

Bucknell University

Bucknell Digital Commons

Faculty Journal Articles

Faculty Scholarship

Winter 12-2017

Waiting as Resistance: Lingerig, Loafing, and Whiling Away

Harold Schweizer
schweizr@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_journ



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schweizer, Harold. "Waiting as Resistance: Lingerig, Loafing, and Whiling Away." *Sociologia Internationalis* (2017) : 79-95.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

WAITING AS RESISTANCE:
LINGERING, LOAFING, AND WHILING AWAY

Harold Schweizer

Der Blick, der ans eine Schöne sich verliert, ist ein sabbatischer.
Er rettet am Gegenstand etwas von der Ruhe seines Schöpfungstages.
Theodor W. Adorno

I. Waiting and Whiling Away

In one of his aphorisms in his *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno thinks of waiting not only as resistance against the avidity of the gaze and the greed of impatience, but also as a temporality by which justice can be done to the particular. In the temporality of waiting (*Tempo [...] des Verweilens*) the object (*Gegenstand*) emerges from its hiddenness among the obliterating mass of the general (Adorno 1982, 94). If the waiter were to linger, loaf, tarry, dwell – if her gaze assumed the quiet stillness that Adorno coins the Sabbath gaze – she would do justice to a singular object that would thereby come to light. If this coming to light is implied in the Latin word *ex-sistere*, to stand out, then in the Sabbath gaze the singular object comes to be. Similar to Adorno, Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that we learn from the work of art how to linger (*verweilen*), and that in this lingering the work of art affords us a glimpse of “what one might call eternity” (Gadamer 1977, 60). It is the same eternity that reveals itself in each leaf of grass and on each page of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*: “I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass”, Whitman declares in the opening lines, and later on: “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,/[...] I witness and wait” (Whitman 1982, 188, 191 f.).

Before we consider this conjunction of a Kantian aesthetic with American Romanticism, let me ask: Are we still speaking of *warten* when we speak of *verweilen*, or of waiting when we speak of leaning, loafing, and lingering? While the verb *to linger* or *to loaf* might not quite capture the slightly more tranquil, elongated, and audible temporality of *verweilen*, the verb *to while* resembles the German verb more closely, especially in its explicit temporal qualifier – *to while away one’s time* – that does away with time altogether and may well transport us into an eternity of

sorts. Common to both languages is that the two temporalities seem to be mutually exclusive: she who lingers does not wait; she who waits does not linger. The Sabbath is set apart. If so, it might be because lingering, *verweilen*, whiling (away one's time), is usually thought of as an intentional, pleasurable activity as we witness and perhaps experience it in the pages of *Leaves of Grass* – while waiting is commonly thought of and experienced as unpleasantly imposed and wholly undesirable. Lingering appears to be its own end, while waiting is ever incomplete without the attainment of its object. The confusion between these temporalities is experienced by literature students who, when assigned the reading of *Leaves of Grass*, might find themselves sorely waiting for it to end when they should learn to linger in each of the fifty-two sections.

A book is not a waiting room. We linger in a book; we wait in a train station. The sign “no loitering” affixed to the door of the waiting room at the bus station literalizes this difference. Everyone can see how we wait in a train station, at an airport terminal, in a hotel lobby – we pace, we consult our watches, we pick up another magazine from the rack, we get up and sit down, we open another bag of *Fritos Corn Chips*. How can we distinguish the economic and psychological aspects of *this* waiting, from that quite distinctly *other* temporality wherein the waiter lingers and loafs and observes a spear of summer grass? And how can such lingering amount to a resistance precisely against the culturally constructed binary of waiting and lingering? How, in other words, can we linger in our waiting?¹

II. The Injustice of Waiting

Waiting is generally thought to be unproductive. He who waits wants, falls short, has not, lacks. The less someone is made to wait, the more he has and holds, and vice-versa. Waiting is a marker of inferior economic and social status, which is why Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon are tramps not CEOs. Social and economic strata, as we well know, are determined, enforced, and ritually performed by strategic impositions of waiting. For a good many of us not much has changed in the hundred years since Kafka's parable of the waiter who waits in vain to gain entrance to the Law. And not much, some of us would say, has changed in the fifty years since Martin Luther King, Jr. said “one hundred years [has] passed since emancipation, with no profound effect on [Black people's] plight” (King 1991, 523). Today as then, waiting is used as an instrument of class, race, rank, and gender distinctions; it is attributed, applied, apportioned to solidify hierarchies and prejudices, and most fundamentally, to signal

¹ Hence Robert Frost's poem entitled “Waiting” in which the speaker is overtly lingering (Frost 1969, 14).

an individual's or a group's existential expendability. When their waiting, despite its strategic and administered prolongations, comes to an end, when the door opens or the line shortens, it is as if the waiter were given a little of his life back by receiving permission to return, for a time, into the purgatory of the busy and the harried. But Kafka's lowly *Mann vom Lande*, who will die waiting rather than gain entrance to the law, exemplifies, as King also put it, that waiting for the socially and politically marginalized "has almost always meant Never" (King 1991, 292).

