Chapter 3

Idleness
Or, How Raymond Queneau's *The Sunday of Life* Explores Profane Time, in Playful Dialogue with Hegel and Kojève

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Abstract
This chapter asks what it would mean to think about temporality in terms of *idleness*. Is it possible to conceive of such a thing as *free time*, or must the time we live in always be committed to a project or a goal? Exploring the notion of idleness through the debate between Raymond Queneau and Alexandre Kojève about the interpretation of Hegel in modern day France, the chapter pivots on Raymond Queneau's novel *The Sunday of Life* (1952) and Kojève's review of the novel, which saw Queneau's characters as "post-historical" figures and introduced the idea of *désœuvrement* (idleness) in philosophical thought. This debate paved the way for a poststructuralist notion of idleness, conceived as *désœuvrement*. Looking back at Queneau's novel, the chapter suggest that it may lead us toward an understanding of idleness that is apt in our day. Rather than seeing idleness as an end figure, or discussing it as a vague poststructuralist concept, it suggest that the figure of idleness has do with a profane worldview that starts to dominate in modernity.

Idleness, désœuvrement, Müsiggang, or simply *free time* – time that is not put to use or laid claim to. Can there be such a thing? In his playful novel *The Sunday of Life [Dimanche de la vie]* (1952), the French writer Raymond Queneau created a figure that embodies the idea of idleness: Valentin Brû, a simple soul and a pacifist soldier who lacks ambition, walks aimlessly around, and thinks about "nothing" – seemingly in full contentment. Is this what idleness looks like? What kind of temporal mode is this?

The topic of idleness has always caused heated debates. It has been conceived of as *otium* and leisure; as the utopia of the worker's movement and laziness; as negation, inoperativity and strike. Although the contexts may shift, discussions on idleness usually take place on a

battleground where moralist and "hedonist" positions clash and where Protestant work ethics is defended or contested. Today, the "old" debates are still with us; some fight for worker's right to free time; others discuss how free time can most productively be spent. Yet the discussions on idleness have started to change. In a society where more and more jobs are lost to automation, it is not obvious that idleness will lead to happiness; it could also lead to boredom and apathy. This again leaves us vulnerable with respect to the attention economy of modern media technology, luring us to consume time in a dull and insipid fashion. Further, a new temporal paradigm emerges in our day, which is all about *imposed* idleness: waiting. Immigrants waiting to start a new life, or unemployed waiting for a job opportunity, or ill and quarantined persons waiting for everyday life to recommence. Indeed, these problems and concerns reveal that *time* is a profoundly political topic, closely connected to societal changes. Moreover, they reveal that we need more profound ways of thinking about *idleness*, beyond the moralist and "utilitarian" regimes of thought.

In this chapter I propose that we think about idleness in terms of a *profane* temporality, devoid of any purposiveness. In a post-modern society such as ours, we should be able to see time as *idle* and develop a less pressed relation to time. However, even if the great narratives are behind us, our modes of temporality are still under the sway of teleological (often religious) models. In this situation, the notion of idleness may help us to decouple time from such models and conceive of profane temporality, sensitive to the strange unfolding of time in everyday life.

A significant resource for thinking about idleness in these terms is the debate that emerged in the French reception of Hegel, in the period 1927-1952. In the wake of Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel, idleness was considered in relation to the idea of History as coming to an

end and was used to envision a post-historical mode of life. Raymond Queneau's contribution to this debate is especially interesting because it takes the form of a novel, a genre that truly engages in temporal experiments. Its title – *The Sunday of Life* (1952) – referred to one of the most intriguing figures of idleness of his day; it was an expression used by G.W.F. Hegel to describe the state of man when the *spirit* had reached the final phase of its unfolding in history. With this novel, where a Hegel quotation served as an epigraph, Queneau thus offered his own take on idleness and the Hegelian ideas that were thriving in France in the post-war period.

Kojève on his side responded by writing a review of the novel, introducing the French everyday word *désœuvrement* (idleness, inoperativity) in philosophical thought, allegedly for the first time. As is well known, this concept became key in poststructuralist thought in the decades that followed (although in various and sometimes misleading translations). In the writings of Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben, idleness *[désœuvrement]* embodies an anti-metaphysical and anti-teleological mode in which one does not pursue any goal in particular. Yet poststructuralist theory has made the concept of *désœuvrement* more abstract and removed it from everyday life. Queneau, by contrast, stayed in the sphere of everyday triviality and spoken language, and Kojève recognized this as a quality in the novel. Hence, there is every reason to return to Queneau's novel and to consider the prehistory of the term *désœuvrement*, which seems to be almost forgotten today.[1]

In what follows, I explore the notion of idleness in light of the constellation Hegel/Kojève/Queneau and discuss how it paved the way for the poststructuralist idea of idleness. Examining Queneau's novel, I suggest that it may lead us toward an understanding of idleness that is apt in our day. I propose that the figure of idleness has do with a profane

worldview that starts to dominate in modernity and that in art and literature is conceived of as a temporal mode - a way of living and thinking time. Accordingly, I propose seeing idleness as a figure for *profane temporality*.

