

Chapter 6: The Fabric of Creative Resistance

You don't even see people photocopying their body parts any more. Those all-in-one machines put an end to that. They're just not built as sturdy and they're always doing something. I mean, you can hardly hop aboard and Xerox your ass when there's a fax coming through at the same time.

– blog entry by Shauny, *What's New Pussycat?*, October 23, 2003

Generally speaking, clerks go unnoticed, people underestimate them.

– Jose Saramago, *All the Names*

Introduction

Looking closely at the artistry and craftsmanship that workers employ in resisting corporate culture, the preceding chapters have highlighted the diversion of significant creative and intellectual resources away from the labor process. Anonymous workbloggers who possess sufficient writing talent and an iconoclastic orientation to the labor process, are able to transform their workplace experiences into witty, satirical critique of organizational ideology and office culture. These wage-workers maintain a writerly ambivalence and autonomy that suggests a heterogeneous confluence of anti-corporate opinion rather than attachment to a unified political agenda. Their writings provide a solid anchor for individual identity that militates against the possibility of becoming a “company man” and – in the presence of a growing ecological and economic crisis – helps to shift the *zeitgeist* in favor of alternatives to corporate capitalism.

This dissertation has posited the existence of a countercultural trope, in today's knowledge economy, that is limited to a small group of skilled, creatively talented, and iconoclastic workers, yet contributes to the ecologically, economically, and ethically mandated shift toward sustainable production and reduced working time. These employees limit their job responsibilities in order make room for the imagination; embody their iconoclastic responses to wage labor in a tangible and enduring creative

form; use globally networked technologies for rapid exchange and dialogue; and organize their wage labor in a manner that frees up time and energy from the encroachment of capital, inhabiting a critical space where the dream of what could be supercedes acceptance of what is.

While blogging is, most likely, an ephemeral form of protest, creative resistance to wage labor is not. The employee-authors in this study contribute to, and are shaped by, a broad and intellectually sophisticated iconoclastic terrain that reaches back at least 200 years. The significance of anonymous workblogging is best understood against the backdrop of literary, celluloid, and musical milestones in the anti-work or anti-commercial tradition, with which bloggers interact. Surveying some of these works and examining the lives of their authors, the first part of this chapter argues that anonymous workbloggers form part of a rich and well-established subculture that emerges from within wage labor itself – opposing capitalist ideology and celebrating the reclamation of company time for one’s own creative pursuits. Analyzing the literary tradition of “hiding out” in wage labor situations while pursuing one’s art, I argue that this orientation is both political and activist, being circumscribed but not negated by its “armchair” and complicit nature.

The concluding chapter, builds on the loose consensus in the anonymous workblogging tradition of maximizing unfettered time for spontaneous self-development through rigorous separation of wage labor and creative activity. Acknowledging bloggers’ deeply held ecological and ethical concerns about the impact of corporate capitalism and their enthusiasm for the three-day week, the final chapter outlines the need for social change that underlies their discontent, imbuing blog postings with a critical

power even where the decision to give up material comforts or join forces with what is perceived as a strident left politics is absent. Accommodating the stuff of bloggers' dreams, this study concludes by tracing the possibility of human emancipation through nonwork, setting out from Marx's concept of minimizing the working week as elaborated in the *Grundrisse* (1993). However, using the literati of the past as a guide, the conclusion also highlights the intellectual thrill of unrealized dreams and foiled ambitions, which makes the postponement of the end of capitalism, and oppression itself, a source of exquisite fulfillment for those who pursue their art clandestinely.

Critical accounts of office work: A historical perspective

Anonymous workblogging has not emerged from the void. A vast library of iconoclastic creative responses to the labor process offers ballast to workers who are being bombarded by new workplace philosophies that demand total commitment and uncritical dedication to the organization. Looking broadly at the tradition of writing about office work, the following surveys critical literary accounts of knowledge work and argues that these – through a loose fabric of association – furnish anonymous workblogs with political and intellectual gravitas. Drawing in particular on the lives of writers whose accounts of office life were drawn from their own workplace experiences, I underscore the argument that creative writers are unlikely to align themselves with an activist agenda, yet are politically and ethically motivated, and capable of political impact. Focusing on the relationship between non-literary wage labor and Franz Kafka's writing process, I develop an archetype for the embedded yet critical employee, using this archetype, along with testimony from the lives of Eliot, Miller, and Pessoa, to analyze anonymous workblogging's potential and limitations with regard to social change.

