CHAPTER I

## *Of the inequality that is between us*

> I admire and love in Adorno someone who never stopped hesitating
> between the philosopher's "no" and the "yes, perhaps, sometimes that
> does happen" of the poet, the writer or the essayist, the musician, the
> painter, the playwright, or scriptwriter, or even the psychoanalyst.
> In hesitating between the "no" and the "yes, sometimes, perhaps,"
> Adorno was heir to both. He took account of what the concept, even
> the dialectic, could not conceptualize in the singular event, and he
> did everything he could to take on the responsibility of this double
> legacy.[1]

### Reading class

I am not a book lover, but I like reading the ideas written in books. So
when I saw an article in *The New York Times* on January 21, 2011 with the
headline "A Getaway for Book Lovers," I hesitated. But January (especially
in Toronto) makes you dream of getaways, so I read on. The article was
about visiting Norwich, England, but what caught my attention was a
photograph that accompanied it: "The entire text of Sir Thomas More's
'Utopia,'" explained the caption, "is inscribed by an artist on an old build-
ing."[2] The photo is of two arched windows in a late-nineteenth-century
brick structure. Following the horizontal bricks as virtual lines, *Utopia* is
written in white paint. The text also goes over the windows. Looking at
the photograph, I was suddenly able to pose a question that had been
nagging at me, half formed and unclear, for a long time: why, at the end
of the beginning of the twenty-first century, would anyone write literary
criticism at all? And if you did, why would you study Renaissance litera-
ture in particular? Something about the photograph gave me hope for an
answer.

Nine months later I traveled to Norwich to see the building, which is
(at least as I write this) still standing.[3] The artist's name is Rory Macbeth,

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and he named the project *No Place (Spiral)*. With the help of some students from the Norwich University College of the Arts, it took him about two weeks to paint all 40,000 words of More's work onto the building for the 2006 EASTinternational Art Exhibition. Beginning in a top corner, the text spirals around the building, and the final word ("Europe," in the translation that Macbeth used)[4] is on the last available brick in one corner of the building. Though the lettering is very neat, it is difficult to read the text (Fig. 1). From a distance, you can tell the building has writing on it, but you can't make out particular words. From closer up, or with the help of a camera lens, you can read the words, but it is hard to put them together into sentences. On the Saturday I was there the area around the building was being used as a parking lot, and I randomly asked people getting out of their cars what they thought about it. The nearly universal reaction to my scrupulously unscientific sample? "That must have taken forever." It feels exactly right: you are overwhelmed by the sheer number of words you are looking at, and you are instantly aware of the amount of work involved in writing them. And you identify with Macbeth as he was painting. "That must have taken forever" means "That must have felt like it was never going to be finished." As it turns out, the building is not finished. In an email to me, Macbeth insisted "[t]he work is in fact incomplete till the building is demolished (with all of the implications of renewal, etc.) … so for me the delay in the demolition (it was meant to happen right away!) has been unexpected and a bit frustrating."[5] In the meantime, *No Place (Spiral)* sits in a sort of limbo, a half-legible building caught between the past and the future. That there is often one of Norwich's famed medieval churches in the background as you look at the building intensifies the problem. From Renaissance text to industrial building to postmodern parking lot, where exactly does this utopia fit?