However, before taking on Queneau and Kojève, and later on Agamben, we should wind back a little further to the idea of idleness in romantic thought and to Hegel's notion of the "Sunday of Life."

Hegel's Sunday of Life

Before idleness became a concern for bourgeois philosophers and writers, it was considered the business of the Gods. Having created the world, the Olympic gods rested, content with themselves, and supremely idle. During the vogue of romanticism, a widespread trope was that if man could have a share in this divine privilege, happiness would begin on earth. Jean-Jacques Rousseau made the idle drifter a romantic hero and the *rêverie* a philosophical ideal in *Reveries of the solitary walker* [*Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*] (1782). In the same vein, Friedrich Schlegel, the prodigy of Jena-Romanticism, wrote "An Idyll of Idleness [Idylle über den Müsiggang]" in his novel *Lucinde* (1799), describing idleness as man's fragment of godlikeness: "O Idleness, Idlenesss! You are the life breath of innocence and inspiration. The blessed breathe you, and blessed is he who has you and cherishes you, you holy jewel, you sole fragment of godlikeness come down to us from Paradise" (Schlegel 1971, 29). At the same time, Schlegel singled out the enemies of idleness, namely Protestant work ethics: "Industry and utility are the angels of death who, with fiery swords, prevents man's return to Paradise." And remarkably, he pointed to the *politics* of idleness, making evident that the privilege is not granted to all: "And in all parts of the world, it is the right to idleness that distinguishes the superior from the inferior classes. It is the intrinsic principle of aristocracy"

(Schlegel 1971, 32) For Schlegel, however, aristocratic right to idleness was not about birth right; rather he was concerned with *spiritual* aristocracy.

This romantic ideal finds a wide-ranging expression in Hegel's thought, in which idleness is conceived of in absolute terms, connoting supreme wisdom and sovereignty. Here, it no longer pertains to a single individual, but to man as such, and it surfaces as the result of a historical process. In the last chapter of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel describes the last and supreme stage in the unfolding of the spirit in history, representing the "freedom of the spirit" and "absolute knowledge." It is in relation to these ideas that Hegel uses the notion of "Sunday of life," yet the notion does not appear in the *Phenomenology*, but can be found in a few other writings by Hegel – each time casually and in passing. Queneau's quotation is taken from a passage in Hegel's lectures on the fine arts (1835), and a closer look on the context in which it occurs is illuminating. There are in fact intriguing similarities between the way of life depicted in Queneau's novel and the everyday life depicted in the pictures that Hegel admires.

Hegel's comment on a painting by Murillo depicting two beggar boys at rest (1645) may serve as a starting point. In the picture, one of the boys holds up a cluster of grapes to his mouth in a god-like gesture. Although the painting's subject is "low," Hegel reflects upon its qualities in terms of "spiritual freedom" and "spiritual cheerfulness". The point for Hegel is that the boys are not depicted as poor or needy, or as occupied with begging; they are not doing anything and appear to delight in the moment:

> But in this poverty and semi–nakedness what precisely shines forth is within and without is nothing but complete absence of care and concern – a Dervish could not have less – in the full feeling of their well–being and delight in life. This freedom from care for external things and the inner freedom made visible

> outwardly is what the Concept of the Ideal requires. […] We see that they have no wider interests and aims, yet not at all because of stupidity; rather do they squat on the ground content and serene, almost like the gods of Olympus; they do nothing, they say nothing. (Hegel 1988 1, 170)

What Hegel admires in this picture is the beggar boys' way of doing "nothing." This carelessness in lives dominated by poverty is serene and almost divine ("almost like the gods of Olympus") because the beggar boys somehow appear as independent of external needs and as resting in themselves. Hence, in this painting, divine light shines not on the privileged class, but on the lower class; upon those who are content with little and have managed to free themselves from earthly ends and pursuits.[2] Inner freedom is here made visible in an external form; indeed, for Hegel, this is the merit of the art of painting.

Hegel puts Murillo on a par with Dutch genre painters, who he sees as the true masters when it comes to depicting everyday motifs and the freedom of the spirit. He continues his reflection on this topic in relation to Flemish and German painting (on the last pages of his chapter on Romantic art), asserting that one of its main achievement is its "utterly living absorption in the world and its daily life" rather than a commitment to religious motifs (Hegel 1988 2, 884). Moving on to Dutch paintings, he describes the bourgeois ethos depicted in such paintings as characterized by loyalty, unassumingness, contentedness, and self-respect without pride. Commenting on paintings of peasant life, a "low" motif in the hierarchy of art, he claims that the "scenes appear so completely penetrated by a naïve cheerfulness" that it is removed from the sphere of the vulgar. He elaborates his description of this superior cheerfulness by using the notion of "Sunday of life":

