

‘I’m writing about strange people, people on the edge, people that society doesn’t like much’: the precariat in the work of Agnes Owens.

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Abstract

This article explores the way in which Agnes Owens, a 20th century working-class writer from Scotland, gives a literary voice to those most marginalized and underprivileged, a category of workers that is often defined as the precariat. The first part of the article traces the historic origins of the term precariat within marxism, then linking it to the growing number of people working today in low paid, short-term and uninsured jobs often beyond the pale of the rest of society. Their accompanying condition of neo-poverty is what Agnes Owens sought to dramatize in her novels and short stories, two of which – “Arabella” and *Bad Attitudes* – are chosen for more detailed discussion. The article seeks to show how Owens not only documents the lives of this modern precariat, but also how these new forms of social deprivation are feminized, since it is clearly the women who are most vulnerable in this new context of social and economic precarity.

Keywords: Agnes Owens, Scottish working-class literature, precariat.

In the most comprehensive survey of 20th century working-class women writers, *Writing on the Line* (1996), there is no mention of Agnes Owens. This is despite the fact that by that year she had already published two novels, *Like Birds in the Wilderness* (1987) and *A Working Mother* (1994), as well as a collection of short stories, *Gentlemen of the West* (1984). She had also contributed nine stories, including her most famous one, ‘Arabella’, to one of the most iconic collections of contemporary Scottish short fiction, *Lean Tales* (1985). The reason for this critical absence might be that Owens did not write about the traditional working class in her novels and stories, even though she came from that background herself. She was 58 when she published her first stories, working for most of her adult life as a cleaner, a typist and in a factory making clocks in the Vale of Leven, Scotland, where she lived. She was also the mother of six children. Alasdair Gray, who helped launch her career as a writer, said when she died at the age of 88 in 2014 that she had been the “most unfairly neglected of all living Scottish authors” (Alasdair Gray 2014). In an interview Owens gave in 2008, Jane Gray asked her: “Your characters are quite often on the margins of society: the homeless, tinkers, people suffering from nervous breakdowns, the mentally ill, alcoholics”, to which Owens replied: “I prefer to write about people that are just condemned, maybe, from the start. You know, maybe their environment, or their parents or they don’t have a chance and they end up being despised. I prefer to give people like that a voice” (Jane Gray 2008). It is this social aspect of Owens’ writing that I want to explore in more detail in this article. In particular, the way her focus on the most marginalized sections of

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the working class, which today we might refer to as the ‘precariat’, both pre-empted this sociological characterization, but also helps to individualize their ‘precarious’ personal predicament in ways that are more empathetic and politically provocative.

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Precariat is a portmanteau word made up of precarious and proletariat. It basically refers to those whose employment and income are unstable, short term and usually seriously reduced, in contrast to those who have a more permanent status as workers with regular pay and conditions. The link to the proletariat reveals the Marxist origins of the word, both Marx and Engels using the word ‘precarious’ in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) to characterize the impact of mechanization on the process of factory production:

The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious (Marx & Engels 1998:8).

As a result, male factory ‘hands’ were replaced by women, children or migrants, who made up a reservoir of cheap labour. However, below this category of replacement surplus workers, Marx (1850) also identified a more amorphous group of even poorer people who lived precariously on the utmost margins of society:

They belonged for the most part to the *lumpenproletariat*, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu*, varying according to the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong (Marx 1968:44).

The modern use of the term precariat seems to incorporate all of these meanings – insecurity, low pay and social exclusion. Today’s word was coined in 2011 by Guy Standing in his book *The Precariat: the new dangerous class*, where he links it to a new stage in modern capitalism with the increased casualization and pauperization of workers everywhere. In what has become known as the ‘gig’ economy, people are employed for temporary, one-off jobs with no social benefits such as holidays, sickness or pension rights. They are often forced to work on so-called zero hour contracts, which give them no regular or sustained employment. Another category that has emerged in this context are the ‘Mac jobs’ where young people, often more women than men, are employed in the growing service sector as low-paid, part-time staff. It is clear from such exploitative conditions that the prime object is not to enhance the career prospects of employees, but only to increase the profit margins of the owners and share holders. The psychological implications of this dead-end form of employment are moreover calamitous. Thus, according to Standing, the lives of the precariat are

dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation. They are denizens rather than citizens, losing cultural, civil, social, political and economic rights built up over generations.

