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"If I Could but See a Day of it": On the Aesthetic Potential for Belonging and Action

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the potential freedom revealed within aesthetic experiences of beauty can encourage a utopian form of belonging that could help materially realize this potential. Drawing upon Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, while aesthetics offers the occasion to imagine freedom, aesthetics alone cannot make us free. To try to instantiate aesthetic freedom, as Herbert Marcuse notes, is utopian: imagining freedom in an unjust world produces dissatisfaction with reality. Thereby, aesthetic occasions can heighten a longing for the material manifestation of the potential freedom it glimpses. Under the right conditions, such longing encourages be-longing, (and be-longing encourages longing), a deep feeling that can excite wills to act in concert to refashion the world inspired by its image. To demonstrate this, I first read Schiller to display the possibility for aesthetic experiences to offer us back our freedom *in potentia*. Then, following Marcuse, I explain the utopian character of this aesthetic freedom, as it longs for broader materialization that is not-yet existent. Finally, I sketch how this longing can encourage be-longing through a reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry for the Future*.

Keywords: aesthetics, potential freedom, imagination, utopia, political possibility.

"One might then look from the novel or painting
or film out at the world."
(Clune 69)

"The more strongly an alternative world is imagined, the more
it becomes a viable candidate as a successor to our present."
(Pears 15)

"Poetry is a prophetic foretelling of the future at the boundaries
between two worlds, the worlds of dream and reality."
(Kocbek)

1.

In his essay "The Poet," Emerson links the words of poets not only to the traditional aesthetic categories, such as the beautiful or the sublime, but, also, to the political notion of freedom: "The poets are thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, 'Those who are free throughout the world.' *They are free and they make free*" (emphasis mine).[1] There is something about poets and their words that have both aesthetic and political significance. The poets, by being concerned with aesthetics, are free, and spread freedom through their words. This freedom is both embedded into the human condition as a possibility and can be realized through one's actions. More precisely for the purposes of this essay, the worlds glimpsed through poetry offer windows into *potential* freedom, at once of this world and of other possible ones, i.e. as no-longer, not-yet, could be, and might never be. When so many do not feel that they are as free as they could or should be, this poetic freedom need not end at the conclusion of its poetic verse. Instead, it can "spill over," co-mingle into, or refract back into everyday life, and this can have material consequences. Like the cave dweller in Plato's famous allegory, Emerson's poet is not content with being free as an individual, nor with merely glimpsing freedom and leaving others unfree, but also shares this freedom with others to realize it as broadly and completely as possible into the

[1] The title of this essay is inspired by William Morris's utopian novel, *News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest*. Before waking up in a future-revolutionary utopia, the protagonist yearns to see what the revolution would look like after a spirited, though unproductive conversation with members of "the League." Morris writes of the protagonist: "After a brief discomfort, caused by disgust with himself for having lost his temper . . . he found himself musing on the subject-matter of discussion, but still discontentedly and unhappily. '*If I could but see a day of it*,' he said to himself, 'if I could but see it!'" (44).

world at large. Poets, then, are not only the unacknowledged legislators of the world, as Percy Bysshe Shelley reminds us, but they also need not only legislate in a prefigurative way: *poetry frees*. If we think of poetry broadly to include other arts of appearance, then it is political insofar as they shape our remembrances of the past, our understanding of the present, and our imagination of possible futures that orient and motivate our actions.

However, this does not satisfactorily delineate how poetry, and art more generally, can "free" in an insufficiently free world and how these words, as Janice A. Radway writes, "might make talk walk," or, put differently, translate the utopian impulses of aesthetic experience into political transformation (18) To this end, I return to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* to sketch a philosophical link between aesthetic experiences and political freedom *in potentia*. Although aesthetics independent of additional action cannot make us free, I argue that they offer an occasion to imagine freedom more broadly. Broadened notions and feelings of freedom need not remain isolated to an aesthetic experience itself: they can refract back into everyday life and contribute to a desire to instantiate such potential freedom more generally. Drawing upon Herbert Marcuse's book *Eros and Civilization*, and Ramsey Eric Ramsey's essay "A Politics of Dissatisfaction: The Heretical Marxisms of Reich and Bloch," I argue that attempts to instantiate such potential freedom are utopian: imagining freedom in an unjust world *develops* dissatisfactions with reality. Aesthetic occasions can heighten a longing for the material manifestation of the potential freedom it glimpses. Finally, drawing upon Kim Stanley Robinson's utopian novel *The Ministry for the Future*, I imagine how, under the right conditions, such utopian longing encourages utopian be-longing, (and be-longing encourages longing), an intense feeling that can excite wills to act in concert to refashion the world.

