political action of its constituents. Through an analysis of the work of writing novels as an ideological critique of industrialism, this essay works towards a theory of intellectual labor as social activism.

Ideologies of Work

"A change of work is the best rest." This maxim, attributed to British Prime Minister William Gladstone, is indicative of the ideology of industrial production and progress pervasive throughout 19th century England.[2] It is no surprise to find it expressed by Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle's detective, who signals not only the spirit of rationale and reason, but also the profitability of serialized literature (*The Sign of Four* 188). Hugh Kenner notes how the publishing boom of the end of the 19th century was driven by cheap paper and steam, "the century's bottled genie" (14). Writers fell under the influence of this thermodynamic regime. Reflecting on the shortcomings of 1899's *When The Sleeper Awakes*, H. G. Wells notes the "considerable pressure" he was under to write a marketable work: pressure that denied him the ability to take any rest from writing (7).[3] Following William Forster's Education Act of 1870, an increasingly literate public met this increase in production.[4] The flood of reading material entailed not just more readers, but more writers. As Walter Benjamin explains, "With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers" (*Illuminations* 232). Many new forms of writing developed within an ideology of hard work, constant production, and ever-increasing demand. Those who would be great writers embraced this ideology to distinguish themselves from the dabblers and dilettantes. Consider, for example, Rebecca West's description of a young Henry James, who, "with defiant industry, with the intention of proving that such as he was he had his peculiar worth…set to work to become a writer" (21).

By the end of the 19th century, however, there was rising discontent with this industrial work ethic. In Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert argues, "We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they

become absolutely stupid" (177). French socialist Paul Lafargue writes in 1883's *Le Droit à la Paresse* (*The Right to Be Lazy*), that, "In capitalist society, work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity" (10).[5] Lafargue argues that mechanical production does not liberate the worker but further enslaves him to an impossible level of productivity. Leopold Bloom muses similarly on the competition and conflation between man and machine when he sees Hynes at the *Freeman's Journal*, "Machines. Smash a man to atoms if they got him caught. Rule the world today. His machineries are pegging away too. Like these, got out of hand: fermenting. Working away, tearing away" (Joyce 98). For humans to avoid becoming machines, Lafargue proposes a regime of laziness that would allow for 3–4 hours of work a day followed by time for leisurely consumption and artistic endeavor.[6] The use of idleness as a scheme through which to explore an alternative economy of intellectual labor has recently been pursued by Gregory Dobbins in relation to Irish Modernism. Dobbins argues that, "Ultimately, idleness is not a condition defined by the absence of any work or activity whatsoever, but rather the context that enables a new form of intellectual labour committed to different forms of representation and analysis not yet recognized as legitimate or productive" (24). While intellectual labor is often contrasted to industrial and mechanical labor, a *new* form of intellectual labor is most directly in competition with existing intellectual labor already deemed legitimate and productive. Intellectual labor such as teaching, reviewing, and article writing was in increasing demand in the 20th century. Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett all taught for periods of time, and Djuna Barnes first earned her living as a reviewer and interviewer for major American magazines such as *World Magazine* and *McCall's*.[7]

Thus, an analysis of work and the novel must be cognizant not only of the ideology of industrial productivity, but also of the influence of this ideology on intellectual labor. Authors positioned themselves both within an ideology of hard work and productivity (to legitimize their efforts) and outside the subjection of menial and deadening mechanical labor (to reclaim the value of contemplation and refinement). The challenge for the modernist novelist was to create a work of art that would not only critique industrial ideology, but also provide a source of income within the same flawed system. As Lafargue contends in "Socialism and the Intellectuals," "When intellectual capacities become merchandise they have to be treated like other merchandise, and they are" (76). Yet to consider work through only a material basis is to oversimplify the intellectual labor of the writer. Again, Virginia Woolf's call for writers to live "in the presence of reality" is instructive. The business of the writer is to communicate to the rest of society the material and social processes that determine this reality. By resituating creative work as sustained effort requiring social engagement, the emphasis becomes less on intangible creative moments of inspiration and more on the "shared social labor at the heart of composing" (Tomlinson 17).[8] Such a social ideology is in line with what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the dialogical nature of language itself. His "Discourse in the Novel" asserts that literary language consists of stratification among "such methodologically heterogeneous phenomena as professional and social dialects, world views and individual artistic works" (292–93). The interrelation of diverse shared and personal meanings determines the work of language; as Bakhtin explains, "However varied the social forces doing the work of stratification…the work itself everywhere comes down to the (relatively) protracted and socially meaningful (collective) saturation of language with specific (and consequently limiting)

intentions and accents" (293). The novel requires a process of formalizing the work of linguistic stratification; as such, an attention to the rhetoric surrounding the work of the novelist also reveals the social forces and ideologies that influence the work of writing. The following section considers—through a stratification of labor, work, and action—how a larger collective discourse on work influenced formal innovations in the novel.

