Inhuman Power: Infrastructural Modernism And The Fiction Of Social Form

Natalie Amleshi
University of Pennsylvania, ngamleshi@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations

Part of the Modern Literature Commons, and the Other History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3442

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3442
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Inhuman Power: Infrastructural Modernism And The Fiction Of Social Form

Abstract
E.M. Forster’s imperative to “only connect” has long been read as modernist slogan for the rarefied depth of authentic interpersonal intimacy. Reframing the historical co-emergence of literary modernism and modern social science, this project tells a different story—not of connections between exceptional humans, but of connections between persons and environments. The prevailing canons of modernism have not yet grasped the internal complexity of early-twentieth-century debates regarding the interdependence of human and nonhuman agency. Early-twentieth-century sociologists like Émile Durkheim grounded both the autonomy of human culture and the disciplinary authority of sociology on the premise of species exceptionalism—the independence of human relations from nature and technology. “Inhuman Power” uncovers how the latent epistemological assumptions of Durkheimian social theory continue to structure contemporary aesthetic value judgments and literary-historical paradigms. The dominant structuring prism of nineteenth-century social theory has led critics to understand modernist art as a form of human aesthetic agency responsive to the reifying degradations of machines, masses, and media—a symbolic consolation for human alienation from nature (both the natural world and the “second nature” of administered society). This model casts modernism within a protracted philosophical stalemate between the human and nonhuman that obscures the mixing of natural and social agencies. Challenging the presumed dominance of this position, “Inhuman Power” assembles a set of core texts that comprise a significant counter-aesthetic to the dualism of nature and society. Examining texts by E.M. Forster, H.G. Wells, Gabriel Tarde, Joseph Conrad, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Charles Chesnutt, this project recasts modernism not in terms of subjects alienated from nature, but subjectivities co-constituted with environments. A shared formal question animates all of the texts that I examine: by what aesthetic concept or literary feature can texts reimagine the conceptual relationship between character and environment, nature and society? Excavating aesthetic strategies developed across sociology and literary art to represent the intensifying entanglement of natural, social, and technological agencies in the first decade of the twentieth century, “Inhuman Power” reanimates these writers’ ambition to imaginatively transform the concepts through which human beings render the material world thinkable and thus how human beings interact with that world.

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group
English

First Advisor
Jed Esty

Subject Categories
History | Modern Literature | Other History

This dissertation is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3442
INHUMAN POWER:

INFRASTRUCTURAL MODERNISM AND THE FICTION OF SOCIAL FORM

Natalie Amleshi

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2019

Supervisor of Dissertation

_________________________

Jed Esty, Vartan Gregorian Professor of English

Graduate Group Chairperson

_________________________

Nancy Bentley, Donald T. Regan Professor of English

Dissertation Committee

Josephine Park, Professor of English

Paul Saint-Amour, Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Humanities
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The funny thing about finishing a dissertation about the power of the nonhuman is to step back and feel more powerfully than ever the transformative, bolstering influence of so many teachers, colleagues, friends, and family—of the very human agency that empowered me and sustained this project from the ground up.

I am grateful to the many remarkable teachers who both modeled and instilled the value of careful reading; critical self-reflection; animated intellectual exchange; and the kind of adventurous, imaginative thinking at the limits of the rigorous and true that brought me to literary study in the first place. Matthew Cooper brought an intellectual energy to Lindbergh High School in St. Louis, Missouri, that opened my eyes to the particular kinds of knowledge that literary texts (and their readers) can produce. Joe Loewenstein and Vincent Sherry were both mentors before I realized that I needed them. Their investment in my undergraduate education is a boost that has pushed me through grad school and beyond.

This dissertation owes most to my committee of advisors. Jed Esty patiently held faith in this project when I found it hard to—challenging me to make connections both within my own thinking and across modes of thought that initially seemed out of reach. More than anything, his instinct to get to heart of things, fast—to conjure the big picture and to keep the big questions ever-present—made it easy to pursue this work as a kind of worthy vocation and not the uncertain, slightly drearier swath of time that it could have been. His intellectual generosity and belief in the kinds of work that we do will stay with me far beyond my time at Penn. Paul Saint-Amour has reliably pushed me both to bring my arguments into tighter analytic focus and to nudge them outside the limits of my scholarly comfort zone. His willingness to entertain my arguments to their furthest reaches modeled for me an alchemic mix of rigor and play that I hope to emulate. Since my first week of grad school, Jo Park has guided how I frame my interests and enthusiasms through the discourses, animating questions, and professional performances that render them legible and socially meaningful. She is the teacher that I self-consciously imitate in the classroom. Individually, each has encouraged, challenged, taken seriously, and advanced my thinking. Collectively, they model the real power of shared intellectual hospitality and generous co-investigation. I cannot imagine a more energetic, challenging, collegial, and (honestly) fun set of interlocutors and mentors with whom to think hard about what it means to teach and write about modernism in 2019.

The English Department at the University of Pennsylvania has been my intellectual home for the past six years, and I am grateful to have been a part of a memorable cohort of fellow students that taught me so much. Both for providing a collegial home within this home and for comments on earlier drafts of my work, I am especially grateful to the Mods group here at Penn, especially Micah Del Rosario, Sam Waterman, Devorah Fischler, Devin Daniels, Alex Millen, and J.S. Wu. Many other scholars, teachers, and interlocutors provided invaluable feedback at key moments: Jim English, Nancy Bentley, Leo Bersani, Emily Steinlight, Rahul Mukherjee, J.C. Cloutier,
Pearl Brilmyer, Joseph Valente, Jonathan Grossman, Kate Marshall, Avery Slater, and Janet Lyon.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the unyielding love of my parents, grandparents, and brother that has always provided the sturdy ground that allows me to stay absorbed in this work without anxiety, insecurity, and self-doubt. It is a tremendous gift that I hope this work honors. This project is dedicated to my mother, Janice Amleshii. Whatever this is, I wouldn’t have been able to do it without her, who has been a kind of co-conspirator in every phase of my education since she first tricked me into learning how to read.
ABSTRACT

INHUMAN POWER:
INFRASTRUCTURAL MODERNISM AND THE FICTION OF SOCIAL FORM

Natalie Amleshi
Jed Esty

E.M. Forster’s imperative to “only connect” has long been read as modernist slogan for the rarefied depth of authentic interpersonal intimacy. Reframing the historical co-emergence of literary modernism and modern social science, this project tells a different story—not of connections between exceptional humans, but of connections between persons and environments. The prevailing canons of modernism have not yet grasped the internal complexity of early-twentieth-century debates regarding the interdependence of human and nonhuman agency. Early-twentieth-century sociologists like Émile Durkheim grounded both the autonomy of human culture and the disciplinary authority of sociology on the premise of species exceptionalism—the independence of human relations from nature and technology. “Inhuman Power” uncovers how the latent epistemological assumptions of Durkheimian social theory continue to structure contemporary aesthetic value judgments and literary-historical paradigms. The dominant structuring prism of nineteenth-century social theory has led critics to understand modernist art as a form of human aesthetic agency responsive to the reifying degradations of machines, masses, and media—a symbolic consolation for human alienation from nature (both the natural world and the “second nature” of administered society). This model casts modernism within a protracted philosophical stalemate between the human
and nonhuman that obscures the mixing of natural and social agencies. Challenging the presumed dominance of this position, “Inhuman Power” assembles a set of core texts that comprise a significant counter-aesthetic to the dualism of nature and society. Examining texts by E.M. Forster, H.G. Wells, Gabriel Tarde, Joseph Conrad, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Charles Chesnutt, this project recasts modernism not in terms of subjects alienated from nature, but subjectivities co-constituted with environments. A shared formal question animates all of the texts that I examine: by what aesthetic concept or literary feature can texts reimagine the conceptual relationship between character and environment, nature and society? Excavating aesthetic strategies developed across sociology and literary art to represent the intensifying entanglement of natural, social, and technological agencies in the first decade of the twentieth century, “Inhuman Power” reanimates these writers’ ambition to imaginatively transform the concepts through which human beings render the material world thinkable and thus how human beings interact with that world.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................. ii

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................... iv

INTRODUCTION: Culture After Infrastructure .................................... 1

The Event of the Social, ca. 1900 ....................................................... 1
“Shot with the colors of culture”: Forster and the Machine ................... 11
Modernism vs./as Media ................................................................ 21
Social Facts and Fiction .................................................................... 32
A Tardean Counterfactual History of the Novel .................................. 46
Modernism and the Character-Environment Complex .......................... 56
Literary Studies in the Infrastructure Era .......................................... 69
Project Outline ................................................................................. 78

CHAPTER ONE: “Alien and Intimate”: Aesthetic Forms of Sociology in Gabriel Tarde
and H.G. Wells .............................................................................. 82

Gabriel Tarde: Literary Sociology ..................................................... 84
H.G. Wells: Sociological Literature ................................................... 105

CHAPTER TWO: “Running the Country Practically”: H.G. Wells and the Enabling
Fictions of Inhuman Power ............................................................. 124

Ambivalent Modernism ................................................................... 124
Forms of Modernity: A Modern Utopia ............................................ 133
Forms of Entanglement: Tono-Bungay ............................................. 153

CHAPTER 3: The Secret Agency of Standardization: Narrative Standard Time and Other
Modernist Infrastructures in Joseph Conrad .................................... 186

Making Time .................................................................................... 186
Rethinking Standardization ............................................................. 190
Un-Knitting the Human ................................................................. 204

CHAPTER 4: Scales of Justice: Overdetermined Embodiment and the Semiotics of State
Racism in W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt .............................. 223

W.E.B. Du Bois: The Hesitations of Sociology .................................. 223
Charles Chesnutt: The Infrastructural Character of Law ................... 255

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................. 276
INTRODUCTION: Culture After Infrastructure

“I see a good deal behind the scenes, and you can take it from me that there is no Social Question—except for a few journalists who try to get a living out of the phrase.”

—E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910)

[T]here exists no society to begin with, no reservoir of ties, no big reassuring pot of glue to keep all those groups together. If you don’t have the festival now or print the newspaper today, you simply lose the grouping, which is not a building in need of restoration but a movement in need of continuation.


The Event of the Social, ca. 1900

When Henry Wilcox says to his soon-to-be wife Margaret Schlegel that “there is no Social Question,” he does not presciently anticipate the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour. But there is an undeniable echo—an uncanny resemblance between these two positions. Both Wilcox and Latour claim professional expertise that demystifies the conceptual coherence and political claims of an entity called “society.” The differences between their positions are abundant. Wilcox’s proto-Thatcherite free marketeerism casts “the Social Question” as the ideological residue of a credulous, feminized reading public. To engage seriously with the social-as-question betrays a “sentimental attitude” that misapprehends the constitutive, unchanging reality of “the battle of life.”¹ But this war language leads us to suspect precisely the opposite of Wilcox’s declaration, for to deny the contingency of one’s commanding position within the wider social field is of course to take a position in the (class) battle. “The social” is a question, but one that the

imperial-capitalist Wilcox would prefer not to engage. On the other hand, Latour’s multifaceted career as social theorist can be characterized as an extended re-opening of the question of the social. While Latour agrees with Wilcox that “society” is an unhelpful, artificial construct—“without sociology there is no society”—he develops that insight to wildly different political effect.² Latour argues that the evident ontological stability of “society” has obscured the vital entanglement of human and nonhuman agency in shaping social life, conceptually blocking our ability to imagine transformative social change: “the apparently reasonable division between material and social becomes just what is obfuscating any enquiry on how a collective action is possible….To put it bluntly: if there is a society, then no politics is possible.”³ Despite a stark divergence in political desire—to maintain the world as it is, to imagine it radically otherwise—both Wilcox and Latour share a central insight that motivates this dissertation: that “society” is a contingent, provisional construction and that this constructed-ness requires mass mediation—be it ideological/human (Wilcox), material/nonhuman (Latour), or perhaps something in between.

As we will come to see in more detail, what both Latour’s revisionist history of sociology insists and Forster’s novel expresses is the uncertain, contested nature of “society” at the turn of the twentieth century, as the newly professionalizing social sciences developed languages and epistemologies to describe the formal interaction of human beings with each other and their technologically-mediated surroundings. The

³ Ibid., 74, 250.
terms of these debates have long shaped how literary scholars understand “modernism” in both explicit and implicit ways, underwriting the criteria of aesthetic value that structure the field of modernist studies. “Inhuman Power” excavates a series of transatlantic exchanges between academic social science and Anglophone literary modernism circa 1900 in order to uncover the hybrid and conceptually daring representational strategies through which artists and social theorists (often both at same time!) sought new aesthetic modes of imaging, figuring and projecting the social outside the framework of the autonomous liberal subject.

We need to unsettle the sometimes-fixed relationship between modernism and sociology in modernist studies. When academic sociology (say, Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life”) appears in modernist scholarship, it often functions as a transparent frame through which to understand modernity, implicitly bolstering the idea that there is a coherent, knowable thing called “modernity” to which “modernism” responds. This reliance on sociology as theoretical frame has concealed the complex, contested and mixed relationship between literary art and social theory at the turn of the twentieth century—occluding the significance of burgeoning sociological discourse not only as theoretical frame, but also as real event in the history of modern literary form. What do we make, for example, of H.G. Wells’ insistence not only that literature should resemble sociology but that “sociology must be neither art simply, nor science, … but

---

4 Fredric Jameson lucidly encapsulates this idea that sociology mediates and conceptually stabilizes “modernity”: “[T]he concept of modernity, which traces its lineage back to the founding fathers of sociology—and with which indeed sociology itself is coterminous as a field of study—seems respectable and academic enough.” (Jameson, A Singular Modernity: An Essay on the Ontology of the Present (London: Verso, 2012), 7.)
knowledge rendered through personality, that is to say, in the highest sense of the term, literature”\textsuperscript{5} Or what of W.E.B. Du Bois’ apprehension that “the Novel” would have a crucial role to play in mediating the world-shaping transformations guiding sociological discourse: “the study of individual life and motive, the machine-like organizing of human economic effort, and the extension of all organization to the ends of the earth”\textsuperscript{6} On the other hand, sociologists like Gabriel Tarde looked to literature as an aesthetically complex expression of diversity, virtuality and potentiality to which sociology should aspire: “[O]rder and simplicity are simply mediating terms, alembics in which elementary diversity is potently transfigured and, as it were, sublimated. The poet and the philosopher…are the terminal flowers of any national tree.”\textsuperscript{7} To what extent, then, did the turn-of-the-century codification of disciplinary sociology enter the texture and form of modernist art? Tracing this intellectual convergence between literary art and modern sociology allows us to recover the contested nature of “society” and “the social” at the turn of the twentieth century and to uncover complex debates regarding how to conceptualize, image and represent the distinctiveness of human social relations in the technologizing, globalizing world that Du Bois describes—a world in which the autonomy of the human was increasingly difficult to disentangle from its technological mediation.

“Inhuman Power,” then, describes two related phenomena:

(1.) Firstly, “Inhuman Power” refers simply to a new recognition of the power of the nonhuman in modern art and social theory. The texts collected under “infrastructural modernism” seek representational strategies to describe the inhuman power of infrastructural technology to shape the limits of human agency and the forms of human social organization. In literary texts, like Rudyard Kipling’s “Below the Mill Dam” (1902), literary character is figured as co-constituted with its material, technological environment. In Kipling’s story, the agency of the anthropomorphized animal-protagonists is figured in differential relation to the infrastructural power of the “Spirit of the Mill.” When the mill dam’s water wheel is finally replaced with electric power at the story’s conclusion, the very representational status of the characters is transformed: the seemingly allegorical Black Rat is jarringly depersonified: stripped of his human characteristics, “caught and stuffed” and put “in a glass case.”8 The introduction of electric power transforms the very genre we thought we had been reading, dramatizing the extent to which our technological environment shapes not only the cultural legibility of the world around us, but also our most basic ontological being. In sociology, theorists like Georg Simmel sought frameworks that that could explain social cohesion and anomie in terms that bridged the gap between individual experience and global-technological extension. In Simmel’s Philosophy of Money (1900), for example, the intensification of global financial infrastructures mediates between wider social patterning and a modern

8 Rudyard Kipling, “Below the Mill Dam” in Traffics and Discoveries (London: Macmillan, 1904), 393.
phenomenology of money, and the human subject is displaced by wider agencies of infrastructural exchange and interpersonal valuation. Both texts depict technical and mediated forms of human agency, coproduced through technology.

(2.) Secondly, “Inhuman Power” also refers to the inhumanity of human collective agency in the twentieth century, mediated by technology. The international terrorism of Conrad’s The Secret Agent (1907) or the world-scale “problem of the color-line” in Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk (1903) describe the conceptual and political intractability of forms of collective violence that exceed the scale or logic of social categories like class and nation. These texts give form to the infrastructural agencies of capital, imperialism, patriarchy and racial domination in shaping the socio-technical assemblages that aggregate collective human agency to what we today recognize to be the geophysical scale of inhuman power.

“Inhuman Power” centers a core group of writers—Gabriel Tarde, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles Chesnutt—that emblematize what I call “infrastructural modernism.” These writers all bear either an overt or clearly evident relationship to the sociological debates and technological discourses that this dissertation describes. This grouping does not constitute an exhaustive or exclusive canon, and a longer version of this project would incorporate additional writers (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Olive Schreiner, Henry James, Georg Simmel at the forefront) whose inclusion would amplify and elaborate its core claims. But in addition to identifying a subset of turn-of-the-century writers overtly engaged in the representational shared space between sociological theory and literary art, this project also describes a series of historical
transformations that suggest new ways of understanding the wider emergence of modernist literary form. The intellectual debates, infrastructural technologies, and new scales of human social organization that I describe exert pressure on the modern literary imagination outside of this small group of writers. In this way, “infrastructural modernism” refers at once to a delimited corpus of writers and texts as well as to a wider set of intellectual discourses, historical tensions and ideological contradictions that recontextualize modernism and reframe familiar literary-interpretive paradigms.

In a well-known critical takedown of modernist aesthetics, Georg Lukács begins with an animating premise: "Content determines form. But there is no content of which Man himself is not the focal point…. [T]he basic question is, and will remain: what is Man?"9 Whereas realism casts “Man” as “a social animal,” in modernism the human has become “solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings.”10 The problem with modernism, Lukács insists, is that “by destroying the complex tissue of man’s relations with his environment, it furthered the dissolution of personality. For it is just the opposition between a man and his environment that determines the development of his personality.”11 Lukács here describes an explicitly “social and historical environment.”12 But what about the material environment, the nonhuman agencies of nature and technology? How might considering forms of environment in which “Man

---

10 Ibid., 19, 20.
11 Ibid., 28.
12 Ibid., 19.
himself” is not the focal point transform our understanding of modernist subjectivity, its evidently structuring solipsism?

This is the essential project of “Inhuman Power,” which argues that the unprecedented proliferation of world-scale technical infrastructure and the resulting experience of socio-technical entanglement exerted new pressures on both novelistic form and social theory at the turn of the twentieth century. Displacing the conceptual centrality of Lukács’ humanist subject allows me to reframe modern literary history through the short span of years bridging the turn of the twentieth century: the historical co-emergence of literary modernism, the professionalizing social sciences, and the world-scale proliferation of technical infrastructure—the aesthetic, social, and technological mediations of what I call “the infrastructure era.”13 What connects literary modernism and modern sociology is a shared responsiveness to precisely the material, technological and nonhuman aspects of environment that Lukács pushes out of the interpretive frame. How might our understanding of modernism transform if we replace Lukács’ isolated subject alienated from her social environment with the radically entangled subject of infrastructural mediation?

13 In disarticulating and analyzing “infrastructural modernism” via the frame of three distinct heuristics—Society, Technology, and Aesthetics—I am adopting the “three entryways into the labyrinth of media” suggested by W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen. But more important than the specificity of these frames, I believe, is their injunction to “triangulate” the study of media in order “to avoid the seductions of binarism” that trap a great deal of media-theoretical scholarship in an endless series of stale binaries and philosophical stalemates: new vs. old, society vs. individual, subject vs. object, etc. (xix). (W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds. Critical Terms for Media Studies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), vii-xxii.)
Despite the ubiquity of “modernism” as recognizable aesthetic category, scholars have long struggled to reconcile its divergent impulses toward impersonality and subjectivity. How can one category accommodate both the radical depersonalization of T.S. Eliot—“Poetry…is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”—and the meticulous interiorization of Virginia Woolf—“concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain”\(^\text{14}\)? “Inhuman Power” constructs a new genealogy of transatlantic literary modernism that recasts this interpretive impasse as animating historical contradiction. The conceptual centrality of the autonomous subject in modernist studies has occluded a socio-technical imaginary that contextualizes and reframes these tensions immanent to our understanding of modernist literary form. We have misrecognized the dynamic co-constitution of character and environment for the painful alienation of self and society. It is this reversion to the alienated subject that underlies the continual return to aesthetic-interpretive frameworks—both subjectivism and impersonality—that are structured through the conceptual prism of the estranged self. But I argue that the “infrastructure era” marked the imaginative opportunity for a generation of literary artists and social theorists to project infrastructure in the place of culture, and to put the mutual constitution of subjects and environments where the autonomous subject once stood. When we reframe the literary history of 1900 through entanglement rather than estrangement, this paradoxical contradiction that has split our understanding of

“modernism” dissolves into a shared ambition to develop new narrative modes and aesthetic forms through which to describe the dynamic relationship between the effect of character and its environmental conditions of emergence.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Of course this characterization of modernist studies paints with a heavy hand, and other scholars have similarly tried to displace the autonomous subject at the heart of modernism. In this regard, my work builds on that of many scholars. Michael Tratner’s *Modernism and Mass Politics* similarly reframes literary modernism through the history of new trans-individual modes of collectivity and social massification in the early-twentieth century. But Tratner’s account differs from my own in his emphasis on the “mass mind;” Tratner reads modernist experimentation as seeking to disrupt the conscious personality “in order to reveal and perhaps alter the socially structured mentality hidden inside each person’s unconscious,” thus emphasizing psychological models of collectivity rather than material conditions of socio-technical entanglement (3). Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). I also build on the example of Michael Levenson’s *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality* to investigate “the relation of character, not to narrative form, but to social form.” Levenson analyzes the “dense web of social constraints” and “intractable communal norms” that press upon and distort the “image of autonomous subjectivity” in modernist art (xii). His work, however, maintains a conceptual orientation around the “self” that this dissertation attempts to displace. Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). In emphasizing the agency of environment on modernist conceptions of character, my argument also builds on Douglas Mao’s *Fateful Beauty*, which analyzes a burgeoning turn-of-the-century concern with “the scarcely registered workings of environment on the developing human being” (5). Mao, however, places special emphasis on aesthetic environments (or, art as environment) as well as on the heightened effect of environment on childhood development, whereas I describe a heightened awareness of environmental entanglement as constitutive of social life in infrastructural modernity. Mao, *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Finally, my work most closely follows Maud Ellmann’s *The Nets of Modernism* in its concern with the “entangled nature of the self” and conception of “the human subject as enmeshed in relations of exchange—sexual, linguistic, financial, pathogenic—that violate the limits of identity” (1). However, Ellmann’s view of entanglement privileges psychodynamics and “interpsychic networks of exchange” over the socio-technical, material model of entanglement that I describe, leading Ellmann to the more familiar modernist roster of James, Woolf, Joyce and Freud. Ellmann, *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
“Shot with the colors of culture”: Forster and the Machine

In the early-twentieth century, writers began to suspect that the socio-technical mediation of infrastructure was coming slowly to overtake the social functions and spaces that had once belonged to culture. This is an abstract claim that gains concretion through the perhaps unexpected figure of E.M. Forster, whose 1910 novel Howards End could be read as a humanist ode to the value of culture as embodied in the novel’s liberal-intellectual heroine, Margaret Schlegel. But Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops,” published just one year before Howards End in 1909, tells the story of a dystopian infrastructural world-state that corrodes and undermines the confident cultural humanism of Howards End. Read together, the Edwardian novel and apocalyptic short fiction dramatize the wider imaginative tension between humanist culture and posthumanist infrastructure that this dissertation traces.

Matthew Arnold’s formulation “to see life steadily and to see it whole,” an evident affirmation of culture’s illuminative value, echoes as sort of reflexive mission statement throughout Howards End. Margaret and her siblings value culture as life’s highest pursuit; their days are filled with discussion societies, symphony visits and aesthetic contemplation. The problem arises, however, when Margaret tries to look

---

16 The line “to see life steadily and to see it whole” is one of several phrasal leitmotifs that recur throughout the linguistic texture of Howards End (“telegrams and anger,” “panic and emptiness,” etc.). The line is a slightly-altered excerpt from Arnold’s poem “To a Friend” (1849), an ode to Sophocles, “[w]ho saw life steadily, and saw it whole.” Forster discusses the poem in his short essay “A Note on the Way” (1934), published in Abinger Harvest (New York: Harvest, 1964).
beyond her own cultural edification, to enact the political value of culture that Arnold describes in *Culture and Anarchy*:

Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light…. It is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindly masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light.\(^\text{17}\)

The question Forster poses in *Howards End* is whether Arnold’s liberal-humanist politics of culture, in which the development of the self unfolds in ameliorative co-development with society (even those “unkindly masses of humanity”) is a practicable (or even thinkable) ideal in the what I have called the infrastructure era.

The modern pressures placed upon this Arnoldian model are dramatized in the character of Margaret, who struggles to reconcile her privileged social position as liberal intellectual with both her burgeoning sense of class vulnerability in relation to the thriving industrial-imperialist Wilcoxes, as well as her overwhelming class privilege over the “abyss”-teetering Basts. The difficulties for Margaret are evident early in the novel, as she breathlessly expresses her personal values to an uncomprehending Mrs. Wilcox:

“Life's very difficult and full of surprises. At all events, I've got as far as that. To be humble and kind, to go straight ahead, to love people rather than pity them, to remember the submerged—well, one can't do all these things at once, worse luck, because they're so contradictory. It's then that proportion comes in—to live by proportion. Don't begin with proportion. Only prigs do that. Let proportion come in as a last resource, when the better things have failed, and a deadlock—Gracious me, I've started preaching!”

“Indeed, you put the difficulties of life splendidly,” said Mrs. Wilcox, withdrawing her hand into the deeper shadows.\(^\text{18}\)

Margaret’s rambling speech trips over itself, as she stumbles over the contradictory moral imperatives underwriting her liberal-humanist values. Margaret can only manage these competing pressures through an imaginative mode of “proportion” that scales down the contradictory experience of modern history to aesthetic legibility, a way of seeing that cordon off Arnold’s universalist cultural humanism into the smaller scale of individual comprehension. But this aesthetics of proportion reaches its imaginative limit in the dreary figure of Leonard Bast, who finally defies the Arnoldian values that Forster elsewhere seems to endorse. After meeting Leonard for the second time, Margaret reflects:

> Culture had worked in her own case, but during the last few weeks she had doubted whether it humanized the majority, so wide and so widening is the gulf that stretches between the natural and the philosophic man, so many the good chaps who are wrecked in trying to cross it. (\textit{HE} 98)

In a surprising exclusion, Margaret, mouthpiece for Forster’s epigraphic injunction to “only connect!” evidently cannot do so with the well-meaning Leonard. Margaret’s aesthetics of proportion is unable to reconcile the dingy, struggling Leonard with the humanizing values of culture, effectively withholding her sweetness and light and undermining the wider Arnoldian value-system. What, then, is the value of proportion? And what relation does it bear to the wider representational logic of \textit{Howards End}, itself?

\(^{18}\) Forster, \textit{Howards End}, 62. Further references to this text hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and \textit{HE}. 

13
an effort to see modern England steadily and whole through the tumult of modern
history?

Arnold’s cultural ideal is finally satisfied near the end of the novel when Margaret
contemplates the English country after the unresting flux of London:

In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole,
group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect
without bitterness until all men are brothers.” (HE 229)

In the more comprehensible scale of country life, Margaret’s aesthetics of proportion can
activate and visualize the imaginative triumph of culture and connection—to connect, we
see, is to see life steadily and to see it whole. This Arnoldian aesthetic coup prefigures the
symbolic reconciliation of the novel’s conclusion in which Helen’s child (fathered by the
now-deceased Leonard) plays in the hay outside Howards End, figurally reconciling the
liberal-intellectual, industrial-imperialist and lower-clerical classes—what Lionel Trilling
declares “the symbol of the classless society” in his well-known reading of Forster.¹⁹
Trilling’s reading—and the wider reading of Howards Ends as triumphant liberal-
humanist reconciliation—relies on Margaret’s aesthetics of proportion, on collapsing the
difference between character and class while excluding the unkept Basts from the
aesthetic frame. To heroize Margaret (as both Helen and Trilling do) is to assume that the
aesthetics of proportion (of imaginatively compressing historical complexity and
contradiction into figural legibility for the individual mind) is a socially ameliorative
triumph in the vein of Arnold’s model of culture.²⁰ Margaret the character, then,

---
²⁰ As Helen tells Margaret in a plainly reflexive comment at the novel’s conclusion:
“Can't it strike you—even for a moment—that your life has been heroic? Can't you
dramatizes the very same agency as *Howards End* the novel, whose late-realist aesthetics serve the important social function of helping its readers see modern England whole. But to what extent might this conclusion problematize rather than vindicate the cultural aesthetics of proportion? Margaret and Helen do briefly acknowledge Leonard from their pastoral retreat:

“A place, as well as a person, may catch the glow. Don't you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences—eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour; sorrow perhaps, but colour in the daily grey. Then I can't have you worrying about Leonard. Don't drag in the personal when it will not come. Forget him.”

“Yes, yes, but what has Leonard got out of life?”

“Perhaps an adventure.”

“Is that enough?”

“Not for us. But for him.” (*HE* 288)

Leonard briefly intrudes Margaret’s liberal ode to difference, tolerance and material comfort, an unwelcome vestige of the personal that irritates her impersonal moral sermon and defies the essential logic of proportion by mixing inharmonious aesthetic scales. But what is most interesting is that Margaret frames Leonard’s exclusion in literary-generic terms, as adventure. Margaret’s cultural imagination relegates Leonard to the minor genre of adventure-romance, withholding him even in death from the fully humanized cultural domain of the novel’s concluding reconciliation—and from the complex interiority of *Howards End*’s own realist characterological depth. Margaret can only hold her cultural triumph in place, can only bear to see it whole, by consigning Leonard to a different genre of experience—a less complex or psychologically deep form of personhood.

________________________

remember the two months after Charles's arrest, when you began to act, and did all?” (*HE* 289).
But *Howards End* elsewhere signals that Margaret’s cultural aesthetics of proportion may face a far greater threat than the unmanageable personhood of Leonard—that the *human* of Margaret’s liberal humanism may be locked in a larger battle with an infrastructural, modernizing agency that is actually transforming the human itself:

London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. (*HE* 222)

To alter human nature is to alter the supreme and stabilizing center of the aesthetics of proportion, to corrode the essential heart of Margaret’s liberal humanism. This moment quickly passes, but it powerfully (if briefly) displaces the Arnoldian humanism that seems to structure the novel’s moral-aesthetic worldview.\(^{21}\) To enframe “human nature” within the wider infrastructural dynamism of London is to relativize the human at the heart of Arnoldian culture. Is culture, then, the highest expression of a timeless human essence, or is human nature contingent, perhaps to some extent even *produced by*, that very culture?

Forster, then, figures Margaret’s realist aesthetics of proportion, of the individual-human gaze, as precariously poised between two interpretive possibilities: (1.) the key aesthetic mode that unlocks Trilling’s perfectly-constructed class allegory of social reconciliation and (2.) the residual aesthetic frame of a cultural humanism under threat by the encroaching “red rust” of urban infrastructure (*HE* 290). Do Margaret’s aesthetics of proportion *solve* the contradictions of Arnoldian culture in the twentieth century, or are

---

\(^{21}\) Despite its clear limitations in the case of Leonard, a stand-in for the systemic relations of economic interdependence that link his precarity to her privilege, which she can bear to see neither steadily nor whole.
they merely a symbolic brake to ward off social transformations that are rendering the very humanizing agency of culture obsolete?

This tension immanent to *Howards End* gains historical and aesthetic depth when read in conjunction with Forster’s short fiction of the same period. His science-fiction story “The Machine Stops,” published just one year before *Howards End* in 1909, gives positive form to the changing human nature to which *Howards End* can only dimly allude from the deepest recesses of its overt Arnoldian humanism. In the story, a totalizing but invisible apparatus known only as “the Machine” has taken over human social organization on a global scale. Politics are equally invisible; nation-states have given way to an unseen Central Committee of the Machine that seems to have ceded all meaningful political agency to the Machine itself. Individuals live physically isolated from each other in small identical chambers outfitted with mediated communication systems that connect these atomized beings across the globe.

Much of the story takes place between a mother and son. Vashti—the mother—embraces the Machine and spends her time sheltered in her room listening to and giving “lectures” via an infrastructural communications technology. Vashti—like most other denizens of the Machine—is deeply distrustful and even fearful of first-hand experience. She dreads speaking directly and especially touching other people. The total experience of mediation—a kind of virtual exchange of already-existing ideas—has taken the place of both physical exertion and Arnoldian culture. There are no books in the Machine (except for the tech manual-cum-scripture “Book of the Machine”) and no felt need to “see it whole” outside the frame of the virtual communications portal.
This totalizing mediation reaches a parodic level towards the end of the story when a lecturer insists that the regurgitation of tenth-hand ideas must supplant the vulgar and distorted experience of the body:

Those who still wanted to know what the earth was like had after all only to listen to some gramophone, or to look into some cinematophone…. “First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by love and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element—direct observation.”

This fear of nature and of direct experience refracts backs and exerts a degenerating influence on the denizens of the Machine. Vashti is described as a kind of semi-human pap: “a swaddled lump of flesh—a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as a fungus.” Her son Kuno, a clear Forster mouthpiece, rejects the Machine and argues throughout the story that the fear of personal connection has withered or diminished some essential quality of the human worth saving:

“It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralyzed our bodies and our wills…”

And it is at this point that these two seemingly divergent literary texts—the Edwardian social drama of Howards End and the science-fictional thought-experiment of “The Machine Stops”—vitally intersect: the imaginative tension between some essential quality of the human and that human’s vulnerability to a kind of environmental agency that brings it dangerously proximate to “nature” and threatens to corrode that very human

23 Ibid., 91.
24 Ibid., 100.
essence. A passage from the story’s apocalyptic conclusion expresses the difficulty of this idea:

[B]eautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Century after century had he toiled, and here was his reward. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with the colors of culture, sewn with the threads of self-denial. And heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, so long as man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul, and the essence, equally divine, that is his body. The sin against his body—it was for that they wept in chief; the centuries of wrong abusing the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend—glozing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of ideas as colorless, last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.25

This is a fabulously confused and confusing passage: the narrator tells us that “talk of evolution” has deteriorated the human body. But is “beautiful naked man” a part of nature, or does he belong to some other distinctively or autonomously human realm adequate to the “essence that is his soul”? Is the power of infrastructurally-mediated intellectual exchange so great that talk of evolution can instigate the material effects of degeneration? Forster can’t quite decide whether it is a natural-physical or cultural-intellectual degenerative agency that the text diagnoses and describes. This conceptual contradiction melds into this passage’s description of the Machine as a garment worn by humanity, “shot with the colors of culture.” But this pseudo-cultural garment of infrastructure has acted on the body, turned it into “white pap;” infrastructure has a material, physical agency that transforms the human in an existential manner, but one that is uncertainty poised between the “natural” and the “cultural,” between “evolution” and “talk of evolution.” Nonetheless, what is clear is that infrastructure acts on the body in a

25 Ibid., 122-23.
way that burrows deeper than the mere garment of culture and that this infrastructural agency has at first covertly but now fully taken over what was once the domain of culture. It is in this way that “The Machine Stops” functions as the posthumanist science-fictional inverse of the liberal-humanist realism of *Howards End* and its cultural aesthetics of proportion. “The Machine Stops” imaginatively extends that second, latent interpretation of Margaret’s cultural humanism—the fear that the humanist value of culture may only be a contingent symbolic brake or residual aesthetic frame, increasingly inadequate to an infrastructural world-in-flux. “The Machine Stops” is the futuristic historical destination of the “nomadic society” haunting the imaginative margins of *Howards End*. What, then, is the place of culture in the twentieth century? Are Margaret’s aesthetics of cultural proportion, which scale the world to her individual comprehension so that she might “see it whole,” a residual and obsolescent aesthetic mode in an infrastructural world that is radically transforming the relationship between humans and their environments, or is culture an historically vital and urgent symbolic practice that needs protecting and reimagining in the “infrastructure era” of the twentieth century? Forster seems clearly to favor the second view, but the representational tension between these two texts, written simultaneously, lays bare the wider historical contradiction from which these questions arise and that this dissertation traces across a series of writers who approach the infrastructure era not as existential threat so much as imaginative opportunity.
Modernism vs./as Media

The late-nineteenth-century spread of technical infrastructure—railways, standards, arrangements of urban space—enabled new forms of social connection that transformed how both artists and sociologists modeled the relationship between self and society in a globalizing world. While networked communications and transportation technologies certainly spread across much of Europe and the United States prior to the turn of the twentieth century, the world-scale proliferation of infrastructural technologies intensified to an unprecedented degree in the final decade of the nineteenth century. As Robert Millward notes of the British context: “The growth of the urban infrastructure was the most dynamic element in the British economy from the 1870s to the 1930s. Even if one ignores housing, the investment in public health, local transport, policing, water, electricity and gas was accounting, by the early 1900s, for one quarter of all capital formation in Britain.”


geopolitical, spatio-temporal and cultural-imaginative upheaval that would have attended such a rapid and complete transformation of the global technology environment. Michael Rubenstein reminds us that the term “infrastructure” only attained its settled, familiar conceptual coherence in the New Deal context of the 1930s. In the first decade of the twentieth century, this terminological-conceptual lack meant that “the nature, context, meaning, and portent of the national electrical grid was unknown and mysterious for those who lived through its construction.”

