LEFT BEHIND:

MODERNISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF OBSOLESCENCE

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A Modernity in Obsolescence

At the start of "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," Theodor Adorno makes the rather puzzling claim that Samuel Beckett's denigration of all philosophical and aesthetic pretense in the play to mere "cultural trash" reveals modernism to be "what is obsolete in modernity" (241). In one sense, Adorno is arguing that Beckett's art of "subtraction" treats the modernist idiom of figures like James Joyce and Franz Kafka as "second-order material" no different than any other piece of detritus littering the cultural wasteland we call modernity (243, 246). As he goes on to explain, Beckett's regression of the aesthetic vocabulary of such writers into a senseless "babbling" dramatizes the "complete reification" of modern life as a whole (262, 245). But more enigmatically, Adorno's theorization of "modernism as what is obsolete in modernity" can also be read to suggest that modernism is itself the locus of the obsolete in capitalist modernity, the very site in which the process of obsolescence finds expression (241). This valence to his claim is strikingly counterintuitive, even when read against the "bombed-out" backdrop that is *Endgame* (246). Indeed, the modernism we conventionally know does not "decay," "vegetate," or obsolesce—it innovates, experiments, and accelerates (244, 262). It relays the speed and dynamism of a world system reaching its apex, reflecting the vast concentrations of power and capital flowing into rapidly expanding imperial centers. And as the product of these radically transformed environs, it instantiates a decisive break from the antiquated doctrines of the past, especially the traditions of realism that are unable to grasp what Adorno calls the "catastrophe that has befallen the whole" (249). Modernism, in other words, is not something "obsolete"—it is something *new*.

Yet, despite running against the grain of our received wisdom about the period, Adorno's off-hand delineation of an "obsolete" modernism crystallizes a historical truth that has gone largely unrecognized by both modernist studies and literary criticism in general, namely, that modernism flourishes precisely at the moment that obsolescence develops into a dominant logic of capitalist production. Today, we refer to this process as "planned obsolescence," a technique of industrial design that limits the use-value of a commodity to drive further consumption. Though its practice is now so ubiquitous as to feel ordinary, obsolescence lacked any formal definition until late in the historical development of the capitalist world system. The term first emerged in the 1920s in fields like accounting, marketing, and economics to distinguish a commodity's "natural" fall into disrepair from what renowned advertising executive Earnest Elmo Calkins called its "artificial obsolescence" on commercial grounds (Calkins 13). As this dichotomy suggests, the immense increase in productive capacity during the first few decades of the twentieth century turned once wholly natural processes of decay and decomposition into active sites of political and economic contestation. Since these processes only drove customers to spend after an item had fallen apart through continued use, capitalists began to define a variety of new techniques that would artificially induce this desuetude at mass-scale. Companies in the fashion and automotive industries, for instance, developed short-term product cycles that encouraged customers, in Calkins's words, to "abandon the old and buy the new to be up-to-date, to have the right and correct thing" (7). Elsewhere, major conglomerates like Gillette and Johnson & Johnson pioneered the design of single-use, disposable products to spur consumer demand (Slade 22). And in the manufacturing sector, General Electric purposefully made use of low-quality materials to precipitate the breakdown of their products and force customers back to the marketplace (81). Together, these techniques streamlined capital's administration of the

commodity object world, reworking its natural rhythms of waste and decay into one single process of orchestrated negation called "obsolescence."

As the following chapters will show, the consolidation of this new sphere of economic activity had far-reaching effects that extended well beyond the walls of big business. By so neatly coordinating the dissipation of the old with the advent of the new, obsolescence not only drove previously unimaginable levels of consumer spending, but radically reshaped the very fabric of aesthetic experience itself. Indeed, one of the most remarkable consequences of obsolescence's wide-scale codification is that it provoked a dialectical encounter between obsolete objects and the work of art. In *The Intelligence of Evil*, Jean Baudrillard summarizes this dialectic in the following way:

> Since the nineteenth century, it has been art's claim that it is useless. It has prided itself on this . . . Similarly, old objects, being obsolete and hence useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their being distant from us in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's artistic act; they too become "ready-mades", nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe. (Baudrillard 111)

As Baudrillard explains via the Duchampian readymade, capital's feverish drive to induce the antiquation and uselessness of its products drew out an unforeseen "aesthetic aura" in the obsolete. Once emptied of their meaning and function, obsolete commodities became objects of a disinterested pleasure, their self-enclosure permitting a form of contemplation akin to the "cold confusion" authorized in the museum (*Prisms* 176). At the same time, however, art's "proud" uselessness gave it the semblance of something obsolete. When subjected to the zero-sum calculus of instrumental reason, it could not but appear as an archaic holdover from a past long absorbed into the "industrial wasteland" of capitalist modernity (Baudrillard 111). Thus, while

seeming to open up a new frontier of artistic possibility in which even the most mundane items of the commodity object world could be elevated to the status of works of art, this dialectical transposition of art and the obsolete ultimately accentuated art's irremediable historical anachronism. In Baudrillard's terms, obsolescence condemned art to "flourish precisely in proportion to [its] decay" (113).

My dissertation brings together a range of novels, manifestos, memoirs, and artworks from the early twentieth century to theorize a modernist *aesthetics of obsolescence* that emerges out of this dialectical entanglement. Focusing primarily on the works of Wyndham Lewis, Joseph Conrad, and George Lamming, it charts the various representational strategies modernists developed to encode obsolescence into aesthetic form and, in so doing, mediate the increasingly obsolescent character of the work of art itself. Though these figures were engaged in vastly different political and artistic programs, I argue that when read together their works render the historical legibility of obsolescence anew, allowing us to examine how obsolescence's transformation from a disparate array of localized practices to a universal principle of commodity production subjected ever greater zones of social life to its reifying logic. In Lewis's Anglo avant-gardism, for instance, we see the slow, seasonal rhythms of the natural world obsolesce within the accelerative temporality of industrial production; in Conrad's exhausted realism, ideas and concepts devolve into cheap, lifeless products; and in Lamming's creolized late-modernism, subjectivity itself takes on the semblance of something old, obsolete, and out of place. Far from merely "replicat[ing] the restless telos of fashion," as Fredric Jameson claims, I argue that these figurations of obsolescence shed light on the entire regime of negation bolstering capital's spectacle of novelty, enabling a new kind of historical consciousness that gleans the present through the outmoded things it leaves behind (*A Singular Modernity* 152). In this way,

the aesthetics of obsolescence give expression to a counter-historical potential in the work of art that disrupts capital's work of negation and makes it a matter of ongoing contestation.

In attending to "what is obsolete in modernity," this dissertation builds upon a small but influential body of scholarship in modernist studies that has sprung up around the question of obsolescence over the past ten years. Drawing from the conceptual insights of both thing-theory and new materialism more broadly, these studies explore the ways that artistic treatments of obsolete things register the strange and stubborn materiality of objects once they are shorn of their use-value. Bill Brown's *Other Things*, for example, turns to the Surrealist exhibitions of Man Ray, Max Ernst, and André Breton to theorize the "Modernist Object," his term for works that repurpose obsolete objects to expose the uncanny "thingness" lingering beneath the commodity form (*Other Things* 82). By transforming the obsolete into art, he claims, the avant-gardes demonstrate that thingness "can persist beyond the object's destruction," and thus too, beyond the purview of the capitalist interest (82). In a similar vein, Babette B. Tischleder and Sarah Wasserman take up Jane Bennett's notion of "thing-power" to document the material agency that obsolete objects exert in the "rich (after)life" they lead after losing their utility (Tischleder and Wasserman 5). When thrown into the cultural sphere, they argue, such things shed their commodity character and reveal an agency to matter that throws the "the unintended, hazardous consequences of runaway capitalism" into sharp relief (5). Gillian Pye likewise borrows from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory in her introduction to *Trash Culture* to investigate how the aesthetic retrieval of outdated commodities discloses an "otherness" in the obsolete that generates powerful reconfigurations of cultural memory (Pye 5). For Pye, these acts of recycling shed light on the "biography" of the obsolete thing, leveraging its circulation in disparate places and times to reveal the gaps in our own apprehension of the present (7).

Throughout all this scholarship, the aesthetic remediation of the obsolete serves to uncover a surprising vitality to matter that attunes us to the wastefulness and negligence of twentieth century consumer culture.

While I share thing-theory's interest in the aesthetic possibilities intrinsic to the obsolete, my project seeks to develop a different framework for understanding the aesthetics of obsolescence that is less beholden to the vicissitudes of "object life" (Tischleder and Wasserman 5). Though the literary-critical model developed by Brown, Wasserman, Pye, and others has fruitfully laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of the commodity form's extended lifespan, I argue that its focus on the agential character of obsolete commodities confines it to just one side of the dialectic outlined above. In so strictly fixing their attention on the irruption of obsolete things into aesthetic experience, critics working within this paradigm overlook how obsolescence, in turn, reconfigures artistic production and marks the work of art with the semblance of something obsolete. As I will expand upon in Chapter 1, this oversight has created an altogether dehistoricized understanding of obsolescence that abstracts the work of art from the historical forces it is said to illuminate. In order to produce a fuller picture of modernism's aesthetics of obsolescence, my project thus takes what we might call an "old materialist" (which is to say, Marxist) approach, reading modernist texts alongside other contemporaneous discourses of obsolescence to take stock of the contradictions wrought by capitalism's emergent system of negation. By foregrounding these still unexamined conceptualizations of obsolescence from the business world, I show that modernist writers were not only keenly aware of the corporate overhaul of the commodity life-cycle, but actively imagined their works as participating in a broader material and ideological struggle over the ephemeralization of everything existing.

A key aim of this dissertation, then, is to use this historical background to reassess our usual periodizing procedures and trace new continuities across the modernist moment. Generally speaking, critics in modernist studies conceive of avant-garde and modernist literary aesthetics as historically overlapping yet artistically opposed phenomena, with the avant-gardes seeking to eradicate the boundary between art and life, and "artistic modernism," to use Adorno's term, working to affirm the autonomy of art from the norms and values of "empirical life" (*Aesthetic Theory* 4, 34). Given the distinct political and aesthetic aspirations underpinning each of these tendencies, critics naturally focus on one side of the equation or the other, attending either to the avant-gardes' pursuit of a pure present for art or to modernist literature's "negative feel for reality" (19). For its part, the existing scholarship on obsolescence centers almost exclusively on the avant-gardes, since the aforementioned ready-mades and Surrealist found objects directly stage the obsolete's aesthetic transfiguration. The aesthetics of obsolescence I theorize here, however, charts a throughline that cuts across this divide. Rather than proceeding chronologically, my project juxtaposes the avant-gardism of Lewis with the disparate modernisms of Conrad and Lamming to demonstrate that both strategies for organizing the relationship between art and life were explicitly formulated as countermeasures to the perceived obsolescence of art as such. In the first half of the dissertation, I turn to canonical theorizations of avant-garde aesthetics from the likes of Peter Bürger and Walter Benjamin to explore how Lewis's Vorticism sought to overcome the shameful obsolescence of art by turning it into a purely technological object. In the second half, I examine the ways that Conrad and Lamming differently leverage the historical obsolescence of the novel form to distance their works from the "ideological superficies of life" (*Aesthetic Theory* 56) and record its everyday cruelties. Taking this oblique approach, I claim, allows us to see both how modernism was shaped by

obsolescence from the very start, and how its aesthetics of obsolescence continue to color our view of the crumbling, collapsing modernity we have come to inherit.

In my first chapter, "Shameful Forms: Modernism and the Aesthetics of Obsolescence," I expand upon this introduction by reading recent literary-critical accounts of obsolescence as part of a larger, ongoing conversation about the decline of modernist studies. I suggest that in the years since Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz first published their influential call for a "New Modernist Studies," the scholarly effort to expand and globalize modernism has gradually exhausted its conceptual and discursive utility, creating new fears about the intellectual and institutional survival of the field as a whole. Following the lead of Mark Goble, I read the thing-theoretical turn to the obsolete as a symptomatic expression of this critical and historical predicament. Though limited in its overall scope, thing-theory's understanding of the obsolete helps us historicize contemporary anxieties about the obsolescence of modernist studies as a kind of affective unease first registered by the modernists themselves. To better grasp how modernist writers made sense of this emergent process of negation, I map out a new intellectual genealogy for the study of the aesthetics of obsolescence based on the still largely untranslated—and critically overlooked—works of Günther Anders. A contemporary of Adorno and Benjamin, Anders's philosophical anthropology is dedicated to unravelling the myriad effects that obsolescence imparts upon both the subjective and objective dimensions of capitalist reality. At the heart of this endeavor is the concept of "Promethean shame," his term for the unique type of affective debasement that develops as workers confront the disjunction between their singular, deficient bodily form and the serial, perfectible form of the machines that absorb their labor (*Prometheanism* 35). Though Anders does not himself extend his analysis to artistic production, I argue that the avant-gardist drive to eliminate the distinction between art and life is structured

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by this precise feeling of shame. By presenting their works as technological prostheses grafted onto the human sensorium, the avant-gardes sought not only to create new modes of sensible life, but to revamp the broken and deficient organs of perception that expose the shameful obsolescence of the human form.

My second chapter, "Wyndham Lewis and the Ecocidal Imagination," considers how Vorticism, in both its early and late stages, figured its specific effort to merge art and life through scenes of mass death, racial domination, and environmental devastation. To draw out what I am calling Lewis's "ecocidal imagination," I read the famous "blasts" and "blessings" of his *Blast* manifestos alongside his neglected late-Vorticist work, *The Caliph's Design*. I begin with this latter text to show how Lewis's reified, technophilic perspective not only views the natural world as a site of accumulation and extraction, but as a vestigial remainder of planetary history limiting the productive capacity of global capitalism. For Lewis, nature is essentially *slow*—its forms and species are beholden to evolutionary patterns of development that industrial modernity has rendered obsolete. The task of the Vorticist artist is thus to guide the impersonal forces of capitalist production such that the forms it generates in nature's place have artistic meaning and intention behind them. In my reading, the *Blast* manifestos put the anti-environmental program of *The Caliph's Design* into action by dramatizing moments of climate collapse and mass extinction. I suggest that these scenes of devastation mobilize the projective, futural rhetoric of the manifesto form to embed readers within a sensorium well-adapted to a world bereft of non-human life. By ridding modernity of these shamefully obsolete forms, Lewis marks out a pure present for art that can be seen as the product of English genius and racial superiority. Ultimately, I take Lewis's ecocidal distaste for the obsolete as a rejoinder to thing-theory's overeager celebration of the radical potentiality of outmoded things. His aesthetics of

obsolescence demonstrate that the obsolete can just as well become the focus of a reactionary or "rearguard" politics that seeks to accelerate, rather than contest, capital's work of negation.

Beginning with my third chapter, "The Obsolescence of the Idea: Fiction, Non-Philosophy, and *The Secret Agent*," I shift away from the study of avant-gardism to query how novelists from the early to late modernist period register the effects of obsolescence within the novel form. I first address the works of Joseph Conrad, specifically his middle period political novel, *The Secret Agent*. Though critics typically read this text as Conrad's conservative screed against revolutionary politics, I argue that his treatment of the philosophical idea as a reified, obsolete object offers a thoroughgoing critique of capitalism's decomposition of historical consciousness. To draw out the precise contours of this critique, I propose that *The Secret Agent* is best understood as a novel of ideas, rather than a dynamite novel or spy thriller (as is typically the case). Reading the novel within this generic framework, I suggest, enables us to reinterpret Conrad's ironic caricature of the revolutionaries' loquacity not as a refusal of their specific ideological fixations, but as an indictment of philosophy's subordination to capitalist logics of value and expansion. Throughout the various scenes of philosophical dialogue and exchange that fill the novel, we see that the ideas espoused by the revolutionaries bear no relation to the real at all—like capital itself, they instead seek only their further valorization and hegemony over other forms of thought. In the final section of the chapter, I introduce François Laruelle's project of non-philosophy to argue that Conrad exacerbates this gap between philosophy's self-interested ideas and the horrifying reality of the Greenwich bombing to show that "philosophy is capital within or of thought" (*Introduction to Non-Marxism* 168). Conrad's ironic rehearsal of philosophical discourse in the novel of ideas, I claim, illuminates how capitalism, via philosophy, induces the obsolescence of historical consciousness by severing our ideas from the

accelerating historical reality they purport to describe.

In my fourth and final chapter, "Obsolescent Life; or, George Lamming Against the Development Plot," I read Lamming's late modernist novel of exile, *The Emigrants*, against mid-century managerial theories of obsolescence to explore the relationship between obsolescence and colonial hegemony. As I show, Lamming was deeply invested in conversations about the corporate administration of the commodity lifecycle, and viewed his novels as a means to retell the history underwriting what he calls the "total philosophy" of planned obsolescence espoused by the capitalist class ("The Imperial Encirclement" 87). At the heart of this revisionist project is the notion that the migrant laborer is the proper subject of any history of obsolescence. For Lamming, the migrant's qualified integration into consumer society not only exposed them to the miseries of industrial wage labor, but brought about the obsolescence of their entire colonial subjectivity. In my reading, *The Emigrants* renders the historical intelligibility of this experience of obsolescence by staging the progressive deterioration of its narrative structure into a discordant concatenation of accidents. Whereas most critics interpret this formal rupturing of the text as a non-specific experiment in high-modernist difficulty, I maintain that it is a much more deliberate and systematic decomposition of the novel's development plot. Lamming's repeated dramatization of the narrative's failure to cohere into an arc of successful Bildung, I argue, encodes the atomizing conditions of factory life into novelistic form, revealing how the daily drudgeries of work denature the cognitive and historical fabric of colonial selfhood. To close the chapter, I propose that Lamming's aestheticization of this process of obsolescence enacts a dialectical refusal of capitalism's orchestrated negation of the things and people it deems outdated. By writing the migrant laborer back into the historical present that excludes them, *The Emigrants* shows that this "total" process remains incomplete and open to dispute.

In his conclusion to *The Object of Literature*, Pierre Macherey remarks that "[t]he role of literature is to say what a period thinks of itself" (Macherey 234). The following chapters suggest that capitalist modernity does much of this thinking by way of what it leaves behind. Although my project takes a wide-angle view of the modernist period to map out how this thought transforms over the course of the twentieth century, it is intended to jumpstart, rather than exhaust, further research into modernism's aesthetic mediation of obsolescence. Indeed, each of my readings points toward possible avenues for such scholarship. In my account of Lewis's manifestos, for instance, I detail a still untheorized conversation between modernists and environmental scientists regarding the effects of obsolescence on climate change; in my reflections on *The Secret Agent*, I argue that Conrad's bleak portraits of Empire might be reread as documents of a colonial regime of extraction that treats the periphery as a dumping ground for the obsolete; and in my examination of *The Emigrants*, I propose that Lamming's analysis of capitalist bureaucracy contains an unexplored critique of the post-war practices of obsolescence that redefined the economic and affective dimensions of the domestic sphere. While these subjects lie beyond the immediate scope of this study, their breadth speaks to the global reach of capital's work of negation. As my first chapter will show, modernism is the very first discourse of obsolescence, and thus a unique, and indeed invaluable, vantage from which to view this work in its totality.

Shameful Forms: Modernism and the Aesthetics of Obsolescence

In 2013, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) released a report on the ill effects of planned obsolescence, the first of its kind to call for a total ban on the practice. The deliberate design of a commodity's early death, the authors claim, is a predatory manufacturing technique that has led to a cascading set of consequences for the larger economy, including an excess use of natural resources, a surge in consumer indebtedness, and an erosion of public trust in the market (European Economic and Social Committee 5-6). They find that its proliferation has had an impact on the courts as well, with companies fighting to limit the consumer's right to repair their purchase so as to ensure their return to the marketplace upon its obsolescence. By renting commodities to buyers in the form of subscription services or subjecting products to lopsided licensing agreements, businesses leave customers with no legal or technical recourse to prolong the life of their purchase beyond what has been mandated by its producer. For this reason, the EESC recommends the creation of a "European Planned Obsolescence Observatory," which would enforce the ban on obsolescence and promote good consumer habits in an increasingly complex and legally tortuous marketplace (3). Once society is rid of this form of technological predation, the authors "hope that Europe will enter a new phase of economic transition by transforming itself from a wasteful society into a sustainable one, where growth is geared to consumer needs, with a people-oriented approach, and is never an end in itself" (4). Ultimately, a 2020 resolution passed by the European Parliament matched this vision of a green capitalism up to a technocratic solution: label commodities with a measure of their lifespan (Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection 8).

In a farcical repetition of history, this remedy to planned obsolescence is what was originally meant by the term when it was first articulated nearly a century ago. Giles Slade traces the first appearance of "planned obsolescence" back to a 1932 pamphlet titled "Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence," written by New York real-estate broker Bernard London (Slade 73). There, London grapples with what he calls the Great Depression's "paradox of plenty," the inexplicable fact that "millions [are] suffering amidst glutted markets and surpluses" (London 9). In order to bring production and consumption into equilibrium, London proposes to establish a government agency that would "assign a lease of life" to commodities and inform consumers of its legally allotted lifespan (12). But London's agency goes a step further than the EESC's obsolescence observatory—his would uphold the "law of obsolescence" by destroying the product at the end of its life and giving the consumer partial remuneration for their now dead property to encourage them to make another purchase (10, 13). By planning the obsolescence of everything made, he claims, the government can resolve the mounting contradiction between productivity and poverty at the root of capitalist crisis. In his new society organized to purge itself of any vestige of the old and the outdated, "[n]ew products would constantly be pouring forth from the factories and marketplaces, to take the place of the obsolete, and the wheels of industry would be kept going and employment regularized and assured for the masses" (12).

As Slade notes in his brief biography of London, it is unclear whether London invented the specific term "planned obsolescence" or if it was already in circulation amongst the New York business elite (Slade 73). Nevertheless, in so forcefully posing the question of what to do with outdated commodities London was engaging in a broader collective reconceptualization of capitalism's techniques of deterioration, disintegration, and waste during the first few decades of

the twentieth century. In the automotive industry, for instance, Alfred P. Sloan's development of the annual model change induced a semblance of obsolescence in older vehicles even when their underlying technology remained the same, winning General Motors a greater share of the burgeoning car market (36). More perniciously, the 1920s saw the rise of the Phoebus cartel, a global network of lightbulb manufacturers who colluded to artificially reduce the lifespan of their bulbs all while keeping their prices as high as possible (Wells 21). As these practices became more widespread, obsolescence became an issue in accounting theory as a poorly defined concept in need of a proper place on the balance sheet. In an article titled "Should Obsolescence be Capitalized?," for example, Earl A. Saliers distinguishes obsolescence from wear and tear because it imparts losses as if "from fire or storm," and thus cannot be written down as a partial or piecemeal cost steadily accrued (Saliers 15). Around the same time, W.B. Castenholz began his study on the costs of obsolescence with an invective against those who simply want durability from their purchases: "There are people, and a lot of them, who would like to see the world continue just as it is, without change and indefinitely; those people do not believe in evolution; they are naturally addicted to the support of things as they are; anything new is disturbing to them, and therefore, undesirable" (Castenholz 269). His distaste for such parochialism leads him to clarify, in an extraordinary definition of the word, that obsolescence is but "*the negative term for improvement and evolution*" (269, emphasis added). The sheer capaciousness of this definition suggests that obsolescence becomes the primary term through which a new collective understanding of capital's immense work of negation emerged at the start of the century, bringing together different processes of artificial deterioration, aging, and technical enhancement into one discernable sphere of capitalistic activity. Obsolescence comes to signify an inverse side to technological progress, which clears away the traces of capital's

most recent pasts to frame the spectacle of the new and the cutting-edge.

This chapter contends that modernist artists were no less engaged in this active reimagining of obsolescence than the moguls, accountants, and real-estate brokers of the time. Typically, modernism is often understood as the aesthetic expression of an emergent global totality characterized by a proliferation of new technologies in transportation, communication, and production. As Hugh Kenner once put it, modernism "evolved parallel technologies of its own" in response to these developments, creating "new ways of writing" for "new orders of experience" (Kenner 10, 14). While this technological conception of artistic production sheds light on the new stylistic techniques and procedures that emerge in the period, it also obfuscates the impact of the negative processes at play in capital's technological acceleration that lie behind the reified immediacy of the market's constant novelty. Recently, critics in modernist studies have sought to correct this incomplete picture of the period's relationship to technology by attending to modernism's "aesthetics of obsolescence," its representational system for the outmoded things left behind by the march of capital's technological progress. Guided by the insights of thing-theory and new materialism, these critics theorize how the modernists, beginning with the avant-gardes, leverage the aesthetic aura that accrues upon obsolete things with their exit from the scene of consumption into a critique of the reifying logic that renders them "dead" and useless in the first place. In their *Cultures of Obsolescence*, Babette B. Tischleder and Sarah Wasserman explain that the obsolete indexes a stubborn effectivity to matter that endures even "after the 'social life' of things has ended," which makes it a powerful vector for feelings of nostalgia, fascination, disgust, and anxiety that situate the subject in history (Tischleder and Wasserman 5). By charting the historical development of an aesthetics of obsolescence that relays these distinctive qualities of the obsolete into artistic works, critics in

modernist studies aim to confront the specter of modernism's own imminent obsolescence in order to better envision what kind of life it might lead after the market deems it dead.

In this respect, the aesthetics of obsolescence deepens our understanding of modernism by more carefully tracing its development in relation to what Marx calls the entire "life cycle of capital," which includes the instances of production where the fetishistic character of commodities is most immediately appreciable, as well as the ancillary circuits of circulation and consumption where commodities are used up, broken down, cast aside, or reinjected back into the process of production (*Capital, Vol. 3* 117). But as I will show, in relying so heavily upon the object-oriented ontologies of recent new materialisms to map these developments, this new body of scholarship also limits the scope of its problematic. The enchantments of "thing-power" reduce the aesthetics of obsolescence to representations of specific outmoded things, leaving aside the question of how obsolescence shapes artistic production as a whole (Tischleder and Wasserman 5). Drawing from the work of Günther Anders, a figure that Jean-Pierre Dupuy describes as "the most neglected German philosopher of the twentieth century," I argue that obsolescence imposes itself upon aesthetics as a problem of form (Dupuy 179). Anders's philosophical anthropology pivots on the insight that the incorporation of obsolescence into the operative logic of capitalist production corresponds to an amplified mode of reification that imparts a deficiency in all that lacks the self-sustaining, perfectible form of the machine. In rendering this defectiveness in humans and art alike, obsolescence provokes a new "form of shame that did not exist in the past," which exposes our inability to imagine, represent, and keep up with our own technological inventions (*Prometheanism* 30). Though his work remains overlooked, I claim that Anders models a valuable way of understanding the avant-garde movements placed at the incipience of the aesthetics of obsolescence. Seen through his analytic

frame, the avant-gardes' attempt to bridge the gap between art and life appears as an inoculation against the shame of obsolescence. Their art serves as a technological supplement to life, which mends the flaws in human form that give it the impression of a historical anachronism out of place in the technical milieu of modernity. The avant-gardes' aesthetics of obsolescence, I argue, makes capital's work of negation legible by working through the tensions of this new form of shame, throwing into focus the contours of a historical consciousness that is unable to imagine the very things it is able to produce.

THE OBSOLESCENCE OF MODERNISM

Over the past few years, a surge of attention has come to surround the question of obsolescence as the once dominant critical paradigms of modernist studies have themselves begun to obsolesce. Under the pressures of a contracting field, the obsolete has emerged as a key term for critics turning away from the logic of expansion so central to the New Modernist Studies, which, since first proclaimed by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, has provided the framework within which new developments in the field are authenticated and valorized. In "The New Modernist Studies," Mao and Walkowitz make clear that their platform is not so much a call for radical changes to the study of modernism as it is a consolidation of then emergent interpretive trends into a program more inclusive and comprehensive than what come before it. Their approach is characterized, above all, by a threefold expansion of the field: a spatial extension of modernism beyond the insular enclaves of Europe and North America, a temporal expansion before and after the rough markers of 1890 to 1945, and a "vertical" expansion of modernism that would include all elements of high and low culture (Mao and Walkowitz 738). By embracing this expansionist tendency, Mao and Walkowitz argue, the New Modernist Studies

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promotes a transnational scholarship capable of "getting out from under the commodity form," and bringing the complexities of the modern subjectivity back to the fore (745).

It has not been lost on critics writing since Mao and Walkowitz took to *PMLA* in 2008 that their attempt to expand criticism beyond the outdated problem of the commodity in order to think "Politics as Itself" risked inflating the field to such a degree that it would lose its coherence (745). Gayle Rogers, for instance, notes that the value the New Modernist Studies places on its constant growth results in a "death-by-prefix," a term he borrows from Janet Lyon to denote the exhaustion and collapse of a concept as it becomes overfull with adjectival modification (Rogers). Rogers's concern with the interpretative protocol of the New Modernist Studies is that its reliance upon the prefix as a means to incorporate new objects into the field results in an endless salvo of various modernisms that weaken, rather than bolster, our understanding of the period. While cold, slow, bad, meta-, inter-, or encyclopedic modernisms might introduce a degree of novelty to the field, with each prefix the central concept around which their new objects are constellated wanes further still. Charles Altieri takes a similar tack in "How the 'New Modernist Studies' Fails the Old Modernism," arguing that "the more expanded the field, the greater likelihood that the concepts asked to synthesize the materials will rely on analogical thinking" (Altieri 767). For Altieri, the constant expansion demanded by the New Modernist Studies requires an impoverished conception of modernism against which to contrast each proposed variant. Accordingly, every new modernism arrives by means of the same "middle brow consensus that high modernism is elitist, formalist, and bound to ideals of mastery" (778). In his now infamous consolidation of these critiques, Max Brzezinski even claims that in the hands of the New Modernist Studies modernism comes to function less like a problem or concept than a brand that unifies a diverse array of inquiries into a "marketable intellectual commodity"

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(Brzezinski 109). What passes for expansion is simply more of the same.

