

Pathologizing Procrastination; Or, the Romanticization of Work

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IN THE NEW TELEVISION SERIES *CASTLE*, the protagonist Rick Castle (Nathan Fillion) is a best-selling author of detective novels. While framed as a series of murder mysteries, *Castle* is very much about writing and textuality, peppered as it is by references to the writing process, the non-realism of fiction, the inventiveness of everyday speech, and the clichés of detective fiction in print and on screen. For instance, a victim’s relative tells a police detective trying to comfort her, “I work in Public Relations so you can save your speech because I have heard them all.... I’m the one who drafts all of that pathos after airline crashes and E.Coli poisonings” (“Home is Where”). Where there is writing, it seems, there is procrastination. From the first episode, Castle is berated by his mother for not working enough on his new novel, and in “Hedge Fund Homeboys” a scene opens on Castle asleep in a chair in his spacious New York apartment, as his computer’s screen saver flashes (facing the viewer, and near the centre of the televisual frame), one word at a time, “Should ... Be ... Writing ... You ... Should ... Be ...” He has had a long day, he is already wealthy, he seems to love his work as a novelist, and yet he has set his computer to nag him to keep writing. Procrastination arises here from the imperative of perpetual work for its own sake—for those who live to work instead

of work to live, as the saying goes (and in an episode that focuses, by contrast, on the idle rich). And yet, given the series' thematic interests in textual production, how can Castle escape writing? For this is the peril of being a writer in an age in which computers, as well as pen and paper, are ubiquitous and portable: writing (essays, books, lectures, e-mails—even novels) is always, everywhere, possible, and so every waking minute is potentially a minute in which we have to answer the admonition, “You should be writing,” with “not now.”

Procrastination arguably emerges in relation to writing in the late eighteenth century. When I was first invited to contribute this essay on procrastination, I puzzled over that for a while, in part because I am deeply wary of the tendency to see one's own literary period as exceptional and transformative, a tendency of which Romanticists are (perhaps) exceptionally susceptible. But William Wordsworth fussed over *The Prelude* for over half a century, S.T. Coleridge was a notorious procrastinator, and I had just taught part of *The English Mail-Coach* (1849) in which Thomas De Quincey's speaker laments, “Oh, this procrastinating mail, and oh this procrastinating post-office! Can't they take a lesson upon that subject from *me*? Some people have called *me* procrastinating” (266). It is tempting to suggest that procrastination appears in this period because of the Romantic formulation of inspiration. P. B. Shelley's image of “the mind in creation ... as a fading coal” (531), Coleridge's lament that he lost most of “Kubla Khan” because he was interrupted by the man from Porlock (250), Wordsworth's “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (598)—these are among the familiar representations of the poet grasping at wayward, ephemeral inspiration. Earlier writers complain of fickle muses, but this Romantic view internalizes even as it mystifies, rendering inspiration both a product of the mind and beyond the mind's control. But because it is beyond the poet's control, it is beyond the poet's embarrassment as well. The *pathologization* of procrastination arises from a different ethic, not of the poet awaiting his muse but of the malingering worker who ignores his screen saver.

Eighteenth-century usage of the term “procrastinate” was generally less focussed and morally weighted than now, often meaning simple deferral or, when negative, merely wasteful. In 1779, *The Accomplished Letter-Writer* advised, in an epistle “To a Friend against Waste of Time,” “every Moment brings us nearer to our End. Reflect upon this, I entreat you, and keep a strict Account of Time. Procrastination is the most dangerous Thing in Life. Nothing is properly ours but the Instant we breathe in” (78). Edward Young's *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts* (1742–1745) warned, in a passage

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frequently anthologized and quoted for the next century, “Procrastination is the Thief of Time” (14). Young’s phrase appears, for instance, in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850): “Procrastination is the thief of time. Collar him!” (185). In such instances, as Dickens emphasizes, time is personal property, to be stolen, spent, or wasted. Understanding procrastination as a moral failure, rather than a private loss, requires an understanding of work as a public resource and hence an ethical obligation—it requires, in short, the emergence of political economy.

The best-known procrastinators of the Romantic period both associated their difficulties with political economy. De Quincey writes in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) of procrastination so profound that he cannot complete even short letters: “[M]y whole domestic economy, whatever became of Political Economy, must have gone into irretrievable confusion” (118). In 1804, Coleridge noted, “All this evening, indeed all this day ... I ought to have [been] reading & filling the Margins of Malthus—I had begun & found it pleasant/why did I neglect it?... The same in reading & writing Letters, Essays, &c &c—surely this is well worth a serious Analysis, that understanding I may attempt to heal/for it is a deep & wide disease in my moral Nature” (*Notebooks* 1:1832). This passage is often cited in discussions of Coleridge’s notorious inability to complete writing projects (see, for instance, Leader 188–89; Greenberg 50). T.R. Malthus is not merely the possible object of a review Coleridge would have to write (Greenberg 50) but also a key early thinker in political economy. In the text that Coleridge was reading, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (*Notebooks* 2:1832n), Malthus laments “lost time and lost eloquence” (12) and the “waste of time and words” (69n), trying to “save time and long quotations” in his own writing (63n), repeatedly linking the unproductive expenditures of time and writing as part of a larger ethic of addressing the improvement of society through cultivation, both cultural and agricultural. Malthus extends the earlier eighteenth-century view of time as a resource to one in which the “waste of time and words” is not merely self-destructive but also against the collective interest as framed by political economy.

This transformation of procrastination from personal waste to a breakdown in one’s “moral Nature” suggests Michel Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish* about the ways in which punishment was interiorized as shame in this same period to render subjects self-regulating. Hence Coleridge moves from symptom (“why did I neglect it”) to diagnosis (“a deep & wide disease”) to treatment (“attempt to heal”), in a fantasy of a self-repairing worker bee. Coleridge’s “deep & wide disease” thus registers the

internalization of the imperative to work—an internalization that seeks to negate the need for external pressures. While opium addiction may have been a contributing factor to, or further effect of, procrastination for some of these writers, it is suggestive given these references to political economy that procrastination rarely seems to be a significant issue for the authors of this era who wrote to live, such as Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, and Dickens. De Quincey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, however, had other sources of income (though limited), and the latter two wrote *Lyrical Ballads* to finance a vacation. For them, as for most university faculty now (and for Castle), writing income is supplementary rather than essential, although of course publishing helps us get academic jobs in the first place. At least for research writing, procrastination is arguably the pathological limit of the spur to publish without the fear that we will perish.

We are the inheritors of the Romantic construction of procrastination as pathology—as a failure to internalize a work ethic derived from political economy. It is not about inspiration or genius but our interpellation as hard-working subjects, independently of economic need, with internal monitors which flash perpetually, “Should ... Be ... Writing ... You ... Should ... Be ...”

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