

# THE BICONDITIONALITY OF CRAFT AND KRAFT

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## Translation

The etymology of *craft*, as given in the Oxford English Dictionary, charts its derivation from Old Frisian and Germanic *kraft*, with cognates found in other Germanic languages such as Dutch, Swedish and Icelandic (*kracht*, *kraft*, *kraftur*). The English word, however, departs from these neighbours and acquires new significations.<sup>1</sup>

This departure may in part be due to a change in the language of governance following the Norman conquest and the expansion of Carolingian political and cultural forms across the British mainland from the 10th century onwards.<sup>2</sup> Hence the modern day German *kraft* translates not into the English cognate *craft* but to a set of displacements mostly of Old French and Latin derivation: force (Old French *force*, Late Latin *fortia*), power (Old French *poer*, Medieval Latin *potere*), virtue (Middle French *vertu*, Latin *virtus*). Similarly, German departs from English in using *handwerk* where English would use *craft* or *handcraft* – the English *handiwork* is closer to the German although with connotations of an inferior or dishonest form of making.

Whereas *craft* in English has evolved towards a meaning of skilled manual work, *kraft* in German has come to acquire meanings related to philosophy and physics. Aristotle's concepts of potential and actual energy (δύναμις – *potentia* and ἐντελέχεια – *entelechy*) are variously translated as *kraft*.<sup>3</sup> In Middle High German translations, deriving via the Latin *vis*, the term describes both an emotive force and an intellectual faculty: the *vis sermonis* (powerful speech) of Quintillian's rhetoric, and the faculties of reason, memory and will. For later writers, such as Johann Gottfried von Herder

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<sup>1</sup>The original meaning preserved in the other languages is 'strength, force, power, virtue'. The transference to 'skill, art, skilled occupation', appears to be exclusively English ... – Oxford English Dictionary 2012.

<sup>2</sup>See Bartlett 1993.

<sup>3</sup>This summary of the various uses of *kraft* in German is based on Clark 1942 and Nisbet 1970.

(1744-1803), it is more the notion of ἐντελέχεια, actual energy, which is expressed and expanded to concepts of cultural and linguistic transmission. In scientific writings, the term is used to translate ideas from Bacon, Descartes and Newton expressing a force that creates movement as well as forms of physical energy and power, as in the later development of electricity — *kraftwerk*, for example, being a power station, literally an ‘energy works’ a place where natural energy is made into electrical power. In the 20th century the word also comes to have importance within various artistic theories, such as those of Wasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) wherein the bifurcated cognates (*craft/kraft*) re-cross one another along the conflicting tensions of Romanticism and Modernist avant-gardes.

In 17th century English, terms such as craft, art and industry were more or less interchangeable, all connoting forms of making.<sup>4</sup> As the forms and structures of production became reshaped with the emergence of industrial capitalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries this loose synonymy becomes increasingly differentiated. As markedly distinct forms of production become defined, so too did they acquire more distinct names. *Industry* becomes associated with the mechanisation of labour and the creation of the new concentrated settlement of workers, the factory town and industrial city. *Art* wrests itself free of association with manual labour through an appeal to bourgeois vanity and the establishment of ‘respectable’ institutions, such as the Society of Dilettanti (founded circa 1734), an elite private members club, and the Royal Academy of Arts (founded 1768) following the French *académie* model.<sup>5</sup> These supplant the artisanal guilds and divert affiliations from the newly emerging labour unions. *Craft*, it appears, is that which trails behind, the residue of forms of making which cannot be mechanized and become the means of income to an increasingly precarious artisanal class or left to stagnate in the rural backwaters that neither the Industrialists nor the Agricultural Improvers could profit from.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the notion of craft as a specifically rural form of manufacture begins here *with* the factory as its necessary ‘other’ rather than within the timeless essence of a place, or the organic expression of deep rooted ties between labour and nature.

Prior to industrialisation, the workers producing what might later be called ‘craft’ were more closely identified with the towns in which their guilds were established. Manufacture in the countryside instead took place largely *outside* of the guild system and, as such, would often be exploited by mercantile investors as a means of circumventing the regulation of costs

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<sup>4</sup>Braudel 1983, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup>For a history and analysis of the Society of Dilettanti see Kelly 2009. The development of the academy system in Europe is outlined in Wick 2000.

<sup>6</sup>This transformation is charted in Braudel 1983 whilst the actual working conditions of 18th and 19th century artisans are discussed in Rancière 1983.

and labour that the guilds maintained. Isolated from the urban markets, rural workers were dependent upon merchants for both the supply of raw materials and for the sale of their produce. Merchants could thereby both control the costs of labour to their own benefit and extract additional value in the exchange of materials and produce with those who worked for them.<sup>7</sup> This “putting-out” system as it was called, was one basis from which Adam Smith (1723-1790) developed the principle of division of labour in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Through his analysis of the putting-out system, Smith proposed new work structures derived from his observations of a small pin manufacturer where each component of the pin was assigned to a different worker.<sup>8</sup> This division of labour extended the breaking of the guilds that the merchants had achieved through a further breaking apart of the process of production itself.<sup>9</sup> In the 19th century John Ruskin (1819-1900) challenged Smith’s theories and the consequences of their application, arguing, in works such as *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) and various lectures and articles of the 1860s, that the division of labour extended directly into the psyche of each individual worker:

It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into mere segments of men — broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail.<sup>10</sup>

Division of labour debilitated the worker. Despite his advocacy of the system even Smith had acknowledged that workers faced with the endless repetition of the same tasks would “generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.”<sup>11</sup>

As Ruskin observed, and the reports of numerous government inspectors and Victorian reformers attested, with the expansion of capitalist forms of industrial production the reality of these consequences grew, as did the ev-

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<sup>7</sup>Braudel 1983, pp. 310–319.

<sup>8</sup>Smith 1976, pp. 14–15.

<sup>9</sup>A worker who produced only part of a good was even more dependent on the manufacturer who brought all parts together for market, than the worker who had previously made a whole good that they could potentially sell direct or negotiate a better price for with the merchant.

<sup>10</sup>Ruskin 1898, pp. 162–163.