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The precariat is the first class in history expected to labour and work at a lower level than the schooling it typically acquires. In an ever more unequal society, its relative deprivation is severe (Standing 2016:x).

The subtitle of Standing's book is 'the new dangerous class', which suggests that the members of the precariat have little or nothing to gain in the long run from living in such a vulnerable and alienated condition. They have no real personal stake in society. In Standing's argument, their hopeless anger and frustration can therefore more easily be manipulated by reactionary populist movements and rightwing parties, something that can be seen throughout Europe and in America. Politically, we seem to be back to the 'lumpenproletariat' of Marx. There is clearly an element of moral panic about this subclass of the poor that threatens the rest of society by its very existence. Precarious refers therefore not only to the instability of their material status, but also to the unpredictability of their reactions to the chronic state of social and economic discrimination in which they are compelled to live. Standing's comments in this context are revealing in terms of his underlying concern about the actual level of threat that the precariat poses to the rest of society:

People are insecure in the mind and stressed, at the same time 'underemployed' and 'overemployed'. They are alienated from their labour and work, and are anomic, uncertain and desperate in their behaviour. People who fear losing what they have are constantly frustrated. They will be angry but usually passively so. The precariatized mind is fed by fear and motivated by fear (Standing 2016:23).

Specifically, Standing warns against "the growth in the number of actions deemed to be criminal. More people are arrested and more are incarcerated than ever before, resulting in more people being criminalized than ever before" (Standing 2016:16). This line between the 'respectable' and 'semi-criminal' working class is also something that Agnes Owens seeks to trace in her writing. There is moreover a shocking element of gratuitous and unpredictable violence in her fiction, to which critics have reacted and to which I will return later.

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Thus far, we have looked at the sociological debate about the precariat from the early capitalist period of Marx to the global free market economy of today. It seems that the precariat, under different names, has always been with us, even though now the phenomenon of a more atomised working life has almost completely replaced traditional working-class involvement in factory production. However, the question can also be posed whether or not the precariat is more of a Western development, since the majority of manufacturing jobs that still exist have been moved to places like China, India, Bangladesh, Mexico and Brazil. This global transformation started in the 1980s when the doctrine of economic neoliberalism usurped the previous Keynesian consensus of welfare state capitalism. It is also at this time that Agnes Owens began her career as a writer in Scotland, a country that suffered much from this process of privatization of public services and industrial closures, not least in the Glasgow region where Owens worked. In retrospect, while the emergence of a local precariat was becoming more visible even at this early stage, it is also clear

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that Owens was responding in her writing to this ruination of the working class in Glasgow. Jobs were being outsourced abroad, transforming Scotland from one of the centres of the industrial revolution in Britain into a so-called twilight zone of mass unemployment, impoverishment and decline. It is sadly symbolic for example that Glasgow has now become the heart-disease capital of Europe.¹ In his full-length study of Owens’ writing, Rupert Alexander Pirie-Hunter argues that Owens consciously breaks with the tradition of working-class literature in Britain, which is usually class oriented and politically radical, to focus instead on the lives of individual people who are abandoned and lost, completely confused about why they are on the receiving end of these calamitous changes in society:

Her focus is not on those who rail against the economic and social forces keeping them down, but on those who have no choice or will but to survive from day to day. These stories are challenging representations of systems of abuse, and of the pervasive and cumulative effects on marginalized individuals. This abuse extends not only to individuals, but to relations between men and women; within families; between communities and the elderly, the youth, the poor and the mentally unstable (Pirie-Hunter 2015:4).