Ironically, our very strategies of resistance against such social and political determinations are also complicit with them. Since, proverbially, nobody likes to wait, we strenuously try to repress, mask, or deny it by distractions that are as bad as, or worse than, the waiting itself: the music while we are put on hold on the phone; the news or sports channel in the hotel lobby; the magazines on ice-curling, fly fishing, or prostate surgery in the waiting room; the cigarettes; the chips; the chewing gum. If there is a political dimension to these distractions, then it might be precisely that they are to distract us from the realization that we are waiting.

III. The Temporality of Things

The very fluidity by which the maxim *time-is-money* rolls off the tongue and the authoritative compactness of the phrase forbidding any dispute, instantly erase the thought that time might have any other than exchange value. It is a time that perforce must be spent, translated, converted into something other than itself. The metaphor, as metaphor, performs this translation, its formal density epitomizing the haste and alacrity by which this conversion is to happen. The resolute foregrounding of its economics is to render time itself inconspicuous; time is to appear and to exist only in its disguises: the wares, the trinkets, the diversions exchanged for it.

Time saved or savored, as we do in lingering by contrast, is time unquantified. Or to say the same differently, only where time is not money can it be experienced as such. Lingerin defies the hegemonic imperative of money-time. It announces the un-measurable, perhaps the immeasurable, time implied in Gadamer's sense of an eternity. It is the eternity in which a child is lost in Rainer Maria Rilke's "Eighth Elegy" and who has to be "shaken" out of it (Rilke 1989, 193). Although lingering presupposes certain economic privileges, I shall argue that lingering as a form of resistance has applications that cut across socio-economic strata even as basic economic needs have to be met before such a resistance can be mounted.

The very time that is pleurably experienced in lingering is unpleasantly experienced in waiting. What is so exasperating, then, about the experience of waiting, is that in waiting, time itself is annoyingly conspicuous. This is essentially what constitutes what I have elsewhere called the scandal of *Waiting for Godot*, where nothing but time itself is scandalously on display. Because “it is we who are passing when we say time passes”, as Henri Bergson tells us (Bergson 2002, 216), the gratuitousness of the waiter’s time amounts to a sense of his existential redundancy as well. And since the waiter is thus subject to inflation and devaluation, he restlessly seeks to grasp any bargain to stem the steady drain and dribbling away of his life. He gets up, he paces, he sits down, he looks at his watch, he grabs another magazine from the rack, all with the characteristically divided attention of the waiter who is always on the lookout for a better deal and into the avidity of whose gaze anything – the dust on that lampshade, the headline in the paper, the *Sandals* vacation ad on TV – comes with the promise of escape from the waiter’s unworthy existence.

For, precisely the thing that is to kill the waiter’s time kills the waiter himself – at least briefly and in installments. I hold in my coffee cup the urn of my own ashes. I read in my tablet my own obituary. I glimpse in the spot of dirt under my fingernail my own insignificance. And yet, to allow oneself a brief death in the cathartic substitution of a thing for the endlessly ragged incompletions of time, to allow oneself to be etherized like a patient on a table (to borrow an image from T.S. Eliot’s “Prufrock”), that is the purpose of the newspaper, the computer game, the lightly salted pretzel. The banal, fragile, obsolescent triviality of the things the entertainment industry supplies liberates the waiter from the intimacy of his own narcissistic self-absorption and functions as a metonymy for the forgettable incident of his own existence – the waiter who – “Prufrock” again – has measured out his life in coffee spoons.

The consumption of objects is to compensate for the waste and worthless time wherein we wait. My sensual, mental, or visual absorption in things promises a brief, but relatively secluded material refuge from the humiliations of waiting. Each thing is to be consumed so that time does not consume me. Each is a substitute for a time that does not have to be endured. If my waiting always seems endless, a *thing* puts an end to this endlessness and heals the injuries sustained by my waiting – but only briefly, for a thing’s temporality is the speed of its consumption.

The temporality of things is ideologically constructed and economically administered. Since we want things, and since we want them now, the supply of useful things as substitutions for the uselessness of waiting is to be as endless and inexhaustible as the time that the thing replaces. The market that is infinite, that will never be saturated, must therefore be understood

not as spatial or geographic but as temporal. And the waiter's consciousness in this temporal economy has a particular psychology. She waits when she consumes things without wanting them. Or vice-versa, she consumes things without wanting them when she waits. The reversibility of the seeing and the seen repeats itself compulsively not only in the scopic field but also in other subject-object relations. For the not-wanting-of-waiting has now been displaced into the not-knowing-of-consuming. As a result, the things that we consume unconsciously while we wait will be eminently forgettable, and if forgettable then replaceable, and if replaceable then the demand for such goods will be insatiable. Imposed and lengthened periods of waiting not only boost the economics of consumption but they also, by the logic of subject-object reversibility, alienate the waiter from herself for she is subject to the things that consume her as much as they are subject to her consuming.

