Tillie Olsen and Time’s Coal:

Some Verses on the Limits of Practice and Discipline

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The writer is on the bus and avails to tap, log, see—see? See it all, on inspection—now into the notes app on that celebrated smart prosthetic. Instantaneous striking. The get around, head down. Well timed action.

If the labour of writing transcribes an everyday commute and fights off nausea by avoiding focussing on the event horizon, what kind of ideological branding drives the bus?

If it’s heavy coat weather outside and the hop on, hop off is cold. If the low winter sun glares and the blue light magnetises. If the writing is intermittent and, by its lack of purpose, feels emancipatory. Then this is a pleasurable attachment to subjugation, it is not the same as liberation.

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‘I have, myself, always required an absolutely quiet and private place to work (preferably with a view of the garden),’[1] declared Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Questioning how and where art is produced, she goes on to say that ‘others have required various versions of an ivory tower, a Yaddo, a MacDowell Colony.’[2] These claims speak of writing as a practice, not as a discipline. They speak of the limits that everything must live within. But desired limits do not speak of *where* to act when the where is everywhere. The everywhere that is in and out of touch with the fraudulence of limits. The everywhere pillarisation. The everywhere efficient little spaces.

What of the caregiving, the pathology, and the poetics? The measurable and unmeasurable lapses of time. How time’s scarcity is a contested object of politics. The temporal capital that erodes so-called human capital. That everywhere we must suffer a want of time and be on top of things. That everywhere is a riddle to be instrumentalised. Not a poetics. An emotional lability. ‘I keep on dividing myself and flow apart,’ recorded writer Tillie Olsen in her diary. And of her aspiration she writes, ‘My conflict—to reconcile work with life … Time it festered and congested postponed deferred’[3].

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At the back of the bus sits a short figure with a torn cap and a face like a cat. It moves into the shaft of sunlight and from its silhouette holds out a pickled mushroom. The writer shuffles in her seat. After breaking its way in, the next thought will be to disbelieve.

The myth tells us that the writer is a woman who is holding down a demanding job, has young children, is altogether *together*, is disciplined and manages to be everywhere, still squeezing in time for writing while riding the bus. A myth also recalls the tale of the bus passenger being considered a failure should they be over thirty. This claim is the acknowledged culture-of-poverty, yet legacy, of Thatcherite Britain. Now the over thirty can legitimately ride the bus but the efficient commute should be optimised and maximised in its reregulation.

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In 1978, Tillie Olsen wrote about those who failed to optimise time, considering herself to be included. Her time having been *festered, congested, postponed*. ‘Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment,’[4]. The impossible demand of optimisation protracts the Thatcherite image of unseized personal opportunity, naming the silent writer as one who has been unable to ‘move their attention’[5] and sit for the labour of writing, even when the opportunity to do so is everywhere. In an ideology of individualism, success is aligned with better ‘impulse control,’[6] as if personal responsibility is really a pursuit of oblivion over a pursuit of absorption, as if there’s bounteous belief in social mobility’s image of autonomous control over destiny. More damaging blows to one’s immiserated spirit. She who even confessed to writing on buses was to some a condemned ‘sell-out’, having ‘raised all those kids […] just [as] an excuse to not sit down and do the work.’[7] The good-enough mother loves her children but responds imperfectly, the good-enough writer optimises everywhere and every time. If tolerance is also a virtue, where is the good-enough setting?

The ‘earth sucks you in, to spew out the coal, to make a few bellies fatter,’[8] Olsen wrote of the farmer family in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, her only published novel. On the bus, she sets down her writing and reaches for the pickled mushroom, the wellspring of suppression. Those potholes, sinkholes, those insidious limitations. The injuries, the incursions, the private colonies. ‘Earth takes your dreams so that a few may languidly lie on their couches and trill “How exquisite” to be paid dreamers.’[9] When we dream of Yaddo but get the bus, what kind of magical thinking has distorted the commute as an opportunity for writing?

Born in 1913 on a tenant farm in Nebraska, Tillie Olsen was the second of six children born to Jewish immigrants from Russia. In 1974, Olsen published *Yonnondio* having written the novel during her tuberculosis recuperation in the thirties. It went to print unfinished. Late to write, late to publish, ‘she did not write for a very simple reason,’ remembers Margaret Atwood, ‘a day has 24 hours.’ She states, ‘For 20 years she had no time, no energy, and none of the money that would have bought both.’[10] The once full becomes depleted. Writing for the *Parisian Review* in 1934, Olsen (then Lerner) notes that if she ‘could go away for a while, if there were time and quiet,’ then perhaps she could ‘do it’. She admits that she—*helpless before the iron*[11]—is instead ‘feverish and tired’[12].