Direct experience of wage labor is not necessary in order to write a powerful critique of it. For example, E.M. Forster's (1910) autodidactic office clerk Leonard Bast, who conceals poetry and scientific pamphlets beneath his ledger, exists in sharp counterpoint to the "anger and telegrams" of the capitalist society that surrounds him. Forster's writing challenges not only the workplace ideology of the time in which *Howard's End* was written, but also persists as a viable critique of post-industrial capitalism. Yet Forster's life as an independently wealthy intellectual involved no exposure to the office routine. Similarly, Oscar Wilde's aestheticism, which promotes a cult of idleness under such edicts as, "work is the curse of the drinking classes," derives from an aristocratic tradition that upholds the dignity of non-work and rejects the Protestant work ethic of the vulgar commercial classes.

Of particular interest to this dissertation, however, are literary *insider* accounts of office life, which I refer to broadly as the "writer-clerk tradition." These direct responses to wage labor span over two centuries, and the novels and poems inspired by white-collar drudgery are some of the milestones of modern literature. Having endured the office routine, writers such as Camus, Henry Miller, Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Dickens, and Gogol all saw in white-collar life some of the fundamental contradictions of their age. As alluded to in Chapter Four, the lives of these authors, as well as the works they produced, provide insight into the orientation of today's bloggers to office jobs that are simultaneously enjoyable and deeply troubling.

Nineteenth and early- to mid- twentieth century writers were preoccupied with the physical hardship endured by low-paid clerks in damp offices, but they were also concerned with the psychological dimension of the labor process, depicting rule-bound

and petty bureaucracies that tyrannized every aspect of a worker's existence, trampling human dreams and desires. Writings about lowly office workers flowed from the pens of authors such as Charles Dickens, who had worked as a law clerk and endured factory labor, as well as writers such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, who were independently wealthy (even if, in the case of the latter, precariously so) and conjured the lives of clerks from their imaginations rather than from direct experience.

Charles Dickens transformed his experience of the capitalist labor process into fiction that challenged the 19th century business world's glorification of the separation of heart from mind. His office-related characters and settings possess keenly observed and exaggerated traits that communicate the shortcomings both of individual human nature and society. John Wemmick, a law clerk with a letterbox mouth, embodies the conflict between human feeling and impersonal bureaucratic values in *Great Expectations* (1861); in *Little Dorrit's* (1857) Circumlocution Office, paper circulates furiously but nothing of any meaning or importance ever gets done; and, looking more broadly at industrialism, *Hard Times'* (1854) Thomas Gradgrind, “a man of facts and calculations” (Dickens, 1980, p. 12) parodies an industrial ideology focused on rational calculation and efficiency, mourning the loss of the sensual and the spontaneous from the lives of working people.

Among nineteenth century writers, the Russians made a specialty of capturing the inner lives of low-ranking civil servants who worked in obscurity in stiflingly impersonal bureaucratic hierarchies. Nikolai Gogol¹, who was of aristocratic birth but worked for

¹ Gogol is Ukrainian but wrote in Russian and is considered to be part of the Russian literary tradition.

some years as a minor civil servant, wrote a series of stories – such as “The Nose” (1835) and “The Overcoat” (1842) that captured the life of the Petersburg bureaucrat, reflecting upon the tormented yearnings of insignificant men. Tolstoy's (1886) short story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, is the reflection of a bureaucrat who looks back on his life and finds it has been meaningless and wasted. Dostoyevsky's early work *Poor Folk* (1846) charts the romantic inner life of an impoverished, aging civil servant, while *The Double* (1846) features a clerk who meets an exact and rather cheeky replica of himself in the desk opposite. And in *Notes From Underground* (1864), an embittered civil servant holes himself up in a St. Petersburg basement to mull over the contradictions of human existence and the failure of reason, and write out his manifesto against men of action.

Another landmark in office writing is Herman Melville's short novel *Bartleby the Scrivener*, which announces in its opening lines that office clerks are more intriguing than they might initially appear. The narrator remarks on his fascination with scriveners as, “what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written” (2004, p. 1). Bartleby's “I prefer not to,” in Melville's (1853) tale of the intractable law clerk has been widely debated in the literature on resistance. Hardt and Negri (2001) see in Bartleby's passive refusal a clearing of the decks – an opening that may be colonized by less passive forces, which push toward the positive negation and overcoming of capitalism. Žižek (2006) has argued that “I prefer not to,” is *in itself* a revolutionary moment, that infuriates rather than parasitizes the capitalist enterprise, enduring as a substantive force that is not merely superseded but persists as an essential part of the process of overcoming.

These nineteenth century literary works highlight the beautiful contradiction between the clerk's humble exterior and his sensitive, quirky, and romantic soul. From the clerk's vantage point, the oppressiveness and banality of the total institution is palpable. His stifled inner life is a commentary on the failure of industrial capitalism or Tsarist bureaucracy to meet the needs of the human heart. His poverty and servility castigate a social system that fails to maintain dignity and meet basic human needs. And the tension of his existence holds up a mirror to the existential struggle of human nature against itself, hinting at cracks in the Age of Reason's confidence that its bold machinery will lead to peace and happiness for mankind.

