

from just reading most literature published today, he would come away with the extraordinary impression that what we mostly spend our time doing is falling in love and, occasionally, murdering one another. But what we really do is go to work—and yet this work is unseen, it is literally invisible and it is so in part because it is not represented in art. If it does appear in consciousness, it does so through the business pages of newspapers, as an economic, rather than a broader human, phenomenon.

Two centuries ago, our forebears would have known the precise history and source of almost every one of the limited number of things they ate and owned. They would have been familiar with the pig, the carpenter, the weaver, the loom and the dairymaid. The range of items available for purchase may have grown exponentially since then, but our understanding of their genesis has grown ever more obscure. We are now as disconnected imaginatively from the production and distribution of our goods as we are practically in reach of them, a process of alienation that has stripped us of opportunities for wonder, gratitude and guilt.

The world is covered in factories and warehouses, but it is impossible for the layperson to go into them or even approach them. Despite their importance, they have no desire to advertise themselves to the public. In business parks, they are spread out across sites of determined blandness marked by gentle gradients, ornamental trees and expanses of preternaturally green grass.

When we think of tourist destinations, we don't think of the places of work. Why, endowed as they are with both practical importance and emotional resonance, do cargo ships, port facilities, airport warehouses, storage tanks, refineries and assembly plants go unnoticed, except by those immediately involved in their operations?

It is not just because they are hard to locate and forbiddingly signposted. Some of Venice's churches are similarly secreted away but nonetheless prodigally visited. What renders them invisible is an unwarranted prejudice that deems it peculiar to express overly powerful feelings of admiration towards a gas tanker or a paper mill – or, indeed, towards almost any aspect of the labouring world.

As a result, a sympathetic response to, say, an electricity pylon is, for most of us, a haphazard and unsupported impulse, an epiphany (顿悟) which might last for a minute on a drive along a motorway or on a walk along a moor, but to which no prestige could be attached and from which little of merit could emerge.