<sup>11</sup>Smith even argues in favour of government intervention to remedy this: “... in every improved and civilized society, this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.” Smith 1976, p. 782.

ident inability of *laissez-faire* market forces to prevent or ameliorate them.<sup>12</sup> Ruskin countered Smith's structuring of labour under principles of *political economy* with his own structuring of labour under a form of *aesthetic economy* derived through his analyses of Gothic art and architecture. Ruskin conceived of the craftsmen of the Gothic cathedrals as working under conditions of an ideal mutual independence in which their labour was a self-fulfilling pleasure. He distinguished the Gothic from the Classic, claiming that the Classic emphasized a mechanical symmetry and repetition of forms dependent upon an "enslaved" form of production, whereas the Gothic prized irregularity and an endless individual variation of "free" production. Industrialisation presented a new form of enslaved production implementing extensive physical mechanisation and thereby separating the creative intellect from manual realisation. The cure, for Ruskin, was that hand and mind should be unified in a "healthy and ennobling labour" that does not merely produce goods but also re-makes the worker:

... we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.<sup>13</sup>

The fragmented labour of industry would be replaced, in Ruskin's vision, by the organic wholeness of craft, and craft would be a two-way process that created both material objects and working subjects. For Ruskin, craft would be rescued from a position of impending obsolescence to one of societal redemption. Ruskin cast this mission as the reclamation of a prior existing practice of craft. His claims and descriptions for what this constituted however were entirely of his own making, bearing little resemblance to historical evidence.<sup>14</sup> Craft was not so much *restored* by Ruskin, but rather, as Latour would put it, *translated*, relating a new ideological project to a set of past buildings and artefacts: "... the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies the original two."<sup>15</sup>

In connecting 'craft' to the 'Gothic', Ruskin modified these two terms in ways that inform much of our current understanding of them. In the arguments through which he forged this link, however, he also mobilized another translation, that of the continual translation between nature and humankind

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<sup>12</sup>These included James Phillips Kay *The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), Friedrich Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), and the reports of the Children's Employment Commission, and Inspectors of Factories.

<sup>13</sup>Ruskin 1898, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup>For a critique of Ruskin's vision of the Gothic craftsman see Unrau 1981.

<sup>15</sup>Latour 1999, p. 179.

brought about by labour. Craft, in this vector of translation, moves across a diagram that brings into play the derivatives of its distant cognate *kraft*. We can conceive of such a diagram as marking different relations of words, objects and processes, like that of Charles Sanders Peirce's *existential graphs*, whose structure and constituents change in different contexts and periods.<sup>16</sup> To translate *craft/kraft* across these different diagrammatic versions is not so much to map the evolution of a singular, cohering concept, or paths of influence and dissemination between different authors or institutions, but rather to investigate the different overlappings, inclusions and exclusions that appear between these. To explore the relation of *craft/kraft* in terms of translation, therefore, is not to present an indexical relation between the meaning of a word in one language and another language, but rather to pursue the movements of each word and see where these cross one-another, depart and collide. Following Peirce, the diagram offers a form of speculative enquiry, a "putting of questions" to the structures marked out upon it.<sup>17</sup> As such, we are putting forth a question as to the biconditionality of *craft* and *kraft*, under what conditions, and in what network of relations, does one, necessarily, depend upon or modify the other?

## Forces

For Herder, *kraft* is a word around which, and through which, numerous concepts are structured, almost as though the entire past history and contemporary unfoldings of the word were laid out in different combinations across his writings.<sup>18</sup> The word is of particular importance to Herder's theories of language. In identifying the primary characteristics of the different arts, Herder states that the visual is perceived in terms of space, music in terms of time, whilst poetry and language achieve their effects through *kraft*:

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<sup>16</sup>These were a form of notational logics, akin to those such as Venn diagrams, through which a problem in relational logic could be mapped out as a diagram on paper so that its components and their relations may be experimented upon through observing different variations in its structure: "... [we] begin a deduction by writing down all the premises. Those different premises are then brought into one field of assertion ... Thereupon, we proceed attentively to observe the graph. ... This observation leads us to make an *experiment* upon the graph. Namely, we first duplicate portions of it; and then we erase portions of it, that is, we put out of sight part of the assertion in order to see what the rest of it is. We observe the result of the experiment, and that is our deductive conclusion." Peirce 1998, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup>See Peirce 2010.

<sup>18</sup>For a survey of the use of *kraft* in Herder see Nisbet 1970 and Norton 1991.

Through *force* [*kraft*], which inhabits words, which, though it goes through the ear, has its effect directly upon the soul. This *force* is the essence of poetry, not coexistence or succession.<sup>19</sup>

As Nisbet argues, this notion of language as *kraft* combines a tripartite metaphysical schema of Herder's tutor Kant, that of *Raum, Zeit, Kraft* (space, time, motivating force) with Leibniz's theory of monads, the elemental perceiving forces which form the basis of matter as ἐντελέχεια (*entelechy*).<sup>20</sup> For Herder, one sense of *kraft* is that of a materiality of mind, or materiality of cognitive behaviour. Language operates through the motivity of cognitive energy, transferring between bodies. This relation between *kraft*, language and cognition is developed at length in his *Treatise on the Origins of Language* (1772). Distinctively, Herder does not argue that the capacity for language in itself distinguishes humans from animals: "Already as an animal, the human being has language."<sup>21</sup> Rather he argues that because humans lack innate *instinctive* abilities for complex activities, such as those that enable a bee to build a hive or a spider to spin a web, they are compelled to *consciously reflect* on their engagement with the world around them and through that, of necessity, produce language. This lack is not a limitation but rather the very condition through which humanity transcends the limited existential sphere of the bee that appears to have no choice but to make a hive, or the spider that can only spin a web and not conceive of any other form. It is through language that humanity works upon itself.<sup>22</sup>

Animals, for Herder, possess the potential (δύναμις) for language but operate within a circumscribed actuality (ἐντελέχεια) of forces like that of a machine and therefore cannot realise the fully integrated being of humankind that is exposed to a multiplicity of forces unfolding and interacting in different ways.<sup>23</sup> Language emerges as a dialectical transformation in encountering these energies.<sup>24</sup> It is both the product and medium of self-awareness in response to external forces, and it is that through which this awareness develops and expands as a force entering and altering the world it encounters.<sup>25</sup> In Herder's account, thinking and naming are the means through which hu-

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Norton 1991, p. 141.

<sup>20</sup>Nisbet 1970, pp. 8–9

<sup>21</sup>Herder 2002, p. 65

<sup>22</sup>"No longer an infallible machine in the hands of nature, he becomes his own end and goal of refinement." — Herder 2002, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup>"... the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses..." — Herder 2002, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup>Herder's dialectic is far looser than that of Hegel and Marx, based more on a metaphor of Newtonian gravitational forces (*Kräfte*) bringing disparate concepts into tension with one another, Nisbet 1970, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup>"... the first moment of taking-awareness was also the moment of the inward emergence of language." Herder 2002, p. 128.

manity transforms and takes possession of the world mixing the energy of (cognitive and cultural) labour into nature:

And if we now ask the first human being, Who has given you the right to these plants?, then what can he answer but: Nature, which gave me the taking of awareness! I have come to know these plants with effort! With effort I have taught my wife and my son to know them! We all live from them! I have more right than the bee that hums on them and the cattle that grazes on them, for these have not had all the effort of coming to know and teaching to know! Thus every thought that I have designed on them is a seal of my property, and whoever drives me away from them takes away from me not only my life, if I do not find this means of subsistence again, but really also the value of my lived years, my sweat, my effort, my thoughts, my language. I have earned them for myself! And should not such a signature of the soul on something through coming to know, through characteristic mark, through language, constitute for the first among humanity more of a right of property than a stamp on a coin?<sup>26</sup>

Herder does not elaborate on the concept of labour implied here, which conflates physical and cognitive expenditure with a legislative concept of *title* evoking the Lockean principle of property rights.<sup>27</sup> The diagram we may sketch from this places *kraft* within a nexus that includes language, labour and ownership, set in relation to trajectories between animal and human (innate intuition versus conscious awareness), nature and culture (pre-given materiality versus self-reflective material production).