Twentieth century writing focuses more explicitly on the existential dimension of working life, and the contradictions and crises of individual identity. White-collar life and dehumanized bureaucracy are examined in works such as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), which features a salesman who loathes his job and *The Trial* (1925), which is partly set in suffocating offices. After Josef K almost faints while visiting a government office, the bystanders discuss his predicament:

"I am an official too, after all, and accustomed to the air in offices, but the conditions are just too awful, you say so yourselves."

"See," he said to the girl, "I've hit on the truth. It's only here the gentleman feels unwell, not in other places" (Kafka, 1999)

In the same decade, Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1921) finds office workers confined by stultifying 9-5 routine and living compartmentalized existences. In the rush hour of the poem's "Unreal City," sighing and lifeless workers trudge across the bridge to work, arriving at the "dead sound on the stroke of nine," and confined until the end of the work day when "the human engine waits like a taxi throbbing waiting" for release to a private

life where, "The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights Her stove, and lays out food in tins."

In the mid-century, Camus' (1995) – who cited Herman Melville as one of his key influences – discovers the mundane as something far more horrifying than his childhood poverty in his first office job. Writing autobiographically as "Jacques" in *Le Premier Homme* (written in 1960, and published several decades after his death), Camus recalls his summer job in an Algerian shipping office, noting that it was not rough treatment by his employers that horrified him, but the stultifying office routine:

But this office work came from nowhere and led nowhere. Selling and buying, everything turned on these ordinary and petty actions. Although he had lived till then in poverty, it was in this office that Jacques discovered the mundane, and wept for the light he had lost. (Camus, 1995, p. 268)

Camus' most famous protagonist, Meursault, in *L'Etranger*, an office worker whom author Julian Barnes has called, "one of the most disaffected characters in postwar fiction," (1995) moves through his pleasant yet mundane existence as though through soup, numb and disengaged. Seasoned by his own experience of the mundane, Camus sees through modern white-collar life to a disenchanting void.

Commenting on the legacy of the Human Relations Movement as well as anticipating the total commitment work culture of later decades, novels of the 1950s and 60s disrupt the logic of continuous labor and enlightened management. Sloan Wilson's *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955), depicts executive Tom Rath's struggle against the seductive encroachment of office work into his personal life. And in a satirical vein, John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (published 1980 after Toole's suicide, but written in the 1960s) situates the overweight and over-educated medievalist Ignatius J Reilly as an office clerk in a dilapidated pants factory where he proceeds to wreak havoc

from within the organization. Echoing in some ways the orientation of today's anonymous workbloggers, he reassures himself that "being actively engaged in the system which I criticize" (Toole, 1980, p. 46), will be an interesting irony, and dedicates a loose leaf folder to a new journal entitled, "Diary of a Working Boy, or, Up From Sloth" (p. 86) in which he enthusiastically records his observations of the working world.

More recent novels capture and critique the insidious nature of corporate and dotcom culture, in which drudgery and repetition have been replaced by artificial cheeriness and an attempt to colonize the worker's soul. Contemporary novels offer an existential recoil from a business culture that presents itself as whole yet is essentially hollow. These novelists seek to capture the subtle exploitation and shattering of identity inherent in white collar culture. In this vein, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) critiques the moral void underlying the yuppie corporate culture of the eighties, Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) captures the emotionally barren and angst-ridden existences of software engineers caught up in Microsoft and startup work culture, and Michel Houellebecq²'s *La Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (published in France in 1994, translated as the less intriguingly titled *Whatever* in 1999) portrays the spiritual sickness of a corporate IT worker patterned after the author's experiences as a computer engineer who, bombarded by corporate babble of the firm's enterprise culture, protests the pointless and menacing nature of his work life:

I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. My entire work as

² Houellebecq has been hailed as an intellectual descendent of Camus, and there are many allusions to Camus' work in his novels. *Platform*, his third novel, opens with the line, "Father died last year," evoking the opening line of Camus' *L'Etranger* (Barnes, 2003).

a computer expert consists of adding to the data [...] It has no meaning (Houellebecq, 1999, p. 82).

Anti-work ideas as pseudo self-help, comedy, and interactive art

In recent years, eloquent anti-work manifestoes have also emerged in the realm of literary non-fiction and pseudo-self-help manuals that are, arguably, a reaction against the earnestness of the enlightened management literature reviewed earlier in this study.