As Maud Ellmann has shown, new networked technologies unsettled basic social distinctions between inside and outside, autonomy and relationality, “insinuat[ing] the public in the private sphere, creating mysterious and uncontrollable relations of dependency.” For literary artists, this extraordinary experience of socio-technical transformation raised pressing questions about the changing social function of literature in a rapidly transforming media environment.

In the case of “The Machine Stops,” the totalizing social saturation of new infrastructural technologies spurred Forster to rethink the boundaries between culture and technology, human and nonhuman. Joseph Conrad shared a similar apprehension, describing in his correspondence a totalizing “knitting machine” that “knits us in…and knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the

29 Ellmann, The Nets of Modernism, 2.
Conrad’s knitting machine literalizes Forster’s shared intuition that infrastructure was becoming a machinic agency materially holding “us” together, becoming the very form of social life. This idea of social form expresses itself in literary form. As I will elaborate in chapter 3, the convoluted, experimental narrative form of Conrad’s 1907 novel The Secret Agent stages the developmental logic of nineteenth-century Bildung (“culture”) against the infrastructural chronicity of standardized time (“technology”). A novelistic knitting machine, The Secret Agent traces the cohesion of London “society” not to interpersonal sympathy or shared culture, but to infrastructure: the circulation of standards that coordinate the practices and mentalities of diverse individuals. This displacement of cultural Bildung by technical infrastructure instigates wider questions about the distinctiveness of the novel in a diversifying media ecology: To what extent is the modern novel distinctive from other kinds of communicative media as a subject-forming technology? Is personhood the result of individual moral development or the byproduct of technical mediation (the process of technological “human-becoming” that media theorist Bernard Stiegler calls “hominization”)?

Does literature serve a higher cultural purpose, or is it simply another technology of personhood?

---


Conrad and Forster’s shared apprehension of infrastructure as a newly powerful agent of social mediation invites literary scholars to rethink what we mean by media in modernist studies. No single theorist has been more influential in orienting literary approaches to media studies than Friedrich Kittler. One reason for my own focus on the axial year of 1900 stems from that year’s significance in Kittler’s media history and theory. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Kittler influentially cast 1900 as the arrival-date of a new discourse network characterized by media technologies (the titular film, gramophone, typewriter) that indexically capture the optical, acoustic and temporal effects of the real—for the first time producing new technical-experiential regimes that break literature’s monolithic hold on “culture.” Kittler saw human beings as the effect of an antiquated discourse network constrained by the uncontested monopoly of writing—a pre-1900 historical condition in which meaning was hegemonically filtered through the hermeneutics of alphabetic language. If the cultural monopoly of literature allowed “so-called Man” to “mistake information for spirit,” then the 1900 discourse network dissolves this humanist spiritual “essence” into the “apparatuses” that comprise its technical-material substrate: “So-called Man is split up into physiology and information technology.”

Kittler’s media theory has rightly exerted a powerful influence in modernist studies, providing an historically-specific account of the ways in which our media environments determine the capacities and limits of the human sensorium. Recent studies

---

by Mark Goble, Sara Danius, David Trotter and Richard Menke all implicitly or explicitly reflect Kittler’s structuring influence.\(^{33}\) Each of these studies coordinates the distinctive stylistic and formal innovations of modern literature with new media technologies. Danius, for example, persuasively argues that “the emergence of modernist aesthetics signifies the increasing internalization of technological matrices of perception.”\(^{34}\) Some of these studies focus on a clearly delimited subset of “new media objects”: “technologies of perception” (Danius), “transmission systems that directly incorporate or adapt writing” (Menke); while others offer a more flexible media archive: “mediums and materialities of communication” (Goble), both “communication”-based and “storage”-based devices (Trotter). Both Goble and Trotter analyze a wider array of new media objects in order to highlight a deep concern with “communication” as that which unites modernism and its modernizing media environment. What media gives to modernism, Trotter tells us, is “an idea about the prosthetic enhancement of our capacity to communicate.”\(^{35}\) This heuristic of “communication” allows Goble and Trotter to reclaim the human from Kittler’s combative antihumanism and connects their studies to the other major vector of research in “modernism and media”: global information networks. Recent studies by Mark Wollaeger, James Purdon and Damien Keane have

---


\(^{34}\) Danius, *The Senses of Modernism,* 2.

\(^{35}\) Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age,* 2.
recast modernism as the literary prehistory of the “information age.”

If the early-twentieth century was the period in which “information…emerged as both the basis of modern political power and one of its primary objects of attention and control,” then these scholars have shown how “information” became newly visible and thinkable as an object of literary representation. Wollaeger, for example, casts British modernism and modern propaganda as competing information technologies, interrelated “mechanisms for coping with information flows that had begun to outstrip the processing capacity of the mind.”

Each of these scholars describes a version of Anglophone literary modernism that absorbs the qualities of new media objects and technologies: contact with a realm of new media complexifies and strengthens the literary. While this mode of analysis has vastly enriched our understanding of the relationship between “media” and “modernism,” these studies deepen and entrench Kittler’s structuring distinction between media on the one hand and literature on the other, even as those domains may increasingly resemble each other. The next step for media-theoretical approaches to modernist studies requires

---


scholars to engage not only with Kittler’s history of the mediated human sensorium but also with his (and many other media theorists’) view of literature as a kind of residual *anti-media* that dissolved into technical obsolescence in the post-1900 discourse network.

Kittler’s aggressive anithumanism repudiates the literary as enfeebled other to media. Books circa 1900 register primarily “an aesthetics of terror”: the formal experimentation of modernism is one last aesthetic gasp, as literature reflexively recognizes itself as an “information technology whose monopoly is now coming to an end.” Are the infrastructural fictions of Forster and Conrad, Tarde and Kipling, merely the stylistic trace of this decomposing human spirit? Against Kittler’s (in)famous assertion that “media determine our situation,” charting a one-directional vector from media objects to the capacities of human agency, Forster and Conrad both theorize a more dynamic relationship between humans and media, culture and technology. Time standardization competes with Dickens. Arnoldian sweetness and light competes with the encroaching red rust. Rather than dissolve the literary along with the human, *pace* Kittler, Conrad, Wells, Forster, Chesnutt, Du Bois and Gilman all recognize literature as *media*: texts that self-consciously *mediate* between a human reader and the wider world. The convoluted narrative chronology of *The Secret Agent*, for example, formally dramatizes the way that media technologies (Greenwich time, mass-circulated newspapers, the novel) structure and condition the social experience of temporality. Conrad’s novel-as-knitting machine reflexively apprehends its social function as literal *middle* between

---

39 Ibid., xl.  
40 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xxxix.
human readers and a rapidly transforming media environment by travestying the standardized socio-temporal logic of infrastructural modernity, projecting an alternate, disruptive experience of time. The example of Conrad suggests that infrastructural modernism not only represents but also serves as a kind of medial infrastructure of its own.

One important model for this approach to modernism-as-media is Kate Marshall’s *Corridor*, which reads early-twentieth-century US fiction as a reflexive media technology alongside infrastructure, transit networks, and domestic architecture, each “encod[ing] their own communicative processes.” Marshall’s study is exemplary for rethinking the “distinction between form (for representing communications) and medium (through which communication happens)” in modernism by demonstrating how corridors “simultaneously operate as form and medium” in the early-twentieth-century American novel. Marshall calls on literary scholars to recognize “the adverbial and adjectival dimensions of media: how they work, and how fiction observes its own operations through them.” This entails reading media as process rather than a delimited set of static objects. Objects only become media through historically-concrete social practices and relationships—by actually mediating—rather than a timeless inner essence or static ontology. What was once media may not be tomorrow. As Marshall explains, we need “to account for how things like spatial structures, technologies, and systems have the

---

42 Ibid., 37.
43 Ibid., 2.
capacity to become media in a local historical constellation.”

It is this attention to mediation as historically-specific social process that differentiates Marshall’s understanding of infrastructure from that of Rubenstein in *Public Works*, who focuses on the ideological “imaginative link[s]” between infrastructure and art within Irish literature, rather than on the kind of formally reflexive mediality that Marshall describes. Marshall helps us to rethink how we adjudicate what is and is not “media” in modernist studies. But returning to the imaginative proximity of culture and infrastructure in Forster circa 1909, the question still remains: In the twentieth century, is “culture” subsumable to “infrastructure”? To begin to answer this question we need first to ask: How exactly does infrastructure shape the experience of modern social life?

This is an abstract, challenging question that scholars across the humanities have begun of late to embrace. Over the past two decades, an interdisciplinary array of scholars across the history of technology (Edwards), urban studies (Easterling), cultural criticism (Parks), sociology (Bowker/Star), media philosophy (Peters), anthropology (Larkin) and social theory (Berlant) have newly theorized the interrelationship of media, infrastructure and environment in shaping the experience of modern social life.

---

44 Ibid.
for a wider conception of “media” than the objects and institutions through which human beings communicate and store data, this newer direction in media studies maintains that media comprise a kind of environment that both enables and constrains the capacities of human agency. Paul Edwards has argued, for example, that infrastructure functions “as environment, as social setting, … as the invisible, unremarked basis of modernity itself.” Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity,” 186.

Infrastructure gives shape “both conceptually and practically” to the very experience of living in “society” such that “to construct infrastructures is simultaneously to construct a particular kind of nature, a Nature as Other to society and technology.” Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity,” 189.

More recently, Keller Easterling has drawn attention not to the clandestine agency of infrastructure as “hidden substrate” or “binding medium,” but rather to infrastructure as “the overt point of contact and access between us all—the rules governing the space of everyday life.” Easterling, Extrastatecraft, 11.

Infrastructural technologies mediate dynamic constellations of space, information and power in ways that exceed older conceptual mediations of political agency like the nation-state, generating “de facto forms of polity faster than even quasi-official forms of governance can legislate them.” What both Edwards and Easterling suggest is that in the twentieth century to think about media is to think about

---


48 Ibid., 189.

49 Easterling, Extrastatecraft, 11.

50 Ibid., 15.
environment—and to think about environment is to think about media, technology, and infrastructure. This idea has recently been developed by John Durham Peters, who extends “media” beyond its conventional humanist referent, the “distributors of messages and meanings designed on a human scale.”51 Instead, he argues, “[t]he old idea that media are environments can be flipped: environments are also media.”52 If we widen our understanding of media to the “enabling environments that provide habitats for diverse forms of life,” then we can recognize media as that which mediates between human beings and the natural world, “always in the middle between sea, earth, and sky.”53 Media studies, then, is reimagined as “a form of philosophical anthropology, a meditation on the human condition, which also means a meditation on the nonhuman condition.”54 Lauren Berlant brings this environmental model of mediation back to her infrastructural social theory. What distinguishes infrastructure, she argues, from “system or structure” is that it allows us to conceptualize “the movement or patterning of social form.”55 Infrastructure “is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure…all the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation.”56

52 Ibid., 3.
53 Ibid., 3, 12
54 Ibid., 12.
What Edwards, Easterling, Peters and Berlant all diversely emphasize is the unique agency of modern infrastructure to shape human beings’ relationship not only with each other but also with the natural world. If infrastructure holds us, as Berlant says, in “a world-sustaining relation,” how do we theorize that world? Do we follow Peters and recognize the continuity between natural and socio-technical media environments, the mediation of human and nonhuman? Or, following Edwards, is our apprehension of modern social life fundamentally shaped by a conception of “Nature as Other to society and technology”? These are questions that Forster, Kipling, Conrad, Wells and Gilman first surveyed at the dawn of the twentieth century. But not only were these ideas explored in literary form—at the same time, these same questions regarding the relationship between nature and society were adjudicated in the codifying disciplinary protocols of academic sociology. As infrastructure shaped and decomposed “society,” sociology emerged to conceptualize and to theorize it. Returning to these turn-of-the-century sociological debates clarifies the intellectual stakes underlying the literary experiments of infrastructural modernism—and why those aesthetic forms constitute a vital imaginative resource for our own infrastructural present.

Social Facts and Fiction

Human beings are, of course, distinctive. But how we represent, conceptualize, and image that distinctiveness has crucial socio-political consequences. How do our conceptual paradigms and aesthetic forms lead us to highlight certain kinds of

relationality and to efface or obscure others? And to what extent might these occlusions conform to—or even sustain—the structural inequality of the modern world-system? The sociological paradigms codified at the turn of the twentieth century continue to structure how we understand the distinctiveness of human social relations and the autonomy of human culture in the present. But what alternative conceptual or aesthetic possibilities might we reclaim by returning to these early sociological debates—recovering the internal complexity and contested nature of turn-of-the-century efforts to conceptualize the distinctiveness of human social life?

Mary Poovey traces the “gradual consolidation of a distinctively ‘social’ domain” to proto-sociological efforts in Britain “to comprehend—to understand, measure, and represent—the poverty that seemed increasingly visible in the last three decades of the eighteenth century.”57 Into the nineteenth century, a widening tension between representation and measurement (as itself a kind of representation) increasingly came to structure European social theory. Oscillating between a “scientific orientation” and “hermeneutic attitude,” a distinctively sociological discourse began to take shape in competition with literary realism: an “inner-disciplinary process of purification” in which sociology repudiated its originary proximity to the aesthetic in order to attain epistemological capital within a burgeoning social-scientific knowledge-system that privileged analysis and systemization above description and classification.58 As Susan

Mizruchi has shown, in the late-nineteenth century a semi-undifferentiated “general group of disciplines”—including sociology, economics, anthropology, and psychology—“reached their critical emergent point at the turn of the twentieth century, when they were institutionalized...as academic disciplines...and codified in the works of major social scientific theorists particular to each field.”

Into the twentieth century, as the study of society became an academic profession subdivided into the distinct disciplines of social science, sociologists “inherited the assumption that a singular logic provided the unseen dynamic of social life” and sought to conceptualize the particular mechanisms, laws and patterns that distinguish human social life from other kinds of relation.

The most influential figure in establishing these disciplinary protocols for modern sociology was Émile Durkheim. In the preface to his sociological study of suicide, Durkheim insists that sociology’s most pressing intellectual task is to delimit its own particular object—to locate the ontological domain that is distinctively sociological: “Indubitably for sociology to be possible, it must above all have an object all its own. It must take cognizance of a reality which is not in the domain of other sciences.” This special domain is what he seeks to locate inductively through the practical application of

differentiated from literary modes” over the course of the nineteenth century, as literature and sociology contested with one another the claim to offer the key orientation for modern civilization and to constitute the guide to living appropriate to industrial society” (1). What Lepines does not consider is that these internal debates and processes of inner-disciplinary differentiation continued to gain complexity into the twentieth century.

60 Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 1.
sociological method—using statistical analysis to uncover the social patterning underlying even the most seemingly intimate or personal domains of human behavior.

Durkheim codifies these methods and the distinctively social ontology that they disclose in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). The first task that Durkheim undertakes in *The Rules* is to distinguish the specificity of sociology from both biology and psychology:

> Every individual drinks, sleeps, eats, or employs his reason…. If therefore these facts were social ones, sociology would possess no subject matter peculiarly its own, and its domain would be confused with that of biology and psychology…. [I]n reality there is in every society a clearly determined group of phenomena separable, because of their distinct characteristics, from those that form the subject matter of other sciences of nature.  

Because every individual eats and sleeps, these behaviors are not *social*, but rather belong to the animal domain of biology. The task of the sociologist is to locate those activities that exceed or press upon individual interiority (the realm of psychology) without bleeding into the wider transspecies domain of nature. Throughout *The Rules* Durkheim epistemologically delimits and describes the privileged object of sociology, the social fact: “a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him.” Two primary features characterize the social fact: they are external to the individual, and they exert a

---

63 Ibid., 52.
coercive force on those individuals who comprise society. Thus for Durkheim “society” is separate not only from biological nature, but also the individual; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The ontological distinction between individual and society lies at the heart of Durkheim’s sociological system. This separable externality of society from the individual allows Durkheim to conclude that the “first and most basic rule is to consider social facts as things.” More than a tentative mental construct or posited concept, the thingliness of the social fact allows Durkheim to assert for sociology the objectivity of the positivist natural sciences—and thus to grant sociology an autonomous domain of study distinct from biology (with its connection to “nature”). These criteria of quasi-scientific objectivity enable Durkheim to distinguish between “normal” social facts

64 Ibid., 56. “A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals.”
65 Ibid. “It is in each part because it is in the whole, but far from being in the whole because it is in the parts.”
66 This conceptual impasse between the individual and society is the basis of Adorno’s influential critique that Durkheim reifies society. Describing “the peculiar tendency of Durkheim’s entire sociology…to posit the thing-like quality of society as something positive, to submit to it,” Adorno challenges Durkheim’s “inclination to repeat the process of reification and autonomization, to which society is subject through its immanent laws, within sociology, instead of critically and dissolving it.” Durkheim’s concept of the social fact thus actively “suppresses that fact that the concept of society refers to a relationship between people.” (Theodor Adorno, Introduction to Sociology, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Christoph G ö dde (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 37.) Adorno thus echoes the Tardean critique of Durkheim that I will elaborate in the pages to come; the difference between Adorno and Tarde is that Adorno conceives the relational mediation of “society” wholly thorough the transactional medium of “exchange, which binds together virtually all the people participating in this kind of society” (31). As we will see, Tarde insists that we conceptualize, say, financial exchange and socio-technical entanglement on the same conceptual plane.
(characterized by their generality) from the “pathological.”\textsuperscript{68} This is the full theoretical ambition of Durkheim’s sociological method: to establish a positivist science of society capable of analyzing social phenomena “beyond a purely dialectical or ideological, political diagnosis.”\textsuperscript{69} \textit{The Rules} is at its heart a critique of the claims of the individual to diagnose the structural conditions of social health in any but the most ideological manner.\textsuperscript{70} The epistemological privilege of sociology relies on the conceptual coherence of a “society” alienated not only from nature but also the self.

This total alienation of self and society is the key point of convergence between classical sociology and Georg Lukács’ early-twentieth theory of the modern novel, still a major conceptual-historical resource for novel theory in the present. In \textit{The Theory of the Novel}, Lukács describes the constitutive alienation between self and society as the key interpretive-historical condition underwriting the modern novel. In contrast to the immanence of meaning apprehensible in ancient epic, modern social life has hardened into a “world of convention” disconnected from the individualized world of the self.\textsuperscript{71} Society has become “second nature, the nature of man-made structures”:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 86. “For societies, as for individuals, health is good and desirable; sickness, on the other hand, is bad and must be avoided. If therefore we find an objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves, to allow us to distinguish scientifically health from sickness in the various orders of social phenomena, science will be in a position to throw light on practical matters while remaining true to its own method.”
\item \textsuperscript{69} Mike Gane, \textit{On Durkheim’s Rules of Sociological Method} (London: Routledge, 1988), 19.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Excepting, of course, the professional sociologist.
\end{itemize}
This second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses—meanings—which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities.72

Thus the alienation of self and society displaces and formally overtakes the more fundamental estrangement of society and nature, producing an experience of scalar irresolution between the individual subject and “a multiplicity of forms too complex for understanding.”73 The modern novel reflects this alienation of self and society through the biographical form, which mediates the fundamental estrangement at the heart of modern social life that the novel seeks to overcome: “The contingent world and the

72 Ibid., 63-64. Following his later turn to Marxism, Lukács more strongly historicizes this concept of “second nature” as the historical experience of the reification of social life in capitalist society— an idea that will become crucial for historical materialist theories of the modern novel, in which the commodity functions as the prevailing analytic unit coordinating the governing structures of capitalism and culture; chapter 3 will discuss limitations of this interpretive model in more detail. “The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created.” (Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 86)

73 Ibid., 62. For an illuminating contrast, see Marshall McLuhan’s reimagining of Lukács’ alienated second nature through the lens of media studies, recasting the body as both “first nature” and media object, endlessly entangling itself with the wider world through the “second nature” of media: “As our second nature consists entirely in our artifacts and extensions and the grounds and narcoes they impose, their etymologies are all to be found in first nature, the wild body. They have no hierarchy or orderly sequence; they subsume, obsolete, retrieve, extend each other, burrow on each other, hybridize, and miscegenate endlessly.” (Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, Laws of Media: The New Science (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 116). To some extent, these two formulations contain in miniature the competing conceptualizations of the relationship among body-media-world that this dissertation will trace within modernist literary form circa 1900.
problematic individual are realities which mutually determine one another.”74 The literary forms that Lukács values—critical realism, the historical novel—are those which strive to overcome this alienation through the horizon of collectivity, that mediate the dialectical synthesis of individual and social collective in narrative form.75

Lukacs’ literary-critical project has remained vital into the twenty-first century most visibly and influentially through the evolving career of Fredric Jameson. Lukacs’ and Jameson’s key shared insight is that the modern novel reflects and seeks to overcome a structuring irresolution between individual experience and a wider collective realm or horizon of meaning—a formal dialectics that Jameson has more recently glossed “the drama of the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality.”76 But it is through this concept of totality that Jameson’s (and Lukács’) connection to Durkheim is most evident. The following passage from Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of Religious Life serves as epigraph to Jameson’s The Political Unconscious:

Since the world expressed by the total system of concepts is the world as society represents it to itself, only society can furnish the generalized notions according to which such a world must be represented…Since the universe exists only insofar as it is thought, and since it can be thought totally only by society itself, it takes its place within society, becomes an element of its inner life, and society may thus be seen as that total genus beyond which nothing else exists. The very concept of totality is but the abstract form of the concept of society: that whole which includes all things, that supreme class under which all other classes must be subsumed.77

---

74 Ibid., 78.
In this Durkheimian model of the social, totality is society, which has achieved autonomy over a natural realm that is inaccessible, alien, ontologically other. The world does not exist outside of our collective representations of it. Nature, biology, psychology, materiality—all are subsumable to society, contained within (or, rather, produced through) its “total system of concepts.” The furthest reaches of totality are simultaneous with the borders of society; the limit of the social is the boundary beyond which nothing else exists. To some extent, Durkheim’s totality is the symmetric inverse of Lukács’ “second nature”: nature become social, fully overtaken by human symbolization.

But why does this totalizing, humanist model of the social matter for our interpretations and valuations of modern literary form? In the conclusion to The Political Unconscious, Jameson discusses the epigraph, stressing the utopian, collective dimension of religion in Durkheim’s theory: the “symbolic affirmation of the unity of a given tribe, collectivity, or…social formation.”78 Jameson ascribes to “cultural production” the socially symbolic function of Durkheimian religion: both reflect “nostalgia for the collective and the Utopian” in a fragmented, class-divided world.79 The novel, then, symbolically affirms the promise of utopian collectivity underlying the atomizing agency of modern society. But we do well to remember Susan Mizruchi’s characterization of Durkheimian sociology as itself a substitute for religion—a secular replacement for the lost universal: “social science confronted the waning reliability of universal ideals—faith

---

79 Ibid.
in God, the valuation of human life—by offering its own methods as a replacement.”

Durkheim’s theory in particular transfers “allegiance from the overwhelming Jewish orthodoxy of his youth” to “the equally cohesive modern symbolic system called ‘society.’” Sociology—as a kind of secular, socially cohesive universal—in this sense *produces* the alienation that it ostensibly *diagnoses*: theorizing an ontologically distinct, fully humanist domain generated out of its own anthropocentric conceptual apparatus. Sociology symbolizes the world via a “total system of concepts” that both *analyze* and *generate* the fundamental alienation of the individual not only from “society” but also from “nature.”

Jameson connects Durkheim’s secular theology with “one of the most urgent tasks of Marxist theory today”: the development of a new conceptual apparatus capable of imaging the utopian collective to come, “a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere appellation of terms drawn from individual experience.” Jameson admits the limitation of Durkheim’s sociological framework of the collective consciousness (like Lukács’ class consciousness) is its “reliance on categories of the individual subject…. an unrigorous and figurative assimilation of the consciousness of the individual subject to the dynamics of groups.”

Nonetheless, however:

> Until this task is completed, it seems possible to continue to use a Durkheimian or Lukácsian vocabulary of collective consciousness or of the subject of history ‘under erasure,’ provided we understand that any such discussion refers,

---

81 Ibid., 9.
83 Ibid.
not to the concepts designated by such terms, but to the as yet untheorized object—the collective—to which they make imperfect allusion.84

Acknowledging the need for new trans-individual concepts, Jameson casts the Durkheimian social totality as a conceptual placeholder en route to an as-yet-untheorized logic of the collective. Lukacsean and Jamesonian models of interpretive critique remain tremendously influential to novel theory in the present. But the wider question that we need to pose is whether the constitutive anthropocentrism of Jameson’s dialectical history, Lukács’ Marxist humanism, and Durkheim’s social totality have blocked our ability to conceptualize the collective from the very start?

Jameson and Lukács inherit from Durkheim a model of human social relations premised on the conceptual polarity—and subsequent dialectical reconciliation—of self and society, a model of art that I call the “self-and-society” dialectic. Lukács’ biographical form, Jameson’s “drama of incorporation”: for both theorists, these narrative forms mediate history in terms of the dialectical ir/reconciliation of the individual to the wider social totality. But as we saw with Durkheim, this “self-and-society” dialectic entails the constitutive alienation of nature and society, the ontological autonomy of human social relations from the biological processes of nature and other forms of human/nonhuman entanglement. An urgent question for novel theory in the present is whether narrative forms and interpretive models of art premised on the constitutive alienation not only of self and society, but also of nature and society, can conceptualize, image, or grasp the genuinely utopian collective to which Jameson’s Marxist dialectics

84 Ibid.
aspire. A major claim of this project is that the humanist dialectics of the “self-and-society” paradigm are incapable of imaging new conceptualizations of *humans-in-nature*, new narrative forms and aesthetic mediations of human/nonhuman entanglement. As recent scholarship across the humanities has shown, the ontological split of nature and society is not only an epistemic rift experienced within the painfully alienated modernist psyche—it is also a social distinction wielded in service of patriarchy, racial domination, colonialism, and environmental expropriation. The burgeoning critical impulse to

---

dissolve the nature/society binary compels literary scholars to develop new interpretive methods and literary histories that rethink the Durkheimian alienation of nature and society.

I outline this genealogy of sociological humanism not in order to discard the concept of “totality” for novel theory, but in order to rethink the conceptual paradigms through which we recognize the modern novel’s “aspiration towards totality.” Against the humanist dialectic of self-and-society, it has become necessary to bring to the foreground an alternative conceptualization of the social long suppressed by the institutional victory and intellectual centrality of Durkheimian social theory. Two animating questions emerge: (1.) Can literary scholars excavate positive alternatives to the Durkheimian model of society (i.e., ontologically distinct both from nature and the individuals who comprise it)? (2.) How might these new conceptualizations reframe both the methods and objects of modern literary study? If we decenter the dialectical relationship between the liberal subject and the societies composed of and authorized by such subjects, what new forms of association or relationality emerge? And what kinds of literary forms come to the fore? Given the intensifying technological entanglement of human and nonhuman agency via proliferating world-scale infrastructure, does an anthropocentric model of “society” any longer make sense? It is through this lens that Durkheimian sociological humanism begins to look like a conservative or reactionary intellectual response to the unprecedented socio-technical mediation of the late-

---

86 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 198.
nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—a sort of conceptual-symbolic brake on the intensifying hybridization of collective human agency.

In the chapters that follow, I analyze texts (many marginal, semi-canonical or uneasily peripheral to the modernist canon) that disrupt or irritate the classical form of the “self-and-society” dialectic. Destabilizing the ontological limits or political coherence of “society” unsettles the stable centrality of the self (and vice versa). *The Marrow of Tradition*, for example, parodies the conventions of realist protagonism in order to hide its *real* protagonist in plain sight. Chesnutt distributes the majority of his narrative attention to an evident protagonist, Dr. Miller. But this narrative space does not dramatize Miller’s heroic agency, moral virtue or distinguished selfhood so much as ironize his lack of historical agency by the novel’s conclusion. Instead, Janet, his narratively marginalized wife, attains symbolic power by repudiating bourgeois values and refusing to step into the position of the liberal subject, opening the novel to a wider symbolic horizon than the middle-class social world of the Jim Crow South that had seemed its evident referent. Through Janet and other marginalized characters, Chesnutt imagines new forms of social recognition rooted in the material body—the marrow of tradition—and its wider socio-technical environment. Only by reimagining the self, Chesnutt suggests, can we reimagine society. At the same time, we can begin to recognize a continuity between Chesnutt’s representation of Janet’s social power and the wider discourses of Darwinian feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman who resisted the socially-reproductive, infrastructural function of female domestic labor by recasting the socially-delimited and symbolized female body as a potent and evolving natural agency.
Both Chesnutt and Gilman imagine a new kind of selfhood that transforms oppressive social environments only by repudiating autonomy in favor new kinds of entanglement with wider nonhuman agencies.

Pursuing different motivations and often to very different ends, each of the texts that I analyze asks what happens to the form of the modern novel when the totality to which it aspires is no longer fully human. These texts exemplify what I call the “self-in-society” model of modern novelistic form, whose conceptualization of human sociality I trace to the turn-of-the-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde, Durkheim’s most significant intellectual rival in the first decade of the twentieth century. I am not claiming that all of the literary artists that I analyze had read or were even familiar with Tardean sociology. Rather, Tarde’s institutional and intellectual confrontations with Durkheim present us with an actual, historical alternative to the dominant Durkheimian conceptualization of human social life—one that offers a positive conceptualization of human/nonhuman entanglement beyond the mere negation of the “human,” “subject” or “society.” Tarde’s sociology not only helps us to model alternative ontologies, epistemologies and politics that decenter the liberal subject, but also suggests new modes for apprehending how modern literary form might mediate the “modernity” of a technologizing world.

A Tardean Counterfactual History of the Novel

To engage the work of Gabriel Tarde in the present is to imagine a counterfactual history of twentieth-century social theory: What if Durkheimian sociology had been forced to confront an active intellectual competitor from its earliest days of institutional codification? Like Durkheim, Tarde sought to conceptualize the distinctiveness of human
social life—to theorize the mechanisms and limits of social cohesion in a globalizing world. But Tarde’s social theory undoes almost all of Durkheim’s epistemological assumptions: the ontologically-distinct “thingliness” of society; the autonomy of human culture; the priority of the macro scale over the micro, of law and structure over process and historical contingency. Recognized as Durkheim’s direct rival in the late-nineteenth century, Tarde was appointed over Bergson to the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France in 1900. And yet Tarde’s distinctive approach to social theory appears to have disappeared soon after his death in 1904. Tarde died “without leaving a school or group of followers in either France or in the English-speaking world” and has for the most part been remembered as Durkheim’s vanquished and unmethodical antagonist.87 The first glimmerings of a Tardean revival emerged via the 1968 publication of Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, in which Tarde is presented as an early and important theorist of difference, the originator of a micro-sociology that rejects impersonal, totalizing explanations of social phenomena in favor of infinitesimal processes of opposition and invention. Tarde’s influence is even more overt in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.88 This Deleuzian recovery has instigated a slow but quickening vivification of

---

87 Matei Candea, “Revisiting Tarde’s house,” in *The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments*, ed. Matei Candea (London: Routledge, 2010), 6. Latour is correct to note that Tarde has “maintained a steady constituency in the United States because of his work on imitation, influence and media and has been considered a founding father of communication studies,” but that this view of Tarde’s media sociology neglects the more radical aspects of his social theory. (Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” in *The Social in Question*, ed. Patrick Joyce (London: Routledge, 2014), 131.)

88 See in particular the “Micropolitics and Segmentarity” chapter, which discusses Tardean social theory as the conceptual bedrock of the micropolitics/micropolitics distinction. (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and
interest in Tarde’s sociology, and contemporary social theorists have begun to wonder whether “we might be witnessing the configuration of a new sociological paradigm (new syntax and new concepts), in which Tarde officiates as a major founder.”89 This Tardean revival has been more lively in France, a result of the recent republication of Tarde’s extensive and diverse corpus. But the recent translation of many of Tarde’s major works into English has accelerated Tarde’s belated revival in the anglophone world.

The contemporary reawakening to Tarde circulates around no figure so much as Bruno Latour, who explicitly names Tarde the “venerable ancestor” and “forefather” of his Actor-Network Theory.90 What connects the social theory of Latour and Tarde across a full century is their shared repudiation of the Durkheimian model of society: estranged from nature, alienated from the self.91 Latour questions the existence of a specific realm, domain or set of phenomena that could be distinguished as “social” and instead calls upon theorists to trace the interlocking varieties, scales and intensities of association among heterogeneous elements (ideas, objects, persons and so on) that constitute the fundamental relationality of modern social life. Latour’s critique of “the sociology of the

---

89 Sergio Tonkonoff, From Tarde to Deleuze and Foucault: The Infinitesimal Revolution (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 27. Tonkonoff convincingly rewrites the intellectual history of twentieth-century social theory from the perspective Tarde, whom Tonkonoff casts as inaugurating an “infinitesimal revolution” that lays the intellectual foundation connecting Foucault’s microphysics of power, Deleuze’s metaphysics of difference and creative repetition, and Latour’s Actor-Network Theory.


91 See the introduction to Reassembling the Social. “It is no longer clear whether there exists relations that are specific enough to be called ‘social’ and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function as ‘a society’” (2).
social” has had a far-reaching impact across the humanistic disciplines. Within literary studies, his polemic against critical demystification has been tremendously influential in guiding the recent impulse to theorize new forms of postcritical method.\(^{92}\) Latour’s growing influence on how scholars conceive the domain, protocols and political efficacy of literary method is both a model and a provocation for my own return to Tarde. If Tarde has proven a vital conceptual resource for social theorists in the present, what does it mean that this alternative to sociological humanism emerged in the turn-of-the-century context in competition with Durkheim? Might Tarde represent a wider conceptual orientation within early-twentieth-century social theory (and, perhaps, literary fiction) that can be traced to other writers? If Durkheim’s social ontology has quietly structured many of novel theory’s most enduring and influential interpretive paradigms, is there a comparable method immanent to Tardean social theory? Does Tarde have a privileged aesthetic orientation or literary form comparable to Lukács’ bourgeois realism and historical novel?

Like that of Durkheim, Tarde’s social theory addresses the elemental questions of human relationality: What is a social group? What is the nature of that group’s cohesion, the bond that holds its elements together? What are the conditions or mechanisms of

---

social transformation? Before engaging his theory on a closer textual level, we can schematize three major points of contrast between Tarde and Durkheim at the outset.

(1.) Whereas Durkheim posits society as a pre-existing domain external to the individual, Tarde refuses to theorize society as distinct from the elements that compose it.

(2.) Whereas Durkheim analyzes the coercive agency of social facts on individuals, Tarde believes that sociology should analyze forms of interrelationship among elements within social groups (in human social relations, these mechanisms of relationality are imitation, invention and opposition).

(3.) Whereas Durkheim explains the micro/lower levels by the macro/higher levels (i.e., social behavior like suicide is explained by the coercive social fact of society; society explains behavior), Tarde explains the macro/higher levels by the micro/lower levels (i.e., the historical reality of social cohesion is explained by studying the mechanisms and processes of social relationality that produce it; behavior explains society).

What unifies Tardean sociology is, pace Durkheim, the constitutive primacy of difference and change, the “affirmation that social life consists of the changing interrelation of an infinite number of agents which are irreducibly different, endlessly varied, and constantly variable.”93 Over the course of the 1890s, Tarde and Durkheim exchanged a series of increasingly pointed disputes regarding the proper methods, objects and purpose of sociology. By the turn of the century, these disputes had coalesced into two competing,

93 Tonkonoff, *From Tarde to Deleuze and Foucault*, 10.
recognizable models of social theory, and in 1903 their rivalry culminated in a public debate hosted at the École des hautes études sociales. Tarde passed away not soon after, and Durkheim quickly codified his institutional victory, establishing himself as the architect of modern academic sociology. This victory had the far-reaching consequence of delimiting sociology’s disciplinary field of knowledge: delimiting the autonomy of human social relations from philosophy, psychology, biology, and art. Durkheim normalized a “macrophysical” perspective of the social world: institutions over individuals; the macro scale over the micro; and laws, structures and regularities over diversity and change. From this perspective, human social relations were “hypostasized in different pairs whose poles would then be studied separately: society/individual, social representations/individual representations, state/civil society, structure/agency.” But now that social theorists are increasingly skeptical of the sharp separation of human social life from other kinds of relationality, Tarde has emerged as a compelling alternative theorist of human being-in-the-world—and intertext for modernist fiction.