The waiter's choice of the things she consumes while she waits is, as I'm suggesting, only seemingly deliberate. It is precisely because I think that I am briefly not subject to the constraints of waiting when I open another bag of lightly salted pretzels, it is precisely because my autonomy is illusory, that my consumption of things turns out to be capricious, random, unpredictable, and thus eminently subject to commercial manipulation. Not only is the waiter's autonomy in the choices she makes illusory, but it is also illusory to assume that the particular thing she thinks she consumes is not the general. Indeed, the fastidious particularity of the lightly salted pretzels only conceals the generic, repeatable, and thus forgettable quality of each thing that takes its turn to distract the waiter from her endurance of time. In sum, because our waiting has no end – until it does – and because we avoid waiting at any cost, the consumption of things is unconscious and compulsive, and our appetite for them insatiable.

IV. The Thing and the Work of Art

Even in his own day, Whitman observed a denigration of life in the inflated imperatives of "The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors, old and new/My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues/[...] they are not the Me myself" (Whitman 1982, 191). In the realm of the undifferentiated, administered consumption of fashions, knick-knacks, and novelties, I am not myself. I am – to mention only some of the deaths that I can die – forgettable, obsolete, reproducible like the things that consume me. But if our escape from time lasts only briefly and intermittently in the cluttered pages of *People* magazine, and we will ever have to die another death in another thing, the inexhaustible supply of similar anesthesia is meant to assure us that we need not wake up.

What then is the difference between an anesthetic and an aesthetic, a bag of potato chips and a spear of summer grass? Or, to ask a related question, how can Whitman's mere spear of summer grass redeem the waiter from his alienated existence as a thing among things? If the usual encounter with an object elicits the immediate question of its consumption, then evidently such a question does not apply to a spear of summer grass. The spear of summer grass appears right at the beginning of "Song of Myself" as an emblem seemingly of the insignificant, worthless, forgettable thing. And when Whitman invites us a little later on, "Loafe with me on the grass" (Ibid., 192), which is also an invitation to loaf with him in his book, we are perhaps to assume that such an invitation might not only be unconventional, but even a tad unseemly. For "Not words, not music or rhyme I want", Whitman insists, "not custom or lecture, not even the best/only the lull I like" (Ibid.). In its smallness and insignificance, the spear of summer grass presents itself only to one who against all precepts of etiquette and industry lulls and lingers and loafs.

The species of grass is a general concept. In the general concept the single spear of grass disappears. For the general, as Adorno points out, implies comparability, exchangeability, substitution. These are economic terms, implying trade, barter, haggling, dealing, and dickering, all of which suggest, were we to submit the spear of summer grass to such terms, its denigration. In the general, to put this simply, the particular is erased. In the terms of the general, what is the value of a spear of summer grass? What can I get for it? Nothing. It is Whitman's purpose, of course, precisely to make economic propositions ludicrous. A spear of summer grass has no value because the only value, in a time-is-money economy, is exchange value. When Kafka cautions, "let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass" (Kafka 1948, 12) and which Deleuze and Guattari paraphrase as "It's not easy to see the grass in things" (Deleuze/Guattari 2004, 25), we are reminded that it is easier to seize a thing that has a certain monetary value, than a worthless spear of summer grass.

Nobody wants a spear of summer grass. It is to be relegated to the species of grass. Once absorbed in the general, its singularity erased, its particularity anonymous, it can be trampled on. Consider the endless analogues of such erasure of the singular in the general and the ethical implications of this erasure: What is a chicken? It is to be relegated to the species of fowl. It is therefore to be tortured and eaten. What is a cow? It is to be relegated to the species of bovine. It is a steak and a handbag. And if we are good economists who like our chicken and beef we should politely decline Whitman's invitation to lean and loaf with him.

And yet, if we turn the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, if we read each line as if it were a spear of summer grass and each page as if it were the Lord's hand-

kerchief (Whitman 1982, 193), if, in other words, we do not decline Whitman's invitation, and we find ourselves accepting his wager at the beginning of "Song of Myself" – "what I assume you shall assume" (Ibid., 188) – then we are compromised, inconsistent materialists. We are already leaning towards loafing. Adorno suggests a temporal paradigm by which we inhabit simultaneously and not without vexation both materialist and idealist, both economic and aesthetic ideologies. Adorno is enough of an economist himself to understand that attention to a singular constitutes an injustice to the general; that eventually there must be a transfer of attention, a "*Weise des Übergangs*" (Adorno 1982, 94), from the particular to the general, from the singular to the social, if only so as to conceptualize, contextualize, situate, and communicate the particular, to which thereby, however, we would have committed the injustice of generalization and stereotyping. The truth that reveals itself in beholding the spear of summer grass, to paraphrase Adorno, constitutes an injustice towards the general, but without committing this injustice, no singular thing will reveal itself (cf. *ibid.*, 94 f.).