In 1953, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship supported eight months on Stanford University’s Creative Writing programme and gave her just enough time to reconnect her notes into four short stories, later published as the collection *Tell Me a Riddle*. She delighted in the continuity of practice, ‘three full days [per week], sometimes more—and it was in those months I made the mysterious turn and became a writing writer.’[13] But then the programme ended and so did her writing. *Tell Me a Riddle* festered for six more years until Olsen won a Ford Foundation Grant in 1959. She was nearly fifty when the collection was published in 1961, her four daughters now adults. Time might be snatched and optimised but, she notes:

When is the time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate,

to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed

with all I did or did not do, with that should have been and what cannot be helped.[14]

Olsen opened her 1962 lecture at the Bunting Institute[15], Radcliffe College, where she was on a residency fellowship: ‘It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable began: “I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron,”’[16]. At Radcliffe, Olsen found herself writing ‘The Death of the Creative Process’, which collaged questions, quotations and observations about the obstacles and impediments of gender, race and class. This essay was an indictment of the fantasy of opportunity, deadly positivity and accentuated magical thinking. Her lecture was later published by *Harper’s Magazine* as ‘Silences: When Writers Don’t Write’ and preceded her landmark survey of disenfranchised literary foremothers and the forces of silence. Published in 1978, *Silences* heretically chronicles ‘impeded, lessened and partial’[17] literary work. It is an apologia, a critical analysis and a lamentation of starved—not unseized—potential. The where and how you are born that determines the where and how you work. In acknowledgment of her own perceived failure, Olsen writes, ‘the habits of a lifetime, when everything else had come before writing, are not easily broken.’[18] These habits are compulsive: the repetitive strain of unused powers, the hijacked mind, thwarted energies, starved hopes, and the unmet hunger for a life more abundant than one’s sanctioned sphere permits. Stopping stopping, the bus grinds to a halt. On the closing page of *Yonnondio* she addressed her reader with the defence:

Reader, it was not to have ended here, but it is nearly forty years since this book had to be set aside, never to come to completion.

These pages you have read are all that is deemed publishable

of it. Only fragments, rough drafts, outlines, scraps remain—to

tell what might have been, and never will be now.

*Yonnondio! Yonnondio!—unlimn’d they disappear.*[19]

Standing on buses, in the office of a dairy-equipment company, in the toilets of a public gallery, at home late at night, ‘after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done, sometimes during,’[20] there is always a conscious storing but never a stock taking. The writing presented here arrives with the editors now more than six weeks late. Its meditation on time is an apologia for a failed instrumentalisation of my commute.

[1] Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.* The Women’s Press Ltd., 1984, pp. 69-70.

[2] Walker, pp. 69-70.

Yaddo is a prestigious artists’ community located on a 400-acre idyllic estate in Saratoga Springs, New York. MacDowell is an artist’s residency programme in Peterborough, New Hampshire, US. Prior to July 2020, it was known as MacDowell Colony but the Board of Directors shortened the name to remove ‘terminology with oppressive overtones’.

[3] Olsen, Tillie, quoted in Panthea Reid. *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles*. Rutgers University Press, 2011. p. 190.

[4] Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. London, Virago, 1980. p. 19.

[5] Wegner, Daniel M. *White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts: Suppression, Obsession, and the Psychology of Mental Control*. Guildford Press, 1994. p. 11.

[6] Liu, Catherine. *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*. University of Minnesota Press, 2021. p. 14.

[7] In a 1984 edition of *Publisher’s Weekly*, the novelist Lisa See wrote that ‘there are some women who feel that when Tillie Olsen gave up her writing to raise all those kids it was a sell-out’.

[8] Olsen, Tillie. *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. Delta, New York City, Dell Publishing, 1979. p. 6.

[9] Olsen, *Yonnondio.* p. 6.

[10] Atwood, Margaret, quoted in Julie Bosman. ‘Tillie Olsen, Feminist Writer, Dies at 94’. *The New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/01/03/books/03olsen.html.

[11] Olsen, Tillie. ‘I Stand Here Ironing’. *Tell Me a Riddle, Requa I, and Other Works*. Bison Books, 2013. p. 290.

[12] Lerner, Tillie. ‘The Strike’. *The Paris Review*, Sept/Oct. 1934. pp. 3-4.

[13] Olsen, *Silences*. p. 9.

[14] Olsen, *Tell Me a Riddle*. p. 292.

[15] Founded just two year earlier, the Bunting Institute provided women artists and scholars with an office and small stipend. The initiative aimed to free women from housework that interrupted intellectual work. They were not, however, not to be freed entirely—the Institute’s founder Mary Ingraham Bunting, reassured sceptics that ‘studying, in appropriate doses, mixes wonderfully with homemaking,’ advising that lectures and discussions are the perfect antidotes to the mental stagnation that threatens anyone isolated in the modern home and the longer hours of study can be fitted around the household’s schedule.’

[16] Olsen, Tillie. ‘Silences: When Writers Don’t Write’. *Harper’s Magazine*, 1 Oct. 1965, harpers.org/archive/1965/10/silences.

[17] Olsen, *Silences*. p. 19.

[18] Olsen, *Silences*. pp. 38-39.

[19] Olsen, *Yonnondio*. p. 132

[20] Olsen, *Silences*. p. 19.