

Idleness as Form: An Introduction

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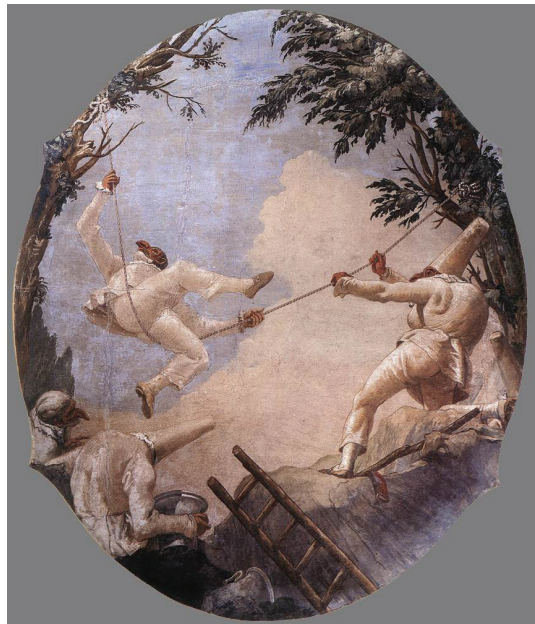
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TO IDLE IS TO DO NOTHING. But even doing nothing must involve doing something. Take Pulcinella—a drunk buffoon from the commedia dell’arte—swinging on a rope swing.

This “figure of idleness,” depicted by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, is clearly idling—swinging from a rope swing may very well be quintessential idleness. Pulcinella is being passively carried by another motion, another power, which leads him nowhere. However, this passive, aimless, pointless activity is not nothing. First, something is happening: the movement, the posture, Pulcinella’s weight straining the rope. Second, Pulcinella is enjoying his idling, and his enjoyment is essential to the activity itself. Third, what is being enjoyed is not merely some physical sensation, nor is it merely the activity of swinging on a rope-swing; what is being enjoyed is also, and crucially, the negation of purposeful, productive, valuable activity. Pulcinella is enjoying the positive experience of not doing anything worthwhile. In idling, negation is itself a positive; idling is a specific absence.



Idling must therefore be understood in opposition to a substantive notion of valuable, worthwhile activity, and different notions of valuable activity lead to different notions of idling. Consider Rousseau, who declares in the *Confessions*:

The idleness [*l'oisiveté*] I love is not that of a do-nothing who stays there with his arms crossed in total inactivity and thinks no more than he acts. It is both that of a child who is ceaselessly in motion while doing nothing and, at the same time, that of a dotard who strays when his arms are at rest. I love to occupy myself by doing trifles, beginning a hundred things and finishing none of them . . . following only the caprice of the moment in everything.¹

For Rousseau, idleness is not inactivity but active aimlessness, an engagement with the world that lacks a concern with accomplishment. When idleness is endorsed, as in Rousseau's case, this is in defiance of a specific notion of worthwhile activity, and when idleness is condemned, it is in affirmation of such a notion. But whether idleness is shunned or saluted, indulging or engaging in idleness *as such* requires one's recognition of the purported authority it negates. Therefore, even those who advertise idleness implicitly introduce the ideals of diligence that they aim to extinguish. This is *the dialectic of idleness*.

Due to this dialectic, idleness can serve as a back door to different social orders and visions of human life. An exploration of conceptions, manifestations, and representations of idleness is at the same time an exploration of the norms, ideals, and assumptions that idleness negates. From examining examples of lethargy, boredom, laziness, indolence, and sloth, we learn about notions of work, creation, value, and meaning. This is the idea that guides our editorial choices in this special issue of *Dibur*.

Idleness will be considered here as a *thick* phenomenon: textured, historical, culturally charged. This activity of negation takes various forms and is associated with various affects and sensations. Idleness has literary and artistic heroes and heroines, figures and topologies, narratives and rituals. In this issue we curate some of these characters and representations of idleness and consider the backgrounds against which they appear. We thus take the figures of idleness to be perspicuous embodiments of their political, social, and historical contexts.