One response to these criticisms has been to embrace the weakening of modernism as a new methodological mood or comportment. In "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," Paul Saint-Amour argues that the attenuation of the field's central term has spurred a descriptive turn that provides a better understanding of the diffuse networks of social ties and historical contexts that comprise the modernist period without any of the totalizing and discriminating inclinations of what he calls "strong theory" (Saint-Amour 451). For Saint-Amour, modernism's weakness offers the chance to demonstrate new scholarly commitments to debility and care that would reorient criticism around an ethics of weakness. Another approach has been to accelerate the inflationary drive of the New Modernist Studies to the nth degree. This is the position taken by Susan Stanford Friedman in her *Planetary Modernisms*, in which she reads the expansionism of the New Modernist Studies as the irreparable shattering of any singular conception of modernism. According to Friedman, modernist studies must instead contend with a plurality of modernisms corresponding to a multiplicitous "network of polycentric modernities" that is irreducible to such tired notions as "capitalism or the nation-state" (Friedman 159). Though seemingly opposite in their reactions to the boom and bust of the New Modernist Studies, both Saint-Amour and Friedman are motivated by a shared anxiety about the obsolescence of modernism. As Friedman explains it, modernist studies is mired in a "palpable anxiety" and "metacritical angst" around the question of expansion that puts the field behind the times (50). Saint-Amour even goes so far as to describe modernism as a "fire that's gone out"; all that remains of it are a few smoldering embers around which its last critics might gather (Saint-Amour 455). These attempts to embrace weakness as literary-critical ethic or ecstatically expedite the field's inflation are but two strategies to productively reintegrate the same anxiety

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about the depletion of modernism as such.

It is at this punctuated moment of unease that obsolescence has emerged as a central, even unavoidable, problem of the field. The push and pull between the defenders and detractors of the New Modernist Studies has of late given way to a shared sense of modernism's desuetude, which is made all the more apparent in light of the current crisis of intellectual production. But rather than resigning critics to modernism's eventual disappearance, the obsolescence of modernism as a concept, period, and discursive formation has paradoxically brought out something new in it. In his definitive essay on the matter, Mark Goble begins by acknowledging the "perhaps inevitable future" where modernism would become obsolete once and for all, surviving only as a vestigial organ of the academy (Goble 147). At the same time, he adds,

> It might even be the case that modernism persists for us today largely as an *aesthetic of obsolescence*, which I would like to argue is not just a sign of its advancing age but a crucial and originary aspect of its character that we now understand with greater clarity precisely because we no longer feel required to insist on modernism's novelty as the important measure of its value. (147, emphasis added).

In an act of critical reflexivity, Goble turns the pervasive anxiety about the obsolescence of modernism back on itself so that this initially excluded aspect of the modernist project can be seen as essential to it from the very start (147). Through this displacement of our critical vision, Goble helps us to understand modernism as the expression of a commodity culture characterized not simply by constant novelty and technological innovation, but by its accumulation of outdated and outmoded things that survive past their allotted lifespan. This is to say that the "anxiety of obsolescence," to borrow Kathleen Fitzpatrick's term, is a quintessentially modernist phenomenon (Fitzpatrick 8). According to Goble, modernism's most lasting legacy derives from

its extensive engagement with the detritus of the capitalist object world and the feelings of disgust, frustration, fascination, and nostalgia it provokes. In keeping with this claim, he proposes an aesthetics of obsolescence that traces a through line from the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Man Ray's avant-garde photography, and Francis Picabia's machinic diagrams to William Gibson's sci-fi novels, Edward Burtynsky's pictures of industrial waste, and internet driven "ruin-porn," all of which engage with a still familiar repertoire of images that isolate the obsolete thing as the fragment of a lost social totality (150, 155 160, 164). When situated within this longer history of technological acceleration and ecological exploitation, modernism takes on "a new afterlife as something retrograde and uncanny," registering in aesthetic form the then nascent processes of decay and disintegration that have since come to define twenty-first century capitalism (162).

Goble's diagnostic reversal of the anxiety pervading modernist studies thus posits an aesthetic reuptake of the obsolete first inaugurated by the avant-gardes that remains little understood despite its enduring influence on art and popular culture. Of late, critics with similar interests in media, material culture, and object-oriented ontologies have sought to theorize such an aesthetics because it puts the very materiality of the capitalist object world into dispute, honing attention to the things littering society that are designed to disappear from the start. Within this paradigm, the aesthetics of obsolescence serves an essentially documentary function, preserving obsolete things in an aesthetic amber that outlasts their more immediately useful lives. In her account of the aesthetics of obsolescence, Lisa Anne Klarr writes that "art acts as a repository for the obsolete, a 'home' for the worthless objects, rejected places, and ruined bodies otherwise considered to be useless" (Klarr iv). Through the representation of outmoded things, she claims, art acts as a reservoir of cultural memory for a society built upon the principle of

constant novelty. Sarah Wasserman clarifies the larger import of this function in *The Death of Things*: "Fiction has always stored and cataloged the objects that populate our world, but it also depicts the decay and disappearance of objects, leaving us a literary history of ephemera that has gone largely unchronicled" (Wasserman 8). The conservation of obsolete material in the "storage medium" of artistic works is important not so much for its own sake, but because it gives expression to processes like obsolescence that evade perception, obfuscated as they are behind the reified image of a commodity's "natural" lifespan (4). By preserving outdated things the work "exposes the 'violence of capitalism' that inheres in ephemera," and, "instructs readers on the necessity of letting things go" (30, 37). The "stubborn fact of the obsolete thing," as Wasserman describes it, brings the transience of capitalist modernity into focus, putting pressure on the subject's constant struggle to renegotiate its relationship with a world that ever more rapidly sheds its form (6). The aestheticization of outmoded things reframes the relationship between subjects and their object world not as one of simple coexistence and shared agency, but of an incessant loss that forces us to question "what it means to be human when being human entails confronting a perpetually shifting material world" (23). The preservation of old, outdated, or otherwise ephemeral commodities in artistic works indeed shows obsolescence to rebound back onto the subject so forcefully as to put existence itself into question.

This more subjective valence of the concept has given obsolescence newfound critical purchase for scholars operating at the fringes of the thing-theoretical analytic both Goble and Wasserman share. Most notably, Philip Tsang's *The Obsolete Empire* takes up obsolescence as the structure of colonial subjectivity in the period of Britain's imperial decline. Tsang argues that obsolescence "registers a distinct temporal experience and relation to history" in which forms of subjectivity outlast the rule and structure of empire itself (Tsang 5). Obsolescence "turn[s]

inward" with imperial contraction, creating subjects both out of place and out of time (14). Building upon Joel Burges' assertion that the obsolescence of one's labor in the face of its automation creates an experience of being both "out of sync and out of work," Tsang describes the inward turn of obsolescence as an experience of "colonial untimeliness" whereby the subject continues to individuate themselves in relation to the absent center of the metropole (Burges 1, Tsang 15). The situation of colonial subjects at the indeterminate end of empire demonstrates that "[t]hese two kinds of obsolescence—that of the objective world and of subjectivity—are inextricably entangled" (Tsang 9). For Tsang, modernism is a response to the dual character of obsolescence, which "finds in obsolescence a great many uses: blurring the new and the unmodern, decelerating and disrupting progress, imagining forms of timeless, and mapping the uneven development of global capitalism" (10). Modernism's aesthetics of obsolescence not only records the fleeting existence of capital's excesses, but takes stock of the "inventory of feelings" that emerge from a world system in collapse (44).

In what is perhaps the most extreme expression of these recent theorizations of the obsolete, Bill Brown has argued that obsolescence cuts even deeper than the subject—at stake in the concept is nothing less than the imminent obsolescence of the human itself. The replacement of human labor with new technologies, fascination with nonhuman beings in popular culture, and the emergence of object-oriented or otherwise post-human modes of thought all speak to a "conceptual obsolescence" of the human as the ontological center around which questions of agency, politics, and culture cohere ("Prelude: The Obsolescence of the Human" 21). Like Wasserman, Brown is wary of the overeager celebration of this obsolescence as the enabling condition for a new conviviality between humans and nonhumans. Rather pointedly, he states that those who proclaim a "new democracy of persons and things," simply "can't help but be

haunted by the fact that we don't yet enjoy democracy among persons" (33). At this historical conjuncture where obsolescence has so thoroughly saturated capitalist society as to put the species-being of humans into question, such a "homogenizing ontology" all too apparently comports with capital's tendency to push human beings to the peripheries of production (33). The obsolescence of the human instead sounds the alarm for "imagining and effecting something other than apocalypse" for human and nonhuman life alike (35).

Brown turns to works by Philip K. Dick and Theaster Gates to theorize a way of reusing of obsolete material that converts it into the means for "reassembling the social" in the face of impending catastrophe (35). Their remediation of the obsolete is an act of what he calls "redemptive reification," a procedure of "rethingification wherein the discarded or ignored object becomes something else, some other thing" (28). Redemptive reification "interrupts reification-as-usual"—it extricates obsolete things from the historical inevitability imposed upon them by the demands of the market and makes them available for the construction of a different form of life and a different kind of future (*Other Things* 374). In rendering obsolete things into the objects of aesthetic experience, Brown argues, they become the site of a new encounter with thingness outside the ambit of use and exchange (126). This is to give a more essential purpose to the documentary function of the aesthetics of obsolescence than mere historical conscientiousness. For Brown, the aestheticization of the obsolete is an act of redemptive reification that reshapes the interface between human beings and the object world by shedding things of their commodity character and pulling "thingness from the blur of habit and the haze of consumer culture" (292).

This wave of scholarship that has sprung up around obsolescence spins a new dialogical thread within modernist studies by way of the problem of the commodity form that Mao and

Walkowitz deemed obsolete. By historicizing the anxiety and unease of the field as the affective

reverberation of its own period of study, these critics create an oblique approach to modernist

aesthetics that finds in art's internalization of the rhythms of commodity production a

surreptitious expression of the techniques of negation and disintegration that have determined the

experiential coordinates of the last century. The aesthetics of obsolescence they theorize seeks to

address how works of art mediate the aesthetic aura that accrues upon obsolete commodities as

they are pushed out of the sphere of consumption. Jacques Rancière poses the problem in this

way: "If the end of art is to become a commodity, the end of a commodity is to become art. By

becoming obsolete, unavailable for everyday consumption, any commodity or familiar article

becomes available for art, as a body ciphering a history and an object of disinterested pleasure"

(*Dissensus* 126). For the critics above, the task of the aesthetics of obsolescence is to preserve

the spectacle of the coterminous end of art and commodities, whereby the obsolete thing

becomes a cipher upon which can be read the history of the subjects and objects jettisoned from

the now-time of modernity. This is to cast the artist in the same role as Benjamin's collector,

who, in gathering up the scattered fragments of the capitalist object world, foments the

"liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful" (*AP* 209). The artist's preservation of

obsolete things in their works is a countermeasure to the perpetual liquidation of everyday life

that gives capitalist modernity the contradictory appearance of perpetual motion at a standstill. In

Brown's terms, art redeems things from their reification, discovering within the old, dead,

useless, outdated, and outmoded a thingly existence more complex and variegated than shelf life.

The aesthetics of obsolescence, that is, demonstrate that commodities continue to live and speak

in ways scarcely comprehensible.

Goble, Wasserman, Tsang, and Brown thus leverage modernism's literary-critical

desuetude into a framework for understanding our ongoing reckoning with a global culture of disposability. The "aesthetics of obsolescence," as Goble writes, "continues to pattern a way of looking at the presence and persistence of technology as a shared phenomenon of global modernity in the twenty-first century" (Goble 161). Though these critics chart a new historical dynamic to modernism's emergence that gives it a certain presentist value, the aesthetics of obsolescence they postulate remain limited for two reasons. First, and with the notable exception of Goble, these critics largely ignore the technological facet of the process of obsolescence. Whereas Goble theorizes obsolescence as a "more specialized phenomenon of technology" that throws the outmoded object into relief against a receding technological horizon, Wasserman and Brown prioritize the obsolete thing as the locus of the subject's vexed relationship with matter (148). The thing-theoretical account of obsolescence reduces it to the romance between the subject and what Brown refers to as the "secret life of things" waiting to be discovered behind the veil of reification (*Other Things* 216). Second, and as a result of this oversight, the documentary function that serves as the basis of these various formulations of the aesthetics of obsolescence abstracts the work of art from the very process it records. Art preserves and redeems obsolete things, but is itself sealed off from the historical development enciphered upon them. Though each account of this aesthetics makes the claim that obsolescence pervades every aspect of modern life, all leave aside the question of how obsolescence comes to impinge upon, and ultimately overhaul, artistic production during the modernist period. Providing an answer to this question requires a conceptualization of obsolescence less committed to the thing-theoretical analytic that has tethered criticism to the spectacle of *das Ding*.

In what follows, I pose a different approach to the concept of obsolescence that more closely scrutinizes its basis in the capitalist organization and development of technology. This

will later prompt a reconsideration of the avant-gardes that these critics have placed at the founding of the aesthetics of obsolescence. For them, avant-gardism is the source of the techniques, styles, and images that have come to define how artists represent obsolete things. While this is to affirm the enduring value of modernism and modernist studies in the period of their mutual decline, it also leaves much to be said about how avant-garde aesthetics mediates the synthesis of art with technology. The avant-gardes, I argue, not only develop influential procedures for rendering obsolete things into the objects of aesthetic experience, but make obsolescence into the most immediate problem of aesthetics as such.

THE FORM OF SHAME

The aesthetics of obsolescence as currently theorized traces its methodological lineage back to a single progenitor: Benjamin. The archaeological delicacy with which his materialism brushes away the historical sediment of modernity to uncover the fossil record written on the flesh of things models an attunement to the outmoded and forgotten products of the capitalist object world these critics claim to inherit and supersede. "Benjamin's writings," as Goble declares, "represent modernism's most intensive and exhaustive encounter with obsolescence" (Goble 153). The aesthetics of obsolescence they articulate rounds out Benjamin's materialism with an existential analytic drawn from the object-oriented and thing-theoretical uptake of Heidegger that would add in the missing phenomenological register to his thought. According to Wasserman, "Benjamin's approach does not directly address the distinct way that transience work on and through the human psyche" (Wasserman 15). What is missing, in other words, is a dimension to obsolescence that would illuminate the subject's entanglement with "obstinacy" of obsolete things without the theoretical baggage of the Marxist structure of alienation (Goble 157).

Benjamin's old and outdated materialism, it seems, stands in need of the expanded, thing-centric ontology of the new materialism to bring this dimension to light.

But the supersessionism implicit in the genealogical self-fashioning of the aesthetics of obsolescence forecloses other ways of thinking about obsolescence that are not grounded upon the ethical commitment to the agency of non-human objects. Throughout this scholarship there is a glaring absence of any discussion of Benjamin's own cousin, Günther Anders, whose two volume study, *The Obsolescence of Man* (*Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen)*, remains the most extensive theorization of the concept to date. In what is the single exception to this rule, Alberto Toscano's "The Promethean Gap: Modernism, Machines, and the Obsolescence of Man" stakes a claim for Anders's importance to any understanding of modernism, and of avant-gardism in particular. There, Toscano offers this pithy breakdown of Anders's biography:

> Anders, born Günther Stern, is a complex figure—dystopian fantasy novelist, anti-academic philosopher, student of Heidegger, distant cousin of Benjamin, first husband of Hannah Arendt, resolute campaigner against nuclear weapons—almost entirely neglected in English since his best-selling epistolary exchange with a repentant participant in the Hiroshima bombing, Claude Eatherly, *Burning Conscience* (1962). (Toscano 601)

Though Anders remains overlooked and under read, as Toscano suggests, his understanding of obsolescence as the effect of our reified conception of the machine form offers a way to reconceive the relationship between aesthetics and technics in the modernist period as one fraught with the problem of obsolescence. The philosophy of technology he lays out in *The Obsolescence of Man* might best be understood as the fullest explication of Freud's oft-cited remark that the scientific and technological advancements of the twentieth century have transformed man from a "feeble animal organism" and "helpless suckling" into "a kind of

prosthetic God" who, despite his magnificent power, "does not feel happy in his Godlike character" (Freud 44-5). At its core, Anders's thought is an investigation into the quality and magnitude of the unhappiness that has come to characterize the relationship between human beings and the technical organs of capitalist production.

His conceptualization of obsolescence rests upon an inversion of the commonsense understanding of this unhappiness as the dreadful alienation felt in having been made into another cog in the machine, a doxa that still predominates accounts of the man-machine relation. "[S]uch Chaplinesque humans," Anders writes, "do not exist" (*Prometheanism* 82). Indeed, he suggests that the situation is precisely the opposite—the cause of such unhappiness is that the faintest "residue" of a self persists in spite of the fact that one "'actually' ought to be nothing— and 'actually' wants to be nothing—other than a 'cog' in a machine" (82). The relation between human beings and the apparatus of production is one of "passionate servitude," to use Frederic Lordon's term, whereby labor is compelled to desire its own alienation from its products and the abstraction of its body into the fragmented gestures of production process (Lordon 17). As Anders explains it, workers are asked to "actively take into their own hands and carry out the process by which they become passive machine parts" (*Prometheanism* 83). This paradoxical demand is the calling card of industrial production—to actively pursue one's own passivity requires that the self be phased out, but never completely eliminated, as some minimal degree of agency must remain to quell the lingering remnants of selfhood that disrupt the smooth functioning of the machine. In those moments when the worker fails to keep up with the machine, the self rushes forth as "something objectionable: as a failure," which interrupts the desire for total reification that would render them, finally, as another part of the machine (83). Caught in this contradiction, the worker comes to experience the self like less like a cog in the

machine than a smear or stain on its surface that reappears just as soon as it is expunged. The residue of self that precipitates from this process remains disgracefully *unreified*, and so appears as old, useless, and obsolete.

The unhappiness of Freud's modern Gods is the surface expression of this more complex event of affective capture. Workers are not simply unhappy in their technological surround, but deeply ashamed of their place within it. This "Promethean shame," as Anders names it, is the lynchpin of his entire theory of obsolescence in that it lays bare the process whereby a technique of capitalist accumulation seeps into the innermost recesses of subjectivity. Promethean shame is the distinctive symptom of a "*new, second level in the history of the reification of human beings*" where life itself appears as irrevocably obsolete and out of place in its world (35). With the complete saturation of subjectivity in the logic of instrumental reason, human beings feel shame not at being made into a thing appended to a cold and uncaring system, but at not being a thing at all. Through this reversal, Anders extends Georg Lukács' account of reification to the capitalist coordination of desire and affect, building upon a preliminary description of Promethean shame that Lukács offers in his explanation of the rationalization of labor:

> [The] fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject. In consequence of the rationalization of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly *mere sources of error* when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational prediction. (Lukács 89)

To this, Anders adds that the reduction of the qualitative character of living labor to the status of glitch or error becomes a "second nature" to the worker that finds immediate expression in shame (*Prometheanism* 35). The shame felt in failing to be reified transposes the point of view of

the production process taken as a whole onto individual self-perception, such that the worker appears to themselves as an aberrance effacing a self-enclosed, autotelic system: "Not only does [the worker] now share their point of view, not only has he fallen in line with the standards they set, his *feelings* have also become theirs: he despises himself in the same way that things would despise him if they could" (35). In shame, reified things serve as the prism of self-recognition and the supply of the subject's entire affective vocabulary.

For Anders, the secondary level of reification that brings about such self-abasement corresponds to the predominance of the machine form over all of social life. In its reified guise, the machine objectifies an autopoietic efficiency that puts the embarrassing limitations of the human into stark relief. The Promethean kind of shame felt in the face of the machine acquires its historical magnitude at a certain stage in the development of capitalist society when the machine becomes a "structural form," Lukács' term for those forms that create the "focal points of man's interaction with environment at any given moment and which determine the objective nature of both his inner and outer life" (Lukács 153). Structural forms are the locus of historical analysis for Lukács because they crystallize the essence of a social totality, dictating the entire character of the epoch over which they preside. The machine is one such structural form insofar as it serves as the principle of the bourgeois' representation of the historical conditions of modernity to itself. The "bourgeois method" views machines as "isolated unique thing[s]," individual historical phenomena possessing such self-evident facticity that they divorce themselves from the rest of their historical reality (153). "To view the machine thus," Lukács continues,

> is to distort its true objective nature by representing its function in the capitalist
>
> production process as its 'eternal' essence, as the indissoluble component of its '

individuality.' Seen methodologically, this approach makes every historical object a variable monad which is denied any interaction with other—similarly viewed—monads and which possesses characteristics that appear to be immutable essences. (153)

In the machine the bourgeois finds the urform of capitalist society. Machines not only define the contours of individuality as the single self-contained unit of productivity, but bestow this monadic structure onto every other historical object. Anders's phenomenology of shame maps the symptomatic fallout of human beings becoming one such object—in his terms, it is "[o]nly when the category 'machine' has become universally applicable and is deemed all-inclusive, can that which was not constructed be reinterpreted as a faulty construct" (*Prometheanism* 37). As a structural form, the machine serves as both the means and measure of social life, containing in itself the "real life-process of capitalism" against which everyone and everything appears as an obsolete modality (Lukács 93).

Anders thus identifies a certain idealization of the machine at this new level of reification that filters our perception of all other forms, including our own. Yet as he makes clear, this idealization is not a simple fetishism that glorifies the machine as the thing most at home in the shock and velocity of modernity, as one might find, say, in Marinetti's Futurism. Rather, Anders ascertains in labor's shameful self-encounter with machines the symptomatic expression of a real idealization of production. Fordism's streamlining of the processes of large-scale industry culminates in what he calls an "industrial-Platonism," which gives products an enduring, open-ended life constantly tending toward its own perfection (*Prometheanism* 53). Mass production is Platonist, or at the very least "more '*Platonist'* than any human world has ever seen before," in that it produces commodities as the copies of a masterplan or blueprint that take on the status of the Idea (52). Things are no longer singular and individual, but serial and replaceable iterations

of an ideal form. At this level of production, the death of any given product directly coincides with its replacement, or better, with an improved version, giving its life a continuity and a perfectibility across its myriad instantiations. One can surmise that this depiction of industrial-Platonism doubly accounts for how obsolescence integrates production and reproduction into a unified whole (52). Industrial capitalism acquires this ideal character as obsolescence comes to conduct the tempo of commodity production, for it is through the planned negation of its products that the "eternal" continuity of their life is established (53). Obsolescence stitches the seam between the life of one thing and the next, ensuring the neat coincidence of the disintegration of the old with the instant apparition of the new. In so doing, obsolescence channels technological innovation, for products are made with an eye both towards their eventual disintegration and their technical enhancement. Once production anticipates itself in this way, capitalist reality takes on the appearance of a perpetual technological splendor, where things, as if by magic, are "reincarnated" in a higher form just as soon as they disappear (52).

At bottom, the acute shame of failing to be reified is a shame at being prohibited from this "Kingdom of Ideas" (52). It does not matter that the immortality of our products is the effect of the capitalist organization of production and not a quality of things in themselves. The bind of reified consciousness is "precisely the fact that we feel inferior to our products, *despite* the fact that we produce them ourselves" (53). The abject sense of our innermost deficiency results from the disparity with which capital allots existence—things are permitted to enjoy a serial, open-ended life, while human beings are condemned to a particular one (53). Compared to our products, Anders maintains, we are poorly made holdovers sentenced to "live our lifetime in obsolete singularity and uniqueness" (53). The shame of failing to be reified that pervades the scene of production has its basis in the shame at having been given this kind of life, that is, at

having been born at all:

> He is ashamed because he owes his existence to the blind and uncalculated, the highly
>
> archaic process of procreation and birth, which places him in stark contrast to the
>
> immaculate products, which are carefully designed through and through. His shame thus
>
> consists in his *natum esse*, in his lowly birth. Once he is ashamed of his antiquated line of
>
> descent, the same naturally also holds for its faulty and inescapable result: he is ashamed
>
> of himself. (30)

Here, Anders clarifies the way that obsolescence has become an intractable problem of the

modern subject. The obsolescence of the human is not a matter of intellectual fashion, as it is for

Brown, or the unevenness of historical time, as it is for Tsang. Rather, human beings come to

experience themselves as obsolete through their exception from this Platonic system of seriality.

Obsolescence inflects upon subjectivity as the shame in failing to achieve "serial perfectability of

the thing" because of our ill-made, outdated form (Toscano 603). The Promethean shame of

having been born in so antiquated a fashion is the affective byproduct of the subordination of

social life to the structural form of the machine that objectifies the entire process of "*industrial

re-incarnation*" as its very essence (*Prometheanism* 52). Against the machine which

energetically pursues the supersession of its form through its own activity, human beings appear

as helplessly individuated into a fixed morphology incompatible with the very world they have

made. Freud writes that when the prosthetic God "puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly

magnificent"; Anders retorts that he remains unhappy because he has "to be a 'self' which is

nothing more than a 'deficient mode' of being a machine, nothing other than a scandalous non-

device and a conspicuous nobody—despite having a definite name, a definite body, or maybe

even portraying the definite flaw of an individual peculiarity" (Freud 44, *Prometheanism* 86).

Anders's heterodox fusion of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and phenomenology pushes the contemporary scholarship surrounding obsolescence onto new terrain. As things stand, critics in modernist studies have concerned themselves with a peculiar species of outmoded object that has preoccupied the cultural imaginary since the first decades of the twentieth century. The aesthetics of obsolescence they theorize attempts to grasp the curious aura that accrues upon things exiting from the sphere of consumption that makes them immediately available as objects of aesthetic experience uniquely capable of breaching the boundaries of the subject. But for Anders the problem of obsolescence is irreducible to the auratic flair of the obsolete—I read his philosophical anthropology as suggesting that obsolescence is a problem of form. His theory of industrial-Platonism speaks to a broader change to the economy of form in which the structural form of the machine becomes the measure of the sufficiency or insufficiency of every other element of capitalist society. The machine is the last reserve of autonomy at this second level of reification, which imposes its praxis and effectivity as the benchmarks for the valuation of other forms. Once obsolescence overrides the logic of capitalist production, everything is judged according to the "*summum bonum* of total usefulness" objectified in the machine (*Prometheanism* 45). The crux of Anders's entire philosophy of technology is that when human beings fall within the scope of this standard they face the shameful verdict that "they *are* preformed, they *are* pressed into a shape, they *have* a form: just the wrong one" (37). Obsolescence renders an implicit deficiency in the forms that lack the seriality of capitalism's products, by which they are found at fault for their own limitations.

Though Anders localizes his analysis to the scene of production where labor condemns itself in this way, I argue that his account of the technological mediation of form offers a more expansive framework for our understanding of modernism's aesthetics of obsolescence. I read

Anders as putting a different inflection upon this notion, posing not an aesthetics of obsolete things, but an aesthetics ensnared in the problem of its obsolescence. In theorizing obsolescence as a process that organizes all of social life under the structural form of the machine, Anders sheds light on the various ways that modernists negotiated the belatedness of their work as an effect of their technological outmodedness. As I will argue in the next section, the predominance of the structural form of the machine over the greater social totality makes artistic production of a piece with other kinds of technical activity, and as such, its products, like all others, are shot through with the character of the obsolete. Against the sheer effectivity of the machine form, artistic production itself can only be seen in the waning of its relationship to life, as a deficient and ineffective activity at the periphery of the production and reproduction of collective existence. This is to flip the old canard of modernism's spirit of experiment, innovation, and rupture on its head, and rethink its drive to develop new techniques for the conjugation of art and technology as formal mitigations against art's imminent obsolescence. Whereas critics like Goble have turned to the avant-gardes as the source of our representations of obsolete things, I take avant-gardism as the first and most unambiguous attempt to advance an aesthetics that would compensate for the shameful obsolescence of art and ourselves.

BRIDGING THE GAP: ART, LIFE, TECHNICS

There is undoubtedly an incongruity between Anders's critical trepidation in the face of modern technology and the more recognizable forms of technophilia one finds throughout the various fronts of the avant-garde. The machine-worship of Futurism, the bombast of Vorticism, and the Surrealist cult of Eros certainly seem wholly uninhibited by any form of shame, be it Promethean or otherwise. Though these immediate differences in comportment are readily apparent, I claim

that Anders's understanding of how reification relays desire through the machine form offers a more incisive perspective on the technofetishism of the avant-gardes. His analytic of shame shows the intensity of this fetishism to spill over its object, such that that it mutates into a repulsion from all that lacks the serial life of capital's products. Indeed, this psychic tension forms the basis of Toscano's reading of Anders. In a riposte to the general posthumanism that predominates recent theories of the obsolete, he takes Anders as the missing theorist of a "modernist inhumanism" that derives new forms of human life out of the "man-machine nexus" (Toscano 594, 607). Along these lines, Toscano reads Marinetti's veneration of the airplane as a reactionary expression of Promethean shame, in that it celebrates the machinic aerial rebirth of the pilot as a liberating line of flight from the terrestrial femininity of human reproduction (598). He contrasts this with Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye, which transforms the camera into a "comradely" instrument for the collective overcoming of the bourgeois sensorium (600). Toscano taps in to this larger force-field of attachments and resistances surrounding the machine form in order to grasp how Marinetti and Vertov posit different configurations of the man-machine nexus as the basis of revolutionary and reactionary politics alike. But Toscano does not go far enough in questioning the aesthetic consequences of their shared "machinism" (594). In both cases, the machine serves as the means to overcome the boundary between art and life so as to bring about a new form of collective existence. Though many critics have taken this technological mediation of art and life as a radical transgression against art's museification, Anders's theory of obsolescence uncovers a different dynamic to their relation. As I will argue, Anders urges us to rethink this most basic relationship between art and life that undergirds avant-garde aesthetics as one of obsolescence, in which both art and life are called to account for their deficiency in the face of the superior form of capitalism's technical inventions.

