“for he could not leave it or stop…”



*“‘When he was seven years old I used to carry him [to work] on my back to and fro through the snow, and he used to work 16 hours a day. . . . I have often knelt down to feed him, as he stood by the machine, for he could not leave it or stop." Fed meals as he worked, as a steam engine is fed coal and water, this child was an instrument of labour.’* Karl Marx, *Capital*.

Taken from depositions submitted in 1863 to the Children's Employment Commission in England, Marx used this mother’s description of her child’s circumstances as part of his examination of The Working Day. Without any intended disrespect to the experiences of exploitation faced by millions of child labourers, this description could also do, I believe, as an emblem for the writer’s level of existence in the present digital age.

Recent initiatives by the European Commission as well as Irish and English governments begin to recognise an alarming state of affairs for the contemporary writer. A European Commission report indicates that Irish and UK writers are disadvantaged compared to some of their Euroland brethren: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/commission-study-remuneration-authors-books-and-scientific-journals-translators-journalists-and>. In Ireland a controversial pilot scheme announced in June acknowledges Irish writers as self-employed and thus permitted to seek jobseeker’s allowance. Meanwhile in the UK, the Arts Council of England (ACE) has told of its ‘concerns that something significant is occurring’ in the realm of literature. ACE is set to release research to show ‘difficulties faced by literary fiction at a time of structural change to the market, following the demise of the Net Book Agreement, the advent of handheld devices and the proliferation of competing media.’ Despite an increase in publishing figures, ‘structural problems remain’, chief executive of ACE, Darren Henley said. (Established 1899, the NBA allowed publishers to subsidise works of important, or potentially important, authors. It was abolished in the 90’s in UK and Ireland. EU countries retaining NBA’s show higher earnings for their writers.)

For ‘structural problems’ read exploitation. Just as the industrialisation of the 19th century did for manual labour, so the current triangulation of digitisation, globalisation, and neoliberalism, provides an unprecedented means for the devaluation of knowledge labour. Moore’s law and the zero costs involved in online publishing/sharing, along with the enervations of copyright law, mean that the writer’s calling is now, increasingly, an unremunerated one.

Nor is this the fate of literature alone; the ‘structural problem’ destabilises the lives of journalists, features writers, editors, academic writers and hacks – all are joining the ranks of the non-remunerated. As Joy Williams wrote in the *Paris Review* a couple of years ago, ‘Understanding something, especially in these tech times, seems to involve ruthless appropriation and dismantlement and diminishment.’ American writers of literary fiction have begun to stir at the dismantlement of their literary inheritance. Manjula Martin has turned a popular magazine resource series, *Scratch*, into book form, subtitled: “Writers, Money, and the Art of Making a Living,” which includes essays by Roxane Gay and Jonathan Franzen. Martin’s conclusion is that, ‘art doesn’t necessarily fit into capitalism. There’s no real profit motive in literature, even great literature.’ But she also concedes that ‘publishing isn’t a charity; someone must be making money.’ <http://www.themillions.com/2017/03/writers-money-millions-interviews-manjula-martin.html>

Whilst many have written about the phenomenon of writers’ plummeting incomes despite increasing turnovers of book sales (myself included: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/can-small-presses-save-us-from-formulaic-fast-fiction-1.2788127>), the acceleration of this dynamic is startling. Interventions by government in which taxpayers pick up the tab for corporate raids on human capital can only be a measly tip in the saucer to a ravenous capitalism. An influential book by Italian economist, Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, focuses on just this problem. His work inspired Swedish poet Ida Börjel to write her long poem, *The Sabotage Manuals*, excerpts from which Commune Edition, translated by Jennifer Hayashida, are included here. Economic theory makes an unusual muse for poetry; Börjel signals the need for literature to react to the violence being done to it. Because if Marazzi’s thesis is correct, then the craft of writing is being consumed by the machine as comprehensively as were the crafts of the peasant classes in the industrial revolution.

I. Etymology

*sabotage* is an internal, industrial

process

The word is taken from the French sabot,

wood clog, and the French mill workers’

manner of protesting against the new

automatic looms by hurling

their clogs into them. So they removed and

aimed, took off their only pair of shoes and

threw them into the machine’s opening and walked

barefoot through *naw*

From *The Sabotage Manuals,* by Ida Börjel

Marazzi presents language as the instrument both of the workings of contemporary finance markets and the production of ‘current dominant forms of social labour’ – i.e. how we all work now. The two go hand in hand, and so we need to understand the ways in which language and subjectivity itself are being appropriated.

In what is being termed ‘the post-human age’, the entirety of human activity at all times is now being made productive. “The issue is not the end of work. The issue is work without end.” (cited in Marazzi) Consequently economic *value* in communicative labour becomes redundant. For example, every google increases value for Google, but not for the googler. Google’srelaunch as Alphabet, signals perhaps the appropriation of language as value code. CEO, Larry Page (net worth $44.6 billion), notes, ‘We liked the name *Alphabet* because it means a collection of letters that represent language, one of humanity's most important innovations, and is the core of how we index with Google search! We also like that it means alpha‑bet (*Alpha* is investment return above benchmark), which we strive for!’

Communication and how it is organised as information flow ‘has become as important as electricity once was in the age of mechanical reproduction.’ (Marazzi) And the communication processes are moving at the velocity of light – a crucial factor for the impoverishment of the craft of writing is its time intensity; writing is snail-paced rewriting in the nanosecond age. (One nanosecond is to one second as one second is to 31.71 years.)

