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## Curb Your Enthusiasm: On Scarcity and Replenishment in Literature

*Scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying importance is an almost ubiquitous condition of human behaviour. Here, then, is the unity of subject of Economic Science, the forms assumed by human behaviour in disposing of scarce means.*

Lionel Robbins,  
An Essay On the Nature and Significance of Economic Science (1932)

*Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.*

Henry David Thoreau,  
Walden (1854)

*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the title of comedian Larry David's highly praised comedy television series, strikes me as an almost perfect motto to frame the following remarks on scarcity and literature.<sup>1</sup> As David repeatedly suggested, the title was to evoke restraint on more than one level: because of its enormously successful predecessor, *Seinfeld*, it warned against overblown expectations regarding the new show even though some of *Seinfeld*'s cast had guest appearances in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It also meant to deflate exaggerated emotional identification with the fictional characters, an obvious disclaimer given the dry comical style of the series. What is more, it criticizes what David repeatedly called his fellow Americans' false enthusiasm, an exaggerated cheerfulness which, when projected towards other people, has the potential of being offensive. And, finally, it evokes David's own restraint in embracing commercial, albeit in his case belated, success as a comedian and writer. Put another way, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* takes issue with a typically American display of exuberance, an excess of excitement that has turned stale and trite because it is ubiquitous. What's lacking in contemporary American media culture (and beyond), thus seems to be the message of the series' iconic title, is a notion of emotional (self-)restraint, an understanding of the positive effects of scarcity of emotions rather than their abundance and ubiquitousness.

<sup>1</sup> The series, starring comedian Larry David as, basically, himself, aired on HBO from 2000 through 2011. It won several major awards and was acclaimed best television series of 2003.

It is this positive aspect of scarcity that I find interesting and instructive. Literature and the arts are a good case in point. Here scarcity appears in the form of asceticism, to be cherished not shunned, actively endorsed and idealized rather than dismissed as an obstacle to artistic success. In what follows I'll take a closer look at the role of scarcity in literature or, more broadly, the applicability of concepts such as scarcity and its opposite, abundance and replenishment, in academic fields that are not primarily concerned with material value but rather with words and ideas. While by most people's standards the shortage of means to achieve ends that are valuable and cherished is judged negatively, in literature—and by extension in the arts at large—it is often the reverse. When used with regard to rhetoric and the style of literary texts, for example, scarcity frequently evokes the shedding of the superfluous, merely decorative components of speech. It is a conscious choice, carefully made by an author or orator, not an indelible fact of the human condition.<sup>2</sup> Authors deliberately embrace the scarcity of words because they believe that clarity and precision are superior to the verbosity of long-winded, ceremonial prose. The “literary” understanding of scarcity may thus help us to question some of the assumptions implied in its economic meaning; more specifically, the ill-fated idea that limited resources are an existential juggernaut, a universal ill that drives much of human history.

### **The Artist in the Garret**

That economists or social scientists define concepts such as scarcity and abundance differently than, say, an artist or a literary critic is hardly surprising. While to the former the lack of resources and material goods represents a social deficiency that needs to be remedied and changed, for the latter poverty and destitution may be less threatening. Just consider Franz Kafka's short story “The Hunger Artist.” In this dark parable, scarcity—that is, the scarcity of food—translates into a figure for art in general; more importantly, it also serves as the artist's (perhaps only) means of rebellion against an encompassing capitalist system, a system glutted with material things to the point where an understanding and appreciation of any true artistic endeavor have become virtually impossible. If the “scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying im-

2 Christine Weder, “Literatur und Ökonomie: Replik auf Monika Dommann,” in “Knappheit,” ed. Maren Möhring, Erhard Schüttelpelz, and Martin Zillinger, thematic issue, *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 2011, no. 1, 137.

portance,” as economist Lionel Robbins points out,<sup>3</sup> prompts us to make choices as to what means produce greater ends—that is, ends that are of greater value to us than others—, in the sphere of art scarcity itself carries value. Here the lack of abundance is not to be feared because it is what distinguishes both the artist and his art from the rest of society.

