

IN SEARCH OF BENEVOLENT CAPITAL: PART II

GAVIN KEENEY

This two-part, semi-gothic literary essay seeks a provisional definition of “benevolent capital” and a working description of types of artistic and scholarly work that have no value for Capital as such. The paradox observed is that such works may actually appeal to a certain aspect of Capital, insofar as present-day capitalism has within it forms of pre-modern political economy that may actually save Capital from its mad rush toward self-immolation.

PART II



I. Personal Capital and Return

When a project is “before” Capital, seeking forms of benevolent capital, which by definition only exist buried within capitalist exploitation (across platforms and across institutions), and then fails to register with the powers that be as “of value,” there is the fall-back position of, or return to, *personal* capital – i.e., an existential justification for the work that redeems the work in the face of failure. Beckett’s “Fail, fail again, fail better” is of this order. Works that are of no use to Capital, while often dismissed as “neo-hermetic” (a claim often levelled at the avant-garde), will fail repeatedly in the attempt to find the necessary agency to go forward, while that forward motion will not depend entirely on external sources of benevolent capital.

“Before Capital” is not so much the test of the value of the work but a test of the merits of the work for Capital (for appropriation, expropriation, and assimilation). “Failure” before Capital is, therefore, the repeated step in the development of works in search of benevolent capital. The return to personal and symbolic capital is the return to the project as such, or to works *for works*. The author returns to the “Muse,” “Muse” signature gesture of the event of the emergence (incarnation) of the work. As a fictive ontology for works, “Muse” signals the cosmological, immemorial figures inhabiting the work – the constellation of forces and factors (lights, intelligences, aeons) that brought the project or work into being. “Muse” is the proverbial backstory for works.

Personal capital in search of the transpersonal inhabitation across works toward the life-work also represents not so much a banal investment of labour as the comprehensive configuration of what is

irreducibly a confraternal order – origins for works always being multiple or polyvalent. Origins being half-unconscious, the conscious half is the artistic endeavour (labour), whereas the unconscious half is the name of the Muse (theft, appropriation, inspiration).

Return endlessly follows upon event, and “return” can be an inevitable aspect of the productive or generative élan of works that edge toward works *for works*. Event, Fall, Return (c.f., Badiou, Žižek) – while apparently setting up eternal recurrence for works – is often an element of the field of the work that is incomprehensible to authors, experienced but non-negotiable in the accounting houses of capitalization for works. Fidelity to such works (c.f., Badiou) is the key. Capital vanishes at such moments – symbolic or otherwise – and personal capital is the “zero degree” works pass through en route to archive, nominal extinction, or re-play. Cultural systems betray a half-conscious knowledge of this ancient generative economy, while it is also quite evident that the guardians and gatekeepers of cultural systems rely on this vague knowledge to manipulate cultural production in the pursuit of privileges. Avant-garde works are assimilated to forms of cultural patrimony once they are rendered harmless to patrimony or converted to historical artifacts.

What appears in this process of cyclical return from the search for benevolent capital is the delineation of the damaged ecosystems engaged – the forays into markets determining not the value of the work as work *for works* but the value of the work for capitalization across markets. This pernicious reduction of free intellectual inquiry to market ideology includes academic systems of exploitation (c.f., Harvey, Eagleton, Giroux) that masquerade as platforms open to all (the ubiquitous open calls), claiming to privilege works versus reputations, though increasingly these platforms spell out in excruciating detail the rules of engagement (generally formulated in language and terms reducible to “return on investment” or “deliverables”). Justification of research merit proceeds in such instances as “product development” for institutions plugged directly into external industries of one kind or another. In the Arts and Humanities, the games of expropriation via residency, fellowship, or exhibition, while indirectly playing to the vanity of all concerned, are often openly or covertly constructed according to networks of privilege that service the professoriate – the openly careerist maneuvers of key players directly linked to escalating opportunities for key players. Works *for works* (forms of free inquiry without imposed ideological bias) cancel this opportunistic gambit simply by existing as use-less to what is nothing other than an institutionalized form of the production of cultural capital masquerading as benevolence offered; offered nominally on behalf of authors and works. If truly “open,” such calls are benevolent insofar as they are not also ideologically sustained or “gamed” (set up in advance to bring in fellow travellers for those who act as gatekeepers). The ecosystems involved may be judged by the language games perpetuated. These games include the use of “linguistic agents” as denoted by Bourdieu et al., if the platform is sociologically biased, while any number of other “linguistic agents” may be brought into play to turn the operation toward “cultural hacking” or neo-avantgarde posturing. “Return to zero” for works *qua* free works is, then, the equivalent of return to resistance within the system, with the resultant electrical discharge producing new doors left ajar or new windows through which to pitch the proverbial paper airplane. That the majority of these doors and windows are electronic doors and windows is the fundamental trait for exposing the class who partake of such vectorial systems that consistently and progressively act as protective borders for privilege, and as filters for “discovery” of works to be appropriated. It is not authors who are of interest to the vectorial class and their enablers in academia and elsewhere, but works. And it is the accrual of works to the ledgers of the privileged that allows the game to move forward, with capture of works to systems the primary vehicle for the production of the matching precariat.