To draw out this point, it is helpful to demonstrate the consistency with which even the most politically opposed factions of the avant-gardes rely upon the same aesthetic strategy for the reintegration of art with life. In a screed to the students of Italy, for example, Marinetti proclaims that, "Futurism is an impassioned attempt at introducing life into art. It exposes the old ideal of the aesthetes, which is static, ornamental, effeminate, elitist, fastidious, and which hates action" (Marinetti 233). Futurism runs counter to the "revolting socialistic intellectualism" of bourgeois aesthetes, throwing art back into the frenzy of modern life with a jolt from the industrial war-machine (233). For Vertov, the Kino-Eye directly works upon the organization of everyday life, "plunging into the chaos of life" so as to reveal in even the most minute of social phenomena the historical immediacy of the revolution:

> To see and hear life, to note its turns and turning points, to catch the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence beneath the press of the revolution, to follow the growth of the young Soviet organism, to record and organize the individual characteristics of life's phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion – this is our immediate objective.
>
> (Vertov 47, 49)

Vertov's revolutionary optimism is similarly expressed in Boris Arvatov's Productivist call for a new collective mode of "life-building," which would "turn art into the creation of real life" by eliminating the distinction between artistic technique and other kinds of technical or scientific activity (Arvatov 15, 97). One might also consider the synesthetic splurge that closes Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto 1918," wherein the negative force of Dada breaks through to life itself: "Liberty: **DADA DADA DADA**;—the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions, freaks, and irrelevancies: LIFE" (Tzara 13). Regardless of where these figures fall on the wide political spectrum of avant-gardism, they all take the separation of art

from life as the most immediate problem of their aesthetics.

The historical emergence of this gap has long been the subject of critical contestation. In his foundational, if highly disputed, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger argues that the separation of art from life is the result of the immanent development of artistic production into its own distinct institution within bourgeois society. Once caught in the institutional framework of capitalism, art encloses upon itself to form a "special sphere of experience" at remove from the "struggle of everyday existence" (Bürger 12, 24). For Bürger, this process culminates in the movement of *l'art pour l'art*, which bestows an autonomy to art that separates it from the "praxis of life" as it is structured under the instrumental reason of capitalist society (36). This separation reveals art's essential ineffectuality, since, having shed "all that is alien to it," art is left with nothing but its self-criticism (27). By reuniting art and life under a new praxis, the avant-gardes dialectically fulfill the self-criticism of bourgeois aesthetics in act. Their break from Aestheticism is the coming into consciousness of artistic production, whereby the "totality of the development process of art becomes clear" (23). With their newly won clarity of vision, the techniques and procedures of previous epochs are made available as artistic means no longer subject to the strictures of any particular style, all equally at hand as means to bridge the gap between art and life.

One major point of contention with Bürger's theory is that it downplays the role of technology as a mediating factor in this new conjuncture between art and life. Most notably, Andreas Huyssen takes Bürger to task in *After the Great Divide* for providing an essentially free-floating account of the development of artistic production divorced from its material circumstances. The event of art's reintegration with life, he contends, cannot be understood solely through Bürger's notion of the art-institution; it instead requires a critical attention to the

new technologies emergent in the period that bridge mass production with mass culture. "[N]o other single factor," Huyssen emphasizes, "has influenced the emergence of the new avant-garde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists' imagination (dynamism, machine cult, beauty of technics, constructivist and productivist attitudes), but penetrated to the core of the work itself" (9). Avant-gardism is a response to the "bipolar experience of technology," which is caught between "the aestheticization of technics since the late 19th century . . . and the horror of technics inspired by the awesome new machinery of World War I" (Huyssen 10). The avant-gardes meet the sweeping technological transformations of everyday life in this new Manichean world with a coequal technologization of art that brings it up to the speed of life. In an emendation to Bürger's central claim, Huyssen ultimately concludes that "[t]echnology played a crucial, if not *the*, crucial role in the avantgarde's attempt to overcome the art/life dichotomy and make art productive in the transformation of everyday life" (9). Their reintegration of art and life transpires through art's technological mediation, which releases technical objects from their immediate utility and lifts the mimetic demands placed on artistic production.

Huyssen thus figures the conjugation of art and technology as a form of mutual exchange, with art "liberating technology from its instrumental aspects" and technology furnishing art with a new practices and techniques (9). By discovering their shared benefit, he claims, the avant-gardes unraveled the "bourgeois concept of reality" and "forge[d] a new unity of art and life" (11-2). In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin offers a counter-history to this model of the contiguous development of art and technology that clocks the lag between the two. Breaking from the fine-grained historical detail characteristic of much of his writing, he condenses centuries of their exchange into a few short sentences:

From a European perspective, things looked this way: In all areas of production, from the

Middle Ages until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the development of

technology proceeded at a much slower rate than the development of art. Art could take

its time in variously assimilating the technological modes of operation. But the

transformation of things that set in around 1800 dictated the tempo to art, and the more

breathtaking this tempo became, the more readily the dominion of fashion overspread all

fields. Finally, we arrive at the present state of things: the possibility now arises that art

will no longer find time to adapt somehow to technological processes. (*AP* 171)

For Benjamin, there is no fusional resolution between art and technology in the modernist period

that brings their history into equilibrium. Art instead confronts its obsolescence as a permanent

condition—the sheer speed of technological change in capitalist society renders the rhythm of

artistic production slower and slower until art is made identical to its failure to adapt to

technological development. In an essay on Benjamin's "archaeomodern turn," Rancière clarifies

that Benjamin is here not simply presenting another version of Hegel's end of art, in which art,

having lost its station as the highest expression of man's relation to the absolute, becomes "a

thing of the past" (Hegel 13). Rather, this history hinges upon the countervailing insight that art's

belatedness is determined by the fact that "modern technology always comes 'too early' for its

self-understanding" ("The Archaeomodern Turn" 35). Technology arrives ahead of its historical

consciousness, making us, in Benjamin's terms, "incapable of responding to the new

technological possibilities with a new social order" (*AP* 26). The long arc of his brief history

implicates art in this widening gap between the products of collective invention and the

possibility of their collective understanding. Art is called upon to clarify "what manner of

nature" the technical discoveries of modernity contain so as to repair the broken bond between

technology and collective life, but always comes too late to its task (396). Seen in this way, the avant-gardes' attack on the art-institution looks rather like an attempt to overcome the obsolescence of art as such. The "colossal acceleration of the tempo of the living" presaged in the "form of the machine" puts art at an impasse, for technology at once renders art's distance from life, and provides the only means to surmount it (394).

By reading history from its retrograde side, Benjamin thus discerns behind this technological mediation of art and life an effort to bring about the reconciliation of technical objects with the increasingly obsolete forms of understanding available to historical consciousness. In *The Obsolescence of Man*, Anders names the split between our products and their apprehension "the Promethean Gap," which he explains as "the effect of the daily growing gap between our two faculties; between our action and our imagination, of the fact that we are unable to conceive what we can construct; to mentally reproduce what we can produce; to realize the reality which we can bring into being" (*Burning Conscience* 12, Toscano 604). The secondary level of reification at the center of Anders's analysis not only reveals our shameful deficiency in form, but exposes our humiliating incapacity to produce images commensurate with the very things we have created. Put simply, obsolescence is an intrinsically aesthetic phenomenon. "[O]ur imagination," as Anders writes, "is unable to grasp the effect of that which we are producing" (*BC* 12). Machines objectify this irresolution between praxis and imagination as their form, at once emblematizing the grandeur of collective human invention and the privation of the individual faculties of representation. Whereas critics in modernist studies have theorized avant-gardism as the first aesthetics of obsolete things, I take this gap between production and representation to be the crux of their aesthetics of obsolescence. Left in the wake of technological acceleration, avant-gardism faces the Promethean Gap as the aesthetic dilemma

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of producing images adequate to their technological surround. Read together, Benjamin and Anders introduce a way of seeing the avant-gardes' various declarations of art's radical leap into life as a leap over this gap, which would meet the deficiencies in human form and thought with an imaginary that would reconcile them with the world they have made.

Of all the figures of the avant-garde, Wyndham Lewis gives the clearest expression to this aesthetics of obsolescence. In a retrospective on his Vorticist years, Lewis sums up the entire effort of the avant-gardism in this way:

> It was, after all, a new civilization that I—and a few other people—was making the blueprints for . . . A rough design for a way of seeing for men who as yet were not there. I, like all the other people in Europe so engaged, felt it to be an important task. It was more than just picture making: one was manufacturing fresh eyes for people, and fresh souls to go with the eyes" (*Rude Assignment* 135)

At a glance this description reads like standard avant-garde fare, not unlike Marinetti's call for the creation of a "**mechanical man, one who will have parts that can be changed**" (Marinetti 113-4). But in loosening his rhetoric from the usual bluster that comes with such declarations, Lewis gives clear expression to the dialectical entwinement of the avant-gardes' appetite for novelty with their distaste for the obsolete. Indeed, the conception of the art Lewis offers here is that of a prophylaxis against the unrelenting shame of obsolescence. Though Lewis dismisses Marinetti's outright technofetishism, his is still an essentially technological conception of art, with the work serving as an organological supplement that compensates for the deficiency of human form, grafting "fresher" parts onto the body's obsolete figure. As he remarks elsewhere, "[t]he eye, in itself, is a stupid organ," which stands in need of such prosthetic enhancement so as not to be so out of place in its new technical environs (*A Soldier of Humor* 270). Avant-garde art,

Lewis suggests, is meant not to integrate with life, but *revamp* it in an act of total technological overhaul. This aesthetic palliative to our obsolescence requires a complete subordination of aesthetics to technics, which brings art into line with the industrial-Platonic model of production. For Lewis, the only conceivable solution to the Promethean Gap that alienates the imagination from its products is a parallel reification of body and soul alike, remaking the entirety of the human sensorium according to the serial ideal schematized on the blueprint. To bring about this "new way of seeing" modernity, art must mitigate against the shameful obsolescence of our unreified form by recreating it in the image of the very things that rendered it obsolete in the first place. As I will argue in the next chapter, the reactionary impulse that propels Vorticism is filtered through the shame of obsolescence, which Lewis contorts into a logic of racial supremacy and ecological domination.

CONCLUSION: A LINGERING FEELING

Toward the end of *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson diagnoses what he calls the "modern feeling" that distinguishes modernism's works from the cultural output of late capitalism (*Postmodernism* 310). Echoing Ernst Bloch's notion of the non-contemporaneity of modern class society, Jameson defines modernity as a "situation of incomplete modernization," wherein different strands and distributions of time persevere before their eventual submission to the singular rhythm of the global market in the postmodern epoch (310). The structure of feeling that corresponds to this asynchrony, Jameson notes,

> seems to consist in the conviction that we ourselves are somehow new, that a new age is beginning, that everything is possible and nothing can ever be the same again: nor do we want to be the same again, we *want* to 'make it new', get rid of all those old objects,

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values, mentalities and ways of doings things, and to be somehow transfigured. (310)

The feeling at the brink of capital's complete totalization is one of resplendence in a newly transformed present, wherein everything becomes possible and the future is suddenly up for grabs. Jameson's key claim is that postmodernity is defined by the abatement of this feeling with the consolidation of the last remaining offshoots of space and time into a synchronized global totality. As he puts it, "[n]ow everything is new; but by the same token, the very category of the new then loses its meaning and becomes itself something of a modernist survival" (311). The total coalescence of the world market dissipates the shock of the new in the rote rhythm of commodity circulation. Under these circumstances, the modern feeling is experienced as a holdover from the past, an affective vestige that allows us to look back on modernism as a mode of artistic production specific to a period of historical transition that has reached its end.

Yet read a bit closer, the modern feeling seems to consist of a more complex entanglement of symptoms than a simple fervor for the new. Behind the desire to fulfill the Poundian diktat to "make it new" lies the more immediate compulsion to purge oneself of the "old objects, values, mentalities, and ways of doing things" that blot modernity's spectacle of novelty, a feeling put on exorbitant display in London's program for the planned obsolescence of everything existing. It is as if the mere inclusion of the self amongst obsolete things contaminates it with a tinge of obsolescence that splits the subject from itself. The event of total self-transfiguration that for Jameson marks modernism's utopian horizon is driven by a repulsion from the old and outdated, which is experienced as an unspecific negative force pressing the subject to shed its form. As I have tried to show, Anders gives a name to this other aspect of modern feeling: Promethean shame. One sees in Lewis' blueprint of the future that the obsolete indeed objectifies a humiliating inhibition to the ecstasy of self-transfiguration, which can only

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be mitigated through the indiscriminate liquidation of the past and the self. Remarkably, Jameson mentions Promethean shame in an aside that likens the anti-intellectualism of postmodern culture to Anders's "Promethean inferiority complex in front of the machine," but goes no further in connecting the feeling of shame to very processes of technologization that he claims provide the conditions of possibility for modernism itself (310, 315). My contention here and in what follows is that even if postmodernity has rendered the modern feeling of the new obsolete, we remain ensnared in its negative dimension, for the Promethean Gap between our praxis and imagination has only continued to widen in this moment of accelerating ecological ruin. Our modernist inheritance consists not just of the anxiety of obsolescence, but of this shame in the face of our collective works that focalizes the aesthetic dilemma between production and representation. Keying in to this lingering facet of the modern feeling allows us to plot the various strategies by which the modernists sought to match their art up to capital's technological inventions and resolve us to limits of our form.

CHAPTER 2

Wyndham Lewis and the Ecocidal Imagination

In 1919, Ezra Pound published a short notice in *The Little Review* to correct the record concerning the reported death of Vorticism. The energy with which the English avant-garde movement's first established itself in the summer of 1914 with the publication of *BLAST* had by the time of his address fizzled out. The First World War had killed two important contributors to the magazine, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and T.E. Hulme, and made the bombast and dynamism so central to that "great MAGENTA cover'd opusculus" seem misguided (*Pound/Lewis Letters* 138). His letter in *The Little Review*, "The Death of Vorticism," serves both as an expression of his commitment to the principles of the movement and as an excoriation of the "idiots" and "blockheads" that had published its premature obituaries ("TDV" 48). Pound opens his retort by placing these obits alongside the other headlines of the day:

> The Kaiser has gone, or at least we hope he will have gone before this article reaches the press room; the Papacy is on its way to commendable dessuetude, with lamentable slowness; Vorticism has been reported dead by numerous half-caste reporters of Kieff, by numerous old ladies, by numberous parasites who having done their best to prevent the emergence of inventions later find it profitable to make copy out of the same, etc., etc. (45)

Positioned alongside the dissolution of the Prussian monarchy and the slow collapse of the Church, the death of Vorticism would seemingly be of equal world-historical significance were it not for the fact that its death notice had been sent to the papers too early. Its demise is simply not yet as clear as the parasitic aesthetes of bourgeois culture claim. "Vorticism," Pound goes on to

declare, "has not yet had its funeral" (48).

Though this pronouncement reads at first glance as a defiance of public opinion, it also admits of a deeper resignation. That Vorticism has "*not yet* had its funeral" expresses the certainty of a death only temporarily forestalled. It is as if Vorticism, though not yet buried, has one foot in the grave, waiting for the right moment to give its last words. For Pound, these last words were to come as a series of images from the warfront:

> After trying all kinds of war painters, with, for the most part, lamentable or at any rate negligible results, the government has taken on Mr. Wyndham Lewis; and after irritating delays, such as may be expected of an artist who waits to know his own mind before rushing into expression, the government is now getting its finest war pictures. The elderly are content to compare them to Lucca Signorelli, but those who really knew Mr. Lewis' mastery of his medium, before 1914, are perfectly content, to see in them nothing more than the continuation of Lewis (48).

Wyndham Lewis, the figurehead of the Vorticist movement, was appointed as the official war artist of both England and Canada in 1917 and had just began to display his paintings at the time of Pound's missive. In Pound's estimation, the parasites of London's cultured elite need only look at these new works in order to see not only that Vorticism was still alive, but that it still had Lewis, the "very great master of design," leading the English avant-garde into a post-war future ("Vorticism").

Far from renewing Vorticism, Lewis's war paintings represented the waning of *BLAST*'s leftover energy. This is particularly evident in the most famous of these images, *A Battery Shelled*, which depicts three officers resting against crates of ammunition as a desolate landscape of fragmented metal and coiling smoke rolls before them (see fig. 1). It is, Douglas Mao argues,

one of the last and most pronounced echoes of Vorticism, "mingl[ing] highly naturalized and individualized human figures with much more schematized and geometrical ones" (Mao 249). Notably, this painting was to be included as a central piece in a failed memorialization project. *A Battery Shelled* was originally commissioned by the British War Memorial Project in 1918 to be on a permanent display in The Hall of Remembrance, a gallery to stand in perpetuity as a dedication to "fighting subjects, home subjects and the war at sea and in the air" ("A Battery Shelled"). As funding eventually ran out, however, the project was scrapped entirely and the paintings were sent to the Imperial War Museum ("Hall of Remembrance"). In other words, Pound had staked Vorticism's future upon Lewis's adaptation of its aesthetic to the technologies of state memory. That this image would forever mediate the nation's relationship to the war would surely be enough to show that Vorticism had in fact not yet been buried. However, even if the scheme to build the Hall of Remembrance had not failed and *A Battery Shelled* had come to figure as the apotheosis of Vorticism, it would also certainly had spelled the end of the movement. The moment at which an avant-garde aesthetics is marshalled in service of the state's memorialization it retreats from the "advanced guard" of culture. That the project to build the Hall of Remembrance fell to pieces only denied the grandeur that might have accompanied Vorticism's last images. To borrow again from Mao, "*A Battery Shelled* signals not just the banality of evil . . . but the banality that comes to almost everything," including the avant-garde itself (Mao 250).

Lewis's "finest war pictures" consequently failed to produce a renewed English avant-garde in the way Pound had imagined. Instead, Vorticism's inevitable end came shortly after Pound took to *The Little Review* when Lewis published *The Caliph's Design*, a largely understudied collection of essays in which Lewis develops the aesthetic principles first laid out

in *Blast*. If Vorticism had any last words they would surely be those of the book's subtitle, which repeats the characteristic invective of Lewis's earlier manifestos: "Architects! Where is your Vortex?" Where in *Blast* Lewis took aim primarily at impressionism and futurism, here he excoriates architects en masse for their failure to produce an environment suitable for artistic practice, calling architecture "the weakest of the arts, in so far as it is the most dependent on the collective sensibility of its period" (*The Caliph's Design* 43). Though Lewis maintains a certain Vorticist polemic, he would later acknowledge that by the time of *The Caliph's Design* he "was no longer a 'vorticist'", as he no longer had the desire to "go on with that particular game" (*Wyndham Lewis on Art* 129). "Yet," he continues, "*The Caliph's Design*, written just after the War, was another *Blast*, and it continued the criticism of *Blast* No. 1 and *Blast* No. 2" (129). Though he builds upon the critical project started in *Blast* he in no way offers a final systematization of its principles, which would either codify the movement's place in cultural history or prepare the ground for its revitalization in a new form. *The Caliph's Design* depletes whatever energy was left of in the Vortex and Lewis leaves others to mourn its passing, abdicating the avant-garde "game" for want of a more fulfilling activity.

Vorticism thereby ends with a failed scheme to integrate it into the functions of the state and with a text that simultaneously continues and terminates its project. It did not receive the conclusiveness of the funeral that Pound had presaged, but entered into a prolonged obsolescence, an indeterminate ending antithetical to the very aims of the avant-garde. As Alain Badiou claims, avant-garde movements "force the recognition" of a new present in order to place "Collective existence and life itself […] at stake" (134). By the end of the First World War not only had the collective life to which Vorticism belonged vanished, it also lacked its leader, Lewis, around whom it had galvanized its antagonism toward the prevailing social order. The

radical "Reality of the Present" he imagined in *Blast* belonged essentially to the past, a part of the wrecked landscape of war in *A Battery Shelled* that reduces everything to banality (*Blast* 7). At its end, Vorticism becomes an avant-garde movement out of time with no position for its aesthetics in the politics of the present.[1]

Mapping the trajectory of Vorticism's protracted and indeterminate demise provides a framework through which we can read it backwards, identifying in its last articulations the ideological conditions of possibility for the first emergence of the "great art vortex" in the *Blast* manifestos (*Blast* 7). For Badiou, the manifesto is a "projective rhetoric" that "envelop[s] a real present in a fictive future" (Badiou 139). It displaces the present moment of its declaration into a future where the new aesthetic experience it produces would be possible. *The Caliph's Design*, however, develops the declarations of *Blast* without the "rhetorical envelope" of the manifesto form (139). It is *Blast*'s after-image stripped of avant-garde technique, within which the most striking features of the original image persist. *The Caliph's Design* therefore marks a transition from Lewis's early work as figurehead of the English avant-garde to his works of the 1920's, notably *The Art of Being Ruled*, *Time and Western Man*, and *Paleface*, which have been at the center of recent returns to Lewis given their wide-ranging philosophical, cultural, and racial diagnoses of modern life. But more importantly for this project, *The Caliph's Design* demands a return to *Blast* and the pre-war avant-garde milieu, serving as a unique index through which we

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[1] One year after "The Death of Vorticism," Lewis would give one last go at the avant-garde "game" with Group X, a loose collection of artists with whom he would organize one show before calling it quits (Halliday 245). Pound would continue to identify with Vorticism and seek out its reappearances in other art movements throughout Europe. In 1924, he saw a resurgent Vorticism in the French impressionist cinema, notably in the films of Abel Gance and Ferdinand Léger (Hickman 293). He would, however, most enthusiastically celebrate the arrival of a new Vorticism in Mussolini's Italy, in which he lived throughout the 1930s. In her analysis of Pound's prolonged Vorticist period, Miranda Hickman claims that Pound saw the 1932 exhibit, the *Esposizione del Decennio*, in particular, as the realization of Vorticism "in the context of an entire culture rather than just a movement in the arts" (294). That Pound's direct association of Vorticism with an emergent multimedia fascist aesthetics coincides so closely with the publication of Lewis' *Hitler* in 1931 should be fact enough to cause some hesitation at the current critical turn away from the question of modernism's reactionary aspect.

can understand how Vorticism devoted itself to eliminating every last trace of the obsolete in newly technologized landscape of the capitalist core.

My claim is that from cradle to grave the fictive future Vorticism creates for its new mode of aesthetic experience is dependent on an indiscriminate violence toward the environment, which for Lewis is the very locus of what is shameful and obsolete in modernity. Broaching the question of Lewis's relation to his ecological surround undoubtedly appears to have some degree of incongruity with his work, given that he was certainly not the most ecologically-minded of the modernists, and even less an admirer of those who were. However, in both the *Blast* manifestos and *The Caliph's Design* Lewis embraces the accelerative forces of capitalist modernity to lay out the conditions for this new kind of aesthetic experience that views nature itself as a rival or enemy (*Blast* 11). Both texts posit worlds wherein all forms of non-human life have been subsumed or destroyed by sheer mechanical will and ingenuity. *Blast* supplants impressionistic reverie with a mechanical subsumption of nature's forms, which in *The Caliph's Design* transforms into the consideration of a world in which all non-human species have been exterminated. Vorticism, in other words, devotes its energy to the present according to an *ecocidal imagination*. In attending to the imaginative aspect of ecocide in this way, my aim is to produce an understanding of how the wholesale devastation of ecosystems and the mass death of existent species is informed and permitted by a reactionary "distribution of the sensible" implicit in the Anglo avant-garde's aesthetics of obsolescence. As Jacques Rancière writes, such a distribution is the "dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*), the *nemeïn* upon which the *nomoi* of the community are founded" (*Dissensus* 36). In this sense, ecocide consists not only of the events of mass death and ecological devastation, but of a relation to collective life, which Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer sum up in *Ecological Form* as a way of

"see[ing] the nonhuman world as a theater for accumulation, dispossession, and capture" (2). Lewis is unique among the modernists in that he turns this way of seeing into an aesthetic principle.

The function of this principle is to ground a notion of race and to readjust the aims and techniques of the avant-garde toward its articulation. From the first to his last Vorticist works, Lewis's ecocidal imaginings demand a retrospective evaluation of the capability and ingenuity of the particular race from which the artist emerges. They ask: which race is capable of transforming the face of the earth? How would they enact their newly won power? And what is the relation of the artist to their race in an entirely mechanized world? In *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos*, Laura Winkiel describes this aspect of Lewis's work as a "metaphysics of race" developed in response to the avant-garde movements that preceded Vorticism, most importantly Futurism, which "impose[s] hierarchies of race and nation on the revolutionary subjects that they envision" (Winkiel 83). What the ecocidal imaginings in *Blast* and *The Caliph's Design* show is that there is an eschatological bent to this metaphysics. In each case, Lewis develops his notion of race through scenes of environmental catastrophe that expunge every trace of the obsolete. The structural antagonism within this metaphysics is that unique environments produces racial difference, but race itself is a striving to transform, supersede, and thereby destroy, the environment through the power of technology. Machines are objectifications of racial ingenuity that express racial superiority to the degree that they destroy nature. This antagonism, I argue, changes the relation of present and future in the right-wing of the avant-garde, or the "rearguard" as Martin Puchner names them (Puchner 3). Where for Badiou the avant-garde manifesto works through envelopment of present in the future, in Lewis's rearguard work the fictive future of ecocide discloses the racial ordering of the past. Lewis uses the manifesto form to lay claim to

the present, and indeed the entirety of the modern world, by virtue of the unique racial character of Englishness. In ecocide Vorticism sees the enactment of racial ingenuity and supremacy, as well as the condition for the emergence of a renewed, unmistakably English, art.

RESSENTIMENT AND *THE CALIPH'S DESIGN*

The Caliph's Design offers the most vivid image of what this apocalyptic future might look like. Like *Blast*, *The Caliph's Design* lays out a host of artistic principles, excoriations of contemporary artists, and demands for a vibrant new art. The key difference is that Lewis expounds upon these ideas through "The Parable of the Caliph's Design," an Orientalist tale that models Vorticist artistic practice. The story goes like this: one day, the Caliph rose from bed and went about sketching an array of abstract hieroglyphs. He then called upon Mahmud and Hasan, respectively, the most celebrated architect and the most brilliant engineer in Baghdad. The Caliph, having grown tired of the appearance of his city, demanded that the two set about transforming his sketches into a design for a new street, which would serve as the first step in the creation of the new city of his imagination. If the two failed to produce a blueprint by 10 o'clock the next morning, their heads would roll. Due to their skill and hard-work Mahmud and Hasan avoided this fate, the next morning handing in to the Caliph a beautiful blueprint that perfectly translated the Caliph's ideas into an actionable plan. In a month, this new street was built, completely transforming the heart of the city.

The Caliph is none other than the Vorticist. The parable, Lewis writes, "describes the state of mind which must be that of every healthy and active artist living in the midst of the blasphemous stupidity, too much so even for health, that surrounds us to-day" (*The Caliph's Design* 33). The only problem with the tale is that the London Vorticists lack the power of

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sovereign decree, the "power of life and death over the Mahmuds and Hasans," which licenses the Caliph to transform his world at will (33). If Lewis had this power, he claims, "I should have no compunction in having every London architect's head severed from his body at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, unless he made some effort to apply a finer standard of art in his own art-practise" (33). Behind this attempt at a comedic embellishment of the act of violence at the heart of the parable is a telling display of Rancière's account of the fundamental aesthetic character of the political. Lewis here makes an explicit attempt at tethering politics to the will and imagination of the artist. He goes on, "I would flood those indolent commercial offices, where architects pursue their trade, with abstract designs. I am sure the result would be to cram the world with form and intention, where to-day, as far as it is beholden to the architect, it has no discernible significance or aesthetic purpose of any sort" (33). The aesthetic degradation of the modern life results from the proliferation of things, machines, and, above all, art, which are devoid of intention and purpose. Vorticism is a response to this overfull but empty world. The Vorticist artist-autocrat takes up a managerial position to marshal his subjects in the project to fill this aesthetic void, using them as artistic tools to turn appearance of the world into a reflection of the unified intention of the state-cum-design firm.

The parable thus constructs a point of view that sees from the "top down perspective of the idealist regenerator of lived experience" along with an accompanying set of principles for artists who would assume this perspective (*Modernist Nowheres* 205). The main lesson artists should learn from the parable is that,

It is life at which you must aim. Life, full life, is lived through the fancy, the senses, consciousness. These things must be stimulated and not depressed. The streets of a modern city are depressing. They are so aimless and so weak in their lines and their

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masses, that the mind and senses jog on their way like passengers in a train with blinds

down in an overcrowded carriage. (*The Caliph's Design* 30)

In taking aim at life the artist must ignore "what objective Nature supplies," which only serves to

deaden the senses, overburden the artistic spirit, and foreclose new modes of artistic expression

(39). Their objective should be nothing less than the complete transformation of the appearance

of the world. As it stands, even the "common man" or the man of the crowd can see through this

"superficial exterior life" and feel the slow and steady deadening of their inner one:

> By the deepest paradox he knows that the plaster objects stuck up in Oxford Street
>
> outside Selfridges for Peace Day are not a symbol of anything but commerce; in which he
>
> equally, though not so successfully, is engaged himself. There is nothing there that he
>
> could not do himself, and they do not reach his imagination. (30)

The parable of the caliph's design, in other words, teaches artists how to respond to the

alienating conditions of capitalist modernity. The stifling of the senses that artist and common

man feel in common is an effect of the commodification and commercialization of everyday life,

here singularly identified in the lifeless edifice of the department store. Vorticism takes such a

totalizing approach to aesthetics and politics so that it can meet capitalism's own totalizing force

head-on and fashion a new inner life through the transformation of the surface of the everyday.