The most concise, fully-developed articulation of Tarde’s distinctive sociological method is outlined in Monadology and Sociology (1893), a short tract central to the contemporary Tardean revival. More than anything, Monadology and Sociology

---

94 No transcript or record of this debate exists except for a brief overview published in On Communication and Social Influence, ed. Terry Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). A script of the debate composed from quotations from Tarde’s and Durkheim’s published works was written and performed by a group of prominent social theorists including Latour at Cambridge University in 2008 and published in The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments, ed. Matei Candea (London: Routledge, 2010), 27-43. A short snippet of the performance can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1TGYXXWue0
95 Tonkonoff, From Tarde to Deleuze and Foucault, 39.
challenges what Tarde perceives as the constitutive anthropocentrism of sociological method, “the prejudice of always considering ourselves superior to everything,” which leads social theorists to simplify and homogenize the complexity of the outside world.96 If we recognize the deep entanglement of human agency with other kinds of being, Tarde argues, sociologists will have to rethink what we mean by “society” from the ground up. The central, animating insight of Monadology and Sociology is that all of nature—organic and inorganic—consists of societies. “[E]verything is a society…every phenomenon is a social fact.”97 To disarticulate “society” from the specifically human entails reimagining society not as an entity or domain, but as a kind of relationship, as “each individual’s reciprocal possession, in many highly varied forms, of every other.”98 This conceptual gear-shift from essence to relation is addressed both to sociology and philosophy.99 He calls upon both to replace the obsession with being, essence, and substance to a new focus on relationship, entanglement and transformation:

All philosophy hitherto has been based on the verb Be, the definition of which was the philosopher’s stone, which all sought to discover. We may affirm that, if it had been based on the verb Have, many sterile debates and fruitless intellectual exertions would have been avoided. From this principle, I am, all the subtlety in the world has not made it possible to deduce any existence other than my own: hence the negation of external reality. If, however, the postulate I have is posited as the fundamental fact, both that which has and that which is had are given inseparably at once…. The concrete and substantial concept which one discovers

97 Ibid., 28 (italics in original).
98 Ibid., 51.
99 For Tarde, sociology is continuous with philosophy: both theorize the distinctiveness of human experience within a wider, radically entangled world. This is of course a primary source of his appeal to thinkers like Latour and especially Deleuze. For a more technical discussion of the relationship between Tardean sociology and philosophy, see Theo Lorenc’s afterword to his recent translation of Monadology and Sociology (2012).
in oneself is, therefore, that of having. Instead of the famous *cogito ergo sum*, I would prefer to say: *I desire, I believe, therefore I have.*

Tarde envisions a model of sociology not premised on the synchronic classification of social groups within a static typological grid—but that instead examines the ever-shifting vectors of relationship that both pre-exist and constitute the self. Tarde asks us “to decompose the reifying notions of our habitual vocabulary”—self, society, nation, institution—by “reconstructing the specific processes of configuration and dissemination that those notions only capture in their results.”

If relationship is prior to being, then neither individuals nor societies (the starting points of Durkheimian sociology) pre-exist this relation but are in fact constituted by and within it. Both individual and society are outcomes which must be explained, not self-evident entities from which explanations proceed. The ontological condition of the world is animate and interconnected, not bifurcated or alienated. Tarde thus asks to rethink the standpoint of sociology: from the secure humanist frame of the Cartesian cogito to new forms of relationality that unsettle our notions of scale, being, and perspective.

So what, then, are the aesthetics of Tarde’s social theory? Given its quick obsolescence in the early-twentieth century, Tardean theory does not have a Lukács or Jameson: a major literary-interpretive extension and expansion of its social model. While

---

100 Gabriel Tarde, *Monadology and Sociology*, 52.
101 Tonkonoff, *From Tarde to Deleuze and Foucault*, 34.
102 For more on this idea, see Lorenc, afterword to *Monadology and Sociology*, 76.
103 Candea offers a helpful clarification of this somewhat difficult point: “Tarde’s radical move is to expand the discussion beyond the chicken-and-egg alternation of human individuals and the relations between them, by inscribing this contrast within a much broader multi-scalar, indeed cosmic, perspective” (“Revisiting Tarde’s house” 8).
this introduction can only begin to approach this larger critical task, we can look to
Latour as a representative model for both why and how to extend Tarde’s insights into
the present. Latour’s critique in *Reassembling the Social* is that the structuring concepts
and frameworks of what he calls “the sociology of the social” (the dominant orientation
of academic sociology traceable to Durkheim) “limit[s] in advance the shape, size,
heterogeneity, and combination of associations” that social theorists are able to
describe.104 Actor-Network-Theory is a set of tools that enable sociologists to abandon
“the fixed frame of reference” that has delimited their understanding of the diverse actors,
scales, intimacies and modes of association that constitute modern social worlds.105 Tarde
figures prominently in Latour’s thought as the originary theorist of this kind of
conceptual upheaval and perspectival flexibility.106 Latour extends Tarde’s idea that
“every phenomenon is a social fact” by arguing that nonhuman agency does not designate
a domain of reality separate from society. Human and nonhuman actors should be
approached on the same conceptual plane. Latour wants us to remember that “nature” and
“society” are not timeless ontological distinctions, but concepts entrenched within and
circulated by modern thought (and, we might add, “operationalized” by modern

105 Ibid., 24.
106 For more on this conceptual relationship between Latour and Tarde, see Bruno Latour
and Vincent Antonin Lépinay, *The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to
“What makes Tarde so difficult for us to understand, after more than a century of
sociologism, is that he never places society and the individual in opposition, but, rather,
he sees the two as nothing but temporary aggregates, partial stabilizations, nodes in
networks that are completely free of the concepts contained in ordinary sociology” (9).
capitalism). “There exists no relation whatsoever between ‘the material’ and ‘the social world,’ because it is this very division which is a complete artifact.” This is not to repudiate the human subject position, but to imagine new ways of conceptualizing humans’ relationship to the wider world from within that subject position. But most suggestive for modern literary studies is Latour’s bid to replace Durkheim’s humanist “society” with a new definition of “the social”: “not a place, a thing, a domain, or a kind of stuff but a provisional movement of new associations.” Prioritizing Tardean relationship over Durkheimian essence, Latour calls for a “shift in perspective” that dissolves the thingliness of the social fact in favor of things themselves: “Things, quasi-

---

107 See, for example, Moore, “The Capitalocene, part I”: “Capitalism ‘operationalizes’ through this ontological rift of Nature/Society….Capitalism’s governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and may be fragmented, quantified and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development or some other higher good” (601).

108 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 75-76.

109 That said, I do believe that this is a weak point in Latour’s framework—drawing a line that some will be unwilling to cross. Latour’s evident confidence that the sufficiently thoughtful, careful and ingenious sociologist can theorize away the constitutive separation of subject and object is, as nearly all of post-Kantian critical philosophy tells us, naïve. Many admirers of Latour recognize this and read him anyway. (For an especially insightful example, see John Durham Peters’ discussion of Latour in the introduction to *The Marvelous Clouds*. ) Despite these limitations, Latour's thinking remains important to so many branches of contemporary humanistic scholarship because of the challenge it poses to conceptual thought-structures (say, the nature/society dualism) that clearly bolster the status quo of a late-capitalist modernity in environmental crisis. What makes the modern novel such an interesting and complex vehicle for Tardean-Latourian thought is that the subject/object distinction is baked into its very form. The modern novel—for so long rightly understood as an important (perhaps, the important) tool for the production of the liberal subject—cannot presume to dissolve fully the subject’s tragic estrangement from the wider world. This is not a limitation, but rather what makes the modernist novel such a complex mediation of history and powerful conceptual tool. As I will discuss at length in the following chapter, it should be anything but surprising that Tarde himself would choose to write a novel at the end of his career.

objects, and attachments are the real center of the social world, not the agent, person, member, or participant—nor is it society or its avatars.“111 Latour helps us to visualize the aesthetic possibilities embedded in Tardean social theory—what it looks like to disarticulate self and society and to dissolve the Durkheimian “firebreaks” that allocate historical agency to subjects and societies. To what extent can we locate this Tardean model of social life in literary fiction circa 1900, and how might this allow us to newly approach the literary history of the early twentieth century?

**Modernism and the Character-Environment Complex**

Modernism has been long understood as a radically subjectivist form of art. The “modernist novel” connotes writerly techniques—Faulkner’s stream of consciousness, Ford’s impressionism, James’ point of view—that variously express the same fundamental insight: the intractability of the monadic subject position, the fundamental estrangement of the subject from “objectivity.” If the human has become alienated from her environment, then Woolf’s “flickerings of that innermost flame” expresses not solipsism but a more authentic reality, the objectivity of subjectivity. This view of modernism centers the subject, ever-disconnected from an atomizing society and a subaltern nature. What the Tarde/Durkheim debate—and the wider codification of sociology circa 1900—signals, however, is that this modernist retreat into the subject is simultaneous with the experience of that subject’s socio-technical entanglement—the burgeoning awareness that to be a subject in the twentieth century is to experience the

---

111 Ibid., 238.
distribution of agency across the human/nonhuman divide at unprecedented intimacies and scales. Durkheim responds to this phenomenon by epistemologically delimiting “the social” from other kinds of relationships and domains. But Tarde’s response is to embrace this intensifying entanglement, to identify relationship itself as the primary object of sociology. Once we appreciate this historical tension—this active intellectual debate—between what we might anachronistically designate humanist and posthumanist models of the social, we can begin to recognize its traces in modernist form, and especially in the texts of infrastructural modernism. These texts develop strategies to represent the distribution of agency across the nature/society divide rather than allocating autonomy to the liberal subject. To highlight relationship over substance is to perceive a social world composed of “quasi-subjects” and “quasi-objects”: human agency is technical and mediated, subjects and objects share agency in ambiguous and uncertain ways, and the “outside” world of the nonhuman begins to resemble the human agency that has altered it.

It is this uncertain distribution of agency between the human and nonhuman that Wells’ Tono-Bungay (1909) captures in Uncle Teddy’s insistence that “Anglo-Saxon energy” (mediated by “threads, wires, stretching out and out…from that little office of ours, out to West Africa”) is “running the world practically.” Just a few pages later, his nephew George embarks on an undisguised journey of colonial resource extraction and begins to experience his self simultaneously as subject and object, person and infrastructural agency. But this is not the liberating self-realization of the Lukácsean

proletariat-as-historical metasubject, but rather a stripping away of individual autonomy that George tries to recover by writing an autobiographical novel, symbolically converting infrastructure back into culture. As I elaborate in chapter 2, what Wells captures in *Tono-Bungay* is not the historical dialectics of self and society, but rather the way that technology and financial capital literally overtake George’s sense of personal agency.

Wells’ effort to write a novel in which nonhuman, infrastructural agencies threaten to overtake the subject defies and problematizes the humanist dialectics of self-and-society and invites us to rethink the terms in which we evaluate, periodize and describe modern literary form. Lukács valorizes realism for its aesthetic mediation of totality, for “display[ing] the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity.” To “totalize” for Lukács is to mediate connections and contradictions within the symbolic horizon of social life. Totality does not refer to an actual, describable object so much as the aesthetic aspiration to connect disparate phenomena within a coherent social-symbolic horizon, “a living whole inseparable from man himself.” Jed Esty has shown that for the nineteenth-century novel the nation could function as this symbolic horizon—a progressive historical force against the more chaotic agencies of modernization, capitalization and empire. But this “soul-nation allegory” loses symbolic viability in the global-capitalist extension of the twentieth-century age of empire, as the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman transforms into

---

114 Ibid., 39.
modernist and colonial fictions of youth.¹¹⁵ Esty helps us to chart the transition from realism to modernism in terms of the waning symbolic horizon of social totality in modern Anglophone fiction: if realism maps totality to the symbolic form of the nation, then modernism aesthetically indexes its failure to map a totality whose symbolic horizon is dispersed into an ungraspable world-system. Tarde invites us to approach this historical framework from another vantage—to query whether the dialectic between individual and social life can mediate history in “the infrastructure era” of sociotechnical mediation. If the infrastructural entanglement of human and nonhuman agency has destabilized the ontological coherence of both self and society, then the question is no longer: Why can’t art totalize society? But rather: What happens to the novel when totality is no longer human? Or, alternatively: What happens to the dialectic when the coherence of both self and society is shaped by nonhuman agencies that defy human symbolization? In Tono-Bungay, “quap,” the energy resource that George plunders, gives representational form to this inhuman, material agency. Over the course of George’s journey, the brute, decaying materiality of quap seems slowly to adopt a life of its own and finally dissolves the hull of his ship, ruining his resource extraction scheme. Quap representationally exceeds its social designation as “natural resource,” becoming a major agent in George’s life story. Finally, George himself takes on the rank, decadent, rotten quality that had one belonged to quap: “I am, in a sense, decay.”¹¹⁶ This agential transformation of seemingly passive matter metonymizes Wells’ wider representational project: a narrative model of history

¹¹⁶ Wells, Tono-Bungay, 382.
shaped not by the dialectical reconciliation of self and society, but rather the shifting
distribution of agency between character and environment.

Against a model of history organized by the dialectical relationship of self and
society, both the sociology of Tarde and the literary example of Wells suggest an
alternative model that we might schematically call “self-in-society.”¹¹⁷ I use this
appellation to designate a number of late-realist and proto-modernist texts that displace or
unsettle the conceptual centrality and ontological coherence of both self and society.
These texts seek forms to describe the mutual constitution of character and
environment—that present human agency as technical and the natural world as
humanized. The “self-in-society” model displaces the autonomy of literary character into
what we might call “the character-environment complex:” the figural domain of
distributed agency. Character emerges through a kind of semiotic labor, a figural
personification of diverse agencies. Selfhood emerges through relationship—the
entanglement of the human body with technology, nature and other humans. These
distributed forms of human and nonhuman agency resemble the “quasi-subjects” and
“quasi-objects” that Latour extracts from Tarde. It is this quality of modern selfhood that
Forster captures when he says that modern science has “split and shattered the idea of a
‘Person,’” revealing that “there is something incalculable in each of us.” This
displacement of the self threatens the very foundation of politics, for “[h]ow, then, can
we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political

¹¹⁷ This appellation does of course risk displacing or concealing its primary Tardean-
conceptual insight: that the “self” or liberal subject does not pre-exist the various social
relationships that in fact constitute the individual subject as such.
storm?" Human beings require a kind of semiotic labor of selfhood in order to survive in the modern world: “For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the ‘self’ is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence.”118 For the liberal-humanist Forster, the social function of the modern novel is to produce and circulate the social fiction of the unsplit, autonomous self. But for many of the writers that I discuss in the chapters to come, the special value of the modern novel is that it can encode the self as social fiction by revealing the co-constitution of character and environment in infrastructural modernity.

Dialectical models of history that import a self-and-society heuristic to the modernist novel misrecognize these novels’ efforts to sustain and semiotically project a “self” whose coherence was increasingly dispersed into biological processes and technological mediation. We need to understand modernism not only in terms of the ir/reconciliation of alienated selves and societies but also in terms of the mutual constitution of character and environment, society and nature, within both the form and content of the modernist novel. Sometimes, as in the case of Wells, this aesthetic ambition is explicit and overt. Describing his feud with Henry James in Experiment in Autobiography, Wells describes the crux of their aesthetic rivalry by distinguishing the Jamesian obsession with “completely consistent characterization arranged beautifully in a story and painted deep and round and solid” to his own efforts to depict “adjustment-interest….a new instability” that “splinter[s] [the] frame” of social and aesthetic fixity.

Wells relinquishes both psychological depth and realist consistency in service of “the discussion of relationships,” subordinating “character-interest” to the dynamic co-production of selves and modernizing social worlds.\(^\text{119}\) For other writers, these aesthetic techniques are more subtle and often involve ironizing the narrative protocols of the realist novel. Tarde, in his sociological-utopian novel *Underground Man* mocks and empties the historical agency of the protagonist, who serves a crucial function before exiting the novel and ceding historical agency to an ever-changing collective in dynamic relation to its nonhuman environment. Conrad is even more explicit: as I argue in chapter 3, the aesthetic centerpiece of his 1907 novel *The Secret Agent* features an elaborate parody of Dickensian urban realism, viciously ironizing the intersubjective class politics of liberal humanism and the dialectical relationship of self-and-society that would presume to mediate modern history. Conrad parodies the culturally-ameliorative agency of humanist *Bildung* through the damaged artist-figure of Stevie whose faux-Dickensian social insight “Bad world for poor people” is both hilariously and tragically inadequate to the complex of material/symbolic, human/nonhuman, social forces that exceed the figural simplification of his realist-aesthetic gaze.

All three of these critiques share a conviction that the realist novel is shaped by a liberal humanism that scales a complex and socially-entangled world to the desires and experiences of the individual subject. Within the fiction of Conrad, Tarde and Wells, the realist novel is figured as one (or some combination) of two things: (1.) A weak and ineffectual consolation for the alienation of modern life (*Tono-Bungay*) (2.) A technology

for the production of liberal subjects (Underground Man, The Secret Agent). These texts’ literary-historical reflexivity helps us to locate and describe the specificity of infrastructural modernism within literary history while also coordinating its characteristic features with other theorizations of the modern novel

(1.) This first point, that the realist novel (understood as some version of Wells’ “completely consistent characterization arranged beautifully in a story and painted deep and round and solid”) might merely offer a sort of weak, belated consolation for a deeply damaging world is to some extent continuous with Leo Bersani’s critique of “the culture of redemption,” a model of art that “repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience.” For Bersani, challenging the culture of redemption entails displacing “the question of authoritative selfhood” through an “aesthetics of narcissism…a self-jouissance” that dissolves the person and “erases the sacrosanct value of selfhood.” This anti-redemptive aesthetic exposes the self as a kind of harmful social fiction, “a practical convenience…promoted to the status of an ethical idea…a sanction for violence.” Like Bersani’s narcissist aesthetics, infrastructural modernism contests a model of art that belatedly compensates for alienation by filtering the jagged and dispersed experience of socio-technical mediation through the conceptual prism of the self. But unlike Bersani, I am less interested in decentering the self through psychodynamics that ultimately refer aesthetic form to the horizon of individual

121 Ibid., 3–4.
122 Ibid., 4.
experience; rather, I am interested in texts that mediate socio-technical entanglement in ways that reimagine the relationship of nature and society.

If Bersani is right that the culture of redemption entails “a certain type of repetition of experience in art,” then sociological novels like Tono-Bungay resist the kind of belated or secondary temporal relationship of art to history that such a model suggests.¹²³ Wells does not console or “repair inherently damaged or valueless experience” so much as investigate how literary form actively structures and shapes how we conceptualize the relationship between human and nonhuman agency in the present and into the future. What I am suggesting is that infrastructural modernism invites us to rethink the division of labor between the “formalist” and the “sociologist” that Franco Moretti describes in Modern Epic.¹²⁴ What distinguishes literature from sociology, Moretti suggests, is that “literature follows great social changes…it always ‘comes after.’” Moretti presents a Levi-Straussian model of literature-as-myth, casting literature with a “problem-solving vocation” to reconcile the “ethical impediments, perceptual confusions, ideological contradictions” of modern social life.¹²⁵ But the sociological literature of Wells, Du Bois, Gilman, and even Forster suggest alternate models for understanding the relationship between literary form and history. It is not clear, for example, that Wells’ posthuman entanglement of protagonist, infrastructure, and nature

---

¹²³ Ibid., 1.
¹²⁵ Ibid. Thus, for example, in Moretti’s reading of modernism, stream of consciousness is an aesthetic tool to make comprehensible and livable “the countless stimuli swirling through the streets of the modern city…. It provides the metropolis with a form, and its inhabitants with a perspective” (124).
in *Tono-Bungay* symbolically resolves a pressing ideological or historical contradiction, or that it seeks “to make existence more comprehensible.”¹²⁶ I am not suggesting that Wells predicts or images a futuristic form of posthuman being before it actually exists, but rather that Wells’ fiction actively seeks to irritate, unsettle and reimagine the prevailing literary forms and conceptual structures of modern thought with the hope that they may be otherwise in the future. In the science-fictional utopia of Tarde, this kind of conceptual play can seem frivolous, but for writers deeply concerned with the lived experience of race and gender like Du Bois and Gilman, their work as sociologists opened their eyes not only to the conceptual flexibility, but also the *historical agency* of literary form. It is this understanding of literary form as conceptual tool and technique that explains Du Bois’ transition away from the academic sociology of his magisterial *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and towards the trans-medial and literary-experimental form of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In chapter 4, I argue that we can understand Du Bois’ vacillation between sociology and literature as expressive of competing impulses both to *understand* the social and to *change* it, which he often experienced in conflict. This tension is most fully expressed in his apocalyptic short story “The Comet” (1920), which casts racial domination as an as intractable historical obstacle that sociology cannot redress without wider the conceptual upheaval that only literature can imagine.

Du Bois’ vacillation between literary and sociological form mirrors the tension I have already traced in Forster circa 1909, in which the apocalyptic infrastructural posthumanism of “The Machine Stops” competes with and threatens the cultural

---

¹²⁶ Ibid., 6.
humanism and symbolic reconciliation of *Howards End*. If *Howards End* supplies the kind of belated, imaginary solution to a real-life contradiction that Moretti ascribes to literary art, then the “The Machine Stops” dramatizes the declining purchase of “culture” to reflect or mediate the material conditions of social life that such an aesthetic solution requires. It is not a coincidence that Wells (electric grid), Conrad (time standardization), Forster (the Machine), Chesnutt (mass media), Du Bois (underground urban space), Gilman (social systems of reproduction), and other turn-of-the-century writers overtly highlight the socio-technical agency of infrastructure in their sociological-literary texts. These are all reflexive texts that apprehend their own status not only as humanist cultural objects but also as *media*: texts that self-consciously *mediate* between a human reader and the wider world—that irritate, displace and reimagine the conceptual structures through which their human readers apprehend and understand themselves in relation to their material world.

(2.) This second point, that the realist novel functions as a kind of technology for the production of liberal subjects, is not exactly an original insight for contemporary novel theory. But the representation of distributed agency within infrastructural modernism displaces the centrality of the liberal subject in many of our most influential literary-theoretical paradigms for apprehending the relationship between literary character and social totality in the modern novel: Foucauldian (Miller), Political formalist (Woloch), New formalist (Levine).
In *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller describes the disciplinary function of the Victorian novel to “confirm the novel-reader in his identity as ‘liberal subject.’”

Because the novel embeds a critical relation to society that exceeds its disciplinary function, Miller shows how the novel—in its failure to form a stable subject in a stable world—does in fact habituate the reader to “a social order whose totalizing power circulates all the more easily for being pulverized.”

The Victorian novel entrenches the self within the disciplinary social order of Western liberalism. In *The One vs the Many*, Alex Woloch redefines literary characterization in terms of a “distributional matrix” that organizes “how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters.”

Woloch thus presents a humanist model of the social, in which the individual character can emerge only via its differential relationship to other characters: “the space of a particular character emerges only vis-à-vis the other characters who crowd him out or potentially revolve around him.”

In *Forms*, Caroline Levine argues that literary theory can disclose the continuity between aesthetic and social form, the “patterns of sociopolitical experience.”

Levine defines “form” as “an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping” that constitutes “the stuff of politics” by “imposing and enforcing

---

128 Ibid., xiii.
130 Ibid., 18.
boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience.”

Levine presents a model of aesthetic mediation consistent with a self-and-society model in which selves are imaginatively separable from the forms that organize or contain them.

It is important to note that all three of these studies deploy archives largely comprised of Victorian novels (despite the fact that Woloch and Levine both aspire to operationalize literary-interpretive approaches that are not historically specific). How and why does modernism—and especially the infrastructural modernism that this project assembles—displace the conceptual centrality of the liberal subject and transform the humanist model of character that these models share? Woloch begins to indicate an answer when he argues that “the realist novel is structurally destabilized not by too many details or colors or corners, but by too many people.” Realism begins to distend into something else with the inclusion of “too many people.” This same dilemma—how to represent and conceptually organize too many people—is at the heart of early twentieth-century sociology. People become “too many” not out of sheer voluminousness, (see, for example, the Homeric epic catalogue), but when the realist social categories of nation and/or class cease to organize collective social life in an infrastructural modernity that irritates the coherent symbolizations through which art mediates social cohesion. With the dissolution of these realist categories, novelists like Conrad begin to shift their reflection to the social itself, questioning and investigating the basic sources of social cohesion. Hence Conrad’s fascination with time standardization, which symbolically and

132 Ibid., 3.
133 Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 19.
materially competes with the seemingly obsolescent social function of Victorian “culture” to bind the teeming streets of London to a wider geopolitics of terror. For sociologists and modernists circa 1900, reflection on “the social” inevitably leads both to reflect on the relationship between “society” and its material-technological conditions of emergence. These material, natural and technological conditions—Conrad’s time standards, Forster’s Machine, and even the “flow” of Joyce’s “subterranean aqueduct”—dissolve the autonomy not only of the liberal subject, but also of “society” as a realm ontologically separable from the inhuman bedrock of its social power.\(^{134}\)

**Literary Studies in the Infrastructure Era**

The texts of infrastructural modernism query the limits of “the social” in a moment of unprecedented socio-technical transformation. To pose the question of “the social”—to coordinate modernism with the referent of “society”—may seem willfully archaic, naively effacing the political agency of the nation-state in wielding the infrastructural biopolitical power described above. Emblematic of this critique is David Lloyd and Paul Thomas’ appraisal of Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society*, whose “somewhat nebulous” concept of “society” prevents Williams from “adequately addressing...the gradual subordination of the institutions of culture to the work of the state.”\(^{135}\) Lloyd and Thomas’ challenge is well-taken, and chapter 4 of this dissertation

---


\(^{135}\) David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 9. According to Lloyd and Thomas, “society” is best understood as a kind of apolitical, transitional domain that “demands its actualization in pedagogical institutions whose function is to transform the individual of civil society into the citizen of the modern state” (145). “Society” exists only insofar as it produces citizen-subjects of the state.
engages in greater detail with the sociological and imaginative consequences of what Michel Foucault describes as the nineteenth-century disarticulation of “society” (constituted via “a tight grid of disciplinary coercions that actually guarantees the cohesion of the social body”) from the sovereign political body of the state. But this dissertation argues that close attention to turn-of-the-century infrastructure requires cultural scholars to reclaim the wider socio-political referent of Williams’ “society,” if wholly reconceived—reprocessed through the insights of media theory and the history of technology.

Alan Liu has recently argued that in “late modernity” infrastructure as “social-cum-technological milieu” has “the same kind of general purchase on social complexity that Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others sought when they reached for their all-purpose word, ‘culture.’” Now that scholars across both the humanities and sciences have come to appreciate the transformative technological entanglement of human and nonhuman agency in the twentieth century, humanists are called to rethink how we theorize the infrastructural mediation of—if not Williams’s “society,” then perhaps Latour’s “the social.” Modern culture is “no longer fully describable in older schemes of

136 Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 37. According to Foucault, “modern” social life is characterized by this disarticulation of society and state, in which “power is exercised through, on the basis of, and in the very play of the heterogeneity between a public right of sovereignty and a polymorphous mechanics of discipline” (38). See also Latour, Reassembling the Social, 161-164, which reframes the relationship between politics and sociology building out of this Foucauldian social-historical insight.
ideology-critique according to which infrastructure underlies an alternate, rather than thoroughly intermeshed, reality of superstructure.”

Liu expresses a growing conviction among both social and media theorists that the technological recombination of human and nonhuman agency has transformed the very logic of critical hermeneutics: future forms of critique must confront the distinctive mechanisms of socio-technical mediation if they are to have any hope in explicating the conditions of modern subjectivity and identity, power and oppression.

While Liu discusses the infrastructural conditions of contemporary digital networks, I locate the prehistory to this present in the short span of years bridging the turn of the twentieth century: in the historical co-emergence of literary modernism, the professionalizing social sciences, and the world-scale proliferation of technical infrastructure—the aesthetic, social, and technological mediations of the infrastructure era. A number of studies across media history, social theory and the history of science and technology have addressed the relationship between new forms of world-scale socio-technical transformation and the social sciences. But the relation of literature to these interdisciplinary conversations is less certain. While literary scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the “infrastructuralism” of modern literature, “infrastructure” often figures in these studies as a kind of privileged represented object bearing

---

138 Ibid., 4.
heightened ideological content or symbolic weight.\textsuperscript{140} Less attention has been directed to the kind of hermeneutic-conceptual upheaval that Liu describes: the way in which socio-technical mediation may actually transform the very conditions of \textit{meaning} in the modern world—the conditions through which “culture” mediates “nature” and “society” in a world in which ever-intensifying technological entanglement destabilizes the coherence of those very concepts.

The texts of what I call “infrastructural modernism” constitute a vital counter-aesthetic to the anthropocentrism of turn-of-the-century social science. In a chapter analyzing the “new scale of twentieth-century engineering” focused on the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt from 1898-1902, Timothy Mitchell asks why “some of the most profound transformations of the modern era, … the techno-scientific transformations of the twentieth century” pose such a deep-seated “problem for social science.” Mitchell describes the epistemological canalization of the social sciences, “still largely trapped in the methods and divisions of labor of the nineteenth century,” codified in the sociology of Durkheim.\textsuperscript{141} These narrow disciplinary epistemologies are incapable of describing the \textit{interaction} of the technical and biological, the cultural and material: “Each of these processes and forces has its own science, which identifies the agents, time lines, geo-spatial scales, and modes of interaction appropriate to its analysis. This tends to

\textsuperscript{140} See, for example, the introduction to the special issue of \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} on “Infrastructuralism.” (Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins, and Sophia Beal, “Infrastructuralism: An Introduction.” \textit{MFS} 61.4 (2015): 575-586.) An important exception to this approach is Kate Marshall’s \textit{Corridor}.

\textsuperscript{141} Mitchell, \textit{Rule of Experts}, 35, 28.
leave each of them isolated in their separate sciences.”142 Mitchell’s contention is that the turn-of-the-century epistemological codification of the human sciences left them without a theoretical language or framework to describe the multiscalar and transdisciplinary nature of world-scale socio-technical transformation.

What Mitchell seeks in the social sciences is the domain of literary form. Over the following four chapters, this dissertation will trace how for many turn-of-the-century artists and social theorists, literature became a privileged medium for capturing the conceptual upheaval attendant on new forms of socio-technical mediation that was increasingly inaccessible to the codifying social sciences. We can thus look to infrastructural modernism as not only a vital historical archive of aesthetic efforts to capture a technologizing world-in-flux, but also an imaginative resource for contemporary social theorists and historians like Mitchell seeking new methods and conceptual vocabularies to describe the mutual constitution of human and nonhuman agencies in the wake of the Anthropocene.

Recovering the contested nature of “society” circa 1900 invites us to rethink and extend what we mean by the “sociology of literature” in and for the present. In the introductory essay to a special issue on “New Sociologies of Literature,” James English asks: “As currently configured, and facing the particular disciplinary circumstances that we do, are literary scholars capable of producing a new sociology of literature?”143 English describes the generalized perception that sociological orientations to literary

142 Ibid., 28.
studies have exhausted themselves or (even worse) watered themselves down to effectively become active participants in the institutional obsolescence of the critical humanities, “in step with ominous trends that are driving humanistic inquiry toward some small, sad corner of the increasingly social-science-dominated academy to endure an ‘interdisciplinary’ afterlife of collaborative media research.”\textsuperscript{144} Whereas English suggests that literary scholars learn to cultivate a more flexible relationship to empirical quantification and adopt new forms of mixed-methods research, I believe that to rethink the sociology of literature entails rethinking what we mean by “the social,” “society” and how those concepts structure the conceptual horizon of literary method. And to rethink these terms means, finally, that we return to the sites, texts and debates of sociological disciplinary emergence when the referent of these terms was more actively contested than the sociologies of our literary-critical present.

For many literary scholars, this disciplinary constructedness is a source of difficulty or embarrassment: classical sociology has not been a particularly fertile ground for Anglophone literary criticism.\textsuperscript{145} Mark McGurl has noted the “anxiety” that sociology provokes in literary scholars regarding its “nature and boundaries.”\textsuperscript{146} Because sociology “only comes into being under that name in the late nineteenth century, with the successful efforts of Émile Durkheim to lodge it in the newly modernizing French university

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
system,” for literary scholars, “its official products carry the heavy baggage of disciplinary specificity.” The “always-already institutional identity” of sociology contrasts with history and philosophy, which are not only “disciplines,” but also “fundamental intellectual modalities, expansions, and narrativizations of the cognitive claims of memory and reason.” What McGurl (rightly, I think) characterizes as a source of anxiety, I want to reframe as both a virtue and opportunity—for turn-of-the-century literary artists and for modern literary studies. Despite its latent anthropocentrism, sociology nonetheless afforded artist-theorists like Wells, Tarde, and Du Bois a conceptual standpoint from which to reimagine the mutual constitution of human and nonhuman agency outside of the humanist “cognitive claims of memory and reason.” From what perspective or through what aesthetic form, these writers ask, can literature conceptualize the distinctiveness of human experience without structurally occluding the force or complexity of the nonhuman agencies that shape that experience?

“Inhuman Power” reclaims for literary studies what Alberto Toscano calls the “aesthetics of social theory”: “the regimes of visibility and sensibility that pervade different ways of doing sociology.” But this reclamation also entails a reversal—how might modernism project its own “social theory of aesthetics”? Toscano calls on social theorists to “interrogate the limits of the institutions, methods and self-understandings that currently define their own practice.” “Inhuman Power” seeks to do the same—not

---

147 Ibid., 332.
148 Ibid., 331-32.
150 Ibid., 80.
in service of instrumental interdisciplinarity but to “renew the cognitive, ethical and political vocation to ‘see it whole.’”\(^\text{151}\) A major claim of this dissertation is that recovering the contested sociological imaginary immanent to literature circa 1900 offers a new way of approaching the “aspiration towards totality” of modernist literary form.\(^\text{152}\) Once we displace the humanist dialectics through which novel theory generally mediates “totality,” then we can reframe modernism away from its ungraspable symbolic horizon and towards the character-environment complex. Ultimately, then, “Inhuman Power” is an argument about the intimacy of aesthetics and social theory. If we follow Toscano in recognizing “the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of social research not as a supplement or an ornament, but as a matter of our modes of representing, figuring or imaging the social,” then to project that insight back onto infrastructural modernism is to recognize literary art as itself an immanent sociology.\(^\text{153}\)

But while English, McGurl and Toscano each invite us to consider the epistemological and representational resonances between literature and sociology as disciplines in general, my argument concerns the historical specificity of Anglophone writing in the short span of years bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why 1900? “Inhuman Power” reframes the historical co-emergence of literary modernism, the professionalizing social sciences, and the world-scale proliferation of technical infrastructure in order to rethink how scholars theoretically stabilize and narrate the relationship between “modernism” and “modernity” that has largely shaped scholarship

\(^{151}\) Ibid.
\(^{152}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 198.
\(^{153}\) Toscano, “Seeing It Whole,” 80.
in modernist studies for several decades.\textsuperscript{154} To focus on the transatlantic micro-history of literary and sociological production in the short span of years circa 1900 is to go against the geographic-temporal grain of most scholarship in modernist studies. This kind of historical lens—geographically wide and temporally narrow—is not meant to signal a naively cavalier disregard for historical specificity or literary-historical periodization, but is rather motivated by a desire to irritate the interpretive protocols through which we coordinate modern literature and capitalism (the often-unspoken horizon of or stand-in for “modernity” in the new modernist studies). To write this kind of transatlantic micro-history is to attempt to bring literary studies nearer to the “modernity” that its cultural objects mediate—to take seriously Sven Beckert’s injunction that “no state of capitalism is ever permanent or stable. Each new moment in capitalism’s history produces new instabilities, and even contradictions, prompting vast spatial, social, and political rearrangements.”\textsuperscript{155} Capitalism is neither organized via the political agency of the nation-state, nor does it possess the inner rationality or consistency that our periodizing

\textsuperscript{154} Paul K. Saint-Amour describes modernist scholars’ recent slackening of gatekeeping, canon-building definitions of modernism (“capitalized singular noun with a bounded referent”) in favor of a weakening of the field’s immanent theory of modernism (“pluralized, adjectivalized, decoupled from high culture, and rethought as a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon”) in \textit{Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 41. While the weakening of “modernism” has surely vivified the field of modernist studies (and opened the door for this very project!), it has also entrenched the centrality of “modernity” as the bolstering historical context that grants coherence to the field’s newly diffuse temporal-geographic borders and proliferating cultural objects. A major claim of this project is that as “modernism” has weakened, the conceptual-historical hold of “modernity” has hardened, and that this hardening has quietly delimited the criteria of aesthetic value by which we measure “modernism.” I discuss this aspect of modernist studies field formation in more detail in chapter 2, framed through the ambivalent canonicity of H.G. Wells.

protocols sometimes suggest. This insight suggests a literary-critical method not wholly
organized by the historical referent or political unit of the nation-state while recognizing
an ever-shifting, structurally unequal world-system as representational horizon. Finally,
then, “Inhuman Power” tells the story not of a total “modernism” that does not exist, but
of an unprecedented moment of conceptual upheaval in the entwined histories of
capitalism and culture.