In most cases today truly free works are to be found outside of academia in both the accidental and the intentional wildernesses that form beyond the reach of Capital, in the most use-less of endeavors (e.g., poetry and literature). The irony is that while these use-less endeavors may undergo a renaissance or revitalization outside of academia, they will then begin to attract attention from within, and academia will attempt to reincorporate what it has formerly driven from its hallowed halls.

II. Ideology and Academic Networks

The extensive and insidious links between academia and various for-profit industries on the prowl for harvesting works from within academia for external capitalization is on display in the various internal and external offers for scholars to “sign on” to programs and events as guests. This includes the widening array of conferences, which may be judged or justified by their connections to industry or their distance from industry. Rarely do such opportunities offer the visiting scholar the freedom to do

whatever s/he pleases. While this seems a foundational consideration for the Arts and Humanities, especially when understood as a super-discipline versus a discrete set of studies, the Arts *and* the Humanities historically offer two of the last places for something altogether “off the map” to be developed – e.g., works *for works* (orphaned or use-less works). If it is increasingly a matter of pleasing one’s masters in the age of the neo-liberalization of the so-called knowledge commons, the proliferation of networks between the art world (which has been thoroughly neo-liberalized) and academia (which is approaching complete capitulation to Capital) makes sense. Benevolent patronage may still exist within both worlds, but it will become increasingly difficult to locate until there is a widespread rebellion from within against the importation of market ideology to two worlds that once favoured free inquiry.

Atop this layer of manufactured significance for programs and platforms is the proliferation of institutes and “cross-disciplinary” activities led by scholars from within the fold of programs and disciplines that require external sources of “meaningful activity” to prop up the general lack of meaningful activity within academia other than the questionable production of platforms. These programs and platforms all substitute for research at the base, or for the absence of significance within disciplines that are internally exhausted. If PR-value reigns supreme within neo-liberalized academia, use-less works justified only by their abject and intentional uselessness will be either valorized as intellectual fashion statement or shunned as trivialities.

The ideological underpinnings of the discursive operations are generally spent generative causes that are also generally safe because they are spent causes – circularity of discursive appropriations the chief sign of the re-cycling of motivation in absence of the “Muse.” Thus, personal capital is almost always imported into academia by way of the residencies, fellowships, and conferences utilized to compensate for the moral vacuum within universities beholden to the production of degrees, the securing of reputations, and the fostering of the horizontal networks of procurement, production, and dissemination of equity that substitute for the creation of works *for works*. These networks are eminently careerist in nature, as are most all bespoke or custom-designed institutes, and the personnel is vested insofar as their presence delivers vertically organized and capitalized cultural goods. The conference leads to the book-publishing enterprises of for-profit companies allied with academic networks that feed the increasingly digitalized production of value (e.g., the proliferation of online journals and e-books), whereas the institutes lead to external funding by industry or non-profit organization toward the perpetuation of an ideological project (e.g., foundation grants for the mass digitalization of research, in whatever form that might take). The ideological underpinnings for such activities are in most cases crafted for public consumption as “progressive” or “liberal” causes, while they are quietly neo-liberal. The actual production of works then is incidental to the platform, and the platform is the primary means (primary venue) for leveraging works as intellectual property for regimes of privilege. “Author retains copyright” is a common refrain in most all instances of expropriation by academia of personal capital (e.g., author rights), appropriation from within or from without, while the author’s presence as co-production assistant within the networks more closely resembles a case of “work for hire” than research as such. “Author retains copyright” is relative nonetheless to the useful life of the work within the network or system of appropriation, with digitalization of works dialogically locking down all works submitted to platforms (“dialogically” in this case meaning that the work in question is the property of the author only when it is no longer of any use to the platform).

Reputations rise and fall in a vast, interconnected system that requires incessant replenishment of spent intellectual goods. Works are assimilated and mined for value (e.g., scalability) and forgotten or assimilated as fodder for the next-generation platform. Authors (and artists) are curated into oblivion and, if they are not assimilated to the machine as day labourers, replaced by the next generation of recruits trained to submit their wares in pursuit of holographic, stereophonic, or hyper-mediatized glory.