We believe the exploration of literary and cultural representations of idleness sheds light on its philosophical significance. Consider a recent monograph by Brian O'Connor in which he defends idleness against philosophers' longstanding condemnation of it. O'Connor describes the "worthiness myth":

It is an uplifting story about how we human beings can overcome those human tendencies we take to be based in nature: the greater the effort, the more impressive and worthy the result. And it is this myth, perhaps more than any other assumed by philosophers, that has been used to deprive idleness of merit. How, those philosophers think, could we be so irresponsible as to turn away from the painful effort of elevating ourselves by preferring to idle? This question goes beyond condemnation of laziness or sloth. It rests on the relatively new idea of the obligation to become worthy of one's humanity through carefully chosen acts of self-realization.²

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Confessions," in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 5:537.

² Brian O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 28–29.

Idleness, O'Connor argues, offers a positive alternative to the common philosophical vision of human freedom as arduous self-realization. Idleness also resists social pressures to adopt ideals that, deep down, we do not endorse. Thus, for O'Connor, idleness offers authenticity and relief from self-sanctioning, and it resists the demands of modern society: to be useful, to be competitive, and to master long-term discipline.

We can see, perhaps, that idleness involves a sense of acting in accordance with values we take to be our own, meeting our personal understanding of what we prefer to do. It is often appreciated as freedom from pressures that seem to want to turn us into human beings of a distinctive kind, requiring us to relate to others—and indeed our own life stories—in ways that appear empty yet supposedly right. Idleness involves no inner struggle in which happiness is subordinated to some higher principle or other. The idle self is at home with itself.³

However, the worthiness myth that O'Connor rejects, even if indeed misguided, is not an unmotivated exaltation of effort and self-discipline. In the Kantian tradition as well as the psychoanalytic tradition, self-constitution is a hard-won achievement because it requires a certain organization of impulses and desires and because it faces a constant threat of disintegration. The self is not a settled fact, but an activity we are engaged in. Given the conditions of our lives and of our upbringing, we make ourselves. Moreover, we must learn to resist our impulses and postpone satisfaction not because of some arbitrary social norm, but because these skills are necessary in order to live by our own values and concerns. Even if we accept O'Connor's vision of idleness as preference satisfaction, it is not difficult to see that impulsive preference satisfaction often leads to less preference satisfaction overall. Similarly, the disciplined execution of our plans over time might be a condition for realizing our own values and concerns, whatever they may be. In other words, it is not obvious that the self can be at home with itself without making an effort and putting in some work.

Nevertheless, it is true that modern society fetishizes certain skills of self-mastery beyond the demands of autonomy and freedom. Consider, for example, the immensely successful book by developmental psychologist Angela Duckworth, *Grit*, which has dominated discussions of education in the United States. Duckworth claims that “grit—a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal—is the hallmark of high achievers in every domain”⁴ and claims to provide “scientific evidence” that grit can grow.⁵ In light of such fascination with productivity and achievement, O'Connor might very well be right that idleness is a much-needed corrective to the ideals that dominate much of modern society.

But if all idleness can be is a rejection of modern notions of freedom and valuable activity in favor of more relaxed, easygoing notions, then idleness differs from other activities only in substance, not in form. Like other activities, it is grounded in a vision of what is worthwhile and valuable. Moreover, if idleness involves the satisfaction of one's current preferences, it might be wondered how different it really is from modern conceptions of rationality. And if idleness has to do with living by one's own values, it might amount to the familiar conception of self-realization which O'Connor purports to reject. We therefore suspect that O'Connor's interpretation of idleness is less radical than first meets the eye.

³ Ibid., 185–186.

⁴ Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 23.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

O'Connor's interpretation of idleness is also profoundly individualistic and antisocial. Idleness is said to consist of a rejection of social imperatives and norms in favor of a distinct idea of freedom and flourishing that we "take to be our own." However, it seems to us that the values we take to be our own also—and necessarily—have social origins and that a social environment is crucial for sustaining them. The fact that idleness might involve resistance to common norms does not imply that it disengages from these norms or rejects the social order as a whole.