2.

To begin, aesthetic experiences can provide the occasion for us to realize our potential freedom. As Schiller explains: "Although [beauty] only offers us the possibility of becoming human beings, it is to our own free will to decide how far we wish to make this freedom a reality" (148). Aesthetic experiences do not, in a straightforward sense, make us free, as if, for example, reading *The Ministry for the Future* would make me free. Indeed, such a simplistic bourgeois conception of freedom as "I do what I like" is precisely one which I think aesthetic experiences could help broaden and nuance. Although this is not the space to fully elaborate a contrasting

notion of freedom, for now, it suffices to say that such a notion follows something more like Hannah Arendt's idea of freedom ("What is Freedom?"). This notion emphasizes freedom as the manifestation of new beginnings in the world, the attempt to enact principles irreducible to pure utilitarian motivations or outcomes, and paradoxically, being both a necessary possibility of human existence *and* only capable of being so through ever-renewed performances. In contrast to a simplistic freedom, then, I experience a deeper kind of freedom when reading *Ministry* that is to varying degrees possible within the world at large. Aesthetics, then, can reveal the possibilities for freedom within a particular historical context and, more generally, the character of this existential freedom inherent within the human condition.

For Schiller, art reveals potential freedom because of the character of our aesthetic relation to a work of art and because of its ability to simultaneously speak to us as individuals and in general as human beings. He writes: "Beauty is indeed form, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time life, because we feel it" (164). Approaching something aesthetically, then, overcomes conventional conceptual divisions that people usually inhabit, e.g., thinking v. feeling, individual v. community, ideality v. materiality, etc. When I look at Henri Matisse's *The Joy of Life*, for example, my senses are engaged by the manifold colors and curves that compose the work. Yet, at the same time, my thought is engaged by the opening within the dancers' circle and possible stories of the figures. Perhaps most importantly for my argument, this painting engages my imagination through this scene to consider what kind of freedom this world would have and glimpse what it would be like. My interpretation of this painting, then, simultaneously employs my faculties that are otherwise often thought of as at odds with one another. This "free play" of our faculties, i.e. the dynamic engagement of our human powers, is itself exemplary of a more complete freedom glimpsed within aesthetic experiences. In a word, being free is something *like* looking at a painting: the way one inhabits poetry, literature, or film hints at a broader way of being free.

In addition to the potential freedom that aesthetic experiences glimpse, crucially, these experiences of potential freedom are not private, subjective, nor merely sensual, though they may feel personal and appeal to the senses. Following Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, if the pleasure from a beautiful experience is truly beautiful, rather than agreeable or charming (i.e. stemming primarily from the senses, e.g., the pleasure from drinking a cup of coffee), then this means that such a pleasure is communicable to others. Here, I follow Communication studies scholars, such as Gina L. Ercolini (*Kant's Philosophy of Communication*) and Scott Stroud (*Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric*),