> In this very heedless boisterousness [unbekümmerten Ausgelassenheit], there lies the ideal feature: it is the Sunday of life [der Sonntag des Lebens] which equalizes everything and removes all evil; people who are so wholly–heartedly cheerful cannot be altogether evil and base. (Hegel 1988 2, 887)

Hegel thus sees the carefree lives depicted in the Dutch paintings as embodying a supreme form of wisdom, and he claims that it results from a leveling process in which evil is cancelled out.[3] But how should we understand the claim that idleness is a great equalizer? Here I think the idler's way of drifting is key; the idler remains open to all possibilities and thus sees all possibilities as equal. Further, Hegel claims that idleness in this way removes all evil, and thus seems to connect evil with plotting and scheming. But the Sunday of life does not have room for this; rather it is characterized by freedom and ease.

Hegel thus sees wisdom incarnated in the profane satisfaction of Dutch and Flemish bourgeoisie, indulging themselves in everyday pleasures. Yet when we read the whole section about these paintings, it seems clear that his comment about the Sunday of life refers not merely to a motif that pleases him, but concerns more widely the way of life described in the paintings and the political regime underpinning it. He shows a deep sympathy for the Dutch people as such, pointing out their modesty, honesty, and their heroism in fighting the despotism of Spain and the Catholic Church (Hegel 1988 1, 169; 598). Thus it seems that his judgement on Dutch genre painting is not purely aesthetic, but involves a broader consideration; for Hegel, the commitment to everyday life in Dutch genre painting represents absolute wisdom *and* political freedom.

We should further observe that Hegel detects a comical aspect in these Dutch genre paintings (Hegel 1988 2, 887), and that caprice and humor are important in Hegel's discussion of the end of art (Hegel 1988 1, 597; 600). Commenting on the last phase of painting, he points out

that the humor result from the artist's subjective vision, which suggests that he has surmounted his material, is no longer bound by it and can contemplate it freely. In Hegel's thought, this means that art now becomes a thoroughly profane thing, or a thoroughly human thing. For Hegel, the Dutch genre painting thus expresses a new state of affairs, and this could be described as a shift to profane temporality – to the "Sunday of life."

Lastly, we should note that this shift to the Sunday of life pertains not to individuals, but to man as such, or rather, to a community. This is hinted at in a passage in the *History of Philosophy*, where Hegel asserts that philosophy operates some kind of mediation between two different modes of life corresponding to the Sunday (rest, community) and the working day (work, individualism): "Philosophy […] unites the Sunday of life when man in humility renounces himself, and the working-day when he stands up independently, is master of himself and considers his own interest." (Hegel 1995, 92) His main point here, it appears, is that philosophy unites self-renunciation and mastery, idleness and work, and thus surpasses the distinctions that usually regulate human life. By the same token, he demonstrates that the Sunday of life concerns the happy life of a community, not individual happiness.

For Hegel, the Dutch genre painting thus appears to represent an *aesthetic* consecration of everyday life, idleness, and free time in a bourgeois community. Speaking in temporal terms, one could say that the Sunday of life opens up *profane time* and brings it to full consciousness. And this, I will argue, is the Hegel that Queneau engages with in his novel *The Sunday of Life*.

Queneau's Novel: Idleness in Modern Day France

The transmission of Hegel's ideas to French intellectual life was rather circuitous and involved Alexandre Kojève, the Russian-French philosopher whose lectures on Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* during the years 1933–39 at the *École des Hautes-Études* in Paris was attended by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, and Raymond Queneau, among others. In fact, Queneau served as editor for these lectures when they were published in 1947. Before these lectures, Hegel was not a topic in French philosophy at all; afterwards, he was the starting point of almost every intellectual venture. The French Hegel was marked by Marxist thought, existentialism and phenomenology – ideas that were in vogue at the time and that embraced a "concrete" philosophy, as opposed to idealism. The outcome was a dialectical materialism that dominated French philosophy far into the twentieth century.

Kojève's achievement was to perform a "humanization" of Hegel's thought; rather than seeing history as the progressing of a lofty "spirit," he saw it as resulting from a series of successful enterprises in which human desire challenged the existing order and won through. [4] To him, dialectics and negativity was thus used to describe man as a historical being, capable of changing reality according to his desires. Yet he also envisioned an egalitarian community in which there would be no more need for action and history had outplayed its role.

However, Kojève's interpretation of Hegel is contested, especially his take on the question of the "end of history." For Kojève, history would come to an end once man had gained self-consciousness and understood himself as a free human being among other free human beings. In his view, this was precisely what had happened when Hegel finished *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, where the last stage of history implies man's absolute knowledge and freedom. The circumstances for this "endpoint" were spectacular: Hegel finished the draft in 1806

during the battle of Jena, when Napoleon fought for the ideals of the French revolution. Allegedly, Hegel could hear the guns and cannons as he wrote, although this may not be entirely correct. As Napoleon won the battle, Hegel thus came to his insight about the ultimate goal of man: freedom, egality and fraternity (the very ideals that Napoleon had fought for). Once this "human condition" was realized, there would (in theory) be no need for (historical) action, Kojève assumed. In 1806, it had thus all been achieved, and what remained was merely the job of tidying up the remains of history.