Just after he completed *No Place (Spiral)*, Macbeth again painted More's words on a building. The second one was torn down. Titled *No Place (Kingly Digs)*, it was done in the forty-room Manor Hotel in Sunderland, a former hostel for the homeless that had been condemned before Macbeth painted it.[6] *No Place (Kingly Digs)* is sort of the inverse of the building in Norwich. *Utopia* was written on the inside, not the outside – haphazardly spray-painted in reddish-brown paint that looks more than a little like blood. In a thirty-three-minute film also called *No Place (Kingly Digs)* made of the hotel for Macbeth by Patricia Doherty (Macbeth mailed me a copy – it isn't otherwise available), you glimpse the interior of the hotel with the jumpy spot of a flashlight as the camera moves through desolate rooms. The first thing you see is an old, white bathroom sink; there is text
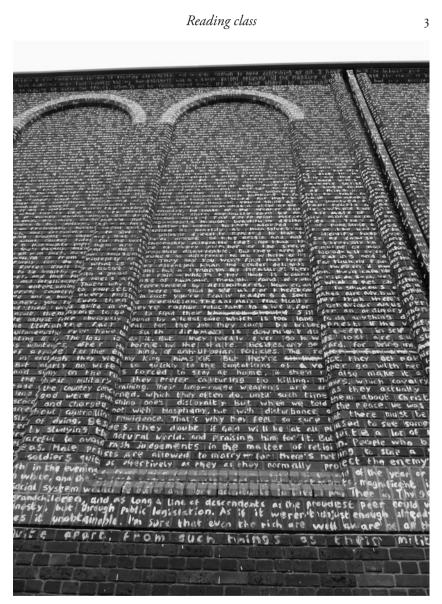
Figure 1 Detail from *No Place (Spiral)*, 2006, by Rory Macbeth. Macbeth painted the entire text of More's *Utopia* upon an abandoned building in Norwich, UK. Photograph by the author.

spray-painted on the wall above it, and some paint has dripped onto the porcelain. It looks alternately decrepit, depressing, and kitschy, sort of a 1980s horror movie – maybe scary once, but now ridiculous. The entire project feels more than a little nostalgic because it seems to want to reactivate a truth about *Utopia*, about the 1980s, and about modern Europe generally. Rather than a social protest, the abandoned building covered with More's words becomes an epitaph to a dead idea.

It is not difficult to say what that dead idea is: it is class. *No Place (Kingly Digs)*, the Sunderland "Utopia," harkens back to the beginning and the end of an argument about class – More's *Utopia* and the 1980s, when Reaganism and Thatcherism announced the end of the era of industrial production and made irrelevant the promise of "the communal living" and the "moneyless economy" of More's Utopians.[7] Modernity after *Utopia* divided the world between owners (capitalists) and the people who labored for them (the proletariat), and what feels nostalgic in the film is its effort to hold onto that account. When you see a shot through a paint-stained window of a row of well-kept houses outside the hotel, you get a sense of the film betraying itself, fearful (or angry) that it is merely caught in an old problem, stuck inside a hotel that has closed. Rather than a lever to expose inequality, the dilapidated hotel is a final glimpse of a social view passing away, an industrial past as foreign as the enclosure movement decried by More's Raphael Hythloday, the learned speaker of nonsense. *Utopia*, that book about communism, is itself put to rest. In the post-utopian world, class seems to be simply not a problem anymore, and the graffiti protests that elicit it end up looking like desperate efforts to summon forth a ghost that no longer haunts the post-industrial world of globalization.

*No Place (Spiral)*, the "Utopia" in Norwich, is not entirely free of such nostalgia. The writing on the building still recalls proletarian graffiti in no small part because of the building it is written on. It was constructed by the Norwich Electricity Company at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the first electricity power plant in town.[8] By writing More's *Utopia* on this building, Macbeth's work invokes a certain modernist "faith in the capabilities of electricity and machines,"[9] a conviction that spanned both sides of the political divide (east/west; socialist/capitalist). "*Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country*," declared Lenin. The dream of a classless society could be realized through electrification: "Only when the country has been electrified, and industry, agriculture and transport have been placed on the technical basis of modern large-scale industry, only then shall we be fully victorious."[10] If class struggle – the

divide between proprietor and worker – was the base of capitalism, electricity was the technical basis that could destroy that base. Something like equality was likewise the hope, or at least the selling point, of the Norwich Electricity Company as well. In 1939 the company organized an "exhibition" to "bring to your notice the many benefits which Electricity can give to your Home." Those benefits were apparent in the advertisements interspersed through the catalog for electric vacuums, electric dishwashers, and electric fireplaces. The greeting on the inside front cover of the brochure nicely summed up the point of these appliances: "Let 'Electricity' be your silent servant."[11] Quiet, unobtrusive, and invisible, electricity would, promised the brochure, perform the functions of servants in the past, but without the noisy complaints. Electric appliances would free you, and in particular free women, from the drudgery of work by transforming service from an unequal relation between people into an expression of human mastery over nature. Service would become something performed by electricity, not by people, and class relations between human beings would be eliminated altogether.