**Project Outline**

Chapter One, “‘Alien and Intimate’: The Aesthetic Form of Sociology in Gabriel
Tarde and H.G. Wells” traces the historical encounter of H.G. Wells and Gabriel Tarde in
order to excavate shared aesthetic strategies between novelist and sociologist at the turn
of the century. In 1905 H.G. Wells wrote the preface to the French sociologist Gabriel
Tarde’s lone work of fiction, the technological utopia *Underground Man* (1896). Wells’
preface offers a complex meditation on the incommensurability of the realist novel and
the transformative potential of human collective agency. Wells’ preface informs my own
reading of *Underground Man*. Against critics who read Tarde’s novel as transparent
social-scientific tract, I argue that Tarde subtly ironizes the individualizing subjectivity of
his protagonist in order to invest utopian energy not in the purification of nature from
society, but rather in the transformative mediation of human and nonhuman agency.

While writing Tarde’s preface, Wells composed “The So-Called Science of Sociology,” a
scathing critique of the latent anthropocentrism of modern sociology. Wells insists that a
genuinely scientific sociology must both include and exceed human experience—must be
a new kind of literature. This chapter takes seriously Wells’ provocation, approaching
Wells’ essay as a statement of modernist criticism and Tarde’s *Underground Man* as a modernist novel.

Chapter Two, “‘Running the Country Practically’: H.G. Wells and the Enabling Fictions of Inhuman Power,” examines how the aesthetic questions posed in the first chapter intersect with and transform prevalent models of literary modernism. Coordinating Wells’ exclusion from many accounts of modernism with the influence of Lukács on twentieth-century histories of the novel, I argue that Wells’ fiction apprehends capitalism outside of the human-centric logic of the commodity form. Less interested in the historical destiny of the bourgeoisie or the psychic degradations of reification, Wells’ fiction models what he calls “adjustment-interest”: the dynamic and co-productive relationship between character and environment. I trace Wells’ aesthetics of entanglement in his semi-fictional *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and semi-autobiographical *Tono-Bungay* (1909). Both texts stage elaborate interactions between protagonist and infrastructure—utopian energy grids and imperial communications networks—that destabilize the narrative centrality and interpretive coherence of both characters. Wells’ “adjustment-interest” gives form to the uncertain limit between human and technological agency in modernity in order to rethink the conditions of individual political agency outside the static binaries of freedom and determinism, human and nonhuman.

Chapter Three, “The Secret Agency of Standardization: Narrative Standard Time and Other Modernist Infrastructures in Joseph Conrad,” begins by reading Conrad’s personal correspondence alongside the essays of Sandford Fleming, an influential engineer of global communications technology and international standard time.
Fleming’s language dematerializes state-owned cables into “bonds of sentiment” that quicken “the ties of sympathy” among the nations of the Empire. Conrad explores this tension between the material and immaterial conditions of infrastructural social cohesion in *The Secret Agent* (1907). The character of the Professor, a parody of the intellectual sterility of modern social science, can only combat the coercive power of social violence through material destruction—the bombs that he distributes indiscriminately to London anarchists who plan to explode Greenwich Meridian. The Professor seeks to exert agency over the socio-technical environment of infrastructural modernity, but his actions are largely ineffectual outside of the personal tragedy of the novel’s domestic plot. The Professor’s fate is inversely mirrored in the character of Stevie, who seeks to exert artistic agency over his material environment but is ultimately destroyed by social forces that defy his humanist aesthetic gaze, his charred remains finally merging with the environment that he sought to grasp. Conrad contrasts both the Professor’s material destruction and Stevie’s symbolic humanism with the formal experimentation of his narrative style. The intricate temporal-formal architecture of *The Secret Agent* contests the machinic chronicity of standardized time, staging a complex meditation on the social function of the novel in a world in which infrastructure overwhelms culture.

modern city. Du Bois describes a turn-of-the-century urban environment which powerfully shapes the very conditions of modern personhood. Building on Simone Browne’s theorization of “racializing surveillance” technologies that reify racialized boundaries in the modern state, I show how Du Bois gives aesthetic form to his urban sociology in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in order to dramatize the new scales of social control enabled by world-scale infrastructure. Du Bois’ account of the scalar mobility of the color line in the twentieth century helps us to understand the infrastructural aesthetic of Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), in which the communications, legal, and urban infrastructures of the Jim Crow South ostentatiously produce and reify racial hierarchies. *The Marrow of Tradition* breaks the conventions of realist characterization in order to imagine new forms of social recognition rooted in the material body—the marrow of tradition—that do not rely on a bourgeois intersubjective sympathy inadequate to transform the inhuman environment of the biopolitical state.

The saturation of infrastructure into the core experiences and functions of contemporary social life—and the corresponding entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies—has only intensified since the turn of the twentieth century. Today’s cultural critique requires new methods and vocabularies to describe the evolving mediation of human beings with their media environments. Responsive to literary scholars’ growing interest in methods that decenter the human as historical agent and interpretive horizon in the wake of the Anthropocene, “Inhuman Power” offers a new genealogy of modernism that situates the originary exchanges between modernist art and social theory as the prehistory of our critical and cultural present.
What is the place of the nonhuman in the modern novel? To attempt an answer is to confront another of the uncanny effects of the Anthropocene: it was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth’s atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centered on the human.

—Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

The framework of the work of art is individual lived experience, and it is in terms of these limits that the outside world remains stubbornly alienated. When we pass from individual experience to that collective dimension, that sociological or historical focus in which human institutions slowly become transparent for us once again, we have entered the realm of disembodied abstract thought and have left the work of art behind us.

—Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*

…there can be no guarantee that the future will have a place for the literary.

—Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*

What is the imaginative form of nonhuman agency in modern fiction? How can literature—made by humans, for humans—hope to transcend a humanism baked into its very form? Surely modern art—the art of “individual lived experience” and “individual moral adventures”—has little to contribute to the apprehension of nonhuman agency in the modern world. And yet this apprehension has become one of literary theory’s most

---

pressing critical tasks. As we increasingly recognize the capacity of human beings to devastate our planet, theorists of the novel have sought to counteract philosophical anthropocentrism—to take measure of the mechanisms through which novels center (and decenter) the human subject as historical agent and interpretive horizon. Seeking the place of the nonhuman in the modern novel, Amitav Ghosh has found it absent; modern literature radically centers the human. But what, or where, is the place of the nonhuman in modern literature? The provocation of this chapter is that some of the most sustained, searching depictions of nonhuman agency in modern literature can be found where perhaps least expected: in modernist sociological texts investigating the science of human sociality at the turn of the twentieth century.

This chapter traces the historical encounter of the British novelist H.G. Wells and the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde in order to excavate shared aesthetic strategies developed between novelist and sociologist circa 1900. Fredric Jameson has described a fundamental incompatibility between the sociological and the literary. The modern novel, beholden to the experiences and desires of the individual, relies on the alienation of self and nature as the very condition of its narrative structure. But if this is the case—if modern art depends on the stubborn alienation of the outside world—then where in the novel could we ever hope to find the place of the nonhuman? The crucial insight shared by Tarde and Wells is that to narrate the place of the nonhuman is not (as Ghosh seems to suggest) to decenter the human, but rather to relinquish the structuring premise of alienation—to risk writing a novel that may no longer be “art.” Seeking to give literary form to the unwieldy shapes of human sociality, both Tarde and Wells recast the
framework of the work of art away from “individual lived experience,” and toward trans-individual collective life. Rather than represent or respond to an alienated world, their fiction contests and reframes the conceptual structures that divide the world into “nature” and “society.” Where is the place of the nonhuman if “nature,” no longer distant and alienated, includes an historically-evolving “us”?  

**Gabriel Tarde: Literary Sociology**

In 1905 H.G. Wells was asked to write the introduction to the English translation of *Underground Man*, the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s lone work of narrative fiction, first published in France as *Fragment d’histoire future* in 1896. Abandoning the language of bald social-scientific theory, Tarde’s science-fiction novel fantasizes humanity’s migration underground in the wake of ecological catastrophe. The novel opens onto a world-society of the near future—a global state united by a shared language (Greek) and powered by massive public works projects. But this world-scale technological colonization of nature is quickly undone, as the sun rapidly begins to cool. A deathly chill spreads over the surface of the earth, transforming the landscape and annihilating civilization. Millions are killed, as humanity flees to ever-shrinking pockets

---

157 I place “nature” in quotation marks to signal the Durkheimian conception of nature as a realm ontologically separate from human social relations. Bruno Latour discusses and critiques this “idea of nature” at length in *Politics of Nature*. Latour insists that we replace “the dual arena of nature and politics” (i.e., of nature and society) with “the single arena of the collective,” a new conceptualization of social life that “blur[s] the distinction between nature and society durably” so that “the properties of human beings and nonhumans with which it has come to terms are in no way assured” (30, 36, 38). Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
of habitable climate. The last human survivors, guided by the anachronistic heroic individuality of their leader Militades, finally seek refuge inside the bowels of the earth. Bringing with them only masterpieces of art and philosophy, the remnants of humanity transform into a unified world society mediated by culture. Eventually these few survivors construct for themselves an underground paradise—a temperate shelter filled with philosophy and art. Over time, these settlers’ intricate tunnels spread under the surface of the earth, and this new sect of humanity develops its own laws, customs, and values that reflect its separation from the organic life-forms of the planet’s surface.

*Underground Man* has not been a particularly contested object of scholarly debate. Perhaps encouraged by the novel’s evident lack of aesthetic merit or literary subtlety, critics seem willing to interpret *Underground Man* in the same critical register as Tarde’s straightforwardly sociological texts, despite the inconsistency of many of the novel’s stated ideas with Tarde’s wider thought. Grant Bollmer, for example, argues that we need to read *Underground Man* as an earnest utopian tract, “a speculative vision for a utopian society.”158 Rosalind Williams reads the novel as a “thought experiment” in which “the natural environment has been replaced not by a technological environment but by a social one.”159 Describing Tarde as a “social aesthete” for whom “society was the highest art form,” Williams locates more artistry in Tarde’s sociological program than in his literary text.160 Alberto Toscano similarly reads *Underground Man* as a “sociological

---

160 Ibid.
thought experiment” that provides “clues regarding the manner in which Tarde envisages the specificity of politics.” According to Toscano, the novel’s premise “allows Tarde to speculate on the being of a society that has been thoroughly purified of its mediation by nature.” But it is, I argue, precisely this purified conception of society that Underground Man contests, despite the text’s overt assertions to the contrary. What all of these readers of Tarde’s novel fail to address is the specificity of its literary form—the manner in which the text ironically undermines several of its most explicit and baldly-stated sociological claims. But what would it mean for literary critics to take seriously Tarde’s decision to write a novel—to ask not only what Underground Man reveals about Tardean sociology, but also what it reveals about the novel at the turn of the century?

Reading Underground Man as an earnestly straightforward utopian tract, as do Bollmer, Toscano, and Williams, invites an initial interpretive question: What is the relationship between the first, surface-level world-society and the second, underground one (ostensibly the site of genuine utopia)? Toscano addresses this question most explicitly, contending that the first social world—what Tarde describes as “the great Asiatic-American-European confederacy”—dramatizes “the limits of ‘extensive culture’... which seems to presage an eternity of pacified intercourse, and a somewhat emasculating ennui.” As Wells notes in his introduction, Tarde’s irony is at its most

162 Ibid.
trivializing and biting in this first section, and it is tempting to read this first social world as the dystopian negative object that the underground utopia will proceed to correct. But this ignores the consistency of this initial world with Tarde’s sociological theories and ideals. Despite the continuity of this futuristic society with Tarde’s own late-nineteenth century present, *Underground Man* emphasizes the radical social transformation that has attended the world-scale unification of language—the world bears witness “to the rapidity, the depth, and the universality of the change which took place in the customs, ideas, and needs, and in all the forms of social life” (*UM* 29). The motor of this radical remaking of the social is none other than the Tardean mechanisms of invention, imitation, and adaptation: “henceforth there was no barrier to stop in its star-like radiation the expansion of any idea, no matter where it originated” (*UM* 30).165 This infrastructural intensification of communication and interpersonal exchange does not simply result in larger or more inclusive versions of older social units like the nation-state, but makes those more archaic mediations of collective life meaningless. The ultimate index of this transformation is literature itself, in which exemplars of the great European national literary traditions—“Shakespeare, Goethe, and Hugo”—have become literally unintelligible, as the dually archaic social referents of the nation-state and the middle-class individual dissolve into obsolescence, the provincial “pretended literatures of our rude ancestors” (*UM* 31, 30).

---

165 I discuss the basic conceptual structure of Tardean sociology in the introduction, in which I frame Tarde’s long-standing rivalry and 1903 debate with Durkheim as a model for the competing orientations of social theory at the turn of the twentieth century,
The unprecedented exchange of ideas and influence profoundly transforms both society and art. But this exchange is facilitated not only by linguistic unification—an intensified world-scale linguistic infrastructure—but also by the “transmission of force at a distance by electricity and its enlistment under a thousand forms”—the amplification of material energy infrastructures. This future world on the surface is characterized by the tenfold multiplication of “the productivity of human energy,” in which waterfalls, winds and tides have become “the slaves of man” (UM 34). In Tarde’s vision, these linguistic, cultural, and energy infrastructures combine to transform the future under the sign and agency of the human—transmuting the natural world into an infrastructural fantasy of unlimited energy. Thus we find even in this first, surface-level social world many of the characteristics that critics like Williams and Toscano attribute to Tarde’s underground utopia: a world-state mediated by culture and the free exchange of influence, structured around the radical separability of the natural and the social. What does it mean that already this seemingly pre-utopian world-state has thoroughly domesticated nature to meet its needs? Just how degraded is this surface world of the future? What is the basis of its comparison with the underground?

This first social world on the surface is doomed not by its political structures, values, or mechanisms of exchange so much as its ultimate vulnerability to the ravaging agency of the natural environment. The sun begins to cool, and the humanized landscape is annihilated by alien natural forces: “from time to time a country or continent broke off suddenly its communication with the central agency, the reason being that an entire telegraphic section was buried under the snow” (UM 55-56). The infrastructures that had
so thoroughly framed the world are suddenly themselves framed by the wider agencies of the planet: “Of this immense network of electricity, which enveloped in its close meshes the entire globe, as of that prodigious coat of mail with which the complicated system of railways clothed the earth, there was only left some scattered fragments” (*UM* 56). But what are we to make of this sudden ecological crisis—the radically-compressed cooling of the earth? At first glance, this certainly seems to be the most fantastic of science-fictional premises. But in fact Tarde dramatizes one of the most basic phenomenological illusions of infrastructural modernity—what Paul Edwards describes as the misapprehension that nature is “orderly, dependable, and separable from society and technology—an understanding that is in fact a chief characteristic of modern life-within-infrastructures.”¹⁶⁶ No matter how thoroughly human infrastructure domesticates the natural world and instrumentalizes its alien agency, nature will always exceed the frame. What both Edwards describes and Tarde dramatizes is the perspectival delusion inherent to an infrastructural modernity in which human entanglement with the nonhuman is ever-intensifying yet ever more structurally foreclosed by technologies that disguise the “permanent imbrication of infrastructure in nature.”¹⁶⁷

The first half of *Underground Man* temporally compresses global ecological catastrophe in order to render *narratable* precisely what tends to recede from view in infrastructural modernity—the inseparability of nature and human social form. Tarde

---


¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
abbreviates ecological catastrophe to the timescale of a human life, suddenly summoning into being the semi-protagonist Militades whose individual agency is required to raise the new underground society. Tarde dramatizes the extent to which infrastructural technologies—language, communications networks, energy infrastructures, and, finally, literary fiction—all produce the illusion of a natural world scaled to human mastery.

Tarde’s world-state on the surface is not a dystopia—a negative example to contrast with a subsequent utopia—but the representation of a contradiction immanent to his literary project: how to describe the mutual constitution of nature and society through a novelistic form whose very mechanisms of plot and protagonism tend to obscure that fact. How can literary narrative be genuinely sociological when its narrative protocols scale the world to the desires, experiences, and agencies of the individual life? This is the question that the opening half of *Underground Man* poses, and to which its subsequent underground half responds. How, then, does our understanding of the novel’s second half—the underground utopia—transform if we read the novel not as a binaristic comparison of dystopia and utopia, but as a natural disaster novel speaking the interpenetration of nature and society?

Despite the extent to which the novel’s opening half dramatizes the constitutive imbrication of nature and human infrastructure, the first underground inhabitants are convinced that their new habitat is radically insulated from the vagaries of nature. Upon their first subterranean descent, these pioneers are surprised to find “enchanted palaces, in which all extremes of climate, rain, and wind, cold and torrid heat were unknown” (*UM* 96). They live under the glow of “innumerable lamps” in an eternal “daylight that knew
no night” (*UM* 96-97) and soon come to recognize the capriciousness of the sun as
a “mode of lighting that bristled with so many inconveniences” (*UM* 99). Growing
increasingly conscious of the extent to which their lives on the surface were responsive to
the organizing agency of the sun—“every night the sun commanded social life to desist
and social life desisted”—this underground humanity comes to see its former self as “the
slave of nature” despite its evident technological mastery (*UM* 99).

Developing its own customs and social structures, this underground society adapts
to the lack of organic plant and animal life. Dwellers soon come to recognize this
“complete elimination of living nature, whether animal or vegetable” as a “purification of
society” in which “the social milieu was for the first time able to reveal and display its
true virtues” (*UM* 111). In perhaps the most frequently-cited passage of *Underground
Man*, the narrator (using language that critics have tended to attribute to the voice of
Tarde himself168) speculates that “destiny had desired to make in our case an extended
sociological experiment”:

> The problem, in a way, was to learn, what would social man become if committed
to his own keeping, yet left to himself—furnished with all the intellectual
acquisitions accumulated through a remote past by human geniuses, but deprived
of the assistance of all other living beings, nay, even of those beings half endowed
with life, that we call rivers and seas and stars, and thrown back on the conquered,
yet passive forces of chemical, inorganic and lifeless Nature, which is separated
from man by too deep a chasm to exercise on him any action from the social point
of view. (*UM* 111-113)

---

168 As we have already seen, both Toscano and Williams adopt the language of the
“sociological thought experiment” to describe *Underground Man* itself—equating the
narrator’s own self-understanding of his social position with the un-ironic sociological
theorization of Tarde himself.
Just as the surface dwellers imagine that they have transformed the waterfalls, winds, and tide into “the slaves of man,” this underground society asserts its mastery over the passive chemical Nature of its subterranean environment. But what should we make of the fact that the passage to which critics have turned for the most explicit statement of Tarde’s utopian ideals in actuality draws a parallel between surface and underground societies that both seek to domesticate their environmental surround?  

Tarde almost immediately undermines the premise of this so-called “extended sociological experiment,” ironizing the pretension and perspectival limitation of his narrator’s own self-understanding. The narrator believes that the elimination of organic life radically liberates the underground dwellers; humanity formerly relied on vegetation for sustenance, making “man a slave to the tyrannical whims of a plant” (UM 124). But of course, no human society can fully eliminate organic life, and the underground dwellers are themselves beholden to the creaturely needs of their own organic bodies. Their survival depends upon meat frozen in ice during the solar cool-down, an exhaustible resource whose future scarcity the dwellers can only manage through population control. Just like their predecessors on the surface, these underground denizens shelter themselves from their reliance on and vulnerability to nature. Literally “shelter”: in underground society, architects are replaced by “sappers” whose vocation is “to work out the plans for excavating and repairing all our crypts and to direct the

---

169 For an illustration of this kind of reading, see for example Williams, Notes on the Underground: “Moral, intellectual, and aesthetic life all flower once humanity is freed from the degrading need to deal with nature’s caprices and hardships….The imperfections of nature are replaced by the perfections of culture” (136).
carrying out of the work by our machines” (UM 127). Domesticity merges with machinery, architecture merges with infrastructure, and the inorganic rocky surround is dually transformed into the substrate both of human shelter and of human productive energy. This infrastructural architecture of underground tunnels is aestheticized by the dwellers into “artificial and veritibly artistic scenery,” and its burrowed dimensions are transmuted into “horizon,” “sky,” and “vegetation”—the natural objects of post-Romantic aesthetic contemplation: “Here is nature winnowed and perfected, which has become human in order to delight humanity, and which humanity has deified in order to shelter love beneath its shade” (UM 129).

In the passage block-quoted above, “Nature” signifies the fully alien—its inorganic, stony materiality intensifying the dwellers’ sense of a radical separability between nature and society. The narrator claims that the brute materiality of the underground habitat is too detached from man “to exercise on him any action from the social point of view.” But just a few pages later, these same rocks become the very substrate of underground social form—the humanized basis of shelter, energy, and culture. What the novel’s narrator cannot seem to decide is whether these rocks are fully alien or fully humanized—whether they are nature or technology. And it is this struggle—this contradiction—within the narrative voice that is the most telling representational feature in Tarde’s novel. If the opening half of Underground Man gives representational purchase to the doomed pretensions of human technological mastery that the wider agencies of nature will penetrate and humiliate, the second “utopian” half would seem to depict technology reclaiming human mastery over nature. But that is not
the case. Instead, the contradictions within the novel’s narrative voice dramatize the powerfully structuring conceptual force of “nature” and “technology” in shaping human beings’ relation to their environment and to “society.” That this inner confusion is subtle and unmarked by the narrator indexes the difficulty of reconciling that contradiction within the individual mind and through the dominant conceptual paradigms of modern thought. Rocks can either function as passively irrelevant or foundationally constitutive to human social development, so long as they do not transform the essential “human” who is the subject of that development. Rocks are either nature or technology—technology masters nature, which eventually reclaims technology. But can we find in Tarde’s novel an alternative to this endless dialectic between the separable domains of nature and society?

The genuinely utopian promise motivating *Underground Man* inheres not in the social structures and customs of underground life, but in the possibility that the limiting and alienating conceptual paradigms of modern thought might be changing. Near the conclusion of *Underground Man*, the narrator gives an account of the current state of scientific research in underground society. Intellectual energy is primarily directed into two sciences—chemistry and psychology—which are felt to be converging into the same field of inquiry, “on the high road to becoming identical by dint of pushing their joint researches ever deeper and crushing to atoms the last problems left” (*UM* 168). Chemistry pursues “the psychology of the atom”—chemists “force their way into the inner life of the molecules and reveal to us their desires, their ideas, and under a fallacious air of conformity, their individual physiognomy” (*UM* 169). At the same time,
psychology pursues “the atomic theory of self,” alternatively understood as “the sociology of the self”—psychologists “enable us to perceive, even in its most minute detail, the most admirable of all societies, this hierarchy of consciousness” (UM 169). Chemistry reveals the personality of rocks, and consciousness is shown to comprise its own society. Taken together, this underground science reveals wider relational energies that are beginning to transform humanity’s conception of its position in the wider world:

We are no longer alone in a frozen world. We are conscious that these rocks are alive and animated, we are conscious that these hard metals which protect and warm us are likewise a prolific brotherhood. Through their mediation these living stones have some message for our heart, something at once alien and intimate, which neither the stars nor the flowers of the field ever told to our forefathers. (UM 169-170)

Modern science reveals humanity’s brotherhood with rocks, its entanglement with the alien. How do we square this passage with the narrator’s earlier assertion that underground life is constitutively premised on the “purification of society,” the radical separation of the social and natural? Are these “living stones” those same passive, lifeless, inorganic rocks, “separated from man by too deep a chasm to exercise on him any action from the social point of view”? Surely not. Here Underground Man most nearly approaches Tarde’s wider sociological thought. The novel imagines future forms of science with the resources, curiosity and technical tools to reveal the intimate entanglement of human and nonhuman being. The underground scientists empirically confirm the genuinely relational ontology theorized more explicitly in Tarde’s Monadology and Sociology. The narrator can only aestheticize these rocks as having “some message for our heart.” But this passage introduces a humanization of nature far different than the domestication and instrumentalization dramatized earlier in the novel—
the fantasies of a technologized humanity projecting its mastery over an inert, passive
nature. Instead, this late passage prompts the reader to ask what it means to find
brotherhood and companionship in the alien agencies that are the very substance of one’s
habitat—the literal substrate of society’s architectural, infrastructural and cultural
capacities. The novel’s most radical—and most overtly Tardean—utopian gambit is not
the fantastic isolation of a pristine human society invulnerable to the vagaries of nature,
but instead the possibility that a transformed environment might itself transform human
forms of knowing and apprehending the world and thus, perhaps, humanity itself.¹⁷⁰
Locating the utopian energies of Tarde’s novel in the narrator’s contradictory self- and
social-understanding—in glimmers of a radically transformative relationship between self
and world that exceeds the narrator’s own cognitive capacities—forces us to reject
readings of the novel that frame the text as a transparent, unartful utopian tract or wholly
earnest vision of a finalized, ideal society. *Underground Man* has been of interest

¹⁷⁰ Tarde gestures toward the slow and ongoing transformation of “human nature” in the
gradual diminution of the dwellers’ fear of death: “psychologists have acquired still
further claims on our gratitude in freeing us from the fear of death. Permeated by their
doctrines we have followed their consequences to their final conclusion with the
deductive vigor that is second nature with us. Death appears to us as a dethronement that
leads to freedom. It restores to itself the fallen or abdicated self that retires anew into its
inner consciousness, where it finds in depths more than the equivalent of the outward
empire it has lost” (*UM* 170-171). In this way, Tarde imaginatively anticipates the
Freudian death drive, in which the body’s organic materiality is subject to the force of a
Thanatos that exceeds human social agencies. Both Tarde and the later Freud place the
human within wider force-fields of relational energy that exceed the psychodynamics of
human social interaction. This constitutive interest in the relational mediation of human
and nonhuman agencies is what unites Tarde and Freud and what differentiates not only
Tarde from Durkheim, but also Freud from his later reworking in Lacan, who contains
the cosmic conflict between Eros and Thanatos within the ambivalent aggressivity
inherent to the specular narcissism of the mirror stage.
primarily to sociologists and intellectual historians. But what can close attention to the
text’s unrecognized literary complexity teach us about history of the modern novel at the
turn of the twentieth century?

*Underground Man* is voiced by a narrator who fully identifies with underground
society, who earnestly extols the virtues of its social structure and its “purification” from
the degradations of nature—who believes he inhabits “an extended sociological
experiment.” Because of the subterranean boundedness of his underground social world
(a sort of knowable community of sociological wish-fulfilment), the narrator is confident
that he understands the customs, values and structure of underground society. But
throughout the latter half of the novel, Tarde indicates this underground society’s
constitutive imbrication with nature and thus undermines the most confident claims of his
utopian cicerone. Tarde ironizes his narrator as a sort of “bad sociologist” presenting his
own contingent social position as a transparent and unmediated sociological experiment,
unable to bring his own historical position, his own situatedness, into the analytic frame.
Critics mirror this reductiveness when they read the narrator as an unironized Tarde
proxy. But it is not an accident that most readers confuse Tarde and his narrator—Tarde
himself invites it! The first-person drifts in and out of the novel’s narrative texture,

171 On the literary representation of “knowable communities,” see Raymond Williams,
Williams, most novels are knowable communities in which “the novelist offers to show
people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways” (165).
This knowability becomes increasingly difficult to represent in the infrastructural
extensivity of the twentieth-century world-system. Thus for a novelist like Tarde the
knowability that Williams describes as characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel
becomes an object of science-fictional fantasy or wish-fulfillment at the dawn of the
twentieth century.
figurally objectifying the narrator into a distinct character, only to fade back into an impersonal and bitingly ironic indicative that is difficult to distinguish from Tarde’s own sociological voice.

This pivoting between characterological objectification and narrative identification is the representational alternative that *Underground Man* poses to the “bad sociology” of the novel’s narrator. *Underground Man* seemingly narrates the historical emergence of a bounded, knowable social world, presenting the reader with both the historical protagonist (Militades) and sociological cicerone (narrator) of that world. But both of these figures shift in and out of narrative focus—sometimes the object of narration, sometimes fading into a narrative background that is indistinguishable from the author himself. Tarde’s narrator often invokes the first-person plural at moments in which he seems most fully to identify with the consolidated, bounded social identity conferred by “underground society,” the comprehensible subterranean social world that literally encloses him. These invocations of the first-person plural frequently equate “humanity” with underground society and emphatically assert the separation of the social from the natural: “we have realized at the same time what an unsuspected drag the terrestrial fauna and flora had hitherto been on the progress of humanity” (*UM* 113). Who or what is the referent of this “we”? The narrator names “humanity,” but Tarde clearly intends the denizens of this particular underground society. This quotation is one of many in *Underground Man* that slips between the “we” of underground society and the “we” of the human species. This is the linguistic trick of *Underground Man*: the subtly shifting referent of “we,” ambiguously poised between species and society. This referential
ambiguity mirrors the wider instability of the novel’s narrative voice, itself uncertainly
poised between historically-situated character and transparent Tarde proxy. Tarde pivots
between these two referents of the first-person plural in order to unsettle both—if as the
narrator, “we” slips in and out of view, functioning as both subject and object.

The animating question that *Underground Man* addresses through its literary form
is the wider sociological problem confronted by artists and social theorists at the turn of
the century: What “we” is adequate to a technologically-saturated world, a globe
symbolically and materially mediated by infrastructures that intensify forms of exchange
to an unprecedented degree? What is the appropriate representational language to
describe the limits and mechanisms of cohesion in a social world that exceeds the
individual’s cognitive grip? More to the point, what is “the social” in modernity? How do
we draw conceptual limits in a world in which we are felt to be mediating with rocks?
These questions allow us to approach with fresh perspective the quotation singled out by
Wells in his introduction as the heart of Tarde’s thought—the passage in the novel in
which Tarde’s own voice seems most discernable.172 The passage critiques the influence
of bourgeois economics on surface-life prior to the solar cool-down (and also, of course,
on Tarde’s own turn-of-the-century present):

> Was the relation of the worker to his employer, of the artisan class to the other
classes of the population, of these classes between themselves a really social
relation? Not the least in the world! Certain sophists, who were called economists,
and who were to our sociologists of to-day what the alchemists formerly were to
the chemists or the astrologers to the astronomers, had given credit, it is true, to
this error—that society essentially consists in an exchange of services. From this

---

172 In his introduction, Wells writes that the ideas expressed in this passage “constitute
the body, the serious reality to which all the rest of this little book is so much dress,
adornment and concealment” (*UM* 16-17).
point of view, which, moreover, is quite out of date, the social bond could never be closer than that between the ass and the ass driver, the ox and drover, the sheep and the shepherd. Society, we now know, consists in the exchange of reflections. Mutually to ape one another, and by dint of accumulated apings diversely combined to create an originality is the important thing. Reciprocal service is only an accessory. (*UM* 116-117)

It seems that Trade critiques an economic hermeneutic—the interpretive point of view in which the economic is understood as first cause of the social and cultural. But that is not quite right. Tarde critiques bourgeois economists as alchemists—occult shamans unscientifically confusing cause and effect, imagining that economic relations reveal the true mechanisms and scope of social relations, when in fact they constitute the limit to a more genuinely social relation. Bourgeois economic theories bolster the degraded relations that a more genuinely social future might ameliorate. What Tarde probes in this passage is the extent to which concepts and material practices sustain each other—such that economic theories with as much essential truth-value as alchemy can achieve a material foothold in social relations. Bourgeois economics and capitalist social relations dually format the world into subjects and objects—“the ass and the ass driver, the ox and drover, the sheep and the shepherd”—actors that exert their agency and things that are acted upon. This passage opens the window to another conceptual possibility for apprehending the mutual exchange of agencies in infrastructural modernity: the exchange of reflections, imitation, entanglement. What the narrator is here unable to process cognitively, but that the “brotherhood of rocks” passage later suggests, is that this exchange of reflections is in fact a posthumanist one.

Grant Bollmer reads *Underground Man* as emblematic of a problematic Tardean ideology, “a general principle in which connection and flow can be equated to nearly
anything that exists.”173 In Bollmer’s reading, Tarde “reduc[es] everything to transmission and repetition” and “assumes most humans to be mere information relays.”174 Bollmer finds in Tarde a generalized imaginary of networked flows that posits connective networks as the ontological basis of the economic, social, political, technological, and biological. This flattening conjunction of the economic and the social can only advance “a bourgeois politics that assumes the masses are ultimately somnambulistic and in need of control.”175 Bollmer’s account of a Tardean politics of the networked human node relies on a conception of humanity as essentially static—nodal vessels unchanged by the exchanges that they facilitate. But as we have seen, *Underground Man* invests its strongest utopian energies in processes of transformative entanglement that meaningfully alter human beings’ relationship not only with each other but also the material world. Tarde critiques the structuring agency of dominant conceptual paradigms that format the world into subjects and objects, distorting and obscuring human beings’ capacity to apprehend their imbrication with and reliance on the natural world. These conceptual paradigms are inextricable from the material practices—the economic exchanges, public works projects, and cultural forms—on which they rely. Both sociology and literary form are implicated in this critique. *Underground Man* is Tarde’s effort to coordinate the conceptual limitations of social thought with the representational limitations of the novel in the late-nineteenth century.

---

173 Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks*, 95.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid., 91.
Central to this coordinated critique is the novel’s break with the conventions of nineteenth-century realist characterization. Tarde dissolves any sort of structuring or stable representational relationship between the narrator and his underground society. Just like the unsettled “we,” the allegorical link between character and society that the novel would dialectically reconcile in its narrative form is disintegrated. Not a coherent character so much as a dynamic narrative function, the narrator in *Underground Man* is a device dramatizing the limits of human cognition, the inability of the modern mind to process the contradictions immanent to the misapprehension of “purified society” or the stable “we” of an essential humanity. And this is the essential role of *Underground Man* within the wider oeuvre of Tarde. The referential instability of the novel’s narrative voice offers a representational device that articulates something Tarde’s social-scientific texts cannot: the relational exchanges mediating human and nonhuman agencies that transform the human while escaping its cognitive grasp. Novelistic characterization offers Tarde a representational strategy—the grammatical flexibility and referential instability of the first-person, the shifting objectification of and identification with the narrator—that renders these forces of entanglement thinkable. Rather than allegorize humanity or underground society, the narrator dramatizes the filtering distortion of human-scaled

176 In this way, Tardean characterization defies the animating tension between allegory and reference that Alex Woloch describes as the immanent tension structuring realist literary characterization. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12-42.
perception, his own immanent contradictions rendering these forces intelligible and thus narratable.

This dispersal of both the omniscient third-person narrator and the representative protagonist deforms—without wholly abandoning—the historical logic underwriting the nineteenth-century realist novel. The first half of *Underground Man* narrates the socially and ecologically catastrophic consequences of anthropocentric conceptual paradigms that conceal the constitutive imbrication of nature and society. The novel’s second half does not solve that problem but invests utopian energy in the possibility of new ways of apprehending the world that are more open to alien agencies. The history of that conceptual mutation—from the alienation of the present to unimaginable future forms of entanglement—requires a far longer timescale than the human lifespan. Thus for Tarde the individual life is not the proper unit through which to narrate history—is not the unit of historical transformation. But recognizing that readers can only apprehend the world through the dimensions of their own cognitive perception, Tarde confronts the challenge that utopia is only thinkable and narratable via the human-scaled perceptions and concepts that he would imagine otherwise. This is the contradiction immanent to the novel form that the sociological novelist confronts circa 1900: the novel’s reliance on and reference to structures of individuation that its sociological energies seek to transcend and its utopian desire aspires to transform.

This articulation of the historical-formal contradiction immanent to Tarde’s novel allows us finally to answer the question with which this reading began: What is the relationship between the first, surface-level world-society and the second, underground
social world? As we have seen, the first half of *Underground Man* condenses world-scale solar cool-down to the timescale of a human life in order to render narratable and representable the constitutive entanglement of nature and society. The novel’s second half subtly narrates the narrator’s own inner contradictions in order to depict the inadequacy of modern social-scientific paradigms to apprehend this imbrication—dramatizing the limits of modern thought-structures that define the human by negating nature and asserting the pristine autonomy of human social relations. Read in this way, we can see the inadequacy of the redemptive historical plot-structure of “dystopia to utopia” that critics generally apply to *Underground Man*. Instead, the thematic architecture of Tarde’s novel recursively folds back onto itself, twice dramatizing the manner in which modern concepts and technologies obscure human entanglement with other forms of life. Utopia is not available as a final historical destination or a narratable movement of historical forces, but rather as a transformative potential glimpsed in the possibility that new concepts and social practices might restructure human beings’ relationship with the world. This literary-formal effort to represent agencies outside of the individual stalls the motor of narrative plot and stretches the bourgeois novel out of recognition.

Finally, then, we can grasp Tarde’s science-fiction novel not as a quirky divertissement, but rather an essential component of a wider sociological project. The stalled, recursive form of *Underground Man* gives representational shape to the contradiction inherent in trying to apprehend human/nonhuman entanglement through the technology of the nineteenth-century novel, whose formal logic reconciles the world to
the desires and experiences of the alienated individual. Tarde presents a fantastic science-fictional premise through not only the constrained agency of a semi-protagonist but also the delimited perceptions of a semi-narrator, both of whom slip in and out of narrative focus. Underground Man thus concatenates the literature of bourgeois individuality with a science-fictional plasticity and futurity that can imagine that individual transformed. Underground Man gives imaginative form to the utopian energy implicit in Tarde’s wider thought—the idea that the radical expansion of imitative energies and transspecies relationality could transform the very composition of “society.” Underground Man dissolves the allegorical logic of the representative protagonist and instead glimpses a new grammar through which we might restructure our relation to the world—tracing the contours of an unstable “we” whose future referent is the novel’s unknowable utopian form.