Corinne Maier's bestseller, *Bonjour Laziness: Jumping off the Corporate Ladder* (2005), counsels office workers to "...seek out the most useless positions," and to "never, under any circumstances, accept a position of responsibility" (p. 135). Paying homage to Oscar Wilde, G.K. Chesterton, and others, Tom Hodgkinson's *How to be Idle* (2005), which was a top ten bestselling book in the UK, celebrates laziness and overtly counters the long-hours, total commitment work culture. Hodgkinson is also the founder and editor of *The Idler*, a magazine that celebrates idle reflection and promotes lifestyles based on shorter working hours (also available on the web at <http://www.idler.co.uk>).

In the past few years a new form of humorous self-help book has emerged, marketed to knowledge workers who feel the squeeze of the corporate culture-driven workplace. As Mark Saltzman writes in *White Collar Slacker's Handbook: Tech Tricks to Fool Your Boss*:

Technology might have created a 24/7 work culture, but a handful of savvy white-collar cubicle dwellers are standing up to 'the man' and using these very same (de)vices – the PC, World Wide Web, email, and portable gadgets—to make it look like they're working when and where they're not" (2005, p. 2).

Saltzman's book is a step-by-step tech handbook that guides workers through techniques such as using remote access software to circumvent company restrictions on Internet use; faking corrupted documents and software installations; and making use of panic buttons such as the infamous "Alt+Tab" keystroke that quickly conceals non-work

activity from the eyes of a passing supervisor. In a similar vein, Chris Morran's *Hardly Working: The Overachieving Underperformer's Guide to Doing as Little as Possible in the Office*, directly addresses the need to appear to “go the extra mile” in today's workplace, presenting strategies that employees can use to make it look as if they are putting in long hours while in fact freeing up time to work on a novel or screenplay on company time. Morran emphasizes the “revolutionary” role of the “Overachieving Underperforming Employee” (2004, p. 101), who cleverly sabotages productivity and sows discontent among his colleagues while making sure he does not get labeled as unproductive or disruptive.

In the realm of TV and film, The BBC's smash hit series *The Office* and the movie *Office Space* stand out as eloquent protests against contemporary workplace culture. Set in the mid-sized sub-office of a paper merchants in Slough, *The Office* was originally aired in the UK in 2001 and gained huge popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. The show revolves around the banality of office life, following manager David Brent's ill-fated attempts to apply new age management techniques to his unreceptive staff. Brent grapples constantly with downsizing-hungry visitors from head office and, in spite of his peppy willingness to go the extra mile for the company, he is made redundant in the final episode. As one of the most successful comedies of recent years, *The Office* has spawned spin-off versions in multiple languages.

The Office was preceded by the movie *Office Space* (1999), which is set in Ninitech, an uninspiring US workplace with an aggressively peppy corporate culture. *Office Space* follows a stressed-out cubicle dweller who seizes control of his situation, and decides not to go into work any more. In a bizarre series of events, he becomes the

darling of a team of management consultants who have been brought in to streamline the company, offering them a brutally honest account of how he spends his work day that resonates with many cubicle-dwellers:

I generally come in at least fifteen minutes late. I use the side door, that way Lundbergh [his boss] cannot see me, and after that I just sort of space out for about an hour . . . I just stare at my desk but it looks like I'm working. I do that for probably another hour after lunch too. I'd say in a given week I probably do only fifteen minutes of real actual work (Judge, 1999).

In the realm of popular music, anti-work lyrics abound, from direct references to the office experience to more abstract yearnings for time off. Indie music, with its distinctly anti-establishment orientation has produced sharply disaffected lyrics that chronicle the suffocated dreams of workers. The Smiths' song "Frankly Mr Shankly" (from the album *The Queen is Dead*) intones, "Frankly, Mr. Shankly, this position I've held; It pays my way, and it corrodes my soul" (Morrissey, 1986); *Radiohead's* track "No Surprises" (from the album *OK Computer*) opens with, "A heart that's full up like a landfill, a job that slowly kills you" (Yorke, 1997), and Clearlake's "I Want to Live in a Dream," on the Lido album, imagines a life without work and money worries, protesting, "I'm sorry but I really can't be bothered" (Pegg, 2001).

The Internet is the site of multifaceted anti-work or work avoidance artworks, interactive games and forums. In addition to the blogs that are the focus of my study. Multiple "Bored at Work" sites offer multimedia creations and forums designed to distract workers who are able to surf the net on company time. In a more intellectual vein, the "Bureau of Workplace Interruptions," (<http://www.interruptions.org/>) is a "time-stealing agency" created by artist Chris Barr, which invites workers to schedule an interruption in their work day. Visitors to the site are informed:

The ruptures we create are temporary spaces for open dialogue, invisible resistance, and general amusement. In short, we hope to invigorate some of the time you spend at work in order to create new experiences and possibilities outside the flow of capital (Barr, 2006).

