

## **TIME & MATERIALS:**

### **THE WORKPLACE, DREAMS, AND WRITING**

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Time has been a big issue for me as a writer lately, because I've felt as if I haven't had time to write. What I have written has been snatched from the jaws of circumstance, from odd phrases encountered at my job to notations of dream experiences hastily jotted down in a notebook by my bed. So when I saw the phrase "Time and Materials" in a technical journal I edit, I recognized a possible vocabulary for dealing with my situation as a poet.

Since I have been employed full-time, writing has continued under increasing time constraints. My job has seemed, on the face of it, to be in conflict with my career as a poet. I wanted, therefore, to turn this situation around. I wanted to find, for myself, value in the condition of employment that would add to rather than subtract from the value of my writing.

The constriction of time involves the writer in tactical maneuvers that define and limit the writing practice. Time is limited not only by normal working hours, but also by fatigue and the practical necessity for relief from application. As sheet metal worker, fiction writer, and critic Michael Amnan writes:

While working at Presbyterian Hospital up around 168th Street, it was easier for me to write during lunch break than once I arrived home, at which time I felt a terribly distracting freedom from explicit constraints.

Amnan intersperses his terse narratives of job life with reflections on the incommensurability of his two vocations. But he's not complaining; he accepts this clash with pleasure. "I feel lost without tension," he writes. Finding himself "spaced within the contingencies of irreconcilable activities," he uses this position to create an ongoing dialectic movement in his alternately descriptive and reflective prose. He writes, "Yeah I

want things to be confused and complex.” This position strengthens Amnasan’s writing by throwing it into relief against his job as a construction worker.

Here is an advantage for writing, which is always a contingent practice, of an alternate career, one which bears the impress of an overarching social necessity. While writing remains relatively “free,” it carries within itself the rigor of material production experienced as a given. The materiality of the job infuses writing with value, no longer practical except in the broadest sense, but resonant with form wrought of direct encounter with the working world.

The time constraint I experience as an employee has been my greatest problem as a poet. But it’s a problem not limited to writers. According to Swedish economist Steffan Linder, our society has entered what he calls a “time famine.”

In his book The Harried Leisure Class, Linder does what he calls “a systematic explanation of changes in time allocation.” He sets out to prove that, contrary to the classical economic model, as society becomes increasingly productive and affluent, it experiences a corresponding reduction in available time.

High productivity has created a time famine, in which articles of consumption vie for the attention of the harried affluent. The surplus of goods in Western society has brought with it a shortage of time in which to enjoy them. Time is experienced as a commodity in short supply.

Linder divides time among five categories: production, personal work, consumption, culture, and idleness. This last category is prevalent in so-called undeveloped societies and, according to Linder, has been completely eliminated in contemporary Western society. (Linder’s book was published in 1970. We have since seen the rise of a dispossessed class in the United States for whom this category again may apply.)

To analyze time allocation, Linder invokes the standard economic principle of equilibrium of yield. This principle states that in capital investments distributed over many sectors, if the yield on one sector increases, the investments must be redistributed to bring

them into a state of equilibrium. The corollary is that when the yield on time spent working is increased as a result of productive growth, the yield on non-working time must be brought into parity. One way to do this is to increase the yield on consumption time. “This takes place by an increase in the volume of consumption goods per time unit in consumption.”

But these leisure commodities, in turn, take time to select, purchase, and maintain, further adding to the time crunch. As an example of the foolishness this consumption-intensive pattern may lead to, Linder writes,

the acceleration of consumption can take various forms.... A man ... may find himself drinking Brazilian coffee, smoking a Dutch cigar, sipping French cognac, reading the New York Times, listening to a Brandenburg Concerto, and entertaining his Swedish wife—all at the same time, with varying degrees of success.

The movie Sammie and Rosie Get Laid recently updated this scenario: it’s Rosie’s night out; Sammie is on the sofa with Walkman headphones, a sandwich, a milkshake, a plate of cocaine, and a magazine, with his pants down around his knees when the phone rings.

Time shrinkage operates at both the level of the society and that of the individual. The high-powered CEO is so productive, that is, his working time is worth so much, that there is practically nothing he can do with his leisure time that will guarantee equivalent value. As a result, he must do nothing but work. And this, indeed, seems to be the pattern for today’s young breed of apoplectic top execs.

Linder classifies “sleep” under the category of “time for personal work,” that is, “maintenance of one’s body.” In the current voraciousness for time, various techniques for the reduction of time needed for sleep have been discussed. “Sleep, it seems, has something in common with the recreation areas in our big cities: both are subject to continual attacks

from those who would like to use these resources for productive purposes.” Needless to say, the economy of consumption posits little value in the natural productions of sleep.