What Adorno *the aesthete* therefore proposes is that rendering justice to the singular is a matter of "*Tempo der Geduld und Ausdauer des Verweilens*" (Ibid., 94), a matter of speed, of patience and endurance of lingering before the singular is eventually erased in the general concept. Adorno names the abuse of the "*Weise des Übergangs*" by which such processes of erasure are performed as "*Gedanken als Gewalt*", thinking as violence and "*Abkürzen des Wegs*" (Ibid.), shortcut of the process. To behold a spear of summer grass or to read a poem, then, is a function of slowness, of slowness of lingering – such as is necessitated by the undulating rhythms of Whitman's lines, for example. Such lingering is prompted, likewise, by the ceremonious formality of a sonnet, or the fragile, fleeting gesture of a flower, or the nuanced forms and colors of a painting – about which, incidentally, Jacques Lacan says that it requires a "taming", "civilizing", and "seducing" of the eyes' "voracity" (Lacan 1973, 115, my translation).² But it is also implied that this temporality of lingering is finite, that although our aesthetic obligations on the Sabbath day are resolutely to be kept, the Sabbath day will pass, and our eyes will have to turn from the particular to the general.

² See Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychoanalyse* where the French reads: "[...] le ressort apaisant, civilisateur et charmeur, de la fonction du tableau" (1974, 115).

V. The Fetish and the Gaze

If haste is one way, the fetish is another to subvert the slowness by which the beautiful comes about. The temporalities of haste and of the fetish are diametrically opposed. Haste is restless speed; the fetish is unvarying changelessness, annulment of time. Slowness, then, is the fragile velocity between the economically administered haste and the psychologically regulated fetish. Like haste, which only accelerates the entropic flow of time in its illusory displacements, the work of art as fetish serves as talisman against the fear of death.

When the child in Whitman's poem asks, "*What is the grass?*" the answer, among the many answers Whitman attempts to give in a catalogue of repeated guesses and maybes, is that it is eminently a thing of time. It emerges as "the produced babe of the vegetation" and eventually transforms into "the beautiful uncut hair of graves". Thereafter Whitman's thought trails off morbidly to "the hints about dead young men and women" (Whitman 1982, 192 f.) before it soon recovers in his consolatory realization that in the repetition of this entropic cycle "there is really no death" (Ibid., 194).

Whitman's notion of immortality, like Adorno's metaphor of the Sabbath gaze, could easily be misunderstood as a Romantic cancellation of this universal law of entropy. In the cancellation of the law of entropy time does not flow from a lower to a higher entropy state. On the contrary, the object has magically returned from the grave to the babe, from its *decomposition* to its original *composition* and appears as if in the stillness of its day of creation. Gadamer is right to associate such a miracle with the sense of an annulment of time altogether by which the aesthetic experience associates itself both with so called *timeless* works of art as well as with religious iconography. If the annulment of this law of entropy were a matter of the aesthetic object's exceptional power by which its very *composition* could withstand its *decomposition*, then we would precisely assume its timelessness, its a-temporality, and glimpse in it a kind of eternity. The utopian fantasy of such a proposition – refuted in the frayed and scruffy heft of Whitman's work, as much as in the fragile rarity of a spear of summer grass – turns the aesthetic experience via a repression of time and human mortality into the canonically fetishized aesthetic object.

One of Whitman's promises, thus, to the aspiring loafer is that he "shall no longer [...] look through the eyes of the dead." (Ibid., 189), and when he a few pages later ecstatically exclaims, "there is really no death", his exclamation is prompted neither by the Egyptian pyramids, nor by the *Mona Lisa*, nor by the bearded and canonized "spectres in books" (Ibid.) but by "the smallest sprout" (Ibid., 194), discernible to the gaze of all, rabbits and

loafers alike. In Whitman's radically democratic aesthetic, therefore, anything can be beautiful: "The smoke of my own breath" (Ibid., 189), "The scent of these arm-pits" (Ibid., 211). Although anemic by comparison, Kant's foremost examples for the beautiful are, more canonically, flowers; but his list also includes, perhaps with gleeful seditiousness, crustaceans, *designs à la greque*, and foliage on wallpaper (Kant 1974, § 16). For the beautiful is not a fetishized thing, but a taste—or a smoke, or a scent. It is eminently a temporality. It is not a thing *in* time; it is a thing *of* time.