Taken together with this broad fabric of critical response to the labor process, the writings of bloggers, which might otherwise be more easily disregarded as “light” venting against a system that otherwise delivers the goods, are imbued with a weightier significance. Several of the bloggers in this study refer directly in interviews and blog postings to this iconoclastic cultural fabric. Recall, for example, from Chapter Four, Tim’s use of Joni Mitchell’s lyrics from *A Free Man in Paris* to articulate his sense of lost freedom; Slowdown’s reference to Phillip Larkin’s poem “Toads” as a protest against his long-hours work culture; Beth’s use of Indie music playlists that channel and express her ennui and dissatisfaction; and Ben’s work-related blog postings that are grouped as “Diary of a Working Boy,” a direct homage to Ignatius J. Reilly.

The culture of critical discourse in which these liberal arts educated workers engage, is unquestionably a space in which Dickens, Kafka, and their ilk are respected, if not revered. Further, this cultural exchange is not one-way or bounded, as the (albeit rare) case of blogger-turned-littérateur Catherine Sanderson, fired author of *Petite Anglaise*, illustrates. Direct influence and use of literary artifacts by workers is difficult to track, and an attempt to assert direct and definite causality between, for example, a liking for Dickens and the work ethic of a particular knowledge worker, would be, arguably, misguided. Nevertheless, these authors are denizens of an intellectual subculture that, by association, imbues their writing with gravitas and militates against the dismissal of anonymous workblogs as an isolated or apolitical phenomenon.

The Writer-Clerk Tradition

Analysis of these creative and intellectual responses to work culture reveals a rich iconoclastic tradition in which it is readily apparent that the producers of anti-work philosophy are often workers themselves, rather than outside observers of the work world. Looking at the double lives of writers such as Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Henry Miller, and Fernando Pessoa – who sojourned in office jobs yet maintained a powerful critical distance from their jobs and from the ideological system that underpinned it – it becomes apparent that participation in the work world and critique of it are by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, observation of author’s lives reveals that “hiding out” in a humble office job – even or especially when double life becomes a torment – can be artistically liberating and empowering. Self-incarceration in a well-ordered workplace in which one occupies a semi-outsider role, curiously sharpens the senses, accentuating the ecstasy of snatched moments of freedom, and restraining self-destructive urges, yet allowing the creative imagination to soar.

Franz Kafka: The Archetypal Writer-Clerk

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) worked from 1908 until the end of his life as an insurance clerk at the Workmen's Accident Institute in Prague, a semi-governmental organization that oversaw accident prevention and provided compensation for injured workers throughout the Kingdom of Bohemia's major industries. He was both a hardworking employee and a tortured but highly productive artist. His refusal to merge creative and wage labor, and his resulting struggle against time-scarcity and over-commitment to his paid job throw light on the decision made by the bloggers in this study to pursue their art under the veil of non-literary paid employment.

Born into a middle class Jewish business family, Kafka obtained a doctorate in law and dabbled with the idea of a paying literary career, but – craving a degree of stability and structure – became an insurance clerk in his mid-twenties. Through an influential uncle, he obtained a position at the *Assicurazioni Generali*, an “obdurately medieval” and rule-bound insurance firm that paid him a meager salary for a six-day working week where long workdays were the norm. Right away, the tension between the creative intensity that comes from time-scarcity, and the painful sacrifice of creative time and energy to office drudgery becomes apparent. After his first week at work he wrote happily to his lover Hedwig Weiler that he was learning Italian and taking vigorous exercise at the end of the working day: “True, I have a position with a tiny salary of 80 crowns and an immense eight to nine hours of work, but I gobble up the hours outside the office like a wild beast” (Pawel, 1984, p. 177). His excitement at this new sense of the precious nature of time was offset by an awareness that too much time was being wasted. He writes a month later, “What I resent is not the work as such so much as the indolence of swampy time. The office hours, you know, are indivisible; even during the last half hour one feels the pressure of the preceding eight as keenly as the first one” (p. 177). Lamenting his lost freedom he exalted idleness, while remaining resigned to his office-bound existence:

People who haven't idled away at least part of their life till age twenty-five are much to be pitied; the money you earn you can't take with you to the grave, unlike – and of this I am convinced – the time you lazed away. I am in the office at eight in the morning and leave at 6:30 at night (p. 177).

In spite of his awareness that his art was suffering as a result of his office job, Kafka stubbornly resisted the idea of pursuing a paying literary career, insisting on

absolute separation of his writing craft from his paid employment. As his friend Max

Brod writes:

Now when it came to the point of having to make a living, Franz insisted that the job have nothing to do with literature; that would have seemed to him a debasement of literary creativity. The bread-and-butter job had to be kept strictly separate from his writing; he would accept no commingling of the two, such as for instance in journalism...” (Pawel, 1984, p. 174).