The particular unfolding of forces and the formations (political, social and cultural) which arise from this are, in Herder's theory, determined by the contextual factors of history and environment. This structure informs and evolves through his comparative studies of literature (including *On the Resemblance of Medieval English and German Poetry* 1777) and the collation and study of what he would term 'folk' culture (*Volk*) beginning with his transcriptions of folksongs from the Baltic region (*Volkslieder*, 1778-79).

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<sup>26</sup>Herder 2002, pp. 144–145

<sup>27</sup>Norton discusses Locke in relation to Herder's theory of language, Norton 1991, pp. 143–146.

## Circulation

Written nearly 100 years later, Marx's (1818-1883) theory of labour as outlined in the opening sections of *The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value*, part III of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), echoes several of the elements and structures that Herder draws upon in constructing his theory of language:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a *force of nature* [*Naturmacht*]. He sets in motion the *natural forces* [*Naturkräfte*] which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the *potentialities* slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its *forces* [*Kräfte*] to his own sovereign power.<sup>28</sup>

Marx also makes a similar distinction between the animal as instinctive versus the human as self-reflective, drawing on the same examples of the bee and the spider, and forming a similar conclusion to that of Herder. It is the ability of the human to plan and reflect upon a *process* of making, the idea of its potential, that is separate from the *act* of making that sets humanity apart. It is through translating the potential idea into an actual thing that the human maker "realizes his own purpose" as a particular kind of being who can transform the external physical world to mirror its internal conceptual forms.<sup>29</sup> This idea of labour as self-realisation reflects the Hegelian, idealist, aspect of Marx's writing based upon a notion of the human as separate from and superior to nature. As Marx elaborates upon the process through which labour as *kraft* mediates between humanity and nature this Hegelian 'spiritual' understanding of production (spiritual in the sense of *Geist* as the realisation of the ideal within the real) comes into tension with a 'materialist'

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<sup>28</sup>Marx 1976, p. 283.

<sup>29</sup>"A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials." Marx 1976, p. 284.



one (developed through his engagement with Feuerbach's writing): production not as self-realisation but as metabolism. Here, the distinction between humanity and nature is less clear cut. The human maker does not impart a superior *spiritual* energy upon the world, thereby animating it and giving it meaning as in the Hegelian model, but rather there is a continuity of *physical* energy that circulates between maker and material, humanity and nature. Whereas the spiritual as idea is constant and eternal, the material as metabolic is variable and temporal, changing through cycles of movement and rest. This was a process in which the maker is physically remade, as outlined in Ludwig Büchner's *Stoff und Kraft* ("Matter and Energy," 1855), a text by one of the contemporary scientific materialists with whom Marx was in correspondence:

Which each breath that passes from our lips we exhale part of the food we eat and the water we drink. These change so quickly that ... we may well say that in a space from four to six weeks we are materially quite different and new beings.<sup>30</sup>

The tension between these different forms of making arises not so much from their inherent opposition, for in Marx the two often co-exist (as in the passage quoted above), but rather due to the way capital, and the capitalist conception of labour, intervenes within and translates these into its forms specific to its own historical development.

This happens in two ways. Firstly, through the division of labour which, for Marx, separates those self-realising forms of making from those which merely drain energies and consume time with no inherent reward. Marx expresses this through the concept of alienation, deriving from Hegel, in which the worker no longer creates something that is of intrinsic value to themselves but, instead, is constantly confronted by arbitrary things that the worker is compelled to make and whose value is withheld from them to be realised elsewhere by someone else. Secondly, in a process that is related to this division of labour, the particularities of different practices of making are abstracted into a general concept of labour expressed as *Arbeitskraft*, labour-power, the potential productive energy that a person can sell to then be put to whatever use the buyer determines. Making, as a circulation between maker and material, humanity and nature, becomes incorporated and re-routed through the circulation of capital and capital determines the conditions under which craft and *kraft* are brought into relation. This is realised (following the Aristotelean dimensions of *kraft*) in the translation of labour from potential to actual:

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<sup>30</sup>Cited in Wendling 2009, p. 64. Büchner (1824–1899) was one of the left-wing scientists of his day who fought in the German revolutions of 1848. The relationship between Büchner's work and Marx's thinking is discussed in Wendling 2009.

The use of labour-power [*Arbeitskraft*] is labour itself. The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes in *actuality* [ἐντελέχεια] what previously he only was *potentially* [δύναμις], namely labour-power in action, a worker.<sup>31</sup>

As language is for Herder, *Arbeitskraft* is a fully dialectical concept in Marx. It presents an understanding of labour that can only arise as a consequence of capital, in part due to the way capital abstracts labour, but, as Marx contends, it is also necessary to grasp and appropriate this understanding in order to move beyond it, precisely because it encapsulates both the materiality of labour itself and labour's relation to nature as part of a continuous materiality. The term entered into Marx's writing in the 1850s following his interest in the developing concepts of physical energy (*kraft*) that would later consolidate into the theory of thermodynamics. Whilst the term is most consistently used in Marx, *Arbeitskraft* was originally coined by Hermann von Helmholtz in his discussion of how energy is stored and released within the muscles of the body through metabolic processes, *Über die Erhaltung der Kraft* ("On the Conservation of Force", 1847). From the metabolic concept of energy arose an understanding of the effects of fatigue, induced through over-work and lack of sufficient replenishment, which gave a scientific basis to calls for a reduction in working hours.<sup>32</sup>

Economic theorists, such as Smith and Ricardo, had rated the cost of labour on the basis of the costs of the worker feeding themselves. This assumed that wages were set by the market value of food and that such costs were sufficient for the employer to cover in return for labour (known as the *subsistence theory of wages*). Marx argued instead that under capitalism, the employer purchased the worker's capacity to work, *Arbeitskraft*, with the capitalist constantly seeking to widen the difference between costs paid for potential labour and the capital realised from the sale of the products of actual labour. This leads to the intensification of labour with the worker receiving less and less of the value acquired from the products, a process hidden in the earlier economic theorists' emphasis upon the cost of food as the arbiter of wages.