In keeping with his self-stylization as the Enemy, Lewis directly and forcefully quashes

any democratic potential one might identify in this project, displacing the antagonism toward the

commodity character of the world twice over. First, Lewis separates himself from the man of the

crowd with whom he shares a common condition:

> So when I say that I should like to see a completely transfigured world, it is not because I
>
> want to *look* at it. It is *you* who would look at it. It would be your spirit that would benefit

by this exhilarating spectacle. *I* should merely benefit, I and other painters like me, by no longer finding ourselves in the position of freaks, the queer wild men of cubes, the terrible futurists, or any other rubbish that the Yellow Press invents to amuse the nerves its readers (39).

Lewis's shift into a mode of direct address enacts the forceful separation of the artist from the man in the crowd. But the insistence of his italicization marks a different force operative in his enunciation—Lewis perhaps *too* forcefully seeks out his separation. The force emanating from the italics is *ressentiment*, the displacement of the despair of one's own condition onto a guilty Other.[2] The structure of Lewis's address collapses what he holds in common with the common man by connecting the latter's good fortune in reaping the benefits of Vorticist artistry with mainstream culture's disdain for avant-garde "freaks" and the failure of Vorticism to penetrate its core. The common man undeservedly benefits from the artist's mortal struggle to gain recognition in an alienated world and for this reason he is put in the position of the "you," rather than, say, members of the "Yellow Press," or Harry Gordon Selfridge, the founder of his most hated department store. In any case, Lewis's mode of direct address ensures the continual circulation of his despair, which, at least in *The Caliph's Design*, is Vorticism's *raison d'être*. Its reconciliation would exhaust the desire to transform the world that ultimately derives from the feeling of having been made a freak.

The second displacement shifts the antagonism to the world of commerce toward other artists who are made responsible or complicit in its appearance. Lewis takes architects,

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[2] Lewis himself not only read Nietzsche, but explicitly would deal with the problem of *ressentiment* in his later works, most evidently in *The Apes of God*, *The Revenge for Love*, and *Rude Assignment*. That he would later do so does not, of course, exempt him from its effects. Toby Foshay even argues that Lewis himself becomes aware in these later works of Jameson's claim that "*ressentiment* is always itself the product of *ressentiment*," identifying the "presence of *ressentiment* within his own satirical representation of it" (Jameson 131, Foshay 146).

Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, some of Picasso, all of Gauguin, "nature-mortism," Futurism, and studio art all to task (*The Caliph's Design* 14). The most important aspect of this displacement, though, is what happens behind its change in object. Throughout *The Caliph's Design*, Lewis frames differences between artists in terms of practice, disposition, and their chosen objects as racial differences. He repeatedly finds at the bottom of competing attempts to represent the deadened surface of a commodified world a struggle between races. Here, for example, is his critique of Gauguin: "Gauguin was not an artist-type. He was a savage-type addicted to painting. He was in reality very like his sunny friends in the Marquesas Islands. He was in as limited a way a savage as an American negro is typic, or a Jew over-raced and oversexed" (69). Like the Impressionists before him, Gauguin remains too tied to the past and to an archaic understanding of the artist as a 'savage.' For Lewis, would-be artists like Gauguin and other primitivists retreat from the depressing conditions of cosmopolitan life and take to the remaining vestiges of an older, more brutish world to express their "long[ing] for some pristine animal fierceness or abundant and unblemished health" (68). Gauguin is a "savage," then, because he finds in the Marquesan Islanders his most appropriate object; they serve as the coherent reflections of his own deficient, and obsolete, racial character. And as he clarifies through the addition of two additional racist stereotypes, race is a limitation of character and artistic capacity. Art that is "over-raced" is too fixed and too particular to totally transform the "putrid dullness" of the world (31).

Lewis builds upon his critique of Gauguin in his analysis of the three main strains of French art, the Romantic, Classic, and Scientific, each of which he associates with a primary racial category:

But then what you will base your views of these movements on will really depend on

what latitude you give, in your mind, to human enterprise: how closely you consider the

possibilities of any short individual life: and whether fanciful claims of Progress excite

you or not. Three or four human types— about as many as there are large sub-divisions

of the human race — Yellow, White, Negritic—wrangle and wrestle about with each

other, rise, flourish and decay, then once more ascend. (89)

Echoing Max Stirner's racial hierarchization of the world, Lewis correlates the struggle between

the three art movements to the more fundamental struggle between the three races.[3] Racial

violence and competition is Lewis's only analog for describing the differences among the art

movements of the time. He thus transfers the geographic separation of the three races onto the

viewer—their approach to art movements depends on the "latitude" of their mind. The artist and

the viewer alike have some degree of mutability in their racial character, and are able to navigate

latitudinally and longitudinally across the separate racial spheres, but the Marquesan Islander

remains fixed in one part of the racial triad. As Nicholas Brown suggests, Lewis's racism does

not straightforwardly seek out to "justify white superiority," but instead focuses its virulence on

the "'Non-White World,' particularly the colonized world" (*Utopian Generations* 130). Their

fixity provides determinate positions that enframe both the conflicts between the races and the

artistic struggle for the control of the world's surface. Race, therefore, offers Lewis the most

basic typological assortment of humans and the primordial scene of struggle which all

contemporary disputes, even aesthetic ones, restage.

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[3] In *The Ego and His Own*, world history is synonymous with the violence of racial struggle: "The history of the world, whose shaping properly belongs altogether to the Caucasian race, seems till now to have run through two Caucasian ages, in the first of which we had to work out and work off our innate negroidity; this was followed in the second by Mongoloidity (Chineseness), which must likewise be terribly made an end of. Negroidity represents antiquity, the time of dependence on things (on cocks' eating, birds' flight, on sneezing, on thunder and lightning, on the rustling of sacred trees, etc.); Mongoloidity the time of dependence on thoughts, the Christian time" (Stirner 59-60). To be sure, Lewis does not insist upon the predominance of the "Caucasian" and as Stirner does, and even critiques this very text in "Enemy of the Stars." Nevertheless, he borrows this tripartite racial division of the world and, as I will argue, reaches similar conclusions about what results from the end of racial struggle.

The incongruity of these overlapping typologies immediately becomes clear to Lewis. He admits that, "The only flaw in this parallel is that the Black race may die out, the Yellow predominate, or all races mingle in a resultant grey-yellow mixture for some time. But the types of mind are likelier stubbornly to persist and maintain their struggle for mastery" (*The Caliph's Design* 89-90). The limitations of Lewis's parallel so immediately press upon him that they express the constitutive inconsistency of his thought, instantiating Adorno's dictum that, "Antagonisms that are unsolved in reality cannot be solved imaginatively either; they work their way into the imagination and are reproduced in imagination's own inconsistency" (*Aesthetic Theory* 169). The antagonism toward capitalism's total subsumption of the appearance of the world is resolved in the other scene, the scene of racial struggle. The incongruity between Lewis's racial types and his aesthetic ones induces in him the vision of an impending crisis in which the conflict between races would be brought to end. The three Vorticist futures Lewis portends are notable not just because they are racist tropes that exist to this day, but because they are resolutions in a separate "primordial" future, which remains distinct and detached from the indeterminate future of capitalist modernity in which Lewis is actually immersed. This is the inconsistency of Lewis's imagination. His racism severs aesthetics from politics, even as he demands the kind of total aesthetic control of the politics as told in the parable. Pressed by the force of *ressentiment*, he displaces an irruption in the distribution of the sensible in everyday life into a conflict between racial types retrojected onto an absolute past. The aesthetic types that "stubbornly" persist and vie for control of the appearance of the world merely repeat and restage the conflict between races. Even though Lewis calls for a transformation of the world, he offers so few glimpses of what this world would look like because his aesthetics seek resolutions for antagonisms disjoined from the world it would change.

Bound as they are to the fundamental structure of racial violence, Vorticist futures can only appear through condensed scenes of mass death. Before Lewis produces a glimpse at the totally transformed world he seeks, he lays one more principle for a specific and purposive Vorticist activity:

> We know that all our efforts indicate a desire to perfect and continue to create; to order, regulate, disinfect and stabilise our life. What I am proposing is activity, more deliberate and more intense, on the material we know and on our present very fallible stock. But that stock must be developed, not in the sense of the prize bullock, not simply fattened, elated, and made sleek with ideas proper to a ruminant species: but made the soul of things in this universe; until as a bird a man would be a first-rate growth, and even as a bullock, be stalled in a Palace. (*The Caliph's Design* 74)

To return to Lewis's description of Vorticism in *Rude Assignment* from Chapter 1, the aim of his avant-garde aesthetics is to provide a "fresh souls to go with the eyes" (*Rude Assignment* 135). It produces a transformation of the collective body such that it can project its inner life out onto the world, making its soul the very "soul of things" (135). Only then would the deadened surface of the commercial world be inflected with the inner soul of the artist. The repetition of racial conflict in aesthetic production thereby results in the same thing as the end of racial struggle does for Stirner: "Reserved for the future are the words, 'I am the owner of the world of things, I am the owner of the world of mind'" (Stirner 60). Through an infinite extension of the soul, Vorticism leaves its mark on every surface in much the same way that capitalism bestows upon every object its commodity form.

Having laid all this groundwork, Lewis then issues his most important command: "Let us substitute ourselves everywhere for the animal world; replace the tiger and the cormorant with

some invention of our mind, so that we can intimately control this new Creation" (*The Caliph's Design* 74). He supplements this with a question: "Supposing that we destroyed every vestige of animal and insect life on this planet, and substituted machines of our invention, under immediate human control, for this mass of mechanisms that we had wiped out, what would be the guiding principle of these new masses?" (75). This is what is behind Lewis's aforementioned declarations that it is "life at which you must aim," and that the Vorticist should "cram the world with form and intention." The total transformation of the appearance of the world and the creation of a new collective body necessitates the extinction of non-human life. Lewis's description of the mass death of ecocide as a "substitution" or "replacement" is telling in that it expresses a refusal of any strict separation of the Vorticism from "Nature's workshop," the organic from the inorganic, or the self from environment (76). But it is precisely through the removal of these distinctions, which are now characteristic of an eco-critical conscience, that Lewis's ecocidal imagination takes flight. Vorticism and nature are both engaged in the same immanent process of the production of forms and appearances, which began with the struggle between the races to determine the color of humanity. Lewis's ecocidal imagination thus derives from his conception of race, this time figuring nature itself as the Other with which it must contend and ultimately subdue. Lewis again runs up against the limits of his imagination as he attempts to define the features of this future so devoid of life. He asks, and is ultimately unable to answer,

> Supposing that we destroyed every vestige of animal and insect life on this planet, and substituted machines of our invention, under immediate human control, for this mass of mechanisms that we had wiped out, what would be the guiding principle of these new masses? The same as at present, the wild animal and insect forms? Would we

domesticate the universe, and make it an immense hive working for our will, scavenging,

honey-making, fetching and carrying for man; or what? (76-7).

Lewis cannot imagine a new collective body without replicating the organizational forms of

animal life he intends to destroy. Faced with this limitation, his description of a Vorticist future

retreats into a demand for pleasure: "We want to enjoy our consciousness, but to enjoy it in all

forms of life, and use all modes and processes for our satisfaction" (77). Beginning with the

failure of Vorticism to gain acclaim in mainstream culture and the feeling of having been made a

freak, Lewis is carried by the force of *ressentiment* to a demand for total pleasure through the

absorption all forms of life into itself. Ecocide is the only measure which can remove all

limitations to enjoyment so that the soul can find itself at home everywhere in the world. The

machines that replace obsolete animal life are apparatuses of pleasure, infinitely plastic forms

through which the human soul can indefinitely project itself onto the universe. Hence, Lewis is

like the man of *ressentiment* Deleuze describes in his reading of Nietzsche, who

> does not know how to and does not want to love, but wants to be loved . . . He therefore
>
> considers it a proof of obvious malice that he is not loved, that he is not fed. The man of
>
> *ressentiment* is the man of profit and gain. Moreover, *ressentiment* could only be imposed
>
> on the world through the triumph of the principle of gain, by making profit not only a
>
> desire and a way of thinking but an economic, social and theological system, a complete
>
> system, a divine mechanism. (Deleuze 118)

Lewis meets capitalism's complete transformation and integration of every aspect of the

everyday with the equally absolutized force of *ressentiment*. It achieves its own divinity,

propelling the infinite extension of the human soul onto every form of life that is alien to it.

Ecocide clears away anything which limits such a divine pleasure.

Vorticism's last text thus culminates with the unspooling of its aesthetics, in which its stated aim of changing the appearance of a commodified world mutates through the compulsion of *ressentiment* into a metaphysical projection of the soul. What starts as a claim for the total coordination of politics with aesthetics ends up leaving the political behind entirely through a series of displacements of its antagonism toward the commodification of the world. Aesthetics becomes sealed off from politics and history, doomed to repeat the primordial scene of racial conflict from which it derives. Just as Lewis's premonitions of mass Black death and "Yellow" domination are imagined resolutions to racial conflict, ecocide offers a resolution to the problem of the artist's alienation through the elision of the political as such. It is the culminating moment in the individual drama of the freak artist at odds with the world, which represents his complete and absolute triumph. Through the individualization of alienation, Lewis uncouples his avant-garde aesthetics from the larger European project of creating a "new civilization," new collective bodies, and futures for a people yet to come. To be sure, these imagined resolutions never guarantee the final separation of aesthetics and politics in the way Lewis imagines, but rather, "[b]y emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation" (*Aesthetic Theory* 177). The resolutions Lewis conjures in response to the commodity character of the world, ecocide and racial violence, are not resolutions at all. Far from ensuring the separation of aesthetics from politics via a metaphysical projection of the soul, they are the points at which politics intrudes back into the aesthetic. They are the schemata of capitalist futurity, the effects of the endless and limitless transformation of capitalist mode of production, which Lewis takes to be the glories of the Vorticist spirit.

These ideas find their first expression in *Blast*, but are restrained by its manifesto form. As Badiou notes, the "rhetorical envelope" of the manifesto ties the future to the present act of enunciation, and thereby limits these cosmic projections of the self onto a future abstracted from the material conditions of the present. *The Caliph's Design* represents the moment of Vorticism's obsolescence because it sheds its manifesto form and thereby gives up on the creation of "new fabric of common sensible life" ("You Can't Anticipate Explosions" 403). The avant-garde project turns into an individual project of self-identification, which alleviates the pain of being rejected by the media and "Yellow Press" by consuming more and more of the universe. Lewis's *Blast* manifestos do not contain this kind of ideational inflation. They do, however, rely upon a metaphysics of race, which in this case enacts itself upon the political reality of the present through ecocide. Where in *The Caliph's Design* Lewis proposes ecocide as the appropriate form for the Vorticist future, in *Blast* it is an already accomplished fact that serves as the sign of English racial ingenuity. In other words, ecocide does not represent the triumph of the soul in an ahistorical future, but the manifestly present condition of a mechanized world. The goal of Lewis's manifestos is to lay claim to this world, which he undertakes through a reorientation of the manifesto form. His rearguard uptake of the manifesto changes its temporal structure such that it folds its real present not in a fictive future as with Badiou, but in a fictive past. By reorienting itself toward the past, the manifesto "rewrites national history in racial terms to authorize the present geopolitical and aesthetic dominance in self-generating and self-legitimizing terms" (Winkiel 135). Forcing the recognition of this past allows Lewis to produce a new sensorium for common life, which is the property and product of English racial character.

     Lewis first articulates the metaphysics of race in *Blast* and *The Caliph's Design* in

response to the increasing circulation of avant-garde art and aesthetics across pre-War Europe. Futurism in particular gained much attention among London's cultural elite as a result of Marinetti's scandalous and insulting speeches to English audiences. For instance, in his 1910 "Lecture to the English on Futurism," given at the Lyceum Club to a room full of future Vorticists, Marinetti lays out a scathing diagnostic of the English race. He offers some degree of praise to supplement his remarks, noting English patriotism and individualism as their two most laudable features (Marinetti 89). In an assessment that Lewis himself will eventually repeat in *Blast*, Martinetti even allows that the English are world's greatest "race of explorers and colonizers, whose huge ocean liners have, without any doubt, caused the world to shrink" (90-1). His praise ends there. "Prolonged periods of peace," Marinetti goes on to claim, have "poisoned the Anglo-Saxon race," creating in them hatred of the poor, a desire "to remain ice cold at all costs," and the loss of any "interest in the life of the mind" (90-2). Soon after, Lewis famously retorted in an article for *The New Weekly* that "England practically invented the civilization Signor Marinetti has come to preach to us about" (qtd in Berghaus 106). This quick retort encapsulates the signature ambition of pre-war Vorticism. By laying claim to modernity as such, *Blast* is to "stimulate[] its audience to compete against other European nationalisms in the sphere of art" (Winkiel 131). It does so by articulating a counter-diagnostic to Marinetti's lecture, which parcels out the faults and virtues of Englishness from the historical perspective of Englishness, without the added blather of Futurist technophilia and "automobilism" (*Blast* 8). This is to say that Lewis's metaphysics of race first emerges within a particular historical and cultural milieu, in which competition between avant-gardes spurred the development of codified racial structures and hierarchies with which they could establish their superiority.

Locating the development of Lewis's understanding of race at this historical juncture is to

resituate recent disputes about Lewis's politics and thought more generally. Most often, critics

locate the emergence of Lewis's racism around the 1930s, particularly with the publication of his

infamous 1931 tract *Hitler*, in which he declares the arrival of Germany's "Man of Peace"

(*Hitler* 44). In his analysis of the evolution of Lewis's politics, for example, Nathan Waddell

writes that, "for all his idealism, and in spite of the deplorable views that mark his writings of the

late 1920s and early to mid-1930s in particular (among them misogyny, homophobia, racism,

and anti-Semitism), Lewis's deeply cultured, perceptive outlook on political matters remain

distinctive" ("Lewis and Politics" 128). Even Fredric Jameson locates the most important

expressions of Lewis's racism in his post-*Tarr* work (*Fables of Aggression* 20). These

organizations of Lewis's writings attempt to chart the evolution of his thinking to pinpoint the

beginnings of racism, but continually omit Vorticism from their accounts. It is as if the shock of

a text like *Hitler* occludes vision of the racial anxieties and concerns that are the heart of *Blast*.

The result, as Urmila Seshagiri writes in *Race and the Modernist Imagination*, is that "*Blast*'s

conceptions of race have received startlingly little critical attention," even, and perhaps

especially, when critics have focused their attention on Lewis's Vorticist works (Seshagiri 210).

To read Lewis's *Blast* manifestos not just as inflected by the conceptions of race in pre-War

Europe, but as competitively engaged in transnational articulations of racial difference, is to

reengage Lewis's work without the occlusive vision imparted from his more ignominious texts.

Lewis breaks from Futurism primarily through a formulation of the privileged racial

inheritance of Englishness, which is bestowed upon them by their unique ecological milieu.

Attending to Lewis's imbrication of race and environment in these manifestos requires a

conceptual shift from the work of critics like Seshagiri and Winkiel in their foundational

analyses of Vorticism's racial imaginary. For Winkiel, Lewis's metaphysics of race depend upon

a notion of blood purity: "'race' under the rubric of modernist nationalism of the Vorticists transcends historical categories by being transmitted through the blood" (Winkiel 122). I instead argue that Lewis's understanding of race is transmitted through the environment, and thus does not rely upon any notion of racial fixity. As shown in *The Caliph's Design*, there is degree of mutability in race, which can shift according to the "latitudinal" coordinates of the mind of those capable enough as artists. Indeed, it is this mutability that can give Lewis's conception of race its viciousness. Seshagiri's reading of *Blast* identifies its incorporation of primitivist aesthetics as tale of racial triumph masked as an artistic one: "the Anglo-Saxon artist proves himself a superior modern 'species' through his capacity to appreciate and imitate *primitive* art forms" (Seshagiri 97). I add that the Vorticism's primitivism works in tandem with its technophilia to mediate the relation of race to environment. It is inbuilt to Lewis's ecocidal imagination as a means to establish the racial superiority of Englishness and secure Vorticism's dominance of the avant-garde scene.

Lewis organizes the first of his manifestos according to an interlocking series of "blasts" and "blessings," which selects aspects and configurations of the political reality of pre-War England and submits them to the scrutiny of the artist. It is a process governed by the edict: "Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves" (*Blast* 30). *Blast* rests on neither side of the blasts and blessings, but produces a unified collectivity through their explosive encounter. It is this form that ties Lewis's manifesto to its political present, as the act of "establish[ing] ourselves" in a new collective formation takes place through the discretization of the aspects of cosmopolitan life so as to find their points of rupture. It bears repeating that the very first blast of the magazine is directed at England's warming climate: "[1] BLAST First (from politeness) ENGLAND. Curse its climate for its sins and infections. DISMAL SYMBOL,

set round our bodies, of effeminate lout within. VICTORIAN VAMPIRE, the LONDON cloud

sucks the TOWN'S heart" (*Blast* 11). Lewis figures the degradation of Englishness into a state of

femininity and torpor as an environmental problem. More specifically, London is beset by

pervasive pollution figured in this vampiric smog cloud, which drains the vitality of the city's

inhabitants. The environment is the objectification of the inner state of the English, which makes

that inner state, or "soul" in the parlance of *The Caliph's Design*, available to the artist for

inspection, scrutiny, and valuation.

As Lewis continues his description of the degraded character of the world and of the

English people, he ends up producing a modernist image of climate change. Only these

"effeminate louts" that have taken to this pollution can properly breathe the air of London's,

"flabby sky that can manufacture no snow" (12). In a moment of melancholic resignation set

apart in small print he admits: "But ten years ago we saw distinctly both snow and ice here" (12).

For Lewis, climate change stands in for the obsolescence of English culture and the inertia of

great English minds, which the manifesto must jumpstart again through its blasts, as with the

final call of the first section: "LET US ONCE MORE WEAR THE ERMINE OF THER

NORTH. WE BELIEVE IN THE EXISTENCE OF THIS USEFUL LITTLE CHEMIST IN

OUR MIDST" (12). Only the genius can find the solution to the climate crisis and muster the

strength to return England to native element. It is, however, a crisis only inasmuch as it threatens

Englishness with various degenerations and devolutions that divorce it from its natural

capacities. The chemist works in the name of his race, not the environment. Remarkably, Lewis's

exacting attention to surfaces allows him to directly see, but in the end misidentify, the

catastrophic effects of capitalist production, namely, the commodification of the everyday and

global warming. By "plung[ing] into the present" and demanding a total transformation of the

appearance of the world, *Blast* and *The Caliph's Design* unknowingly produce an image of that world as constituted by these twin catastrophes (*Blast* 147). But since Lewis's metaphysics of race mediates Lewis's relation to the present and makes these phenomena visible in the first place, the only common sensible life that can emerge in response to them is one predicated upon racial superiority.

In response to these crises and to Marinetti's insulting diagnostic of the English, Lewis develops a counter-history that describes the unique racial inheritance of Englishness. It is a tortuous history dependent on racial tropes, associational leaps, and a predetermined teleology. First, Lewis blesses England for its ports and ships, symbols of imperial commerce and the intrepidness of sailors taking on "the vast planetary abstraction of the OCEAN" (22). Therefore, a new kind of art for the English and for the North would be based on the bare fact that,

> [6] The English Character is based on the Sea. [7] The particular qualities and characteristics that the sea always engenders in men are those are, among the many diagnostics of our race, the most fundamentally English. [8] That unexpected universality as well, found in the completest English artists, is due to this. (35)

In this associational chain, English character is based on the sea, which it itself an abstraction of planetary scale. As a result, the sea engenders in Englishness a capacity for abstraction that gives their art its "unexpected universality." The essence of Englishness, then, is abstraction itself. When Lewis claims that "our Vortex insists on water," it is both because Vorticist art pursues the fluidity and volatility of water, and because the Vortex is by and for Englishness itself (147). Vorticism produces a new narrative of racial inheritance which grounds English art and expression in the universal by virtue of its unique ecological milieu. But far from representing a break from the past, Lewis here repeats a racial trope that designates the English as an "island

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race," which Kathleen Wilson describes as a way of seeing "Englishness as defined by a conjuncture of territorial boundaries, topographical features and historical continuities that included language, character and physical attributes. Ideas about nation and race occupied overlapping if not identical cultural and political terrains in this construction" (Wilson 55).[4] Lewis calls upon the natural affinity of the English people to the sea to revitalize a specifically English mode of aesthetic production, which would take the avant-garde scene by force on account of its implicit universality. In so doing, the manifesto reroutes its functions by enveloping the present moment of its utterance in a fictive past, in which collapsing forms of collectivity are reconfigured as conditions for a renewed racial unity. The manifesto, in short, becomes a document of racial inheritance.

To borrow Winkiel's term, this is the "racial myth" beneath Lewis's metaphysics of race (136). It not only explains the universality of English art, but also provides an account of how the shape and appearance of modernity came to be:

> [1] The modern world is due almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon genius,--its appearance and its spirit. [2] Machinery, trains, steam-ships, all that distinguishes externally our time, came far more from here than anywhere else . . . [6] By mechanical inventiveness, too, just as Englishmen have spread themselves all over the Earth, they have brought all the hemispheres about them in their original island (*Blast* 39-40).

Lewis directly transposes his response to Marinetti's critique published in *The New Weekly* into his manifesto. By virtue of their unique capacity for abstraction derived from their archipelagic heritage the English are able to manifest their innermost spirit as the external appearance of

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[4] Wilson traces this notion back to the 1760s, during which time Englishness was still a "nascent ethnicity" in the process of differentiating itself from the other island races that surrounded it (Wilson 13). It provided a rhetoric for racial exclusion and domination during the rise of the Empire, and was later proffered both by Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher in their defenses of the imperial order (54, 204).

modernity. As in *The Caliph's Design*, *Blast* seeks out a harmonization of the soul with its universe. Whereas in *The Caliph's Design* this harmony was found in a metaphysical elsewhere, in *Blast* Lewis finds it the mechanized contours of the imperial world. The aesthetic task of Lewis's manifesto is to discover in the political reality of the present its inner racial soul, such that the form of the world becomes the after-image of English ingenuity and supremacy. The factories, cranes, boats, dredgers, and bridges of the industrial landscape all spring from the "mechanical inventiveness" of the English race, dotting the landscape with the objectifications of its spirit. They are all points in the harmonic coordination of the hemispheres around the metropole, which transform the global circuits of production and trade into the collective body of Englishness itself.

Though this would appear to accomplish the manifesto's task, Lewis still must reckon with the inevitable fact of global warming. If there is a feeling of alienation and isolation in *Blast*, it is from the disjunction between the England's lousy, sterile climate and the racial superiority of Englishness. How can there be a new English art if they are so disconnected from that environment which is the source of their racial ingenuity? Lewis answers:

> [3] It is not a question of the characterless material climate around us. Were that so the complication of the Jungle, dramatic Tropic growth, the vastness of American trees, would not be for us. [4] But our industries, and the Will that determined, face to face with its needs, the direction of the modern world, has reared up steel trees where the green ones were lacking; has exploded in useful growths, and found wilder intricacies than those of Nature. (*Blast* 36)

Whereas Lewis begins Blast by cursing the climate's effects on racial character, here he embraces the crisis as an opportunity for racial renewal. The manifesto reveals the world in its

essential Englishness through its abstract machinic form, "proclaim[ing] Anglo-Saxon's nativist superiority as the founders of the industrial revolution" (Winkiel 135). Because Englishness is based on an abstraction, it need only be surrounded by abstractions to be at home in the world. Pollution, loss of snow, and "flabby skies" are no matter, as they are the vestigial features of an obsolete and outmoded ecology. The ingenuity bestowed upon the English by their island heritage allows them to transcend the specificities and problems of their environment, and sanctions their claim to the Amazonian jungle and American redwood forests alike. Their "characterless" climate is the generic, universal form of modernity which effaces all ecological difference.

At this point Lewis's ecocidal imagination takes flight. Environmental differences essentially serve as limitations to the universalization of race and their destruction opens up new compositions of the global, racial collective body. As in *The Caliph's Design*, Lewis poses technology and nature as two modalities of the same aesthetic process in competition with one another for control of the appearance of the world. The global networks of trade and commerce made visible in the English port signal a phase shift in this relation, wherein the steel trees of the industrial landscape burst forth endlessly with new contours as the green ones stay the same, tied to their simple, obsolete particularity. The green trees, as Lewis writes, are essentially "lacking." Nature thus bears within it the machinic seed of its own obsolescence. For this metaphysics of race, the English derive their unique racial capacities from their island environment, but turn their machines against the natural world once its presents a limitation to the constitution of a global collective body. Nature appears so slow, disposable, and simple only from the view of racial superiority derived from the myth of the island race. Ecocide enacts a redistribution of the sensible, changing not just what can be said and what can be heard, but the speeds that

"characterize bodies and their modes of aggregation" (*Dissensus* 92). Everything must be kept up to the appropriate velocity in the ecocidal imagination. Nature's slower forms disturb the alignment between the collective body of the English and the world; it is the "sterile Tyrant" still reigning over modernity that must be overthrown (129). As Lewis writes of those other ecologies, "In the forms of machinery, Factories, new and vaster buildings, bridges and works, we have all that, naturally, around us" (40).

The obsolescence of nature thus coincides with the coalescence of race in the ecocidal imagination. *Blast* offers a perversion of Marx's claim that, "Nature is man's *inorganic* body— nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself the human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die" (*The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 67-8). Lewis's manifestos are disruptions of a dialogic "intercourse" with nature, which for Marx sustains the life of the human species. Their metaphysics of race extricates the human from this relation, as if human life is separable from that of nature. By reconfiguring Marx's understanding of the imbrication of human species and the natural world as a relationship between race and their "inorganic body," nature becomes a fundamental limitation to life. It produces differences in form and speed in the collective body of Englishness, which disrupts that unity between race and the world upon which his metaphysics of race depends. It is therefore incorrect to suggest as some critics have that Vorticism is an avant-garde of "stillness" or that it resists the Futurist penchant for technophilia (Hanna 25, Gąsiorek 164). Vorticism shapes itself around a speed beyond Marinetti's Futurism, which remains too attached to individual technical objects. The Vorticist reconfiguration of the manifesto form into a document of racial inheritance allows for the transposition of Englishness onto the mechanized networks of trade and commerce, such that capitalist acceleration becomes

the actualization of racial potential. Ecocide ensures the seamless integration of the two. *Blast* thus finds the deliverance that *The Caliph's Design* locates in a metaphysical elsewhere within the careening speeds of global capitalism and the technological cityscapes of a world in which only steel trees are left standing.