Did this mean that a post–historical era had been inaugurated? Rather, Kojève considered 1806 as a premonition of the end of history, opening up the endgame, so to speak. As we know, the period after 1806 is not short of events, so it would seem futile to claim that history ended in 1806. Yet the question that troubled Kojève was the following: What would be the state of man after the end of history? Was not man defined precisely by his capacity for desire and actions? If that was the case, what would become of man once he had achieved absolute wisdom and sovereignty? Would he still be human? Kojève famously suggested, in a brief remark, that the end of history could imply either a return to animality or an extreme kind of formalism (embodied in the Japanese *snob*) (Nichols 2007, 87). These questions elicited vivid discussions among the French intellectuals in Kojève's circle (Bataille, Lacan, and others).

The debate took a new direction when Queneau in the aftermaths of World War II published *The Sunday of Life* (1952) and Kojève the same year published a review of the novel, seeing it as a "post-historical novel." Now the debate centered on a work of literature, and the topics of wisdom, idleness, the end of history were related to World War II. Further, Quenau's epigraph referred to Hegel's lectures on fine art specifically: "…it is the Sunday of life which levels everything, and rejects everything bad; men gifted with such good humour cannot be

fundamentally bad or base.” The Hegelian context that Queneau brought to the fore was thus his writings on romantic art and Dutch genre painting. In my view, this reference is important to understand the philosophical weight of this lighthearted novel. What Queneau depicts is how the Sunday of life – that is, a new temporality – could potentially begin in modern day France. The novel is thus engaging in a temporal experiment. With this in mind, let’s take a close look at the narrative:

What is puzzling about this novel is that its protagonist Valentin Brû does not pursue any project in particular (in this respect, he is a typical anti-hero). He appears to have no aims, desires or wishes, but instead goes with the flow. Although he is a soldier, he has no wish to change the world or go to war, and when Julia – an old maiden and a shop-keeper – wants to marry him, he consents somehow passively, thinking that running a shop could be a nice pursuit. Yet as a shopkeeper he is hardly industrious, as the third-person narrator demonstrates: Admiring a set of beautiful buttons, he wonders whether he should be collecting buttons rather than selling them. Later, when he starts selling photo frames, he ends up talking to the customers rather than trading with them. He enjoys *simple life*, chatting, eating, dreaming and drifting, and his days unfold within a small circle of family members and acquaintances from work. Numerous references to popular culture during the pre-war years contribute to giving a picture of Valentin’s life: the journal *Marie-Claire*, sports magazines, the cinema, and new cars.

In this depiction of everyday life, language plays a major role. The characters consistently use colloquial language instead of standard French, and the novel’s orthography is characterized by expressions such as “chsais pas” (for “je ne sais pas,” meaning “I don’t know”) and “Mzelle Ségovie” (for Mademoiselle Ségovie) (this is perhaps less noticeable in the English

translation). Queneau is well known for his aim to perform a revolution in language by introducing popular language into literature, thus bridging the gap between oral and written French language and preventing the written language from becoming a dead language (like Latin). Thus, in Queneau's novel, language no longer conforms to official spelling conventions, but reaches a stage of freedom and idleness.

This way of exposing everyday language and everyday life speaks to the novel's epigraph and to Hegel's appreciation of Dutch genre painting. Queneau shows how an "utterly living absorption in the world and its daily life" can be performed in modernity and how a modern novel can be "completely penetrated by a naïve cheerfulness." In this manner, he gives a literary version of "the Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil." In a modern and profane situation, and more precisely in a World War II-context, contentment and self-consciousness amounts to finding pleasure in "little life" – rather than in grand projects. Idleness is thus revaluated and seen as a supreme mode of being and a supreme mode of relating to time.

Numerous scenes in the novel show how time does not lead anywhere and resists mastery. As Valentin does not want to compete with the shopkeepers in the quarter, he realizes that he is unsuited for commercial enterprises. He feels that the hours in the shop are long, and starts a series of time experiments:

> Sitting at his cash desk, he would watch the clock above Meussieu Pouncier's shop, and follow the progress of the big hand. He would manage to see it jump once, twice, three times, and then suddenly found that it was a quarter of an hour later and the big hand had taken advantage of this to move without his noticing it. Where had he been all that time? Sometimes he had been back in Madagascar,

> sometimes he had relived an episode from Flash Guy or Mandrake, his favorite heroes, sometimes he had merely re-eaten a meal or re-seen a film, more or less fragmentarily. (Queneau 1977, 113-114)

Valentin watches the clock, trying to experience time as it passes, but he is not able to follow its course because his inner world takes over. As the narrator relates, he is not able to empty his mind, and is constantly disturbed by images and sounds. Time simply escapes him; it passes without him being able to observe, keep track of or control it . The classical time paradox depicted already by Augustine is here reduced to a trivial experiment that ends in a pop cultural *rêverie*.