H.G. Wells: Sociological Literature

Writing the introduction to the English translation of Underground Man in 1905, H.G. Wells identifies most strongly with the explicit sociological speculation of the novel’s second half. Tarde’s novel “gives out clearly what so many of us are beginning dimly perhaps to apprehend, that ‘society consists in the exchange of reflections.’”\(^{177}\) Wells finds in Tarde a shared desire for genuinely transformative social theory; both he and Tarde “[dream] of the possibility of human groupings based on interest and a

---

common creative impulse rather than on justice and a trade in help and services.” 178

Their sympathy consists in a common impulse to imagine new mechanisms of social cohesion and new forms of social relation. Wells explains that the primary purpose of his introduction is to direct the reader past the “lightness and cheerful superficiality of the opening portions of this book”—the “rather disappointing” depiction of the solar cooldown—and toward “these obscure but curiously stimulating and interesting caves, and tunnels, and galleries in which the elusive real thought of M. Tarde lurks.” 179 Wells emphasizes the constitutive relationship between the subterranean environment and the novel’s most profound sociological insights, suggesting that the stony surround is not mere science-fictional backdrop, but rather implicated in and necessary to the novel’s socially-transformative imagination.

What does it mean for Wells to draw such a strong connection between Tarde’s sociological insights and the rocky environment of the novel’s underground social world? As we will come to see more clearly in the following chapter, Wells’ conception of the “modern” condition is defined primarily in terms of the intensifying interpenetration of nature and society in the wake of technological advancement. Wells’ thought—like that of Tarde—draws together three discrete epistemological domains—natural science, literature, and social theory—and mutually implicates them in either opening or foreclosing the possibility of social transformation in modernity. Wells’ concern is that all three domains combine to stabilize “nature” to the detriment of transformative social

178 Ibid., 17.
179 Ibid., 19.
change. In his quasi-sociological study *Mankind in the Making* (1903), Wells critiques the artificiality of the “nature” concept, implicating both literature and infrastructural engineering in the production of a delimited nature ideology:

One would think that no human being would ever discover there was any such thing as “nature” were it not for the schoolmaster—and a quotation from Wordsworth. And this nature, as they present it, is really not nature at all, but a factitious admiration for certain isolated aspects of the universe conventionally regarded as “natural.” …. Trees, rivers, flowers, birds, stars—are, and have been for many centuries Nature—so are ploughed fields—really the most artificial of all things …. A grassy old embankment to protect low-lying fields is Nature, and so is all the mass of apparatus about a water-mill; a new embankment to store an urban water supply, though it may be one mass of splendid weeds, is artificial, and ugly. A wooden windmill is Nature and beautiful, a sky-sign atrocious …. Vesuvius, for example, is grand and beautiful, its smell of underground railway most impressive, its night effect stupendous, but the glowing cinder heaps of Burslem, the wonders of the Black Country sunset, the wonderful fire-shot nightfall of the Five Towns, these things are horrid and offensive and vulgar beyond the powers of scholastic language.180

Wells critiques the epistemological limitations of the post-Romantic “nature” ideal, diagnosing the capacity of both infrastructure (“the mass of apparatus about a water-mill”) and literature (“a quotation from Wordsworth”) to format our experience of the nature/society divide: to frame “nature” as a series of distinct, separable objects of aesthetic contemplation. Wells understands literature as a kind of technology coplanar with water mills and the underground railway—one of several modern infrastructural technologies that artificially structure our experience of our surrounding environment. Wells worries that post-Romantic literature—modern literature, the literature of individual experience and the individual life—disrupts our capacity to recognize ecology.

---

Modern literature, like infrastructure, artificially domesticates the world to the agency of human subjects, enframing the world into objects of aesthetic reflection or technological use-value. This apprehension of the infrastructural agency of literature in producing and sustaining anthropocentric conceptual structures is the point of intersection between Wells and Tarde.

Wells’ preface to *Underground Man* reflects on the complicity of nineteenth-century literary realism in imaginatively bolstering the anthropocentrism that animates his critique of “nature.” But Wells is ambivalent regarding the proper representational strategies through which to address this problem. Like many readers of *Underground Man*, Wells is concerned with the novel’s evident lack of psychological depth and human drama, and he actually *re-writes* Tarde’s solar cool-down passage, dramatizing the manner in which the solar extinction could have been written had Tarde chosen to depict it in realist fashion:

…a world-wide wind, and then first little flakes and then the drift and driving of the multiplying snow into the dim illumination of lamps, of windows, of street lights lit untimely. Then again, the shiver of the cold, the clutching of hands at coats and wraps, the blind hurrying to shelter and the comfort of a fire—the blaze of fires. One sees the red-lit faces about the fires, sees the furtive glances at the wind-tormented windows, hears the furious knocking of those other strangers barred out, for, ‘we cannot have everyone in here.’ The darkness deepens, the cries without die away, and nothing is left but the shift and falling of the incessant snow from roof to ground. Every now and then the disjointed talk would cease altogether, and in the stillness one would hear the faint yet insistent creeping sound of the snowfall. ‘There is a little food down-stairs,’ one would say. ‘The servants must not eat it. We had better lock it upstairs. We may be here—for days.’

181 Wells, introduction to *Underground Man*, 11-12.
Wells lavishly rewrites the solar extinction in what he calls “realistic fashion”—the more familiar register of novelistic realism scaled to human experience and bourgeois class politics (“‘There is a little food down-stairs,’ one would say. ‘The servants must not eat it’”). The elaborate detail and length of Wells’ rewrite (here only quoted in part) suggests the strong appeal this representational register of human suffering and class politics holds over Wells’ own imagination. But he ultimately concludes that “M. Tarde was well advised to let his hand pass lightly over this episode, to give us a simply pyrotechnic effect of red, yellow, green and pale blue, to let his people flee and die like marionettes beneath the paper snows of a shop window dressed for Christmas.”

Wells emphasizes that neither the suffering nor the desires of the human beings that populate Tarde’s novel are accessible to readers. These characters are not persons, but marionettes staged behind a shop window. Tarde commodifies them, turns them into objects rather than subjects of historical narration. If these beings change over the course of the novel, that transformation is not motivated by their own dissatisfaction or agency, in their desire for a new class position or romantic fulfillment. Instead, Wells suggests, these beings only change when newly posed behind a different window, when placed in a different social and material environment. Withholding the social desire and inner lives of his characters displaces individual experience as the locus of socio-historical transformation within the novel. Tarde thus troubles the division of conceptual labor between the subject and object of novelistic representation—he objectifies and makes passive the novel’s evident

---

historical subject, without fully withholding the realist conventions of protagonist and narrator.

The moment of social transformation in *Underground Man* is designated by Wells as a “pyrotechnic effect”—a construction whose agency is intentionally obscure. This destabilizing of human agency—figuring human beings as uncertainly poised between subjects and objects of historical narration—disrupts the narrative logic of naturalist determinism that might otherwise attend the premise of social extinction. Wells concedes that any “realistic” treatment of solar extinction would necessarily fall into the darkest naturalism: “Directly one thinks at all seriously of such a thing as this solar extinction, one perceives how preposterously hopeless it is to imagine that mankind would make any head against so swift and absolute a fate.”183 But what alternative is there to this naturalist stalemate between freedom and determinism? Wells locates a possibility in the various forms of irony pervading the narrative texture of *Underground Man*. Tarde mocks human presumptuousness, “our conceit in our race’s capacity” to do “all sorts of organized and wholesale things quite beyond [our] capabilities.”184 But at the same time, Tarde narrates the transformation of those human “capabilities” that realism would otherwise essentialize or render static. If realism representationally aggrandizes human agency, sustaining the centrality of the individual subject, then irony corrodes that agency, undermining the human as subject of social transformation.

183 Ibid., 13.
184 Ibid., 14.
At the outset of his introduction, Wells identifies two linguistic registers that tend to dominate discussions of “the material future of mankind”: pseudo-scientific discourse and the trivializing levity of Tardean irony. The conceptual paradigms through which individuals’ “workaday thinking goes on” are not up to the burdensome imaginative task. Radical social transformation is “out of proportion” with the individual life, and the formal calculus of realist aesthetics and the nineteenth-century novel are unable to reconcile that scalar impasse. “We are interested,” recognizing that social transformation constitutively entails human involvement, but at the same time “we feel it is outside us and beyond us.” Wells captures the contradiction that Tarde’s sociological fiction addresses: that the social is simultaneously human and inhuman—that it is constitutively comprised of individual lives, but has grown and is growing in excess of the capacity of those individuals to transform, represent or narrate it. This social growth, out of proportion with the individual life, signals the incompatibility of realist aesthetics and Tardean sociology. Tarde relies on irony to capture both the representational burden of the infrastructural social aggregate and the theoretical recalcitrance of its mechanisms of transformation. Irony—a kind of middle ground between representational tool and cognitive defense mechanism—is the aesthetic solution to both a literary-representational and social-theoretical impasse.

---

185 Ibid., 4.
186 Ibid., 4-5.
But Wells harbors a deeper-seated worry: is this kind of writing enjoyable to read? Wells takes *Underground Man* as conceptual tool more than socially-significant literature:

It does not give any measure of our real sense of the proportion of things that the Future should appear in our literature as a sort of comic rally and harlequinade after the serious drama of the Present—in which the heroes and heroines of the latter turn up again in novel and undignified positions; but it seems to be the only method at present available by which we may talk about our race’s material Destiny at all.\(^{187}\)

This is the representational challenge of a sociological literature that ironically corrodes the individuating logic of realist aesthetics: How to imagine “our race’s material Destiny,” a transformed social future, and still produce *narrative*—still write stories that readers care about? Can the narration of collective social transformation ever simulate or recreate the “serious drama of the Present,” or are those dramatic forms constitutively beholden to the psychological realism that Wells’ preface recreates, critiques, and finally discards? Can readers *desire* the social? If the limit of the novel is the limit of the individual subject or the human species, how can the novel narrate or instigate social transformation, especially in a world increasingly shaped by new forms of socio-technical mediation? These literary-interpretive questions define the problem space of the infrastructural modernism that Tarde and Wells share. Taken together, these questions concatenate into a central, animating question that Wells explores more fully in a series of essays and literary texts written in the latter half of the decade: By what aesthetic

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 6.
concept or literary feature can texts represent the transformative exchanges between character and environment, subject and object, human and nonhuman?

***

Wells’ interest in Tarde’s sociological antirealism coincides with the early institutional development of sociology in Britain, in which Wells himself played a minor role. While completing the preface to *Underground Man*, Wells had become briefly but intensely involved with both the Fabian Socialists and the Sociological Society at the London School of Economics. Disciplinary sociology had been slower to develop in Britain than in Germany and France, and the Sociological Society only held its first meeting in 1904. Wells participated in the Society’s early meetings, and is listed as a member for both 1904 and 1905 in the Society’s *Sociological Papers*. But Wells soon grew disillusioned with the scientific pretensions of mainstream British academic

---


sociology, which was increasingly modeling its methods on the natural and physical sciences: empirical observation, classification and the formulation of testable laws. It was in this intellectual context that Wells delivered “The So-Called Science of Sociology” to the London Sociological Society in 1906—his most fully-articulated metadisciplinary reflection on sociological method and the relationship between art and sociology.\textsuperscript{190} Despite the essay’s close analysis of the relationship between literature and sociological method, Wells’ essay has been largely ignored by literary critics. For the most part, “The So-Called Science” has been of interest mainly to historians of sociology who suggest that social theorists might recover Wells’ more speculative methodological approach as a sort of lost origin for a more theoretical British sociology or a model for contemporary social theory.\textsuperscript{191} Read in conjunction with his preface to Tarde and his early-twentieth century literary texts, “The So-Called Science of Sociology” should also be read as a significant, if unrecognized, statement of proto-modernist criticism—a methodological explication of the constitutively sociological dimension of Wells’ “modern” literary form at the turn of the century.

\textsuperscript{190} An early version of the essay first appeared in 1905, the same year that Wells wrote both Tarde’s preface and \textit{A Modern Utopia}.

\textsuperscript{191} Both Kumar and Levitas make a version of this argument. Levitas: “[I]f Wells had been appointed, the history of sociology would have been very different: both utopia and gender relations would have been central to the discipline from the outset. If ‘The So-called Science of Sociology’ is now treated as a mere footnote, if that, both in histories of sociology and in histories of Wells’ own life and work, this may not have been inevitable. It should more properly be read as a serious prospectus for a quite different and then potentially possible development of sociology…which is less repressive of normative and utopian aspects of social understanding” (534-35).
Wells’ essay makes the central, polemical argument that academic sociology “is not a science at all.”¹⁹² Tracing the burgeoning field’s disciplinary history, Wells contends that sociology has achieved coherence only by way of an “arbitrary assumption that the whole universe of being was reducible to measurable and commensurable and exact and consistent expressions” (SS 3). But that measurability is “not innate”—the assumed commensurability on which sociology relies is historical rather than essential. Wells argues that contemporary science has confused sociology and reification—that the social transactability immanent to capitalist social relations has been mistaken for the essential nature of society. This confusion of capitalism for sociology is just the most telling example of a wider anthropocentrism underwriting the epistemology of modern science: “In the general usage of to-day, ‘science’ implies a quality of knowledge that enables its possessor to foretell consequences within his purview; and within that restricted sense, the great mass even of natural history still does not come” (SS 8).

Modern science frames the world to the purview of the human scientist, to the timescale of the human lifespan, to the ratios and rationalizations of use-value. The sociologist can only identify analytic units, discover social laws or create knowledge about entities that fall within this delimited purview. Sociology, then, is always already limited by the imagination and values of its human scientists, and produces, in effect, a sort of self-colonization of human social life by bourgeois concepts. Wells invites his readers to consider: What is the “purview” of the professional sociologist, and how might shifting

the field’s basic conceptual orientation transform both the predictive value and social utility of sociology? How can sociology be made both more truthful and socially useful?

Wells’ first scientific axiom is that “there are no identically similar objective experiences” (SS 5). Not only human beings, but even atoms have individuality, and “only in the subjective world, and in theory and the imagination, do we deal with identically similar units” (SS 5). Scientific units are only practically commensurable, and modern science confuses “a sort of labor-saving bias in the common man’s mind, in the normal human mind” with genuine scientific truth. Reliant on conceptual infrastructures scaled to the perspectival limits of human cognition, modern science both confines itself to and formats the world in the anthropocentric image of “the normal human mind.”¹⁹³ Wells’ demand is not that we should fantastically break free of our embodiment or impossibly transcend the perspectival limitations of human cognition, but that we should not mistake our anthropoid limits for knowledge of the world: “great practical convenience is no proof whatever of…final truth” (SS 7). Rather than repress the scalar distortions of human cognition, Wells insists that scientists bring them into the analytic frame. If modern science relies on concepts that abstract individuality, then scientists must “admit that we become less ‘scientific’ as we ascend the scale of the sciences” (8). Human individuality is harder to ignore than that of atoms. And yet, Wells insists, social

¹⁹³ Hence the appeal of evolutionary thought for Wells throughout his intellectual life, from his earliest coursework with T.H. Huxley to his later macrohistories of the planet. In transcending the reliance on classificatory schemes and rigid conceptual structures, Darwin is for Wells the first and best scientific theorist of individuality: “it was only with the establishment of Darwin’s great generalizations, that the hard and fast classificatory scheme broke down, and individuality came to its own” (6).
scientists from Spencer to Durkheim have sought to divide human society into discrete social types and quasi-distinct social entities. But not only is this task intellectually dishonest, it is futile to “isolate complete communities of men” in a world of intensifying socio-technical mediation: “These alleged units have as much individuality as pieces of cloud; they come, they go, they fuse and separate” (SS 9). The ground of the social is shifting under sociologists’ feet, and the static conceptual paradigms of academic sociology are the belated, ineffectual effort to stabilize a world radically in flux. Like “the material future of mankind” in Underground Man, the question of the social is simply too big for the conceptual structures of positivist science. What Wells demands is not that we find better classificatory concepts, but that we pay closer attention to the very techniques through which we render “society” representable—that we become more attentive to the processes through which the effect of scale is produced and “the social” becomes apprehensible as a series of commensurable units or social types. This is for Wells a question of representation that requires a fundamental conceptual reorganization. Rather than a series of measurable units, sociologists must recognize that “there is only one unit”: not so much a static and unchanging “humanity,” but a conception of human life radically open to change:

We cannot put Humanity into a museum, or dry it for examination; our one single, still living specimen is all history, all anthropology, and the fluctuating world of men. There is no satisfactory means of dividing it and nothing else is the real world with which to compare it. (SS 9)

Wells challenges sociology to orient itself to a radically unwieldy and ever-shifting single unit of analysis: the human historical process itself, so open to evolutionary transformation that it also in a sense contains the nonhuman historical process. Such a
radical shifting of analytic perspective requires commensurably new methods; sociologists must “be prepared to admit devices of presentment and methods of approach that will shock any other sort of scientific men” (SS 8).

Because the social is constantly evolving, transforming and mediating, “no sociology of universal compulsion, of anything approaching the general validity of the physical sciences, is ever to be hoped for” (SS 9). The social is not accessible to the human cognitive apparatus, and the sociologist is limited by “the personal angle of vision” (SS 9). But this scalar impasse is not a limitation for Wells—rather, it constitutes the very object of sociology itself. Revoking at the outset the possibility of a final sociology or fully comprehensive social typology, Wells understands the vocation of sociological method to be the ongoing mediation of individual mind and evolving, complexifying social totality: “Sociology, it is evident, is, upon any hypothesis, no less than the attempt to bring that vast complex unique Being, its subject, into clear true relations with the individual intelligence” (SS 9). Sociology aspires not only to explicate social relations, but also to perfect and transform them—to bring individual elements into new forms of relation. Any account of the social must incorporate the individual point of view as much as the general—any presentation of the social “must involve an element of self-expression, must partake quite as much of the nature of art as of science” (SS 9).

Sociological method, then, must facilitate exchange across seemingly opposed modes: the individual and the social, art and science, subjectivity and objectivity. A sociology more perfectly adapted to its object is, finally, a kind of literature: “neither art simply, nor science in the narrow meaning of the word at all, but knowledge rendered through
personality, that is to say, in the highest sense of the term, literature” (SS 10). Wells identifies two primary literary forms that “subserve sociological purposes”: social forms of “History” and, especially, “Utopias”—asserting, finally, that “the creation of Utopias—and their exhaustive criticism—is the proper and distinctive method of sociology” (SS 11).

A sociology properly attuned to the evolving nature of its object is, then, constitutively literary, reconciling the ever-transforming social to individual experience. Wells advocates for a sociology combining the best aspects of literature and science. But what would it mean to take his provocation further and excavate a sociological dimension immanent to modern literary form? Can we recognize literature itself as a kind of sociological method? At the conclusion of the essay, Wells opens the window to just this manner of reading, contrasting positivist sociology and art as competing methods of social science. Wells asserts that “the existing classification of the departments of mental activity is one, not only of field and range, but of method and nature,” challenging the dominant view “that artistic and literary expression are inferior and unsubstantial human activities, methods of decoration as it were, applied to the ‘scientific’ gold” (SS 12). In the essay’s conclusion, Wells doubly emphasizes “method.” Art, for Wells, is neither the aesthetic consolation of a reified world nor an autonomous realm separable from science. Art—and literature in particular—is a counter-method to positivist sociology, an epistemological activity seeking not only to explicate but also to intervene in a transforming social field.
What are the features of a literature that aspires to sociological method? For Wells, to imagine the social is to desire utopia:

There is no such thing in sociology as dispassionately considering what is, without considering what is intended to be. The history of civilization is really the history of the appearance and reappearance, the tentatives and hesitations and alterations, the manifestations and reflections in the mind and that, of a very complex, imperfect, elusive idea, the Social Idea. It is that idea struggling to exist and realize itself in a world of egotisms, animalisms, and brute matter. (SS 10-11)

The utopian aspect of Wellsian literary form consists in representing the potential reanimation of the world-as-it-is by the Social Idea—in glimpsing civilization’s potential transformability through aesthetic forms that break through the intractability of the present, displacing the inertia of the individual with the dynamic transspecies relationality of the social. In this way, Wells’ utopian sociology of the “intended-to-be” returns us to and anticipates Amitav Ghosh’s recent critique of literary realism in The Great Derangement—of “conceiving…fiction and politics in terms of individual moral adventures”:

What fiction…makes possible is to approach the world in a subjunctive mode, to conceive of it as if it were other than it is: in short, the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities. And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis. 194

Ghosh closely echoes Wells in calling for a future-oriented fiction of social transformation and immanent potentiality. Ghosh and Wells both highlight the imaginative limitations of a realism scaled to the individual life. But for Wells, the literary method of sociology does not confine itself to the explicit imagination of “future

194 Ibid., 129, 128.
forms of human existence”—its method is to apprehend the shifting contours and broadening domain of the Social Idea as it struggles to realize itself “in a world of egotisms, animalisms, and brute matter.”

Wells’ Social Idea—like Tarde’s infrastructural utopia—mediates across the human/nonhuman divide. Sociology is not the science of pristinely separate, ontologically distinct human social forms, but rather describes the co-constitution of human and nonhuman agency in dynamic socio-technical environments. Wells’ literary-sociological method demands that we reconsider the concepts that render human society and nonhuman world both thinkable and ontologically separable. It is only by remaking these conceptual structures (and the aesthetic forms that bolster them) that we can begin to imagine new mediations of the Social Idea—begin to imagine a political body adequate to the transformations of infrastructural modernity. Wells insists that to remake our political institutions we first have to reimagine our social concepts and that this is equally the task of the humanities and of science. Sociology is the object of Wells’ most scathing critique because it has failed to grasp its privileged place as “the science of the social” at the intersection of art and science, giving itself over to the methodological limitations of positivism. The utopian gambit of Wells’ essay, then, is not for literature to overtake science, but to work with science—remaking the conceptual structures of the “human” sciences into something more flexible, grasping the ever-intensifying mediation of human and nonhuman agencies in the composition of modern social worlds.

Returning to Ghosh’s critique of a realism trapped in contemplation of the existent, Wells’ essay invites critics to attend more closely to the representational
strategies through which literary form responds to world-scale systematic transformation outside of its overt thematization. Wells calls us to attend closely to the literary features through which the shifting contours of the Social Idea and its entanglement across egotisms, animalisms and matter is given representational form. As we will soon observe in Wells’ turn-of-the-century literary texts, this utopian literary-sociological method need not confine itself to the genre forms of utopian tract and science fiction. Despite the perspectival limitations inherent to literary realism that Wells theorizes and that Ghosh critiques, the formal logic of the nineteenth-century novel is implicated in and transformed by Wells’ infrastructural modernism. In the following chapter, I will trace the literary-formal convergences between Wells’ most overt sociological utopia, *A Modern Utopia* (1905), and his most conventionally realist novel, *Tono-Bungay* (1909). Both texts not only thematize the infrastructural basis of modern social relations, but also fissure narrative agency across spilt protagonists and dissolving narrators—giving complementary formal shape to processes of socio-technical mediation that systematically transform the composition of modern social worlds.

The literary-sociological method modeled and theorized between Tarde and Wells requires that we trace a new genealogy of modernism in terms of its historical co-emergence with modern sociology. Tarde and Wells’ shared critique of realism—what I call their infrastructural modernism—recasts modern literature’s prevailing orientation away from alienation and towards entanglement, away from the individual and towards the social, away from the autonomy of literary character and towards the character-environment complex. Recognizing these aesthetic continuities developed across
literature and sociology in the first decade of the twentieth century demands a literary-critical practice attentive to the relationship between literary form and changing material conditions in a time of systemic, world-scale transformation. Once we recognize the collective, rather than individual, framework of their social science fiction, we can see that both Tarde and Wells embody a modernism responsive to the representational project envisioned by Ghosh, a complex aesthetic response to an infrastructural modernity that continues to demand our most exacting artistic ingenuity.
CHAPTER TWO: “Running the Country Practically”: H.G. Wells and the Enabling Fictions of Inhuman Power

**Ambivalent Modernism**

The case of H.G. Wells has long presented a classificatory challenge to critics of modern literature. Despite the wide-ranging diversity of his written output—from his early scientific romances of the 1890s to the posthumanist speculation of 1945’s *The Mind at the End of Its Tether*—most sustained discussions of Wells tend ultimately to address themselves to the same recurring question: is Wells a *modernist*? It is a simple but forcefully structuring question—one that Wells himself seems to have anticipated. Writing in 1930, long after his reputation as a novelist had been eclipsed by that of historian, educator and activist, Wells declared himself “a haphazard and pampered prophet” who found it “amusing and profitable to write stories.” Distinguishing his own writerly goals from self-conscious literary artistry, Wells affirms: “I have never taken any very great pains about writing. I am outside the hierarchy of conscious and deliberate writers altogether. I am the absolute antithesis of Mr James Joyce.”

Many critics beg to differ. Over the past few decades, numerous readers of Wells have taken pains to reclaim him under the sign of modernism—to construct a modernism that can shelter Wells and Joyce under the same roof. J.R. Hammond insists that it is a mistake to take Wells’ self-assessment at face value, that “he has been taken too readily

---

on his own estimation.” Hammond asserts that despite an evident stylistic conservatism, Wells “has far more affinity with the modernists than the realists—that is to say, he was much more consciously experimental in his work than is generally acknowledged.” Hammond locates Wells’ modernism in a vaguely defined yet willful stylistic experimentation. Robert Caserio develops this argument for Wells as a major experimental author of the early-twentieth century, offering a more precise account of “the Wellsian New Essay,” a generic hybrid combining Menippean satire and the essay form meant to replace the novel of “experiential access” with a new emphasis on overt ideological statement prior to its containment within the personality of the protagonist. Caserio contends that critics have failed to apprehend the radically experimental force of Wells’ literary output due to an uncritical repetition of the high modernists’ own self-canonizing efforts. Whereas Wells recognizes “that ‘art’ is a bourgeois invention that masks political and economic realities we cannot afford to leave covered up,” literary scholars have been too quick to accept the class-bound and ideological account “of what modernism and the novel are or ought to be” underwriting the distinction James, Ford, Lawrence, and Woolf all draw between their own literary output and that of Wells.

197 Ibid., 5.
199 Ibid., 89.
Both Hammond and Caserio insist that we admit Wells among the modernists due to the formally experimental quality of his literary texts. In both accounts, “modernism” seems to consist in the formal or ideological subversion of more naive realist representational practices and epistemologies. But critics have also insisted on the modernism of Wells on precisely the opposite grounds. In her discussion of Wells’ Tono-Bungay, Benita Parry contends that Wells fails to meet the requirements of modernism defined via “ideological subversion, whether effected by radical technical experimentation and conspicuous virtuosity of style or by defamiliarizing the process of fictional representation.”

Despite Wells’ lack of formal experimentation, however, Parry notes the centrality of processes of “modernization” to the thematic and stylistic texture of Tono-Bungay. For Parry, the particular generic quality of Tono-Bungay is constituted in this contradiction between its residual style and modern content—its representation of “what happens at the base, but without evoking that sense of experimental fermentation which persisted into the era that is the book’s moment.”

Wells’ novel is thus for Parry “transitional”—stylistically and ideologically beholden to earlier, non-modernist representation, while “signs of a literary modernism do circulate in its chronicle of an England reordered and unsettled by capitalism-as-imperialism.”

---

201 Parry, like most critics, takes Tono-Bungay (1909) as representative as Wells’ mid-career literary output, the period following the heyday of Wells’ late-nineteenth-century scientific romances (The Time Machine (1895), The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896), The Invisible Man (1897), The War of the Worlds (1898)).
202 Parry, Postcolonial Studies, 149-50.
203 Ibid., 150.
And thus we approach the crux of the interpretive impasse—why Wells’ modernism or non-modernism has remained such an animating and essential question for contemporary readers. It does seem clear that an author so invested in emerging forms of genre fiction, popular education, and journalism—so invested in being widely read—should uneasily coexist with the values of many high modernists, as Caserio shows. But where does Wells’ modernism reside, if even those critics who claim him as modernist cannot agree as to where to find it or in what it consists? Wells brings to the forefront definitional contradictions immanent to the field of modernist studies itself. As modernist studies has enriched itself in opening up to more objects and authors than older ideologists of modernism were willing to admit, the field has necessarily grown more historical and materialist in order to maintain its conceptual and epistemological coherence. The stylistic experimentation of modernism is seen as responsive to transformed historical conditions—to the emergence of modernity. Despite the diversity and globally expansive array of texts and media comprising this newer modernism, however, the account of what constitutes “modernity” has remained more stable. For Parry, the essential “modernity” of Tono-Bungay—Wells’ relation to “the modern” that

---

204 On this idea regarding the incompatibility of modernism and wide readership, see also Simon J. James: “Earlier Wells texts such as Tono-Bungay and Boon may share characteristics with modernist fiction, but Wells could never choose to be a modernist writer, since he wanted his books and the ideas they contain to be read by as large an audience as possible—no doubt in part out of artistic vanity, but above all so that humanity’s prospects for survival and well-being might be improved” (190). Maps of Utopia: H.G. Wells, Modernity, and the Ends of Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

205 For the classic account of this wider transformation in the field of modernist studies, see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies.” PMLA 123.3 (2008): 737-48.
marks him as transitional or semi-modernist—is to be found in “a narrative where the
positivistic, technocratic and rationalistic remaking of Europe is structurally linked to the
exploitation of the colonial world.”206 This is the modernity story of global capitalism, in
which commodification, reification and rationalization serve as the governing structures
coordinating modernist culture and capitalist modernity.

This modernity story is shaped by the methods and disciplinary protocols of late-
nineteenth century social theory and sociology. Returning to the animating questions of
the Tarde/Durkheim debate, we can begin to appreciate the persistent influence of
Durkheimian social theory on many of our most durable paradigms for conceptualizing
twentieth-century social transformation: the understanding of the social as autonomous,
_sui generis_, composed of social facts and collective representations ontologically distinct
from the natural world.207 For Durkheim, social facts have a reality-status and
explanatory value that exceed the total sum or aggregate of the individuals who comprise
its composite units: the whole is alienated from and coercively acts upon the sum of its
parts. Combining Bruno Latour’s critique of Durkheimian sociology with a the
postcolonial critique of modernity, Timothy Mitchell has discussed the limitations of this
social-scientific paradigm for apprehending the techno-scientific transformations of the
early twentieth century. Mitchell contends that two legacies of late-nineteenth-century

206 Parry, _Postcolonial Studies_, 150.
207 I discuss the 1903 Tarde/Durkheim debate in the introduction to the dissertation,
which I frame as a model for the competing orientations of sociology at the turn of the
century.
social theory continue to structure and distort our perception of techno-scientific modernity:

First: developmental narratives of the nation-state continue to be embedded within a universal framework—“the story of rationalization, technological and social progress, the growth and transformation of production, and the universalization of the culture and power of the West”—whose assumed universality is the condition of possibility for Durkheimian social science, the smooth canvas on which its social typologies can unfold. But this so-called universal framework only emerges in simultaneity with the radical expansion of Western wealth, technical knowledge, and infrastructure that provide the material conditions that authorize its linear-progressivist philosophy of history.

Secondly, and following from the first: Durkheimian social science continues to authorize the structuring assumption that all social actors are human: “The protagonists of the history of the nation, of modernity, of capitalism, are people. Human beings are the agents around whose actions and intentions the story is written.” Human intention—“the spread of this human reason, technical knowledge, or collective consciousness”—confers the rationality on which social theory relies, and the assumed universality of sociology is the belated intellectual echo of Western colonial practices.209


209 Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 29.
Combined, these two legacies of nineteenth-century sociology produce a social science such that “in the explanation of events one always knows in advance who the protagonists are.” This framework, as we have already seen in the Tarde/Durkheim debate, posits an epistemological impasse between human and nonhuman agency. In fact, Mitchell cites Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method* as exemplary of this structural divide, and the quotation he cites bears repeating:

> While the scientist who studies physical nature is very keenly aware of the resistance it offers him, and which he has so much difficulty in overcoming, the sociologist seems to move in a sphere perfectly transparent to his view, so great is the ease with which the most obscure questions are resolved.  

Contrasting the purely alien and material resistance of the object world to the wholly-available transparency of the social, Durkheim founds modern sociology on the absolute distinction between an autonomous realm of human intention and agency and an object world upon which that intention acts, or to which it responds. What this model cannot apprehend are the ways in which the seeming ideality of universal human agency is shaped, transformed and grounded in combination with other forms of agency: “No explanation grounded in the universalizing force of human projects and intentions can explore whether the very possibility of the human, of intentionality, of abstraction depends on, at the same time as it overlooks, nonhuman elements. These appear merely physical, secondary, and external.”

---

210 Ibid.


This chapter argues that the special value of H.G. Wells to contemporary readers resides in his apprehension of modernity and global capitalism in a different conceptual and representational register than the modernity story that Mitchell describes. My earlier discussion of the Tarde/Durkheim debate excavated a counter-aesthetic to the dominant paradigm of nineteenth-century social science—Tarde’s framework of monadological relationality undoes almost all of Durkheim’s epistemological assumptions: the ontologically-distinct “thingliness” of society, the autonomy of human culture, the priority of law and structure over process and historical contingency. In this chapter, I analyze how Wells’ mid-career literary output extends the aesthetic logic of Tarde’s relational metaphysics into a new literary mode for imaging socio-technical modernity.

Tracing a competing “modernity story” from Tarde to Wells enables us to consider with fresh eyes the essential question of Wells’ modernism. On the whole, I think we have to agree with Parry and Simon James that by the conventional requirements of ideological subversion, radical technical experimentation, and resistance to the massifying tendencies of the commoditized literary marketplace, Wells is not a modernist.213 Neither our discomfort with gatekeeping definitions of modernism nor with Wells’ consequent exclusion changes the fact that Wells is an ill fit. The argument of this chapter is not that we sneak Wells in the back door of a no-longer-quite-so-pretentious modernism, but rather that we take Wells’ ill fit seriously as provocation to rethink the

---

213 James: “The aesthetics of Joyce or Eliot require a strenuous level of knowledge of the culture that is anathema to Wells’ iconoclastic dismissal of the residuum. The solipsism of much of modernism’s representation of the self is similarly antithetical to Wells’ increasingly collectivizing aims” (Maps of Utopia 190).
limitations inherent in our conceptual understanding of what “modernity” and “modernism” entail. Despite the conceptual loosening that has attended the new modernist studies, the field has relied on a relatively stable *modernity* to which *modernism* is understood as the aesthetic response. Reading through the structuring prism of nineteenth-century social theory has led critics to understand modernism as a form of human aesthetic agency that redeems or responds to the alienating alterity of machines, masses, and matter—casting modernism within a protracted philosophical stalemate between the human and nonhuman that obscures the mixing of natural and social agencies. The enduring interest of Wells resides in the fact that he forces us to rethink this division of conceptual labor. Models of modernism defined as the stylized aesthetic response to the global pressures of reification, rationalization and commodification do not offer a fully convincing explication of Wells’ literary production in relation to its wider historical context. Hence the continued confusion as to the terms and extent of his “modernism.”

This is not to deny Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism”—that the notion of “modernity” encodes the social upheavals attendant on the intensification of capitalist modes of production and the world-scale colonization of market logic.\(^\text{214}\) To trace an alternative modernity story via Wells is not to repudiate the world-shaping force of capitalism, but rather to rethink the concepts and literary forms through which we apprehend and intervene in that world-shaping force. For Jameson is also right to assert

that the concept of modernity “traces its lineage back to the founding fathers of sociology—and with which indeed sociology itself is coterminous as a field of study.”

This chapter takes us back to that coterminous moment—when the terms of “modernity” were far more contested than the prevailing paradigms of today’s modernist studies—to recover alternative concepts with which to coordinate capitalism and culture not beholden to those limitations that Mitchell describes.

**Forms of Modernity: *A Modern Utopia***

Wells most closely approximates the overtly “sociological utopia” described in “The So-Called Science of Sociology” in *A Modern Utopia*, first serialized in the *Fortnightly Review* between October 1904 and April 1905 with the subtitle, “A Sociological Holiday.” Like Tarde’s *Underground Man*, the text is uncertainly poised between literary text and sociological tract, outlining elaborately detailed accounts of futuristic-utopian social formations, customs, and laws—all mediated by a series of narrative frames and split narratorial figures. Given the self-consciously “literary” quality of *A Modern Utopia*, critics have struggled to pin down precisely how earnestly readers are meant to take the utopian ideas theorized within. In the preface written for the text’s 1925 republication, Wells retrospectively describes *A Modern Utopia* as an “experiment in form.”