who interpret Kantian philosophy for human communication. Such aesthetic communicability makes possible not only detached or limited understanding, but also that others might come to feel similarly to one another through communication. Kant explains: "The universal *communicability* of a pleasure already includes in its concept that this must not be a pleasure of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but one of *reflection*; and thus aesthetic art . . . is one that has the reflecting power of judgment and not mere sensation as its standard" (185). In other words, aesthetic pleasure is produced through the *reflection* upon beauty, e.g., a painting or novel, and this reflection can be communicated and shared with others in a way that is different than, for example, sharing a cookie. (Indeed, when one reflects upon a work of art, this process of reflection is similar to and can be a forerunner to conversing with another.) This communicability is key for Kant's aesthetics because it means that aesthetics are *public*, not private, and, I would add, that it is something that one can argue about in a way one cannot about matters of agreeability. No argument could persuade someone that the coffee tastes good *to them* if it does not in a way that one might be persuaded to find beauty in a painting like *Joy of Life* if, at first, they find it grotesque (though without recourse to proofs to compel agreement). Kant later describes this as the ability "to argue [*streiten*] about taste (but not to dispute [with recourse to proof, *disputieren*])" (214). Therefore, that one *judges* a work of art to be beautiful places this on the terrain of interpretation: neither my senses (nor adherence to a concept) dictate my judgment. Art's communicability, then, allows for the possibility that it may be reflected upon and judged in public, i.e. that one's first impressions may not be their last.

One can see the philosophical underpinnings of a more harmonious way of being-with-one-another through art's propensity toward sociability. Kant goes as far as to say that the ability to communicate about art with others "promotes the cultivation of the mental powers of sociable communication" (185). Where Schiller draws out the possible [human] consequences of an aesthetic education, Kant highlights the foundation that makes this possible through the way art indicates and promotes a propensity toward sociability. That one can simultaneously speak with others about *The Joy of Life* as an individual and as a possible representative of a group itself points to the profound interconnectedness of being-in-the-world with others. Since Kant identifies that there is only empirical interest in aesthetics within society, aesthetics provides both a baseline foundation of human sociability and, in the way that one can "woo and court" others, also offers an example of being-with-one-another that might provide an opportunity to think (and think differently) about what freedom looks like with others in society (176). Contrary to the popular

notion that art is individual and that reflection upon it is personal or purely subjective, then, the idea that sociability is at the basis of aesthetic reflection is paramount. Aesthetic sociability means that potential "connections" between people are already latent, with Kant even aspirationally claiming that "[i]n [aesthetic] taste egoism is overcome" (qtd. in Arendt, *Lectures* 67). The ability and potential desire to reflect upon art with others are the aesthetic buds that, given the right conditions, may flower into political action.

Building upon Kant's aesthetics, Schiller links the public character of beauty to happiness and to tempering our sense of limitations: "Beauty alone do we enjoy at once as individual and as genus, i.e., as representatives of the human genus . . . Beauty alone makes the whole world happy and each and every being forgets its limitations while under its spell" (177). Akin to the simultaneous aesthetic engagement of thought and feeling, a work of art feels personal but also can speak to others in shared ways (and this sharedness need not be identical). This communicability is present not only by the fact that pronouncement "this is beautiful" can be understood by others, but also in the sharable spellbinding effects of a work of art. This is another feature of potential freedom aesthetic experiences can reveal: there is no necessary nor inherent antagonism between individuality and generality. For example, I can feel attracted to *Joy of Life* in a way akin to others without losing myself in this kinship. Indeed, the painting itself suggests a harmonious way of being-with-one-another while retaining individuality.

The political potential of aesthetic reflection, however, need not end at the point of beauty's ability to be enjoyable as an individual and as genus, nor its propensity to human sociability: one of Schiller's contributions to Kantian aesthetics is to link this public quality of beauty to human happiness and to easing human limitations. Breaking down the inappropriate barriers between public/private, thought/feeling, and idea/material makes us more happy and uplifts our feeling of possibility. If one cause of unhappiness is produced by overstraining one "half" of our selves, e.g., work that taxes thinking, at the expense of atrophying the other "half" of our selves, e.g., feeling, then these experiences momentarily restore the balance of these aspects of our being. By appropriately exercising the full powers of the psyche, aesthetic experiences can relieve the feeling of being a brain without concern for the body, or a body without concern for the brain. Although, as Ramsey, citing Bloch, reminds us, we are still resisted in the material realm and constrained by thinkability in the ideational realm, beauty helps us forget the artificial constraints and limitations created by a society that privileges, for example, reason over emotion (Ramsey, "A Politics of Dissatisfaction" 29).

3.