True, scarcity—when referring to the artist’s precarious social position—is rarely sought but often inflicted; in other words, it is an effect rather than the explicit goal



Carl Spitzweg,  
*Der arme Poet*.  
© Bildarchiv  
Foto Marburg /  
Julius Bard.

of choosing creative work. What is more, the meaning of scarcity in art has changed significantly over time. Prior to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when artistic work had been to a large degree commissioned and funded by either king or church, its practitioners were frequently well-endowed and, more often than not, had

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Robbins, *An Essay On the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 15.

been members of the most privileged classes. The modern version of the “hunger artist” thus is an invention of the nineteenth century, when artists embraced an increasingly grim social reality in order to maintain their independence, and the profession’s blight was turned into a romantic myth that turned on the opposition between the spirituality of art and the materiality of the larger capitalist society.<sup>4</sup> From that time on art came to figure as the realm where the utilitarianism rampant in modern capitalist society is being sublated, either by way of the artist’s social isolation and monastic lifestyle (as in Carl Spitzweg’s famous representation of “The Poor Poet”) or by way of the spiritual aloofness of the work of art itself. Hence the role of the artist as rebel and prophet; and hence the ambiguous status of artwork as being simultaneously outside and inside the economic sphere.

### The Rare Object

From yet a different angle, Walter Benjamin also emphasizes the role of scarcity and abundance in the field of art, here: the visual arts. In his oft-quoted essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin discusses the invention of mechanized means of visual reproduction such as photography, claiming that the ensuing abundance of images jeopardizes the authority of the technically reproduced artwork and, ultimately, makes its “aura,” or authenticity, disappear.<sup>5</sup> Rather than merely criticizing the loss of an artwork’s singularity, Benjamin identifies the late nineteenth century as ushering in an important paradigm shift regarding the status of art in society: namely, its transformation from ceremonial practices rooted in ritual, religion, and tradition to modern forms that considerably distanced the object from the observer by way of multiplying it and putting it on display in a museum. In other words, as long as art objects remain scarce and unique they tend to have cult value, when reproduced and made available in abundance, however, they gain in exhibition value. Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the increase in exhibition value—which, according to Benjamin, equals an increase in the numbers of art objects available—has led both art-

4 Cf. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “The Prestige of the Artist under Conditions of Modernity,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 83–100; Donald E. Pease, “Author,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 105–20; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

5 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 218–19.

ists and critics to resuscitate the earlier notion of authenticity. Under conditions of technical reproduction, in order to separate true art from the burgeoning forms of popular art, craftsmanship, and kitsch, it had to be original and authentic, that is, a manifestation of the artist's ongoing attempt to be groundbreaking, audacious, and new.<sup>6</sup> As Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing at the outset of the modern era of technical reproduction, reminds us "all men stand in need of expression," but "adequate expression is rare." It is this scarcity of authentic expression that elevates the poet and turns him into interpreter and representative of all men: "he stands among partial men for the complete man, and appraises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth."<sup>7</sup>

If authors have for long been associated with the absence of material well-being, of being outside of the marketplace and its promises of economic success, the same has been true for the artwork itself. Even though the ideal of scarcity (or uniqueness) as guarantor of originality and newness has proved to be utterly illusive, it lingers on as an artistic gold standard, a foil against which success in the arts is measured.<sup>8</sup> Because of the improved means of technical reproduction and its corollary, an as yet unknown onslaught of images and ideas, to create an original artwork has, however, become increasingly difficult.

### From Scarcity to Replenishment

After the second World War, literary authors who tried to live up to the earlier, modernist ideal of newness and originality often experienced a form of exhaustion, a feeling of being drained of their creativity by an overwhelming plentifulness and abundance of art forms: everything has been said and written, any conceivable literary style already proposed, any new path or direction already trodden and explored. It is against this backdrop of impending artistic impotence that US author John Barth published in 1967 his controversial essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," which was followed in 1980 by a companion piece, titled "The Literature of Replenishment." Both essays were expressly written with the notion of scarcity in mind: here, the scarcity of literary originality and

6 Cf. Klaus Benesch, "From Franklin to Emerson: Contestations of Professional Authorship in Early National America," in *Contestations of American Culture(s)*, ed. Udo Hebel (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), 77–96.

7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1972), 347–65.