In light of these criticisms, we would like to consider a more radical notion of idleness that is, at the same time, more social than the one O'Connor puts forward. Idleness, we propose, is fundamentally different from other activities in that it lacks a goal or purpose, it is not grounded in any set of values or commitments, and it may involve lack of control and be infused with passivity. That we idle shows that we can actively engage the world without fully understanding what we are doing, why we are doing it, and where it will lead us. Idling is a way of being by which we are able to rejoice in contingency, uncertainty, open-endedness, and ignorance. As such, idleness undermines both the assumption that *to be is to be active* and the assumption that to be active we must engage in purposeful, controlled activity. Moreover, while idleness may resist the social order, it also engages it. It defies the social order but also explores it. Idleness can be a force that shapes and revises social norms rather than one that withdraws from them altogether. The social order is the environment in which we idle; and in idling we may, without intending to, discover within our social world new possibilities of beauty, pleasure, and value that would not be available otherwise.

In her book, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, Lucy Alford follows poetic manifestations of idleness. For Alford, idleness consists not only in flouting norms and imperatives, but also in "an exploration, veneration, and indeed formal cultivation of a very different attentional practice."⁶ Idleness is thus a mode of attention that does not negate or reject formalities and norms but draws on them and develops them. Alford discusses Joan Retallack's free-flowing and automatic poems, featuring idleness as a poetic procedure;⁷ A. R. Ammons's poems, which feature what she dubs "nonselective receptivity"; and Frank O'Hara's friendship and banter songs, which offer a powerful demonstration of the way idleness feeds on social, cultural, and artistic norms while playfully subverting them.

In describing O'Hara's poems, Alford writes about the "formal characteristics of friendship as a particular form of idleness."⁸ She argues that O'Hara's poetry allows for an intimate and singular language to come to life, a language in which the proper and the improper blend. The quality of friendship's idle banter comes through in a lightness of tone, a quickness of perceptual switches, and an assemblage of quips and parries. Friendly banter inhabits a mode of idled attention because it takes place in the unstructured space between "us"—a close union, but a noninstitutional one—in the easy rhythms of our interactions.⁹

For Alford, what makes banter idle is not that it means nothing, but that it allows for—and exemplifies—subjective and poetic freedom. But unlike O'Connor, who interprets idleness as a form of *solitary* autonomy, Alford sees idleness as a freedom that exists *within a relationship*: "friendship's rhythms, tonal qualities, and the sense of shared but open proximity."¹⁰ Made out

⁶ Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 375.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 379.

of poetic banter and loving gestures, this language exemplifies idleness not because it discusses doing nothing, and not simply because the friendly dialogue demands a retreat from “doing things.” The important thing, perhaps, is that language itself, when turned into a banter of love exchange, loses its aim, so to speak, while remaining active and meaningful. In enjoying the play of language with a loved friend, using and misusing it, the content isn’t all that important. Consider O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You.”

Having a Coke with You

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt
partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches
partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary¹¹

Love, in this poem, exists around and within a leisurely drift through art and culture, across Europe and New York: “I look / at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world / except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and anyway it’s in the Frick / which thank heavens you haven’t gone to yet so we can go together for the first time / and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism.”¹² Moving through the poem means moving through art’s history and culture, from *The Polish Rider* in the Frick Collection in New York City to a drawing of Leonardo, from San Sebastian to Bayonne.

Such cultural drift, recognizable from the works of Hemingway, Stein, or James Baldwin, does not, all by itself, imply idleness. What makes it idle is its combination with the drift of attention away from the authoritative status of *The Polish Rider*, Biarritz, or “Futurism” toward child-like, somewhat crass, actions, such as eating yogurt or having a Coke. Freedom here is attained in the admiring gaze which favors the portrait of the lover over any work of high art. This defiant romantic gesture lasts only a brief moment before it is itself playfully subverted: “it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience / which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I’m telling you about it”¹³

There is, in the poem, defiance—which is why O’Hara is telling about it—but there is no call for revolution. There is no revolution against capitalism, neither against its work ethics nor against its demands of productivity. O’Hara’s idleness is not an escape from a coercive regime, it is internal to the social, cultural, modernist, capitalist order. By shifting the constraints and imperatives of this order, it creates new meaning, beauty, and interpretations of tradition. O’Hara’s idleness is communicative, it shares itself and seeks new forms of intimacy. Yet it is embedded within a social and historical order and exists within its limits. This is just one example of how the study of literature, by revealing a possibility not easily discerned, may contribute to a philosophical and historical investigation of idleness.