In the neatness of its white letters, *No Place (Spiral)* transforms the post-class dreams of Lenin and the Norwich Electricity Company into the cool irony of postmodern art. The old electricity power plant becomes a "power plant" in permanent quotation marks. Power no longer has an origin in a building but emanates from everything and everyone: biopower, not electricity production. The "power plant" that first came to mind as I looked at it was the Tate Modern Gallery in central London, which was the Bankside Power Station before turning into a temple of post-industrial aestheticism. In *No Place (Spiral)* the mortar between the bricks becomes the lines upon which the words are written; the building itself becomes a text. And its discourse is never finally legible, literally or figuratively. No matter where you stand, either around the building or on the internet, you can't read the entire thing; the building as text moves beyond anyone's "perceptual equipment."[12] Macbeth's insistence that the work is unfinished until it is demolished consequently makes a certain sense: this utopia will be a virtual utopia or a heterotopia,[13] not an actual one. Its destruction releases it from the last material bridge to an industrial past. Because it is now a virtual "power plant," it does not really matter whether you see the work in situ in Norwich, in a photograph, or on the internet. History itself becomes a virtual space, and the difference between More's early-sixteenth-century work, the late-nineteenth-century building, and the twenty-first-century painting disappears into the permanent present of the era that no longer thinks historically.

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Yet *No Place (Spiral)* is not exactly postmodern. Instead, it turns modernist class and postmodern biopower into something else. This transformation appears not as content or theme but as what I will call throughout the book form. In person, on the internet, or in a photograph, it is obvious that *No Place (Spiral)* has borders – the lines of the text very carefully follow the lines of the brick – but that horizontal organization seems a symptom, not a cause, of an invisible inner logic that organizes the entire thing. Macbeth carefully calculated how to fit all of More's 40,000-plus words onto the building.[14] "It was important to me that the building and the book fitted together as closely as possible," he wrote to me.[15] And the result is that *No Place (Spiral)* is very much an integral artwork even when, or maybe because, you can't see all of it, even in person, even in three dimensions.[16] It is not just endless text or circulating discourse. It looks more like a well-wrought urn than graffiti. "Europe" begins and ends on the last brick of the building; "the end of the aristocracy" appears very neatly beneath the exterior staircase; "in many cases perfectly ridiculous" is elongated on the final line of one side of the building. The text of More's *Utopia* draws a border around the building, a line of demarcation that it does not, or does not exactly, cross. The building is not a node of discourse circulating among More, Tudor History, the Norwich Electricity Company, Lenin, E. P. Thompson, or the Tate Modern. To see the many different issues the work invokes is always to go further into it, not outside it. Its citations and allusions end up reinforcing the border of the building as an art object.

This stress on borders owes a lot to a tradition of utopian writing inaugurated by More, and which Jameson has dubbed the utopian "program." A utopian program "must posit limits" that sharply differentiate the "boundaries between the Utopian and the non-Utopian," between the utopian inside and the non-utopian outside.[17] More's *Utopia* stages an imaginary origin for this sense of border-erection at the moment when, sometime in the undefined past, King Utopus has a fifteen-mile channel dug to make Utopia an island separated from the mainland.[18] At that moment, the island of Utopia becomes a utopian program. It is this border-erecting, though, that has made utopias seem so alternately creepy or hallucinatory or exclusionary. Utopias often enough have been merely excuses for totalitarianisms, from the benign to the malignant: hippie colonies, Brasilia, Le Corbusier apartment buildings, Stalin's work camps. When the film of *No Place (Kingly Digs)* peeps out of the window of the hotel, it is looking at a world it is otherwise trying to exclude.