The *Work* of Art

In the opening of *Einbahnstraße*, Walter Benjamin makes the claim that "Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing" (*Reflections* 61).[9] This distinction between writing, on the one hand, and action, on the other, is striking. Most immediately, it suggests that writing itself is not a form of action. Benjamin seems to align writing with contemplation rather than with action, but what of the activity of writing itself? From the perspective of an M. Marmodin it appears as leisure and convenience, but for the writer it requires a sustained mental and physical effort. Although writing can potentially take place anywhere—lending it a unique degree of mobility, writing long works such as novels requires the writer's body to be relatively immobile for long periods of time, thus demanding also a large degree of stability and support. Given the ambiguous tenor of the act of writing (both physical and contemplative), it is helpful to situate it in terms of what Hannah Arendt outlines as a spectrum of labor, work, and action.

In her influential essay "Labor, Work, Action," Arendt reveals how an ostensibly autonomous contemplative life depends on "all sorts of activities" (167). Following Locke, Arendt distinguishes between the labor of the body and the work of the hands. Unlike labor, which is a cyclical process of exhaustion and regeneration, work consists of reification, material fabrication that has an end product. Despite this distinction, Arendt argues that a conflation of labor and work occurs when work is repeated; she writes, "The impulse toward repetition comes from the craftsman's need to earn his means of subsistence, that is, from the element of labor inherent in his work" (174). This element of labor inherent in work threatens to lead to the privileging of instrumentality and utility as the ruling measure of human life. One way out of such repetition and instrumentality is through works of art, the "only…kind of objects to which the unending chain of means and ends does not apply…the most useless and, at the same time, the most durable thing human hands can produce" (177). Yet, as Woolf reminds us, the work of art does not exist without the labor of the artist. This labor is intellectual, but it also partakes of the cycles of exhaustion and regeneration of bodily labor. Thus, a young Faulkner writes to his mother, "Dear Moms—I finished my novel last night. I think I wrote almost 10000 words yesterday between 10:00 am and midnight—a record, if I did. 3000 is a fair days work" (*Thinking of Home* 186). Nor does the work of the artist exist outside of the economic realities of his or her day. Franz Kafka constantly desired more time to write, even while making his work in insurance and his experience with bureaucracy the subject of his literary masterpieces.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the artist is precisely the untenable economics of artistic work. A frustrated Lawrence asks, "Why can't I earn enough, I've done the work. After all, you know, it makes one angry to have to accept a sort of charity" (*Letters* 475). Depending on a sort

of charity was more norm than exception: Joyce and Harriet Shaw Weaver, Barnes and Peggy Guggenheim. Among charity, sponsorship, and awards, the economy of the novelist became increasingly flexible and precarious. At best, this flexibility led to great works of literature. Patronage and serialized publication in the *Egoist* and *Little Review* buoyed Joyce through the monumental task of writing *Ulysses*. At worst, the precarity of literary work led to what Beckett called, "the impossibility of working" (*Letters* 305).[10] Such lacunae also shaped the careers of Djuna Barnes and perhaps most notably Jean Rhys, who did not publish for 27 years between *Good Morning, Midnight* and her most celebrated work, *Wide Sargasso Sea.* The peculiar precarity of the novelist's work is that it is both financial and psychological. While Woolf refers to writing novels as "horrid labour," she also referred to her first novel, "Melymbrosia" (which became *The Voyage Out*), as a "work of imagination" (*Moments of Being* 25). The work of imagination is a seemingly intangible creative process, but its results can be best understood as a constant pressure on form. It is not enough to simply repeat the work that has come before; instead, the work must continually evolve through new feats of imagination.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the career of James Joyce, where each work presents a substantial departure from the one before. It is fitting that his last great effort—*Finnegans Wake*—was titled "Work in Progress" for many years. While aesthetic innovation places great demand on the writer, it also demands an increasingly intellectual reading public for its reception. Thus Joyce's imaginative work demanded a communal effort, which began with 1929's *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Explaining the logic behind Joyce's work, Samuel Beckett writes, "Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; it is *that something itself*" ("Dante…Bruno. Vico..Joyce" 504). Joyce's writing—or not-writing—presents a continual investment in work over labor. In his effort to avoid repetition, the writing becomes not just the fabrication of something new in the world, but the fabrication of perpetual innovation, thus the encyclopedic method of *Ulysses* and the new lexicon of *Finnegans Wake*. Beckett, for his part, would invert this logic. His work in the *Trilogy* and after foregrounds not the work of art but the labor of writing, a repetition of diminishing returns. Both modes present an impasse for the work of the modernist novelist and for the reader of the novel. Joyce requires an impossible level of production—demanding the "whole Life"[11] of his readers—and Beckett, perhaps most strikingly in *Malone Dies*, denies any generative potential for life beyond the page. Given what the modernist novel became, it is perhaps helpful to consider what modernist fiction set out to become.