Given the pressing needs to realize broader forms of actual political freedom, one must justify the value of this vision of potential freedom as an avenue for actual freedom. In other words, what, if any value, do utopian glimpses into alternative ways of being offer to redress actual material conditions? In short, aesthetic experiences can display a potential freedom that at once glimpses positive alternative ways of being-in-the-world *and* can produce or reinforce a kind of dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs. Here, I draw upon Marcuse's account of the preserved "memory" of freedom held within art through its link to fantasy and imagination. Marcuse writes: "Like imagination, which is its constitutive faculty, the realm of aesthetics is essentially 'unrealistic,' it has retained its freedom at the price of being ineffective in the reality" (172). Schiller's account already provides a link between potential freedom and aesthetics. Marcuse's account, here, then, offers a political assessment about the effectiveness of this potential freedom for liberatory projects, one that he values for its preservation of freedom, but not for its political transformative effects. (Even if one does not subscribe to the idea that aesthetics are *essentially* ineffective in reality, one of the reasons they require justification as important is because they are often viewed as ineffective.) Yet, within Marcuse's framework, I think that this potential freedom is not inherently ineffective if, with the imagination, it links up to a dissatisfaction with the comparative unfreedom of the wider world that socially shared aesthetic experiences can provide occasions for. Insofar as potential freedom could manifest into forms of actual freedom, the scaffolding for which lies within dissatisfaction, then, in principle, art is not necessarily ineffective for change. This is because experiences of potential freedom can expand existing dissatisfactions, (or generate new ones), to bridge potential freedom glimpsed into materialized freedom. In essence, art *can* be transformational, and this transformation need not end at, for example, the boundary of a canvas or cover of a book.

One way in which art can be transformational, within Marcuse's framework, is its link to fantasy and imagination. Indeed, these faculties are key to the kind of potentially effective dissatisfaction because they are less constrained by reality while still maintaining a connection to reality. As Marcuse explains: "Phantasy (imagination) retains the structure and tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, prior to its becoming an 'individual' set off against other individuals" (142) If fantasy is still connected to the existing reality but not wholly subservient to it, then fantasy can offer enough distance from reality to judge it, yet fantasy can also preserve enough connection to reality to change it. In other words, drawing upon cultural studies scholar Stephen Duncombe, fantasy and

imagination can simultaneously operate within the criteria of *desirability and plausibility* (10). By straddling between these criteria (criteria that need not be contradictory), the potential freedom glimpsed within art can produce a dissatisfaction that does not only preserve possible freedom but can also promote actual freedom.

Of course, the difficulty is *usually* (though not always) believed to be the plausibility of liberatory visions, not the desirability. One hears a version of this in statements like "it sounds good in theory but does not work in practice." Marcuse's argument that art is not taken seriously enough to prompt political change suggests the power of what Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* calls the reality principle, whose guiding criterion of plausibility tends to be conservative. It is interesting to note that Freud views artistic creation as a kind of weak harmony between the drive to pleasure and the limits of reality: "This ['higher and finer'] kind of satisfaction—the *artist's joy in creating*, in fashioning forth the products of his *imagination* . . . has a special quality [for avoiding suffering]" (31, emphasis mine). However, plausibility is not inherently conservative, and is indeed necessary for liberatory projects to have a chance at success. One can see this even within Freud's pessimistic identification of artistic (and scientific) exploration as a strategy to ward off suffering (and perhaps even hope for happy hours) within the constraints of reality. Insofar as art is concerned with what is possible, it can speak to desirability *and* plausibility, and reinterpret what it means for something to be plausible. (Indeed, far-right projects seem to be becoming less plausible with this having little effect on either their desirability or political potency for many. This precisely points to the importance of desirability for political projects in tandem with plausibility.) As Marcuse notes, "[p]hantasy plays a most decisive function in the total mental structure: it *links* the deepest unconscious with the highest products of consciousness (art), the dream with the reality" (141, emphasis mine). On Marcuse's account, art is legible to both our desire for liberation and ability to assess the plausibility of possibilities. This is because it links these seemingly disparate aspects of life: unconscious and conscious, dream and reality, etc. (This is also why conservative art exists, is legible as plausible, and why it can reorient or sustain particular desires.)