But the borders of *No Place (Spiral)* seem less exclusionary than a question, an inside and an outside that keep wondering which is which. The building maintains its borders, but it also seems continually to surpass them. And it is this "utopian impulse," as Jameson calls it,[19] that poses more or less the same question that Derrida asks of the utopian tradition generally when he accepts the Adorno Prize: "Could there be an ethics or politics of dreaming," wonders Derrida, "that did not yield to the imaginary or to the utopian, and was not an abandonment, irresponsible, and evasive?"[20] Can you hold onto a utopia without digging a channel? Can you hold onto dreams, longings for something better, without them being utopias – abandonments of the world, evasions of responsibility, work camps or hippie colonies? Derrida uses Adorno's description of Benjamin to work through a response. What was remarkable about Benjamin's criticism, wrote Adorno, was that "[i]n the form of the paradox of the impossible possibility," Benjamin "*overcame* the dream without *betraying* it [*ohne ihn zu* verraten] and making himself the accomplice in that on which the philosophers have always agreed: that it shall not be.'" Here is Derrida's explication:

> the impossible possibility, the possibility of the impossible this is what Adorno says: *die Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen*. We shouldn't let ourselves be affected by "that on which the philosophers have always agreed," namely the first complicity to break up and the one you have to start by worrying about if you want to do a little thinking. *Overcoming* the dream without *betraying* it (*ohne ihn zu verraten*) – that's the way, says Benjamin, the author of a *Traumkitsch* [Dream Kitsch]: to wake up, to cultivate awakeness and vigilance, while remaining attentive to meaning, faithful to the lessons and the lucidity of a dream, caring for what the dream lets us think about, especially when what it lets us think about is the *possibility of the impossible*.[21]

The "form of the paradox of the impossible possibility" – the border of the utopian work, the lucidity of the dream – functions less as a channel that separates off the utopian program so much as a line that marks an edge that makes possible the impossible, makes it possible to imagine a "beyond" at all. This possibility of the impossible comes about, consequently, through strict adherence to form, to a constant respect for and return to the lucidity, organization, and structure of dreams. To see the border you must always see beyond the border; but to see beyond the border you always have to look at the border.[22]

Macbeth's *No Place (Spiral)* points to itself as it also points beyond itself, and it does it through a certain devotion to More's text. For it is,

obviously, the words of *Utopia* that hold Macbeth's building together and give it its peculiar form. The walls of the building are themselves organized by the words, not the other way around: the words follow the lines of the bricks, but they end up overcoming without betraying those lines and become focused very much on a different sort of organization (surely that is one reason the words go over the windows as well – see Fig. 2). Not the exact words, though. The fact that Macbeth used an English translation rather than More's Latin stresses that there is just something unknowable, some part of the Renaissance *Utopia*, that remains out of your grasp. The building is not interested in speaking with the dead in their language. Using an English translation, though, the lingua franca of the globalized world, means it is possible and maybe even imperative to read the words and to speak with, not the dead exactly, but with a translated ghost. The translation doesn't necessarily matter much, then, because there is a specter of a *Grund* or *Geist* that haunts all the words, the word of the words, the all that organizes them. "I wish I could read all those words," said one little girl to me as I was taking photos of the building. I am pretty sure she was just performing the role of young-scholar-to-be and telling me what she thought would make her seem smart (what scholar isn't a bit of a brat?). But I think she's right: the wish to read all the words, to read the all of the words, to read every one of them, to read all of each of them, all their nuance, but to read them all in their totality – that is what Derrida means by holding onto the dream, what Adorno means by "the *form* of the paradox of the impossible possibility." The utopia written on the building is a dream: you can't really see all of it; you can't quite read the entire thing. And yet it has form. The words organize the entire building and hold in place *Utopia*. They create its borders and make possible the movement beyond that respects their integrity.