VI. The Tempo of Taste

Raymond Williams points out "that nearly all forms of contemporary critical theory are theories of consumption. That is to say, they are concerned with understanding an object in such a way that it can profitably or correctly be consumed" (Williams 1980, 45 f.). Of all theories of consumption, Kant's denial that anything at all is understood or consumed in the aesthetic experience, is by such measures the most ascetic. And yet, the sensuality of Kant's metaphor of taste (*Geschmack*) tells us that a theory of desirelessness is thinkable only as an oxymoron. Ironically, Kant's very asceticism eventually transforms into a prodigiously productive theory of consumption once the New Critics fetishize the Kantian aesthetic experience in the well-wrought urn.

Adorno's theory, too, is a particular version of a theory of consumption. It proposes that the beautiful comes about in the *Tempo* of the gaze. But the *Tempo* makes all the difference. Without this *Tempo* on loan from my gaze, the smallest sprout remains either hidden in the general species of grass, or fetishized in the object that hides my death. If the smallest sprout is gobbled up by rabbits, it is subject to what Adorno called "shortcut of the process"; if it is made into a timeless work of art, its and my temporalities are therein cancelled.

In the slowness of my gaze the smallest sprout comes into existence – and its smallness holds a mirror to my self. Just as the object reveals itself in my gaze, I am revealed in its gaze. The reversibility of the gaze implies that the aesthetic experience is a perpetuation of the mirror stage, anticipated in Lacan's observation that it is an aesthetic "primordial form" (Lacan 1977, 2) of the child's reflection that initiates the imaginary identification. Lacan's hapless child is an overt if unacknowledged reiteration of the child in Rilke's "Eighth Elegy"³ whose gaze has been paralyzed in the illusory form (*Gestaltung*) of an object. As in Rilke's elegiac poetry, in Lacan's trag-

³ "denn schon das frühe Kind/wenden wir um und zwingens, dass es rückwärts/
Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das/im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod./Ihn
sehen wir allein" (Rilke 1989, 192).

ic theory such imaginary identification ever sends us on to the alienating destination that we have charted in the fetishized object. On the extreme end of its reification, the aesthetic experience comes full circle back to the economy of (expensive) things.

VII. The Stillness of the Gaze

The Sabbath gaze has lost itself in the beautiful. The word “lost” announces a reflective stillness – the cessation of the avidity of the gaze. The word also implies that the Sabbath gaze is not premeditated, calculated, or even intentional. It is because of the innocence, as it were, of the gaze that it salvages in the object the stillness (*Ruhe*) of the day of its creation. The word *Ruhe*, stillness, quiet, rest – like Whitman’s word “lull” – implies both an auditory quiet and the cessation, or rather, as we have seen, a slowness, of movement, above all the movement of the sensory apparatus that wants to consume all things. It is my stillness – for we are the time that passes – which is the stillness of *verweilen*, in which the beautiful can manifest itself.

Like the beautiful, the stillness of the Sabbath is intrinsic. Neither has economic purpose; their purpose is precisely not to have economic purpose. The invention of the Sabbath – before we used to do our shopping on the Sabbath – had long been a gesture toward social equality since all competition rested on that day. Nothing is bartered, wanted, or won on the Sabbath. “Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am”, writes Whitman (1982, 191). It is the day, for Whitman, on which one “bends an arm on a impalpable certain rest” (Ibid.); it is the day on which “the farmer stops by the bars [...] on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye” (Ibid., 200); it is there for observing, waiting on and witnessing of that which was “dropt” during the week: “the handkerchief of the Lord”, for example. The Sabbath gaze that rests on the sudden exquisite particularity of a single spear of summer grass, or a single poem, is to assure no more than “that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*” (Ibid., 193).

For if the Sabbath is the day par excellence wherein the creator *rests*, and in and *because* of this resting, finds her creation beautiful, then a mere leaf of grass, a poem about a leaf of grass, indeed any thing – and we are things too – invites, indeed necessitates, sabbatical readings. The aesthetic judgment, for Kant as for Adorno or Gadamer, is a judgment attained in a temporality experienced as an unproductive lingering. It is an experience that in resisting extrinsic appropriation, utility, or objectification attains moral and political dimension.

The difference between waiting and lingering, as between a thing and a work of art, is established in the *Tempo* of my desire. While Kant demands, as I mentioned, that in the aesthetic experience desire be altogether suspended, Adorno suggests that desire be slowed, delayed, curbed, reduced – all of which is implied in the temporality of lingering. What is common to both Kant and Adorno is that the stillness and tranquility practiced in the contemplation of the work of art does not come about through the want of the consumer of things. It comes about – fortuitously – through the taming, relaxing, slowing of the avidity of the gaze; it does not come about through rapacity but through what for example Wordsworth calls “a wise passiveness” (Wordsworth 1988, 130) which is a version of Lacan’s “laying down of the gaze” (Lacan 1978, 114).