Linder’s objective analysis of the economies of time accounts in part for the experience of pressure many of us feel. His study of time as a “moving belt of units” also confirms the French situationist political analysis of the late 1950s. In a talk presented May 17, 1961, at a conference of the Group for Research on Everyday Life convened by Henri Lefebvre in Paris, Guy Debord, the author of Society of the Spectacle, had already anticipated this situation.

“The use of everyday life,” he said, “in the sense of a consumption of lived time, is governed by the reign of scarcity: scarcity of free time and scarcity of possible uses of this free time.”

In the shift from classical to late capitalism, what constitutes productive or wasted time has reversed itself.

For classical capitalism, wasted time was time not devoted to production, accumulation, saving. . . . But it so happens that by an unexpected turn of events modern capitalism needs to increase consumption, to “raise the standard of living” (if we bear in mind that this expression is completely meaningless). Since at the same time production conditions, compartmentalized and clocked to the extreme, have become indefensible, the new morality already being conveyed in advertising, propaganda and all forms of the dominant spectacle now frankly admits that wasted time is the time spent at work, which latter is only justified by the hierarchized scale of earnings that enable one to buy rest, consumption, entertainments—a daily passivity manufactured and controlled by capitalism.

But as we have seen, it is an increasingly frantic passivity of temporal constraint.

Contemporary consumer society is a logical but surprising extension of protestant/capitalist ideology—an age of curiosity, in which the subject is driven by fear of

“missing something” but can never be satisfied by the limitless series of self-reflective commodities, and where work and politics provoke only boredom. Work—conceived by the Puritans as the road to the hereafter—now simply signifies a means to leisure, “self-realization,” etc. The emptying out of work leaves a large vacant space around which we organize the time of our lives.

Time in the workplace is generally treated as a cost factor, to be reduced to a minimum per productivity unit. Time management is seen primarily as a means for controlling costs. With the fashionable use of the daily planner, the priority on time efficiency has been extended beyond the workplace to social, leisure, and personal life. In this view, the experience of time, as rhythm, is simply an unnecessary by-product.

But the ideal of total temporal efficiency is only that. By its nature, the eight-hour workday and forty-hour week are laced with unproductive periods. Work flow may vary, but employment hours do not, so there is slack time. The experience of this vacuity, and the airlock between work and home, the commute, are fertile ground for speculation. Thus working time is organized around vacant or interstitial time.

The opening up of a vacant center at the heart of late capitalist production presents an opportunity for writing. From within this abandoned core, writing may excavate the materials of production and export them into general circulation. In so doing it may even reanimate the processes and episodes of production.

All of this has been meant to show that time organized around work makes its mark on writing in a variety of ways, and that the limits imposed by work represent not simply an obstacle but an opportunity for writing—not least because the workplace is the site of common activity and therefore enables writing to bear witness to our common experience.

As part of that experience we encounter language. In its role in the workplace, language is employed as a tool, with specific uses and applications. As a tool, language is the foremost delimiter of specialization.

Professional languages function by excluding ambiguity, as well as by excluding non-members of the profession. The relation of word to meaning is strictly determined by the instrumentality of the profession. Misunderstanding must be precluded. Moreover, the social exclusivity of the profession must, at the same time, be defended. These functional limits, in the connotation and reception of language, preserve the status of its users and the consistency of its methods.

However, this restrictive use of language is always a holding pattern, a provisional and ultimately fated attempt to hold back the floodgates of language, which, by its structure, always tends toward multiplicity of usage.

Jacques Derrida proposes this dynamic in his essay "Signature Event Context."

A written sign carries with it a force of breaking with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription. This force of breaking is not an accidental predicate, but the very structure of the written. . . . Writing... carries with it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve [and] whose forces of generality, generalization, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a "new" concept of writing which also corresponds to whatever always has resisted the former organization of forces, which always has constituted the remainder irreducible to the dominant force which organized the [language].

This sense of resistance, of activity excluded from the normal considerations of the workplace, as a site for writing has been expressed by Carla Harryman in her discussion of her own work. In her book Vice she writes:

We know in the workplace there are many things that can't be said. The individual response functions as pure subjectivity. I.e. it cannot be taken into account.

When the language of the workplace is excerpted and reframed as part of writing in its widest, most generative sense, its instrumentality is sacrificed. The loss of practical meaning sets off a concomitant release of potential energy. The power stored in the language is released like an electron in a nuclear reaction. Here we could redefine the meaning of our century's most famous equation:  $E = mc^2$  where  $m$  = functional meaning,  $c$  = the possible meaning horizon, and  $E$  = energy—an intellectual/emotional displacement.