WHAT TO DO WITH LEWIS?

In tracing the folds, desires, and connections of Lewis's ecocidal imagination, the question inevitably emerges—why read Lewis at all, given his racism, violence, and, at times, fascism? In *Fables of Aggression*, Jameson emphasizes that this question poses,

> the most urgent and visceral issue for any reader, namely, why he or she should be
> expected to find aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction in a work whose impulses are often so
> ugly or ideologically offensive. This is no mere question of personal taste but rather a
> fundamental aesthetic problem; a problem intensified by the presence, alongside the
> expression of this or that overt political opinion, alongside the lifelong affirmation of the
> intellectual inequality of human beings and even more disturbing fascination with racial
> categories, of that obsessive sexism and misogyny which can go unnoticed by no reader
> of Lewis's work, or of the following pages. (*Fables of Aggression* 20)

The problem for Jameson is how to deal with that sheer intensity overflowing from Lewis's aesthetics. Lewis produces in his readers an ugliness so viscerally felt that it spills into anger, disgust, and revulsion, all of which must be confronted and resolved to sustain any further engagement with his works. The question of Lewis's relevance to modernist studies, and for criticism in general, rests upon how one resolves this encounter.

The primary response to this problem has been to qualify, justify, or otherwise explain

away the ugliest elements of his work. Jessica Burstein frames the dilemma in this way: "Being Wyndham Lewis means never having to say you're sorry. Being a Lewis critic, on the other hand, means constantly apologizing" (Burstein 145). Lewis produces a shame in his readers, which they must displace by through his work other theories, histories, and modes of thinking that resist its ugliest elements. Ivan Phillips takes up Burstein's assessment as the rallying cry for a return to "[t]he work, not the life," because many of the critiques of Lewis's racism and misogyny "tend to reveal more about the preconceptions and methodologies of his critics than it does about his work" (Phillips 113). Though he tries to provide a historical frame of reference that explains the emergence of Lewis's racism, he frequently amends this analysis by reducing his racism to "ruinous lapses of judgment," and "surface idiocies" that "distract us from the basic tolerance, moderation, and farsighted multiculturalism of his enterprise" (121, 122). Alan Munton, with whom Phillips aligns himself, has gone so far to say that Jameson's work, particularly his conceptualization of Lewis's "protofascism," has deluded Lewis criticism altogether. By ignoring the particular texts and the historical circumstances under which Lewis was writing, Jameson collapses the nuances of his thinking. In a repetition of Lewis's own obsessive attention to national difference, Munton even claims that Jameson's work has led to a devolution of American criticism, contributing to the endless "persistence of 'protofascism,' which is often taken up by younger critics who otherwise show no signs of being capable of comparable radical social thought of their own, though they readily identify gender politics and racism" (Munton 10). These responses deploy similar containment strategies in the face of the most offensive and vile elements of Lewis's work. Criticism is reduced to the complexification of Lewis's own thinking via the historical detail and the textual exception. Endless qualification in the name of authorial complexity is not a return to the "work," but an interminable delay of

that very encounter with the visceral aesthetic problem of his racism, misogyny, and indeed, his ecocidal imagination. It is to read the work in defense of the life, hoping, like Pound, to restore the "very great master of design" to his proper place in cultural consciousness.

The response to the question of what to do with Lewis cannot supplant shame or disgust with better feeling. Instead, it must produce an understanding of how those deeply felt revulsions are the effects of impersonal forces given form in the work itself. As Jameson writes, Lewis's "artistic integrity is to be conceived, not as something distinct from his regrettable ideological lapses (as when we admire his art, *in spite of* his opinions), but rather in the very intransigence with which he makes himself the impersonal registering apparatus for forces which he means to record, beyond any whitewashing and liberal revisionism, in all their primal ugliness" (*Fables of Aggression* 21). If there remains importance in reading Lewis, it is because he serves as the impersonal vector of forces which admit of no resolution or exoneration. To *whitewash* them is to placate the self, quelling that radical revulsion that comes from his work. I would add, however, that Lewis not only registers those forces he "means to record," but also those he does not. In his rearguardist embrace of capitalist acceleration and his racialization of the technologies of empire, he too registers the then unnamed effects of these forces upon the environment.

CONCLUSION: SOOT-GAUGES

Lewis's *Blast* manifestos ultimately "fabricat[e] a present" for Vorticist art in which a new crisis became visible, but not sayable (Badiou 140). It is a crisis that simultaneously surfaces in a report, "The Sootfall of London: Its Amount, Quality, and Effects," published in *The Lancet* in 1912, at which time the Vorticists were forming their counterblast to Marinetti's Futurism. The report petitions for soot-gauge observations, which measure the weight of soot deposits in rain

water to detect excess wastage of fuel, potential defects of coal-fired energy, and "the emission of products injurious to health, corroding to building fabrics, and often enough opaque in the aggregate to the sun's radiations, so reducing day to the darkness of night" (47). The report concludes:

> At present the readings of the soot-gauge merely prove the existence of a serious evil amongst us, and also that there is every reason why this evil should receive regular registration and treatment. It is to be hoped that the time will come, however, when the soot-gauge will be an entirely superfluous instrument as an auxiliary in weather observing stations, an obsolete apparatus the use of which would be ludicrous in improved conditions. (47)

The authors of the report detect something lurking beyond London's pollution problem, an unnamed evil to which we can now apply the name: climate change. Their hope for the obsolescence of the soot-gauge is a utopian hope for a different future and a different relation between technology and nature, which would not necessitate the unending development of new devices to measure the evils of an accelerating economy. This is to say that the authors express, from the very same historical juncture, the obverse of Lewis's ecocidal imagination. They and Lewis indirectly introduce this crisis into the common fabric of the sensible in their confrontations with technological expansion, environmental change, and the sickened body of the collective. If Lewis has any continued relevance for criticism it is that his exacting attention to the surface and voracious desire exterminate the obsolete provide a distinct vantage from which we can see how this crisis intrudes into literary form. But what cannot be avoided is that the unintended historical prescience upon which this relevance depends is the product of an ecocidal imagination, which sees increasing sootfall, London's "flabby skies," and vampiric

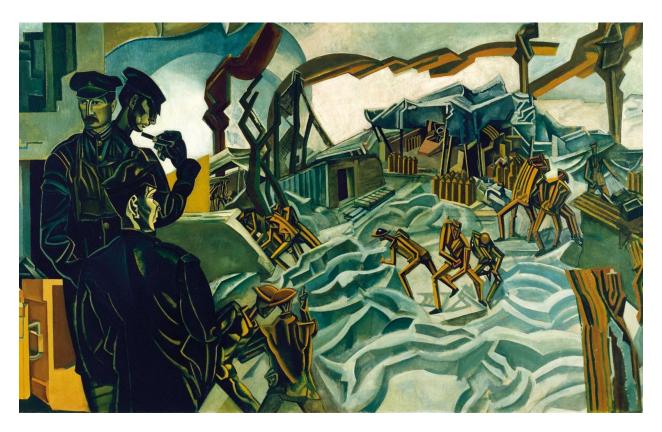smog clouds as the promising signs of a race renewed.

Figure 1, Wyndham Lewis, *A Battery Shelled*, Imperial War Museum, 1919.

CHAPTER 3

The Obsolescence of the Idea: Fiction, Non-Philosophy, and *The Secret Agent*

Up to this point, the avant-gardes have played a rather outsized role in our account of

modernism's aesthetics of obsolescence. As I have tried to show, this is due in no small part to

the fact that their direct confrontation with the shameful ineffectuality of art registers the effects

of obsolescence before it is even fully articulated within the walls of big business. By collapsing

the boundaries that distinguish art as sphere of contemplative experience separable from

collective life, the avant-gardes not only expose the commodity character of the work of art, but

shed light on the emergent processes of negation that structure the very appearance of the

commodity world of capitalism. Much remains to be said, however, about the place of fiction

within this longer arc of artistic development. While critics have readily come to laud the avant-

gardist uptake of obsolete objects as a radical attempt to marshal "the revolutionary energies that

appear in the 'outmoded,'" as Benjamin puts it in his essay on Surrealism, fiction has tended to

receive a more sober, conservational purpose (*Selected Writing, Vol. 2* 210). In *The Death of

Things*, to return to our earlier example, Sarah Wasserman suggests that fiction is in itself a

"special kind of archive," which dialectically preserves obsolete things from the accelerative

flow of commodity circulation by formalizing the process of their decay and disappearance

(Wasserman 68). In staging the ephemerality of the objects of our attachment, she claims, fiction

teaches us how to lose our world, and how to lose it well. Similarly, Joel Burges emphasizes

fiction's capacity to "make obsolescence itself legible" through its remediation of outmoded

things (Burges 46). According to Burges, the literary-critical attunement to the "obstinacy of the

obsolete" cultivates a flexible apprehension of our own historicity as products of a present that

too will end up as another layer in the historical sediment of modernity (132). For both critics, the fictional documentation of outdated things shakes us out of our habituation to the rhythms of market society by revealing our shared vulnerability to the historical crosscurrents that eventually render everything, and everyone, obsolete.

This chapter deviates from the thing-centric conception of fiction as "storage medium" (Wasserman 235) predominant in recent scholarship by turning to the works of Joseph Conrad. Conrad is indeed a conspicuously absent figure in all the available histories of the aesthetics of obsolescence, fitting into neither Mark Goble's account of avant-gardism's transformation into the post-industrial aesthetics of figures like Bernd and Hilla Becher, nor Wasserman and Burges's history of the collision course between modernist fiction and new media found in the work of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and China Miéville. Writing through the *fin de siècle* and into the 1920s, Conrad simply predates the "cultures of obsolescence" mapped out by each of these critical strains (Tischleder and Wasserman 10). Yet Conrad, I argue, is an essential figure for any such theorization of the aesthetics of obsolescence because his particular historical position between what Fredric Jameson calls the "structural breakdown of the older realisms" (*The Political Unconscious* 207) and the rise of high modernism and the culture industry provides a unique vantage point from which to reexamine fiction's entanglement with capital's nascent regime of obsolescence. Throughout his works, one finds representations of the uncanny aura of obsolete objects, as for instance in *Heart of Darkness*, when Marlowe arrives at the mouth of the Congo River only to find the empire's "decaying machinery" looking "as dead as the carcass of some animal" (*Heart of Darkness* 116). While such depictions might be useful additions to the literary-critical inventory of outdated things, here I want to argue that the value of Conrad's works to the aesthetics of obsolescence lies in their apprehension of the gap in

representation underlying the obsolete's auratic overhaul. Recall that for Günther Anders the codification of capitalism's processes of negation not only transforms the lifecycle of objects, but instantiates a breach in thought that Anders calls the "Promethean Gap," which leaves us "unable to conceive what we can construct; to mentally reproduce what we can produce; to realize the reality which we can bring into being" (*Burning Conscience* 12). Conrad's keen sense that the burgeoning totality of global capitalism had brought about the obsolescence of what, in a letter to Arnold Bennett, he called "dogmas of realism" leads him to confront this emergent gap in our historical consciousness as the defining problem of fictional representation (*Life and Letters, Vol. 1* 303).

Undoubtedly, many of Conrad's novels can be read as meditations on our cognitive maladaptation to modernity. *Nostromo*'s sprawling tale of revolution, *Lord Jim*'s heroic romance, and *Heart of Darkness*' "wild story of a journalist" (as Conrad once called it) all speak in their own way to the unassimilable elements of capital's global order (*Collected Letters, Vol. 2* 407). But as I will argue in this chapter, *The Secret Agent* stands out amongst these works because its fictional retelling of an actual attempt to sabotage this order directly dramatizes the insurmountable gap that separates our ideas from the very reality they help bring into being. The events of the novel are based on the "Greenwich Bomb Outrage" of 1894, a bungled plot to blow up London's Greenwich Observatory perpetrated by a member of the underground anarchist group, Club Autonomie. Conrad's novelization of this incident centers around Adolf Verloc, the novel's eponymous secret agent, and a cabal of would-be terrorists who laze around the shop he operates with his wife Winnie. Just as the sinking of the *Patna* serves as the absent center of *Lord Jim*, the unnarrated event at the heart of *The Secret Agent* is the tragic death of Stevie, Winnie's younger brother, who vaporizes himself when he accidentally detonates the bomb

given to him by Verloc to level the Greenwich Observatory. The sordid truth of this affair is slowly revealed through a cat-and-mouse game involving Verloc, the anarchists, Chief Inspector Heat, and the Assistant Commissioner of the Police, which culminates with Winnie killing Verloc and, eventually, herself. These events are all filtered through the unsparing irony of the novel's narrator, who heaps disdain upon nearly all of the characters involved, but reserves a special rancor for the revolutionaries. What makes Michaelis, Yundt, Ossipon, and the infernal Professor so uniquely irredeemable is that their radical rhetoric anemically shrouds the emptiness of all of their needless philosophizing—as the Professor himself describes it, the anarchists "talk, print, plot, and do nothing" (*The Secret Agent* 58).

Critics have naturally taken Conrad's sardonic portrayal of such fecklessness as evidence that *The Secret Agent* is a fundamentally conservative text, more interested in castigating those who would dare to overcome the violent contradictions of capitalist life than those who profit from them. Jameson, for instance, proclaims that *The Secret Agent* is one of Conrad's most "powerful counterrevolutionary tracts" (Jameson 268). In a notably acerbic essay on the novel that I will return to later on, Terry Eagleton similarly argues that in *The Secret Agent* Conrad's politics devolve into a "metaphysical conservatism," which is both "hostile to 'orthodox' bourgeois liberal doctrines yet dependent on the social order they help to sustain" (Eagleton 56, 61). Though these readings do help to bring out the intricacies of Conrad's own fraught relationship with the revolutionary movements of his day, their immediate apprehension with the novel's representation of left thought and praxis forecloses other ways of understanding its political ethos. In the effort to derive the substance of a "Conradian ideology" (Eagleton 56) that precipitates from the text's contradictions, they overlook that the novel's self-conscious staging of philosophical discourse puts the political and historical status of the idea at stake. Conrad

himself, in fact, emphasizes that his interest in the Greenwich bombing was first sparked by its obstinate defiance of every idea imputed upon it. His "Author's Note" describes the event as,

> a bloodstained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that thing could not be laid hold of mentally, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other. As to the outer wall of the Observatory it did not show as much as the faintest crack. (249)

For Conrad, the stark juxtaposition of the perpetrator's exploded body with the unscathed wall marks a limit to thought—neither philosophy nor the "perverse unreason" of madness are able to produce an idea that would give sense and coherence to the event. In the novel itself we indeed see a typological assortment of character according to their specific animating idea, each of which is shown to fail in the face of the ineffable real circumscribed by Stevie's dissipated flesh, the "whitewashed wall" that drives Winnie to her death, and the final lines of the newspaper article that reverberate at the text's end: "*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*" (190, 242). The wager of this chapter is that the idea itself remains the still unthought locus of *The Secret Agent*'s representation of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Focusing our attention on the idea's broken relation to the real allows us to pursue a new way of interpreting the novel's excoriation of the anarchists not as a fatalistic acquiescence to the reality of capitalist modernity, but as a radical critique of its historical enclosure.

In what follows, I draw out this critique by returning to the question of *The Secret Agent*'s generic composition, a question that has persistently harried critics in their attempt to

navigate the novel's conflicting ideological valences and somewhat enigmatic formal complexities. Whereas much recent scholarship on the novel has come to theorize it as Conrad's late return to the form of "dynamite fiction," I claim that reading *The Secret Agent* as a novel of ideas shows Conrad's disparaging treatment of the anarchists to be an ironic degeneration of the novel form back into the strictures of philosophical dialogue that brings the reified character of thought to the fore. Within this generic framework, the various kinds of inactivity, idle chatter, and fruitless philosophical debate that proliferate throughout the text can all be heard to speak to the idea's shameful implication in capital's process of self-valorization. To borrow a turn of phrase from François Laruelle, whose longstanding and still understudied project of non-philosophy will inform the final section of this chapter, I argue that Conrad's dramatization of the idea's monadic capture ultimately suggests that "philosophy is capital within or of thought" (*Introduction to Non-Marxism* 168). A former student of Louis Althusser's, Laruelle maintains that philosophy, like capital, is an "automatic subject," which authorizes its hegemony over other forms of thought by legitimating its own unique sufficiency to determine the real (*Capital, Vol. 1* 255). In staging the failure of ideas to cohere to the real, Conrad likewise shows philosophy to be routed through the logic of capitalism's subsumptive drive. Far from capitulating to capital's inevitable future, *The Secret Agent* induces the obsolescence of those ideas that render its fateful necessity and vindicate its everyday cruelties.

THE DYNAMITE NOVEL OF IDEAS

In a letter to Robert Cunninghame Graham sent shortly after the publication of the novel, Conrad remarks that his primary intention in writing *The Secret Agent* was to create a "new departure in *genre*" after spending two years working on his "largest canvas," *Nostromo* (*Life and Letters,*

Vol. 2 60, *The Secret Agent* 248). Part family tragedy, part detective fiction, part spy thriller, *The Secret Agent* is a generic experiment that gives the violence and intrigue of revolutionary politics the "ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject" (*LL 2* 60). The formal dissonance between these various registers has made *The Secret Agent* a rather confounding text to read, since the novel displaces the characteristic tensions of each of its components in a carousel of irresolution—as the Verloc family becomes increasingly entangled in the plot to bomb the observatory, the public melds into the private, the domestic collides with the political, and the radical transforms into the reactionary. In their attempt to iron out these disjunctions, critics have recently come to read *The Secret Agent* as a "dynamite novel," a subgenre springing from 19th century sensation fiction that depicts acts of anarchistic terror against the state (Mulry 73).[5] As Barbara Melchiori explains in her foundational study on the genre, the dynamite novel emerges in response to the Fenian dynamite campaigns in the 1880s and the upsurge in anarchist bombings on the continent that continued into the early 1900s, both of which struck a new "fear of explosions" in the public at large (Melchiori 7, 9). By focusing its conventions around the miniaturized explosive power of the dynamite stick, dynamite fiction scales political conflict down to a scope amenable to that of the novel form and, in so doing, demonstrates how political violence brings separate spheres of social life into gruesome contact with one another. Reading *The Secret Agent* in this way has helped critics position the variously disjointed elements of the novel in relation to a longer history of terroristic violence that runs up into the 21st century, centering specifically around the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Within this critical framework, the novel becomes something of a skeleton key with which to decipher the affective repercussions of what at the time seemed to be a new form of geopolitical conflict inaugurated by collapse of the World

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[5] Other notable dynamite novels include Henry James's *The Princess of Casamassima*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Dynamiter*, and G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

Trade Center.

Part of the reason 9/11 looms so large in recent scholarship on *The Secret Agent* lies in the fact that Conrad's novel became one of America's most widely cited and talked about artistic works in the immediate aftermath of the attacks (Shulevitz). The day after the event, for instance, the editors at *National Review* summed up the essential reality of the spectacle by comparing it to the plot of Conrad's novel: "The United States is hated because we are, indeed, powerful, rich, and good. Like the temples of Rome sacked by the barbarians, or the Greenwich Observatory that was the target of anarchists in Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent*, our national headquarters and totems excite the fear and wrath of those in the world who feel themselves shortchanged" (*National Review*). A few weeks later, columnist Roger Kimball doubled down on this unabashed jingoism in the same publication. Much to the chagrin of "anti-Western agitators like Edward Said," he writes, the mere existence of cultural documents like Conrad's testifies to the superiority of Western civilization, and are thus best read as expressions of our urgent need "to rehabilitate the word 'imperialism'" (Kimball). On the other side of the media sphere, *The Secret Agent* was quickly taken up as a cautionary tale against these hawkish tendencies of American political consciousness, since the novel's biting criticism of its characters demonstrates terrorism to be, "a futile activity, its violence doomed to rebound on the terrorists themselves," as Emily Eakin put it in *New York Times* (Eakin). Judith Shulevitz meanwhile took these conservative commentators to task for missing the simple fact that the novel shows Conrad to "distrust[] governments as much as he scorned those who sought as a matter of abstract principle to overthrow [them]" (Shulevitz). To read *The Secret Agent* in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11th, she suggests, demands that we read the novel for its basic humanistic impulse to celebrate the persistence of "the anarchic human heart" against the violence intrinsic to the cold

abstraction of modernity (Shulevitz).

As the immediate shock of the event dissipated, literary critics sought to more deeply historicize these public-facing acts of interpretation that mediated the real-time processing of the accelerated shifts in the American psyche that were then emergent alongside the revving up of the nation's war machine, the rapid development of the state's surveillance apparatus, and a consolidation of power in the government's executive branch. The result was a wave of studies about Conrad and terroristic violence from Sarah Cole, David Simpson, David Mulry, Michaela Bronstein, and many others, which turned Conrad into a major figure in the burgeoning field of Terrorism Studies. *The Secret Agent* becomes a particularly significant text in this field because its return to the form of the dynamite novel registers a distinct shift in the public conception of political violence around the turn of the 20th century. As Cole contends, "*The Secret Agent* charts an evolution from the anarchist moment, in all its Victorian detail (which the novel relishes), toward the full-fledged terrorist mode, a more general condition of existence extending into the future," which instantiates a new collective "image of modern violence as pure, endlessly suspended potential" (87, 109). By detailing this formal dimension to *The Secret Agent*, critics like Cole not only locate the fervid anxiety and paranoia of America's post-9/11 symptomatology within a longer prehistory of terroristic violence, but show these symptoms to stem from the same hermeneutic difficulty animating the text itself, that is, the difficulty of producing meaning out of explosions.

Yet with the waning of the tensions characteristic of the Bush era and the introduction of an altogether new set of problems in the third decade of the 21st century (the COVID-19 pandemic, return of war to Europe, ecological collapse, etc.) this critical paradigm has lost much of its supposed timeliness. "Conrad's prophetic powers," as James Wood dubbed them in *The*

Guardian, simply seem less prescient twenty years after the attacks (Wood). While these

historical developments have led to a decline in the both the mainstream and scholarly popularity

of *The Secret Agent*, they also make the novel available once again for reinterpretation precisely

because we no longer feel the need to insist upon the text's presentist value as a heuristic for 21st

century living. More specifically, they enable a better reading of one of the distinguishing

features of *The Secret Agent*, one that is inimical to the tropological conventions of the dynamite

novel, namely, the utter passivity of its do-nothing terrorists. In his study of the genre, Mulry

writes that dynamite fiction is "uniformly curious about the nature of asymmetrical warfare,

where the guerrilla anarchist-revolutionaries use ingenuity (and of the wonders of science) to

give them the edge against the conventional power advantages of institutional and conventional

military force" (Mulry 81). I want to show, however, that *The Secret Agent* is far less concerned

with this scene of revolutionary action taking place at the bleeding edge of technological

innovation than it is with the placid circulation of ideas that bring about a situation of

revolutionary inaction.

Throughout the novel, Conrad goes to great lengths to typologize each of the characters

according to a specific idea that captures their obsession, but the radical zeal of Michaelis,

Yundt, the Professor, and Vladimir incites his lengthiest reflections on the idea as such.

Typically, critics have treated the interpretation of the revolutionaries' monomaniacal fixations

as its own kind of detective work, tracking down the echoes of Bakunin in Yundt, a hidden

Proudhonism in Michaelis, or an off-hand reference to underground anarchist magazines like

Freiheit that became popular in the late 19th century.[6] This historicizing framework is especially

effective because it calls the bluff Conrad frequently makes throughout his letters and in his

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[6] Readings of this sort can be found in Norman Sherry's inventory of characters in *Conrad's Western World*, or
more recently, in Mulry's similar itemization of the revolutionaries in *Joseph Conrad Amongst the Anarchists*.

"Author's Note" that he lacks familiarity with radical politics and in fact had "no idea to consider Anarchism politically" when writing *The Secret Agent* (*LL, V2* 37). But in trying to fill in the historical context of the novel that Conrad represses, this paradigm also overlooks the textual dynamic of the idea itself. Reading the novel of ideas as part of *The Secret* Agent's complex generic matrix, or to see the novel as, to coin a somewhat unwieldy turn of phrase, a "dynamite novel of ideas," allows us to see how the dialogic profusion of these philosophical positions throughout the text renders the idea as both "an object of representation and as the dominant in structuring the images of characters," as Bakhtin describes it in his reflections on the genre (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 23). Rather than construing the revolutionaries simply as archetypal stand-ins for specific ideological formations, this approach attunes us to the centrality of the idea to the novel's formal makeup and its predominance over the formation of character. It will show that the idea maintains an inhuman autonomy that is irreducible to ideological content, which exerts its own unique pressure on the structure of the novel as a whole.

Early on in the text, the revolutionaries are introduced by way of a monologue that brings out this facet of the idea. Chapter 3 opens with Michaelis, the "ticket-of-leave apostle," trapping the anarchists and reader alike in a pseudo-Marxist ramble:

> . . . All idealization makes life poorer. To beautify it is to take away its character of complexity—it is to destroy it. Leave that to the moralists, my boy. History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production—by the force of economic conditions. (*SA* 33)

The ellipsis that starts the chapter spares the reader from what can be assumed to be a lengthy preamble full of philosophical bloviating that has brought the rest of his compatriots to a state of

total agitation. The closing remarks that are left in the text provide a summary outline of his philosophy as a crude economism resistant to all idealizing conjecture, playing directly off of Marx's famous contention in "The Eighteenth Brumaire" that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" ("The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" 10). Importantly, it is only after articulating this doctrine that Michaelis's disembodied voice gains corporeal form. Once he has finished emphasizing the importance of his lessons to the rest of the revolutionaries, the narrator notes that Michaelis's ideas were pushed out with "a voice that wheezed as if deadened and oppressed by the layer of fat on his chest" (*SA* 34). An image of his whole bodily form eventually secretes from this suffocating voice entombed in his flesh: "He had come out of a highly hygienic prison round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semi-transparent complexion, as though for fifteen years the servants of an outraged society had made a point of stuffing him with fattening foods in a damp and lightless cellar" (*SA* 34). In keeping with Bakhtin's notion that the idea provides the principle for the structuration of character, Michaelis's materialist musings here embody themselves in his very form. As the narrator will troublingly continue to stress throughout the rest of the novel, Michaelis's most noticeable characteristic is his obesity, which serves both as an implicit indictment of his hypocritical excesses and an exaggerated figuration of the philosophical bloat distending the text. The whole process of his grotesque embodiment shows Michaelis not to be a "free and independent" character in his own right, but the fleshly excrescence of the idea that speaks through him (51).

His conversational partner, Yundt, takes his shape in similar fashion. Whereas Michaelis stands in for the pipe-dreaming Marxist intellectual, Yundt is a "veteran of dynamite wars,"

whose démodé anarchism sees clandestine violence as a cleansing panacea for the everyday violence of capitalist modernity (38). Condemning what he perceives as Michaelis's pessimistic surrender to the natural unfolding of history, Yundt declares that he has,

> always dreamed . . . of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity. (34)

Yundt's is a politics of creative destruction, built upon individual acts of self-sacrificing heroism that bring about a new world through the remorseless obliteration of the old. In contrast to Michaelis's massive frame, however, Yundt is withering away, his corpse-like body manifesting the historical anachronism of this political imaginary. As the narrator goes on to detail, Yundt speaks with a "dried throat and toothless gums" that sputter out words in a near incomprehensible garble, "constantly catching the top of his tongue between his lips at every second word as if though he were chewing it angrily" (34, 37). He seemingly survives off the unrealized prerogative of his anarchism by masticating the idea in this way, a quirk further denoted by the "extraordinary expression of underhanded malevolence surviv[ing] in his extinguished eyes" that gives him the look of a "moribund murderer summoning all his remaining strength for a last stab" (34). In Yundt, the idea of revolutionary anarchism lives out a body to the point of such living death, lingering on even after the conditions for its realization have been cancelled out by the capitalism's inevitable future.

Despite their grandiose declaration of values, it quickly becomes clear that there is hardly any dialogue actually occurring between these two. At the charge of pessimism, Michaelis's

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rhapsodizing sputters out and he turns inward in a frustrated huff:

> Michaelis pursued his idea—*the* idea of his solitary reclusion—the thought vouchsafed to his captivity and growing like a faith revealed in visions. He talked to himself, indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers, indifferent indeed to their presence, from the habit he had acquired of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell, in the sepulchral silence of the great blind pile of bricks near a river, sinister and ugly like a colossal mortuary for the socially drowned. (36)

Yundt's shortchanging of Michaelis's philosophical pretense here clarifies the actual status of the idea for the text at large. Like Michaelis's cell, the idea becomes its own monadic prison, an *idée fixe*, which submits all other thought to its singular preoccupation. It thereby takes on the added quality of a devotional object, a resonance that the narrator will frequently call upon in order to condemn Michaelis's materialism as little more than the dreadful theology of a "hermit of visions in the desert of a penitentiary" (40). Yet what draws the most ire from the narrator is the indifferent loquacity of this article of faith—the idea continues to speak through character in a torrent that is entirely unconcerned with any audience or listener. For Michaelis, the very presence of other voices even becomes a threat to the idea's further elaboration, such that the "mere fact of hearing another voice disconcert[s] him painfully, confusing his thoughts at once" (36). The sole aim of the idea is to drown out these other voices that interfere with its logorrheic self-articulation, splitting characters off into so many siloed echo chambers.