If Valentin's everyday life is full of idle time, however, world history still makes itself present in the novel, albeit in a degraded form. Valentin has a high regard for the deeds of the past, or more accurately, he is passionate about the battle of Jena in 1806, in which Napoleon's army won over the Prussian army. This, of course, alludes to Hegel's admiration for Napoleon as a *world spirit* and the turbulent conditions under which he finished the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in 1806. The allusion is important because it resonates in the novel's pre-war setting (1936-1939) and connects Queneau's war, World War II (starring Hitler) with Hegel's war (starring Napoleon). In this manner, profound questions regarding history, war and self-consciousness emerge in the novel, and a peculiar Franco-German relation is established in which the topics of war and philosophy are intertwined. When Valentin's dream of visiting Jena as a historical site finally comes true, the Franco-German relations are described merely as a touristic enterprise paying tribute to the past in a rather superficial way. A second reference to the world situation is Valentin's casual talk about the recently opened world exhibition, L'Expo 37, situated in the vicinity of the Pont d'Iéna (the Jena bridge) in Paris. This world exhibition marked the symbolical confrontation between German Nazism and Russian communism, with the two pavilions facing each other. This way of depicting history

and international relations may be seen as a critique of capitalism: tourism and trade have here taken over for profound memory and an internationalist spirit. At the same time, this emphasis may be seen as a way of profaning history and of miniaturizing the power of world historical agents. This is what history looks like after the end of History, the novel seems to imply.

Yet the question of the future remains, and it gradually becomes more pressing in the novel. With his acute sensitivity, Valentin feels the war is coming, whereas others carelessly assert that there's not going to be a war. The role of the future is highlighted through new occupation; due to a series of unfortunate events, he starts working as a fortune teller, dressed as a woman. Behind a door with the sign "Madame Saphir. Past. Present. Future," Valentin soon learns to take his cue from the customers. Improvising, he tells them comforting tall tale stories, thus trading in the future. This shows how the future has become a petty industry, invested with predictions, hopes and fears that may or may not come true. Yet when the war finally breaks out, Valentin (formerly a soldier) is enlisted to serve in the military forces, and these speculations about the future must stop.

The status of the war is in many ways key to the interpretation of the novel, but at the same time hard to pin down. Before the war, Valentin thinks of it as an ultimate limit after which there will be no continuation, but when a question concerning the future is raised, the narrator relates that it is not of any concern for Valentin, because for him there wasn't going to be "any after the war or rather there would be nothing" (Queneau 1977, 202-203). Yet this viewpoint is not as simple as it may seem. Valentin's conviction is not merely that there wouldn't be any after the war in ordinary terms, but rather that there would be "nothing." But is "nothing" something? The role of the war and its relation to time and negativity here come to the fore, an issue that was key to Kojève. Although the novel does not give any clear

answers, its ending suggests that “nothingness” for Queneau is akin to idleness. The war is first depicted through the mobilization phase, which is marked by “inactivity” and “killing time” (Queneau 1977, 202-204), that is, imposed idleness. Then a time gap occurs before we encounter the characters during the armistice phase. In this manner, the action of war is taken out of the picture. Rather than describing the dramatic events, Queneau ends the novel on a comical note: The closing scene depicts Valentin, a demobilized solider, trying to help some girls to enter the train with their luggage, but his obliging behavior is described as being merely an excuse to touch their private parts. In Queneau’s novel, desire is thus depicted as a petty and vulgar drive in everyday life, and not as the force of history. Valentin’s idle way of life could thus be seen as embodying a profane temporality that is not concerned with future goals or fulfillments.

Kojève’s Review: Wisdom After the Second World War?

Having examined Queneau’s novel, let’s take a look Kojève’s review, published the same year in the journal *Critique*. Its title was “The Novel of Wisdom” [Les Romans de la sagesse], and in addition to *The Sunday of Life*, Kojève comments on two previous novels by Queneau: *Pierrot my friend* [Pierrot, mon ami, 1942] and *Far from Rueil* [Loin de Rueil, 1945]. Kojève playfully announces that he intends to do a hegelian reading of the three novels as their author is well versed in hegelian thought, and he uses the same Hegel quotation as Queneau as an epigraph (the one from the lectures on art). Yet Kojève chooses to discuss Queneau’s novel in relation to Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and the question of the end of history, rather than Hegel’s writings on art. He thus bypasses an important context.