It is as *Arbeitskraft* that labour and nature enter into the diagrammatic structure of capital, the circuit of capital as Marx calls it:

Whatever the social form of production, workers and means of production always remain its factors. But if they are in a state

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<sup>31</sup>Marx 1976, p. 283

<sup>32</sup>Wendling 2009, pp. 77–81.

of mutual separation, they are only potentially factors of production. For any production to take place, they must be connected. The particular form and mode in which this connection is effected is what distinguishes the various economic epochs of the social structure.<sup>33</sup>

In Smith, labour is conceived of as a substance, a ‘vital fluid’, that can be extracted from the worker and ‘fixed’ in another entity just as certain gasses, such as oxygen, could be extracted from the air and fixed in substances such as blood or water.<sup>34</sup> Labour is then an ingredient added to a commodity and sold on to the buyer, value being attributed on the basis of this mix of substances. This conception of labour emerges from Smith’s earlier work on sympathy (as part of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759) which likewise was understood as a ‘subtle’ fluid that communicated feelings between the organs of the body and between people. As Schabas argues, Smith’s ideas extended those of contemporary Scottish physicians, some of whom, such as Joseph Black, were his personal friends, and who were conceiving the body as a system of subtle fluids that transferred elements and sensations within the body itself and between the internal and external realms. Defining labour as a substance relates it to other physical commodities thereby underpinning the argument that labour can be measured in its exchange for food. Early Marx develops upon this Smithian concept of labour and value as substance, and, it is notable that in the *Grundrisse* “labour power” is rendered not as *Arbeitskraft* but as *Arbeitsvermögen*, *vermögen* expressing the idea of a volumetric capacity like that of a jar — and also used to describe the value of cash in a bank account.

In the shift from *vermögen* to *kraft* however, Marx rejects the notion of labour as a substance and instead begins to understand it as a *relation*. In regard to wages, there is no quantity of labour in itself, only the time in which the worker is under the control of the employer and the relation between that time and the market value of the goods produced which the capitalist seeks to maximise in their own favour. More deeply, however, *Arbeitskraft* also expresses a relation between humanity and nature in terms of both the resources consumed within production and the ways in which different social and technological forms of production change our relationship to the material world.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Marx 1978, p. 120.

<sup>34</sup>See Schabas 2005. Marx discusses the absence or misunderstanding of *Arbeitskraft* in Smith’s work in Marx 1978, p. 285.

<sup>35</sup>Marx argues, for example, that hunger is experienced differently depending on how food is produced and consumed, contrasting a hunter-gatherer society to a contemporary Western one. For a discussion of the relation between labour and nature in Marx see Schmidt 1971.

There is perhaps some notion of *Arbeitskraft* in Ruskin's discussion of what he calls "mechanical powers" which he divides into three kinds: the "vital" muscular power of the worker, natural power such as wind, and artificial power such as produced by steam engines. But whereas Marx argues that labour-power consumed in production should be reduced to a minimum in order to free up energies for our own disposition outside of labour, Ruskin argues that society should seek to utilise the vital power of humanity to its full potential before drawing on natural or artificial means, that it would, for example, be better for a human to pull a barge along a canal than a horse or an engine.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in Ruskin's time barges often were pulled by people, mostly by women who, as Marx noted, were often compelled to do so because, whereas a horse or machine would incur a necessary investment of capital, "that required to maintain the women of the surplus-population is below all calculation."<sup>37</sup> For Marx, the figure of the unpaid female barge hauler demonstrates how capital undermines the potential of technological and social developments to reduce exploitative labour. For Ruskin it epitomises the proper relation of human labour to nature. Even though Ruskin may have challenged the impacts of factory work he was nevertheless willing to endorse forms of enforced toil where they would be integral to his moral structuring of society through labour, a factor evident in his belief that even the elderly and infirm should be expected to work.<sup>38</sup>

The question is not only what means should be employed to fulfil a task, but also how we decide who does this. Whilst Ruskin proposed that workers should own their own tools and found some common ground with the labour movements of his day, he did not wish to give workers control over production as a whole. Nor did he wish for workers to have a say in determining what forms of production were most useful in relation to society's needs or to see the dissolution of distinctions between workers and those who, like himself, placed themselves above them.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Ruskin reduces the worker to an animal-like status akin to that of the bee in Herder and Marx's accounts, who builds from instinct rather than design.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense *craft* and *kraft* entail opposing tendencies. The Marxian

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<sup>36</sup>These ideas are specifically outlined in Ruskin 1905a but run through works such as Ruskin 1905d.

<sup>37</sup>Marx, quoted in Wendling 2009, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup>See Ruskin 1905d and Ruskin 1905a.

<sup>39</sup>Like that of his mentor Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), Ruskin's vision was resolutely anti-democratic and based on the principle that society be led by a privileged elite. See Cockram 2007 and Lippincott 1938.

<sup>40</sup>"[The bridge-builder] may be merely what Mr. Carlyle rightly calls the human beaver after all; and there may be nothing in all that ingenuity of his greater than a complication of animal faculties, an intricate bestiality – nest or hive building in its highest development." – Ruskin, appendix on "Divisions of Humanity" in *The Stones of Venice I, Works*, vol. IX, p. 67, quoted in Hanson 2003, p. 172.

concept of *kraft* proposes that the worker can be the conductor of a force that moves through the individual and across society and nature, labour is a relation between humans within society and between society and nature that evolves and changes over time. Ruskinian craft reductively constitutes the worker themselves as a substance formed by labour even whilst seeking to shape that substance as a whole coherent form in opposition to the fragmentation of industrial labour. The relation between craft and *kraft* is therefore denied in Ruskin, a denial that follows from Ruskin's more fundamental rejection of process in favour of form.

### Formation

If the machinic, industrial world formed one flank of attack against which Ruskin assailed, there was another equally dangerous foe against whom he summoned his intellectual forces, one that may surprise us: nature. Nature in itself, understood for itself, or rather an emerging conception of nature that challenged Ruskin's ideas of its aesthetic and spiritual value. That challenge came from someone whose attention to nature was as assiduous as Ruskin's own: Charles Darwin (1809–1882). The danger of the industrial, in Ruskin's view, was that it de-naturalised culture and labour replacing the instinctive and organic with engineered artificiality. Darwinian evolutionary theory however, postulated a continuity between the human and animal that erased the distinctions upon which Ruskin based the moral and spiritual superiority that brought man closer to God, and suggested that the capacity for intelligence and emotion that we attribute to humans may not be uniquely ours in the ways that Herder and Marx assumed.

Evolution, in the sense Darwin described, did not exist for Ruskin. In contrast to the transmutation of one species into another shaped by forces (*kräfte*), whether vital, environmental or energetic, as proposed by evolutionary theory, he stated that species were simply and eternally distinct from one another, static forms that symbolised specific moral qualities.<sup>41</sup> For Ruskin, language was a distinctly human ability, not a capacity inherent in animals, as Darwin and Herder had proposed, and he supported his friend, the linguist Max Müller, in his denouncement of Darwin's language theories.<sup>42</sup> A greater challenge, however, lay in Darwin's analysis of the role of colour and form in plants and animals. For Ruskin these existed for the

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<sup>41</sup>See, for example the arguments in Ruskin 1905b, p. 342 and Ruskin 1905c, pp. 353–56.