The volume contains eight essays. Charlie Tyson’s essay, “The Allure of Idleness in Zola’s Rougon-Macquart,” focuses on Émile Zola’s depiction of idleness and beauty in “The Ladies’

¹¹ Frank O’Hara, “Having a Coke with You,” in *The Selected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage, 1974), 175.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Paradise.” Tyson’s essay discusses the formal manners in which idleness can “infiltrate” a literary genre. Zola’s naturalist working-class novels are infamous for their innate hopelessness and dire depictions of labor, which Tyson names “downward mobility.” This evokes a contradictory moral lesson: the only plausible hope can be found in work. Thus, these novels envision capitalism as a hellish prison while also reinforcing its demand for work.

Tyson’s essay finds that when Zola’s naturalism moves its glance toward idleness, something different happens. Tyson is interested in how, in the “The Ladies’ Paradise”—a naturalist novel that takes place in a Parisian department store—the “allure of idleness” allows for appearances of beauty, “aesthetic experience,” and even hope. These come to life neither through a negation of capitalist social relations nor by offering an alternative to the rules of the naturalist novel. For Tyson, the beauty that arises within “The Ladies’ Paradise” comes from the colorful dance of commodities and consumers: in the Paradise, political passivity and aesthetic passivity converge. “The store is an embodiment of a new social and economic order. It is also an aesthetic triumph. Its blinding colors, sensuous surfaces, and sheer, awe-inspiring magnitude conspire to transfix and gratify the senses.” Release, reprieve, and beauty are to be found, not outside of the system, but within it. Moreover, if the naturalist novel exemplifies depicting the passivity of human beings against their dire social conditions, here this passivity is maintained, while its meaning changes. As Tyson shows, idleness radicalizes form and content not by negation but by suspension: deep inside the “horror genre” of the naturalist novel, idleness opens up a fragile and problematic paradise.

Ruth Wenske’s essay, “‘A Human Measurement of Time’: Communal Temporalities of Waiting in Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*,” also finds beauty, and even a sense of community, within an experience of idleness—particularly in acts of waiting as depicted in contemporary African literature. Wenske starts off by depicting how, due to processes of colonization and capitalization, waiting—for a visa, for a work permit, or simply to find work—is a common predicament of those who live in the African continent in the wake of colonialism. The predicament of waiting is “the result of state mechanisms that, intentionally or not, are characterized by control, inefficiency, and, very often, a disregard of personal freedom and rights.” Often a coerced inactivity, waiting is politically and socially intertwined with experiences of failure.

However, Wenske argues that something else happens in waiting. Reading Kyomuhendo’s and Achebe’s novels, she shows how waiting becomes “a time when social relationships are built.” In times of waiting, intertwined forms of storytelling and communal cultivation flourish: “when waiting together, communities make stories, and stories make communities, and both, together, foster a communal meditative life, or, more accurately, a communal narrative life.”

Waiting thus allows for a space-time in which the binaries of passivity and activity, idleness and productivity, failure and success, are blurred if not altogether suspended. Moreover, for Wenske, these spatial refuges of storytelling allow for a certain “sensibility” (or attention, to use Alford’s categories) for “communal processes of meaning-making.” Collective waiting becomes creative. If the capitalist post-colonial state enforces “standardization and precise measurement of production,” then in waiting, time is re-framed and experienced according to “human measurements.” Time is at once a human experience and a human construction.

James Reich’s essay, “Rest and Play in Deep Focus,” examines theological pictures that are implicit in our modern notions of work, rest, and play. Reich compares notions of work

and nonwork in Judaism and Shaivism, which has come to be known as Hinduism. While the prominent cycle of work and rest in Judaism is well known, the essay compares it to the figure of Shaivism's "playing god." In Shaivism, god works through attentive and idle play: "In the Shaiva model [...] God's creation of the universe is not the model for work but for play, and the primary distinction is not between work and rest but between activity driven by need and activity without any purpose or need, driven only by joy, which is to say, theologically and philosophically speaking, driven by a direct knowledge of one's own, complete fullness, beyond one's personal, limited subjectivity."