This shift of attention to those who are marginalized and disempowered involves also a conscious narrative redirection. For Owens, the precariat is gendered. Poverty is feminized. In this increasingly unequal redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, it is the women who have lost control over their lives. The rich have got enormously richer to the point where now one percent owns half the world’s wealth, most of them men.² At the same time, also in contrast to previous working-class writers, Owens is not primarily concerned with exploring the male-dominated world of work, although there are stories set on building sites and in offices. Instead, she reveals the domestic impact of this growing malaise of precarity. How the lack of any stable source of income translates into an individual loss of identity, often leading to drunkenness, domestic violence and marital breakdowns. Owens wants to show her readers what goes on behind closed doors, where the everyday struggles of people in dire personal straights are played out. Let us turn therefore to the fiction of Agnes Owens to see how these social divisions are dramatized in her work and what sort of images she projects of those who are condemned to live a life in which chronic deprivation has become the norm.

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Agnes Owens published altogether five novels and four collections of short stories. For the purpose of this article I have chosen to focus on one short story, ‘Arabella’ (1978) and one novel, *Bad Attitudes* (2003). Together, they provide a representative selection of the writing that Owens produced, which was a mixture of social realism, naturalistic dialogue and often surreal twists of plot. Her stories are dark vignettes that depict the experiences of men and women at the end of their tether.

¹ See further, BBC News, 5th June 2014, www.bbc.co.uk. Glasgow has also the highest rate of infant mortality in Britain, a statistic that is directly linked to high levels of poverty. See The Guardian, 27th November 2017, www.theguardian.com

² See further, The Guardian, 14th November 2017, www.theguardian.com

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Without doubt, they can be read as parables of precarity, showing how the pressures of scarcity and material denial are coped with or not. Owens' narratives can often be grim and tragic, but there is also a sense of people almost expecting the worst as part of their natural lot.

The short story, 'Arabella', is the one that initiated Owens' career as a writer. It was this first example of her literary skills that drew the attention of the creative writing workshops that were held in the Vale of Leven where she lived. Her teacher, Liz Lochhead, recalls her initial reading of this remarkable story: "From the shift in the second sentence when it had me doing a double take, it began its work of filling me with a mounting, irresistible and exhilarating black glee. It shocked, amazed and delighted me" (Lochhead 2008:vii). Owens' other teacher, the novelist Alasdair Gray, commented in retrospect about the story that "Agnes has written equally good things since, though nothing as fantastic" (Alasdair Gray 2009). In her turn, Jane Gray describes the portrayal of the character of Arabella as "witchlike" in a narrative that is "highly ironic [...] thus insisting on the disparity between what Arabella takes herself to be and how other characters (as well as the reader) see her" (2008).

Arabella is the personification of precarity. She is a young woman who lives alone with her four dogs in a rundown cottage on the outskirts of town. She survives on social security benefits. She cannot read, not having ever gone to school. She also carries on a dubious trade as a "healer", her customers being "a regular clientele of respectable gentlemen who call upon her from time to time to have their bodies relaxed by a special potion of cow dung, mashed snails or frogs, or whatever dead creature was at hand" (Owens 2008:2). Although it is never clearly stated, this form of healing also involves performing sexual services. She is more worried however about a forthcoming visit by the Sanitary Inspector, who threatens to evict her because of the unhygienic conditions of her home. She has no friends, only male customers. Despite her apparent self-sufficiency, the circumstances of her life are constricted, wretched and vulnerable. Owens has said that she wrote the story out of "spite" (Quoted in Alasdair Gray 2009) and the reader is certainly meant to take almost perverse pleasure in reading about a woman who lives so much against the codes of what is acceptable in society.

The opening scene of the story, Arabella pushing a pram with four dogs in it, is a striking image that seems to make an ironic comment on the concept of motherhood. Arabella is not the usual single mother 'scrounging' on benefits. Her dogs are her "children, as she preferred to call them" (Owens 2008:1). She is devoted to them, in her rough and ready way, to the point of sacrificing her own physical needs for theirs:

Most of her Social Security and the little extra she earned was spent on them. She was quite satisfied with her diet of black sweet tea and cold sliced porridge kept handy while her children dined on mince, liver and chops (Owens 2008:1).

