

Foreword

Lisa van Vark

“Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you?” (15) Gordon Comstock, the protagonist of George Orwell’s 1936 *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* viciously asks. By turning down a decent, well-paid job as a copywriter for a low-paid one in a shabby bookshop that only sparsely receives customers, Gordon, an aspiring poet, declares his “war on money” (57) and paves the way for a life dedicated to writing poetry. In this self-inflicted condition of poverty, however, the protagonist finds himself in a nasty position. Although Gordon vehemently loathes money as he regards it as an invention of the bourgeoisie, defying the money-god also deprives him of the inspiration he so desperately needs in his struggle to establish himself as a poet. His only published volume of poetry, *Mice*, hardly sells and the *magnum opus* he is composing—a long poem called *London Pleasures*—does not fare so well either, since the only thing the protagonist can think about is money. “Invention, energy, wit, style, charm,” Gordon sadly grasps, “they’ve all got to be paid for in hard cash” (15). Gordon’s poverty, however, does not merely cause a profound lack of inspiration. His condition stem-

ming from insecure economic circumstances—and, in relation, his ever-growing obsession with (his lack of) money—also seeps into his social life. Abhorred, Gordon exclaims: “how can you make love when you have only eightpence in your pocket?” (172).

Although Gordon’s obsession ultimately turns him into an absurd and deeply comical protagonist, Orwell’s novel does seem to criticise certain social conditions, not in the least the very same conditions in which the novel was written. Orwell himself confessed that this novel came into being not because of artistic motives but because of dire need, as he was desperate for money and had to “turn out something to bring in £100 or so” (Meyers 205). As some of the papers in this issue will emphasise, art and precarity are often closely yet complexly interlinked.

Some of the economic hardships and circumstances voiced in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, however, are also recognisable in this day and age. This year, the International Labour Organisation issued the report “World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2017,” stating that for many emerging and developing countries “chronic-poor quality employment—as represented by high shares of own-account workers and contributing family workers (collectively classified as workers in vulnerable forms of employment) and working poverty—takes centre stage” (1). Not merely emerging and developing countries struggle with ‘vulnerable forms of employment’. Vulnerable or precarious work can be understood as: “the result of employment practices by employers designed to limit or reduce their permanent workforce to a minimum, to maximize their flexibility and to shift risks onto workers. Resulting jobs typically are non-permanent, temporary, casual, insecure, and contingent” (5). These temporary, contingent, and insecure jobs seem to be increasingly prevalent in society nowadays.

Isabell Lorey’s paper “Precarization, Indebtedness, Giving Time,” which opens *Frame* 30.2, departs from exactly these aspects of socio-economic precarity and goes on to investigate precariousness inflicted by neoliberalism, discerning three dimensions of the precarious. Lorey argues that time might offer a necessary escape from capitalism “that exploits all social activities and therefore life itself.” A different time, an “idle time,” is called for. She explores time’s potential to resist mod-

ern capitalism. The relation between neoliberalism and precarity is explored further by Niels Springveld. He discerns two trends in literature related to precariousness: the socio-economic and the socio-ontological. After providing the reader with an overview of the rise of neoliberalism and the precarisation that seems to accompany this surge, Springveld stresses the relevance of discussing these two ‘strands’ of precarity in relation to each other. Drawing from Judith Butler’s political ethics, Springveld argues for a synthesis of the concepts of precarity and precariousness.

The “neoliberal labour condition” is addressed once more by Pascal Gielen and Lara Garcia Diaz in their paper “Precarity as an Artistic Laboratory for Counter-Hegemonic Labour Organization.” Their argument might be seen to form a diptych together with Lorey’s argument, as they suggest that the art field can provide a battleground where “counter-hegemonic responses” can take place. Artistic organisations and cultural institutions, Gielen and Garcia Diaz argue, take the liberty to experiment with counter-hegemonic ideas and strategies where other spaces and practices, such as research journalism and mainstream media, do so less and less. The art field might thus offer a space for resistance to the neoliberal, in which precarity functions “as a point of articulation from where those moments of insubordination can develop.”

In Sieglinde Lemke’s paper, the emphasis shifts from aspects of the ‘precarious life’ to discussions of ‘precarious work’. Lemke, being a researcher of American culture, describes the functionality and necessity of the “precarious gaze.” She does so using Tom Stone’s series *Outsiders*; photographs of homeless people. By way of discussing the voyeuristic gaze and the ethical duty of the self to recognize another (e.g. Levinas), Lemke emphasises that “precarious aesthetics,” because of its unsettling nature, draws the viewer into “a third space between condescension and identification.” In this space, Lemke suggests, could a “culture of carelessness” effectuated by neoliberalism be combatted. The importance of the gaze might also come to mind when reading Monica Jansen’s paper on precarity on stage, in which she investigates the expressions of precarity in the provocative, angry, and extraordinary Italian theatre monologue *La Merda (The Shit)* set during the Berlusconi-era. Jansen ad-

dresses the ways in which the monologue and the main character lay bare the precarious socio-economic conditions of the Italian youth and young women in particular, who are often subject, as Jansen explains, to a form of “slut-shaming.” Referring to Lorey’s *State of Insecurity*, Jansen demonstrates, however, that even amidst these gazes, the female body can become a place of resistance and how, through this play, affect is used by the Teatro Valle Occupato as cultural activism.

The last two papers of *Frame* 30.2 both discuss precarity in literature, albeit in very different ways. In “Terrorism, Precarity, Security: 9/11 Revisited,” Jago Morrison, specialised in contemporary fiction, examines precarity in connection to security in the context of 9/11. He does this through the lens of *Falling Man* written by Don DeLillo in 2007, but, contrary to some of the papers discussed earlier, Morrison does not investigate the work of literature as a site of resistance. In this paper, it is argued that the novel does not directly confront politics but first and foremost revisits the event of 9/11 as a “revelation of precarity, a collective wound” that can best heal “on an acceptance of dependency,” a remarkable take on the event in turbulent times as these, especially when one considers recent developments regarding the European Union and increasing political tensions worldwide.

Gabriel Giorgi’s paper “The Form of the Improper: Clarice Lispector and Precarity” closes the current issue of *Frame* with an analysis of a rather ‘old’ expression of precarity: Clarice Lispector’s 1977 *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*), a classic of Latin American literature. Reminiscent of some of the problems that are expressed in *La Merda*, *A hora da estrela* presents a protagonist plagued by poverty, unemployment, and the notion of being “superfluous”—a striking example of the contemporary precarious worker. Through an in-depth literary analysis, Giorgi demonstrates that the protagonist figures as a forbearing signifier for precariousness that “will shape the contours of the contemporary.”

It is striking to see that activism and the call for resistance shimmers through most of the lines in the excellent and thought-provoking collection of papers presented here that range from considering the theoretical frameworks of precarity to the expression of precarity in art and literature. It seems, then, that the absurd but nevertheless unsettling ex-

clamations of Orwell's protagonist Gordon Comstock, consumed by his lack of money and therefore plunged into an existential crisis, not only echo into this day and age, but are also met with a contemporary reply.

Works cited

International Labour Organization.
“World Employment and Social Outlook:
Trends 2017.” ILO, 2017.
**International Metalworkers’
Federation.** “Survey on Changing
Employment Practices and Precarious
Work.” IMF, 2007.

Meyers, Jeffrey. *A Readers Guide to Orwell.*
Thames and Hudson, 1975.
Orwell, George. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying.*
Secker & Warburg, 1966.