After a creatively unproductive year at the Assicurazioni Generali, Kafka obtained a position with the Workmen’s Accident Institute, which by virtue of its semi-governmental structure implied a mere six hour workday, leaving afternoons free for literary work.

According to biographer Ernst Pawel³, Kafka's new job afforded much-needed collegiality and structure, and provided him with meaningful work that improved industrial safety. In addition, his conscientious and skillful work was rewarded by frequent pay rises and promotions. Kafka was fascinated by the insurance business and had a hand in writing important documents in which he seemed to take some pleasure and pride, sending copies of the company's annual report to his friends, with his own contributions underlined. He was popular with his colleagues, one of whom referred to him as “our office baby”, (p. 188) and held in high esteem by both his boss, who thought him an “eminently hardworking employee endowed with exceptional talent and devotion to duty” (p. 186). Even the office cleaning lady remembered Kafka as exceptionally considerate and gentlemanly.

³ Pawel also lived the double life of writer and insurance executive, spending 36 years as an employee of New York Life Insurance.

At the same time, “he hated the monster bureaucracy to which he felt indentured” (175) and was able to behold and critique the system’s ramifications from his relatively comfortable position. His professional surveys of Bohemian factories made him aware of the frequent maiming and death of workers, and the cold impersonality of the apparatus that was supposed to deliver compensation or, better, keep them from harm. In the early years of his career, Kafka is rumored to have quietly intervened in order to overcome bureaucratic impasses, expressing his surprise and concern that the workers did not rise up against the bureaucracy that victimized them: “How modest these people are. Instead of storming the institute and smashing the place to bits, they come and plead” (Pawel, p. 188).

As his increasing seniority multiplied his responsibilities, Kafka struggled with the energy-sapping demands of his job and resented the sacrifice of time that should have been spent writing to his growing duties as an insurance executive. Pawel comments that, “recognition, success, promotions were all bought at enormous expense in time stolen from his true task in life” (p. 190). He wrote to a friend in 1911 that balancing his writing with his job meant leading a “horrible double life, from which madness probably offers the only way out” (p. 190), and in his diary he railed against the impossibility of balancing writing and his work responsibilities, “At the office I live up to my outward duties, but not to my inner duties, and those unfulfilled duties grow into a permanent torment” (p. 222).

Kafka was tormented by his effort to separate his job from his artistic life but felt that the purity of self-expression demanded such a rigid separation. The stifling offices and bureaucratic nightmares that characterize his novels and short stories, are testimony

to this unrest, in spite of Kafka's apparent simultaneous enjoyment of his job, which offered the neurotic author much needed structure and collegiality. His experiences illuminate the efforts of today's workbloggers to pursue their art clandestinely, supported by wage labor that leaves time and energy free for creative projects. This process of "hiding out" simultaneously provides artistic inspiration and fuels their critical orientation while providing the comforts, collegiality, and sometimes plain job satisfaction that balances a creative process that is often highly strung and erratic. Shielding their art from economic considerations they are able to produce without consideration for what might sell or be judged important by cultural institutions and the artistic community.

There are many limits to this archetype, as applied to the bloggers in this study. First, Franz Kafka was a literary genius who composed numerous towering works of fiction, and it is not the intention here to make comparisons as to the relative degree of talent that is manifest the respective writings of world-famous authors and today's anonymous workbloggers. Second, Kafka was extremely neurotic, depressive, and tortured – a comparison with his life does not allow for the relatively happy compromise that some of the bloggers in this study achieve through limiting their ambition and freeing up work time to pursue their creative projects. However, his perception of the inversely proportional relationship between promotion/job responsibility and creative output underscores the wisdom behind bloggers' careful management of the appraisal process to prevent promotion and the increased commitment that more senior positions demand. A third limitation of this comparison is that there is no evidence that Kafka wrote his novels on company time. Rather, he sought to locate a government job with a six-hour work day,

something that was possible in Prague a century ago but is less easily imaginable in today's long-hours work culture, which remains fixated on the eight-hour day as an unchangeable norm. Perhaps Kafka's six hours of wage labor point to a more fulfilling relationship between wage labor and creative activity that – in an enlightened society based on minimizing working time – could obviate the need for time-stealing.

Elliot, Miller, and Pessoa

T.S. Eliot, who experienced a somewhat less tortured double life than Kafka, worked from 1917-1925 in the foreign department of London's Lloyds Bank, and represents the more happy yet enduringly critical compromise that can be achieved between wage labor and art. Eliot enjoyed the creative tension that the office routine introduced into his life and he drew artistic inspiration from "sojourning among the termites" (L. Gordon, 2000, p. 167). His friend Ezra Pound criticized his choice of career but, as Lyndall Gordon observes, the poet reveled in his humble disguise: "Eliot was invisible as a man of destiny: superman in the guise of a clerk. Pound and others thought it pitiful to spend his days at a bank, but it left his imagination free, and he relished the completeness of his disguise, for he excelled as a clerk" (p. 165).