Since, as the Surrealist Manifesto reminds us, imagination is also concerned with the criteria of plausibility,[2] then, drawing upon Ramsey

[2] I refer to the following within Andre Breton's first 1924 Surrealist Manifesto: "To reduce imagination to slavery—even if one's so-called happiness is at stake—means to violate all that one finds in one's inmost self of ultimate justice. *Imagination alone tells me what can be*" (qtd. in Marcuse 149).

Eric Ramsey's "A Politics of Dissatisfaction," I argue that art can help "potentialize the potential" of particular possibilities in conjunction with making them appear desirable (and the existing state of affairs or other possible situations appear to be undesirable). Building upon Ernst Bloch's ontology of possibility in *The Principle of Hope*, Ramsey explains: "Potentializing the potential is not to do the thing to be done . . . rather it is bringing the possibility of something's capacity-of-being-done out from under the sedimented and reified naturalness of business as usual" (35). Actualizing possibility requires activating possibility, i.e. possibilities must be understood as possibilities, however nascent this understanding may be, if they are to be realized. When art potentializes potential freedom to create, for example, more just gender dynamics, then this potential at once draws upon the criteria of plausibility and desirability, ideally displaying that something *ought* to be done otherwise and that something *could* also be done otherwise. This makes dissatisfactions more potent because one is more likely to interpret them as legitimate.

If art, as Hannah Arendt describes in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, can "woo and court" people to the desirability and plausibility of a particular possibility, then such a possibility can manifest or aggravate dissatisfaction with the status quo (72). Combining the feeling of potential freedom latent within art with existing dissatisfactions and the imagination of alternate possibilities accentuates the potency of one's dissatisfactions. Often, dissatisfactions are dismissed on the grounds of desirability, e.g., "you ought not feel dissatisfied by your class position, it's on the basis of merit," or, on the grounds of plausibility, e.g., "there's nothing one can do to adequately redress racial discrimination without making it worse." Instead, if the longing for something better is considered desirable and plausible, then, dependent on material conditions, this puts it closer to what Bloch calls the "real possible" or the "not-yet" (Ramsey, "A Politics of Dissatisfaction" 29). By moving closer to the kind of possibility more ready to be realized, a more plausible dissatisfaction with reality could be the ideational beginnings of transformative cooperation and action (especially when coupled with the desire for something better).

If one grants that one can and ought to hone our dissatisfactions with reality and channel them toward actualizing appropriate possibilities, one still must justify why art is an appropriate place where this might occur, as opposed to other places, such as within banal experiences or with ordinary objects. For instance, if mundane experiences of imagination are, admittedly, much more common, then it might appear that this would be a more fecund ground to prompt and hone dissatisfactions. Although I hold onto, *in principle*, the possibility that almost any experience can have this kind of disclosive power, it can only do so if it is seen "from

the right light," e.g., poetically. The problem with mundane experiences of imagination, in part, stems from their ordinariness, averageness, and leveled-down character which make it difficult (though not impossible) for them to provide new perspective. Indeed, Martin Heidegger's description of "the they" (*das Man*) offers insight into this leveling of the mundane:

> We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the "great mass" the way *they* withdraw . . . The they . . . prescribes the kind of being of everydayness. (123)

Mundane imagination, banal experiences, and ordinary objects are unlikely to produce the kind of dissatisfactions that could manifest into the transformative cooperation and action necessary to realize greater freedom because they are, too often, already judged as *they* would see it, seen as *anyone* else would. The everydayness, averageness, and leveled character of the they, which is how one usually exists (and, on Heidegger's account, how we mostly exist) is so powerful that the glimpses of potential freedom that reside within them would require monumental effort and desire (for most) to reflect upon. Given the lack of freedom and the injustices in the world, and the myriad of ways in which people habituate them, places where present habits tend to perpetuate themselves are not fecund for bringing the potential freedom of the human condition to the fore. Thus, any place that could glimpse the potential freedom in a more vibrant way must have a meaningful potential to contend with the everydayness, averageness, and leveling of the they (even if still quite difficult).