Wells recounts an arduous process of trial and error, systematically testing and discarding a series of generic forms: argumentative essay, discussion novel, ancient

---

215 Ibid., 7.

133
dialogue, hard narrative. Seeking a middle ground between the binary structures of propositional argumentation—“hard, heavy lines, black and white, yes and no”—and “the vulgar appetite for stark stories,” Wells finally arrives at the composite form of *A Modern Utopia*: “a sort of shot-silk texture between philosophical discussion on the one hand and imaginative narrative on the other” (*MU* 6). If, as Krishnan Kumar suggests, the complex genre composition and literary devices of *A Modern Utopia* leave readers “unsure of the author’s intent and even of his fundamental faith in his utopian vision,” how does this bizarre, knotted text—more narrative apparatus than literary form—subtend the specifically sociological method Wells theorizes for utopian art?217

*A Modern Utopia* opens with “The Owner of Voice,” a self-declaring “portrait of the author” typographically set off from the main body of the text with italics (*MU* 7). Ostensibly, the author of this utopia—the owner of the voice—is Wells himself. But our assumptions are soon undone, and the text carefully explains their analytic distinction: “Throughout these papers sounds a note, a distinctive and personal note, a note that tends at times towards stridency….Now, this Voice, and this is the peculiarity of the matter, is not to be taken as the Voice of the ostensible author who fathers these pages” (*MU* 7). The author distinguishes the writerly personality of his authorial “voice” from the “distinctive and personal note” of its vocal performance. The voice is more an instrument, less an idiosyncratic personal style—more an object, less a subject. But almost immediately the author gives concrete form to this non-authorial voice:

> The Owner of the Voice you must figure to yourself as a whitish plump man, a little under the middle size and age, with such blue eyes as many Irishmen have,

217 Kumar, “Wells and ‘The So-Called Science of Sociology’” 207.

134
and agile in his movements and with a slight tonsorial baldness—a penny might cover it—of the crown. His front is convex. He droops at times like most of us, but for the greater part he bears himself as valiantly as a sparrow. Occasionally his hand flies out with a fluttering gesture of illustration. And his Voice (which is our medium henceforth) is an unattractive tenor that becomes at times aggressive. Him you must imagine as sitting at a table reading a manuscript about Utopias, a manuscript he holds in two hands that are just a little fat at the wrist. (MU 7)

As many critics have noted, the owner of the voice is recognizable as a parodic self-portrait of Wells himself.218 Despite the asserted non-equivalence of author and owner of the voice, both seemingly refer to Wells. The disembodied author gives concrete satirical form to a degraded version of himself—prying the “unattractive tenor” of his vocal instrument free from the ideal personality of his authorial voice. Wells then duplicates this figural trick on just the next page—parodying himself into the even less inspiring form of the botanist, the sentimental companion and pedantic dialectical counterpart of the Owner of the Voice in utopia.219 Like Tarde in Underground Man, Wells frustrates

218 See Patrick Parrinder: “[T]he narrator himself, a plump blue-eyed sparrow of a man whose voice is an ‘unattractive tenor that becomes at times aggressive,’ is an easily recognizable caricature of H.G. Wells: he is both Wells and not-Wells” (102). Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995). See also Francis Wheen, introduction to A Modern Utopia (New York: Penguin, 2005), xxii.

219 Critics have been less willing to read the botanist as a form of Wellsian self-parody, but the character is clearly interpretable as a satire of Wells’ well-documented romantic sentimentality and natural-scientific training: “But over against this writer here presented, there is also another earthly person in the book, who gathers himself together into a distinct personality only after a preliminary complication with the reader. This person is spoken of as the botanist, and he is a leaner, rather taller, graver and much less garrulous man. His face is weakly handsome and done in tones of grey, he is fairish and grey-eyed, and you would suspect him of dyspepsia. It is a justifiable suspicion. Men of this type, the chairman remarks with a sudden intrusion of exposition, are romantic with a shadow of meanness, they seek at once to conceal and shape their sensuous cravings beneath egregious sentimentalities, they get into mighty tangles and troubles with women, and he has had his troubles” (MU 8).
the relationship between transparent authorial proxy and distinctly objectified character. All three of these figures are both Wells and not-Wells, subjects and objects of narration. Wells triply allegorizes himself into his utopian semi-narrative, begging the question as to whether the text is more concerned with intimate self-examination or futurological speculation.\textsuperscript{220} Wells himself seems trapped in this question, unable to motivate \textit{A Modern Utopia} without recursively re-inserting himself into the text, each satirical degradation parodying and thus flagging in advance his own sense of personal limitation—the structures of individual personality or desire that might foreclose authentic sociological investigation.

In the diegetic narrative of \textit{A Modern Utopia}, the Owner of the Voice and his botanist companion are transported to an alternate version of earth—an exact copy of the physical constitution and population of the planet in 1905, reimagined through the structures and customs of Wells’ modern utopia. Throughout the text, Wells emphasizes the specifically \textit{modern} quality of this futuristic social form, and the narrative proper begins by contrasting “modern utopia” to all preceding forms of utopian thought. Earlier utopias were “perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won for ever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things” (\textit{MU} 11). Wells rejects the notion that any society could achieve static and perfected organizational finality, reproducing its

\textsuperscript{220} This impasse between utopian speculation and narcissistic self-knowledge is staged within the utopian text proper via the Owner of the Voice’s increasing obsession with meeting his utopian double: “That I have come to Utopia is the lesser thing now; the greater is that I have come to meet myself” (\textit{MU} 156); “My Utopian self is, of course, my better self—according to my best endeavours—and I must confess myself fully alive to the difficulties of the situation. When I came to this Utopia I had no thought of any such intimate self-examination” (\textit{MU} 167).
unchanging perfection into generational futurity. A modern utopia is constitutively dynamic:

The Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages. Nowadays we do not resist and overcome the great stream of things, but rather float upon it. We build now not citadels, but ships of state. (MU 11)

Kinetic utopia does not finally conquer nature but enters into flexible compromise with it. The “whole trend of modern thought” is against the permanence of “enclosure” — the modern social process is constitutively one of social extension, inclusion and growth, rather than the twinned partitioning of the natural world and human social organization. The kinetic modernity to which A Modern Utopia refers is that of endless incorporation and transformation—a social world that “floats upon” rather than “resist[s] and overcome[s]” or insulates itself from “the great stream of things.” For Wells, earlier utopias like William Morris’ News From Nowhere rely on a kind of magical thinking in which utopian social structure unproblematically transforms human behavior, ameliorating “the nature of man and the nature of things together” (MU 12). Morris’ utopia is facile wish-fulfillment, not sociology. It fails its most urgent narrative function: “to bring that vast complex unique Being”—the wider world of egotisms, animalisms, and brute matter—“into clear true relations with the individual intelligence.”221 Wells seeks a narrative apparatus that can actively mediate the relationship between the individual and that wider world—that can reconcile a reader to her social world so that she can better transform it. Rather than lay out the static structures of the timeless

---

perfected state, Wells addresses the mechanisms through which the “limitations of human possibility” adapt themselves to “the inhumanity…the insubordination of nature” (*MU* 12).

Wells most comprehensively describes the socio-political structure of the utopian state in the chapter discussing utopian economics. This chapter is also the text’s most explicitly *utopian*: the economic system it describes does not yet exist even in the modern utopia itself but is elaborately outlined as the aspirational destination of an even-more-perfected social world. Utopian economics seeks not to abolish money, but to “amplify the scope of this most precious invention” by converting commercial exchange into an elaborate world-scale energy infrastructure—currency replaced by “force,” value “measured in units of energy” (*MU* 55, 56). Wells transmutes the transactional mediation of commercial exchange into the material transspecies relationality of socio-technical mediation. This infrastructural economy dissolves the coherence of older mediations of collective social life: if the “old order” comprised a “system of institutions and classes,” utopia fosters a more dynamic system “of enterprises and interests” (*MU* 56). Wells gives imaginative form to the “movement” that for Lauren Berlant distinguishes infrastructures from institutions that congeal power into the illusory appearance of social permanence.223

---

222 In Wells’ modern utopia, the world-scale energy economy outlined in “Utopian Economics” is thinkable, but not actualized in socio-political practice: “Heaven knows where progress may not end, but at any rate this developing State, into which we two men have fallen, this Twentieth Century Utopia, has still not passed beyond money and the use of coins” (*MU* 55).

223 Berlant: “Movement is what distinguishes infrastructures from institutions, although the relation between these concepts and materialities is often a matter of perspective. Institutions enclose and congeal power and interest and represent their legitimacy in the way they represent something reliable in the social, a predictability on which the social
Only this fully consolidated energy infrastructure can replace money as the most dynamic, totalizing agency of social transformation that Wells can imagine. Unlike the “bad psychology” of the money economy, beholden to exchange values derived from “individual preferences which are incalculable and unique,” a genuinely modern infrastructure-economy attends to the dynamic needs of the collective, mediated by “units of physical energy” (MU 60, 58). Utopian economics are thus a “physics applied to problems in the theory of sociology” (MU 59, 60). Infrastructure makes possible the ameliorative physics of sociology and renders social transformation thinkable, revealing the constitutive continuity of economic exchange, interpersonal psychology, and socio-technical mediation. Economics is ultimately subsumable to the psychological, and psychology becomes relational psychology: “a science of human aggregations… of the methods of intercourse and collective decision that hold human groups together, and finally of government and the State” (MU 61). Finally, then, economics is “subordinate and subsequent to this general science of Sociology” (MU 61). A Modern Utopia literalizes infrastructural mediation—the socio-technical entanglement of human beings and a once-insubordinate nature—as the motor of social transformation in modernity. An amplification of Wells’ own infrastructural modernity into its most extreme futuristic form, Wells allegorizes the emergent infrastructural systems of the early-twentieth century into a fantastic world-scale energy economy that can powerfully bring the social and natural into mutually transforming relation.

—

relies. Institutions norm reciprocity. What constitutes infrastructure in contrast are the patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use” (“The commons” 403).
The utopian heart of *A Modern Utopia* gives sociological shape to a world radically in flux, in which “there is no being, but a universal becoming of individualities” and ontological stability gives way to transformative processes of entanglement (*MU* 21). Wells’ investment in giving representational shape to a world of constant socio-technical transformation helps to clarify the text’s bizarrely convoluted form, which aspires to what Wells describes in the 1925 Preface as a “sort of lucid vagueness” (*MU* 5). More than simple “ambiguity” or “fuzziness,” “vagueness” is a charged word for Wells, drawing on his early training in the post-Darwinist natural sciences. We can refer, most tellingly, to his usage in “Scepticism of the Instrument,” a 1903 paper that was published as the appendix to *A Modern Utopia*: “A mind nourished upon anatomical study is of course permeated with the suggestion of the vagueness and instability of biological species.”

In the essay Wells contends that the evolutionary transience of all existing life forms requires that we recognize the inherently provisional nature of all systems of logic, classification, and social signification. The essay describes the formative effect of Wells’ early education in comparative anatomy under T.H. Huxley, which powerfully confirmed the constitutive impermanence of the human animal: “I knew him incurably for what he was, finite and not final, a being of compromises and adaptations” (*SI* 252).

---


Evolutionary theory conditioned Wells’ subsequent encounter with philosophy—“a way of taking logic in the flank” (SI 253). The human “thinking apparatus”—its brain, instincts, structures of thought, and adaptability to new technical tools—are just as subject to “adaptations and approximations” as the human body, are in no way “mysteriously different and better” (SI 253). Wells had expected logic and language to share the same “profoundly provisional character” as the evolving natural world, but instead found only “a sort of intellectual hardihood,” an assumption of permanence incompatible with humankind’s constitutive plasticity (SI 253). Wells images the human “thinking apparatus” as a sort of synthetic technology comprising somatic matter, technical tools, and structuring concepts—a composite cognitive instrument that remakes the material world in its own image: “The forceps of our minds are clumsy forceps, and crush the truth a little in taking hold of it” (SI 256; italics original). The flimsy imprecision of human concepts mirrors the plasticity of the human itself: "Every species is vague, every term goes cloudy at its edges” (SI 257). Again, that key term “vague”—coordinating the constitutive instability of both mind and matter that together mediate into an ersatz, ever-changing thinking apparatus whose apparent permanence philosophers have sought to formalize in “relentless logic…a sort of intellectual pigheadedness” (SI 257).

Biological evolution prompts Wells to contest humanity’s supposed domination over nature. Wells challenges the epistemological authority of modern thought and dissolves the ontological stability of scientific and philosophical conceptual paradigms. In this way, Wells’ essay anticipates the insights of contemporary media theorists who
assert the primacy of cultural techniques over the ontology of concepts. These theorists seek to describe the historically and culturally contingent technics and media technologies that underwrite supposedly universal “philosophical idealizations.” Bernhard Siegert, for example, echoes Wells’ synthetic “thinking apparatus” when he asserts that “humans as such do not exist independently of cultural techniques of hominization.” These techniques range from seemingly banal rituals of self-care to the weighty conceptual structures that Wells’ essay attacks. Most crucial is to recognize the techniques through which privileged cultural abstractions are distinguished from wider material nature. Siegert urges us to recognize a door, for example, as “both a material object and a symbolic thing,” which partially produces the evidence permanence of our technologically-mediated spatialization of the outer world. Doors are cultural techniques because “the operation of opening and closing them processes and renders visible the distinction between inside and outside.” For Siegert, to attend closely to cultural techniques is not to repudiate ontology, but to recognize ontological distinctions as themselves the effect of mediation: the theory of cultural techniques is not “anti-ontological,” but rather “moves ontology into the domain of ontic operations.” We should read Wells’ essay as an early version of Siegert’s contemporary critical project—uncovering the “relentless logic” and rigid classificatory schemes of modern thought as ontology-producing cultural techniques avant la lettre. But what, then, is the relationship

---

227 Ibid., 13.
228 Ibid., 9.
of Wells’ post-Darwinian proto-media theory and the wider project of *A Modern Utopia*? How does Wells’ critique of modern thought—its artificially fixed ontology—animate and inform his sociological literary form?

That Wells chose to publish “Scepticism of the Instrument” as the appendix to *A Modern Utopia* suggests a strong interpretive relationship between the texts that invites us to bring Wells’ philosophical critique to the intensely mediated social world of kinetic utopia. Like Tarde, Wells’ utopianism ultimately takes aim at the anthropocentric conceptual structures of modern thought—both recognize that social transformation requires a radical conceptual upheaval. Rigid conceptual paradigms that allocate the world into subjects and objects and cordoned social types interfere with the project to remake or reimagine the social. Language and literary form have a role to play in producing and sustaining these structures. Wells’ aesthetics of “lucid vagueness” is an attempt to destabilize the conceptual relationship between representational subjects and objects in *A Modern Utopia*—embedding ontological plasticity within his utopian social world. *A Modern Utopia* thematizes that plasticity via an infrastructure economy that radically entangles the relationship between the natural and the social, gradually transforming both nature and society—both world-state and citizens—in an ongoing process of mutual adjustment. Wells aspires to give form to the ontological transformability of human and nonhuman that rigid conceptual structures and social typologies do not allow. But *A Modern Utopia* is not simply a posthumanist fantasy of proliferating and unstructured materiality. As the economics chapter makes clear, these abstract philosophical claims ultimately refer back to questions of political structure,
social form, and power. Wells does not simply thematize mediation or represent infrastructure but seeks a literary form that can contest the rigid conceptual structures that underwrite not only positivist thought, but also modern aesthetics. This is the relationship between “Scepticism” and *A Modern Utopia*: the essay diagnoses the limitations of modern thought, to which *A Modern Utopia* seeks a counter-aesthetic.

Alexander R. Galloway has described the social context of contemporary information aesthetics as powerfully shaped by positivist logical structures baked into the algorithmic infrastructure of contemporary life. Wells’ critique of logic in “Scepticism” offers the prehistory to Galloway’s social diagnosis:

Today’s systemics have no contrary. Algorithms and other logical structures are uniquely, and perhaps not surprisingly, monolithic in their historical development. There is one game in town: a positivistic dominant of reductive, systemic efficiency and expediency. Offering a counter-aesthetic in the face of such systematicity is the first step toward building a poetics for it, a language of representability adequate to it.229

*A Modern Utopia* is Wells’ attempt to construct such a counter-aesthetic. As Galloway asserts, “The point of unrepresentability is the point of power…. The point of power today resides in networks, computers, algorithms, information, and data.”230 Wells locates the switch-point between material infrastructural networks and positivist conceptual systemics in the process of socio-technical mediation itself. The infrastructure economy at the heart of *A Modern Utopia* fantasizes a vision of world-scale mediation that radically socializes the natural landscape and thus structurally reformats the relationship between nature and society. Wells apprehends the relationship between

230 Ibid., 92.
literary form and social formation as residing in the conceptual structures that distribute the world into subjects and objects, autonomous selves and an alienated nature. If modern conceptual structures and realist literary form both format the world into subjects and objects that are all too easily assimilated into modern structures of power, then A Modern Utopia contests that process via its bifurcation into authorial allegories and narratorial proxies that figure Wells’ authorial semi-protagonism as both subject and object, neither subject nor object. This domain of distributed agency and mediated personhood—of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects—constitutes the “character-environment complex” of A Modern Utopia. Ultimately, Wells addresses the question of how literary form symbolizes personhood in the social world that it narrates. The “lucid vagueness” of A Modern Utopia is not only Wells’ counter-aesthetic to positivist science, but also a counter-method to positivist sociology that identifies its human protagonists and social agents in advance—that can only reproduce the world in its own image.

***

At the outset of A Modern Utopia, the Owner of the Voice outlines the fundamental axiom of all utopian thought, the premise that his text shares with even those older tracts: “the complete emancipation of a community of men from tradition, from habits, from legal bonds, and that subtler servitude possessions entail…. the human power of self-escape, the power to resist the causation of the past, and to evade, initiate, endeavour, and overcome” (MU 13). What makes the text utopian is its dual freedom: not

---

231 I discuss Wells’ critique of literary realism, especially its incompatibility with socially transformative thought, in my discussion of Wells’ preface to Tarde’s Underground Man in chapter 1.
only the freedom of the author to imagine a fully-transformed social world (without narrating the historical process through which those transformations are actualized), but also the freedom of the text’s protagonists to shed their earthly burdens and past determinations—to enter into free relation with this new society. But both the Owner of the Voice and the botanist struggle to reconcile themselves to the fluid sociality of modern utopia. The botanist obsesses over his earthly romantic unfulfillment, what the Owner of the Voice describes as “this intrusive, petty love story” (MU 25). Rather than explore and adapt himself to his utopian surround, the botanist searches for the utopian double of his earthly paramour—to the growing resentment of the Voice: “I wish I had never brought this introspective carcass, this mental ingrate, with me….The old Utopists never had to encumber themselves with this sort of man” (MU 124). As the text proceeds, however, the Voice becomes increasingly fixated on locating his own utopian double: “That I have come to Utopia is the lesser thing now; the greater is that I have come to meet myself” (MU 156). Ultimately neither the botanist nor the Voice is able to liberate himself from the past—their earthly determinations constantly impinge upon their utopian integration: “Why should a modern Utopia insist upon slipping out of the hands of its creator and becoming the background of a personal drama—of such a silly little drama?” (MU 173). Both protagonists thus break the fundamental utopian premise. Transported intergalactically to the utopian world-state, neither is able to liberate himself from his human desires—from bad memories, heartbreak, loneliness, ambivalence.

This non-calibration of desire and world is also activated at the level of literary genre. “Personal drama” overwhelms utopia; the novel overtakes sociology. The
protagonists’ romantic unfulfillment and social jealousies increasingly overtake the narrative frame. Utopia fades from foreground to background, and the materials of a perfected utopia slowly devolve into those of a second-rate novel. This is Wells’ response to the “magical thinking” of Morris-style utopia—giving literary form to the difficult, gradual process of adaptation and mutual adjustment that utopian social transformation necessarily entails, but that prior texts have failed to give shape. For Wells, the paradox immanent to utopian speculation resides in this contradiction underwriting its premise of “freedom from determination”—the impossibility of freely imagining the world otherwise without prior determination by the world that is. Human desire is the obstacle to utopia—though prior utopian texts do not recognize it as such, failing to give shape to the conservatism of human memory and the provincialism of human desire. Reconciling this constitutive smallness of the human thinking apparatus with the radical futurity of genuine utopian speculation and social transformation is the literary-formal problem that Wells tries to crack in A Modern Utopia. It is not enough, then, to speculate on the social structures and customs of a perfected modern utopia. Wells addresses a more fundamental question regarding the social function of utopian sociology and the mechanisms of social transformation: How does genuine change come into being? More to the point, where does the agency of social transformation reside—in the transformation of structures, or in the transformation of humans? Is it sufficient simply to construct more perfected social structures, or do the beings that populate those structures need to transform more meaningfully? And how might literary form aesthetically mediate this historical-imaginative tension?
The conceptual intractability of this question in *A Modern Utopia* explains the
generic un-reconciliation of its literary form, in which utopian discourse scaled to social
structure and novelistic narration scaled to individual experience compete for symbolic
priority. At the text’s conclusion, the botanist finally encounters the utopian double of his
long-lost earthly paramour, for whom he longingly pines throughout the text. The
botanist is shocked, however, to learn that the utopian version of his lover is happily
married and has no interest in his romantic affection. When the Owner of the Voice tries
to reason with the botanist, informing him that his emotion has “no place” in utopia—that
his pain is merely a “scar from the earth—the sore scar of your past”—the botanist
responds with violent rage: “Of course we are covered with scars, we live to be scarred,
we are scars! We are the scars of the past! These dreams, these childish dreams—!” (*MU*
237). This pained outcry marks the final instant of utopia—the “bubble bursts” and both
characters are suddenly transported back to earth. The text’s fragile utopian vision fails to
withstand the botanist’s emotional wounds, and utopia fails to uphold its first premise:
freedom from past determination. But the Owner of the Voice tells us that this utopian
dissolution results not from the botanist’s narcissism or melancholia, but from a more
general perspectival incompatibility. Our protagonists have become too invested in the
individuals populating utopia, rather than its perfected social structure:

To find the people assuming the concrete and individual, is not, as I fondly
imagine, the last triumph of realisation, but the swimming moment of opacity
before the film gives way. To come to individual emotional cases, is to return to
the earth. (*MU* 234)

Utopia is unrepresentable at the level of the emotional case—the concrete and individual.
But if utopia is incompatible with the experience of the individual narrative subject, then
how to present it to individuals? How to communicate it? The social function of Wells’ sociological utopia is to translate the world to the individual reader without narrating the egocentric, obfuscating experiences of the individual: “This infinite world must needs be flattened to get it on one retina. The picture of a solid thing, although it is flattened and simplified, is not necessarily a lie… We fail in comprehension, we fail so variously and abundantly. We see as much as it is serviceable for us to see, and we see no further” (MU 245). This is the formal mandate and representational challenge of Wells’ infrastructural modernism—to compress the global aggregate to the scale of the human thinking apparatus while indicating the provincial conservatism of that very same individual point of view. But where, then, does this leave the individual?

_A Modern Utopia_ concludes with a final, italicized “portrait of the author,” pulling away from one set of semi-Wells proxies to a third. In shifting from the Owner of the Voice to the author, this conclusion dissolves the first-person narration of the Voice and objectifies that character within a wider authorial gaze. The Owner of the Voice is transformed from organizing center of consciousness and pseudo-utopian cicerone to anonymous and unexceptional case study—a perspectival shift that deflates the text’s utopian cerebration into the personal dreams of a rather ordinary mind:

_The omnibus sways forward. Rapt and prophetic, his plump hands clasped round the handle of his umbrella, his billycock hat a trifle askew, this irascible little man of the Voice, this impatient dreamer, this scolding Optimist, who has argued so rudely and dogmatically about economics and philosophy and decoration, and indeed about everything under the sun, who has been so hard on the botanist and fashionable women, and so reluctant in the matter of beer, is carried onward, dreaming dreams, dreams that with all the inevitable ironies of difference, may be realities when you and I are dreams (MU 246)._
Why qualify over 200 pages of seemingly earnest utopian speculation, filtering them through the limited and finally ironized figures of the Owner of the Voice and the botanist? In its concluding pages, *A Modern Utopia* reveals itself as simultaneously utopian tract and novel. The text projects a perfected social world—the modern utopia—as an object of desire and sociological speculation, but then contains that desire within the minds of fissured authorial proxies and autobiographical semi-protagonists, each new version of Wells objectifying and ironizing the one that came before. The final paragraph resolves neither the inner conflict within the author, nor the genre conflict within the text, staging an unresolvable conflict between “that great scheme”—the collective—and his own human passions:

> At times that great scheme does seem to me to enter certain men's lives as a passion, as a real and living motive; there are those who know it almost as if it was a thing of desire; even for me, upon occasion, the little lures of the immediate life are seen small and vain, and the soul goes out to that mighty Being, to apprehend it and serve it and possess. But this is an illumination that passes as it comes, a rare transitory lucidity, leaving the soul's desire suddenly turned to presumption and hypocrisy upon the lips. One grasps at the Universe and attains—Bathos. The hungers, the jealousies, the prejudices and habits have us again, and we are forced back to think that it is so, and not otherwise, that we are meant to serve the mysteries; that in these blinkers it is we are driven to an end we cannot understand. And then, for measured moments in the night watches or as one walks alone or while one sits in thought and speech with a friend, the wider aspirations glow again with a sincere emotion, with the colours of attainable desire...." (MU 247-48)

The author describes his inconstant desire for social transformation, always reverting back to personal pleasure and self-satisfaction. The author wants to desire the social, but finally acknowledges the fundamental disconnect between the impenetrable opacity of the social totality and his own egocentric limitations. He is capable neither of intellectually nor emotionally reconciling himself to totality. He is not overwhelmed, but
unmoved. The question that *A Modern Utopia* ultimately addresses is whether there is any way—conceptually or representationally—to close the gap between an increasingly entangled social totality and the emotional resources of the modern individual, the conceptual resources of modern thought. How can a sociological literature address and repair that disconnect? Discussing Wells’ sociological method, Ruth Levitas describes the pedagogical vocation of utopia: “the education of desire. Utopia creates a space in which the reader is addressed not just cognitively, but experientially, and enjoined to consider and feel what it would be like not just to live differently, but to want differently.”

But in *A Modern Utopia* Wells does not educate so much as humiliate. The text can only ironize and parody this idealistic, pedagogical social desire, as Wells implicates himself more and more deeply within the narcissistic circuits that his sociological better-half aspires to transcend. *A Modern Utopia* does not narrate development so much as dramatize its limit. Wells’ stagnating characters ironize and undermine the formal logic symbolically baked-in to the nineteenth-century novel of individual experience, development, and dialectical social reconciliation. But is this grim aesthetics of humiliation and non-development merely nihilistic? What positive representational function might this convoluted “experiment in form” serve?

The radical, world-scale social transformation that Wells aspires to represent is not attainable or narratable in the timescale of the human lifespan. No human individual can be the subject of utopian social transformation. Hence Wells makes himself into a series of ironic self-parodies that interfere with the coherent, stable conceptual division

---

between narrative subject and narrative object. This distribution of narrative agency
dissolves the autonomy of Wells’ characters and gives positive form to the imaginative
impasse between self and society that so consumes the “author” at the text’s conclusion.

*A Modern Utopia* refuses formal dialectics—refuses to reconcile self and society in
narrative or symbolic literary form. Instead, Wells gives form to the scalar-imaginative
impasse between self and social totality as the representational *object* of a sociological
literary method that aspires to intervene in and transform the social, rather than represent
its infinitude or allegorize its ungraspable immensity. *History*, then, is symbolized not in
the dialectical ir/reconciliation of self and society, but rather in the conceptual flexibility
of Wells’ semi-objectified characters. Wells’ preferred literary techniques—figural
“vagueness” and characterological plasticity—encode the utopian promise not only of
new conceptual instruments and literary forms, but also of new forms of collectivity and
socio-technical mediation (symbolized in *A Modern Utopia* by the transformative
entanglement of the just-barely-thinkable infrastructure economy). *A Modern Utopia*
frustrates the dialectical reconciliation of self and society, then, in order to give aesthetic
form to socio-technical mediation—to entanglement-in-action. But this aesthetic project
entails reimagining the very representational logic of the nineteenth-century novel—
remaking the novel of character into the character-environment complex of infrastructural
modernism.
Forms of Entanglement: *Tono-Bungay*

What, then, does Wells’ sociological criticism—his engagement with Tarde, sociological essays, and sociological utopia—tell us about how to read Wells’ more frequently studied and recognizably literary texts? For Wells, the vocation of the sociologist was not to represent or typologize existing social worlds, but to imagine better ones—and to make explicit the constitutively *aesthetic* quality of social projection and thus the representational-conceptual structures underwriting politics. In a condition of unprecedented infrastructural extension, Wells’ sociological criticism poses entanglement as the animating historical condition of modernity and the privileged representational object of modern literature. Socio-technical mediation—and the ever-intensifying entanglement of human and nonhuman social actors into closer relation and widening planetary extension—posed both an unprecedented formal challenge and conceptual opportunity. Rather than distribute social units into a static, positivist grid, Wells’ literary sociology seeks to reimagine the concepts and aesthetic forms through which human beings relate to and apprehend the wider world. *A Modern Utopia* imagines a future social world in which infrastructural mediation and the institutional apparatus of the state could unproblematically merge at planetary scale. Contemporary readers are often put off by the Eurocentric political naiveté of Wells’ world-state politics, but in *A Modern Utopia* the political institution of the world-state seems secondary to Wells’ primary locus of utopian agency: a planetary infrastructural network and energy economy that radically transforms the relationship of humans and environment, society and nature. Socio-technical mediation structures both the form and content of *A Modern Utopia*—not
only does Wells depict a thickly mediated future social world, but he also dramatizes his protagonists’ struggle to assimilate—to mediate—with that world. The static, recursive form of *A Modern Utopia* lays bare Wells’ apprehension of fundamental deadlocks in modern social thought—art/science, present/future, subject/object—and reframes those structural binaries as a formal genre problem: the bourgeois individualism of novelistic fiction unable to reconcile itself to a genuinely transformed utopian social world. The text imaginatively projects a perfected future but is unable to narrate its realization as historical process.

_Tono-Bungay_, begun by Wells in 1906, just one year after the publication of _A Modern Utopia_, is Wells’ effort to represent socio-technical mediation as a historical process shaping modern social life at the turn of the century. Described by Wells in 1925 as his “finest and most finished novel upon the accepted line,” _Tono-Bungay_ immanently critiques the structures of individuation that so frustrate _A Modern Utopia_.\(^{233}\) Casting the nineteenth-century novel as a literary technology of individuation, _Tono-Bungay_ corrodes and ironizes the Bildungsroman as a novelistic form that bolsters the autonomy of the self and domesticates a vast, entangled world to the scale of individual experience. At the same time, Wells searches for representational perspectives through which to transcend and transform both the literary-formal and conceptual structures of bourgeois individuation.

Equal parts condition-of-England novel, Bildungsroman, novel-within-a-novel, and adventure story, *Tono-Bungay* shares with *A Modern Utopia* a composite generic make-up. Written as the autobiographical novel of our first-person protagonist-author, *Tono-Bungay* narrates the life of George Ponderevo as he rides the coattails of his Uncle Edward’s financial rise and fall in late-nineteenth-century England. George earnestly pursues a socially-useful end for his lower-middle-class scientific studies until his life is suddenly swept up in the spectacular commercial success of Tono-Bungay, a tonic produced and marketed by his Uncle Edward. Tono-Bungay, via a dubious admixture of bad science, financial speculation, and innumerable deceptions, takes on a powerful agential force in George’s life—leading up to the violent climax of George’s disastrous trip to Africa, whose ill-fated outcome coincides with his uncle’s financial failure. In a bare-faced depiction of colonial violence and resource extraction, George recounts his ruinous journey to plunder quap, a miraculous energy commodity discovered on the African coast, and his subsequent murder of a retreating native man.

Returning to the question of Wells’ modernism which this chapter begins, it is clear that the overt display of colonial plunder and murder in *Tono-Bungay* differs from the stylistic registration of the ungraspable imperial totality influentially outlined by Fredric Jameson in “Modernism and Imperialism.” If the *directness* of Wells’ representation of colonial violence is bound up with his ambivalent, conflicted status as modernist, then might *Tono-Bungay* offer a counter-model for apprehending the relationship between modern literary form and late-stage capitalism-as-imperialism? Jameson proposes that British imperialism inaugurates an historically unprecedented
extension of the capitalist economic system beyond the existential experience of metropolitan daily life. This extension provokes a “spatial disjunction” that renders subjects unable to grasp the imperial system as a whole.\(^{234}\) Modernist style—a new spatial language of the imperial-infinite—formally registers the meaning-loss attendant on this world-scale imperial extension and thus obliquely assimilates the economic conditions of British modernity, its “new spatial language” now the “marker and the substitute...of the unrepresentable totality.”\(^{235}\) Jameson extends the Lukácsian idea of modernism as the definitive art of lost totality, historicizing Lukács’ account of the incipient universality of reification to late-stage imperial England. In “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács describes the total power of the commodity “to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image.”\(^{236}\) Systematically submitting subjects, objects, ideas, and things to a consolidated regime of universal exchange, reification inexorably concretizes the concept of “totality” into the social field itself, as the commodity becomes “the universal category of society as a whole.”\(^{237}\) Lukácsian reification has provided an invaluable tool for coordinating the governing structures of capitalism and modern culture. As C.D. Blanton explains, reification has provided “the ground bass of an account of modernism in particular, the conceptual instrument through which a materialist criticism might discern in twentieth-century art the apparently final crisis of a social order ungraspable with the more limited tools of


\(^{235}\) Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” 163.

\(^{236}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 85.

\(^{237}\) Ibid., 86.
what Lukács termed ‘bourgeois reason.’” Building out from Lukács, Jameson’s imperial-modernist style aesthetically processes the formal contradiction of a thinkable but unrepresentable social totality concretely shaped by commodification.

But where does this account leave Tono-Bungay? Near the outset of “Modernism and Imperialism,” Jameson makes explicit Wells’ exclusion from the essay’s analytic field, assimilating Wells into the “literature of imperialism,” which is "not modernist in any formal sense, and, emerging from sub-canonical genres like the adventure tale, remained ‘minor’ or ‘marginal’ during the hegemony of the modern and its ideology and values.” Wells’ engagement with the mass-cultural adventure tale evidently submits his fiction to the reifying logic of commodification—its penetration by the commodity inhibiting its capacity to dialecticize the historical contradictions of imperialism into modernist art. Jameson’s brilliant reading thus has the bizarre side-effect of disqualifying from modernism some of the most explicit engagements with British imperialism in modern art. But if critics have moved away from gatekeeping definitions of modernism derived from self-affirming modernist ideology and if, as Jameson suggests, literary style

---


239 Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” 152.

240 Despite Jameson’s explicit exclusion, critics have applied the interpretive framework of “Modernism and Imperialism” to Tono-Bungay. See, for example, Parry: “Fredric Jameson’s observation of the ways expansionism affected the cognitive vistas of metropolitan novels written at the century’s turn are abundantly confirmed in a book where domestic space is reconciled on an imperial scale, and the prospect on the local and familiar is infused by imaginings of the distant and exotic. What is unknown about an alien colonial world is conjectured in the narrator’s encounters with the capital city whose visible perimeters are suggestive of yet farther and inconceivable boundaries” (Postcolonial Studies 150-51).
registers imperialism in a politically unconscious manner, why should shared aesthetic values or marginal canonicity disqualify Wells from sophisticated formal engagement with the historical conditions of global capitalism? The Marxist humanism of Lukács and Jameson relies on the commodity form to coordinate the governing structures of culture and capitalism—projecting the social totality as the ungraspable aspirational object of modernist alienation. But what if we can look to Wells for an alternative conceptual structure coordinating capitalism and modern literary form? What this chapter proposes is that Wells’ fiction is governed by a Lukácsian "intention towards totality”—does aspire toward a totalization of the social effects of global capitalism in service of utopian social transformation—but that Wells seeks representational strategies and conceptual structures outside of ungraspable totalities and alienated nature.

Jameson’s essay proceeds through a reading of Forster’s Howards End (itself an imperial-age condition-of-England novel published just one year after Wells’ Tono-Bungay). In Jameson’s reading, Forster constructs a compensatory social world of legible and achieved community as symbolic affirmation of social unity—Forster’s humanist ideology of connection is dialectical counterpart to the meaning-loss attending imperial extension:

Because in the imperial world system this last [the representation of inner or metropolitan space itself] is now radically incomplete, it must by compensation be formed into a self-subsisting totality: something Forster uniquely attempts to achieve by way of his providential ideology, which transforms chance contacts, coincidence, the contingent and random encounters between isolated subjects, into a Utopian glimpse of achieved community. This glimpse is both moral and aesthetic all at once, for it is the achievement of something like an aesthetic
pattern of relationships that confirms it as a social reality, however ephemeral.\textsuperscript{241}

The bounded social world of \textit{Howards End} transmutes chance encounter into meaningful social relationship and symbolically projects a knowable totality. It should be clear that Forster’s ideology of humanist connectivity is difficult to reconcile with Wells’ post-Darwinist evolutionary plasticity (even if, as we have already seen, Forster’s confidence in that liberal humanism is undermined in short fiction like “The Machine Stops”). Wells’ fiction and nonfiction tend to reject the utopian consolations of Forster’s nostalgic knowable social world as wholly inadequate to an imperial modernity constitutively mediated by world-scale infrastructure. As we observed in \textit{A Modern Utopia}, for Wells modernity is constitutively \textit{extensive} (technological mediation extends human social form to a planetary scale) and \textit{intensive} (technology mediates human and nonhuman agency in ever new combinations). Wells’ literary fiction—like his sociological method—seeks to intervene in the dynamic mediation of individual and social world in order to mutually transform both. For Wells, utopian promise ultimately hinges on the ontological plasticity of human subjects and environments, and both his literary and extra-literary texts project radically recomposed social worlds whose transformation require the socio-technical entanglement of human and nonhuman agency. Coordinating Wells’ exclusion from accounts of modernism with the influence of Lukács on twentieth-century histories of the novel, this chapter argues that Wells’ fiction apprehends capitalism outside of the

\textsuperscript{241} Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” 163.
humanist logic of the commodity form.\textsuperscript{242} Less interested in the historical destiny of the bourgeoisie or the psychic degradations of reification, Wells’ fiction traces the limits of human agency in an era of unprecedented socio-technical mediation. For Wells, global capitalism is not a sovereign totality only thinkable via the commodified traces of our own alienation, but rather a powerful composite of human and nonhuman agency whose mechanisms of socio-technical mediation can be represented and transformed. This intensifying entanglement of agency constitutes the modern historical condition to which Wells’ literary form is responsive and allows us to reread \textit{Tono-Bungay} not as commodified anti-modernism, but sociological anti-realism—or, alternatively, infrastructural modernism.