Leading a double life as clerk and poet imbued Eliot's life with an intensity that illuminated the problems of his society. During his snatched lunch break, Eliot watched the old-time fishermen along the banks of the Thames and marveled at how they "spat time out" (L. Gordon, 2000, p. 164), unhindered by the rigid schedule that drove him back to the office once lunch was over. The office job was, for Eliot, an experience that sensitized him to the imposition of numbing routine and the time-scarcity that characterized the modern urban labor process. Eliot ultimately ended his sojourn and proceeded to engage in wage labor that directly drew upon his literary talents. However,

his decision to pursue a clerkship furnished him with insights that fueled his famous commentary on modernity. Taking refuge in obscurity afforded him creative freedom and confidence to develop a style that may not have blossomed so readily had he spent his days in literary circles.

The double life of the employee-artist is enacted more explosively in the case of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*, which illustrates the rich satirical fodder that derives from wage labor, the urge to reclaim time for one's creative and subversive endeavors, and the dialectical relationship between the writing process and rejection of the system in which one is embedded. Miller's writing career was launched by an ill-fated commingling of literature and bread-and-butter that ended ultimately in his 1930 flight to Paris to live as an impoverished artist. He spent the years 1920-1924 employed at the Western Union telegraph company in New York where he was responsible for hiring and firing messengers in a chaotic office. Western Union, which Miller calls alternately the Cosmodemographic, Cosmodemonic, and Cosmococcic Telegraph Company of North America was, "senseless from the bottom up. A waste of men, material and effort. A hideous farce against a backdrop of sweat and misery" (Miller, 1993, p. 19).

As a writer, Miller felt that his desk job perch allowed him, "a bird's eye view of the whole American society" (p. 20), in all its rotten glory. Sucked into the chaotic office culture, he worked hard at the job but, along with his colleagues, kept an eye on the door, exploiting any opportunity for a prank or a sexual encounter: "We were a merry crew, united in our desire to fuck the company at all costs." (30) This desire was indulged when Miller received an invitation from the vice-president to write a Horatio Alger-style story about the messengers. Miller was repelled by the idea of using his literary skill in

the service of the organization as, for him, the self-reliant, entrepreneurial, rags-to-riches heroes created by Alger were the "dream of a sick America." He resolved that his story would be a chance to, "wipe Horatio Alger from the North American consciousness," and to use all the writer's notes he had been gathering for years from behind his office desk. He wanted to capture the dirty reality of the people who came to his office looking for work, often destitute and derelict, yet in Miller's opinion worth a hundred times more than the degrading job they had to beg for. The result, a story called *Clipped Wings*, was a story about twelve messengers, "gentle souls, insulted and injured, who run amok or suffer violence; the stories are full of bitterness and horror, ending in murder or suicide, usually both" (Wickes, 1974, pp. 170-192).

Miller felt that as a piece of writing the story was a failure, but the process of writing it was cathartic, driving him to break with the 9-5 once and for all. The desk job increasingly symbolized an inertia that he had to escape in order to become an artist. In *Sexus*, he expresses the colonization of the self and the foreclosure of reflection that his Western Union job entailed: "I hardly know myself, living the way I do. I'm engulfed...I wish I could have days, weeks, months, just *to think*" (p. 189). He continues:

Do you know what I think sometimes?" I went on. "I think that if I had two or three quiet days of just sheer thinking I'd upset everything. Fundamentally everything is cock-eyed. It's that way because we don't let ourselves think.

For Miller, the life of the writer-clerk is ultimately untenable. As he later wrote in *Tropic of Capricorn*, "I had to learn, as I soon did, that one must give up everything and not do anything else but write, that one must write and write and write..." (Miller, p. 34). Although the break was necessary, his years of office life gave him rich artistic fodder that formed some of the most original passages of his work and his most vivid condemnation of American society. Miller, with his readiness to flee, his ability to

sacrifice the stability of the day-job for the penurious unknown, represents the reckless moment in anonymous workblogs, the dream of quitting that runs through many of the blogs in this study.