In contrast, her own parents show little or no affection for her. When she visits them as a dutiful daughter might, bringing flowers (albeit wild dandelions), they

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completely ignore her: “Her bedridden father had pulled the sheet over his face when she had entered. Her mother sat bent and tight-lipped over the fire [...] they never uttered a word except for the terse question ‘When are you leaving?’” (Owens 2008:1). The whole story seems to depict a dysfunctional woman living in extremely precarious circumstances, whose only emotional point of support in her life are her pet dogs. When she tries to get some post-coital advice from one of her customer’s, a “councillor’s son”, about what to do about the Sanitary Inspector’s visit, he merely insults her person:

‘That’s your worry,’ he replied, as he put on his trousers. ‘Anyway the smell in this place makes me sick. I don’t know what’s worse – you or the smell’ (Owens 2008:3).

Owens not only satirizes the ideals of a traditional working-class family, at the centre of which is a loving mother, she also depicts the profound suspicion a single woman might feel towards the representatives of order in the form of the Sanitary Inspector who seek to control her life. It’s as though Arabella’s body is not only commodified by her customers but is also a locus of disgust and transgression that attracts the attention of other male representatives of authority. Throughout the story, there are recurring images of the insanitary, or ‘insane’ nature of Arabella’s condition, not least in her total lack of personal hygiene, challenging the gender norm about women and the attractiveness/repulsion of their bodies:

Arabella studied her face in the cracked piece of mirror and decided to give it a wash. She moved a damp smelly cloth over it, which only made the seams of dirt show up more clearly. Then she attempted to run a comb through her tangled mass of hair, but the comb snapped. Thoroughly annoyed, she picked out a fat louse from a loose strand of hair and crushed it with her fingernails (Owens 2008:4).

At the same time, despite all the indications of Arabella being a person totally beyond the pale of society, without stability or support, there is also the suggestion that she has other resources as a ‘wise woman’, that enable her to survive. Her knowledge of natural remedies has in part made up for her apparent ignorance of the ways of the world:

Her parents had never seen the necessity for schooling and so far Arabella had managed quite well without it. Her reputation as a healer was undisputed and undiminished by the lack of education (Owens 2008:2).

The culmination of this portrayal of subversive female disorder occurs when Arabella deals with the Sanitary Inspector in her own drastic and highly symbolic way. In an act of surreal seduction, she overwhelms him with her revolting physical presence, thus destabilizing the relationship of power between them. Normally, the presence of an official from the local council would intimidate any lower-class woman living alone, especially when it involves the prospect of an eviction order. In contrast, however, it is Arabella who ends up silencing the man through her obscene attentions intent on curing him of a sickness caused by “twenty years of

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examining fetid drains and infested dwellings” (Owens 2008:5). His physical ailments are however also a symptom of the moral decay of a man whose job it has been to punish the poor for their filth and feckless behavior. Standing refers to the precariat as a potential threat to the status quo by their very existence and in this case the fear of losing her home turns Arabella into a killer. This murderous treatment is meted out in symbolic stages: at first, merely the sight of her is physically debilitating:

She could see at a glance that this was a sick man, though not necessarily one who would take his clothes off. The Sanitary Inspector opened his mouth to say something but found that he was choking and everything was swimming before him. He had witnessed many an odious spectacle in his time but this fat sagging filthy woman with wild tangled hair and great staring eyes was worse than the nightmares he often had of dismembered bodies in choked drains (Owens 2008:5).

Despite these ghoulish premonitions, the climax of the story still comes as a shock when Arabella reveals her naked buttocks to the man, at the same time waving a “dollop” of foul ointment under his nose to make him faint. In a final carnivalesque reversal of roles, this reclusive female reveals surprising “great powers” (Owens 2008:5) when she drags the inspector’s half-dead body to a barrel of her cleansing witch’s brew and topples him in to drown. ‘Arabella’ is in many ways a piece of feminist wishful thinking, a psychological return of the repressed, in which a female member of the precariat manages to turn the tables on the patriarchal powers that be. It is a modern revenge tragedy as well as a burlesque farce, in which we are invited to identify with this terrifying female grotesque. At the same time, Owens turns the world upside down in a utopian twist of precarious usurpation. The reality is of course that the dispossessed like Arabella rarely manage to get their own back, however much they would like to silence their persecutors by tipping them headfirst into a barrel of shit.