Whitman’s verbs “observe”, “witness”, “wait”, “lull” hold desire in abeyance, slow it down. He does not voraciously pick and eat the spear of summer grass; nor does he indifferently disregard it, for dis-regard would be a matter of the gaze’s restlessness; nor does the sensuous frivolity of his loafing resemble the anemic desirelessness of Kant’s aesthetic; nor does it resemble the economically administered gaze of the consumer of things; nor does it resemble the deferential piety of the visitor of the museum who genuflects before fetishes; nor does it resemble the satisfaction of the student of poetry whom Whitman ridicules in the rhetorical question, “Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?” (Whitman 1982, 189). In this observing and witnessing, we do not attend to the meaning – that is to say to the mastering – of poems, for that would be to assign them exchange value. For what is mastered must serve. Whitman’s radical idleness thus transgresses all the institutionalized pedagogic, economic, and moral imperatives of his day’s protestant work ethic that favored, as do we, plumbers over poets.⁴

VIII. The Slowness of Stillness

„But in the rush of everything to waste”, Robert Frost implores the new-lweds in his sonnet “The Master Speed”, “That you may have the power of standing still” (Frost 1969, 300). As an alternative to the “meaning of poems”, Whitman proposes a similar *standing still* – perhaps in the horizontal – when he suggests that the loafer should be seduced rather than indoctrinated: “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems” (Whitman 1982, 189). The lingerer is seduced; the waiter is manipulated. Since one would scarcely be able to observe, from afar, the difference between seduction and manipulation, we are reminded that

⁴ See Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio’s claim that “we need more welders, less philosophers” (sic.). (*The Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 14, 2015).

waiting and lingering, and especially their differences, are to some degree invisible. There is a certain intimacy, or even secrecy, that adheres to these temporalities; this is particularly the case with lingering, that secretly turns impatience into delight, or even perhaps a thing into a work of art.

The *origin* of all poems – a version of Adorno’s day of creation – is attained in stopping. Stopping, standing still, leaning, loafing, lingering, waiting, witnessing, observing, and not to forget “compassionating”, all perhaps in the same “slightly leaning-forward position” that Lacan assigns to the child in the mirror stage (Lacan 2006, 76) – these are the temporalities within which the beautiful – briefly – reveals itself. The *brevis* of the appearance of the beautiful is announced in the abruptness of stopping. While stopping initiates lingering, lingering, we might say, is an extended stopping. We linger like the boat that floats in the current of the river that flows past it at slightly greater speed; and it appears to the person in the boat as if she were standing still.

We might thus understand the aesthetic experience within the linear flow of time as the illusion of standing still, a motionless stillness. This is the *Tempo* of Adorno’s Sabbath day. It is tempting to Platonize such a concept, as I have pointed out, as a fetishized unchanging timelessness, but that would precisely obscure the fact that stillness is a slowness and that standing still is a movement, and that the beautiful cannot be had, kept, and put on a shelf.⁵ When Whitman leans and loafs and observes a spear of summer grass, he observes the spear of summer grass in the same temporality as his own.

The waiter who stops, stops waiting because the train has arrived, or she starts to linger because she observes a spear of summer grass. The lingerer who stops doesn’t stop lingering. She lingers in a temporality that has slowed to a seeming stopping. She stands still. She leans slightly forward. If she were to receive advice from the productively busy and harried, she would be told that such leaning will end in her falling behind. But she lingers self-forgetfully; she learns the origin of all poems. She has lost her gaze in the stillness of its day of creation.

IX. The Illicitness of Stopping

The risk of falling behind, or of falling out of sync with the busy and the harried, is the poet’s professional hazard – to whom Herman Melville’s Bartleby, who famously prefers not to work, should perhaps serve as a

⁵ When Ralph Waldo Emerson in his poem “Each and All” finds beautiful sea shells and takes them home with him, he discovers that “the poor, unsightly, noisome things/Had left their beauty on the shore“.

warning. Stopping – of time, of intention, of purpose – is the romantic trope par excellence. We find it in Wordsworth and Whitman alike. In Wordsworth programmatically in the lines “I sit upon the old gray stone,/And dream my time away” (Wordsworth 1988, 130); or in the lines, “Dull would he be of soul who could *pass by*/a sight so touching [...]” (Ibid., 285). The same imperative to linger, not to pass by, is the origin of “Michael”, where “you might *pass by*,/Might see and notice not [...]” (Ibid., 224 f., my italics). In Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner”, the mariner stops the wedding guest and prevents him from going to heaven – often allegorized as a wedding feast in the Christian Bible. In Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Bartleby’s stopping of all professional obligations and activities, and his eventual death, present yet another version of the economic and existential perils of stopping. Many poems imply that the poet stands still, stops, lingers, and many poems thus also imply that such stopping and lingering is contrary to all economic interest. Unlike a novel, which one reads by waiting for the end of the sentence and for the end of the page, as Sartre puts it (Sartre 1949, 41), a poem, I propose, is a stopping.