As an icon of creative resistance, Miller is both ballast that makes ennui and participation tolerable (“I am doing this banal job in order to satirize the system”), and a disruptive force that militates against acceptance and ennobles only those who are willing to take a risk – of being fired for their blog or of impulsively throwing up the job after a bad day. The time to think that Miller craves is, arguably, the same time that Marcuse discusses in reopening the possibility of the Great Refusal. It is this idea that many of the anonymous workbloggers in this study subscribe to. Even without taking Miller’s final step of giving up the job to pursue an artistic career, they live with an acute awareness of that possibility. Their efforts to steal time within the working day are the beginnings of a reflective process that could potentially “upset everything.” Even if this possibility is held out only as an aesthetic sensibility that is indulged during the interstices of the working day, it has political power when waged, through well-crafted and widely read blog postings, against a culture of continuous labor and total commitment.

While Miller exemplifies the cathartic break with routine, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) expresses the fulfillment that derives from endlessly postponing that break. This Portuguese writer who never left Lisbon as an adult, wrote an ode to hiding out as part of what became his *Book of Disquiet*, which comprises a set of loosely associated fragments – some of them written on office stationery from the firms he worked for – that were found in a trunk after his death. Pessoa’s office work involved writing business letters in foreign languages and he was fairly autonomous and comfortable. However,

living through his autobiographical semi-heteronym, Bernard Soares, he becomes an assistant bookkeeper in a fabric warehouse, whose job is to enter prices and quantities of fabric into a ledger.

Soares exalts inaction and lowly clerkdom as an aesthetic ideal and a source of existential satisfaction. His writings, which recount mundane office events and muse philosophically on existence, are not dissimilar in tone and structure from blog postings. He writes that there is “an aesthetics to wasting time” (Pessoa, 2003, p. 266), which consists of carefully managed monotony that renders small events thrilling and frees the mind to dream. Intrinsic to his philosophy is the notion that dissatisfaction is innate to the writer and that actual achievement of ambitions removes the more infinite and exquisite pleasure of unfulfilled dreams. Echoing Dostoevsky’s underground man he rails against men of action and instead advocates “a code of inertia for superior souls in modern societies” (p. 265). Resolutely opposed to advancement that would awaken him from this thrillingly monotonous existence, he longs to remain in the lower ranks of the organization: “I think that I shall always be an assistant bookkeeper in a fabric warehouse. I hope, with absolute sincerity, never to be promoted to head bookkeeper” (p. 314). Relishing his clerkdom as a sublime realm of the possible, he admits that movement toward his goal would mean closure and a narrowing of existence:

“My days at the office, where I always do the same dull and useless work, are punctuated by visions of me escaping, by dreamed remnants of faraway islands, by feasts in the promenades of parks from other eras, by other landscapes, another I. But I realize, between two ledger entries, that if I had all this, none of it would be mine” (p. 154).

Pessoa’s writerly acknowledgement that the artistic temperament thrives in a state of carefully managed adversity is echoed by Henry Miller who, in spite of his own

confident rejection of bourgeois capitalism, is disinterested in crafting alternative social programs, or writing manifestoes:

[A writer] doesn't want a new world which might be established immediately, because he knows it would never suit him. He wants an impossible world in which he is the uncrowned puppet-ruler dominated by forces utterly beyond his control. He is content to rule insidiously – in the fictive world of symbols – because the very thought of contact with rude and brutal realities frightens him. True, he has a greater grasp of reality than other men, but he makes no effort to impose that higher reality on the world by force of example (Miller, 1965, p. 18).

Miller and Pessoa express the existential satisfaction that is gained from hiding out, making transparent the pursuit of an art that is deeply critical, which flourishes alongside an existential interest in perpetuation of the exploitation and injustice that inspires it.

Taken together, the lives of these writers – Kafka, Eliot, Miller, Pessoa – express convictions that describe and circumscribe the lives and limitations of the bloggers in this study. Overlapping and contradictory, their choices and their writings loosely describe a way of being that is anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic in nature, yet also inert and opposed to action, beyond the action of putting words together and expanding the time available for waking dreams. The implications, in terms of social programs or organized social change are indeterminate but the region that is carved out is one of possibility rather than resignation. As Miller expresses, the price of writers' extreme sensitivity is often inertia. The writer-clerk tradition denies its own power but in doing so creates an aesthetic of time-wasting that both negates the existing system and agitates by provoking dreams of the alternative.

Kafka, Miller, and their ilk would be a very sorry and ill-chosen organizing committee for progressive politics. Kafka could not even eat in company due to his neurotic attachment to Horace Fletcher's mastication guidelines; Eliot was prone to

nervous breakdowns and anti-semitism; Miller's repugnant sexism and malice are anathema to progressive ideals; and Pessoa writes that humanitarians make him sick to the pit of his stomach. Yet, as icons of an oppositional, countercultural, and subversive tradition these writers are linked by a current of discontent that exists in continuity with the blog writings featured in this study. Drawing on insights from the writer-clerk tradition, the following chapter posits a theory of creative resistance that encompasses the maverick talents and political skittishness of today's writer clerks.