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Bad Attitudes is one of the last novels Owens wrote. As with much of her work, it has not received any real critical attention.³ In some ways it repeats the themes that are prevalent in Owens’s other writing, although this story is particularly bleak. It depicts a world of troubled people living in slum tenements that are about to be demolished. Derelict lives in abandoned homes. As with Arabella, everyone is threatened with eviction. This domestic insecurity is also the cause of tensions between individuals and within families, psychological strains that lead to drunkenness, adultery, anti-social behavior, exclusion and finally murder. The story is a piece of almost social Darwinistic fiction in the traditions of Zola, Theodore Dreiser and the slum novels of Arthur Morrison and George Gissing. The brutality

³ Newspaper reviews are also scarce. In *The Guardian*, Ali Smith wrote for instance: *Bad Attitudes* is “a simple parable of harsh hospitalities and home-truths. The polarized characters are stacked (and stack themselves) against each other in a network of small lies and selfishnesses” (27 September 2003); while Alistair Braidwood noted: “There are battles of the sexes, ages and even the classes, with individuals’ prejudices and insecurities exposed”, www.dearscotland.com

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and demoralization of the inhabitants reflect the social and economic exposure of their daily lives that hover between frenzy and despair. When things fall apart around them, it is the women who struggle to maintain some sort of normality, much to their own cost. The destruction of their homes and their fear of being moved to anonymous high-rise flats outside of town means only the disappearance of what little mutual support that remains. The word ‘attitude’ in the title is significant since, according to Owens herself, it is these socially induced “treacheries of attitude” that characterize her stories: “Treachery, people are treacherous, you’re treacherous yourself sometimes. That just sums it up: that I like to expose the treacheries. But people that are treacherous are not necessarily monsters. They’re not necessarily evil or wicked” (Quoted in Jane Gray 2017). Surprisingly, in his study of working-class fiction, Ian Haywood claims that “Owens frequently portrays working-class women in a dehistoricized context” (Haywood 1997:151). However, a more compelling case could be made that Owen’s narratives of loss situate themselves instead at very specific moment in post-war capitalism when free market deregularization was imposed on both the private and public sectors. As Ingrid von Rosenberg notes, “the time of action” in Owens’s novels “is the Thatcher years, when intensifying economic decline hit Scotland particularly badly and the laws protecting workers’ rights were scrapped” (2000:194). When society shows no sense of loyalty to its citizens, this translates into a dog-eat-dog ethos where people have to fend for themselves and the weakest go to the wall. Owens shows how people are punished for being poor. Yet it seems ironic that when systems of support collapse, women are exposed even more to patriarchal structures of privilege that are reproduced on an individual level. This is the case with Rita Dawson in *Bad Attitudes*, whose husband is a violent drunk who relies on his belt to impose himself on the family. When she decides to leave him and asks the local council for help to get her a place of her own, the official in charge exploits this request to gain sexual favours from her:

‘See what you can do with this,’ he said, thrusting his penis into her hand, which she almost let go, that is until it occurred to her that this could be the price she’d have to pay in return for a flat (2009:387).

Once again, women’s encounters with men in authority are rarely happy or supportive occasions. There seems little difference between the way they are treated by either social workers or the police. In both cases, there is always some sort of ulterior motive. One of the families that squat in a half derelict tenement are travelers, or ‘tinkers’ as they are called. When their 15-year-old daughter goes missing, another example of the precarity of their situation, Flora, the mother, receives a visit from the council. Instinctively, she feigns gratitude for the official concern while remaining suspicious of their real intentions:

‘I’m much obliged to ye, mister.’ Flora called after him, glad to see him go, for she’d never trusted do-gooders with their posh accents and put-on smiles who expected you to be grateful

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to them for ruining your life. At least if a cop took you in for questioning they sometimes gied ye a fag (2009:426).