<sup>42</sup>Max Müller (1823–1900) was a German linguist who specialised in the historical evolution of languages and in particular the development of Aryan Indo-European. In a lecture series called "On Darwin's Philosophy of Language" (1870) he disputed Darwin's proposals that language might be innate in animals, arguing instead that it was a uniquely human attribute.

benefit of mankind, that we might read the words of God inscribed in nature for our moral betterment and to take pleasure in His Creation. For Darwin, the value of a beautiful flower or impressive plumage was intrinsic to the species itself, having evolved not for human delight but through processes of sexual selection: to encourage pollination by insects in the case of plants, and, for bird plumage and constructions such as bowers, in response to the choices made by females in determining with whom they would mate. As with language, Darwin proposed that the aesthetic sense was not unique to humankind but part of our common animality and that nature's beauty was not given by God or shaped by man, but driven in many respects by female control over reproduction.<sup>43</sup>

It was formation rather than evolution that mattered to Ruskin. In *The Queen of the Air* (1869) Ruskin dismisses Darwinian evolution and metabolic theories and argues instead that life arises from the spirit breathed into matter. This spirit shapes that matter in an outward expression of its moral character. Our physical substance is given spiritual form through understanding and adhering to the moral forms given in nature. The worker takes shape as a moral form like the decorative elements of a Gothic cathedral. This is not a dynamic, responsive process, however, but rather the realisation of a pre-determined ideal state, more akin to the Aristotlean notion of *telos*. One which we may ascend towards or fall from.

In one of his *Fors Clavigera*, a series of published letters addressed to the "workmen and labourers of Great Britain," Ruskin describes an outing to the ruins of Furness Abbey during which he encounters a group of workmen relaxing after work. The letter begins with a discussion of language and of what kind of language it might be expected that such a working man could understand.

Ruskin criticises those who believe the working classes are incapable of understanding educated language and should be spoken down to as though they are "the flat-foreheaded creatures of another race, unredeemable by any Darwinism."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Ruskin describes the "navvies of Furness" who, dressed in brown rags, stumble drunkenly out of a pub to squeeze themselves into the crowded third class carriage of a train, as nothing more than "a Fallen Race, every way incapable, as I acutely felt, of appreciating the beauty of *Modern Painters*, or fathoming the significance of *Fors Clavigera*."<sup>45</sup>

Whilst, on the one hand, Ruskin defends the working class from being seen as inferior, he nevertheless claims that they are "fallen" — a choice of phrase that might be compared to his description of the people of India as

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<sup>43</sup>For a detailed account of the debates between Ruskin and Darwin in terms of aesthetics see Smith 2006. For the emphasis upon female, rather than male, selection see Cronin Smith 2006.

<sup>44</sup>Ruskin 1907, p. 182.

<sup>45</sup>Ruskin 1907, p. 182.

“degraded races.”<sup>46</sup> In seeking to uncover what they had done to “deserve their fall,” Ruskin points to what he saw as the upsetting of a previously just social order in which the “peasant paymaster” exchanged the food he produced in return for the benefits brought to society by the educated classes (amongst whom Ruskin placed himself). One illustration of such a subject is given in this letter: that of the Tyrolean peasant working hard within nature and obedient to moral governance.<sup>47</sup> He closes his argument in admonishing the drunkenness of the navvies of Furness, stating, to his working men readers, that: “Only by quiet and decent exaltation of your own habits can you qualify yourselves to discern what is just, or to define even what is possible.”<sup>48</sup>

The unjustness of the current social order and its political economy can only be reversed, in Ruskin’s account, by the working man redeeming and re-forming himself as a moral and spiritual subject, a subject given form by labour:

Labour considered as a discipline has hitherto been thought of only for criminal; but the real and noblest function of labour is to prevent crime, and not to be *Reformatory* but *Formatory*.<sup>49</sup>

Going beyond his pedagogical pursuits, Ruskin would seek to establish an environment in which this could be put into practice. In a *Fors Clavigera* letter of 1871, a year after the Furness letter, Ruskin announced the setting up of the Saint George’s Fund to raise money for the purchase of land to establish what would become the Guild of Saint George,<sup>50</sup> an agricultural community in which, as a later letter describes, its members would be:

... entirely devoted, according to their power, first to the manual labour of cultivating pure land, and guiding of pure streams and rain to places where they are needed: and secondly, together with this manual labour, and much by its means, they are to carry on the thoughtful labour of true education, in themselves, and of others. And they are not to be monks nor nuns; but are to learn, and teach all fair arts, and sweet order and obedience of life; and to educate the children entrusted to their schools in such practical arts and patient obedience; but not at all, necessarily, in either arithmetic, writing, or reading.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Ruskin 1905c, p. 364.

<sup>47</sup>Ruskin 1907, p. 194.

<sup>48</sup>Ruskin 1907, p. 190.

<sup>49</sup>Ruskin 1905a, p. 544.

<sup>50</sup>The Guild was originally called Saint George’s Company but could not maintain that name for legal reasons, see Atwood 2011, p. 152.

<sup>51</sup>Ruskin 1872, pp. 8–9

The Guild was established as an organisation and continues to this day. Land was purchased in Wales, Worcestershire and Yorkshire, and a number of projects were realised by Ruskin and his followers.<sup>52</sup> In most cases, however, the projects were short-lived failures and the community Ruskin envisioned never fully came to be. The Guild of Saint George was perhaps more effective as a fictional archetype in which Ruskin conceived of his ideal society.

In relation to what might be termed our Ruskinian diagram, the Guild acted as a physical formation that constituted its structure in terms of social and political translations. Not of labour into capital but of labour into fidelity, labour as obedience, and labour as creative servitude. Whilst the subjectivity of the worker is to be fashioned through labour, the worker is not an active, political, subject in his or her own right, but rather a substance within whom that moral order could be fixed, and which would translate into the forms they created. The worker not only creates artefacts but becomes an artefact themselves, immobilized in the very stone that they carve. A static symbol rather than a creative, social or even material force, their potential only realised in so far as the gentlemanly guild masters of Saint George would permit — and for women this would be an even more circumscribed life. Craft may give the fullness of a particular form of labour, a skill, to the worker, but it does not necessarily make that worker a full human being for and in themselves, one free “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner.”<sup>53</sup> One free to explore mathematics, read poetry or pursue other interests outside of the ‘noble life’ of labour. Or, indeed, to enjoy the beauty of a meadow through the haze of a drunken Summer afternoon.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>These included the Saint George’s Museum in Walkley, a weaving mill in Laxlay on the Isle of Man and another mill in Huddersfield, see Anthony 1983, pp. 183–184. The most successful of these was perhaps the printers set up by George Allen (now George Allen and Unwin) which published much of Ruskin’s writings.

<sup>53</sup>Marx and Engels 1970, p. 54.

<sup>54</sup>In this respect Marx is also guilty of tending towards a certain bourgeois prurience, particularly in regard to working-class women who he describes “become rough, foul-mouthed boys before Nature has taught them that they are women. ... they learn to treat all feelings of decency and shame with contempt. During mealtimes they lie at full length in the fields, or watch the boys bathing in a neighbouring canal. Their heavy day’s work at length completed, they put on better clothes, and accompany men to the public houses.” — Marx, *Capital*, p. 437, quoted in Wendling 2009, p. 155 who discusses this passage in greater detail.