One of the great accomplishments of Macbeth's *No Place (Spiral)* is that it makes you want to go back to Renaissance literature to read its words again. The building locates its origins in More's words, that is, in the world of the Renaissance in English that More's Latin words help inaugurate. The Renaissance was the origin of modernity and its many utopian programs. The Renaissance is also, in *No Place (Spiral)*, the uncanny origin of something else, of a possible impossibility that arrives after the rejection of modernism and its particular nightmares. Through *No Place (Spiral)* the Renaissance becomes an origin of a critique of the postmodern. Renaissance literature, which seemed buried in the past – in the modernism it inaugurated and in the historicism that has come to dominate its study – starts to point toward another rebirth. The artist's name,
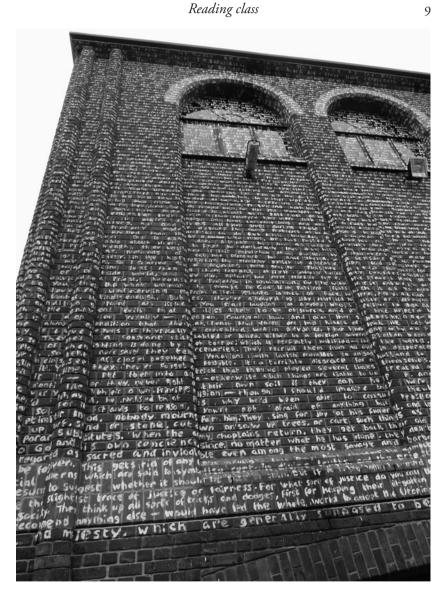
Figure 2   Detail from *No Place (Spiral)*, 2006, by Rory Macbeth. Photograph by
the author.

remember, is Rory *Macbeth*, a weird name if ever there were one, another word to try to read all of. When you go back and read Renaissance literature through *No Place (Spiral)*, the words you thought you knew no longer say exactly what you thought they said. And what class means in *Utopia*, or in the nineteenth century, or today, starts to look a little different.

But which words? What words of More's are all the words? You can't read all of them, but you can try to read all of some of them. The place many readers have looked for the key to *Utopia* is the conclusion of Book II when the narrator, happily also named Thomas More, returns and briefly comments on Hythloday's description of the island. It is a crucial moment for many reasons. Structurally, this is the moment when the opening, dialogic frame of Book I returns and closes around the description of the island of Utopia that is Book II. The character of More finally gets his opportunity to say what he thinks about Raphael and his description of no place. Because of these intersections, this is the place where many have looked for an author, or for authority, or for the reconciliation of the character Thomas More and the historical figure Sir Thomas More: here is what More really thinks, or the real meaning of *Utopia*, or the very ground of no place:

> When Raphael had finished his story, I was left thinking that not a few of the laws and customs he had described as existing among the Utopians were really absurd. These included their methods of waging war, their religious practices, as well as other customs of theirs; but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy. This one thing alone utterly subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty which (in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth.[23]

It is impossible to tell to what extent this passage is ironic.[24] But before trying to sort out its possibilities, it is worth pausing to note that a passage in which so many have tried to find More's intent as the basis of the meaning of *Utopia*, the moment at which the work seems to close in on itself and ground its own meaning in the immanent closure of the frame begun in Book I – this passage is also about "the basis of their whole system." The sentences that seem to hold the meaning of the work, that declare that all of the words of the work will be contained within them – these sentences are primarily concerned with the basis of a commonwealth, that is to say, with its borders, with the very foundation of its form.

They do not exactly tell you what that basis is. But they do promise to tell you. More agrees that the "basis" of Utopia, the principle that grounds all other "laws and customs," including "waging war" and "religious