Kojève reads the three protagonists as figures of the Wiseman after the end of history, asserting that they embody the concept of wisdom in Hegel’s though: perfect satisfaction

accompanied by the fullness of self–consciousness. Yet he points to the fact that Queneau's protagonists do not correspond to common ideas about the wiseman and that their lives appear to be utterly banal: A disinterested proletarian with aristocratic inclinations, a poet who does not write, and a naïve soldier who is a pacifist. In keeping with the colloquial style of Queneau's writing, Kojéve designates them as "voyous désœuvrés" – "idle rascals." In this manner, he initiates the use of the French everyday notion *désœuvrement* in philosophical thought, a notion that will have a rich afterlife in poststructuralist thought. Discussing the protagonists use of colloquial language, Kojève refers to the divide between abstract philosophy and everyday language and suggests that the specialization of modern philosophical language may well have necessitated a return to everyday language (in this contexts he suggests that Socrates was an "idle rascal" using colloquial language).

For Kojève, the major question is how Queneau's antiheroes could possibly have reached absolute wisdom while still living in historical times: "How is it possible that three men have been able to reach wisdom, that is, absolute wisdom, even definitive wisdom, because it is total, before history has come to an end?" (Kojève 1952, 394).[5] Apparently, the wisdom achieved by these anti–heroes could only be simulated wisdom, Kojève suggests. Or could it possibly be authentic? Kojève reminds the reader that the "idle rascals" belong to the time of World War II and sees the war as instrumental in bringing about a major shift; the transition from a philosophical contemplation of time to true wisdom:

> Thus it is not at all surprising if this war has allowed Soldier Brû […] to transgress the final lap that still separated *philosophical* contemplation of the time of Being in itself or Temporality as such, where nothing happens, from *Wisdom*, which makes it possible to grasp in one single discursive gaze the concrete totality of the fulfilled Universe. (Kojève 1952, 396)

In his reading of Queneau's novel, Kojève thus sees World War II as a stand in for the end of history, opening up a new era. It could be objected that Valentin appears to remain the same before and after the war, but Kojève argues that his fine presentiments about the war as final and without continuation allow him to gain wisdom *before* the war has started. This is important because it grants to the idle drifter a sensitivity that others do not dispose of, a sensitivity associated with wisdom. In the novel, wisdom thus comes in an unexpected form: perfect satisfaction and self–consciousness are here embodied in the figure of the "voyou désœuvré." In Kojève's jesting interpretation, this is an entirely plausible pathway, for it saves wisdom from abstraction and sterility: "Nothing surprising, then, if the wisdom that the last war brought to Valentin Brû is authentic wisdom, which, far from enjoying a sterile play with itself, immediately gets in touch with concrete and sensible reality" (Kojève 1952, 396). Wisdom thus unfolds in everyday life as the result of a cunning dialectical move.

Kojève's Hegelian reading of Queneau is remarkable, sensitive as it is to the question of language and the role of the war. Given the playful tone, however, his verdict on the novel is somewhat hard to grasp. On the one hand, he appears to acknowledge the wisdom of Queneau's figures; on the other hand, he appears to mildly mock their way of life and Queneau's take on the Sunday of life. Today, we may perhaps be inclined to side with Kojève's mocking penchants and see Queneu's vision as naïve and simplistic. In many respects, Queneau's antiheros appear to embody the trivialities of the petty bourgeoisie, relatively unaffected by the war and world history.

However, we should observe that Queneau's protagonists are depicted as *exceptional* within their fictive universe and thus stand out from the middle class individuals surrounding them. Although their way of life in many respects resembles the careless life of the petty

bourgeoisie, it does not stem from the same ideology. Valentin lacks industriousness and is not a successful shopkeeper, but his shop is the meeting point of the quarter. He is not a brave soldier, but he brings with him his penchants for simple pleasures to the army. Unlike others, he can feel the war is coming, and this seems to suggest that he disposes of extraordinary resources. As an idler, he is not already committed to a way of thinking and to an ideology and thus has a greater presentiment of what is merely in germ. In Queneau's fictive universe, it is thus the unassuming idler – the "voyou désœuvré" – who is granted supreme insight.

Queneau's idleness is incompatible with history insofar as history (traditionally conceived) consists of a succession of efforts to change the world through wars and grand projects**.** Valentin lives in a world where war is still on the agenda, but he is out of joint with the ideological tendency of their day and thus appear as naïve or even silly. Yet in Queneau's novel, there are signs that the times are changing and that history has been degraded: Jena has become a site of tourism, and international relations are now maintained through world exhibitions, not merely through war. World history thus appear as a thing of the past, accessible as ruin and as display.

What, then, is Queneau's take on the "Sunday of life"? Kojève's interpretation of the novel took as its point of departure Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and the question of the end of history. Yet as we have seen, the novel refers to key passages in Hegel's lectures on art, in particular his reflections on Dutch genre painting. Where Hegel recognized the everyday happiness in Dutch genre painting of the seventeenth century, Queneau offered a modern vision of the Sunday of life: Everyday happiness set in modern day France, close to the war. Accordingly, Queneau's novel in fact follows Hegel in associating the Sunday of Life with everyday life, idleness, and humble figures.