As work language is cut away and grafted, it tends toward more personal, everyday meanings, often with a strong emotional content.

In his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" Wordsworth wrote:

The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.

Wordsworth's attack on Pope and his circle, who made of poetry its own specialized, professional language, was consistent with his view of the dehumanization of specialized labor in newly industrial urban Britain. His plea for a simple, common vocabulary for poetry houses democratic and humanist values within a rural nostalgia.

In our time, the fracture and dissociation of communications tools is assumed as a given. Within this situation, a semantic displacement of terms can drain specialized language of its isolating productive assurance and exploit it in the expression of human desires.

The paring away and grafting of specialized work language into alternate human terms is a project with incredible unrealized potential. It involves a separation from, though not a rejection of, the workplace, in order to reintegrate that place with other places resident in the heart and mind of the person. This linguistic reintegration is a way of countering the compartmentalization of daily life.

Alan Davies's book Name, for example, is a series of love poems in the language of ventilation unit sales. The semantic dicing of elements produces some startling, funny, and often moving results. By mixing elements of daily language, including the language of work, Davies creates a dreamlike medium that is difficult to analyze, despite the obvious displacements of its elements. This synthesis is a remarkable feat, a voice constructed of command-driven particles, as supple and tender as a lover's.

### **THE DREAM LIFE OF WRITING**

For writing, dreams have always held a singular fascination. As both time and material they seem to be of an entirely other order. Since the beginnings of writing, the dream has served as a framing device for embedding stories within stories, adding richness and complexity to narratives. Poets have cited dreams as sources of inspiration, images from the Muse. In dreams, the subjective vision acquires a kind of universal validity, by virtue of seeming to come from outside. Their means of interpretation have empowered priest classes and bolstered cultural mythologies. Yet the modern obsession with the interpretation of dreams obscures their value for the activity of writing.

The language of work is normally viewed as a semantically closed space, with circumscribed referentiality and membership. The language of dreams has been similarly regarded—as a set of symbols referring to the particular psychology of the individual and accessible only to those within the personal sphere, and even then perhaps only with the aid of an instrumental, professional language—in our era the language of psychiatry.

This emphasis on the semantic dimension of dreams aims at a reduction of dream material to complex but delimited meanings. What it neglects is the syntactic dimension—the grammar of dreams. This aspect becomes especially interesting when you look at how dreams may be written.

Dreams do not dictate the manner in which they are to be recorded. Despite the Beat “first thought, best thought” claim to natural, spontaneous prose, Jack Kerouac's



dream narrative style is highly conscious, involves great density of decision-making within the moment-to-moment writing activity, and is in fact a triumph of artifice.

The range in styles of dream writing delineates differences not only in individual psychic experience but in systems of retrieval and storage. We may distinguish Steve Benson's florid piling on of intricate detail; Lyn Hejinian's novelistic, crafted prose; my own telegraphic, affectless approach; Peter Schjeldahl's arch, socially ironic polish; De Quincey's baroque rhapsody; Kerouac's helter-skelter soloistic improvisations; etc.

Finally, the dream material in itself becomes less interesting than its use in writing. The concrete naming necessary to the written text requires the destruction of the "original" in the moment of its apprehension through language.

Thus, to write a dream is to obliterate its contents, and to replace them with the parallel but unequivalent contents of language. One might argue the same thing about any descriptive language, and the propaganda of the 1988 presidential election campaign would be an example, but there is a difference. The dream, being by definition private experience, can never be independently verified, so the report cannot be contested.

The dream elements are thus withdrawn from their context in sleep and grafted into the ongoing context of language as it presents itself to consciousness. Such activity may reveal the dream work itself, the preparatory work of dreams. But it will also involve the mind in a host of further associations, intentions, and imaginings.

Thus, the dream record is a cover, in several senses: it covers the dream the way a report covers an event—or the way a musical group may "cover" an original hit—but it also covers in the sense of obscuring the event, covering it with a screen of words which supplant memory's vague sensations with crisp, delineated images and set verbal rhythms.

Dreams operate by mechanisms of displacement; one element stands in for or replaces the next. The telling or writing of a dream performs a further displacement. It stimulates the memory to discover parts that had been submerged, but also forces

elements into a greater degree of definition than they had in memory. In effect, any dream record is a fiction.

Work time is not organized in relation to experience. It is simply organized in relation to production. One person's time is someone else's materials.

Dream time is organized solely in relation to experience and purely to fulfill the demands of the individual psyche. In dreams, one is, as it were, at the mercy of one's own control.