This verbosity, I argue, complicates the usual conception of the anarchists' inaction as a fatalistic depiction of the depleted possibilities of revolutionary politics. In her account of their impassivity, Mi Jeong Lee writes that, "Conrad's anarchists are knitted too closely into the capitalist system to which they purport to plot against" and therefore "the lack of action that

characterizes Conrad's anarchists—their failure to bomb anything—is indicative of their inseparability from that rotten society itself" (Lee 7). Though the novel's fiercely sardonic portrayal of the anarchists does suggest a degree of complicity in the system they claim to despise, the strictly ideological conception of their impassivity glosses over Conrad's emphasis on the idea's own constriction of narrative. In Michaelis and Yundt, the idea retreats into an indifferent loquacity that insulates them from any dialogic contact with their outside, inverting what Bakhtin calls the "inter-individual and intersubjective" expression of ideas he finds in Dostoevsky (*PDP* 88). For Bakhtin, the polyphonic resonance of the novel's voices opens the idea up to a living relationship with the world, where it shatters its reified form and attains a state of "unfinalizability" (63). By contrast, Michaelis and Yundt's failed attempt at philosophical discourse show the idea to function less like the transparent pane of dialogic exchange than a conceptual infestation that allows for no activity other than its further propagation. The anarchists' lack of action is thus best read not as a direct expression of Conrad's conservative politics, but, as I will expand upon in the next section, one part of his larger formal interruption of the novel of ideas' dialogic mechanism. Reading *The Secret Agent* within the generic framework of the novel of ideas in this way lets us to slip out of the historicist straitjacket that has come to bind the novel to the post-9/11 moment and hone our attention to the ways that ideas themselves shape the novel's antagonisms. Ultimately, this approach will show that the politics of the novel is not to be found at the level of its ideological content, but in the non-cohesion of these ideas to each other and to their world.

THE "MAN OF NO IDEAS"

In order to fully broach the problem of *The Secret Agent*'s politics, it is first necessary to further

distinguish exactly how Conrad's "departure in genre" formally conjugates itself with the novel of ideas. *The Secret Agent* lends itself to so many different readings—for example, as a feminist text, reactionary proselytizing, or subversive tract—because it short-circuits the basic interpretive patterning of the genre. In her *Theory of the Gimmick*, Sianne Ngai explains that in modelling itself after the strictures of philosophical dialogue and predication, the novel of ideas carries out a devolution of the novel form back to its earlier historical configurations. The "personified abstractions" of allegory, the narrator's direct speech, and similarly direct speech by character are all, she emphasizes, techniques "significantly associated with didactic impulses in the novel in its earliest stages, when the genre was still difficult to fully separate from romance and history" (Ngai 124). Importantly for Ngai, the anachronistic re-infiltration of these features back into the novel form has a rebound effect on its interpretive protocol. Building on Wayne Booth's conception of novelistic irony, she argues that the formal retrogression of the novel of ideas results in an "undertheorized mode of irony as difficult to codify as the genre itself . . . novels alert the reader to the possibility that their ideas officially presented for reflection are specious, precisely in order to redirect the reader's focus to a conversation with the implied author, 'conducted' 'behind the main character's back'" (118, 124). In the novel of ideas, that is to say, we hear the idea twice: first as the diegetic locution of the idea, and second as the ironic utterance of the implied author. For Ngai, the novel of ideas is thus defined by its interpretive "bait-and-switch," whereby the heightened cognition staged in the open discussion of ideas serves as smokescreen for tête-à-tête between the reader and the implied author (124). Every expression of the idea gives us, to quote Booth, "*the intellectual pleasure of hearing at least two voices talking at once, one of them betraying itself to the other*" ("Irony and Pity Once Again: 'Thaïs' Revisited" 338).

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The Secret Agent shares many of the features of the novel of ideas that Ngai and Booth name—it is inundated with expressly stated philosophies, figures like Michaelis and Yundt flatten out into allegorical abstractions, and its severe treatment of character suggests a didactic through line to the narrative. Yet what makes *The Secret Agent* a special case is its equivocality. The didacticism inferred by its biting irony never resolves itself into decisive judgment because the novel disrupts this "conversation" held between the reader and the implied author. Conrad does this by manipulating two integral nodes in the hermeneutic movement that produces the "intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole" given in the image of the implied author: the narrator and the hero (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 73). The narrator, for its part, openly casts aspersions throughout *The Secret Agent*, but its scorn primarily consists of a sardonic replication of a character's animating idea. For instance, when Michaelis hears Yundt's accusation that he is a pessimist, the narrator slips into free indirect discourse to emphasize Michaelis's unshakeable attachment to his philosophy:

> He a pessimist! Preposterous! He cried out that the charge was outrageous. He was so far from pessimism that he saw already the end of all private property coming along logically, unavoidably by the mere development of its inherent viciousness. The possessors of property had not only to face the awakened proletariat, but they had also to fight amongst themselves. Yes. Struggle, warfare was the condition of private ownership. It was fatal. Ah! (*SA* 35)

Shortly thereafter, the narrator similarly introduces Ossipon by mimicking his preoccupation with the phrenological race-science of Cesare Lombroso, observing that "A bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mould of the negro type. His almond-shaped eyes leered languidly over the high check-

bones" (35). Like an ideological chameleon, the narrator inhabits these philosophical attachments permeating the novel through an ironic redoubling that careens through different narrative modes, folding ideas in on themselves in order to highlight their emptiness. By remaining in such ideological camouflage, the narrator elides any Archimedean point where ideas might been seen in relation to an underlying posited truth.

Gleaning the gist of the conversation with the implied author in *The Secret Agent* is made all the more difficult by the fact that the ostensible hero of the novel, Verloc, is a fool. Though the narrative shifts its focalization throughout, Verloc is the hinge upon which the entire edifice of the text depends: his laziness prompts Vladimir to drum up his hare-brained plot to bomb the observatory, his spinelessness leads to Stevie's dreadful death, and his callousness drives Winnie to eventually plunge a carving knife into his chest. Like the rest of the anarchists, Verloc is entirely bereft of heroic virtue. But Verloc differs from the likes of Michaelis and Yundt insofar as he lacks any characteristic idea that would situate him within the ideological coordinates of the text. Whereas for Bakhtin, "the hero in Dostoevsky is a man of the idea," the hero at the center of *The Secret Agent* is, as Ossipon designates him to the Professor, a "man of no ideas" (*PDP* 85, *SA* 60). By placing a person of such profound stupidity in the structural position of the hero, Conrad obtrudes against the meaning-making dynamic of the novel of ideas. Recall that in Bakhtin's understanding of the form, the struggle of the hero is fundamentally the "struggle against a *reification* of man, of human relations, of all human values under the conditions of capitalism" (*PDP* 62, italics original). The "*active broadening*" of the hero's consciousness that occurs through their dialogic intercalation with other autonomous consciousnesses unravels the finality of their objectification under capitalism (62). Verloc, however, is constitutionally incapable of such expansion of being. The only idea he is able to stick to is his paradoxical

"philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort," a negative relation to the idea that staves off the excessive effort required of any true believer (*SA* 10). Since his basic relationship to the larger social totality is one of such "fanatical inertness," he comes to function as a null point in the dialogic field of the novel, his stupidity foregrounding the complete disconnection between ideas and the reality they purport to describe (10). Far from grounding the conversation between reader and implied author, Verloc heightens the equivocality of the novel to such an extent that the idea is let free to speak its self-valorizing, which is to say capitalist, imperative.

The events of the novel are set in motion when Vladimir tries to use this man of no ideas to bring his idea into reality. Vladimir does not present his plan as a tactical scenario typical of the dynamite novel, which would involve codified steps, procedures, organized personnel, and contingency plans. Instead, Vladimir relates the plot to bomb the Greenwich observatory as a bestowal of philosophical principle, disseminating his idea through the functionary under his command. Growing tired of Verloc's excuses for his laziness, he tells Verloc straightforwardly: "This is the psychological moment to set your friends to work. I have called you here to develop to you my idea" (24). This peculiar formulation distorts the usual discursive scene wherein two speakers might seek to "develop" thought through dialogic interaction and rapport. For Vladimir, the development of his "philosophy of bomb throwing" instead takes place as a kind of viral replication, whereby the idea encodes itself into another subject and occupies their voice (*SA* 26). Being devoid of any idea of his own, Verloc serves as a perfect vector through which to spread the idea and bring about its more general public infection. Indeed, Verloc is himself noted to be "like the Influenza," as his only use to his tyrannical superiors is as a travelling orator spreading ideas at "open-air meetings and at workmen's assembles in large halls" (6, 19). And yet, the

virological metaphor divulges that there is there is no "development" to the idea occurring in their exchange at all—it merely copies itself in an effort to reshape everyone and everything in its image. The grammar of philosophical discourse Vladimir deploys only thinly veils his idea's domineering impulse to subsume ever wider swathes of reality under its mandate.

From the very start, however, Verloc undercuts this "plot" that Vladimir sets up for the rest of the narrative, in which the bombing of the Greenwich Observatory would bring about the actualization of his philosophy (26). While Vladimir soliloquizes about the significance of his idea to destroy the "sacrosanct fetish" of science, often for pages on end, Verloc sits befuddled in front of him, unable to fully cognize what he is hearing. "Verloc's immobility by the side of the armchair," it is mentioned, "resembled a state of collapsed coma—a sort of passive insensibility interrupted by slight convulsive starts, such as may be observed in the domestic dog having a nightmare on the hearthrug" (27). At the first test of his principles, the hero of this novel of ideas collapses into a catatonic state, decomposing the form's affectation of argument into a one-sided affair (27). Conrad, however, leverages Verloc's impassivity to exacerbate the self-interested loquacity of Vladimir's idea. With no dialogic counterpart, Vladimir eventually talks his philosophy up into a total farce: "But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes" (27). Vladimir can come to enjoy the absurdity of his "philosophy of bomb throwing" because it is purely an exercise of the philosophical faculty divorced from the thorny question of its concrete mediation. As Vladimir makes clear, he provides the "higher philosophy," while Verloc must solve its "practical application" (27). In its catatonic neutrality, Verloc's silence repels the Vladimir's "philosophy of bomb throwing" back onto itself, such that it reveals this implicitly

hierarchical structure to its pronouncement. Verloc impassively exposes this philosophy's pretension to bring about a new reality through the annihilation of science to be a farcical justification for the almost playful rehearsal of its dominion over other subjects (25).

In provoking this imperiousness with respect to the idea, the dialogic nullity of the man of no ideas at the center of *The Secret Agent* magnifies the narrator's ironic estrangement of the philosophical discourse staged throughout, throwing what Charlotte Jones calls the "recalcitrance of the real" into sharp relief (Jones 79). Vladimir, the narrator stresses,

> developed his idea from on high, with scorn and condescension, displaying at the same
> time an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the
> revolutionary world which filled the silent Mr Verloc with inward consternation. He
> confounded causes with effects more than was excusable . . . assumed organization where
> in the nature of things it could not exist; spoke of the social revolutionary party one
> moment as of a perfectly disciplined army, where the word of chiefs was supreme, and at
> another as if it had been the loosest association of desperate brigands that ever camped in
> a mountain gorge. (*SA* 24)

The problem with Vladimir's idea as it is conveyed here is not simply that it is incorrect, but that it speaks to a world of its own design. In his total misjudgment of the constitutive antagonisms of his political situation, Vladimir gives expression to the gap between ideas and the real that will only continue to widen as the plot to bomb the Greenwich Observatory unfolds. To borrow a term from Michael Levenson, the absurdity of his "philosophy of bomb-throwing" speaks to a fundamental "groundlessness of values" in *The Secret Agent*, which makes every idea appear as a free-floating monad suspended over an abyss (Levenson 5). Whatever their differences in ideology, Michaelis, Yundt, Vladimir and all the rest speak with philosophical authority to a real

that resists all of their philosophizing. The conversation between the reader and implied author that for Ngai and Booth provides the interpretive basis for the novel of ideas thus loses its footing, as the novel's equally levelling irony shows each idea to be an absurd misapprehension of the real.

As a novel of ideas, then, *The Secret Agent* sets itself up for failure. The didacticism implicit in its presentation of philosophical discourse falls in to an all-encompassing equivocality that closes off any exit from the cruelties of the world it represents. This is why Eagleton, in his scathing assessment of the novel as Conrad's naturalist hangover, argues that *The Secret Agent* puts itself into "stalemate" (Eagleton 60). According to Eagleton, each pivot between the novel's wide array of ideologies is part of a series of "mutually cancelling moves," which neutralizes every attempt to move beyond the "'normative' assumptions of the bourgeois world" (61). What is missing from the novel, he declares, is a "court of moral appeal" where its equivocal presentation of values can be placed on firmer ground and arbitrated once and for all (62). Contra Eagleton, I claim that the text's equivocality is not a symptom of Conrad's underlying "'metaphysical' conservatism," but a more deliberate act of formal subterfuge that exposes the isomorphism between philosophy and capitalism (56). In refusing to ground the conversation between reader and implied author within any such "court of moral appeal," Conrad illuminates the gap between ideas and the real that draws out philosophy's relentless pursuit of its own hegemony over other forms of thought. To return to Laruelle's formula, "philosophy is capital within or of thought" because it, like capitalism, stakes an "authoritarian claim" to the real that sanctions its subordination of all other thought to its specific procedure (*INM* 165, 167). In Vladimir's plot to bring about a "universal repressive legislation," we see that the authority of philosophy provides him with just such a claim (*SA* 24). By accentuating the real's recalcitrance

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from the idea's loquacious subsumption of the novel's diegetic space, Conrad distorts the novel

of ideas to show, as Bakhtin writes of Dostoevsky, that the "reifying devaluation of man . . .

permeate[s] into all the pores of contemporary life, and even into the very foundations of human

thinking" (*PDP* 62). Thus, what appears on its surface to be a text about anarchist insurgency

against the state is, at bottom, a novel about the insurrection of fiction against philosophy. In

what follows, I turn to Laruelle's project of non-philosophy in order to give full detail to this

antinomy. While bearing in mind Laruelle's own hesitancy with non-philosophy's cross-

disciplinary expansion, I want to suggest that his understanding of fiction's insubordination of

philosophical procedure provides a way to read *The Secret Agent*'s merciless ending as Conrad's

decomposition of the "thought-world" of capitalism (*INM* 159).

FICTION & NON-PHILOSOPHY

In 1988, the *Collège international de philosophie* organized a debate between Laruelle and

Jacques Derrida that has since come to be recognized as the site of a minor philosophical

"controversy." The scandal came early on in their discussion when, after Laruelle wrapped up his

opening remarks on non-philosophy, Derrida accused his opponent of practicing a form of

"philosophical terror" (*The Non-Philosophy Project* 74). Throughout his retort, Derrida brings up

a number of concerns with non-philosophy, which range from his confusion with Laruelle's

conception of science to his disagreements with the non-philosophical characterization of Kant's

transcendental philosophy. Yet what evokes the most consternation from Derrida is Laruelle's

understanding of philosophy's relationship, or lack thereof, with the real. Derrida explains to

Laruelle: "You oppose reality to a number of things; you oppose it to the totality—it is not the

whole, beings as a whole—and you also stressed its distinction from effectivity and possibility"

(76). But, he goes on to note, what he finds "more surprising is when you oppose reality, on the other hand, to philosophy" (76). For Derrida, Laruelle's claim that philosophy is a discourse of auto-legitimation routed through an "authoritarian claim" to the real is intolerable. It suggests that Laruelle's own project of non-philosophy is exempt from this charge, meaning that Laruelle, like the anarchists of *The Secret Agent*, hypocritically critiques the very system he helps perpetuate. Fundamentally, Derrida thus contends, there is a "violence" in Laruelle's reduction of the plurality of philosophical discourses to a singular practice of domination (80). Having lost patience with Laruelle's outright refusal to participate collegially in "philosophical society," Derrida ends his remarks by asking Laruelle how he could possibly be expected to understand non-philosophy as anything other than a "gesture tantamount to socio-philosophical war" given such discourtesy (80).

In response, Laruelle clarifies that Derrida has raised an "absolutely standard, normal, common objection" to the practice of non-philosophy (87). Throughout the rest of their exchange, Laruelle will attempt to disabuse Derrida of his symptomatic acrimony by clarifying some of the central concerns of his project. According to Laruelle, Derrida construes non-philosophy as a terror campaign because he attempts to grasp the non-philosophical notion of the "philosophical decision" while his thinking still remains ensnared within the "medium of philosophy" (87). The decision is indeed the crux of Laruelle's conception of philosophical procedure, and is best understood in juxtaposition to the definitions of philosophy offered up by other thinkers of his generation. If for Derrida philosophy is a "self-consciousness of the play of a certain kind of writing," to quote Richard Rorty, and for Deleuze a production of concepts, for Laruelle philosophy is a decision that divides the real (Rorty 113). The philosophical decision rests upon an amphibology, whereby philosophy produces a representation of the real (Being, the

All, the Absolute, etc.) which it then consecrates as constitutive of the real itself (*Philosophy and Non-Philosophy* 10). Put simply, philosophy "decides" what the real is by splitting it into a separable term. Laruelle's concern is that the decisional structure of philosophy carries with it a duplicitous presupposition of the sufficiency of philosophy to engage in any such reciprocal transaction with the real, a "faith" in what he calls the "Principle of Sufficient Philosophy" (*PNP* 12). For Laruelle, philosophical discourse is oriented not toward the human, truth, value, or any other ideal, but the production and reproduction of this sufficiency. The Principle of Sufficient Philosophy validates philosophy's sovereign authority over the real via the decision, and thus too, "ensures philosophy's domination of all regional disciplines and sciences" (*From Decision to Heresy* 287). The goal of non-philosophy, by contrast, is to cultivate a form of thought that proceeds according to (or from the perspective of) the real, understood this time as a radical immanence "anterior" to all philosophical representation (*PNP* 23).

The complicity between philosophy and capital that Laruelle discovers is grounded within the relationship of domination sustained by philosophical sufficiency. Just as "the driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is the self-valorization of capital," the driving motive of philosophical production is the self-valorization of philosophy (*Capital, Vol. 1* 449). Through the decision, philosophy entrepreneurially pursues an exchange relation with the real, which establishes the convertibility between its concepts and their determining instance. Now, Laruelle makes clear that his argument is not intended to construe philosophy as a "simple capitalist phenomenon in the historical and social sense of the word," as such a claim would restrict itself to the problem of philosophy's appropriation under capitalism while leaving philosophy's own procedures intact (*FDH* 262). Laruelle instead emphasizes that "philosophy is the capital-form *in* thought" because it encodes the dynamic of capital's valorization within its

circulation of concepts under the Principle of Sufficient Philosophy (*FDH* 261, emphasis added). Philosophy and capitalism symmetrically conjoin in a "philosophico-capitalist regime," which exercises its hegemony over thought by subjecting other forms of knowledge production to capitalism's system of exchange (*INM* 4). Once fused together, this regime gives shape to a "thought-world" or "capital-world," an image of the real that englobes thought and subjects it to the normative economy of philosophical predication and consensus (17). Like the global market itself, the thought-world of philo-capital effaces its outside, forcing a perspective on the real that is skewed by a philosophical astigmatism. Ultimately, Derrida accuses Laruelle of terrorism because non-philosophy is a direct attempt at destabilizing this regime so that a new experience of the real, dispelled of philosophy's "hallucinations," might become possible (*PNP* 22).

The name Laruelle gives to the distinct creative practice of non-philosophical thought that brings about this experience is "fiction." By fiction, Laruelle does not strictly mean the mode of novelistic discourse that we typically associate with the word. Fiction is for Laruelle a way of conjugating philosophy's concepts with other "genres" of thought that weakens the preeminence philosophy enjoys by virtue of its decisional structure (*Photo-Fiction: a Non-Standard Aesthetics* 6). Non-philosophy, Laruelle clarifies, is itself an "an activity of radical fiction, of creation of sense, and of a sense freed from its inscriptions in the objects, texts, representations, blendings of the 'effective' world" (*PNP* 91). "Philo-fiction," his name for the primary generic form of non-philosophy, treats philosophy as a "sterile," "inert," or "raw" material, terms which all suggest a neutralization of the implicit hierarchical ordering concepts carry with them by virtue of the Principle of Sufficient Philosophy (*PNP* 20, *Biography of Ordinary Man* 202). Laruelle's aim is to bring this neutralizing procedure to bear upon the thinking of art, since philosophy, via aesthetics, straightforwardly reveals itself as a discourse of

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mastery in its claim to speak the truths only mutely expressed by art itself. "Aesthetics," he writes, "was always a carbon copy of art in philosophy and subsequently art was always understood as a deficient modality of philosophy" (*Photo-Fiction* 4). Laruelle thus proposes the creation of a multiplicity of different fictions ("art-fiction," "photo-fiction," "music-fiction," "poetry-fiction," "painting-fiction," etc.) each of which maintains the autonomy of its medium by appropriating philosophical material only under the condition that the Principle of Sufficient Philosophy is suspended (*Photo-Fiction* 10, *PNP* 31).[7] By depriving philosophy of its sufficiency to determine the real in this way, fiction brings about what Laruelle has recently come to describe as the "degrowth" of philosophy, a deliberate impoverishment of the "marketplace" of concepts, positions, and arguments sustaining its image of the real (*The Last Humanity* 41, *FDH* 262). In its autonomy from philosophy's universal mediation of knowledge, fiction unfastens the relations of exchange that bind this thought-world together and ensure its hegemony over other forms of thought.

My intention in providing this cursory overview of Laruelle's work is not to suggest, of course, that Conrad is himself practicing non-philosophy or that *The Secret Agent* is a non-

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[7] Here, it is important to note the rather telling absence of something like "literature-fiction," "novel-fiction," or even "fiction-fiction" from this list. Despite his frequent recourse to the powers of fiction, Laruelle never explicitly clarifies the relationship between non-philosophy and literature, or what we might call "actually existing fiction." Most often, practitioners of non-philosophy try to get around this problem by claiming that Laruelle's use of the word fiction refers primarily to the philosophical school of "fictionalism" associated with Hans Vaihinger (*FDH* 30). This ignores the simple fact that Laruelle frequently alludes to literature in his discussion of non-philosophy's fictions, though in a notably ambivalent way. At times, he describes non-philosophy as producing "literary" effects within thought, but at others, literature appears as a functionary of deconstruction, or even worse, as a debased form of philosophy itself (*PNP* 163). For example, in *Photo-Fiction* Laruelle writes that, "[f]ar from being a deficient, imaginative, and literary form of writing, fiction in its own way becomes a complex art, an art of interweaving disciplines as if imagination would acquire a more superior dimension of complexity by practicing an already existing art, in its form, material, and effects" (*Photo-Fiction* 26). Within this dismissive gesture we catch a glimpse of philosophy's own domineering mien; a rather unsettling effect in the otherwise "democratic" approach to thought called non-philosophy (*The Non-Philosophy Project* 85). Perhaps it is because literature itself veers rather closely to non-philosophy's under-determination of philosophy that Laruelle must condemn it as a minor form of philosophical reflection in this way. Whatever the case may be, my aim in forcing Laruelle's non-philosophy onto the terrain of literary criticism—a domain of knowledge independent from philosophy and non-philosophy alike—is to provoke this ambiguity in Laruelle's use of the term fiction and decide in favor of literature's autonomy.

philosophical text. Saying so would do injustice to the specificities of the novel and non-

philosophy alike. Rather, I want to argue that there remains a still untheorized homology

between modernism and Laruelle's non-philosophy and that makes his project a useful model for

evaluating *The Secret Agent*'s formal attentiveness to the philosophical idea. Laruelle himself, in

fact, consistently likens non-philosophy to Cubism throughout his work, indicating that

modernism provides the prototypical basis for the entirety of the non-philosophical project.[8] This

comparison is perhaps best evidenced by his defense of the "art-medium" as the font of its own

autonomous fictional discourse, which resonates directly with Clement Greenberg's conception

of modernism as the return of the work to the medium-specificity of its surface (*Photo-Fiction*

26). Greenberg writes, for instance, that,

> "[t]he essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a
>
> discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to
>
> entrench it more firmly in its area of competence . . . What had to be exhibited was not
>
> only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was
>
> unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own
>
> operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself" (Greenberg 6).

Laruelle's sterilization of standard philosophical procedure intends to ensure the right of each

medium to its self-determination in just the same way. In his terms, fiction provides a resource

for "retain[ing] their autonomy and consistency," so that they can articulate their own effects

without philosophy overwriting them (*Photo-Fiction* 26). Non-philosophy might thus be

considered as a kind of modernism within thought, which deposes the "unitary" paradigm of

philosophical representation in favor of medium-specific zones of knowledge each capable of

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[8] See *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy* 18, *Photo-Fiction: a Non-Standard Aesthetics* 13.

grounding their specific operations and procedures (*PNP* 3).

It is within this vein that Laruelle's non-philosophy helps to sharpen the anti-capitalist edge of Ngai's critique of the novel of ideas. Ngai builds her account of the genre's anachronism on the basis of Adorno's remark that "Ideas that are treated, depicted, or deliberately advanced by a work of art are not its ideas but materials—even the 'poetic ideas' whose hazy designations were intended to divest the program of its coarse materiality" (*Mahler* 3, qtd in Ngai 112). According to Ngai, Adorno directs our attention to the reification of ideas that occurs as they are shuttled from philosophy into the work of art. As she puts it, once ideas make their way into the work they "take[] the form of a 'transportable intellectual unit,' a *déjà-là*, or self-standing proposition," which is to say, gimmicky "readymades" that stick out when enframed within the novel's generic confines (Ngai 106). Non-philosophy's treatment of philosophical material suggests, however, that the novel of ideas need not simply fall prey to capitalist gimmickry in its reification of ideas. By reducing ideas to materials in the way Adorno details, the novel of ideas might also deprive philosophy of its sufficiency, and thus too, dispossess itself of the thought-world that emerges from its conceptual economy. My contention is that Conrad's rendering of the loquacity of philosophical discourse carries out just such a dispossession. In staging the disastrous incapacity of ideas to relate to the real he marks a limit to philosophy's world, showing it to be fueled by the same compulsion to mastery as capital.

Nowhere does this become clearer than in the final chapter of *The Secret Agent*, wherein the Professor stumbles out into the street to find a multitude unmoved by the grand enterprise of his idea. Throughout novel, the Professor distances himself from the rest of the anarchists because they remain stuck in a philosophical torpor that flies in the face of his own faux-Nietzschean triumphalism. His feverish pursuit of his own *idée fixe*, the "perfect detonator," is

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designed to blast all such idealism, since, in his words, "[t]he condemned social order has not been built up on paper and ink, and I don't fancy that a combination of paper and ink will ever put an end to it" (54). Yet in the last lines of the text, Conrad shows the Professor's insistence upon the "force" of his character to be a farcical cover for the fact that he is simply an ideologue more beholden to philosophy than anyone in the novel:

> And the incorruptible Professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (246)

Conrad himself recognized that in leaving the reader with such a disdainful image he risked reducing the entirety of the novel to a parody of radical politics, and many critics, like Eagleton, have readily taken to this reading.[9] But what is so often missed in this passage is that the idea itself provides the inflection point for the entire scene. As the narrator pulls our perception further away from the Professor and out into street, the idea remains the center of focus, getting smaller and slighter while the text falls into a disjointed staccato. The effect is a general diminution of the idea, whereby it takes on the reified character of the various tchotchkes and bric-a-brac lining the shelves of Verloc's shop that Conrad describes in the very first page of the novel. The images of death and destruction the Professor invokes reveal themselves as fanciful

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[9] In a letter to Graham, Conrad speaks to this awareness when he justifies his treatment of the anarchists: "But I don't think I've been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries,-they are shams. And as regards the Professor, I did not intend to make him despicable. He is incorruptible at any rate. . . I wanted to give him a note of perfect sincerity. At the worst he is a megalomaniac of an extreme type. And every extremist is respectable" (*LL V. 2* 60).

chimeras springing from his idea, to be cherished and "caressed" like the prized objects of a hoard. In his miserly fixation with these phantasms he too takes on the shameful comportment of Verloc's anonymous customers, who "h[a]ng about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly" (3). By returning the novel of ideas to its original commercial scene in this way, Conrad winnows down the philosophical discourse that has distended the text with myriad arguments, commands, and pronouncements. For all its violence and viciousness, the Professor's apocalypticism turns out to be little more than the cheap, lifeless product of a reified consciousness englobed by philosophical sufficiency.

Conrad thus concludes his "departure in genre" on one final note of equivocality—there is no climactic conflict as one might expect from a dynamite novel, nor a decisive apprehension of a hard-won truth that would bring the novel of ideas to a proper close. Rather, Conrad exacerbates the diremption of the novel's reified ideas from the real in the cold disregard that distances the Professor from the multitude. The indifference with which the multitude treats the Professor forces the inward retreat of his reified consciousness, where, as J. Hillis Miller writes, he is left "hovering interminably in the infinite moment between the decision to bring about the 'destruction of what is' and the moment of the explosion" (Miller 43). By dilating this moment of indecision in the Professor's encounter with the greater social totality, Conrad indefinitely forestalls the judgment that would bring the conversation between reader and implied author into a lasting agreement. While we might read such equivocation as the text's last "act of negating its every proposition," we would do well to see this negation not as a surrender to the "callous inhumanity" of capitalist modernity, as Eagleton claims, but as fiction's mutinous refusal to participate in the philosophical consensus that sustains it (Eagleton 58, 59). In the multitude's mute disinterest we indeed catch a glimpse of the obsolescence of every "thought-world"

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conjured up by the novel's competing philosophies—Michaelis's vision of a world set up like an "immense and nice hospital," Vladimir's scheme to enact a "universal repressive legislation," and the Professor's own idea to make a "clean sweep" of social life, all decompose into the image of a singular "pest" in a swarm (59, 239). This metaphoric degeneration of the novel back to a state of protean formlessness breaks down all the conceptual contours that have been cast over the Greenwich affair, showing them to be nothing but what Laruelle calls the "fetishistic illusions of philosophy" (*PNP* 168). Through the figuration of its own regress, *The Secret Agent* brings about the eclipse of the idea, and with it, the entirety of the "capital-world" (*INM* 170).