Queneau's achievement, as I see it, was to connect the Hegelian issues related to art and profane life to the "Hegelian" issues haunting his own time: the question of the end of history (vividly debated in the Kojève circle) and World War II (a major historical event). In this manner, he took both Hegel and Kojève seriously, albeit playfully. What we should discern in these debates is Queneau's modern interpretation of Hegel and his profanizing gesture, endowing everyday life with meaning. To Kojève's question about the state of man after the end of history, Queneau offers a possible answer: After the violence of the world wars, after the summit of abstract philosophical thought, what takes place is a *return* to the trivialities of everyday life and colloquial language. *This* is what true wisdom looks like, the novel seems to suggest. *The Sunday of Life* could thus be seen as a homage to a *profane* temporality. Now time finally becomes idle, or, to speak in Hegelian-Kojèvian terms, it becomes humanized, liberated and self-conscious. In this perspective, we may consider the notion of *free time* – conceived as profound idleness – a quite recent phenomenon.

Taking his cue from Hegel, Queneau uses the Sunday of life as metaphor for a temporality that differs from the temporality of work and purposiveness. Sunday is the time of idleness and rest, but also connotes supreme creativity and power: it is the day when God rested after having created the world. For man, the Sunday of life marks the beginning of everyday happiness on earth; a fragment of godliness, to use Schlegel's phrase. It does not end all temporality or stop all creativity and activity; it is a condition in which man is at the summit of his capacities, but not committed to using them in any particular way. Hence, rather than a farewell to temporality, the Sunday of life implies a new and radically profane world view and a new *ontology*; or rather it is a category in which temporal and ontological aspects intersect. In French poststructuralist thought, this was conceptualized as *désœuvrement*.

Contemporary Idleness

The idea of idleness – conceived as *désœuvrement* – had a rich afterlife in the second half of the twentieth century, even if the expression "the Sunday of life" moved to the background, after substantial critique of Hegelian thought. It was first explored in relation to literature, but soon took on a more political signification. Already in "Literature and the Right to death" (1949), Maurice Blanchot discussed literature in terms of negativity and death, referring to Kojéve's reading of Hegel. In *The Space of Literature* (1955), he described literature in terms of *désœuvrement* (unfortunately translated as *inertia*), highlighting its profundity, and describing it as a region in which nothing is accomplished (Blanchot 1989, 46). With poststructuralist thought, *language* and *literature* were broadly conceived of in terms of *désœuvrement*, that is, as signs that drift off towards various significations without achieving anything final. With the new "discourse paradigm," the debate on idleness thus shifted from history and time to discourse and time, and idleness would no longer be conceived of in dialectical terms, but rather in terms of free play, lack of finitude and lack of purposiveness (Queneau's attention to popular language may be seen as preparing for this shift). In literature and philosophy a new temporal mode thus started to gain ground that differed from Hegel's dialectical scheme.

While *désœuvrement* may not appear as a political term, its political implications became increasingly clear in the debates that emerged about the idea of community. This political engagement was, of course, in keeping with Hegel's and Kojève's overall perspectives: both were deeply concerned with politics and the happy life of a community.[6] In the 1980ies, a number of intellectuals attempted to conceive of a community that was not grounded in a metaphysical idea about an identity, a goal, or a fulfillment (such as a Communist state or a

Third Reich). Could there be such a thing as an *communauté désœuvrée* – a deconstructed community that refrains from taking on the task of fullfilling a specific goal? An "inoperative" or "idle" community, which is still a community (and not an atomistic society) – because one communicates and shares language in an infinite dialogue? These questions were explored in Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* (*La Communauté inavouable*, 1983), Jean–Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (*La Communauté* désœuvrée, 1986), and Giorgio Agamben's *Coming Community* (*La Comunità qui viene*, 1990).

In the other end of the political spectrum, we find a different response, the book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) by political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Influenced by Kojève's thought, especially his vision of an egalitarian community in which history has outplayed its role, Fukuyama suggested that the year 1989 – which saw the end of the cold war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union – represented the end of history and the universalization of the Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. Yet, when Kojève's thought was brought into a liberalist framework, the idea of idleness disappeared from the discussion (instead, industriousness was seen as a value). New political circumstances thus spurred new interpretations of the Hegel/Kojève-constellation, taking it in different directions. Where the poststructural paradigm maintained idleness/*désœuvrement* as a key idea, Fukuyama's liberalist train of thought did not.