Reich argues that the idea of the Jewish Shabbat and the figure of the playing god offer insight into the political and communal ideals which make true rest possible. When discussing Shaivism's orgiastic rituals and the communal aspects of the Shabbat, Reich delineates a concept of idleness that operates beyond the limits of modern, capitalist individual autonomy and its sense of vocation. "The deeper principle shared by both traditions," Reich writes, "is that the isolated individual can never experience rest or joy or true play on their own." He then moves on to connect these theological potentialities with the lineage of Marxist and anarchist thought that idealizes and conceptualizes rest and play as both the goal of emancipation and its praxis. The theological meaning of idleness, according to Reich, glimmers in the juxtaposition of rest, play, and collective political resistance.

Remaining within the framework of the critique of vocation, Eyal Bassan's essay, "Amateurism, Now: Roland Barthes and the Contemporary Stakes of the Amateur," offers an investigation of amateurism. Bassan's essay is concerned with conceptualizing amateurism as the suspension of late capitalist, neoliberal ideology of professionalism and entrepreneurship. If the neoliberal self is constantly investing in himself—making everything a profession—the amateur "swimmers, pianists, or tennis players [...] are not at all indifferent about their craft or activity. They do care about it, deeply. What they care less about is 'results'—in the broad, utilitarian sense of the term; unlike the professional, they are not invested in their amateurish practices for any bottom line." For Bassan, the problem with having a profession isn't the activity or devotion it demands, but how it coerces projection, possession, and monetization.

The attempt to conceptualize amateurism follows Roland Barthes's notions of the "*amator*"—"the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again)." He follows Barthes's attempts to translate haiku poems without even knowing Japanese, and how in doing so he courts a nonpossessive relation to the Orient and its body of knowledge. Barthes's experimentations (and failures), however, serve as the ground from which Bassan accounts for the singular—and frail—mode of resistance which amateurism allows for today, and following the rapid rise of amateur activities during COVID-19 lockdowns. "Amateurism—not as a rocking-the-boat kind of rebelliousness but as the gracious contentment of a practice with mitigated claims or outcomes—may emerge not only as a site of release from the pressures of the neoliberal life but also as a potential for a post-Orientalist alternative for encountering alterity." Bassan is fully aware of the problematic politics he invokes—privileged, passive, and somewhat impotent. However, that is precisely the point. Perhaps amateurism is important because of its inherent weakness.

In "When Enough Is Enough: Relational Readings of Narrative Enoughing," Yael Segalovitz and Alex Brostoff develop the concept of "enoughness." Brostoff and Segalovitz begin with the tense linguistic function of "enough," marking and moving between what is precisely sufficient and what is a little bit too much. Idleness is thus evoked in the attempt to prescribe enoughness

beyond the binary of satisfaction/lack that guides (capitalist and other) notions of action and production. In enoughness, they consider the poetic and linguistic caesura that this tension opens up, without attempting to resolve it.

The essay, however, does not offer a theoretical analysis but a poetic experimentation in enoughness. It moves between readings of Clarice Lispector, H el ene Cixous, Sigmund Freud, Maggie Nelson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Donald Winnicott. The abundance of writers, texts, and genres, and the different interpretative approaches—Lispector’s short story “Covert Joy” is read from the perspective of psychoanalysis, critical theory, auto-theory and autofiction—create and demonstrate the tension that the concept evokes. The poetic and theoretical excess makes palpable the need for and experience of enoughness.