8 Cf. Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," in *English Critical Essays*, ed. Edmund D. Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

innovation; there, the capacity of literature to overcome its own modernist “exhaustion” by projecting an alternative aesthetics based on repetition and renovation (i.e., of previous art forms). Put otherwise: late-modernist literary replenishment, according to Barth’s analysis, tended to avoid the fallacies of authenticity and originality by providing new experiences through hybrid, recycled, mixed-means art forms, which ultimately produced an abundance of available styles.<sup>9</sup>

Yet it also tended towards an ever more radical version of scarcity and restraint, what Susan Sontag has called an “aesthetics of silence.” If the former (repetition/renovation) represents a multiplying of means, the latter ushered in an extreme artistic asceticism that would eventually verge on the annihilation of form altogether. While art can never be totally silent (because it always remains within the limits of its own discursiveness), some artists clearly have taken the ideal of scarce means and formal restraint to its limits. Think of John Cage’s *4’33’’* (1952), a musical composition that consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of total silence, i.e., non-music. Cage may be seen as the ultimate master of artistic scarcity: by forsaking any form of music altogether he provided us with a musical masterpiece, a composition made of nothing and everything, containing no music and, simultaneously, all the music that has ever been composed and played. “Genuine emptiness, pure silence,” as Sontag explains, “are not feasible—either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical. . . . Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.”<sup>10</sup> Cage’s *4’33’’* powerfully attests to the power of scarcity in the arts: to say something not by choosing among scarce means but by reducing them even further to (almost) nothing.

The late-modernist turn towards silence can be seen as an extension of the Romantic ideal of economic scarcity into the realm of form. Mimicking the social isolation of destitute artists, the aesthetics of silence posits emptiness or “non-art” as a genuine art form. In so doing it resists the encroachment of form by the surrounding materialist culture. “Silence,” Sontag argues, “is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, consumer, antagonist,

9 See Wayne C. Booth, “Renewing the Medium of Renewal: Some Notes on the Anxiety of Innovation,” and Ihab Hassan, “Ideas of Cultural Change,” both in *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, ed. Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

10 Susan Sontag, “Aesthetics of Silence,” *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), 11.

arbiter, and distorter of his work.”<sup>11</sup> The aesthetics of silence are thus always also a gesture of rebellion. “When the language of words fails,” as critic Richard Blackmur reminds us, “we resort to the language of gesture.”<sup>12</sup> While this may be true for ordinary speech, in literature (as in all art) silence, the seeming absence of any means of expression, evokes not so much the failure of words but their absolute power. When Emily Dickinson, one of the major American writers of the nineteenth century who famously refused to be published during her lifetime, in a poem titled “Publication – is the Auction” compared the publication of her works to a slave auction, she might have sensed the power of silence or better: self-silencing in literature. As did Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, the inscrutable scrivener who “preferred not to” speak and write anymore, thereby resisting his cooptation into America’s capitalist culture. From this perspective, then, *Bartleby* or the equally muted sailor in Melville’s dark novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz (“The horror! The horror!”), Eugene O’Neill’s *Hairy Ape*, the often stammering characters of Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee—all speak, by various forms of not-speaking, to the power and beauty of the ultimate scarcity of words, that is, silence.

This modern aesthetics of silence is also what drives Kafka’s hunger artist. If his artistic project consists in the negation of any means of expression other than his own emaciated body, the ultimate vanishing and disappearance of that body turns into a figure of the paradox underlying all art, namely, a representation of absence through the absence of representation, an endorsement of artistic expression by not-speaking. As I hope to have shown, in literature and in the arts in general the scarcity of means to produce desirable ends has been vital in establishing artistic labor as exempt from the influence of modern capitalist society. It has also led artists to frequently depend on an aesthetics of scarcity rather than an aesthetics of plenty and abundance.

Finally, in literature and the arts the absence or lack of meaning itself carries meaning. Contrary to the realm of economics, here the absence of speech, marble, paint, etc. can become a powerful signifier for the thing—art—itself. It is because of this paradox, of having or getting something by not having it, that literature and the arts do (or should) matter regarding issues of scarcity and abundance. Not only do they reach beyond the bleak facticity of the economic realm, they also open up new avenues for

11 *Ibid.*, 6.

12 Richard Blackmur, *Language As Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (London: George Allan, 1954), 3.



reconnecting human sensibility to the environment and the real. In doing so they valorize a more positive understanding of scarcity as an important resource and a form of replenishment. The lesson to learn here, evidently, is not to further prompt economic development and growth but to rein it in, to curb our enthusiasm vis-à-vis a culture predicated on plenty and abundance.

### Suggested Reading

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**Suggested Listening**

Cage, John. *4'33''*. As performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra on 6 January 2004 at the Barbican Center, London. Conducted by Lawrence Foster. Broadcast by Radio 3, introduction by Tommy Pearson. [http://www.ubu.com/film/cage\\_433.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/cage_433.html).