Reflection upon art offers a more fecund ground for the honing of dissatisfactions that could transform into action because it offers a way to *yield* to the painting, novel, film, etc. In other words, at its best, art can keep the they at the appropriate distance, or more precisely, be in an appropriate relationship to the they and viewers and readers of an artwork. Here, I am borrowing Ramsey's use of "yield" as one appropriate part of the interpretation of art ("Before the Work of Art" 94). In contrast to the habitual character of the mundane that draws one *into* the everyday, Ramsey explores why art can be different:

> [When art addresses us], we are *drawn out* of the time of the day-to-day, out of ourselves in our everydayness—thus, out of the ways we are accustomed to making sense of things. By being drawn out of the time of the everyday, *there is a chance to be drawn into something else*—i.e., into the ongoing meaningfulness—in a manner that makes us aware of it and aware that our being there is a site of this disclosure. (93, emphasis mine)

Even at their best, ordinary experiences tend to draw us in, rather than out, unless we already have a broadened perspective or child-like wonder, e.g., it takes a poetic comportment for Walt Whitman to not be able to know what grass is and find awe in the child's question, "What is the grass?"[3] Following Ramsey, then, one feature of art, is that it also provides an occasion for reflection with the promise that some new perspective or understanding may be gleaned deeper as an outgrowth of the encounter. Although an interpreter may be called to provide much effort in the task of interpretation, an artwork can be a co-creator of interpretation in a way that, though still difficult, is more accessible for glimpsing potential freedom than the banal. With effort from viewers and readers, artworks may even maintain an appropriate relevance to the averageness of the they to help readers stay with the potential long enough to better assess its plausibility and desirability.

As my description hints at, art is not suitable to glimpse at potential freedom because this potential is easy to glimpse: the above passage I cite from Heidegger explicitly mentions how the they already interprets literature and art in average ways, levels them, and makes them accessible within the everyday. To confront this challenge, eminent art, despite all the odds, can still find ways to beckon the interpreter in and encourage her to stay with the work. By eminent art, I do not intend to valorize works simply for their age, influence, fame, status as a marker of social capital, etc. Such valorization is precisely a way *one* [*das man*] often praises art ("Oh, look at that Matisse"). Instead, by eminent art, I simply mean works that tend to resonate with their viewers or readers in such a way that excites the imagination. As Ramsey explains of this possibility of art, "[w]e turn to art because we need imagination to understand who we are . . . paintings as works of art do the work of art by embodying a futurity that sets into relief our interpretive finitude" ("Before the Work of Art" 101). The hint of an eminent work, here, is that if one glimpses into its potentiality, yields to it, grapples with this, then truths can be revealed that can change lives. Irrespective of form or genre, eminent art provides material rich enough to make the effort, for example, to imagine a more just world, worthwhile. Thereby, they can hone dissatisfaction in a way that is irreducible to other means of persuasion, e.g., pamphlets, manifestos, orations, because of the way eminent art challenges the interpretations of the they (e.g., what Schiller describes as an idolatry of utility), if one stays with the work.

[3] This refers to the following passage in Walt Whitman's 1855 poem, "Song of Myself": "A child said *What is the grass*? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is any more than he."

4.

In this final section, I investigate how this more individual longing for a better possible world can transform into a kind of utopian be-longing to maximize the possibilities for realization through a reading of Robinson's *Ministry*. Of course, just as no aesthetic experience is purely individual or private, the longings that may develop into belonging themselves are always already social. This reading of *Ministry* also serves as an example of how the interpretation of a work of art can glimpse at, deepen, and communicate the potential freedom of the human condition within a work of art to inspire political action.