The writer’s successive and differing states, her hesitations, expansions and changes – of self as much as of codex – the edits and re-edits – ‘real paths into which the highroad of consciousness leads,’ as Henri Bergson put it in *Time and Free Will*, may eventually result in the teeny tiny commodity that is the book. In following this book on its journey towards its reader we enter the realm of finance, a kind of Mordor to the Shire of the bookshelf. Marazzi details the historical shifts that have taken place since the 1970’s, whereby public finances – initially the pension funds of New York City-employed manual workers – refuse collectors, road sweepers, toilet attendants – were syphoned off by private finance initiatives. ‘In 1975 the United States initiated the process of multiplying the devices for draining off savings in order to reinforce stock-market financing of the economy,’ Marazzi writes. Thus unleashed, deregulation galloped across the plains of finance like Dark Riders swarming over Middle-earth: neo-liberalism was born.

Our precious, the book, relates to this burgeoning of the free market through the system’s dependence on the creative force of prophecy. How the world is represented has an effect on prices in the stock market. ‘The obstacles between people and their happiness are no longer exogenous natural constrictions but their own beliefs.’ (Orléan, 1999) This rhetoric of belief is manifested via the explosion of the internet and *online trading* – what Marrazi terms, ‘the socialisation of finance.’ The essential substance of such trading is liquidity. The more liquidity is pulled into the prophecy machine, the more that speculation can throw up immense profits for the trading outfits. Thus, the tech industry enters the narrative, and thus remuneration for writers and artists exits.

Digital technology, founded in part on an ethos of communality, of shared, free knowledge, provides the means for the global expansion of deregulated market trading at the same time as it facilitates the hunt for liquidity. And it is liquidity not books that mainstream publishing answers to. “Only a vast, deep market, permanently animated by voluminous transactions offers players the certainty, at any moment, of finding a counterpart; that is, the possibility to get out without losing capital. This property has a name: liquidity.” (Lordon, 2000, cited by Marazzi)

What was firmly rooted

lies rotted. What was cast solid

is perforated. Into those openings the

saboteur sticks her fingers.

From *The Sabotage Manuals* by Ida Börjel

This factor alone, the liquefying of securities, makes an economics of creativity impossible because of the instantaneous dynamic whereby fungibles can be interchanged. Our precious, in this aspect, is no more than an inconsequential piece of matter hanging off the end of a long chain of fervid performatives. Literary activity is subsumed within the circuits and cycles of finance capital. Communications are the substance of all the conventions of global trade: interpretive models, analyses, predictions, orders to buy, to sell, to short or long, to asset strip – a maelstrom of language drives the forces of liquidity: those private equity groups, investment banks etc., that own the publishers that wag the tails (shops), that books cling to. Language becomes instrumental without necessarily being meaningful; if it sells it’s good.

But there’s more.

A crisis of measurability develops when all of time is work time. Manning the ‘linguistic machines’, there is no cut off point for the worker: social labour continues with every click, scroll, ‘like’, and search. In *Move Fast And Break Things: How Facebook, Google and Amazon Have Cornered Culture And What It Means For All Of Us*, author Jonathan Taplin points out that in 2014 alone, Facebook users provided ‘almost fifteen million years of free labour.’ This to the fifth most valuable company in the world (market capitalisation of $445 billion in 2017). The former editor of the *Guardian,* Alan Rusbridger told a *Financial Times* conference that Facebook had ‘sucked up $27 million of the newspaper’s projected ad revenue’ in 2016. Facebook’s textbook, free market objectives: growth and monetisation, exemplify semio-capitalism, and the transformation of work, as Marazzi has shown, into life without payment.

For the writer, she whose stock in trade is words and only words, it’s a disaster. ‘I have confronted the harsh truth that your/my/our work often has very little or no market value as it is assigned by our cultural and economic system, particularly as it plays out online.’ Martin notes.

follow the manual to a T the leadership

uses the manual to sue its workers

to release themselves from liability to wash

their hands of the matter it is written into

impossibility through the bodies in line to the dock in the morning

through the centuries and where the bodies once stood

the radio waves run warm in the game for today’s temp jobs

advertised via text to the uneducable educables

to the overqualified seasonals

the bodies under 40 and their way of dancing

tip-toeing through 24/7 availability

tip-toeing through

homelessness rootlessness childlessness but in a present

but in a present but in a present that holds on

in a present that holds you in a present where there is one sales associate

for every seven-hundred applicants in sublets

three four five roommates month-to-month

weekly run into the sand where she waits absolutely loyal

with a wreath of silence around her neck

From The Sabotage Manuals by Ida Börjel.

We are impoverished by the consequences: a lack of diversity in publishing is noted by Arts Council of England CE, Darren Henley, as marginal voices get shut down. Those who cannot afford to work for nothing, and those whose work pushes at the margins of what is possible – such as a present day Beckett or Stein for instance, are particularly vulnerable to the limits set by profit-adoration. The abolition of the Net Book Agreement in the flagrant neo-noughties is now seen as a catastrophe for literature, allowing as it did, free rein for the Dark Riders of finance. ‘The real story of the industry is the slashing of lists, mergers, collapses, buy-outs, sackings and losses on a scale never before witnessed,’ Sam Jordison wrote in the *Guardian.* One publisher alone, according to Jordison, fought against the NBA’s demise: ‘That lone voice belonged to the heroic John Calder, publisher of Beckett, William Burroughs and Henry Miller.’

*General Advice to Lower Morale and Create Confusion*

after completed sabotage resist the temptation to

linger and witness the result there are

of course occasions when it to the contrary would seem suspicious

if you walked away

From *The Sabotage Manuals* by Ida Börjel