## Life

In a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1872, Ruskin reflected on the influence of his ideas. The revival of Gothic styles, to which he had contributed, had become a characteristic of 19th Century design, yet he was dismayed that this so often took the form of pastiche ornament appliquéd to the shells of steel-frame industrial halls, structures that he described as “accursed Frankenstein monsters of, indirectly, my own making.”<sup>55</sup>

His analogy invokes another face of 19th Century Gothic, one very different from that of Ruskin’s vision. By the time of Ruskin’s letter, Mary Shelley’s novel, a key work in Gothic fiction, had become a popular moral tale warning against the dangers of modern scientific progress. Ruskin refers to it in this regard but this was not how the tale had originally been told. Faced with supporting a child on her own, following the death of her husband, Percy Shelley, in 1822, Mary Shelley (1797–1851) had revised her best known work so as to avoid censure and appeal to the mores of a middle-class audience.<sup>56</sup> This edition of *Frankenstein* from 1831 is the version most widely known today, adapted into numerous plays and films in which the ambitious doctor has come to epitomise the hubris of a mad scientist playing at God. The figure of Victor Frankenstein in the original version of 1818 is, however, far closer to Ruskin than he might imagine.

The germ of the story famously originated through a game to invent the best horror story between Shelley, her husband and their friends Lord Byron and John Polidori whilst travelling on the Continent in 1814. As the narrative developed into a novel it became a medium through which to reflect upon debates within the wider intellectual and political circles in which Shelley engaged. Amongst the Shelley’s close friends was the surgeon William Lawrence (1783–1867), who had been a friend of Mary Shelley’s father during her childhood and, in 1815, was personal physician to Percy. Lawrence was a pioneering but also highly controversial figure in his day. His *Lectures on physiology, zoology and the natural history of man*, published in 1819, which openly questioned the Biblical account of Genesis, was banned by the Lord Chancery on grounds of blasphemy. An earlier series of lectures, published in 1816, had challenged the work of his tutor and mentor John Abernethy (1764–1831) who had sought to harmonize Christian and scientific belief on the origins of life. The development of many of Lawrence’s most controversial ideas coincides with the germination of *Frankenstein* and many of the debates in which he was involved are echoed in the book. Those familiar

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<sup>55</sup>Ruskin, letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 1872, author’s own emphasis. Quoted in Cockram 2007, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup>See Marilyn Butler’s introduction to Shelley 1994.

with later interpretations of the book may assume that Lawrence was the basis for the character of Victor Frankenstein. Yet it was not Lawrence's ideas that are espoused by Shelley's character but those of Abernethy.

As part of lectures on anatomy given in 1814, Abernethy proposed that a "subtile substance" was necessary to impart life to the organs of a body and that this was akin to electricity:

The phænomena of electricity and of life correspond. Electricity may be attached to, or inhere, in a wire ... So life inheres in vegetables and animals ...<sup>57</sup>

Abernethy drew these ideas from the work of John Hunter.<sup>58</sup> They combine elements of Luigi Galvani's famous experiment of 1780, applying electricity to the limbs of a dead frog with the notion, developed in the work of Joseph Black that had influenced Adam Smith, of certain intangible capacities, such as emotions and sympathy, being expressed as 'subtle fluids' or substances that could be transferred between and fixed within different bodies.<sup>59</sup> Life, in Abernethy's view, derived from an external source that was applied to inert material forms from outside.

Lawrence argued conversely that life emerged as a consequence of the combination of elements within a body. It could not be reduced to these components (as those of a strictly mechanist viewpoint might claim) but was, nevertheless, integral to the biological organization of each creature. The only externally deriving factors coming from that creature's parents and what it drew from its environment — pre-empting aspects of later theories of evolution and metabolism. Lawrence was particularly interested in the ability of simpler lifeforms, such as the hair-worm *gordius* and *vorticella rotatoria* protists, to self-generate and noted that these were often far more robust than higher life forms such as humans. For Lawrence, mankind was not the pinnacle of God's creation, an ideal type to whom all other creatures should be compared, but rather a demonstration that greater biological complexity came at the cost of greater susceptibility to illness and break down.<sup>60</sup>

The Lawrence-Abernethy debate is often characterised as one between materialism and vitalism yet this is misleading. Both protagonists supported

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<sup>57</sup>Abernethy 1814, p. 42, quoted in Morton 2002, pp. 18–19.

<sup>58</sup>John Hunter (1728–1793) was a leading surgeon and anatomist of his time. His theory of life was an inspiration to the poet Coleridge.

<sup>59</sup>... a subtile substance of a quickly and powerfully mobile nature, seems to pervade everything, and appears to be the life of the world; and therefore it is probable that a similar substance pervades organized bodies, and produces similar effects in them." — Abernethy 1814, p. 51, quoted in Morton 2002, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup>For a more in-depth analysis of Lawrence's work and debates with Abernethy, see Ruston 2005, pp. 46–48 and Harkup 2018.

their own versions of these theories. Abernethy's were dualistic, proposing that vitality derived from an external, spiritual source. Lawrence's were monistic, arguing that vitality was emergent within organic matter and that there was no unique human soul or superior life force. Abernethy's dualism gave scientific legitimacy not only to God as creator but also to a conservative social order in which an external governing class (the aristocracy) ruled over the majority, just as the the Queen of the Air breathed her spirit into Ruskin's view of the world. Lawrence's work was seen as giving support to atheism (of which Percy Shelley was one prominent proponent) and to the kinds of radical democratic politics that had torn down aristocratic rule in France and in which power emerged from the masses. Indeed the argument between Lawrence and Abernethy might better be described as a divergence between theocracy and autonomy.

Whilst the creature is given life through the application of Abernethy's theories, much of the novel's drama arises through the creature's attempts to assert its own autonomy. It is as though, as soon as life has arrived, the need and the demand for autonomy will follow. This is linked to a demand for recognition and love. The creature wants recognition from its creator as an autonomous being whom he should love for its own sake and not for its reflection of his own creative powers, yet this is precisely what Victor Frankenstein cannot give. His greatest fear is the creature's autonomy, its self-will, which he cannot imagine in any terms other than the dangerous and horrific. Many interpretations and allegorical readings of the novel have been made: an indictment of modern science, a meditation on Shelley's childhood and the loss of her own child, a parable on the status of women and a prefiguration of Queer theory.<sup>61</sup> One of the most common interpretations from the 19th century onwards has been that which relates the creature to the working classes. A cartoon published by *Punch* magazine in 1866 titled "The Brummagem Frankenstein" (Brummagem being the local name and dialect of Birmingham) depicts a working class man as the monster, waiting to be given the vote. In another *Punch* cartoon, from 1882, it is the Irish Fenian movement who are portrayed as the monster. In both cases the analogy alludes to supposedly unnatural and dangerous consequences of giving political power to a hitherto excluded section of the population.<sup>62</sup> In a more recent analysis, Franco Moretti compares the monster to the emergence of the industrial proletariat as a body, both physical and social: "a *collective* and *artificial* creature. He is not found in nature, but built [from] ... the limbs

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<sup>61</sup>See Morton 2002 for different examples of such analyses.