***

Giving retrospective account of his feud with Henry James in \textit{Experiment in Autobiography}, Wells describes the representational crux of their aesthetic rivalry:\textsuperscript{243}

\textsuperscript{242} For two revealing accounts that do read \textit{Tono-Bungay} as structured by the commodity form, see Esty, \textit{Unseasonable Youth} and James, \textit{Maps of Utopia}. Esty interprets George as a subject whose inner life is shaped by reification, his development “hijacked by the unstable logic of commodity fetishism and the unpredictable rhythms of the business cycle” (116). Esty reads George’s dysfunctional personality and erratic desire as symptoms of concrete processes of modernization and interprets the deformed Bildungsroman structure of \textit{Tono-Bungay} as formally responsive to the dissolution of the soul/nation allegory in imperial modernity. James argues that \textit{Tono-Bungay} “replaces the Bildungsroman as its narrative model with the art of the advertisement.” Commodities replace socially-sanctioned conduct as the promised guarantors of happiness, dissolving morality from the novel’s narrative logic. “Advertising is the negative image of Wells’ ideal of didactic art, in which the effect of beauty to inspire, move, and change the mind is used to cause harm to the body” (109).

\textsuperscript{243} For more on the Wells/James debate, see the correspondence and intellectual responses collected in \textit{Henry James and H.G. Wells: A Record of Their Friendship, Their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and Their Quarrel}, eds. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958).
I sketch out scenes and individuals, often quite crudely, and resort even to conventional types and symbols, in order to get on to a discussion of relationships. The important point which I tried to argue with Henry James was that the novel of completely consistent characterization arranged beautifully in a story and painted deep and round and solid, no more exhausts the possibilities of the novel, than the art of Velasquez exhausts the possibilities of the painted picture….Competent critics have since examined this supreme importance of individualities, in other words of “character” in the fiction of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Throughout that period character-interest did its best to take the place of adjustment-interest in fiction. With a certain justice these authorities ascribe the predominance of individuation to the example of Sir Walter Scott. But more generally it was a consequence of the prevalent sense of social stability, and he was not so much a primary influence as an exponent. He was a man of intensely conservative quality; he accepted, he accepted wilfully, the established social values about him; he had hardly a doubt in him of what was right or wrong, handsome or ungracious, just or mean. He saw events therefore as a play of individualities in a rigid frame of values never more to be questioned or permanently changed. His lawless, romantic past was the picturesque prelude to stability; our current values were already potentially there. Throughout the broad smooth flow of nineteenth century life in Great Britain, the art of fiction floated on this same assumption of social fixity. The Novel in English was produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who liked to feel established and safe for good. Its standards were established within that apparently permanent frame and the criticism of it began to be irritated and perplexed when, through a new instability, the splintering frame began to get into the picture. I suppose for a time I was the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture.244

Wells relinquishes both psychological depth and realist consistency in service of “the discussion of relationships,” subordinating “character-interest” to “adjustment-interest.” In a fortuitous example that renders Wells’ contrast with Lukács obvious, Wells asserts the conservatism of Sir Walter Scott, whose Waverley (1814) represents for Lukács “the classical form of the historical novel.”245 For Lukács, Scott’s novels exemplify bourgeois realism in its productive and progressive phase, prior to its historical-aesthetic dissipation

following the failure of the 1848 revolutions. *Waverley* and its successors synthesize psychic and collective life, realized in the concretion of character as historical type and protagonist of historical narration. Implicitly challenging Lukács’ humanist account of historical narration, Wells perhaps unintuitively suggests that the narration of national formation and class conflict is in fact conservative, subsumable to a static “social fixity.” Whatever historical dynamism inheres in Scott’s raw materials is contained by his novels’ orientation to the status quo of the present, functioning as the mere “entertainment of secure people who liked to feel established and safe for good.” Wells’ own literary practice breaks with the emphasis that nineteenth-century fiction places on character and individuality—rejecting both the “concrete typicality” of realism and “abstract particularity” of modernism.246

David Lodge builds his reading of *Tono-Bungay* out this retrospective Wellsian account. Lodge argues that “the main vehicle of Wells’ social analysis of the condition of England in *Tono-Bungay* is not the story or the characters, but the descriptive commentary”—the landscape, townscape, and architecture whose description constitute the narrative frame of Wells’ novel.247 For Lodge, this web of description transfers characterological significance onto England itself, which functions not as setting or symbol, but as “the central character” of *Tono-Bungay*.248 Lodge equates the Wellsian unfixed frame with national description and identifies England as the novel’s organizing

248 Ibid.
social referent. But Wells’ description of the unfixed frame comes just after a rather extensive discussion contesting “the prevalent sense of social stability” scaled to the nation-state—“the broad smooth flow of nineteenth century life in Great Britain.” Wells does not repudiate “the novel of completely consistent characterization” simply to relocate that centralized protagonism into the nation-state, but rather to represent “relationship,” what he calls “adjustment-interest.” Unfixing the social frame requires unloosing both character and environment into flexible plasticity. Relationship is apprehensible only through the dynamic entanglement of human and nonhuman social actors, of characters and environments. What renders conservative the historical narration of Scott (and, we might wager, Lukács) is the thickly consistent humanism of their history—an anthropocentric medium of human progress unable to describe the dynamic relation between human agency and its material conditions of existence. Post-Scott realism is shaped by a “rigid frame of values” that structures the social domain and identifies its protagonists in advance—unfixing the social requires re-opening the question of who and what counts as a social actor. Wells’ conception of the human as a plastic and sociotechnical animal—“a being of compromises and adaptations”—destabilizes the centrality of the human foothold on the universe and opens up narrative to relationship and adjustment.249 This narrative and characterological intervention takes the shape via the character-environment complex of infrastructural modernism, which in the case of Wells we can also describe negatively as an overtly sociological anti-realism. But what, then, is the hermeneutic function of a plastic narrative subject enmeshed in

dynamic relation with its environment? What is the referential logic of the plastic subject?

The form of *Tono-Bungay*—quasi-Bildungsroman and semi-condition-of-England novel—is constitutively shaped by its novel-within-a-novel structure: *Tono-Bungay* is both a novel written in 1909 by H.G. Wells and the autobiographical manuscript written by our first-person protagonist-author George Ponderevo. The opening lines of *Tono-Bungay* address this same question of coherent characterization that Wells critiques in James. But rather than assert the conservatism of consistent Jamesian point-of-view or Lukácsian social types, George laments their absence. Consistency of character is unavailable to him:

> Most people in this world seem to live “in character”; they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the three are congruous one with another and true to the rules of their type….They have a class, they have a place, they know what is becoming in them and what is due to them, and their proper size of tombstone tells at last how properly they have played the part. But there is also another kind of life that is not so much living as a miscellaneous tasting of life. One gets hit by some unusual transverse force, one is jerked out of one’s stratum and lives crosswise for the rest of the time, and, as it were, in a succession of samples. That has been my lot, and that is what has set me at last writing something in the nature of a novel.²⁵⁰

George figures “type” as an organizing category imposed from without and granting the very possibility of the individual life’s narratability—lending meaningful shape to the bare chronicity of the lifespan. George is able to read others as social types, but not himself. Struck by a mysterious “transverse force,” George seeks to make himself a literal character in the story of his own life, to give symbolic shape to his own

---

“crosswise” experience. George’s symbolic lack is ultimately what motivates him to write “something in the nature of a novel.” From the outset, then, *Tono-Bungay* is presented as an aspirational project of self-symbolization, a technology of self-production. Wells figures the novel not as a lens into the psychic life (however degraded) of the ultimately sovereign subject, but rather as a technology that sustains the very notion of the subject—of the narrating self striving to disentangle its individual autonomy from the “transverse forces” of modern life and requiring the figural projection of aesthetic form in order conceptually to cohere.

George returns to these meta-reflexive narrative questions just a few pages later at the beginning of the second chapter, addressing again the organizing principle of his autobiographical novel:

I’ll own that here, with the pen already started, I realise what a fermenting mass of things learnt and emotions experienced and theories formed I’ve got to deal with, and how, in a sense, hopeless my book must be from the very outset. I suppose what I’m really trying to render is nothing more nor less than Life—as one man has found it. I want to tell—MYSELF, and my impressions of the thing as a whole, to say things I have come to feel intensely of the laws, traditions, usages, and ideas we call society, and how we poor individuals get driven and lured and stranded among these windy, perplexing shoals and channels. I’ve got, I suppose, to a time of life when things begin to take on shapes that have an air of reality, and become no longer material for dreaming, but interesting in themselves. (*TB* 12)

George cannot seem to motivate his life story into narration without distinguishing his self from the wider web of life. This time moving away from the mediating category of the “type,” George pivots between life and self, individual and society. His novel aspires to reconcile these realms but seems to stumble at the very prospect of disentangling them into distinct categories. George wants to give holistic account of that thing “we call
“society,” but he seems unsure of what that even entails. What precisely is “society,” and what is its relationship to “we poor individuals”? Is George, as Lodge contends, describing England, or something wider and more difficult to delimit conceptually? A confused perspectival jumble between transverse forces and human agency, life and society, the individual and the we, George’s novel struggles even to name its representational object, let alone conceptually grasp the “thing as a whole.” In this way, *Tono-Bungay* mirrors and reverses the formal structure of *A Modern Utopia*. Again Wells depicts a semi-autobiographical version of himself and struggles to motivate the text into narrative action. But rather than repeatedly parody himself (and thus transform what looks like sociology into something more literary), the author of *Tono-Bungay* asks its readers to work out the sociology immanent to its literary content. Not so much realist description of England or allegory of capitalist modernization, the animating representational logic of *Tono-Bungay* entails the sociological drama that it stages from the outset: not only George’s ongoing effort to describe that inchoate assemblage “we call society,” but also the reader’s effort to identify that “we” and George’s relationship to it. Of what social referent (if any?) is George representative?

Early in his life, George’s sense of “we” is stabilized by the residual aristocratic England of the Bladesover estate that employs his mother as housekeeper. The gentry values and social hierarchies of Bladesover adopt a sort of structuring social-interpretive function for George throughout his life: “Bladesover has never left me; it is, as I said at the outset, one of those dominant explanatory impressions that make the framework of my mind. Bladesover illuminates England…It is my social datum” (*TB* 65). But this
country-house model of social form is challenged and strained upon George’s first visit to London, which he can only understand as a deformed version of Bladesover:

A city of Bladesovers, the capital of a kingdom of Bladesovers, all much shaken and many altogether in decay, parasitically occupied, insidiously replaced by alien, unsympathetic and irresponsible elements…. Such was the world into which I had come, into which I had in some way to thrust myself and fit my problem, my temptations, my efforts, my patriotic instinct, all my moral instincts, my physical appetites, my dreams and my sanity. (TB 103)

In London, the bounded Bladesover model proves an inadequate unit of social analysis—distended, decayed, overgrown, and occupied. While George is unable to represent or interpret London, he does recognize the necessity of reconciling his own individual desires to the total socio-economic apparatus of the city. Unable to represent the social totality, George instead narrates his own uncomprehending process of social ill-adjustment in the heart of the British empire.

George is only able to reconcile his desire with the London social world through commerce—the production and sale of the bogus health tonic Tono-Bungay. Infatuated with the lower-middle-class Marion, but unable to support her financially, George finally abandons his scientific studies and accepts employment from his Uncle Edward. Backed by low costs of production, financial speculation, and Teddy’s genius for the arts of modern advertising, Tono-Bungay takes off, and George receives the financial windfall necessary to marry Marion and kickstart his social ascent. George accepts the money despite reservations about Tono-Bungay, which upsets his moralized sense of social value. George complains to his uncle that “‘it’s a damned swindle!’” (TB 135). But Teddy contests the accusation of deceit and insists, “‘It’s as straight as—it’s fair trading!’” Asserting the positive social function of advertising and commerce—
suggesting that their bogus tonic might bolster confidence in the case of an epidemic!—Teddy insists that Tono-Bungay is no more deceptive than any other commodity: “‘I’d like to know what sort of trading isn’t a swindle in its way. Everybody who does a large advertised trade is selling something common on the strength of saying it’s uncommon…’” (TB 135). Tono-Bungay the commodity invites an interpretive question analogous to that staged by Tono-Bungay the autobiographical novel: Is Tono-Bungay, like George, exceptional or typical? Is bogus health tonic the distorted parody or the exemplary form of value production in global capitalism? Teddy is right about the swindle inherent to the logic of capitalism in the late-imperial world-system. His ability both to recognize and enact the constitutive swindling at the heart of global capitalism enables his meteoric success in that system. Teddy contrasts with the uncomprehending George, marked from the outset by his inability to represent or understand the “transverse forces” pressing upon his agency. Despite his expressed reservations, George’s incapacity for guilt and unwillingness to extricate himself from the exploitative circuits of capitalist value production are the signs of his typicality as subject of British imperial capitalism. What fascinates Wells is the complicity between George’s indifference to the social violence that he perpetrates (along with Teddy) and the activity of fiction writing that so determinatively structures the novel’s autobiographical form. Dramatizing the ethical, political and imaginative limits of George’s conceptual grip on a world that he nevertheless exploits, Tono-Bungay traces the dynamic relationship between George’s agency and the techno-scientific and financial networks into which he is increasingly insinuated, and which finally overwhelm his sense of personal autonomy. Itself a kind of
meta-reflexive media theory *avant la lettre*, Wells’ *Tono-Bungay* explores the technologies and techniques—including the Jamesian novel of “completely consistent characterization” that George’s autobiographical *Tono-Bungay* seemingly epitomizes—through which the swindling at the heart of modern capitalism is conceptually and representationally shaped into something else, something more palatable and socially energizing, and thus more difficult to transform or contest.

***

Teddy understands the violence inherent to his model of society-as-swindle. Describing his plan to corner the market on medicine, Teddy imagines a profit-generating scheme as the quintessence of supply and demand: “‘You watch your chance, wait for a tropical war breaking out, let’s say, and collar all the quinine….Lord! there’s no end of things—no end of little things. Dill-water—all the suffering babes yowling for it’” (*TB* 69). When George replies that Teddy’s market interference will surely hinder doctors, Teddy jumps at the opportunity to imaginatively project his swindling into capitalist art: “‘They got to look out for themselves. By Jove, yes. They’ll do you if they can, and you do them. Like brigands. That makes it romantic. That’s the Romance of Commerce, George’” (*TB* 69). Teddy rationalizes an economic system constitutively structured by individuals’ mutual pursuit of self-interest through its metaphorization in literary form—transmuting systemic social violence into “the Romance of Commerce,” which functions throughout *Tono-Bungay* as a sort of self-justifying slogan for Teddy’s financial exploits. The symbolic logic of “romance” reformats the exploitation and suffering of crying babies into an adventure of interpersonal exchange at the level of individual desire,
experience, and satisfaction. Romance structurally effaces the victims of Teddy’s adventure capitalism, imaginatively sustaining the coherence of a world structured by exploitation.

In addition to rationalizing his own activity, Teddy asserts the positive social value of trade and advertisement, which has replaced the symbolic social function of religion in modernity:

“There’s Faith. You put Faith in ‘em…. It’s the modern way! Everybody understands it—everybody allows for it…. [I]t MAKES TRADE! And the world lives on trade. Commerce! A romantic exchange of commodities and property. Romance. ‘Magination. See? You must look at these things in a broad light. Look at the wood—and forget the trees!” (TB 135)

Teddy describes the imaginative sustenance that advertising bestows to the incoherence of modern commodity exchange. “Romance” formally coordinates Teddy’s swindle and a “modern” social world that thrives on the symbolic coherence that advertising and commodity exchange project after the death of God. What interests Wells is how the symbolic logic of Teddy’s self-justifying slogan—figuring the modern world as an object to be plundered by the bourgeois capitalist—takes on agency in the wider world. The romance of commerce begins as motto, but what if it also has a kind of agency in the transmutation of the natural world into “nature”—into natural resources available to the imperial subject?: “Look at the wood—and forget the trees!” For Wells, this material transformation—from natural world to natural resource—is continuous with a symbolic, literary process foundational to the logic and mechanisms of capitalist imperialism.

The romance of commerce reaches its apotheosis in Teddy’s giant map revealing the gradual colonization of England by Tono-Bungay:
Section by section we spread it over the whole of the British Isles; first working the middle-class London suburbs, then the outer suburbs, then the home counties, then going (with new bills and a more pious style of “ad”) into Wales, a great field always for a new patent-medecine, and then into Lancashire. My uncle had in his inner office a big map of England, and as we took up fresh sections of the local press and our consignments invaded new areas, flags for advertisements and pink underlines for orders showed our progress.

“The romance of modern commerce, George!” my uncle would say, rubbing his hands together and drawing in air through his teeth. “The romance of modern commerce, eh? Conquest. Province by province. Like sogers.” (TB 149)

Wells here analogizes the representational logic of cartography (projecting geographical space as legible to and available for colonial appropriation) and the social function of literary romance. Teddy’s “romance of commerce” not only symbolically transvalues the world into the open frontier of his commercial imperialism, but also transforms himself into the heroic agent of that conquest. Demonstrating the mutually sustaining agencies of romance and map, Wells asserts the symbolic logic of literary form as a crucial, necessary technology in wider processes of imperialism—bestowing the narrative perspective and symbolic coherence required to motivate self-serving swindle into modern religion. Not only does Teddy recognize that “fiscal instruments are at root economic fictions dependent upon popular confidence,” but also—to reverse William Kupinse’s reading—that literary fiction can function as an economic instrument, symbolically reconciling bourgeois economic agency with the wider world.251 As both Fredric Jameson and Nicholas Daly have argued, fin de siècle romance functioned to imaginatively project symbolic coherence and utopian social reconciliation, the formal

---

counterpart to ever-fragmenting realist and naturalist narrative modes in the wake of capitalist commodification, world-scale imperial extension, and the atomization of social life.\textsuperscript{252} Teddy draws on a literary form scaled to utopian social wholeness, social reconciliation, and symbolic coherence in order to obfuscate the systemic forms of world-scale social violence that his financial manipulations instigate. Whatever the transformative potential projected by utopian romance, it is here the very form and cover for capitalist exploitation and imperial social violence: the “courageous fiction” sustaining capitalist social life (\textit{TB} 221). Finally George recognizes this enabling fiction as an infrastructural agency crucial to the operation of technological modernity:

The whole of this modern mercantile investing civilisation is indeed such stuff as dreams are made of. A mass of people swelters and toils, great railway systems grow, cities arise to the skies and spread wide and far, mines are opened, factories hum, foundries roar, ships plough the seas, countries are settled; about this busy striving world the rich owners go, controlling all, enjoying all, confident and creating the confidence that draws us all together into a reluctant, nearly unconscious brotherhood. (\textit{TB} 221-22)

\textsuperscript{252} In \textit{The Political Unconscious}, Jameson describes turn-of-the-century romance as dialectical counterpart to the “reification of realism in late capitalism” and literary form in which utopian social transformation is historically thinkable: “Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place” (104-5). For Jameson, the “ultimate condition of figuration” of romance “is to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony” (148). Daly argues that turn-of-the-century romance forms share with modernism a resistance to the mass-cultural commodity—culturally and psychologically “training” readers to life within capitalist modernity: “the romance revival provided the narratives and the figures that enabled late Victorian middle-class culture to successfully accommodate certain historical changes, notable modernizing processes” (24). \textit{Modernism, Romance and the fin de siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
What is it that holds this “reluctant, nearly unconscious brotherhood” together?

Structurally equivalent to railway systems and energy infrastructures, Teddy’s quasi-literary capitalist fiction sustains this modern social world. The social function of advertisement is to produce the fiction of social cohesion, the romance of commerce. Thomas Richards has shown how advertising in *Tono-Bungay* functions as “a fantasy of information control… a massive attempt to control the entropic character of the capitalist economic process.”

Richards helps us to see the infrastructural quality of advertising, sustaining the illusion “an achieved discursive order” that lends purposive coherence to the chaotic extension of world-scale commodity exchange, resource extraction and labor exploitation. But what Richards does not address is that in *Tono-Bungay* this infrastructural, socially productive quality of fiction is not cordoned off into the self-evidently capitalist “ideological functions” of advertisement but implicates the novel form itself. The interpretive question that preoccupies Wells throughout *Tono-Bungay* is what it is that distinguishes the bourgeois novel of “consistent characterization” from the “romance of commerce.”

Early in *Tono-Bungay* George asserts that “it isn’t a constructed tale I have to tell, but unmanageable realities” (*TB* 13). George’s autobiographical novel insists upon the clear distinction between representation and reality. But as the novel progresses, the fictional and the material interpenetrate more and more persistently and confusedly, as George implicitly analogizes between the “life”-forming fiction of the novel (scaled to

---

the individual) and that of his uncle’s finance capitalism (scaled to the social)—both novel and advertisement sustain “the one reality of human life—illusion” (TB 221). This interpenetration of the fictional and material intensifies in the build-up to George’s disastrous trip to Africa to steal raw materials in order to corner the market on electric light filaments. Discussing the source of power that they seek to produce and enact, George declares to his uncle, “‘Anglo-Saxon energy,’” who enthusiastically responds:

“That’s it, George—energy. It’s put things in our grip—threads, wires, stretching out and out, George, from that little office of ours, out to West Africa, out to Egypt, out to Inja, out east, west, north and south. Running the world practically…. Very likely destroy Christianity…. Well, we got to run the country, George. It’s ours. Make it a Scientific Organised Business Enterprise. Put idees into it. ‘Lectrify it. Run the Press. Run all sorts of developments.” (TB 262).

Wells obscures the distinction between two different kinds of “Anglo-Saxon energy”: the bourgeois initiative of our two capitalist heroes, and the electrical grid—the wider field of infrastructural technologies that will enable the radical expansion of their consumer base. Teddy’s aspiration to “run the country practically” captures in its overdetermined ambiguity the central representational tension saturating George’s narration of his life, the raw material of Wells’ novel—frustrating the clear distinction between the human and the technological, the individual and the infrastructural.

George and Teddy first learn of quap from Gordon-Nasmyth, a Conradian caricature who seemingly emerges from the world of fin de siècle imperial romance: “that queer blend of romance and illegality….a lank, sunburnt person in tweeds with a yellow-brown hatchet face and one faded blue eye—the other was a closed and sunken lid” (TB 223). Gordon-Nasmyth gives personified form to Teddy’s “romance of commerce,” embodying both the antirealist fantasy of romance and the colonial resource extraction of
capitalist commerce. This romantic unreality structures George’s apprehension of colonial plunder, which he can only imagine as shaped by a fairy tale: “our world was England, and the places of origin of half the raw material of the goods we sold had seemed to us as remote as fairyland or the forest of Arden” (TB 226). However, when George finally sails to the African coast, this symbolic logic breaks down—the romantic fairy-tale of colonial plunder dissolves and becomes real when George encounters the brute materiality of quap:

So it was quap came into our affairs, came in as a fairy-tale and became real. More and more real it grew until at last it was real, until at last I saw with my eyes the heaps my imagination had seen for so long, and felt between my fingers again that half-gritty, half soft texture of quap, like sanded moist-sugar mixed with clay in which there stirs something—One must feel it to understand. (TB 228)

Confronted with quap’s unmeaning physical presence, the fictional projections enabling George’s “Anglo-Saxon energy” corrode. The brute materiality of quap dissolves his commercial fairy-tale, and the symbolic projections sustaining capitalist social life in the imperial center no longer hold. In Tono-Bungay, then, the meaning-loss of British imperialism does not register in the imperial-infinite of the metropole, but rather at the scene of colonial resource extraction itself. Less interested in mapping the ungraspable totality of the imperial world-system, Wells instead depicts the mechanisms through which that meaning-loss is repressed and supplemented by compensatory symbolic and literary forms that motivate, enable, and justify colonial expropriation: adventure tropes, advertisement, the realist novel.

After examining a quap sample stolen by Gordon-Nasmyth, George discovers its potential value as key component of electric light filament. As the financial health of
Tono-Bungay deteriorates, George and Teddy recognize an opportunity to rejuvenate their business empire by cornering the market on light fittings and monopolizing the electric lamp market. Quap, a fictional energy commodity, is introduced to the reader and to George as a natural resource to be expropriated. This predetermined symbolization of quap as extractable resource is emphasized by its name, which is Gordon-Nasmyth’s approximation of a native pronunciation that he does not bother to learn: “‘They call it quap, or quab, or quabb,’ said Gordon-Nasmyth; ‘but our relations weren’t friendly enough to get the accent right....But there the stuff is for the taking’” (*TB* 223). Colonial appropriation is baked in to quap’s very name, the symbolic marker of its status as source of capitalist value to-be-expropriated. But as we have already seen, as George approaches Mordet Island firsthand, his epistemological bearing starts to break down, conceptual identities dissolve, and the extractable source of use-value takes on an animating force of its own—a “sanded moist-sugar mixed with clay in which there stirs something” (*TB* 228). The animated materiality of quap exceeds its totalizing symbolization as natural resource and leaves George at a loss for words (a rarity!): “One must feel it to understand” (*TB* 228). Mordet Island continues to disorient George, resisting his efforts to find meaning both in his labor and in the natural landscape. The longer he stays, the more his psychic and symbolic orientation dissolves, as the island seems to generate its own alien mythology. Early in his stay, for instance, a young laborer restages a sort of Biblical creation myth: “But I cannot now write the history of those days of blundering and toil: of how Milton, one of the boys, fell from a plank to the beach, thirty feet perhaps, with his barrow and broke his arm and I believe a rib” (*TB* 330-31). The
Miltonic poet of paradise lost is reimagined as literal fallen man, his broken rib impotent to affect the life-giving agency of the Biblical original. Wells parodically reimagines the creation of “man,” forcing George to confront the artificial, quasi-mythic constructedness of his own understanding of “humanity.” This symbolic breakdown increasingly irritates George into violent and unmeaning social discomfort, corroding his usually decent manners into uncomprehending hatred of an increasingly uncertain “humanity”: “I found out many things about myself and humanity in those weeks of effort behind Mordet Island. I understand now the heart of the sweater, of the harsh employer, of the nigger-driver…. But I hated all humanity during the time that the quap was near me” (TB 331-32). Once the fairy tale deteriorates, and the Tono-Bungay swindle is no longer mediated by romance, George is overwhelmed by the brute violence of colonial theft, which suddenly resists symbolic rationalization and meaningfulness.

George’s hateful derangement culminates in his inexplicable murder of a retreating native man encountered while aimlessly exploring. Narrating the event in retrospect, George describes his initial encounter with the stranger as a meeting of two mutually sentient human beings: “[E]ach of us was essentially a teeming vivid brain, tensely excited by the encounter, quite unaware of the other’s mental content or what to do with him” (TB 333). But George’s initial recognition of human reciprocity is canceled when his counterpart turns to run away. Fearing that the stranger will sabotage his unlawful plunder, George coldly shoots him in the back: “I saw, and saw with a leap of pure exaltation, the smash of my bullet between his shoulder blades. ‘Got him,’ said I, dropping my gun and down he flopped and died without a groan” (TB 334). Considering
the body of the man he has just murdered, George reflects, “I looked about me and then went forward cautiously in a mood between curiosity and astonishment to look at this man whose soul I had flung so unceremoniously out of our common world. I went to him not as one goes to something one has made or done, but as one approaches something found” (TB 334). The mutuality of their initial encounter wholly effaced, George apprehends his victim as a soulless fleshy husk, a thing found rather than a fellow being intentionally murdered.

Although he does not deny the criminality of his actions or make a strong effort to conceal his actions from the reader, George is unable to make sense of the murder in the narrative of his life:

*It was the most unmeaning and purposeless murder imaginable. Even as I write down its well-remembered particulars there comes again the sense of its strangeness, its pointlessness, its incompatibility with any of the neat and definite theories people hold about life and the meaning of the world. I did this thing and I want to tell of my doing it, but why I did it and particularly why I should be held responsible for it I cannot explain*” (TB 333)

George is able to understand this murder as a crime, but not as an ethical violation.

Despite George’s persistent efforts to downplay the significance of the African plunder and murder on the course of his life, the episode is crucial to the meaning of Wells’ novel because it transposes the systemic-infrastructural violence of imperialism into the ethical dimension of individual morality, meaning, and agency. The episode marks the narrative switch-point of George’s agency from the systems-infrastructural to the individual-existential dimension of colonial violence, and the enabling fictions that had allowed him to comprehend the ethical legitimacy and social meaningfulness of imperial resource extraction—“the romance of commerce”—no longer make sense when shooting another
man in the back, so that George is finally forced to confront his actions’ “incompatibility with any of the neat and definite theories people hold about life and the meaning of the world.” George recognizes his guilt but does not feel guilty. Recognizing the African stranger as a fellow embodied creature—a fellow “teeming, vivid brain”—George is nonetheless unable to recognize him as a shared member of “humanity” against whom he has committed a morally reprehensible act. George is unable to process this collective, systemic violence of British imperialism at the level of individual ethics or in the narrative form of the bourgeois novel of individual experience. In the symbolic logic of *Tono-Bungay*, George’s unnamed victim is structurally equivalent to the nameless quap—a source of value to be expropriated from the colony. George’s unfeeling incomprehension at his own murderous act reveals the inadequacy of individual ethics or life stories to narrate or critique the infrastructural agencies of colonial modernity. Confronted with the colonial violence in which he was complicit far before he shot a man in the back, George retreats into uncomprehending disconnect and denial. We ultimately see that the question of George’s individual guilt or remorse is to some extent irrelevant, posing an ethical dilemma to a political problem requiring collective social transformation.

How, then, can a novel hope to intervene in such a situation? The sociological antirealism of *Tono-Bungay* aspires to critique and ironize the individuating and ethical logic of the bourgeois novel from the inside out. George’s retrospective narration frames the African plunder episode as a journey into the brute wilderness of nature from the socialized imperial center:
All these African memories stand by themselves. It was for me an expedition into undisciplined nature out of the world that is ruled by men...They are memories woven upon a fabric of sunshine and heat and a constant warm smell of decay. (*TB 325*)

George’s strenuous effort to cordon his colonial murder from his wider life to story—to convince both his readers and himself that it was “the most irrelevant adventure in my life”—is analogous to his mental effort to distinguish the nature of Africa and the society of England (*TB 223*). Positing an “undisciplined nature” ontologically distinct from the ethical mandates of “the world that is ruled by men,” George insists and relies on a space outside of his imperial social world from which he can expropriate the necessary value from natural resources and colonial subjects to sustain his own “Anglo-Saxon energy.” This projection of a separable “nature” is the enabling fiction of George’s colonial plunder and murder.

It is helpful, finally, to recall Timothy Mitchell’s description of the world-structuring agency of socio-technical infrastructure in the early-twentieth-century colonial periphery: “These projects began to arrange the world as one in which science was opposed to nature and technical expertise claimed to overcome the obstacles to social improvement....Such programs and campaigns manufactured a world that appeared as natural resources versus technology, bodies versus hygiene, men versus machines.”

Mitchell describes the techniques and processes through which socio-technical projects—for instance, the extension of the electric grid via powerful new forms of electric light—format the world in self-sustaining ways. The infrastructural agency that Mitchell

---

describes is both representational and real, both material and symbolic. These processes and techniques of infrastructural extension symbolically encode and materially transform the wider environment into natural resources, human bodies into expropriable labor. In Tono-Bungay, then, Wells draws attention to forms of capitalist value expropriation outside of the factory system, wage relation, or Lukácsian proletariat qua metasubject—and frames these less socially-recognized forms of value extraction as the real motor of capitalism-as-imperialism at the turn of the century. What motivates the composite form of Tono-Bungay is Wells’ recognition of the complicity of fairy tales, romance, and even, individuating novelistic form in producing and sustaining—both materially and symbolically—the infrastructural agency that Mitchell describes. By what narrative techniques, Wells asks, can the novel of individual experience not only represent the enabling fictional structures of colonial violence (as in the African plunder episode), but also critique and perhaps transform the infrastructural agency of modern literary form? To what extent can Tono-Bungay tell the lie and expose the violence latent within the nature/society distinction?

While figured by George as a site of imperial resource extraction, the landscape of Mordet Island is saturated with heaps of rank, festering matter that resist the expropriable use-value of commodified nature: “white dead mangroves and the black ooze of brackish

water” (*TB* 223). The decaying matter that pervades this “zone of stunted vegetation” offers a version of the natural world that resists the expropriating logic of the “natural resource”—the lifeblood of capital that George vampirically seeks to extract in a last-ditch effort to save his dying enterprise (*TB* 333). Upon his first encounter with quap, George begins to suspect its powerfully disintegrative agency. But he only experiences its material agency of decay after hoarding mass quantities onto his ship, whose hull the quap literally disintegrates. George and his crew barely escape with their lives, but their plunder is lost. After returning to London, George regains the calculating rationality that his imperial voyage had agitated and unsettled. Seeking to rationalize his once-fevered apprehension of quap’s rotting material agency, George adopts the static positivism of geological science, outlining “the full particulars of my impression of all this in the *Geological Magazine* for October, 1905” (*TB* 329). But the decaying materiality of quap resists its scientific containment—and in the latter section of *Tono-Bungay* quap begins to take on a life of its own, as its festering materiality saturates the representational texture of George’s novel. Convinced of quap’s rotten, corrosive properties, George expounds upon the physically and morally deteriorating effects of quap with abandon, a radical promiscuity of real and metaphorical decay:

This is no imaginative comparison of mine. To my mind radio-activity is a real disease of matter. Moreover, it is a contagious disease. It spreads.... It is in matter exactly what the decay of our old culture is in society, a loss of traditions and distinctions and assured reactions...I am haunted by a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating away and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world. So that while man still struggles and dreams his very substance will change and crumble from beneath him.... Suppose, indeed, that is to be the end of our planet; no splendid climax and finale, no towering accumulation of achievements, but just—atomic decay!... Science can see ends—to this strange by-play of matter that we call human life. (*TB* 330)
Like George’s Anglo-Saxon energy, the energy-commodity quap equally refers to the individual body it sickens and the social body that it dissolves. George equates the radioactive materiality of quap qua matter to the wider deterioration of “culture” in “society.” What culture provides to society are the assured traditions and distinctions that stabilize social hierarchies and secure social identity—precisely those qualifies of stable selfhood that George lacks at the novel’s outset and that he seeks to attain by writing his life story. But writing Tono-Bungay has the opposite effect. By the novel’s conclusion, the rank, decadent material agency of quap seems to overtake George himself:

> It may be I see decay all about me because I am, in a sense, decay. To others it may be a scene of achievement and construction radiant with hope. I, too, have a sort of hope, but it is a remote hope, a hope that finds no promise in this Empire or in any of the great things of our time. How they will look in history I do not know, how time and chance will prove them I cannot guess[.] (TB 382)

By the conclusion of his 400-page autobiographical novel, George’s sense of self has dispersed into material agencies of dissolution and decay—taking on the very qualities of the nature that he had sought to extract. On the whole, this seems a rather grim conclusion to George’s life story. But in what, then, does the “remote hope” that attends this experience of decay consist? The hope, George tells us, resides not in the Empire nor in “any of the great things of our time,” but rather in a far-flung futurity that seems more the domain of Wells’ late-nineteenth scientific romance. The decaying quap—exceeding its social designation as natural resource—in fact becomes a major agent in George’s life, finally overtaking even his sense of personal autonomy and identity. This decay—perhaps aligned with the transverse forces that destabilize his coherent character in the novel’s first lines—opens George’s and our own imaginative horizon to an apprehension
of self and world that undoes the nature/society dualism on which George’s colonial resource extraction relied. Instead, George perversely signals hope through a radical dispersal of self and world. And it is here that the ironized bourgeois realism of Tono-Bungay intersects with the sociological futurity of A Modern Utopia: in a model of selfhood constituted via transformative entanglement with the nonhuman. George dramatizes the “vagueness” of the plastic human subject in action. He is a characterological device for narrating the transformative entanglement of human and nonhuman agency that Wells describes in his sociology. This agential transformation of seemingly passive matter—quap—metonymizes Wells’ wider representational project in Tono-Bungay: a narrative model of history shaped not by the dialectical reconciliation of self and society, but rather the shifting distribution of agency between character and environment.

At the same time, Tono-Bungay dramatizes George’s worry and Wells’ apprehension that the stable and sovereign subject might not be the content, but rather the product of fictional narrative form. Like the laborers in his uncle’s factory that he effectively mechanizes and the steamboats named after canonical British authors—Caxton, Pepys and Shakespeare—the sight of which incites in George a wish “to take them out and wipe them and put them back in some English gentleman’s library,” George’s life story registers and narrates a world where both bourgeois subjects and bourgeois literature are becoming infrastructural—technological handmaidens to the systemic forces of late-stage capitalism-as-imperialism (TB 387). From the “romance of commerce” to the bolstering selfhood of the novel, Tono-Bungay is deeply invested in
disclosing the agency of literature in shaping how its readers symbolize and conceptualize the world around them—and its potential complicity in the swindling and systemic violence of imperialism. If the nineteenth-century novel domesticates entanglement via the humanist dialectics of self-and-society or the autonomous subject-as-protagonist, then Tono-Bungay seeks to render that process visible.