The Hardest Task

In 1937's "The Storyteller," Benjamin finds the novel especially problematic, or, an especially *inactive* form of literary work. The novel, he argues, is the work of a solitary individual in isolation. Further, an isolated reader then consumes this solitary work. For Benjamin, the rise of the novel reveals the decline of storytelling, the result being a certain loss in the "communicability of experience" (*Illuminations* 86). This inability to communicate experience was made apparent following World War I, when soldiers returned silent, unable to

speak or make sense of the war. The figure of the soldier unable to speak of war was common in the post-war fiction of Woolf, Faulkner, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. It is perhaps telling that the most convincing communication of the experience of war occurred not in fiction but in poetry, most notably through the formal innovations of Wilfred Owen and the sensual immediacy of Isaac Rosenberg.

Yet the need for the novelist to respond, to rise to the need to communicate experience in new ways, was not entirely lost. As WWI got underway, D. H. Lawrence took to the page to renegotiate the novelist's work and responsibility in tumultuous times. "Novelists," he writes in 1914's *Study of Thomas Hardy*, "have the hardest task of reconciling their metaphysics with their living sense of being" (91). It is crucial to note that in Lawrence's formulation, metaphysics (ideology) must be reconciled with a living sense of being. The novelist must work with a metaphysics but not let it determine the novel. Lawrence's attention to a "living sense of being" is instructive in that it removes the work of the novel from the autonomous realm of fabrication and resituates it in terms of an active participation in the world. As Arendt writes, "All human activities are conditioned by the fact of human plurality, that not One man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth and in one way or another live together" (179). Lawrence reveals this living sense of being among others through the new rhythmic form of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. Writing in the unpublished foreword to *Women in Love*, he claims, "every natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, frictional to-and-fro, which works up to culmination" (486). This new mode of writing removes the novel from its sensationalist element, which Benjamin aligns with reading to find death, and returns it to a meditation upon the creative potential of literature.

"Action," concludes Arendt, "with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin something new" (181). The task of the modernist novelist was to create, through intellectual labor, not just new literary works but works capable of acting in the world. Whether by questioning moral and ethical norms and standing trial for obscenity, challenging gender roles and demanding the right to earn a living, or presenting the political failings of post-war reconstruction and foretelling the return to world war, novelists strove to create change beyond the page and to influence a readership to engage with rather than escape from important issues of the period. This essay has sought to contextualize the active accomplishments of novelists during this period within their approach to the ideology of work itself. Though writers embraced certain aspects of the industrious ideology of productive labor to legitimize their endeavors, they ultimately moved beyond an ends-based model of instrumentality to recapture the ineffable potential of the creative process. In his unpublished introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner describes how such work strove to find, "That emotion definite and physical and yet nebulous to describe: that ecstasy, that eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise, which the yet unmarred sheet beneath my hand held inviolate and unfailing, waiting for release" (226). Faulkner does not stress his own genius or exceptional creativity; rather, it is the release of language itself that holds such potential. The writer, in this sense, is less the creator than the conduit of language, inviting a necessarily social approach to the novelist's work. This is perhaps the greatest legacy of the modernist writers: not the endless

permutations and innovations to literary form, but the reclamation of the literary as a social act capable of influencing a reader's living sense of being, capable of generating new conditions of lived experience.

Towards an Ideology of Intellectual Work

At the approach of the centennial anniversary of WWI, questions of work and intellectual labor continue to be essential. With the rise of global capitalism, neo-liberalism and financial market instability, work is being theorized in terms of scarcity, precarity, and flexibility (Vosko 2006, Ross 2009, Lewchuk 2011, Standing 2011). Intellectual labor, particularly in Universities, has grown increasingly complex and subject to the logic of corporate interests (Readings 1997, Bousquet 2008, Newfield 2008, Ginsberg 2011). Meanwhile, aspiring and established intellectuals alike have been unable to shake their portrayal as idle enjoyers of a stressless and carefree existence. A recent article in Forbes magazine, which cited Careercast.com's designation of University Professor as the least stressful job of 2013, unleashed a massive backlash from tenured, adjunct, and temporary professors all over the world (Adams). It is easy to see the modern day intellectual—laptop in hand, moving from coffee shop to coffee shop—as an extension of the "men of letters" critiqued so thoroughly by M. Marmodin in Paul de Kock's *The Gogo Family.* Yet now, as then, such a portrayal is caricature. What remains certain is the changing condition and security of intellectual labor as universities face budget cuts, increased enrollment, and new technology platforms for online education.[12]