With this understanding, this section explores how these latent social connections may become more manifest into concrete political action with one another. By utopian, I follow utopian-studies scholar Lyman Tower Sargent's description: "Utopianism is a philosophy of hope, and it is characterized by the transformation of a generalized hope into a description of a non-existent society" (8). Utopian belonging, for my project, refers to a coming together of dissatisfied people to manifest a world inspired by the hope for something better, e.g., something more akin to the potential freedom one can experience in art. Although I base my interpretation of utopian belonging within the science-fiction world of *Ministry*, I do not think this undercuts its ethos: insofar as this literary utopia resonates with possible action, it serves as an *example* to orient our thinking. Indeed, English scholar Robert Markley goes as far as to say: "Robinson's fiction makes a strong case for seeing science fiction, and not traditional literary realism, as the truly significant genre for our current moment in human and planetary history" (2). Or, as I cite Kocbek in the opening epigraphs, "[p]oetry is a prophetic foretelling of the future at the boundaries between two worlds, the worlds of dream and reality." The *boundary* condition of poetry, literary utopias, and art in general, between dream and reality is not just a weakness: its prophetic strength lies in the possibility of honing dissatisfactions with reality, coalescing around common dissatisfactions, and encouraging action inspired and motivated by the possibilities presented in the novel.

Ministry prophesizes that banal dissatisfactions can transform into radical ones, given the right circumstances. In a near future world that wrestles with the environmental and political-economic challenges of climate change, Robinson imagines a yellow-vest-esque French uprising. In accord with Ramsey's description of a pedagogy around dissatisfaction, one of the character's dissatisfactions in the novel begins much more modest than visionary:

> I myself was a kid, *the main thing that got me out there was how much I hated school*, where I always had been made to feel stupid. I was slotted into the bottom classes early on and my life was sealed at that point, on a track to servitude, *even though I knew I had real thoughts, real feelings*. (Robinson 245, emphasis mine)

Simply hating poor schooling alone is not enough to manifest a robust and radical dissatisfaction that could link up with others into liberatory projects. *But it is a start*. In contrast to the character's school, the street uprisings became the classroom that potentialized the belief that life could be different and better, confirmed the legitimacy of the character's thoughts and feelings, and translated this feeling into co-feeling and coordinated action. Yet, without the hatred of poor schooling, being made to feel stupid, and being slotted to servitude, then it is difficult to imagine this character participating in the uprising. The education that the uprising provides in this case, then, is the education of their dissatisfaction into a form of action in concert with others. This action in concert with others recasts the object of oppression and increases the likelihood of transforming the collective situation into something else (Ramsey, "A Politics of Dissatisfaction" 36). Under the right conditions, in this case a nation-wide political movement, the narrower dissatisfaction can link up with a more robust dissatisfaction; the "real thoughts and real feelings" are confirmed and broadened to incorporate and develop the dissatisfactions of others.

At this point, the utopian character of the belonging is still unclear. Indeed, there is an impressionistic quality to utopian belonging: how the form of dissatisfaction takes shape into coordinated material movements can be ambiguous. Robinson writes of the uprising's narrator: "But for sure what happened then was the most intense and important feeling I could ever live in this existence . . . *solidarity*. We could see so many others with us, all on each others' side" (246, emphasis mine). In contrast with pervasive feelings of loneliness and busyness under capitalist life (loneliness to such a degree that the US surgeon general recently described it as an epidemic), working together with others for the common good is a profoundly attractive proposition. Indeed, one of the characters of Edward Bellamy's classic utopia, *Looking Backwards*, identifies solidarity as the essential difference between Victorian and eutopian civilization:

> If I were to give you, in one sentence, a key to what may seem the mystery of our [eutopian] civilization as compared with that of your age . . . it is the fact that the *solidarity* of the race and the brotherhood of man, which to you were but fine phrases, are, to our thinking and feeling, *ties as real and as vital as physical fraternity*. (64, emphasis mine)

Coupling Robinson and Bellamy's descriptions of solidarity, solidarity has a complex interrelation between the idea of togetherness and its material manifestations through action. Similar to the social character and communicability of aesthetic experience, any solidarity is built from and upon the fundamental existential feature of being-with one another, even if such ways of being-with one another manifest more as deficient modes of concern, e.g., being-without-one-another, passing-one-another-by, and not-mattering-to-one-another (Heidegger 118). Utopian belonging, in its more prefigurative moments, appears more ideational than material. However, this feeling of solidarity before it manifests in action is also essential: for millions would not take to the streets in concert, and, as Robinson later writes, work *harder* than they did as wage slaves for the sake of hope for a better world, unless there were common dreams between people (278). In other words, like the possibility for sharedness in aesthetics without identicality, utopian belonging, gathered around simultaneously common and disparate hopes, can manifest in different forms in the present, from extraordinary uprisings to everyday kindnesses.