Enoughness serves not only as “associative drift” but also as a limit (an ethical and even political encounter with the Other). Much like the discussion of forms of idleness in the other essays, for Brostoff and Segalovitz “enough” cannot be considered without an encounter. In their close reading of “Covert Joy,” they invoke Winnicott’s “good enough” mother—which serves as a limit for an over- and ever-desiring subject. The “parental acknowledgment” of the good enough mother “is expressed by a gesture of enoughness” they argue. “The mother terminates her child’s torture of the protagonist, telling her, in what Sedgwick would identify as an acknowledgment: “that’s enough, you can stop now.” For Segalovitz and Brostoff, enoughness does not simply serve as a “liminal” or hybrid space between desire and its objects, but also as a relational encounter point: in order for us to stop—craving, producing, consuming—a limit demarcated by another. It is here that the use of auto-theory (in the process of writing the essay) is inherent to its meaning: “As a threshold and as a speech act, as a gesture and an imaginary, ‘enough’ works against the capitalist imperative ‘to have,’ while setting and transgressing limits between subjects. The relational limits of enoughness, however, rear their heads at the moment of conclusion, for being ‘good enough’ also suggests being able to see where one’s own limits are.”

In her essay “On the Historical Raison d’ tre of Arabic Cookery Literature: An Essay on Productive Idleness,” Limor Yungman describes the emergence of Iraqi cuisine and cookery books in medieval Baghdad. She argues that affluence, leisure, and idleness led to the creation of a literary genre: cookery books in Arabic. In Abbasid Baghdad, hunting and feasting were a way to dispel idleness, and medieval Arabic culinary writing became a preoccupation of the educated ruling social class. Court members wrote cookbooks both to engage with culinary discourse and to create luxury commodities, the manuscript being a rare and sought-after object. We find another example of the creativeness of idleness, made possible by a withdrawal from certain activities that nevertheless engages social norms and traditions.

In “Idle Labor: Distraction, Strike, Potential,” Yoav Ronel discusses the potency of idleness in contemporary neoliberal times. Ronel suggests that today, as work becomes more and more problematic, the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism become more apparent and catastrophic. Despite the dramatic technological advances of the last century, which brought great increases in productive power, Western humanity hasn’t managed to reduce its working hours—quite the contrary.¹⁴ Many kinds of work and much work time have turned into what David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs”: “meaningless and purposeless labors in which workers find no value and cannot feel they are contributing to society, or where they pass the time in boredom or carrying out

¹⁴ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).

bureaucratic tasks.” On the other hand, low-paying jobs become more and more precarious as living wages skyrocket.

Facing what he dubs “a crisis of work,” Ronel suggests that idleness becomes a viable existential and political option. However, as he explains, things are not that simple. In fact, as work becomes glaringly aimless and the future radically bleak, doing things without a sense of purpose has become the norm. “There is then no sharp distinction between work and idleness: idleness isn’t opposed to work but operates according to its totalizing logic and creates various modes of idle activity and active idleness. Still, we cannot really be idle, in a pure sense, without feelings of guilt and actual debt. The age of idleness is paradoxically the time in which idleness is just about impossible.” Reading works of contemporary Israeli literature, Ronel suggests that as long as idleness adheres to neoliberal individualism, it remains symptomatic to the political problems and limits of the time, without fully expressing its latent emancipatory potential.

Maayan Goldman presents her collection of online images of women resting. In the accompanying essay, “To Have My Rest and Eat It Too,” she reflects on the ideal of rest embodied in these photos and on what drew her to collecting them: “Women and girls, some of whom I know and love, doing nothing, moving nothing, retiring, receding and staring into their phones.” Goldman yearns for the state of being these women and sees herself as one of them. Like them, she indulges in restive, immediate, uncomplicated satisfaction. She doesn’t abandon the world, she stays close to her “attachments,” but in these images of resting women, and in herself, she finds the possibility of doing and non-doing, of holding on and giving it all up.

We hope that this diverse collection of essays will allow readers to explore idleness not as an abstract idea but as a concrete phenomenon, an experience, which takes on different guises depending on the context of its occurrence. We also hope that by reflecting on idleness through the lenses of literature, poetry, history, theory, and religion, readers will discover new forms of productivity and worthiness. Finally, and most of all, we hope readers read this volume as if taking a stroll, not committed to any one path, free to take as many breaks as they like, letting their minds wander as they read, pleasantly passing the time. A