In the novel, the narrative chain of dysfunctional relations is connected to the character of Rita's son, Peter, a fifteen-year-old boy who begins the story by taking his dog for a walk among the tenements where his family used to live. This triggers a flashback of scenes that occurred in and around his old home. He is also looking for the daughter of the traveler family whom he spoke to before she disappeared. He bumps into their old neighbour, Shanky, who is one of the last residents to remain in the building. When Shanky asks him why he came back, he says: "I like it here. I didn't want to leave" (2009:367). Like Arabella, Peter has a pet dog, which is another link with the past. He also doesn't go to school. Not that family life was much easier when they lived in the tenements. His drunken father's regularly beating him causes his mother to comment at one point: "You can tell he's back in the Victorian era when kids got belted for nothing" (2009:378). This is an oblique reference to the 'return to Victorian values' of family, church and nation that Mrs Thatcher personified as prime minister. Also, her introduction of the 'short, sharp shock' punishment of juvenile delinquents. The 'bad attitudes' of people turn in Peter's case to even worse behavior, starting when he persecutes a nosey neighbour who complains about his dog shitting in her garden. In response, he smashes her window, paints a swastika sign on her door and hits her on the head with a catapult stone. His actions merely imitate the abusive behavior of adults around him. A tipping point comes when he arrives home to find that his dog has been put down, which is a traumatic loss for him. Throughout the novel, Owens builds up a narrative of impending disaster where one mistake leads to another. Beaten at home, Peter finds little support at school either, where his constant yawning only gets him sent to the headmaster to "ask to be given two of the belt for distracting the class" (2009:371). Thus, the pattern of physical punishment is repeated. When he is sent to see Tom, a social worker, for absconding from school, he is threatened with the prospect of approved school where he will be locked away. No one seems to notice the violent resentment that is building up inside this seriously disturbed young man:

'They can't keep me in for ever. They'll have to let me out sometime.' 'I wouldn't bank on it,' Tom said. 'And if they do let you out who's going to give you a job with your record?' 'I don't want a job'. 'What do you want?' 'To be left alone' (2009:398).

Owens shows that there is a whole system of official retribution that only goes to increase the boy's desperate sense of entrapment. The only real personal bond he makes is with Shanky, who invites him into his flat on several occasions for food and warmth. However, Shanky is suspected of kidnapping the traveler girl and feels himself threatened by his 'tinker' neighbours. In an ominous turn in their relationship, Peter suggests that he can help him acquire a gun to protect himself. A desperate offer for a 15-year-old boy to make. As with Arabella, there is an underlying streak of physical violence that constantly threatens to break through the surface of people's lives. It is almost as if society is at war with itself and people

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are being pushed to the limits of what they can handle. There are no longer any restrictions to their behavior, since their lives are clearly without much value and this is also how they perceive other people’s. This conclusion lies at the heart of Owens’ critique of contemporary society.

Like ‘Arabella’, the story ends in a gratuitous act of brutal murder. Peter grabs an iron bar and smashes the skull of two people who come to Shanky’s flat: firstly Maggie, one of the traveler family, and then Tom, the social worker. It is a vicious outburst of violence that only goes to show the twisted loyalties of the young boy, who imagines it will be of help to Shanky. Feigning illness after the murder, Peter spends most of his time in bed at home, looked after by his mother. It is an ironic return to childhood. His real callousness and calculation are revealed, however, in the chilling last paragraph of the novel, where he is planning to get rid of the murder weapon he has kept under his bed on which the “bloodstains and hairs were still plain to see”. It is a final, perverse flashback, indicating he will not be held to account for his bloody crime:

Once the coast was clear he’d walk outside with it under his jacket then toss it in the deepest part of the river, which had already been dredged for the murder weapon. He didn’t think they’d dredge it again (2009:446).

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Precurity is not just an economic phenomenon that affects the conditions and pay of both skilled and unskilled workers. The privatization of the economy has also had a detrimental impact on the fabric of society as a whole. The previous existence of the Welfare state signaled that society cared about its members, that every life matters. When this protective structure is removed, the civic bonds between people are also broken and this undermines the networks that keep people together. It is this fundamental breach of shared values and support in everyday relationships that Agnes Owens sought to capture in the stories she wrote. This was not only a literary project on her part however. Her collection of novels she dedicated to her 19-year-old son Patrick, who was stabbed to death on the doorstep of the house where the Owens family lived. It was the result of a senseless gang fight between teenage boys. Owens knew therefore at first hand what the personal cost of this collapse of community can mean. Her writing remains a disturbing reminder of the devastating impact of precarity on all of our lives.

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