<sup>62</sup>The cartoons are reproduced in Morton 2002, p. 50. In each cartoon the role of Victor Frankenstein is given to a prominent political figure supporting the cause that the monster represents, John Bright in the first and Charles Stewart Parnell, suggesting that each may regret the consequences of their actions.

of those — the ‘poor’ — whom the breakdown of feudal relations had forced into brigandage, poverty and death.”<sup>63</sup>

Debates of how life comes to be are also those of how life is to be lived. Just as biological autonomy is realised through the ability to self-generate it may be that political autonomy could be achieved through the self-regulation of a nation by its own people. The revolutions in America and France had shown how this might be possible but also the threats this might pose to incumbent power. In Britain, the political establishment feared the consequences of such developments. *Frankenstein* was born in an era of an oppressive Tory government who in 1817 suspended the right of *Habeus Corpus* (the right that the accused must be present at their own trial) and passed the *Seditious Meetings Act*. This act restricted people’s ability to hold large meetings, create organisations or discuss issues that the government considered unlawful, such as advocating common ownership of land.<sup>64</sup> Whilst initially sympathetic to the new America as an extension of the English model of liberty, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke wrote against the French revolution and in favour of the restoration of monarchy and continuity of traditional values. In response to Burke, Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), had defended and promoted the ideas of the revolution. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) she rejects Burke’s call for the continuity of tradition to ensure social stability, which she states would justify slavery on the basis of tradition, arguing instead in favour of ensuring the rational autonomy of the individual as the basis of a just society. She would extend this as the basis for female emancipation in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), laying the foundations for modern feminist theory.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to Burke’s society based on rank and tradition, Wollstonecraft outlines her model for an ideal life in which each family has its own farm, sufficient for their needs.<sup>66</sup> This ideal is echoed by the De Lacey characters, an educated middle-class family who, having fled from injustice, have settled on a small-holding in the Swiss countryside. It is here that the creature seeks solace, at first hiding in their wood-barn adjacent to the house. By quietly observing their life, listening to their conversations and book readings, he learns to speak human language and to learn of “the strange system of human society” and its history: “I heard of the division of property, of immense

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<sup>63</sup>Moretti 1983, pp. 83–90.

<sup>64</sup>See Ruston 2005, p. 57, for details of the act see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seditious\\_Meetings\\_Act\\_1817](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seditious_Meetings_Act_1817).

<sup>65</sup>For the background to these writings and debate with Burke see Janet Todd’s introduction to Wollstonecraft 1994.

<sup>66</sup>Wollstonecraft developed this across various writings including the *Vindications* and also *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796).

wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, of descent, and noble blood.”<sup>67</sup>

This is the Herderian phase of the creature’s life. Just as electricity had flowed through the body in order to give it motion, now the “*force [kraft]*, which inhabits words ... has its effect directly upon the soul.” The creature’s linguistic ability, which starts not as a human but as an animal sound, emerges in relation to its environment and through a growing consciousness of its own limitations. The creature works to acquire language so as to overcome prejudice at its deformity.<sup>68</sup> Yet, the creature’s dreams of acceptance are shattered when he reveals himself to the family. Whilst the elder De Lacey, who is blind, is initially sympathetic, when the grand-children encounter the creature they react with horror at his appearance and chase him from the farm. Even within this idyll of middle-class enlightenment, the creature is rejected.

The creature not only relates to his environment as a Herderian linguistic-animal, he is also a metabolic force. Despite the demonic nature ascribed to him, the creature does not devour flesh but prefers a diet of nuts and herbs.<sup>69</sup> This vegetarianism sets him apart from the normal habits of humans. Shelley’s husband was an early advocate of vegetarianism in Europe and in 1813 had published *A Vindication of Natural Diet*. The pamphlet was, in part, a challenge to the ideas of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) who, in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), had argued that famine and malnourishment amongst the poor was nature’s response to the inability of the lower classes to regulate child-birth and manage their resources. In contrast, Percy Shelley argued that social and political factors were the main elements determining the situation of the poor and working classes: the poor starved whilst the rich ate in excess. The rich monopolised access to the land in ways that inflated costs and prevented a more just system of food production. If workers were indeed paid in food this payment was a meagre recompense for their labour.<sup>70</sup> The Natural Diet was one practical response to this, demonstrating how a more nutritious diet could be based on foods with less intensive production needs.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Shelley 1994, p. 96.

<sup>68</sup>Shelley 1994, pp. 90–92.

<sup>69</sup>“My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” – Shelley 1994, p. 120.

<sup>70</sup>In this respect, *A Vindication of Natural Diet* can be seen as a contribution to the same political movements that the *Seditious Meetings Act* sought to suppress.

<sup>71</sup>For an in-depth discussion of Percy Shelley’s vegetarianism and its relation to the literary work of both Shelleys see Morton 1994. William Godwin was also an opponent of Malthusian theory which he responded to in his *Of Population: An Enquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind, Being an Answer to Mr. Malthus’s Essay on That Subject*, published in 1820. Notably, Edmund Burke was opposed to state subsidy to prevent the poor from starving, see Neocleous 2004, p. 81.

The diet, it was believed, would enable the lower classes to become healthier, stronger and more able to assert themselves. As we see in the creature, he far exceeds the physical strength and capacity of ordinary humans in part due to his ability to survive on a “coarser diet” than that of his bourgeois creator.<sup>72</sup> Somewhere between primitive myth and technological dream he is both a modern version of the *Grugach*, working in secret for the De Lacey family gathering fire wood for them, and a prefiguration of the Soviet *Udarnik*, the super-productive ‘shock worker’.<sup>73</sup> It is this fear of the creature’s potential to over-reach ordinary human production that haunts Frankenstein and leads him to refuse the creature’s plea for a female companion, lest they should procreate and breed some new super-race.

Like the greatest landscapes of the high Alps and Arctic in which the creature finds a home, his scale and strength are evocations of a central aesthetic of the Gothic and Romantic genres: that of the sublime. It was Edmund Burke who had most inspired interest in the sublime and for all their opposition to his moral and political views, many in Shelley’s circle embraced the sublime as an expressive medium for their own ideas. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Burke defined the sublime as that which gave aesthetic pleasure in ways that were contrary to the beautiful. Whilst our sense of the beautiful arose from an experience of harmony and order that could be appreciated in terms of our faculties of rational comprehension, the sublime was that which exceeded and overwhelmed these. We respond to the beautiful in reposed contemplation from which we derive pleasure, yet the pleasure of the sublime begins in fervour, astonishment and terror. The very emotions through which Victor Frankenstein responds to his own creation.

Burke’s response to the French Revolution evokes the sublime whilst simultaneously opening up a deep fissure between his political and aesthetic philosophies. For here were events that inspired the very reactions that he had accorded to the sublime, and that many around him were embracing as such, yet which were born in the politics of a future society that he could not endorse. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* he sought to heal this fissure by translating these events from the order of the sublime into a new aesthetic category. The sublime resolved from terror into pleasure by the fact of our remaining distant from it, like a glacial mountain that towers on the horizon but which we do not dare to climb. When such distance

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<sup>72</sup>“... I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon a coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame, my stature far exceeded theirs.” — Shelley 1994, p. 96.