III. Inassimilable and Use-less Works

Work *for works* (i.e., free works) are first of all inassimilable and use-less to Capital. If they are also of no use to platforms, within the art world or within academia, they are paradoxically of maximum use for the development of alternatives. Shades of grey in this mathesis also suggest that some works might co-inhabit platforms or systems that are transitional states between parasitical and benevolent capital. Yet all such works are essentially developed on the performative-formalist side (as *lived* works), and they may be re-naturalized “downstream” in markets or sent “upstream” toward extant spectral ecosystems, so-called weeping meadows (c.f., Angelopoulos), where no market is to be found. In the

latter case, the role of the utterly use-less work is to wear the appropriate crown of thorns – as martyred work. It is here that a Christic development occurs for works of such an order. There is no “sublunary” place of taking-place present, while the proverbial and dynamic *absence* of a place of taking-place ironically takes precedent. In the Arts and Humanities this empty “place” or “space” used to be called the avant-garde. The simple solution, without “scholastic” equivocation (c.f., Ockham, Scotus et al.), is the transfer of moral rights *to works as such* – with the knowledge commons as new-old “address” (place) for use-less works. With this transfer of rights to the commons comes the responsibility of the commons for the author or artist. Notably, collectivization without respect for the individual has been – historically – a disaster. That the disaster has occurred both on the left and on the right is well worth noting.

In the annals of literary and artistic history, for example, there are innumerable examples of such errant works belatedly assimilated to cultural patrimony. Yet they generally return only as mockery of their former selves – tidily commodified for consumption by the art and literary worlds, where they only half existed previously as aberrations (c.f., Debord, Marker et al.). What is self-evident in the age of hyper-mediatic performance for both scholarship and the arts is that works that head “upstream” will generally vanish in the process – appearing here and then appearing there, ultra-temporally, but having no “proper” home address. Chris Marker’s epistolary works are exemplary in this respect. The role of the author in such cases is transfigured by the orphaned work *for works*. Yet for very different reasons than the fate of authors under structuralist or post-structuralist critique (c.f., Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida), the author or artist does not exist in the multiple worlds consumed by neo-colonial capitalist conquest.

The search for benevolent capital advances with the work, on cat’s paws. The work *for works* inhabits multiple dimensions of socio-economic and socio-cultural intrigue simultaneously. It hovers here, and it dashes over there. It is cat’s meow and it is cat’s grin. Often it is “a grin without a cat” (c.f., Carroll, Marker). Benevolent capital approaches insofar as the work is captivating, beguiling, or reminiscent of something Capital regrets having destroyed – wildness in a sense, but primordially as cipher for freedom from exploitation and domestication. The next-level paradox is that Capital may need that beguiling something to redeem itself – not to save itself, which is hardly in the best interest of all, but to sacrifice itself to a cause other than itself. Mimicking the sacrifice of aeons as theorized in Gnosticism, and suggesting a War in Heaven, concealed or vanquished prospects are revealed or reborn. Immemoriality and eschatology (c.f., Levinas, Derrida, Marion) reveal themselves as, secretly, one thing. Far from “immanentizing” the immemorial or the eschaton (a common complaint levelled against privileging that which formally transcends any direct relation with thought), both remain at a distance in works, effectively *crossing* works, and connoting the metric of the work (c.f., Agamben). Alternatively, criticism of such a nuanced view of immemoriality and eschatology indicates an aversion to non-relational works, or to works that remain wilfully unsituated or ill-situated in mere utilitarian orders. All utility is internalized, and all relations are sublated (c.f., Cacciari et al.). Notably, such works *for works* open onto elective nihilism, or forms of revelation and reverie (dream-states and anamnesis). *The law disappears ...*

Can Capital step out of its own way? Can Capital facilitate its own redemption? Is the figure of benevolent capital a figment of the imagination (wishful thinking) or a figure eight within the ravages of rampant, bloodthirsty contemporary capitalism? The mining of the “commons” by Capital, while a long-standing affair, grows more desperate today as untapped resources to assimilate to the circuit of capital diminish. Additionally, there is the odd “mis-use” of the public domain or the commons, by Capital, to effectively “park” resources while awaiting a means (usually technological and legal) to convert collective capital into private capital. Rights for works as works is the corrective to this theft.

The hypostatization is evident. There is no one thing named Capital. Capital is a mask worn by souls – many waiting for another cause other than the worship of Mammon. The theological precepts are basically a-theological. There is no religion involved. There is only the hoped-for respite from centuries of hard-bitten penury for works, which always infers “for authors.” As all authors are, after all, mere day labourers, such also launches the search for benevolent capital, while suggesting the transfer of rights to works, to benefit all concerned, is one way out of the present stalemate. The most abstruse work of all is to work on behalf of all. Artist and author, demoted over time to wage slave, represents Everyman. Shelley clearly knew this, while dodging creditors back in England, both before and *when* he drowned at sea off of Venice, Italy ... Did he know it *after* he drowned? The life-work is a vector of another order. Certainly he left this impression.

Titian's Hour returns at evening under the right atmospheric circumstances. The glow is spellbinding. Yet for many it is merely a postcard to mail home after a day trip elsewhere.

Finis

Photo credit: "Trapped in the Victoria and Albert Museum," London, England, 2018. Photo: Ishita Jain.

<https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/in-search-of-benevolent-capital-part-ii/2018/02/21>