Due to its scarcity, stable employment has become more valuable than ever, a condition that makes the critique of established forms of work seem all the more difficult and irresponsible. Rather than working less, the current climate in higher education calls for working more in a wider variety of capacities. Benjamin Ginsberg, for example, argues that faculty must increasingly work in administrative capacities in order to protect both faculty and student interests (213–214). In a climate of economic precarity, laziness and the refusal of work would seem to be inadequate strategies for creating social change. Gladstone's formulation that "a change of work is the best rest" relies on a surplus of available work, but when changing work becomes synonymous with part-time and limited term employment, such change is necessarily anxiety provoking rather than restful. Nowhere is this more visible than in the intellectual labor of teaching, as universities increasingly rely on adjunct, part-time, and graduate student instructors to perform the bulk of undergraduate education. Such a system is not only detrimental to intellectual laborers, but to the social potentials of liberal education itself. As Mark Bousquet argues, "Flexible teachers cannot afford to provide an obstacle to the advancing administrative ideal of an ultimately education-free transfer of cash for course credits" (42). Faced with such uncertainty, a new rhetoric has emerged, not of refusing to work, but of opting out of academia, i.e. the "just don't go" mentality (Benton 2009, Schuman 2013). However, as Tressie McMillan Cottom points out, such "blanket advice" ignores questions of race, gender, and class, indeed, the very social bedrock upon which the humanities staked many of its claims in the 1960s (Cottom 2013). The current challenges facing universities are significantly different, yet, as Bill Readings argues, "What we stand to learn from the events of 1968 is that the emergence of the student who has a problematic relation to modernity offers a

resource for resistance" (150). Thus, more productive than simply opting out of the conversation is the sustained critique of the state of intellectual labor as a problem of modernity and a cause for social activism in its own right. The increasing unionization of contingent and graduate instructors has led to new solidarity within academia as well as identification with other precarious labor forces.[13] In addition, new initiatives to provide support and alternative career paths for PhDs are working to diversify the professional applicability of intellectual work.[14]

In modernist terms, it is increasingly difficult for intellectual laborers to earn rooms by their wits. As academic freedom is increasingly constrained through a subsistence-based labor system, academic work will necessarily suffer. As with writers of the novel, the question is fundamentally an ideological one: what is the purpose of intellectual work, and can a critique of intellectual work lead to new forms of social influence? The current economic climate invites an emphasis on forms of labor and work as objects of critical inquiry. The historicization and contextualization of intellectual labor can provide insights for our contemporary period. Such inquiry reveals strategies for legitimizing new forms of work, but more importantly, it necessitates a discussion of the elements most vital to the ideology and practice of intellectual labor. This emerging articulation should stand not as a defense, but as a call to shape the future of an active intellectual discourse capable of creating meaningful change in the world.

Notes

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[2] Other adherents to this dictum included James Garfield and Thomas Edison.

[3] This pressure is in fact dramatized in the work itself, as the opening scene presents a man unable to rest, driven mad by the constant spinning of the world. He subsequently falls asleep for 203 years.

[4] The act signaled a shift from theological ideology to state-sponsored education.

[5] Paul Lafargue, 1842–1911, was born in Cuba. He married Karl Marx's daughter Laura, and ended both of their lives in a suicide pact.

[6] Such a regime is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's famous quip, "I don't want to earn my living; I want to live."

[7] Lawrence critiques a factory style education in "The Man's World" chapter of *The Rainbow*.

[8] Tomlinson's work centers on public interviews with writers and the metaphors they use to discuss their work.

[9] Benjamin's distinction here is echoed by advertising magnate David Ogilvy, who councils, "If you want ACTION, don't write. Go and tell the guy what you want." See *The Unpublished David Ogilvy.* London: Profile Books, 2012, pg. 70.

[10] In reference to his affinity with painter Bram van Velde.

[11] Interview with Max Eastman in *Harper's Magazine*, as quoted in *James Joyce* (1959) by Richard Ellmann.

[12] See the recent debate over MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

[13] University of California Graduate Students, for example, are represented by the United Autoworkers Union.

[14] See, for example, The Versatile PhD.

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