In the wake of poststructualism, Agamben has continued to explore the topic of *désœuvrement* and its conflicting interpretations.[7] In his epochal work *Homo Sacer* (1998), he is not merely concerned with the end of history, but also with the end of law and the end of the national state. In that context, he addresses the history of the term *désœuvrement*:

> The theme of *désœuvrement* – inoperativeness as the figure of the fullness of man at the end of history – which first appears in Kojève's review of Queneau, has been taken up by Blanchot and Nancy, who places it at the very center of his work *The Inoperative Community*. Everything depends on what is meant by «inoperativeness.» It can be neither simple absence of work nor (as in Bataille) a sovereign and useless form of negativity. The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode [modo di esistenza] of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum* [transition from possibility to actuality]. (Agamben 1998, 61-2)

For Agamben, *désœuvrement* is neither the absence of a work (*ergon*) nor a useless form of negativity, but rather a generic mode of *potentiality*, that is, a potentiality that maintains all possibilities. Potentiality for Agamben is closely akin to *power*. The term is central to his reflections on how we can possible conceive of man without rooting our ideas in (fixed and limiting) identities or ends. His suggestion is to envision man as a "form-of-life" endorsing a life practice without calculation, through a multitude of *contingent* modes, preferences, styles and tastes (Agamben 2000; Agamben 2016). For Agamben, the idea of *désœuvrement* is thus at the heart of a reconsideration of our ways of thinking about the human being.

I will close this brief survey by mentioning Catherine Malabou's contribution, *The Future of Hegel* (2004). Discussing temporality with reference to both Hegel and Kojève, she points to a problem that emerges in our day: the arrival of free time. Due to technological simplification, ordinary people will have even less to do in the future, and the risk connected with this is severe boredom, she contends. Here she addresses a problem that was also acknowledged by Kojève and by Walter Benjamin: the possibility that free time will not lead to happiness, but rather to boredom. Still, she closes her book on a hopeful – although rather

vague – note, suggesting that we should enter into the serenity and the perils of the *Sunday of life*.

But what would it means to enter into the Sunday of life? For us, today? Just as in the historical discussions on idleness, the stakes are high and conclusions are hard to draw. Yet my suggestion is that the temporal experiment conducted in Queneau's novel may lead us toward an understanding of idleness that is apt in our day. Rather than seeing idleness as an end figure, heralding post-historical temporality, or discussing it as a vague poststructuralist concept, signaling a state of luxury or inertia, I suggest seeing idleness as a *figure for profane temporality*. In my mind, this gives us a profound notion of idleness – steeped in history and sensitive to despotism – that may guide us in our pressed relation to time today.

In our day, we witness the emergence of a 24/7 society, urging us towards perpetual production and performance, and this may severely endanger our relation to idle time. At the same time, as Malabou warns us, we may be seeing a historical shift in the relation between work time and leisure time, as more and more jobs are lost to automation. In this situation, the question of *boredom* inevitably emerges, and we risk becoming the victims of the attention economy of capitalist media. Further, a new temporal paradigm has started to emerge in our day; *waiting*, or imposed idleness (migrants waiting for their papers, or unemployed people waiting to get a job). This means that the politics of a society may turn out to decide who is idle, who is working around the clock, who is bored and who is submissively waiting. But idleness should not be the privilege of a chose few, nor should free time be granted without agency and power.

To come to terms with our pressed relation to time today, my suggestion is that we need a more profound way of thinking of idleness. Conceiving of idleness as profane temporality may help us see that we are facing new forms of despotism today that pushes us towards intolerable ways of relating to time: First *capitalism*, turning humans into producers and performers, committed to maximizing the profit of every minute. Second *technology* – from robots to smartphones – outmaneuvering human powers and creativity. Third *bureaucracy*, making us wait for everyday life and creating states of exception that put life on hold. If the forces of capitalism, technology and bureaucracy are given free rein, our possibility to enjoy profane time – to enjoy idleness – will be severely damaged and a set of new temporal paradigms will start dominating in the "free" world: *24/7 productivity, boredom* and *waiting*. That is why we should take idleness seriously and remain attentive to how art and literature experiments with idle time.

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[1] Two recent books on idleness discuss a wide range of sources in philosophy and literature, but none of them looks at the constellation Hegel/Kojève/Queneau. See O'Connor 2018 and Ladyga 2019.
[2] It should be pointed out that Hegel views on laziness goes in a different direction; laziness is associated with the rabble (der Pöbel), which is criticized by Hegel for its rejection of work and its non-ethical way of life. See Hegel 1991. The role of the rabble in Hegel has recently been discussed in a critical perspective, see Ruda 2011; Zambrana 2021.
[3] *Ausgelassenheit* would later become central in Heidegger's thought.
[4] For an introduction to Kojève's thought and its influence on modern French philosophy, see Vincent Descombes 1993, 1-48.
[5] The translations from Kojève's review are mine.
[6] In this context, it should be pointed out that Kojève ended his career as a powerful bureaucrat working for the French Ministry of Economic Affairs and is considered one of the chief architects of the European Economic Community (EEC). As James H. Nichols points out, he was both a major intellectual figure (whose position was extremely complex) and an "éminence grise" in French politics. See Nichols 2007, 1; 93.
[7] Also in *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben adresses Kojève, and more specifically, the question of the status of man after the end of history. Taking issue with Kojève, Agamben discusses the relation between man and animal and outlines some of the features of his notion of "form-of-life." See Agamben 2003, 9-12.