Time in dreams seems to possess the kind of absolute density of production the workplace may strive for but can never achieve. There is no down time in dreams, for dreams are, themselves, pure production. It is only in the gap between the dream and the record that an interstitial space opens up. This space begins, presumably, at the dream itself, but writing begins from a re-experiencing of the dream in memory, and memory, in turn, is responsive to the stimulus of writing.

In dreams we are "disembodied," even if they involve us in bodily adventures, since locus and moment are no longer fixed by what we consensually term "reality." The increased availability to perception of contents stored in memory is accompanied by a loss of identity, for there is no one outside one's self to confirm for oneself an identity. As Gertrude Stein wrote, "I am I because my little dog knows me," but in dreams we are, by analogy, "at the movies alone"—though I may encounter others in the most intimate or antagonistic ways, they are no more than my own "inventions" and can never confirm or deny my reality, much less my character.

The loss or confusion of identity becomes, itself, the theme of many dreams. And as Lyn Hejinian shows in the following discussion, presence is not a requirement. The dreamer may completely cease to exist in the dream, while, in waking retrospect, the dream contents may be seen to stand, metonymically, for the person.

An example of a person in dissociation from context is a dream I had of myself—I know it's a dream of myself in retrospect, but in the dream it is only a sequence of images, dreamed on the night of September 28, 1987: "A dress, or a woman wearing blue or black. She is a manikin or a living woman. The figure is full face or maybe in silhouette. A view then or after a little time of a saddle-stitch stapler and a book nearby. First the stapler is in focus and then the book." .... Now what interests me right off is that every sentence—i.e., every expression—is in the form of a duality. It enacts the double situation already existing in a dream, in which there is a dreamer (in this case never even in range—I didn't feel the situation as "I saw a stapler and then a book") and a dreamed (which here is "I" but again never felt as such until after I woke up). I know it's "I" because of wearing black, because I can identify the stapler and even identify with the stapler, or the symbolism of the stapler and the book. But all the contexts in which a manikin (immobilized figure) and a living woman (eroticized figure) and a stapler (the one I used in putting together all the Tuumba books) and a book (I am a literary person) function as parts of a life are missing from the dream. As a result, one has, so to speak, a series of nouns.

If the fundamental duality that Hejinian points out is that of the dreamer and the dreamed, this duality is constantly displaced, because the dreamer virtually does not exist, except as a boundary to the possible domain of dream contents. Therefore the duality is injected into the content itself, which takes the form of a series of transformations, antitheses, and equivalences.

The syntax in dreams is characterized by a dialectical movement, where a unique element is immediately modified by a counter element, sometimes an opposite, to produce a revised or transformed element.

Often in writing my dreams, I find myself punctuating sentences with a semi-colon, to divide two clauses, the first a kind of thesis, the second an antithesis or qualification of

the first. Another common feature is the double-take, a replaying of a scene, as if the first time one didn't quite "get it right."

The dialectical movement, driven by a dynamic negativity, finds expression in language whose elements, as "nouns" or images or sentences or scenes, represent the resting places of dream thought, and whose syntax, the sequence, rhythm, and inevitable editorial construction, convey the leaps or gaps or synthetic fusions of its becoming.

In his introduction to a 1954 edition of the existential psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger's essay Dreams and Existence, Michel Foucault points to this syntactic movement as an important key to the meaning of dreams missing from Freud's classic symbolic interpretation.

As waking consciousness darkens and flickers out, the dream seems to loosen, and finally untie, the knot of meanings. Dream had been taken as if it were the nonsense of consciousness. We know how Freud turned this proposition around, making the dream the meaning of consciousness.

Freud caused the world of the imaginary to be inhabited by Desire as classical metaphysics caused the world of physics to be inhabited by Divine Will and Understanding: a theology of meanings in which the truth anticipates its own formulations and completely constitutes them. The meanings exhaust the reality of the world which displays that reality.

One might say that psychoanalysis gave the dream no status beyond that of speech, and failed to see it in its reality as language.

Freud's symbolism concentrates exclusively on the semantic or paradigmatic dimension of language. We are presented with a series of symbols whose root meanings can be discovered through a search for the subject's repressed thought. Each dream symbol is a complete result of a complex synthesis of causes drawn from various planes of

experience: physical sensation in the moment of sleeping, the events of the previous day, ongoing personal issues, and deep memories, often most significantly of early childhood.

Thus Freud unties the sequential order of the dream in order to show it in its verticality, as a forest of symbols, of correspondences. This method has proven tremendously useful for the treatment of neurosis, and has determined the very form of our thought in the twentieth century, but it does not exhaust the meaning of dreams, because by concentrating on the semantic dimension it leaves out the syntactic, horizontal dimension.