We can never know what will trigger dissatisfactions into action (thus how important potentializing as much potential for change as possible). This is why honing longings and dissatisfactions into forms of belonging, such as through art's potential freedom, is essential. Returning to Robinson, he describes the 21st-century French revolution: "I think that's what happened here, *some trigger or combination of triggers*, the extinction of some river dolphin, or another refugee boat going down offshore, who knows, maybe just lost jobs, but suddenly we were all headed to Paris" (245, emphasis mine). The silver lining in the catastrophe we live in is that there will be triggers that could transform banal longings into utopian longing; banal belonging into utopian belonging. These forms of longing and belonging, should they arise, will be profoundly meaningful: amidst the catastrophes to come there can be reversals of what is expected, as the etymology of "catastrophe" reminds us.

One such possible reversal from the present is a feeling of being significant. Amidst a future flooding of Los Angeles, one character in *Ministry* finds *purpose* in helping others in a way she did not find in seeking fame. As this unemployed actress turned impromptu flood relief worker puts it: "Here I was helping people, all of us scared, and my right bicep just screaming, and I kept thinking This is real, this feels good, why again are you trying to be a fucking actress?" (Robinson 278). In these circumstances, even profoundly intense labor becomes profoundly meaningful: helping others feels "real" and "good," even though every conventional metric, including the pain from her body's "screaming right bicep," feels bad. This glimpse into the likely future of flooding and other

climate-related catastrophes displays a source of hope in more people working (and working together) in ways that now tend to appear available only to the most selfless. The utopia of saving the world for all inhabitants of the biosphere (or at least for as many as possible) points to a possible source of profound meaning, even in the most seemingly mundane tasks. Rather than only or necessarily immiserating people, this glimpse allows us to imagine future situations where we can reintroduce and recast the joys and struggle of living with one another.

Made possible in part by the glimpse of potential future offered in novels such as *Ministry*, we can think *ahead* to act in ways that pave the way for these triggers-to-come to channel into anticipatory forms of belonging. One cannot simply wait for the world to become more like the utopian vision glimpsed by poets and utopian literature if they expect it to come to fruition. (Indeed, Emerson reminds us that poetry is also an active force, not a passive vision of what could be. Or, as Kocbek identifies, poetry is at the *boundary* between dream and reality, i.e. it is a dream with consequences for reality and within it.) As Black science-fiction writer Octavia Butler explains in a section entitled "Count on Surprises," "[o]ur tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great influence over this child, even though we cannot control it absolutely. Best to think about it, though. Best to try to shape it into something good." Thinking through the future that *Ministry* prophesizes, then, is not just helpful for seeing a potential future in an abstract sense, but, more importantly, such prophetic imagination can help shape our future toward something better within the here and now. No matter how naïve it may sound to cynical ears, a hope of *Ministry*, and utopian literature in general, is that the imagination of a potential future may help bring something better into fruition, not merely be a momentary venting of dissatisfaction or escape from emptiness or exploitation. Although no single work can provide a blueprint for what one ought to do (nor should one want it to, given the ambiguity and contingency of life), nonetheless, the image of utopian solidarity and meaningfulness of life are but two aspects of this work that can inspire and orient one's own actions, in addition to broadening one's conceptions of what is possible, what is plausible, and what is desirable. Witness *Ministry*'s final prophesy: at once glimpsing our potential freedom, honing dissatisfaction with the world in comparison to the beauty of its words and vision, and a declamation for utopian belonging *par excellence*:

> That we could become something magnificent, or at least interesting. That we began as we still are now, child geniuses. That there is no other home for us than here. That we will cope no matter how stupid things

> get. That all couples are odd couples. That the only catastrophe that can't be undone is extinction. That we can make a good place. That people can take their fate in their hands. That there is no such thing as fate. (Robinson 563)

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