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[Review] *Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900*

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## The Stationary State

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Christopher Webb

*Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900.*

Richard Adelman. 2018. viii+233 pp. £75. Cambridge University Press.

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Richard Adelman neatly summarises his latest study as ‘an attempt to reconstruct and explore the nineteenth century’s many debates over idleness and aesthetic consciousness’.<sup>1</sup> For most readers, this prompts an important question right away: what is ‘aesthetic consciousness’? Although Adelman is reluctant to provide an exact definition of the term (there is no exact definition), he indicates that it is a state of mind brought about by idle contemplation and ‘the free play of imagination’<sup>2</sup>, a state that allows the contemplator to apprehend his or her surroundings (or an object within those surroundings) before they go on to encounter a higher knowledge or truth about their surroundings/that object. For the many Romantic poets who describe this ‘transcendent repose’ in their various writings, it is ‘always [an] obliquely but powerfully and earnestly, political’ (non-)activity because it opposes the burgeoning ideology that belongs to the work-centric, commercial society in which they were writing.<sup>3</sup> The Romantic conception of aesthetic consciousness—so tied up with being idle—was a state that would later need ‘to be purged from diligent, ethical, work-based Victorian society at almost all costs’.<sup>4</sup> It is the development of ideas surrounding idleness and aesthetic consciousness, from their Romantic inception through to their complete dismantlement at the beginning of the twentieth century, which Adelman traces.

*Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900* comprises eight sections: an introduction, five main chapters, a conclusion, and an epilogue. The first chapter, ‘Idleness, Moral Consciousness and Sociability’ considers the ways in which John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley extend and expand upon a number of first-generation Romantic poets’ conceptions of idleness and contemplation, focussing especially on those espoused by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cowper and William Wordsworth. Adelman is particularly interested in ‘the extent to which both [Keats and Shelley] frame idle

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Adelman, *Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

contemplation as a matter of moral and social utility'.<sup>5</sup> He shows through careful examination of Shelley's 1816 'Mont Blanc' poem and Keats's letters that, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, idleness is portrayed not only in a positive light but as a 'psychological category of central importance to human life'.<sup>6</sup> This had not always been the case. In fact, it was Coleridge and Cowper who 'developed the poetic discourse of idleness in the last decades of the nineteenth century' to counterbalance the claims made by political economists like Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson who, were 'strenuously [arguing] that man is a labouring and trading animal above and before all else'.<sup>7</sup>

Adelman proceeds to chart the influence of these Romantic ideas concerning idleness and creativity. In chapter two, 'Political Economy and the Logic of Idleness', he draws attention to the work of three major political economists of the first half of the nineteenth century: David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and John Stuart Mill. By the time we reach Mill's 1848 *Principles of Political Economy*, we observe a 'significant flowering of positivity surrounding idle contemplation, not just in economic thought, but in the century as a whole'.<sup>8</sup> What certain eighteenth-century economists tended to treat as a 'gap in labour—and thus in life', Ricardo, Malthus and Mill regard (like the Romantic poets before them) as an 'intricate bundle of taxing, pleasurable and highly significant activities'.<sup>9</sup> This treatment of human repose and the desire for leisure, Adelman explains, is introduced in British economic thought for the first time by these economists, 'remarkable in the context of that discourse's history'.<sup>10</sup> This, then, is the high-water mark for Idleness, a time in which repose and passive contemplation is tolerated—and perhaps even valued—within Victorian commercial society. It is 'at this point', Adelman jumps in to remind us, 'that Keats and Shelley's analyses of idleness [...] have now taken on a very direct significance to political economy itself'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, 'the nineteenth century's powerfully commercial and industrialized society [was] in need of the corrective that Romantic idleness [...] offer[ed]'.<sup>12</sup>

The 'flowering of positivity' that culminates in Mill's *Principles* is then complicated by the influential output of both Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx (the latter an anomalous, though justified, deviation from Adelman's otherwise strictly British, chronological development of ideas), as we see in chapter three, "The 'Gospel of Work'". Both men provide 'powerful and far-reaching counter-narrative[s] to the Millite and Romantic positive

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

conceptions of idleness<sup>13</sup>, which colours the British viewpoint on idleness and aesthetic contemplation for the rest of the century. The third chapter is divided in two: the first part is taken up with an examination of Carlyle and Marx's take on idealised forms of labour and their critique of idleness before the second part turns to the 'effect of this powerful ideology by considering some of the poetic accounts of idle contemplation that stand in the wake of the "gospel of work"<sup>14</sup>. These poetic accounts include the works of Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Alfred Tennyson, with the latter being the most critical about the moral worth of idleness and meditative contemplation.

Chapter four, 'Cultural Theory and Aesthetic Failure', considers high Victorian cultural theory in the shape of (the later) Arnold, Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Each of these writers bear the imprint of Carlyle and his contemporaries' 'gospel of work' as they seek to professionalise aesthetic contemplation. This impulse is antithetical to Keats's original, democratic vision of the aesthetic encounter (accessible by anyone). While these theorists all agree on the power and potential transformative effect of aesthetic consciousness, they do so at the same time as they introduce a 'series of practical hurdles to the widespread adoption of that state'.<sup>15</sup> 'Where once idle contemplation was conceived of as a promising instant [129] access to moral consciousness, it has become, for Arnold and Ruskin [by the 1850s and 60s], a life's work that might never end [...] inaugurat[ing] a situation [in] which society requires professional men of culture—or critics of aesthetic objects, as will be the case with Pater in the 1870s—in order to guide and temper its actions'.<sup>16</sup>

The final chapter, 'The Gothicization of Idleness', examines the tradition of vampire fiction across the nineteenth century as a means to understand how that ('very conservative') genre handles aesthetic idleness and its social alternatives.<sup>17</sup> Adelman's analysis of Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker's popular vampire narratives illustrates how the poetic idle contemplator is villainized, and how 'a kind of total warfare' is waged against that leisurely (often aristocratic) figure of the vampire, a creature demonised for its refusal to work (and reluctance to become a productive member of society). This forms an appropriate conclusion to Adelman's study because 'this genre's negativity around aesthetic repose is representative of the fate of this category more broadly by the final years of the century'<sup>18</sup>, which leads us to the 'Epilogue: Substitutive Satisfaction', Adelman's brief look

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 128-129.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

into ‘the scathing negativity of the early twentieth century around aesthetic consciousness’—the nadir of the Romantic-inspired tradition—which is felt most profoundly in the work of Sigmund Freud.

Like his previous work, *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750-1830* (2011), Adelman’s book is judiciously argued and measured in its tone throughout. It is a subtle, important contribution to the growing field of literary criticism that deals with political economy, achieving precisely what it sets out to do: that is, paint a ‘portrait of nineteenth-century culture preoccupied with, and troubled by, the categories of idleness, repose and aesthetic contemplation’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 190.