<sup>73</sup>The *Grugach* is a figure in Scottish folklore and fairy culture, a kind of benign giant who would watch over a community in secret and perform extraordinary tasks for them. The shock workers were a movement in the Stalinist-era Soviet states championing highly-productive workers, the most famous of these being Alexey Stakhanov.

collapses, however, that which at first may have appeared sublime became *monstrous*. In Burke's eyes, this is what became of those who joined the spirit of the revolution. Burke decries the constitution of the new republic as "a monstrous medley of all conditions, tongues, and nations," an unnatural assemblage like "the Hieroglyphick Monsters of Aegypt. Dog in Head and Man in Body ..."<sup>74</sup> Only true royalty could be sublime, the revolutionaries were merely an unruly, barbaric mob.<sup>75</sup>

Ruskin drew from and admired Burke's writings, yet had initially rejected the notion of the sublime as a distinct aesthetic feeling. Contrary to the position put forward by Burke in which the sublime and beautiful stood apart as separate qualities, for Ruskin everything was subordinate to the beautiful through which the moral value of the good was imparted to Creation. Yet, as he sought to demonstrate the significance of Turner's painting and those wilder natural landscapes that were the most removed from those of the industrial, he increasingly accepted and gave prominence to the sublime in itself.

For both Ruskin and Burke the sublime was an experience only accessible to those with sufficient education and refinement. The educated and ruling classes could perceive the sublime precisely because they could withdraw and distance themselves from the contingencies of life. Only a painter, such as Turner, trained in the Academy could capture the sublime, whilst the work of a self-trained lower-class engraver, such as Thomas Bewick, whilst admirable, could be no more than a picturesque outgrowth of his environment.<sup>76</sup> With nothing to separate them from nature or the materials on which they worked, the lower classes could be led to aspire towards 'higher' models but could not achieve the necessary distance that aesthetic awareness required.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Burke had argued that it was only in the pain and physical stress of labour that the lower classes could glimpse some awareness of the true sublime that lay in the power and terror instilled by a royal authority that they would never possess.<sup>78</sup> What Burke offers the worker is not sublime but merely exhaustion, fatigue, a metabolic rift that drains the soul. Nothing noble here.

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<sup>74</sup>From *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and letters by Burke, quoted in Neocleous 2004, pp. 71, 77.

<sup>75</sup>For a detailed discussion of these themes in Burke see Neocleous 2004.

<sup>76</sup>See *Ariadne Florentina*, Works XXII, discussed in Smith 2006, p. 127.

<sup>77</sup>"Now, in the make and nature of every man, however rude or simple, whom we employ in manual labour, there are some powers for better things; some tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought.... But they cannot be strengthened, unless we are content to take them in their feebleness, and unless we prize and honour them in their imperfection.... And this is what we have to do with all our labourers." — Ruskin (10.191) quoted in Unrau 1981, p. 43.

<sup>78</sup>"As common labour, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a mode of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system." — Burke 1987, p. 136.

The craftsman is a creation of Ruskin's, an expression of his desire "to form a single living spirit" sewn together from the fragmented bodies of industrial workers and his personal reveries upon the remains of Gothic Venice. Whilst differing deeply in their approaches, Ruskin is not so different from Frankenstein, for both ultimately do not love their creations in themselves. Ruskin may pity the industrial worker, like the navvies of Furness, and wish to redeem their labour as craft but, like Frankenstein, he does not believe his creation capable of discovering its own truth or realising its own potential and he does not wish to give it autonomy. Ruskin's craftsman is every bit as artificial as Frankenstein's creature and Smith's factory worker and every bit as alienated from its own work and society.

The moment of intercession between factory and cathedral that Ruskin once envisioned has passed. The conditions that previously brought craft and *kraft* into co-determination are bifurcating and the distance between man and nature upon which they were predicated are collapsing in various indeterminate ways. We appear now to be caught between two seemingly opposed conceptions of a post-industrial sublime. Each follows from a particular trajectory that we can trace through the figurations of Frankenstein and Ruskin. At one extreme the notion of a re-making of the human within the unbridled energies of a techno-capitalist sublime heralded in certain forms of Trans-humanism and in the Dark Enlightenment of Nick Land. At the other, the dream of re-forming our inner subjectivities into perfectly crafted souls at one with nature as espoused in certain Primitivist ecologies and the Golden Dawn of John Michael Greer. One looking forwards the other back, but each the political child of Edmund Burke.<sup>79</sup> These trajectories offer us a choice between a letting-free of productive forces that ultimately envelops and contains us versus an enforced ennoblement that is ultimately as constraining and reductive as the industrial world it was called upon to oppose. Neither is the hard realism nor authentic tradition it claims to be, for all the challenge they claim to pose each is merely a politics of consolation.

There is no consoling denouement in Shelley's original telling of *Frankenstein*. The point of the story, after all, is that the creature is neither accepted nor vanquished. It must instead seek its own space outside of human society. In this sense the creature is an emblem of rejection. It is itself rejected by its creator and all whom it encounters but it also rejects the worlds to which they belong and seeks some other trajectory that shatters the horizon of possibilities within which those worlds were constructed.

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<sup>79</sup>Burke is a key reference in much of Land's recent writings on the Dark Enlightenment and Neoreaction. Greer describes his relation to Burke in <https://archdruidmirror.blogspot.co.uk/2017/06/a-few-notes-on-burkean-conservatism.html>. A meeting point between Land and Greer's ideas might be found in concepts from Nick Steves that Land has called *Deep Heritage* and which have strong parallels to both Ruskinian and Primitivist cultural politics: <https://nickbsteves.wordpress.com/2013/05/14/reactionary-consensus-ii-deep-heritage/>



Where does this rejection come from? It does not come from claims upon an identity denied within the norms of existing society, nor does it come from an appeal to an imagined future or past, nor from the position of an exclusively human political subject. This is a rejection from sensate, self-directing matter and the play of its potential forces. Able to understand and respond to human society yet neither admitted into the realms of the human or social, the creature becomes a kind of nature-after-man, nature that has lived through science, a science that is no longer a knowledge exclusive to humanity. The creature reveals a nature that Frankenstein and his world cannot accept. One that undermines the distinction between the human and the bee but does not seek to reduce that which is less 'cultivated' to mere animality.<sup>80</sup> Which refigures the relations of making and matter, craft and *kraft*, in ways that question what is necessary and not merely consoling to us. This is what Shelley's tale points towards. In this sense it is perhaps better that we do refer to the creature as the 'monster' for it is that which is de-monstrative, that which is exceptional to our ordinary perceptions and representations.<sup>81</sup> That which shows the opening of potential for things to be other than they are now. That the future possibility may come from unexpected sources. That it may take a form that we struggle to recognize and comprehend and yet which we must love in order to let it live.

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<sup>80</sup>Tim Ingold's writing has done much to challenge this distinction, see the various essays in Ingold 2000.

<sup>81</sup>This is what Donna Haraway describes as the "promise of monsters," see Haraway 2004.

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