That a dream can be reduced to the product of a complex of private causes leaves unaddressed the meanings it inevitably accumulates by virtue of its expression in communal, multivalent language.

Wittgenstein observed of Freudian dream analysis that if dreams are essentially a translation of information from one form of thought into another, then we should be able to translate in both directions. In other words, if from the dream we are able to deduce the complex, then we should be able to go the other way and, if we know the complex, derive the dream. But this, of course, is not the case. It is the peculiar fascination of dreams that they are entirely unpredictable.

The possibility of a grammar of dreams leads away from the consideration of the dream as a code for the analysis of the individual psyche toward a more general view of dreams as problems in perception and description, that is, as problems for writing.

In my book Covers, I have extended the dialectic of displacements that occurs in the progression from life to dreams to writing. On each page, a brief dream narrative in prose is followed by an improvisation in verse form. The poems were constructed by selecting key words at random from my dream notebook. The poems are often reflections on or extensions of the dream fragments. As such they combine interpretation and fiction. In addition, due to the intervention of the key words, they bear trace elements of other dreams. And finally, each seeks its own path in the ongoing temporality of writing.

My intention was to expand on the possible meanings of the dream fragments, by engaging the attention in an instantaneous complex, through rhythm, syntax, and sequence. The faithful, transparent language of the dream record is set against the capricious, alert action of writing at play with its materials.

In The Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Freud speaks of dreams as “the guardians of sleep,” and it is easy to think of examples wherein by the ceaseless activity of transformation, equivalence, and opposition, the inevitable moment of waking is redefined, disguised, and folded back into the dream contents in a perpetual holding action.

But while the dream defends the body from waking, and ensures the continued rest and revitalization of our physical powers, it also eludes deep, dreamless sleep. Dreams represent a consciousness poised between waking and sleep, which defends sleep from waking, but also, as Maurice Blanchot points out in his foreword to the dream journals of Michel Leiris, fights to stay alive as mental activity, so that “sleep grows sleepless.” This persistent activity, akin to insomnia, is also at the source of writing.

In Kafka, we find a writer of fiction for whom dreams and the work-place share an equal though conflicting significance.

Kafka’s The Trial was apparently written in all-night, insomniac sessions, and it contains the kinds of displacements found in dreams: the court inappropriately located in the rundown suburb; the abjectly seductive nurse; the whipper and his victims in the “lumber room” of the bank—and there again, as if no time had passed, the next morning.

The writing inhabits a claustrophobic thought world, where each assertion engenders an immediate counter assertion. Every ray of hope is qualified by a reason for despair. The protagonist K attempts, in the unfolding of the unseemly and preposterous details of his narrative, to justify everything—not only himself, but all appearances.

This obsessive desire for justification is present at every level. K’s case may be seen as a cipher for Kafka’s writing, by which he stakes his only claim to self-justification. But

the tortuous difficulty of his “case” interferes with and eventually overwhelms his career at the bank, his “normal” daily life.

Kafka’s relation to both work and dreams is alienation. The limits of bureaucratic hierarchy by day and subjective isolation by night become unbearable burdens. The evident joy of his writing is bitterly humorous.

Writing is always a matter of limits. The language of the workplace, functioning within the limits of instrumentality and class, may be liberated by cutting it from its normal context and grafting it within the process of creative work. When this is done, the specialized language may, itself, serve as a limiting factor, within which the creative process may be able to define itself. For freedom always requires limits, however arbitrarily they are established.

As the composer Anthony Braxton remarked of a particular solo by the saxophonist Warne Marsh:

It’s so inside the chord changes, he’s really somewhere else. It’s like you know the context so well that you’re free: you’re free because you understand the rules to such a level that you can do anything you want. That’s what freedom is. You can’t be free unless you have a context to be free in.

While the dream itself would appear to be a free play of ideas, unchained by normal limits of perception and logic, it also presents an impenetrable limit: it is pure experience; its facts can never be verified, its implications never entirely known. It is the peculiar fascination of dreams that they appear “all ours” on the one hand, but completely outside us on the other, for they come to us, as it were, out of the blue.

In dream writing one is poised between the abject instance of a remote subjectivity and the expression that confirms itself, through language, in shared history.

The threat of alienation and isolation is present to our experience both of dreams and of the workplace. At the same time, the limits we encounter in both spheres may be turned to advantage through the singular power of writing.

Writing can go anywhere and use anything. There are no privileged subjects and no primary materials. My interest in work and dreams meets in a third term, which encompasses them without exhausting itself. It is continually outstripping its materials. It condenses our experience of time to the level of momentary attention. It transcends its own time and materials. It is writing.

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