One of the most famous iterations occurs in Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. “He will not see me stopping here”, announces the speaker, implying the shy illicitness of his intention to stop “Between the woods and frozen lake/The darkest evening of the year” (Frost 1969, 224). The owner of the woods, for whom the woods likely hold economic interest, might think of such stopping as quaint, unreasonable, or perhaps even as trespass. There is, as the long, dark night in Frost’s poem intimates, something risky about stopping to watch the woods fill up with snow. It might take forever. One might never keep one’s promises. One might advisedly, as Frost warns in “Desert Places”, defy the Romanic imperative and decide on “going past/[...] lonely as it is” (Ibid., 296). There is, for different reasons, something risky about stopping this day and night with Walt Whitman. One might think of it differently the morning after. In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, the horse – clearly denigrated to a workhorse – rightly “gives his harness bells a shake” but neither the bells nor the clumsiness of the rhyme, “to ask if there is some mistake”, awakens the traveler from his trance. For there is another, beautiful, sound in the woods that evening: “the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake” (Ibid., 224), which is the outward manifestation of the traveler’s enchantment.

The poem ends with the traveler’s resolute determination to keep his promises. Frost does not tell us what promises these are, but we can surmise that they have to do with the fulfillment of ultimate, essential obligations, perhaps no less than the fulfillment of life itself, since the traveller emphatically repeats to have “miles to go before I sleep,/And miles to go before I sleep” (Ibid., 225). The repetition in that final couplet implies

the arduous labor that it is to fulfill the promise of one's life. But that is the promise the traveler has perhaps, in that long pause after "lovely, dark and deep" (Ibid., 224) found in the silent falling of the snow – the promise of life that now enables him to keep his promises.

If they are made out of habit they are not promises. If they are made out of necessity they are not promises. If they are made out of duty they are not promises. If they are made out of fear they are not promises. Neither habit, nor necessity, nor duty, nor fear compels the traveller to stop. The promises he intends to keep originate from a realm outside of or prior to a contractual economy. Promises, thus, if they are to have value, might most felicitously originate in the authenticity, freedom, and solitude of self-reflection, in the enchanting stillness of a snowfall, in the vast space of liberty that Frost's poem presents to us as a stopping by woods on a snowy evening. We are not horses.

The horse waits, the traveler lingers. Stopping, pausing, lingering, indeed reading, listening, and looking, are essential conditions for aesthetic and ethical insight. They are neither simplistically useful, nor immediately practical, nor always convenient, nor highly regarded by horses. But aesthetic and ethical insight, the perception of the beautiful and of the good, is not granted to one who does not stop and risk her journey, as the poem suggests, indeed who does not risk her future.

Surely, the traveller in Frost's poem had not planned to stop, was not told, was not asked, indeed did not know she would stop. The beautiful cannot be ordered, scheduled, planned, or predicted. It happens in that it happens through us, if we were so inclined as to lend ourselves to its happening through our "wise passivity" in it. And if it is true that the kind of stopping we witness and experience in Frost's poem leads to the perception of beauty and that perception to the ability to make free moral choices – because the perception of beauty is eminently free – then stopping is an activity. Even waiting, that most maligned of all temporal experiences, can be an activity – but only *if the waiter lingers in it*. Even waiting may present itself as an opportunity to encounter those aspects of life otherwise obscured by haste. We mostly wait in haste.

Frost's poem asks us to stop *in* and *with* the poem to attend to the origin of all poems in the sweep of easy wind and downy flake, to hear out of what intimations the traveller awakens to keep her promises. Waiting is attention. The ability to wait – lingeringly, patiently – informs the way we are with other people, especially people who need of us a waiting, as Simone Weil puts it, that is wholly subservient to nothing but waiting (Weil 2001, 62–65). In such waiting, we oppose not only the voracious speed of modern life, but also the ordinary expectations according to which waiting is always supposed to be object-related and not in itself a valuable experience.

In waiting with a poem, a painting, or a patient, we find ourselves in the realm of lingering, in a wholly otherworldly, immeasurable temporality that immerses us in a waiting without object or end. We linger in it endlessly. We wait without end. Some medical schools thus train their doctors to learn patience by having them look at paintings, read poems, or perhaps observe a spear of summer grass. Illness or suffering, or the attention to the beloved who suffers, are most irrefutably experiences of stopping and lingering. Medical practitioners would do well to sense a patient's deeper temporality and through patience come to apprehend the patient's endurance. The instrumental, object-related nature of ordinary waiting conceals this intimate, existential aspect.