CONCLUSION: THE SHAME OF THOUGHT

Near the end of his "Author's Note," Conrad confesses that despite all of his disdain for the anarchists, their radicalism nevertheless inflected upon his writing in an unexpected way. Once caught up in the dreadful story of the Greenwich outrage, he remarks that he found himself transformed into something of a co-conspirator: "I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life" (*SA* 251). In attending to *The Secret Agent*'s own perplexing fixation with the idea, my aim has been to locate this spark of "extreme" revolutionary sentiment in the disaccord between fiction and philosophy. As I have tried to show via Laruelle's non-philosophy, Conrad's uptake of the generic elements of the novel of ideas provokes their irresolution through an ironic *détournement* of standard philosophical procedure, which accentuates the consonance between philosophy's loquacity and capital's "one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself" (*Capital, Vol. 1* 342). Through the repeated collapse of

the dialogic interaction between its self-interested ideas, *The Secret Agent* stages the obsolescence of the "old, old words" we call philosophy (*Narcissus* vii). Ultimately, Conrad's ploy in estranging fiction from philosophical predication is not to resign us to an unknowing inwardness, but rather to plunge philosophy back into the shameful historical circumstances that render its legibility. Indeed, "shame" is the only word that Stevie, in his exile from philosophy's discursive community, can conjure up to articulate the historical reality misrecognized by every other character in the text (*SA* 136). With this "little word," Stevie speaks to the basic chain of misery safeguarding the reproduction of the everyday, given in the figure of the "poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home" (136). Fiction gives expression to the shame that indelibly links thought to this "[b]ad world for poor people" (136).

CHAPTER 4

Obsolescent Life; or, George Lamming Against the Development Plot

"It is our job to make women unhappy with what they have . . . You might call us

'merchants of unhappiness'" ("Brave New Look" 72). These are the concluding remarks of an

address given by B. Earl Puckett, then CEO of department store conglomerate Allied Stores, to

his fellow industry leaders of the Fashion Group in 1950. Though shocking in tone, Puckett

intended his speech to be a factual primer on the basic principles behind his company's rapid

growth into the largest department store chain in the United States, with gross revenue reaching

nearly half a billion dollars per year by mid-century ("Allied Makes a Buy" 100). Throughout, he

emphasizes that "[b]asic utility cannot be the foundation of a prosperous apparel industry," since

"money not spent for soft lines . . . was not spent on other lines of merchandise, but was saved by

the consumer" ("Brave New Look" 72). In 1948, he goes on to explain, the fashion industry saw

record sales as a result of Christian Dior's unveiling of "The New Look," which styled an

embellished return to tradition after the shock and turbulence of the Second World War (72).

From Puckett's perspective, the profits that mass-market retailers raked in as they rode the wave

of Dior's success serve as evidence that a "New Look" ought to be created every single year to

funnel the wealth hidden inside consumer's bank accounts directly into the pockets of industry

executives. The *Time Magazine* reporter covering Puckett's speech notes that he remained

completely "stern" as he summed up the strategy with which they might achieve this goal: "We

must accelerate obsolescence . . . We must make these women so unhappy that their husbands

can find no happiness or peace in their excessive savings" (72). Unlike the earlier evangelists of

planned obsolescence discussed in previous chapters, who saw the practice as a means of

economic uplift and technological evolution, Puckett preaches obsolescence as the basis of a new experience of misery that pushes the pace of consumption to its limit. In his estimation, once women are hooked onto the season's "New Look," their unhappiness will drive their husbands to spend whatever is left in the savings account to preserve the simple tranquility of domestic life.

In the years since *Time* first reported on this meeting, Puckett's address has become something of a mainstay in the still limited discourse surrounding the phenomenon of obsolescence because of the unalloyed cynicism with which he expresses the profit motive. His words were first introduced to a wider audience by journalist Vance Packard in his 1960 bestseller, *The Waste Makers*, a scathing indictment of modern consumerism that endeavored to take stock of the shifting patterns of consumption in the post-war era. Packard saw Allied Stores as pioneering a technique of "forced obsolescence" in the world of soft goods, which eventually came to define how products were produced throughout other sectors of the economy (Packard 77). To Packard, the proliferation of this technique signaled the arrival of a new, "overdeveloped stage" in the history of the American economy, characterized by the confluence of a superabundance of commodities from the world market and a "psychologically sick and psychologically impoverished society" (315-16). More recently, geographer Andrew Brooks has built upon Packard's analysis by placing Puckett's speech at the very inception of our current "fast-fashion system," which utilizes the flow of mass-produced goods from the Global South to drive an ever-accelerating cycle of conspicuous consumption and disposal (Brooks 81). Like Packard, Brooks sees Puckett's formulation of planned obsolescence as the basis of this "never ending contest of purchases" fueling global textile production (81). Writing in *Bloomberg* in 2022, Natalie Obiko Pearson, Ekow Dontoh, and Dhwani Pandya likewise take up Puckett's address to examine the emergence of fast-fashion's "global textile waste crisis" (Pearson, et al).

His call to abolish utility in favor of quick obsolescence, they claim, presages the universal cheapening of clothing we see today, which saddles developing nations in the international waste trade with an ecologically noxious glut of unrecyclable garments (Pearson, et al). While these writers do hold some immediate differences in focus and concern, their various responses to Puckett all suggest that his specific articulation of obsolescence not only describes the unhappy consumptive experience of the affluent, presumably white, familial unit, but a more ubiquitous form of immiseration that permeates the global supply chain. What once was an ill-defined business practice dreamt up by ad men and fringe entrepreneurs, in other words, resurfaces in Puckett's speech as a streamlined method of commodity production buttressing the uneven development of the imperial world system as a whole.

This chapter seeks to further illuminate the relationship between obsolescence and colonial hegemony through the works of one of Puckett's more unexpected critics: George Lamming. Along with Samuel Selvon, Lamming is perhaps best known as the artistic figurehead of the "Windrush Generation," the wave of migrants who moved from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom shortly after Parliament restructured its immigration policy in 1948. As Simon Gikandi observes in *Writing in Limbo*, Lamming was central to the development of a distinctly "Caribbean modernism" in the 1950s, which repurposed the high-modernist idiom of cosmopolitan exile associated with figures like James Joyce and Ezra Pound to "write the West Indian subject into history" (Gikandi 65, 255). By refashioning the lonely alienation of his exile in England into the wellspring of a new Pan-Caribbean identity, Gikandi writes, Lamming sought to "break through the consciousness that had imprisoned him in the dogma of the colonial mother . . . redefining the terms that fixed him as a colonial subject" (70). To be sure, this monumental artistic effort appears rather far afield from the aesthetics of obsolescence discussed

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up to this point, especially considering the historical distance that separates Lamming from Wyndham Lewis and Joseph Conrad. To borrow a turn of phrase from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Lamming "emerges at the high-noon of anti-imperialism," nearly half a century after Wyndham Lewis and Joseph Conrad first grappled with the shameful deficiencies of their respective forms (Ngũgĩ 12). Nevertheless, in much the same way that anxieties about the onset of modernization gave these earlier figures a sense of capitalism's organized negation of its world, Lamming's uncertainty about the future of the West Indies led him to develop a discerning ear for the ideological vocabulary of the capitalist class. Indeed, what makes Lamming a pivotal figure in the longer arc of aesthetic invention charted by this dissertation is that one of the key "terms" he reappropriates from capitalist discourse to narrate the West Indian experience of deracination is obsolescence.

Lamming gives his most extensive appraisal of the term in a piece titled "The Imperial Encirclement," which takes aim specifically at Puckett for his ruthless profiteering. Anticipating many of the recent fears about the global consequences of planned obsolescence, he reads Puckett's call to "accelerate obsolescence" as,

> the clearest articulation not just of a Chairman of a garment industry. It is the essence of a total philosophy and I believe that this philosophy, articulated here, is essentially the philosophy that underpins the faith and practice of corporate capitalism, whether it is garments or foods or whatever. Utility is not their purpose. That purpose is the creation of false needs in order to justify a demand for an expanding consumerist society. ("The Imperial Encirclement" 87)

Lamming remained a committed Marxist for much of his life, so it is no surprise that he reads Puckett's address to the Fashion Group as the symptomatic expression of a larger shift from the

"old imperialism of Europe" to this new regime of corporate capitalism (86). His truly original

insight, however, is that the "total philosophy" of planned obsolescence touted by entrepreneurs

like Puckett is best understood in relation to the "history of migration" from "every poor sector

of the world" to the metropole (89). Planning the obsolescence of commodities at mass-scale, of

course, requires a supply of cheap importable labor to meet consumer demand, and Lamming

recognized that the Caribbean emigrants of his generation served as a vital source of such labor

for post-war Britain.[10] But Lamming does not simply champion a history from below—for him,

the history of the migrant worker is so essential to our understanding of Puckett's philosophy

because their qualified incorporation into consumer society exposed them to what Philip Tsang

calls the "obsolescence of subjective experience[]" itself (Tsang 12). The advent of the consumer

capitalist model, Lamming explains, did not elevate the colonial peasantry to free and equal

participants in the marketplace, but rather sealed their fate as mere "instruments of production"

at the beck and call of Empire ("The Imperial Encirclement" 90). The experience of this unique

form of historical "neglect" forced workers to confront their own subjectivity as a vestigial

holdover from the system of Crown colony rule, which they continued to inhabit long after the

old foundations of the colonial regime were subsumed into corporate capitalism (90). As

Lamming puts it elsewhere,

> just because the so-called colonial situation and its institutions may have been transferred
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> into something else, it is a fallacy to think that the human-lived content of those situations
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> are automatically transferred into something else, too. The experience is a continuing
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> psychic experience that has to be dealt with and will have to be dealt with long after the

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[10] As the historian Robert Miles explains it, from 1945 to 1951 Britain confronted a labor shortfall roughly "in the order of one million persons" (Miles 432). In passing the British Nationality Act of 1948, it thus called upon its "surplus colonial manpower" to bolster waning productivity in agriculture, coal mining, and textile manufacturing (435).

actual colonial situation formally ends. ("A Future They Must Learn" 164)

In unearthing this lived contradiction at the heart of decolonization, I take Lamming to suggest that the experiential locus of obsolescence lies not with the modern consumer, but with the migrant laborer, who suffers their own historical desuetude as they are set adrift "into streets they do not know to rescue their dignity from a permanent deprivation" ("Encirclement" 89).

In many respects, Lamming's oeuvre serves as one long testimonial to this facet of colonial existence. Lamming himself considered each of his novels to be installments of one single "book" about colonial struggle that charts an entire cycle of exile and return—it begins with *In the Castle of My Skin*, a semiautobiographical bildungsroman that sets the stage for expatriation, reaches a climax with *Of Age and Innocence*, Lamming's investigation into the political exigencies of return, and ends with *Natives of My Person*, which completes the cycle by moving back in time to the foundational "voyage" that is the Middle Passage ("Reflections on Writing *The Pleasures of Exile*" 274). Together, these works constitute a "grand epic of the decolonization process," to again quote Ngũgĩ, which deposes the unitary authority of the colonizer through a seditious retelling of Caribbean history (Ngũgĩ 32). In what follows, I focus my attention on the most anomalous "chapter" of this larger work, *The Emigrants,* in order to examine how Lamming's strategic redeployment of modernist techniques of fracture and fragmentation mediates the migrant worker's experience of obsolescence and elevates it to a matter of world-historical concern.

As its title suggests, *The Emigrants* is Lamming's most explicit attempt to grapple with the lived history of migrant labor, centering specifically around a group of workers from across the Caribbean archipelago who all leave for England in search of "a better break" (*The Emigrants* 33). But unlike his other works, which chronicle the experience of decolonization

through more traditional novelistic means like the Bildung plot (*In the Castle of My Skin*) and historical allegory (the later San Cristobal novels), *The Emigrants* tells the story of their displacement through the deterioration of its own narrative fabric. The novel begins by recounting the emigrants' journey from the Caribbean to British shores, during which time they experience a form of cultural cross-contamination that breaks down their national differences and opens them up to the utopian possibility of inhabiting a shared West Indian identity superseding their provincial separation of "small island[s]" from "big island[s]" (41). Upon arriving in England, however, the plot that ties each emigrant's individual ambitions to this larger pursuit of collective self-definition falls apart in catastrophic fashion. Lamming formally redoubles the isolation, distrust, and bigotry they encounter in their new country by shattering the novel's already threadbare narrative into a kaleidoscopic array of disconnected perspectives. These careen into one another with little sequential logic up to the very end of the novel, wherein the first wave of emigrants turn their backs on a group of newly arrived workers and sends them out into the street. The result is an altogether disorienting textual artifact, which captures the historical privation of migrant life through a repeated negation of novelistic structure.

The sheer difficulty of reading *The Emigrants* has frequently led critics to characterize the novel, with varying degrees of approval, as a Woolfian revolt against the "tyranny" of plot ("Modern Fiction" 9). At first, reviewers panned *The Emigrants* as a disappointing follow-up to *In the Castle of My Skin* because its disruption of the usual patterns of narrative sequencing bogged the story down with needless gimmickry. One columnist, for instance, lambasted the novel for being "curiously dislocated," noting that Lamming "switches from scene to scene, and period to period, for no obvious reason, is elliptical without excuse, and obscure where everything is plain" (Muir 13). Another called the book a "yawn" because Lamming goes too far

in "disguis[ing] his direction, the motivation of his characters, their appearance, and even the meaning of what they are saying" (Rodman 282). Gikandi's and Ngũgĩ's reappraisal of Lamming in the 1980s and 90s, however, helped restore *The Emigrants*' literary-critical purchase by reinterpreting its fractured plotting as a form of late modernist "experimentation" that elicits the historical contradictions of decolonization (Gikandi 73). While their critical tendency has fruitfully drawn more attention to the complex interplay of history and technique in the novel, here I want to argue that the persistent scholarly emphasis on this indistinct spirit of modernist "experiment" running through *The Emigrants* has in fact limited our understanding of its overall form. As I will show, far from being a brash upheaval of narrative convention, Lamming's treatment of plot is a more purposeful decomposition of the two generic paradigms that predominate over stories of this sort: the Bildungsroman and the migration narrative (Vadde 32). For Lamming, each of these genres harbors a developmental logic that is anathema to the lived experience of the migrant laborer, inscribing them either into the bourgeois hero's arc of individual growth or the wayward community's smooth integration into a new collectivity. By staging the successive failure of each of these development plots, I argue, *The Emigrants* not only demonstrates the irresolution between their liberal arcs of progress and the historical underdevelopment of the Caribbean, but encodes the negative dimensionality of obsolescence into the form of the novel itself. *The Emigrants*, that is to say, renders the historical legibility of obsolescence by imprinting the effects of capitalist decay onto its very structure, detailing the collective breakdown of the emigrants' colonial subjectivity through a cumulative degeneration of its most basic narrative components. In so doing, Lamming produces a counter-historical record of migrant life that contests the finality of capital's systematic negation of both its world and the subjects that suffer its iniquities.

Thirty years after the publication of *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming published a new

introduction to the novel that sought to demystify some of the more unusual aspects of its

composition. Though *In the Castle of My Skin* was an immediate critical and commercial

success, even drawing praise from the likes of Richard Wright, Lamming recognized that his

"methods denoted a break from convention" and had bewildered some readers along the way

("Introduction" xxxv). To clear up this confusion, Lamming explains that his break from literary

tradition does not have to do with style, voice, or subject matter, but with character. The stylistic

innovations that many "conventional critic[s] of the novel" were so eager to inventory are, he

claims, the secondary effects of his decision to focus the novel around a collective milieu rather

than an individual consciousness (xxxvi). Throughout *In the Castle of My Skin*, he writes,

> The Village, you might say, is the central character. . . . . In this method of narration,
>
> where community, and not person, is the central character, things are never so tidy as
>
> critics would like. There is often no discernable plot, no coherent line of events with a
>
> clear, causal connection. Nor is there a central individual consciousness where we focus
>
> attention, and through which we can be guided reliably by a logical succession of events.
>
> Instead, there are several centers of attention which work simultaneously and acquire
>
> their coherence from the collective character of the village. (xxxvi-vii)

To Lamming, this new and distinctly Caribbean pursuit of "collective character" inverts typical

novelistic procedure, whereby a "prolonged exploration of consciousness" slowly circumscribes

a wider collective reality (xxxvi). In the Caribbean novel, Lamming claims, collective character

instead shows individual consciousness to be just one dimension of a larger transindividual

existence yet to be written into history. By lifting narrative action out of its familiar patterns of time and causality, collective characters like the village allow us to see the "fractured" or otherwise split consciousness of the Caribbean poor at a distance from the "individual wretchedness of daily living," thus restoring them to a dignity denied by the entire history of "Plantation Slave Society" (xxxvi). What results is (in Bakhtinian parlance) a new kind of *polyphonic* novel, which proceeds from the decentered perspective of the whole to illuminate the "essential humanity" of its parts (xxxvi).

Critics have naturally been drawn to Lamming's introduction because it provides the clearest account of how his writerly practice intersects with his thoroughgoing critique of capitalism and white supremacy. Whereas much of his other prose is characterized by an elliptical, often inscrutable, style, here he writes straightforwardly that his novels serve as "a way of restoring these lives—this world of men and women from down below—to a proper order of attention; to make their reality the supreme concern of the total society" (xxxvii). Yet critics have also been quick to notice that for all of the introduction's insight and timeliness, its post-hoc explication of *In the Castle of My Skin* does not accurately describe the content of the novel. As Gikandi puts it, Lamming's "retrospective reading" is simply "too neat" in its characterization of the village's role in the novel (Gikandi 74). Aarthi Vadde likewise notices that his "retrospective theorization of the techniques in *Castle* speaks just as well, if not better, to *The Emigrants*" (Vadde 135). For both, the most glaring flaw of the introduction is that it disregards the significance of G., Lamming's authorial surrogate, to the narrative as a whole. Though G.'s narration often effaces his own presence, so much so that at times one hardly notices that he is in fact an active participant in a given scene, the story of his adolescence nevertheless provides the framework within which the history of the village is told. The village's historical transition out of

a system of quasi-feudal rule under the old colonial master Mr. Creighton and into a rentier

economy controlled by the despicable Mr. Slime is indeed conveyed as a corollary to G.'s

entrance into higher rungs of education, and thus too, into the nation's burgeoning middle class.

Through this biographical overcoding of the historical process, Lamming constrains the plot's

dispersal into the pure polyphony of collective character and sets it on the path of progress.

Literary criticism, of course, has a name for the kind of text that develops a synthetic

unity between biography and national history in this way: the Bildungsroman. Though its precise

contours have been subject to debate since the term was first invented, as a "generic ideal" the

Bildungsroman has come to name a familiar set of conventions (Esty 18). In a Bildungsroman

we expect to see, for instance, a process of ego-formation that takes place in the movement from

childhood to adulthood, a self-authorized compact between the budding hero and their social

surround that makes them a willing "part of a whole," and the delineation of a national destiny

that gives these developments allegorical impact (Moretti 17). The successive iteration of these

conventions produces an "image of man growing in *national-historical* time," to use Bakhtin's

oft-cited phrase, which fuses individual growth and national progress into one coequal process of

evolution ("The *Bildungsroman*", italics original 25). This paradigm remained more or less

stable until the modernist moment. As Esty has convincingly argued in *Unseasonable Youth*, the

uneven development of the capitalist world system reflected itself in the literature of the period

as a disintegration of the organic harmony between these two symbolic orders, resulting in a

form of "stalled" or "thwarted Bildung" that leverages arcs of arrested development and "frozen

youth" to delegitimize the capitalist promise of universal uplift (Esty 29, 236). Citing familiar

figures like Joyce, Woolf, and Conrad, Esty claims that this "antidevelopmental Bildungsroman"

proliferates primarily in "colonial contact zones," that is, places where the contradiction between

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the "bounded," progressive temporality of the nation-state and the "unbounded," asymmetrical temporality of the global market is most intensely felt, internalized, and contested (2, 196). The story of modernism is thus for Esty the story of a "growing obsolescence of national allegory" in the peripheries of the capitalist world system, which irreparably fractures the congruity between individual biography and collective destiny (24).

In his conclusion, Esty suggests that the modernists inherit this legacy of anti-Bildung to a succeeding generation of postcolonial writers who then reconfigure its representational strategies to document "the disillusionment and breakdown of postcolonial states and subjects" (207). Tracking the Bildungsroman's cross-cultural circulation in this way, he claims, forces us to grasp how modernism was shaped by imperial hegemony from the very start. But as I have already intimated, *In the Castle of My Skin* seems to run counter to this historicizing paradigm. For all its stylistic nuances, the novel closely conforms to the classical strictures of the Bildungsroman, particularly in its stubborn allegorical alignment of biographical development and historical transformation. Nowhere does this become clearer than in the novel's conclusion, when G. gains entry into the regional high school and is forced to separate himself from village life. While Boy Blue and Bob continue on at the village school where they will eventually learn a trade, G. joins the ranks of "the children of the clerical and professional classes" and receives training to become a petit-bourgeois functionary not unlike Mr. Slime and his new class of capitalist upstarts (*In the Castle of My Skin* 218). He thus finds himself suspended between two different forms of life: "I remained in the village living, it seemed, on the circumference of two worlds. It was as though my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best, while I remained impotent to wrest what my fortunes had forced me into. And it was difficult to say who was responsible" (220). In G.'s frustrated attempt to grapple with the consequences of his

newfound class mobility, one cannot help but hear the echoes of Bakhtin's description of the subject who develops from the vicissitudes of Bildung:

> He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. ("The *Bildungsroman*" 23, italics original)

Just before G. leaves for Trinidad to start his career as a teacher, his childhood friend Trumper forces such a breakthrough when he returns from America bearing a spool that plays Paul Robeson's, "Let My People Go." Upon hearing these words, G. arrives at an understanding of his race that makes it possible to turn himself into "different kind of creature," one capable of inhabiting a historical consciousness fit for Barbados's new political and economic reality (*Castle* 301). G.'s development is thus brought to a close with a lesson running against the grain of colonial instruction, which links his vocational calling with a newly won duty to struggle for "[his] people" (298).

This brief overview of *In the Castle of My Skin* is a necessary stepping stone in our reading of *The Emigrants* because the latter picks up some four years after G. says "farewell, farewell to the land" (303). Though this may seem to be a plot point too basic to cause controversy, it is in fact rarely acknowledged in the scholarship surrounding *The Emigrants* because critics have continually failed to recognize the narrating "I" who opens the novel as G. himself. In *Chimeras of Form*, to use just one example, Vadde bases her interpretation of *The Emigrants* as a "plotless novel" on the narrator's conspicuous anonymity:

> Unabashedly critical of the liberal fiction of an autonomous, coherent self, the novel

dispenses with its first-person narrator as the first condition of narrating the deracinated

'we' of West Indian identity. The 'I,' who is invested with no backstory or biographical

markers, is a placeholder for individuality rather than a psychologically fleshed-out

person. (137)

While we might grant Vadde some leeway given that the narrator quickly disappears from the

novel before ever explicitly identifying himself as G., this account of his characterization misses

an important textual detail. The narrator is, as a matter of fact, invested with backstory and

biographical markers both. He not only tells us that he grew up in Barbados, but that he has just

spent four years living in Trinidad, details which directly match G.'s trajectory throughout *In the

Castle of My Skin* and, of course, Lamming's own biography.[11] What's more, the narrator

divulges a macabre fascination with "touch[ing] dead birds," a quality that harkens back to the

opening chapter of *In the Castle of My Skin*, where the young G. force-feeds his pet pigeon

castor oil and kills it (*The Emigrants* 17). These connections are all backed up by Lamming

himself, who repeatedly emphasized the continuity between the two novels throughout his

career.[12] It is important to take stock of such textual minutia from the start, I argue, because the

interpretive lapses and miscues that have led to G.'s misrecognition have also limited our

understanding of the novel's erosion of literary form. Whereas critics like Vadde have read

Lamming's initial obfuscation of narrative voice as an ambiguous form of "plotless storytelling"

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[11] It is worth mentioning that Sandra Pouchet Paquet's foundational study on Lamming, aptly titled *The Novels of George Lamming*, presents a weaker version of my claim: "The first person narrator, who is remarkably like G. in tone of voice, is all but totally obscured until his narration resumes briefly in the third and last section of the novel" (32). I pursue the stronger version of this argument (that the narrator is G.) because, in my estimation, there is a preponderance of evidence about the narrator's identity that has yet to be squared with the novel's formal complexities.

[12] In an interview with George Kent, Lamming states, "If you take *In the Castle of My Skin*, where the realization of the world is seen through boys—this is the growing-up; and then the next book, *The Emigrants*, with these men moving out to England. The emigrants on that ship can be seen as the extensions of the boys of *In the Castle of My Skin*. This was in a way the logic of development" ("A Future They Must Learn" 168).

or modernist experimentation more generally (Vadde 120), here I want to suggest that it is a conscious act of self-elision that evacuates the Bildungsroman of its biographical core.

The Emigrants begins in much the same way as In the Castle of My Skin, with G. again interrogating his surroundings through his uniquely impressionistic perspective. Now on the island of Guadeloupe, he spends much of his time drinking and socializing with the other emigrants as they anxiously await their next voyage to England. During these perambulations, a refrain gradually begins to settle over his mind that will continue to weigh upon the text until its very end: "We were all waiting for something to happen" (The Emigrants 5). The stubborn reiteration of this phrase structures the narrative around the anticipation of an event that would emplot G. and the rest of the emigrants within the same progressive arc. As Vadde observes, The Emigrants starts as a "journey to an expectation," a phrase Lamming uses in The Pleasures of Exile to describe his own experience aboard the HMT Empire Windrush (Vadde 145, The Pleasures of Exile 211). Yet each time this phrase repeats, it also ramifies into a different tense that defers the arrival of this expectation. While G. glides through various quotidian encounters, we read, for example: "We were still waiting for something to happen," "We waited, sure that something would happen," "We were all going to wait to see what would happen," "We had waited to see what would happen" (6, 10, 11, 13). This constant variation in tense imbues the refrain with an anxiety about the narrative's eventual cohesion—it is as if G. must frenetically permute the phrase if he hopes to catch a glimpse of the ineffable occurrence that will make everything fall into its right place. But in ending with the past perfect, the gap between expectation and event is infinitely prolonged. The "waiting," in other words, never coincides with seeing "what would happen." In this way, the plot that would bring about the allegorical alignment between G.'s pursuit of freedom and the destinies of the rest of the emigrants is held

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in limbo, leaving us in the remainder of a text thrown off "historical and biographical course" ("The *Bildungsroman*" 15).

G. eventually brings this "journey to an expectation" to a premature end when, just twenty four pages into the novel, he writes himself out of the plot entirely. As he waits for the looming event to befall the emigrants, G. realizes that his narrative of continuing growth cannot be told in concert with their pursuit of a better life because his biographical presence implicitly frames their historical emergence within the bourgeois hero's development plot. "Those four years in Trinidad," he notes,

> seemed nothing more than an extension of what had gone before, but for this important difference. I had known greater personal freedom. I had won the right of the front door key, escaped the immediacy of privation, and walked, unrebuked in the small dark hours. I felt my freedom fresh and precious. It was a child's freedom, the freedom too of some lately emancipated colonials. It can be felt and it lasts if you remain what you are when you feel it. (*The Emigrants* 8)

With a knowing sense of the generic paradigm within which his life story was told, G. intuits that his growth in the Bildungsroman led him towards a "child's freedom," that is, the freedom of the rights-bearing citizen whose willing submission to the social order grants them the joys of private leisure. He thus begins to distrust the novel's capacity to narrativize the experience of these other "lately emancipated colonials," as they too would be set on the path toward a merely personal freedom that reinforces their denigration as the juvenile subjects of Empire. This concern comes to a head when G. mechanically combs through a new novel he receives in the mail: "Someone had posted me a book called *The Living Novel* and I read it as though by habit, page after page for several hours. The Novel was alive, though dead. This freedom was simply

dead" (8-9). G.'s dispassionate response to this eerily anachronistic text leads him to understand that the kind of novel which formalized his emergence into national-historical time is unable to document the collective experience of a new mélange of deracinated peasant workers thrown into the global labor market. For the novel to redeem its living relationship with history, G. thus exorcises what is dead within it, namely, himself.

One could feasibly imagine that this moment of self-sacrifice brings the novel to its conclusion. In just a few short pages, the hero of the novel steps into a new relationship with his historical reality that redefines the terms of the social pact and brings the current stage of his development to a fitting end. G. even gives his departure suitable theological weight by reciting Christ's final words upon the cross as he absents himself from the text: "Father Into Thy *Hands* I Commend My *Spirit*" (24, italics original). That the novel continues for another 258 pages therefore poses a serious interpretive conundrum. My wager here is that Lamming's obviation of the Bildung plot stages the breakdown of the novel's biographical structure to open the narrative up to an oblique temporality that charts an arc of obsolescence, rather than progress. We might juxtapose this formal strategy with Joyce's archetypal high-modernist supersession of the Bildungsroman in *Ulysses*, which imbues the elements of *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* with such maximal symbolic significance that they crystallize into a new kind of national epic. Lamming's subtractive approach, by contrast, does not just "stall" the development plot as Esty suggests, but puts it into retrograde. The next section explores how Lamming furthers this aesthetic of obsolescence by recoding the novel as a migration narrative, a form that ostensibly democratizes the meaning-making dynamic of the Bildungsroman and gives it a global reach. But as we will see, it too emplots the emigrants in a progressive design that belies the qualitative character of their exile.

While reflecting on the story of his own emigration to England in *The Pleasures of Exile*,

Lamming infamously remarks that his fellow traveler Samuel Selvon possessed a "peasant

sensibility" (*Exile* 225). On its face this claim reads like an insult, given its connotations of

simplicity, backwardness, and unsophistication. In reality, Lamming was of course celebrating

Selvon's incorporation of the West Indian "peasant tongue" into the hallowed halls of English

letters, an achievement that, in Lamming's estimation, laid the foundations for the West Indian

novel as such (45). Selvon's creolization of the novel, he argues, forced the irruption of the

peasantry into a form that had yet to accommodate its existence, creating an altogether new kind

of cultural object: "For the first time the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source

of labour. He became, through the novelist's eye, a living existence, living in silence and joy and

fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian

peasant to his true and original status of personality" (39). Echoing his theory of collective

character in the introduction to *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming again identifies the novel as a

technology of historical restitution, which dignifies its oft-forgotten subjects by representing

their lived experience in all its fullness. But what makes the West Indian novel so unique, and so

important, for Lamming is that it specifically captures the shifting sensibility of the peasantry as

they enter into a moment of complete "historical novelty" (38). With the decline of imperial

power, this vestigial class of agricultural laborers once bound to a specific location in the

plantation economy becomes, in Lamming's terms, "universal figure[s]" of exile as they are

uprooted from the land and thrown into the turbulent crosscurrents of global trade (29). They are

thus forced to endure the friction between their historical class position as the agrarian workforce

of a now obsolete system of production and their new role as an itinerant surplus population of labor called upon by the "Mother Country" to buttress its waning industrial economy (80). Such a sudden "leap in[to] the twentieth century," Lamming suggests, "shatter[s] all the traditional calculations of the West," opening up a new horizon of political and aesthetic possibility (36).

This is indeed the situation that the emigrants find themselves in as they leave the Caribbean behind. Though they possess different racial, economic, and national backgrounds, each traveler boards the ship in search of financial freedom and a "reprieve from the restrictions and humiliations of island life" (Paquet 33). With G. having now expunged himself from the text, the novel shifts into a third-person perspective to inventory the specific life stories of the emigrants making such a precarious "leap" into the future. This substitute narrative voice introduces, to name just a few, Ursula Bis, the privileged daughter of a Trinidadian barrister, Phillip, a young student, Tornado and the Governor, two former Royal Airforce pilots, Dickson, a school teacher, Higgins, an aspiring cook, and Collis, a writer figure who assumes the role G. once occupied. Though *The Emigrants* shifts its focalization throughout, none of these characters ever assumes a central role in the unfolding of its plot. The narrator instead maintains a distanced perspective, which at the start illumines the chronotope of the ship itself:

> It was the third day of sailing and the third of the passengers' unconscious grouping on
> the deck. Overhead the sky was thick black and the stars opened across an area that let
> the eye see the light yellow and golden beyond the punctured blackness of the sky. The
> light of the ship was dim and uncertain like gaslight. The passengers, grouped or
> scattered here and there, were like men standing aimlessly at crossroads waiting for
> something to happen, hoping however that nothing would happen except the usual things:
> a pleasant voyage, a safe arrival. (*The Emigrants* 25)

In sharp contrast to G.'s protean musings, here the narrator pulls back to show the lonely light of the ship cutting across the dark void of the Atlantic. From such a distance the travelers lose their distinction, decomposing into so many scattered points on an empty plane. By figuring the abstraction of the emigrants' individual personalities in this way, the ship circumscribes a space within which the novel's refrain, "we were all waiting for something to happen," gains new direction and momentum. In the ship's equalizing frame, the emigrants come to inhabit the empty time of waiting not as an insufferable expectation, but as a shared hope for a safe and comfortable journey presaging their eventual success. The ship, in other words, provides a space within which the plot can start anew, this time as a migration narrative leading from collective itinerancy to stable employment and communal renewal.

In *Migrant Aesthetics*, Glenda R. Carpio writes that migration narratives follow a developmental "überplot" that shuttles its subjects through successive phases of displacement, acculturation, and, eventually, success (Carpio 159). For these stages to play out properly, migrants must negotiate how "to become recognizable to society and the state," which often requires that they shed overly particular cultural markers that signal their status as foreigners (3). In the emigrants' case, their "plot of acculturation" immediately runs up against their antiquated provincialism, which threatens to subvert the significance of their entire journey (3). While congregating in the dormitories, an argument breaks out between a few minor characters that brings the problem of such parochialism to the fore. Tellingly, these characters are referred to only as "the Jamaican," "the Barbadian," and "the Grenadian," that is, flattened stand-ins for their respective countries who project a predictable nationalist sentiment. At first, Tornado's reflections about the lack of economic opportunity in Trinidad ignite a spark of mutual understanding: "There was no interruption, and when he had finished the silence returned.

Whatever the difference in their past experience they seemed to agree on one thing. They were taking flight from something they no longer wanted. It was their last chance to recover what might have been wasted" (*The Emigrants* 34). But at the mention of the differences between "small islan' people" and "big islan' people," all such sympathy vanishes (36). The group mocks the Grenadian for always relying on the "big island next door"; the Barbadian claims that everyone else on the ship is less educated; and the Grenadian, in turn, ridicules the Barbadian for not understanding socialism (36). This circular firing squad carries on until the Governor shouts them down with his characteristically "loud masculinity," reminding them that they are all "small islanders" in the eyes of the English (37-8). Faced with this harsh reality, the emigrants begin to grasp that their thinking is "far behind the times," ensnared as it is in a regional prejudice that implicitly reaffirms the sovereign authority of the metropole. In the absence of any better framework for their collective relation, the emigrants thus begin to gravitate toward Tornado's remark that they are all in pursuit of a "better break" (33). This phrase allows them to narrativize their migration as a shared journey toward personal enrichment, delicately maintaining the balance between their desire for communal belonging and their individual entrepreneurial ambitions.

Though only for a moment, the emigrants do arrive at a cohesive pan-Caribbean identity that appears to secure the eventual success of this secondary development plot. Once the ship sets out into the open ocean and leaves the islands behind, the narrative switches into a form of dramatic dialogue that evidences an authentic solidarity developing amongst those onboard. Addressing a character known only as the "Strange Man," a misanthrope who belittles the aspirations of the other emigrants, the Jamaican calls upon the poetic timbre of the grotesque to retell West Indian history:

This West Indies talk is w'at a class o' doctor call symptomatic. It hold more than the eye

can see one time, that's why me take to lookin' into hist'ry. An hist'ry tell me that dese

same West Indies people is a sort of vomit you vomit up. Was a long time England an'

France an' Spain an' all the great nations make a raid on whoever live in them islands.

Whatever the book call them me no remember, but most o' them get wipe out. The de

great nations make plans for dese said islands. England, France, Spain, all o' them, them

vomit up what them din't want, an' the vomit settle there in that Caribbean Sea. (65)

The Jamaican's emetic metaphor enables a flexible apprehension of the West Indian past, which

both acknowledges the horrors of the region's colonial history and extols the character of the

people who suffered under such rule. Though the symbolic resonances of vomit would suggest

that West Indians are but a waste product purged from other these societies out of concern for

their national health, he keeps pushing the metaphor, adding that this vomit continued to "stir"

and churn in the Caribbean "till the vomit start to take on a new life" (66). This historical

revision recaptures what Lamming calls the originary "cosmopolitan" character of the Caribbean

peasant class, which from the beginning was composed of labor retched out from Africa, China,

Southeast Asia, and the Americas (*Exile* 37). In attuning the emigrants to this historical fact, the

Jamaican gives the story of their journey political and historical significance, for if the Empire's

vomit is flowing back to the mother country, then they are forcing the Empire to re-ingest the

excretive surplus it deemed inimical to the smooth functioning of the social body. Through this

creative retrieval of the metaphorics of disgust, he provides a framework within which the

emigrants can see their pursuit of a "better break" as an assertion of political agency and a

reclamation of their historical character.

Most often, this scene is read as Lamming's most extensive reflection on the ambitions of

the West Indies Federation, a short-lived political project which sought to unify the Anglophone

Caribbean into a regional bloc capable of exerting influence on the international stage. Though

this enterprise eventually fell apart when Jamaica voted against unification in 1961, throughout

the 1940s and 1950s it served as a utopian lodestone which brought writers, academics, and

politicians from across the region into a shared sphere of activity. As Lamming himself

acknowledged, nearly all of the Caribbean writers of his generation directly saw their works as

contributing to a transnational Caribbean consciousness fit for this new political entity.[13] The

back-and-forth amongst the Jamaican, Tornado, the Governor, and the rest of the emigrants

indeed appears to bear out this pursuit by gradually delineating the figure of a new Caribbean

citizen born out of the abject miasma of colonial rule. In Imre Szeman's terms, their

conversations read as a "literary experiment in nation-building," with the ship serving as a

laboratory of international solidarity enabling the emigrants to envision a harmonious "pan-

Caribbean space" (Szeman 179, 186). But while this historicizing claim does give depth to the

emigrants' migration narrative, it does not fully explain some the other elements at play in the

dramatic dialogue. For instance, while the Jamaican, Tornado, and the Governor pontificate

about West Indianness with their usual masculine bravado, the lowly cook Higgins acts as a

killjoy by interrogating the particulars of their mutual desire for a "better break." Just as the

emigrants start discussing their shared qualities, he interjects with his own anxieties about getting

the proper "papers": "'Tis the only thing to save a man these days. Papers. Qualifications. You

go for a job, ol' man, you doan' have to talk, no boss ain't want to hear you open yuh mouth. All

you got to do is show that piece o' paper, an' the man who got the paper will be the pick. The

better the paper the better yuh chance" (*The Emigrants* 59). Higgins's overriding concern with

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[13] See "The Aesthetics of Decolonisation: Conversation between Anthony Bogues and George Lamming" 185.

clearing the administrative hurdles of the job market, I argue, complicates the straightforward reading of the emigrants' portion of the novel as Lamming's literary rehearsal of the West Indies Federation's political program. By interrupting the dramatic dialogue with Higgins's considerations of bureaucratic procedure, Lamming elicits the tension between the collective optimism of this project and the atomizing effects of the capitalist system. He thus sows seeds of doubt in the plot that the emigrants set out for themselves, for as Higgins correctly ascertains, they will not enter into England as a community of fellow travelers, but as individual wage-laborers in competition with one another.

The emigrants' entire arc of collective uplift ultimately falls in on itself once they catch sight of British shores. As they enter port, the images of honest work, communal care, and financial achievement that sprang from their longing for a "better break" give way to grim resemblances between core and periphery—the industrial fans dotting the horizon of the working-class district, Collis notes, remind him of the "old plantation windmills of the tropics" (99). Lamming registers the psychic torsion of this uncanny doubling by shifting the narrative into free indirect discourse, in effect breaking apart the dramatic dialogue that once gave the emigrants' conversations a didactic gravity. During their last moments aboard the ship, the narrator specifically focalizes on Higgins, who experiences a rupture in consciousness as he tries to reconcile the difference between his idealized image of England and its actually existing miseries:

> It mattered to be in England. Yes. It did matter. Wherever there was life there was something, something other than *no-THING*. There was also unemployment, a house shortage. These were not important. Or were they? Starvation. Death. Yes, even death. There were not important, for what mattered supremely was to be there, in England. To

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be in England . . . He stood on the deck considering the newspaper report. It did not

matter. No. It did not; for there beyond the water too large for his view was England

rising from beneath her anonymous surface of grey to meet a sample of the men who are

called her subjects and whose only certain knowledge said that to be in England was all

that mattered. (107, italics original)

Higgins's vacillations here define the contours of the ideological lacuna underpinning both the

migration narrative and the novel as a whole. In so anxiously trying to demonstrate the

significance of his arrival to himself, Higgins comes to grasp that the "something" they were all

waiting for to bring about the culmination of their collective development is in a fact a "*no-*

THING," a phantasm that tacitly figures England as the symbolic ideal of the social order.

Lamming's emphasis on the thingly, reified character of this nothing plays off the polysemy of

England "mattering" to the emigrants' journey—at once, England is the privileged site of

meaning in their story and a physical and material place within which their imagination of a

better life might be sensuously apprehended. The dissonance between this England and the

moldering expanse before them reveals the plots of upward mobility, communal restoration, and

historical progress that the emigrants pursued in place of G.'s narrative of growth to be, in

reality, so many pathways toward proletarianization. In the closing lines of this section, the

narrator divulges the truth that the hopes and ambitions driving the migration narrative's

"überplot" are all neutralized by the sublime indifference of England's "anonymous surface of

grey," which ensures that no event will come and no opportunity will be realized.

There is undoubtedly a certain tedium in Lamming negating *The Emigrants*' generic

patterning not once, but twice. By disfiguring what Bakhtin calls the "plot-compositional

structure" of the Bildungsroman and the migration narrative one after another, Lamming

threatens to reduce the entirety of the text to a cynical indictment of literary form as such (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 101). In response to this apparent pessimism, critics like Vadde have come to categorize *The Emigrants* as "Lamming's bleak novel" (Vadde 144). Taking issue with its overly abstract treatment of national belonging, Szeman similarly argues that *The Emigrants* only ever produces an "empty idea of freedom" (Szeman 195). In my view, these criticisms are shortsighted both in their immediate interpretation of the novel and in their understanding of Lamming's aesthetics as a whole. Against Vadde and Szeman, I want to suggest that Lamming is not indulging a simple pessimism in dismantling these forms, but staying faithful to his endeavor to compose a novel that incorporates the historical experience of the Caribbean peasantry into the "imaginative record of the total society" ("Introduction" xxxvii). The most immediate dilemma facing Lamming's aesthetic enterprise, as I have tried to show, is that the generic resources most readily at Lamming's disposal harbor a progressive dimensionality that runs counter to this very experience—the development plot of both the Bildungsroman and the migration narrative chart national progress through the psychic and social growth of the citizen character. The peasantry's radical irruption into modernity, by contrast, does not take place as a smooth adaptation to the accelerative temporality of market society, but as an experience of proletarianization that induces the obsolescence of their very subjectivity. The next section argues that the final half of the novel gives expression to the historical desuetude of the peasantry's colonial consciousness by unravelling all the logical connections that once secured the cohesion of the novel's plot. Far from condemning the novel form to obsolescence, Lamming's transformation of the narrative into an empty accumulation of accidents creates an altogether new novel *of* obsolescence, which places the experience of the Caribbean peasant class at the very center of modernity's history of negation.

From the moment the emigrants leave the edifying chronotope of the ship, the novel swings into a narrative countermovement that systematically unwinds the cumulative progress of its various arcs of development. Gone is any distinct narrative voice, familiar generic structure, or clear causal linkage between events. We are instead sent through the looking glass into a narrative that proceeds through the cumulative deterioration of its entire visual field, breaking up both the chronological cohesion of the plot and the characters' individual perspectives themselves. Lamming signals this about-face in the novel's most famous scene, the so-called "train episode" at the end of the first part, which details the emigrants' journey from the docks to the heart of London (Rizzuto 394). What makes this scene so notable is that it formally enacts the disintegration of the novel's narrative fabric through a material derangement of the text itself. Rather than continuing along with Higgins's highly focalized portrait of torment, the narrative splays out into an array of fragments cordoned off to restricted zones of the textual surface. These fall in disjointed columns across the page, leaping from one perspective to another with little indication as to who is speaking or how each relates to another. As Nicole Rizzuto keenly observes, each column "twin[s] the train's motion" by framing the action through a paratactic "window," wherein we catch brief glimpses of the racism, cruelty, and derogation the emigrants experience upon arrival (Rizutto 394). At one moment, for instance, a fellow passenger mistakes the emigrants for Africans, remarking that his "sister's a missionary in Africa, says it's a nice place, and your people very good people" (*The Emigrants* 116). In another, they are complimented for "speak[ing] excellent English for a foreigner. Much better than the French" (117). The repeated fluctuation between these scenes enacts a somatic relay of the emigrants'

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collective disorientation in their new country, forcing the reader's eye to career across a deterritorialized textual multiplicity shorn of connective tissue. One endures the bodily exhaustion of this process all the way up to the point that the train finally lurches into London, where it is suddenly plunged into the city's suffocating smog. In a foreboding premonition of the emigrants' coming isolation, this "thick choking mass of cloud" fully obscures their perception of one another and the text slows down to a trickle: "The other talked as if they were choked. Weak. Frightened. They said it wouldn't be so cold. So cold. . . . So frightened . . . so frightened" (123-4).

Though *The Emigrants* does return to a somewhat more recognizable novelistic form after dispersing into this loose patchwork of sense impressions and fleeting phenomena, its events never again cohere into a unilinear plot. Lamming instead relates the working lives of the emigrants in fits and starts, with abrupt leaps in time and sudden changes in voice that disrupt the easy flow of the diegesis. For instance, as the emigrants discuss the available jobs at the tire factory, the narrator unexpectedly transitions to Collis anxiously smoking in the lavatory of a "stranger's house" (138). We only learn later through an analeptic shift into the recent past that Collis was in the home of the Pearsons, a well-to-do couple whose family history as colonial officials has led them to serve as mediators between recently arrived migrant laborers and local factory owners. This scene, in turn, morphs into a conversation at the local salon, where conversation flows across the page without any direct attribution. The novel continues along these lines until the very end, weaving in and out of different perspectives with few durational markers and little chronological consistency. Understandably, critics have struggled to devise an interpretive model capable of producing meaning out of this derangement of plot. As previously mentioned, Vadde comes up with the term "'plotless' modernism" to describe *The Emigrants'*

"experiments with narrative temporality" (Vadde 113, 146). J. Dillon Brown similarly conceives of this part of the novel as an exercise in "modernist difficulty," which indulges in "technical experimentation" to forestall its easy consumption (*Migrant Modernism* 84). Mary Lou Emery also deems the novel a "contra-modernist" text that "experiments with the language of the novel" to construct a distinct Caribbean perspective (Emery 167). The problem with these critical frameworks is that their gestures toward a free-flowing spirit of modernist experimentalism coursing through *The Emigrants* simplify the formal dynamics of the text more than they illuminate them—one is left to wonder what exactly goes into this literary "experiment." If we press this line of reasoning further, what we find is not so much a rehearsal of modernist abstraction in toto, but a more specific reconfiguration of the event that runs against the grain of the novel's forward motion.

Lamming in fact guides the reader toward this particular aspect of the text later on in the novel when Philip comes across a letter from the elusive Azi, a virtuoso mathematician at Cambridge who acts as both friend and intermediary amongst many of the emigrants. Though we are only shown a fragment of the letter, it appears to lay out a grand theory of historical development in just a few short pages:

> I think I begin to understand two things. One is the accidental nature of social relations. This is what I think they call History . . . If you like you can explain the relations in terms of their historical development, but *beneath* the history, there is no *reason* we can detect for these things being what they are. The other is the insignificance of events. The same errors are committed, the same consequences crush us. But nothing really *happens*. We adjust to some abstraction as easily as we adjust to some concrete occurrence. (213, italics original)

Azi's understanding of events divulges the logic behind Lamming's elliptical plotting. In prying

events from the usual rhythms of narrative, Lamming not only highlights the emigrants'

estrangement by reproducing it at the level of form, but short-circuits what Jacques Rancière

calls the "fictional rationality" undergirding novelistic action, which "show[s] the linking of

causes and effects that leads beings, unbeknownst to themselves, from happiness to misfortune,

or from misfortune to happiness" (*The Edges of Fiction* 2). Once shorn of their function as

stepping stones in the generic design of the Bildungsroman and the migration narrative, events

dissipate before they can fuse into any such sequence that would sort fortunes and tie up loose

ends. They instead accumulate as a series of disjointed "accidents," in Azi's terms, emptily

iterating one after another without ever yielding a reason for their occurrence or building toward

a greater cumulative development. As a result, they start to lift out of the fabric of history—

events can be privately suffered as rote, causeless "consequences," Azi suggests, but they never

assume the significance of a happening that sweeps life up in the currents of a collective

historical transformation. Everything occurs over a void, a "no-THING," which turns all

experience past or present into a dull, solitary torment.

By debilitating the fictional reason that underwrites the direction and coherence of

events, Lamming thus gives rise to a narrative counter-temporality that renders the retrograde

motion of obsolescence in novelistic form. As the plots that once tethered the fate of each

character to a larger project of collective flourishing regress into this litany of discrete accidents,

time dissolves into a uniform emptiness that throws the antiquation of the emigrants' subjectivity

into relief. Though much of the novel's second half is tightly focalized through the perspective of

the emigrants, late in the novel the narrator disrupts a conversation between Tornado and the

Jamaican to show exactly how this abstract temporal regime denatures their historical

consciousness:

> The day had followed the pattern which other days had rehearsed. They had worked, returned home, and now in the early night which had suddenly grown thick outside they were together in a small room which offered no protection from the threat of boredom. It was so easy to feel the emptiness of being awake with no activity which required their whole attention. In another climate, at another time, they would ramble the streets yarning and singing, or sit at the street corners throwing dice as they talked aimlessly about everything and nothing. Life was leisurely. But this room was different. Its immediacy forced them to see that each was caught in it. There was no escape from it until the morning came with its uncertain offer of another day's work. Alone, circumscribed by the night and the neutral staring walls; each felt himself pushed to the limits of his thinking. All life became an immediate situation from which action was the only escape. And their action was limited to the labour of a casual hand in a London factory. It was here in the room of garlic, onions, and mist that each became aware, gradually, anxiously of the level and scope of his private existence. Each tried to think, for that too was a kind of action. (*The Emigrants* 192)

Here, the narrator's swerve into the distant authority of the third-person pulls our perception out of the ceaseless collision of accidents and embeds it within a concrete set of historical circumstances. In this brief glimpse at the totality of migrant life, we see that novel's "homogeneous, empty time" which accumulates one accident after another is ultimately a formal transposition of the capitalist administration of the working day onto narrative chronology ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 263). The daily drudgeries of factory life stagnate the developmental momentum of time, suspending the emigrants in an inescapable "boredom" that

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nullifies the meaning and cohesion of any event that would befall them. What is especially

notable, however, is that this empty or "neutral" temporality does not just passively habituate the

emigrants to its vacuity, but actively induces the obsolescence of their peasant "way of seeing,"

Lamming's term for the collective sensibility that grounds mutual recognition in a shared

historical context (*The Pleasures of Exile* 36). The emigrants' metonymic reduction to "casual

hands" for hire gives expression to the total degradation of their capacities for "thought" and

"action," which now can only emulate the machinic gestures of the factory floor. Such a

qualitative deprivation of subjectivity forces the inward retreat of consciousness, where it

winnows down to an utterly "private existence" shed of all historical character. To this newly

anonymized proletarian self, the collective bonds, ambitions, and histories that once secured their

communal pursuit of a "better break" appear as the vestigial remainders of "another time," unfit

for the grinding rhythms of the shift.

Though each of the emigrants comes to feel the suffocating pressure of life in the

metropole, Lamming draws out this obsolescent dimension of capitalist temporality through

Collis, the writer figure who slots in for G. once he excises himself from the text. Were

Lamming to have continued along with the plots of the first part of the novel, we might expect a

character of this sort to function as the narrative's developmental locus, synthesizing a whole

new mode of perception out of the cultural contradictions of exile. With Collis, however, this

plot plays out in negative. Lamming stages the obsolescence of the emigrants' peasant way of

seeing through the degeneration of Collis's perceptual system, figuratively posing his descent

into blindness as a reflection of the general breakdown of the emigrants' collective sensibility.

This figural register comes to the fore when Collis loses his job at the tire factory and his vision

begins to deteriorate into a kind of prosopagnosia or "face blindness": "It was as though his

imagination had taken control of his vision, and faces lost their ordinary outline. He wouldn't recognise the nose as nose, or the eye as eye. The organs kept their form, but somehow lost their reference. They became objects" (*The Emigrants* 219). That Collis's eyesight continues to decay until his entire vision sinks into England's "anonymous surface of grey" suggests that he is not experiencing organological failure, but the subsumption of his former way of seeing into the ambient sensorium of capitalist society (274). In overriding the autonomous functioning of his perceptual system, Collis's "imagination" seems to internalize the reified uniformity of the everyday and cast it over his field of vision, reducing everything he sees to an array of disconnected objects. As this reified gaze turns back onto itself, it reveals the shameful deficiency of the emigrants' physical and psychic form, which now appear as the artifacts of the Empire's juvenile past. In this way, Collis himself becomes a ledger upon which the effects of obsolescence are recorded and made visible. Through the reified overhaul of his sensorium, we are able to trace the mounting negation of the emigrants' collective way of seeing as they are subsumed in the atomized monotony of industrial wage labor.

Fittingly, it is Collis who triggers the total collapse of the emigrants' peasant identity in the last scene of the novel, wherein he declares to the Governor, "I have no people" (280). With these words, Collis refuses to help find housing for a group of newly arrived migrant workers who have suddenly shown up at door of the Governor's nightclub. In an ironic reversal of ideological positioning, these migrants are led by the Strange Man, the very same figure who sought to disabuse Tornado and the Jamaican of their idealistic allegiance to a transnational Caribbean community. Having now bought in to the political promise of "w'at those chaps say 'bout 'bein together," he begs the Governor to use his capital to help those in need (279). Upon hearing Collis's words, however, the Governor is unable to recognize the migrants as fellow

exiles thrown into what Ngũgĩ calls the "counter-flow of human traffic from colonised territories to the 'mother countries'" (Ngũgĩ 12). He thus pushes them back out onto the street, where they scatter into the night: "The voices of the crowd in the cul-de-sac called for the Strange Man who had remained where he was, silent, self-rebuked. Later he walked through the door rubbing his hands as though there was something eternally wrong with them and Collis returned to the window and watched the night slip by between the light and the trees" (*The Emigrants* 282). In a striking inversion of G.'s triumphant return to his "people" at the end of *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming concludes *The Emigrants* by dramatizing the dissipation of a people into capital's anonymous multitude. There is no event that finally transforms the novel's litany of accidents into the arc of the emigrants' fateful reunion, only another chance encounter that accentuates the depth of their solitude in the null time of capitalist modernity. As Collis retreats into the bar to watch this time aimlessly "slip by," the Strange Man is left suspended in an infinite moment of "self-rebuke" that throws the appalling obsolescence of his form into sharp relief. Against London's reified surround, the hand—that interface between self and world—not only appears to him as an alien, objectionable thing, but an "eternally" defective appendage inherited from a past long superseded. His compulsion to "rub[] his hands" clean of this history is nothing less than the final symptomatic expression of a people's way of seeing entering into the moment of its historical extinction.

It is not difficult to understand why critics have so frequently read this conclusion as a key example of the "overall pessimism of [Lamming's] fiction" (Simoes da Silva 193). In ending the novel on such a despairing note, Lamming seems to condemn West Indian identity to the dustbin of history and, thus too, resign us to capital's inevitable conquest over every aspect of social life. Yet when read as part of his larger attempt to interrupt the official telling of history,

this "pessimistic" conclusion can be seen in a new light. Indeed, for Lamming the novel form does not just intercede into the production of historical fact, but does so on in the interest of the proletariat itself:

> But the history of labour, as told by the forces of labour, is not very prominent in official texts of history. I do not know whether literary scholars make the connection, but one of the functions of the novel in the Caribbean is to serve as a form of social history. The novelist thus becomes one of the more serious social historians by bringing to attention the interior lives of men and women who were never thought to be sufficiently important for their thoughts and feelings to be registered. ("Concepts of the Caribbean" 5)

To borrow a term from Rancière, Lamming's understanding of the novel form is "dissensual"—it supplies a "reconfiguration of the sensible" that draws out the qualitative experience of those too poor, too unfortunate, and too unremarkable for the historical record (*Dissensus* 140). From this perspective, Lamming's bleak portrayal of the emigrants' disbandment reads not as an acquiescence to capital's triumph over the laboring bodies that sustain it, but rather as an aesthetic sublimation of their collective negation in the empty time of capitalist progress. By giving the process of their obsolescence objective form, Lamming forces the entry of the West Indian worker into the fabric of "social history," where their experience of historical anachronism transforms into the fragile basis of a new kind of collective belonging. In this way, *The Emigrants* itself serves as testament to the persistence of the West Indian life amidst the overwhelming forces that would render it in the monochromatic grayscale of the market. As a document of the migrant laborer's obsolescence in the metropole, it holds out the possibility of a different collective future by putting the reified finality imposed upon them into dispute.

CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL-HISTORICAL DIALECTIC

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin offers what he calls a "modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic" (*The Arcades Project* 459). Typically, he argues, historians ascertain the "'productive,' 'forward-looking,' 'lively,' 'positive' part of the epoch," by setting it off against its "abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent" side (459). For the historical materialist, however, this process must play out in reverse. It is of "decisive importance," he writes, "that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision . . . a positive element emerges in it too—something different from that previously signified" (459). My intent in this chapter has been to show Lamming's systematic degeneration of the Bildungsroman and the migration narrative to be a dialectical endeavor of this sort. By staging the negation of each of these "forward-looking" genres, Lamming places the "abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent" dimension of capitalist modernity at the very center of our literary-critical purview. Indeed, his foreclosure of every generic movement into the integrated wholeness of bourgeois futurity not only elicits the retrograde dynamic of obsolescence within the form of the novel, but reveals it to be the "total philosophy" underwriting the organization of capitalist society ("The Imperial Encirclement" 87). Through the emigrants' voyage into the reified heart of Empire, we see capital's regime of negation course its way through the factory and into the innermost recesses of subjectivity, where it ultimately precipitates the dissolution of an entire way of seeing. Yet as I have tried to demonstrate, *The Emigrants* poses its own way of seeing through this very dissolution, one that puts the reified sensorium of capitalist life at a critical distance from our own. Within the novel's deteriorative frame, we are able to grasp that our collective immiseration is to the benefit of those like Puckett, the self-proclaimed "merchants of unhappiness," who administer the comings

and goings of everything and everyone in the capitalist world. Lamming reminds us that though our obsolescence is planned, those plans might yet be thwarted.

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