If I stop and wait I may find my promise and therein the power to keep promises. If I claim my experience of waiting rather than being merely subjected to it, if I resist the commercialization of time, if I own my time, if I stop to watch the woods fill up with snow, I make time matter – and then I matter. Matter, of course, is just another word for time, and time another word for being.

X. The Necessity of Linger

We must learn to linger in our waiting. No doubt, this sort of resistance by which we oppose the time-is-money culture is unspectacular, indeed literally so in that it is largely invisibly performed in small rooms before dawn, in sudden clearings in the woods, in languid moments on Tuesday afternoons. One doesn't need an app or a degree for it. Like Henry Thoreau's art of sauntering, or Whitman's loafing, or Wordsworth's whiling away his time on a gray stone, or Frost's stopping on a snowy evening, the art of lingering opposes economic appropriations.

And yet, evidently lingering, loafing, and whiling away, necessitate a cabin by Walden Pond, or a horse-drawn sleigh. Kant, too, clearly emphasizes that before one can have an aesthetic experience one's basic material needs must be met. But the aesthetic experience troped by Adorno as the stillness of the day of creation, or by Whitman as the origin of all poems, also implies the priority of the aesthetic over the utilitarian. It is for Whitman, as we have noted, the "First-day" on which the famer loafs to see his oats, even as he must have sown them before, even as in our protestant work ethic one does not deserve to rest without having worked. But it is even more incontestable – if nonetheless widely contested – that one *cannot* work without having rested. The priority of rest over work, of the aesthetic over the utilitarian, is a necessity not just a pious maxim, or a dispensable luxury. For when the dialectical relationship between the aesthetic and the utilitarian has been reductively falsified in the self-sufficient monad

of economic utility, all lives turn out to be nothing but things to be consumed.

References

- Adorno*, Theodor W. (1982): *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben.* Frankfurt a. M.
- Bergson*, Henri (2002): *Key Writings.* Ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey. London.
- Deleuze*, Gilles/*Guattari*, Felix (2004): *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* New York.
- Emerson*, Ralph Waldo (2001): *Emerson's Prose and Poetry.* Ed. by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York.
- Frost*, Robert (1969): *The Poetry of Robert Frost.* Ed. by Edward Connery Lathem. New York.
- Gadamer*, Hans-Georg (1977): *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest.* Stuttgart.
- Kafka*, Franz (1948): *The Diaries of Franz Kafka. 1910–1913.* Ed. by Max Brod. New York.
- Kant*, Immanuel (1974): *Kritik der Urteilskraft.* Unveränd. Nachdruck d. 6. Aufl. Hamburg.
- King*, Martin Luther (1991): *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. by James M. Washington. San Francisco.
- Lacan*, Jacques (1973): *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse.* Paris.
- (1977): *Écrits: A Selection,* New York.
- (1978): *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis.* New York.
- Rilke*, Rainer Maria (1989): *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.* Trans. by Stephen Mitchell. New York.
- Sartre*, Jean-Paul (1949): *What is Literature?* New York.
- Weil*, Simone (2001): *Waiting for God.* New York.
- Whitman*, Walt (1982): *Poetry and Prose.* Ed. by Justin Kaplan. New York.
- Williams*, Raymond (1980): *Problems in Materialism and Culture. Selected Essays.* London.
- Wordsworth*, William (1988): *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth.* Ed. by Stephen Gill. Oxford.

Zusammenfassung

„Waiting as Resistance: Lingerin, Loafin, and Whilin Away“ ist eine Kritik der Ökonomie des Konsums. Die Unterbewertung des Wartens als verlorene Zeit und deren ökonomische und psychologische Verdrängung im Konsum von kaufbaren Dingen, enthüllt sich als Unterbewertung des Lebens selbst. Im Verweilen und ähnlichen nicht objekt- oder zielorientierten Zeitlichkeiten erleben wir eine fundamentale Temporalität, die allgemein ist. Das Essay knüpft konzeptionell an ein kurzes Zitat von Theodor Adorno an und argumentiert mit Hinweisen auf das dichterische Werk von Walt Whitman und anderen Dichtern, immer mit dem Ziel, gegen die Reifikation der Zeit als Geld und die soziale und ökonomische Reduktion aller Lebenswerte zu opponieren.

Abstract

„Waiting as Resistance: Lingerin, Loafin, and Whilin Away“ is a critique of the economics of consumption, suggesting that the widespread denigration of waiting as lost time and its economic and psychological displacements in consumer goods amount to a denigration of human life itself. In the practice of lingering and its related temporalities, the author proposes, we regain an appreciation of the fundamental temporality of all things, that everything, we humans included, is constituted by time. Conceptually indebted to Theodor Adorno and substantiated with reference, chiefly to Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” and other poetic works, this argument throughout opposes the reification of time as money and the attendant social and economic demotion of all value to exchange value.