Finally, then, we can recognize the literary-sociological ambition embedded in the novel’s final sentence: “We are all things that make and pass striving upon a hidden mission, out to the open sea” (TB 389). Across all of these texts—“The So-Called Science of Sociology,” A Modern Utopia, Tono-Bungay—Wells seeks a kind of literature engaged in actualizing a collective subject that does not yet exist. If the vocation of sociology is to image a collective “struggling to exist and realize itself in a world of egotisms, animalisms, and brute matter,” then the realization of that collective is practically but powerfully shaped by literary fiction. Tono-Bungay is a call, then, not for the enabling fictions of imperial resource extraction, the sovereign self, or the capitalist swindle—or even of existing nations and empires. More than anything, Tono-Bungay pursues a “we” that is not the subject of literary representation but rather its utopian desired object.
CHAPTER 3: The Secret Agency of Standardization: Narrative Standard Time and Other Modernist Infrastructures in Joseph Conrad

There is a – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. You come and say: “this is all right; it’s only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this – for instance – celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.” Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened. You can’t interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can’t even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is – and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. I’ll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.

—Letter from Joseph Conrad to R.B Cunninghame Graham (1897)

Making Time

Throughout his long and restless career as novelist and essayist, Joseph Conrad sought to give shape to the paradoxical presence of the social: coercive, tangible, invisible, formless. Probing the limits of maritime imperial romance, international spy fiction, and perspective-shifting psychological fiction, Conrad’s novels of the early-twentieth century aspire to give representational and conceptual shape to the limits and mechanisms of social cohesion—what he had earlier described as the “knitting machine” of the social in a letter to R.B Cunninghame Graham. What makes the political imagination of Conrad’s fiction so difficult to grasp is the profound ambivalence Conrad
himself seems to exhibit towards this totalizing machinery of modern social life—finally registering only a noncommittal amusement at the “remorseless process” that “knits us in and knits us out.” In this chapter, I argue that Conrad most fully explores the socio-technical machinery of modern social life in his extended reflection on the socially-productive agency of standardization in *The Secret Agent*. Registering the late-nineteenth century proliferation of socio-technical infrastructures—from time standardization to the repetitive circulation of mass media—Conrad explores the constitutive role of standardization in shaping the modern subject. What would it mean for the novel, Conrad invites us to ask, if the cohesion of modern “society” is shaped not by interpersonal intimacy, sympathy, or culture, but by *infrastructure*—the technologized circulation of material and symbolic standards that coordinate the practices and mentalities of teemingly diverse individuals? What is the social function of literature in a world in which the infrastructural knitting machine has encroached on the humanist domain of culture?

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries witnessed a radical expansion in the infrastructure of international communication—what we might understand as the material analogue of Conrad’s imaginative “knitting machine.” British and imperial advocates imagined an extensive system of intercontinental cables to function as a “public service network for the British Empire.”256 Perhaps the most persistent of these advocates was Sandford Fleming, a Scottish-born engineer today best remembered as an

influential champion both of global communications technology and international standard time. In a series of essays published in 1907, *To the Citizens of the Empire*, Fleming calls on the British Empire to establish:

> an unbroken chain of state-owned cables connecting the self-governing British communities in both hemispheres....By bringing the several governmental units, now separated by great oceans, into one friendly neighborhood, electrically and telegraphically, results will follow of the most satisfactory character,—commerce will be quickened, the ties of sympathy will be made more effective, the bonds of sentiment will become more enduring, and by this means, unity, strength and permanence will be assured to the family of nations constituting the Empire.\(^{257}\)

Fleming offers a far more benign figuration of infrastructural social cohesion than Conrad’s mechanical and merciless knitting. In Fleming’s description, the infrastructural cable-system functions not only as a powerful symbol through which to envision the imagined coherence of a technologically, financially and sympathetically unified imperial world-system, but also as the material means through which this communicative social integration would be achieved. In Fleming’s self-described “cosmopolitan” vision, global cable networks and international standard time collaborate as the enabling conditions of possibility for communication at a global scale—a fantasy of worldwide communication facilitated not only by material communications technologies, but also by immaterial and symbolic ones. Taken to its limits, Fleming’s vision blurs the line between imperial hegemony and cosmopolitan transnationalism, and his detractors resisted this fantasy of social integration as a dangerous threat to national sovereignty in the age of empire.

Charles Piazzi-Smyth, astronomy professor at the University of Edinburgh, responded to

a paper circulated by Fleming with a warning against the degraded social effects of this cosmopolitan temporality, deriding “the dread international conference which transcends all mere radical politicians in seeking ever by blood and fire to destroy most completely the ancient and necessary barriers between the nations, and to form all mankind into one vast, headless society.”258 The infrastructural and communicative unification of the world threatens to decapitate the body politic.

The integrating liberalism of Fleming and the neo-Burkean backlash of Piazzi-Smyth track the ambivalent relationship among national, imperial and utopic-transnational forms of mass-mediated social organization. A crucial question posed by the proliferation of world-scale infrastructure—and especially time standardization—is the extent to which the socio-technical entanglement of ever-widening swaths of humanity into technological relation meaningfully transforms the political units and social categories that mediate human collective life. In an earlier essay on time-standardization, Fleming asks:

The human race is no longer confined within a narrow area. It has overspread the surface of the earth; in the old and new worlds it has grown, in some portions of their extent it is still growing, from an infantile condition to a state of manhood. Are we not yet able to look beyond one individual horizon and enlarge our range of vision so as to include a system which will satisfy the requirements, not of a locality, but of the whole globe?259

259 Sanford Fleming, *Time-reckoning for the Twentieth Century* (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1886), 49.
Fleming quietly slips from spatial-material “growth”—the widening extension of infrastructural communication networks across “the surface of the earth”—into the developmental “growth” of transformative maturation—“from an infantile condition to a state of manhood.” Does spatial growth necessarily entail transformative, developmental growth? Have human social relations outgrown—spatially and/or developmentally—Piauzzi-Smyth’s nation-state? New forms of standardization knit human beings together in radically uncertain ways at the turn of the twentieth century: Was the socio-technical entanglement of ever-more humans into standardized networks the next developmental stage in the history of human progress, or merely a replacement for the declining symbolic purchase of culture? Does standardized time measure the developmental growth of human progress, or is time the synthetic, chronometric invention of corporate-capitalist interest? If time is made, then might the same be true of the human? What is the agency of standardization?

**Rethinking Standardization**

Following Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, standardization most commonly enters the purview of modernist studies as symptom of the disenchanted world of reification and alienation. As culture splinters off from social and political life in modernity, its hard-fought autonomy is shown to have already been determined by the capitalist market economy. Modern culture—both “high” and “low”—is constitutively
structured “by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness.” Thus for decades scholars have productively understood modernism by reference to the commodity form. In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” for example, Fredric Jameson influentially insisted that critics of modern culture abandon the strict separation of “high” and “low” in favor of an approach that reads “high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism.” Jameson contends that modernism is only thinkable as responsive to the historically unique, standardizing effects of late capitalism, the tendency “to dissolve and to fragment or atomize [unified social groups] into agglomerations of isolated and equivalent private individuals, by way of the corrosive action of universal commodification and the market system.” Finally, modernism can only be understood as the dialectical counterpart of mass culture: “for modernism, the commodity form signals the vocation not to be a commodity.” Of course, Jameson’s (and countless other critics’) extensions of Frankfurt School critical theory have been incredibly generative for the study of modern culture, expanding both the field of analytic objects and the political horizons of modernist studies. But what has the persistent return to the hermeneutics of the commodity obscured? Scholars have increasingly sought methodologies that apprehend cultural objects outside of the

262 Ibid., 15.
263 Ibid., 16.
structuring logic of the commodity form. In this section, I read a modernist text especially self-reflexive in its thematization of standardization—The Secret Agent—in order to analyze the new forms of mediation that come into view when we disarticulate standardization from the commodity.

Critics have generally seen Conrad’s novel as harshly critical of standardization, reading Verloc’s botched assault on the Greenwich Observatory as an attack on time standardization itself. Tanya Agathocleous suggests that we read the Greenwich Meridian in Conrad’s novel as “the ur-symbol of standardized time.”264 Although he has little patience for the anarchists who perpetrate the terrorist attack, she argues, Conrad does sympathize with their plot to “‘smash’...time coordination, a concept singled out for critique by many modernist writers because of its reifying, homogenizing role in national life, and its connection with capitalist efficiency.”265 Similarly, Adam Barrows contends that Conrad’s novel resists “the injunction to fit all human time into a single standardized system of measurement explicitly designed for the maintenance of global commerce.”266 Despite the novel’s sustained “ironic method,” both critics agree that Conrad sincerely endorses the explosion of global standard time. But just how earnest is this endorsement?

265 Ibid., 187.
266 Adam Barrows, The Cosmic Time of Empire: Modern Britain and World Literature (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010), 101.
Early in *The Secret Agent*, Mr. Vladimir outlines his long-winded “philosophy of bomb throwing” to Verloc, stressing the apolitical nature of his chosen target. Most significant for Vladimir is that the target confound conventional rationalizations of anarchist violence: class interest, poverty, religion, revenge. Instead, he targets modern society’s “sacrosanct fetish”: science (*SA* 23). Only through an “act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable” does Vladimir imagine he can blunt “the sensibilities of the class you are attacking....You can’t count upon their emotions either of pity or fear for very long” (*SA* 25, 24). In this Aristotelian poetics of the bomb, Vladimir fashions himself a terrorist-poet competing against the homogenized bourgeois values both symbolized and reproduced by the popular press: “I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy. Starvation itself could hardly be dragged in there—eh?” (*SA* 26). Vladimir seems to embody the modernist disposition that Agathocleous and Barrows attribute to Conrad himself—fantastically negating standard time, the homogenizing forces of capitalism, and commoditized news culture in a single aesthetic explosion. But what this reading neglects is the extent to which Vladimir’s plan relies on those mechanisms that it would ostensibly destroy. Vladimir nominally calls for “a clean sweep of the whole social creation,” but he in fact constructs a plan that constitutively depends on journalists and standardized communications circuits so as to “have any influence on public opinion” (*SA* 24).

---


193
Vladimir aspires to destroy immaterial targets that are symbolically rich (pure mathematics, standardized time, astronomy, science), but is in fact blind to his own reliance on the material and cultural infrastructures that he would otherwise destroy. Rather than earnestly endorse Vladimir’s plan, then, Conrad subtly and ironically exposes Vladimir’s (willful or naive) ignorance of the material conditions on which his plan relies, conditions sustained by time standardization and the Greenwich Observatory.

Vladimir’s “philosophy of bomb throwing” dramatizes the capacity of modern infrastructure to frustrate the distinction between the material and the symbolic. Vladimir aspires to assault the fetishized ideals of science by attacking time standardization, which he understands as the idealized scientific rationalization of a genuinely anarchistic temporality. Vladimir hopes to destroy the symbolic ideal by detonating the material base, but we can recognize the futility of his enterprise from the very start. Vladimir orchestrates a terrorist attack on Greenwich Meridian—both the material and symbolic zero degree of time standardization. But the Greenwich Meridian does not produce time standardization. Time standardization emerges through its continual reproduction in the material technologies, international institutions, and embodied subjectivities that enact and live those standardizations across global and local contexts. The scientific ideals of standardization only become social reality through their mediation in technical infrastructures and subsequent social reproduction. In the passage above, Conrad figures this crucial force of infrastructural mediation in the newspaper—the media technology
whose daily circulation reproduces the socially-symbolic effect of collective standardized time.\textsuperscript{268}

It is no accident that Vladimir’s philosophy of the bomb (the passage in \textit{The Secret Agent} that engages with the material and symbolic dimensions of time standardization most explicitly) brings us to the newspaper—to what many critics of modernism have read as the paradigmatic form of commoditized culture. As several critics have shown, Conrad’s novel does voice a critique of the popular press and of commoditized culture more generally.\textsuperscript{269} But it also examines the productive social function of infrastructural mediation that can fall out of view when we read \textit{The Secret Agent}—both the novel itself and its own reflexive representations of mass culture—in terms of the commodity form. In \textit{The Secret Agent}, Conrad figures both time standardization and the newspaper as mutually-reinforcing modern infrastructures with powerful roles in the cohesion of modern social worlds. Conrad’s novel explores the processes of mediation through which scientific idealizations become material social reality through infrastructural mediation—of which the newspaper is perhaps the most powerful agent. Reading the newspaper as infrastructure rather than commodity requires that we recognize not only the psychically-degrading effects of modern forms of

\textsuperscript{268} For the classic account of the relationship between the daily circulation of mass media and the construction of symbolic community and nationalist sentiment, see: Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (London: Verso, 1983).

standardization (i.e., Lukácsian reification), but also the powerful mediating role of standardization in the cohesion of modern social worlds. This recognition of the powerful agency of both standardization and the newspaper within The Secret Agent calls for a different critical practice than the familiar modernist paradigms of “high/low culture” and the commodity form—a critical hermeneutics in which standardization does not inevitably refer to the homogenizing effects of reification and rationalization.

In his reading of the politics of time standardization, Barrows draws on Peter Osborne’s The Politics of Time, and Osborne’s account of the relationship between standard time and the homogenizing force of capitalism nicely captures the logic underwriting most accounts of time standardization in The Secret Agent: “Capitalism has ‘universalized’ history, in the sense that it has established systematic relations of social interdependence on a planetary scale...thereby producing a single global space of temporal co-existence or coevalness, within which actions are quantifiable chronologically in terms of a single standard of measurement: world standard time.”

Osborne reads time standardization as the measure of capitalism—what Adorno would call “the total social process” of commodification and mutual alienation. In this account, capitalism is the sovereign agent that organizes the planet in its image, producing the global space most amenable to its own reproduction.

In modernist studies, the commodity form has served a function similar to Osborne’s standard time—a stable unit always in reference to the scale of capitalism.


drawing its agency (or lack thereof) from that measure. In their introduction to an edited special issue on “Financialization and the Culture Industry,” C.D. Blanton, Colleen Lye, and Kent Puckett describe the structuring function of the commodity as stable unit of measure for cultural critics in the wake of Adorno and Lukács: “[the commodity] stands not only as capitalism’s minimal unit of analysis but also as the source of the logic that ultimately governs the structure of culture.”271 The commodity form functions for critical theory as the analytic unit coordinating cultural objects and the total social process of capitalism. For critics in the wake of Lukács, Adorno, and Jameson, the structure of culture in capitalism is understood to be governed by reification, alienation, and ideological misprision. If the commodity is the constitutive unit of the “total social process,” then the vocation of critical theory must be to relate our cultural objects back to the agency and logic of that process. When we confine our understanding of “media” to the commodity form, then, we circumscribe the agency of those media objects within the structuring logic described by Blanton, Lye, and Puckett—media objects can only coordinate the sovereign agency of capitalism with the subjectivities that it alienates. In this paradigm, standardization can only be understood through reference to the dual phenomena of Weberian rationalization and Lukácsian reification. Commodified mass culture is the conceptual unit that coordinates the homogenization of the rationalized material world with the reified subjectivities of the masses. But what would it look like to imagine media objects and forms of mediation that are not subject to the sovereign

agency and interpretive horizon of the total social process of capitalism? What would it look like, finally, to read standardization not as a monolithic capitalist technology that can be detonated (whether via bombs or critical theory), but rather as a series of techniques and technologies that enable new forms of social connection across a complexifying media environment?

In order to address this question, we must return to that media form so central to Conrad’s socio-political investments in *The Secret Agent*: the newspaper, which Conrad invites us to read not only as mass-cultural commodity, but also as infrastructural media technology. Critics have already noted the interpretive centrality of the newspaper in Conrad’s novel. In a comprehensive reading, Peter Mallios reads the *The Secret Agent* as responsive to the commercialization of the press, enabling “an extension of a bourgeois administrative logic” through the increasingly extensive influence of new journalism. Mallios links the “priority of the newspaper as a money-making commodity” to its increasingly pervasive “agency of social control.”

Ultimately, in tracing the forms of ideological power exerted by the newspaper, Mallios reads *The Secret Agent* as a meditation on Baudrillardian simulation. The press “substitut[es] signs for the real.”

Mallios rightly emphasizes the fate of Ossipon, whose identity disintegrates following his abandonment of Winnie and her subsequent suicide. Ossipon learns of her fate in a newspaper and is psychically tormented by “the beauties of its journalistic style,” compulsively repeating its vague account: “An impenetrable mystery seems destined to

---

272 Mallios, “Reading *The Secret Agent* Now,” 166.
273 Ibid., 160.
274 Ibid., 171.
hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.” Ossipon does not understand this sudden dissolution of his personality; he is “menaced by an impenetrable mystery—the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases” (SA 227). In Mallios’ reading, Ossipon’s psychic disintegration is the price paid for his clear-eyed recognition of the newspaper's ideological power of simulation.

Before responding to Mallios’s reading, I want to bring in a passage that he does not discuss—a competing moment depicting Ossipon in the wake of Winnie’s suicide:

He walked. He crossed the bridge. Later on the towers of the Abbey saw in their massive immobility the yellow bush of his hair passing under the lamps. The lights of Victoria saw him too, and Sloane Square, and the railings of the park....The clock tower boomed a brazen blast above his drooping head. He looked up at the dial. . . . Half-past twelve of a wild night in the Channel....And again Comrade Ossipon walked. His robust form was seen that night in distant parts of the enormous town slumbering monstrously on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist. It was seen crossing the streets without life and sound, or diminishing in the interminable straight perspectives of shadowy houses bordering empty roadways lined by strings of gas lamps. He walked through Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons, through monotonous streets with unknown names where the dust of humanity settles inert and hopeless out of the stream of life. He walked. (SA 219-20)

This is a bizarre passage in the context of the novel. The narrative perspective, which throughout The Secret Agent quietly vacillates between ironic distance and intimate omniscience, suddenly and somewhat jarringly pulls back. The buildings and streets of London sentiently observe the wandering Ossipon, who momentarily gains perspectival agency in order to observe the clock tower and note the (standardized) time. As the passage moves from particular London buildings to the more abstract geometry of London’s municipal infrastructure, the narrative gaze momentarily shifts from Ossipon to “the dust of humanity.” Figuring Ossipon first as subject, then as object, the passage
suggests that what we recognize as “humanity” is merely the effect of how formless life-dust has taken shape in its larger technical and natural environment—just as Ossipon’s identity is given shape by the familiar structures that allow him to recognize himself in the newspaper. The passage elaborately stages the contingent nature of distinctions between person and thing, subject and object, nature and culture—distinctions that are supported by material and symbolic standards: time, municipal infrastructure, and the familiar repetitions of mass media. Read in conjunction with Ossipon’s haunted relationship to the newspaper, this passage suggests that the mutually-reinforcing infrastructural technologies of standard time and daily newspaper are not just coercive simulations, the ideological lubricant and constitutive analytic unit of capitalism. This passage alternatively invites us to recognize the foundational role of technical infrastructure in producing and sustaining material conditions of modern personhood. Conrad’s infrastructuralism invites us to reframe standardization not as a limit on human agency, but rather as producing the very conditions through which a recognizable “humanity” can come into being.

While contemporary sociological analyses of standardization can lack historical specificity, these texts rightly emphasize the constitutive relationship between the codification of new forms of standardization and the historical emergence and experience of modernity.275 John Durham Peters and Paul N. Edwards both connect the

pervasiveness of standardization in modern social worlds to the development of modern infrastructures.\textsuperscript{276} Drawing on Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s influential account of standardization in \textit{Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences}, Peters emphasizes how the hiddenness of standards, their tendency to escape from view, obscures the logistical aspect of media.\textsuperscript{277} For Peters, “Logistical media have the job of ordering fundamental terms and units....The job of logistical media is to organize and orient, to arrange people and property, often into grids....They prepare the ground on which we can make such distinctions as nature and culture.”\textsuperscript{278} Peters invites us to read “media” not only as symbolic, ideological, or simulated, but also as \textit{technical}—implicated in materially structuring the world and the social forms that inhabit it. Peters invites us to understand logistical media as a sort of Greenwich Meridian, the zero-degree of mediation necessary for the cohesion of social worlds: “In arraying things around polar points, logistical media set the terms in which everyone must operate. The zero is the paradigm case of a logistical medium: an apparent nothing that marks out longitude and latitude, and orders of magnitude, and thus shapes the world; it is an operator that arranges data and regulates processing.”\textsuperscript{279} Peters figures time standardization as the paradigmatic metaphor through which to explicate the logistical aspect of more familiar


\textsuperscript{278} Peters, \textit{The Marvelous Clouds}, 37.

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid.
“media” objects like the newspaper. Conrad’s novel anticipates and imaginatively tests the limits of this contemporary media-theoretical insight.

In *Sorting Things Out*, Bowker and Star explicitly frame their examination of standardization against Baudrillard’s simulation—against the notion “that it is impossible to sort out media representations from ‘what really happens.’” They worry that Baudrillard “pays no attention to the work of constructing the simulations, or the infrastructural considerations that underwrite the images or events” and argue that “there is more at stake—epistemologically, politically, and ethically—in the day-to-day work of building classification systems and producing and maintaining standards than in abstract arguments about representation.” Without endorsing their dismissal of representation, I do think that their concern with the simultaneously symbolic and material aspects of standardization—their rejection of a strict distinction between “some otherworldly ‘real’ or ‘constructed’ nature”—helps us to read Conrad’s novel differently and rethink standardization in literary studies more generally. Building on Mallios’ Baudrillardian reading of *The Secret Agent*, I want to suggest that we read the newspaper not as an ideological simulation in service of bourgeois social control, but as part of a larger technical infrastructure of logistical mediation. The logic of simulation relies upon maintaining an absolute difference between representation and the world that is represented, between social construction and reality. Paying attention to the material, logistical quality of the newspaper (that comes into view in concert with time

281 Ibid., 10.
282 Ibid., 47.
standardization throughout *The Secret Agent*) reveals forms of “media” that explicitly do not constitute a virtual world, cutting Ossipon off from some more real, more material reality. Rather than concluding with Ossipon’s recognition that he has been living in a world composed of simulations—ideological representations separable from a more authentic reality—the novel instead terminates with Ossipon’s devastating recognition that what he had earlier dismissed as “mere newspaper gup” is in fact, like time standardization, what has held him in relation to the social world (*SA* 53).

Rethinking standardization as not only a monolithic technology of capitalist social control, but also as a series of techniques that confer commensurability to the practices and mentalities of diverse individuals highlights larger questions regarding the sources and limits of human agency, both in Conrad’s novel and in our own critical practice. Understanding standardization as a social process immanent to the culture industry or commodity form will always refer standardization to the same logic of capitalism—a capitalist logic to which we tend to attribute an internal logic, inherent rationality, or general structure that’s given credit or lends explanatory force to our interpretations. Disarticulating standardization from the commodity form and from this determining capitalist logic allows us to re-open questions of power and agency, rather than treating them as answers known in advance. Must all forms of standardization necessarily refer to the same total social process? Rethinking standardization entails recognizing the extent to which many of our interpretive paradigms immanently refer to the not-so-secret-anymore agents of rationalization, reification, and alienation. Disarticulating standardization from the commodity form might allow us, then, to grasp the positive force of technical
mediation in the formation of social worlds and to imagine new forms of political agency by recovering both the technical and representational nature of human agency. But what, then, is the status of the human subject in such a world?

**Un-Knitting the Human**

Throughout *The Secret Agent*, readerly agency is undermined by the novel’s structural and dramatic ironies—what Mark Wollaeger describes in his reading of *The Secret Agent* as “an aesthetic of formal perfection and controlled violence” that enacts “an aggressively punitive discipline linked to authorial efforts to master the audience.”

The most jarring of these structural ironies are the novel’s temporal disjunctions, manipulating chronology both forward and backward to disorienting effect. In the first of these shifts, Conrad jumps from Verloc’s anxiety after meeting with the anarchists in Chapter III to the aftermath of the Greenwich explosion in Chapter IV. This temporal rift initially obscures the identity of the bomb victim (we, like the Professor, have no reason to believe that the bodily remains are those of Stevie rather than Verloc) before placing the reader in a position of dramatic irony for much of the novel’s second half, as the knowing reader watches the characters unravel the mystery for themselves. This dramatic irony is felt most painfully in Chapter VIII, in which the narrative shifts back in time before Stevie’s death to recount his and Winnie’s mother’s journey to deposit herself in the almshouse in a misguided and ineffectual gesture of self-sacrifice for her son.

---

believing that the relief of her burdensome presence will make Verloc likelier to provide for her children.

These structural ironies—both the representational aporia of the failed bombing and the gratuitous temporal backtrack of the cab ride—unsettle the stable chronicity of the novel’s narrative texture. Both temporal rifts also constellate around the central figure of Stevie, whom critics have often read as the interpretive center of *The Secret Agent*. Critical readings of Stevie tend to cast him into one of two camps: Stevie is either emblem of the canny, modern artist (“That Stevie is identified as the novel’s artist-figure as well as its conscience says much about Conrad’s sense of art’s inefficacy, its inability to bring about any change in the world.”284) or, alternatively, paradigmatic example of the naive reader whose depth has been corroded by commodified mass culture (“Stevie is the most obvious manifestation of the novel’s decidedly unflattering estimation of the general reading public: in his gullible excitability and his woeful lack of verbal or political sophistication, he stands as Conrad’s cruel caricature of ‘public opinion.’”285).

Focusing either on Stevie’s sympathetic vulnerability to the shocks and manipulations of lowbrow journalism or on the anti-mimetic geometric formalism of his compulsive circle drawing, critics tend to understand Stevie via reference to the commodity form.

Understood as the site of either symbolic resistance or vulnerability to commodification, Stevie is trapped within the interpretive dialectic of modernism and mass culture, casting Stevie as either the psychically-degraded or socially-ostracized outcome of the total social process of modern cultural production. But is there an alternative to this powerfully structuring interpretive paradigm? More to the point, can we coordinate Stevie’s overdetermined relationship to the modern cultural field with the wider chronological ironies structuring the novel’s narrative form? And why do these temporal and dramatic ironies circulate so persistently around the figure of Stevie in particular?

The question of irony has of course motivated readers of the The Secret Agent for decades, critics often implicitly or explicitly responding to Irving Howe’s influential reading in Politics and the Novel of the The Secret Agent’s “thick fog of irony which steadily eats away at the features, the energies, the very vitals of its major characters.” 286 Howe sees Conrad’s irony as an aesthetic weakness, a totalizing and suffocating derision that “turn[s] in upon itself, becoming facile through its pervasiveness and lack of grading.” 287 Howe’s vision of an all-encompassing scorn that corrodes the freedom of the novel’s characters casts Conrad’s ironic method as a saturating aesthetic fog whose totalizing aspect mirrors the “total social process” of capitalized modernity. In Howe’s reading, Conrad’s diegetic landscape is subject to a totalizing pressure that constrains the fate and meaning of the novel’s characters in a manner duplicative of the standardized, homogeneous texture of the modern administered society of commodity exchange and

287 Ibid.
mutual alienation. This understating of irony is ineluctably bound to the question of determinism. But must we follow Howe in locating monolithic and totalizing vectors of narrative determinism? It is my view that the novel’s relevance and value for contemporary readers resides not in the philosophical stalemate between freedom and determinism, but rather in the dynamic exchange between cultural and technological agencies of determination in the making of modern subjects.

Returning to the question of Stevie, we can begin to rethink his function in Conrad’s convoluted narrative knitting machine by adopting and developing in a rather different direction Joseph Valente’s insight that the impairment of Stevie’s “idiocy” resides “not in his powers of ideation but in his powers of mediation.” Valente shows that Stevie’s disability is not a function of diminished intellect but of “a phenomenological circuitry (sensory, perceptual, affective, cognitive) overloaded to the point of derangement, a state of hyperesthesia or systematic overstimulation that spasmodically distorts the information to be processed by intensifying it.” While Valente reads Stevie’s phenomenological circuitry as psychologically mimetic, bearing an indexical relationship to neurosensory disorder via a psychological realism that my reading generally resists, I want to borrow and to emphasize the active and dynamic mediatory relationship between subject and world that Valente helps us to see. More than subject to the mutually-constituting processes of the culture industry and Howe’s ironic fog, Stevie is constantly processing and giving form to the world around him.

289 Ibid.
Conrad offers two glimpses into Stevie’s paradigmatic mode of artistic production: the compulsive drawing of circles. The first scene shows Stevie tensed with aesthetic precision and metrological exactitude: “His spare time he occupied by drawing circles with compass and pencil on a piece of paper. He applied himself to that pastime with great industry, with his elbows spread out and bowed low over the kitchen table” (SA 8). The second glimpse reveals an unloosed symbolic proliferation: “the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable” (SA 34). Only 26 pages separate these two brief scenes of artistic production, but Conrad neither draws attention to nor explains why Stevie vacillates between two wildly divergent aesthetic styles. In fact, despite their differences, these circles are easily subsumed within the totalizing irony condemned by Howe: despite the aesthetic aspirations and symbolic longing that the narrator attributes to Stevie’s artistic production, the circles are only of interest to the novel’s characters as evidentiary measure of Stevie’s pathological degeneracy. As Ossipon mutters to Verloc after examining Stevie at work: “‘Very good. Very characteristic, perfectly typical.’ ‘What’s very good?’ grunted inquiringly Mr. Verloc, settled again in the corner of the sofa….‘Typical of this form of degeneracy—these drawings, I mean’” (SA 34).

But rather than read the circles as evidentiary symptom—either of mental disability or of the pressures of the culture industry—attending to these moments of
aesthetic production as scenes of \textit{mediation} allows a shift in interpretive emphasis. The mediation paradigm invites us to read these scenes as staging and exploring the dynamic process of calibrating self and environment. Taken together, the two circle tableaux stage competing modes of symbolization and social description, as Stevie grasps for an aesthetic form to reconcile his inner turmoil with the outer world. Throughout the novel Stevie is characterized by his “convulsive sympathy” and “immoderate compassion”—his excessive empathy for the pain of others—that he struggles to reconcile with the “monstrous town” surrounding him. The measured exactitude of Stevie’s compass and first aesthetic style indexes his desire for an aesthetic form of social wholeness or coherence that could reconcile this dialectic of self and society; the second aesthetic mode, the violent and chaotic proliferation of tangled circular derangement, is countermeasure to that first style’s impossibility, the negative allegory of social indescribability. To read Stevie as “ostracized artist” or “degraded reading pubic” replicates Ossipon’s facile diagnostic imaginary and conforms to Howe’s totalizing, homogenized landscape of ironic determinism. The purpose of Conrad’s irony is not to flatten Stevie into a series of hyper-legible symptoms, but to anticipate, preempt and ironize our own impulse to replicate the diagnostic hermeneutics of Ossipon. Taking Stevie seriously as embodiment of an ongoing (if failing) process of mediation allows us to examine how he mediates between self and world and to trace how that dynamic relationship changes in relation to his surrounding environment.

If Stevie’s degenerate pathology in \textit{The Secret Agent} is conditioned by his inability to mediate successfully with his environment—to process and give symbolic
form to the world around him—can we come to a more specific understanding of the nature of this failure? In the sentences immediately preceding our first glimpse of Stevie’s circular compulsion, Conrad emphasizes Stevie’s age, poised on the threshold of maturity: “By this time a growth of thin fluffy hair had come to blur, like a golden mist, the sharp line of his small lower jaw” (SA 9). From the outset, Conrad presents Stevie as the novel’s lone figure of youth, a budding artist on the cusp of adulthood. That this youthful emblem of potentiality is so quickly pathologized and then unwittingly exploded in a failed terrorist attack orchestrated by his self-centered brother-in-law via the Russian embassy is of course a measure of Conrad’s bleak irony. For a few moments, Conrad’s narrator briefly glimpses the potential subject of the modern Künstlerroman before shifting its attention to the novel's wider field of hypocrites, shams and narcissists. In this novel, evidently, Stevie is only meant for victimhood, unable to mediate self and world or to develop to individualized maturity in the social context of modernity. But if Conrad figures Stevie as an emblem of Bildung, The Secret Agent is decidedly not an anti-Bildungsroman or novel of frustrated formation, non-development, stagnation, or regress. Stevie has blown himself to bits long before the novel can trace the wounding of modern institutions or narrate anything resembling stalled development. Instead, in the form of Stevie, Conrad offers a fleeting glance of Bildung-as-anachronism, its holistic and measured forms of social description failing and devolving into a parody of modernist formal derangement before its literal explosion.

And yet, Stevie—emblem of anachronistic Bildung—returns ghostlike after his death in the temporal backtrack of the cab ride to the almshouse. Circling back to the
wider interpretive question of the novel’s structural-chronological irony, we can see that
the mediating function of Stevie becomes more legible when we examine Stevie in
relation to the environment in which he seems most at home: in the residual Dickensian
representational field of the cab ride chapter. In terms of strict narrative motivation, the
cab ride chapter is surely the least essential and seemingly gratuitous in a novel filled
with obscure connections and vaguely-networked relations. The chapter does not advance
the plot, and in fact shifts backward chronologically in order to depict the final
interaction of Winnie and Stevie’s mother with her children before their deaths. The
primary effect of the chapter is to generate a devastating and painful dramatic irony, as
the reader observes the mother's misguided assumptions and ineffectual self-sacrifice in
full awareness of the futility of her actions. We have already come to learn that it was
Stevie who was killed in the Greenwich explosion and not Verloc—rather than secure
Stevie’s future, she has left him even more vulnerable to the self-interested manipulations
of her daughter’s husband. At the same time, this shift backwards within the narrative
chronology seems to correspond to a wider historical-representational shift at the level of
narrative imagery, as the chapter is filled with caricatured images that seem to have been
pulled from the universe of Victorian social realism:

The conveyance awaiting them would have illustrated the proverb that
“truth can be more cruel than caricature,” if such a proverb existed.
Crawling behind an infirm horse, a metropolitan hackney carriage drew up
on wobbly wheels and with a maimed driver on the box. This last
peculiarity caused some embarrassment. Catching sight of a hooked iron
contrivance protruding from the left sleeve of the man’s coat, Mrs.
Verloc’s mother lost suddenly the heroic courage of these days. (SA 114-
15)
The chapter seems to fold back temporally into a residual Dickensian universe filled with images of social violence scaled to nineteenth-century urban realism—the emaciated horse, dilapidated carriage, and hook-handed driver all allegories for the class degradations and inequity of the poor that characterize nineteenth-century social fiction. At the same time, the narrator highlights the stereotyped, preprocessed effect of these images with an introductory pseudo-aphorism—“truth can be more cruel than caricature.” Why ostentatiously construct a hypothetical proverb, whose distance from the echoed original (“truth is stranger than fiction”) begs us to consider the relationship among caricature, fiction and truth?

Conrad’s narrator insists that the maimed hansom driver and his sickly horse are truth and not caricature within this diegetic world. But of course they are caricatures. In the cab ride chapter, then, the stereotypical, mediated images of Dickensian social realism saturate and perceptually structure the world in a manner functionally indistinguishable from diegetic “reality.” The chapter initiates a chronological shift backwards that is more significant than simply rewinding the diegesis to the days before the disastrous explosion. Instead, the chapter textually constructs a world subject to the representational logic of Dickensian social realism—a logic examined by Jonathan Grossman in his reading of the worldview embedded in Dickens’ depictions of nineteenth-century transit networks. In a literary-critical gloss on the cab ride chapter’s essential conceit, Grossman shows that Dickens’ narrative engagement with forms of public transit gave representational purchase to the interconnected, networked community of his Victorian readers: “In Dickens’ hands, the novel as an art not only could enable his
community, whose individuals were increasingly atomized, to come to know their manifold unseen connectedness, but also, more specifically, could help to produce its self-comprehension in terms of a criss-crossing journeying of characters simultaneously circulating all around.”\textsuperscript{290} Grossman helps us to see how Victorian formal strategies—omniscient narration, simultaneity, serialization, multiplottedness—give representational purchase and legible social description to a world increasingly difficult to grasp through transit networks that extend beyond the scope of the city and Londoners’ everyday lived experience. In the cab ride chapter, then, Conrad constructs a world whose anachronism matches that of Stevie—a world whose representational texture promises the comprehensive social legibility that Grossman finds in Dickens and in which Stevie’s mediatory impulses may finally find resolution.

It is in this residual Victorian environment that Stevie-as-\textit{Bildung} finally becomes legible and his mediatory impulses seem something other than degenerate symptoms.\textsuperscript{291} As the chapter and cab ride progress, Conrad emphasizes the overwhelming nature of Stevie’s “convulsive sympathy”: “He could say nothing; for the tenderness to all pain and all misery, the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them to bed with him. And that, he knew, was impossible. For Stevie was not mad. It was, as it were, a symbolic longing” (S4 123). As


\textsuperscript{291} Of course, as Conrad’s narrative voice itself signals, this is a caricatured and reductive reading of the political referent and aesthetic scope of Victorian realism, one that we don’t have to endorse unquestioningly without recognizing its function within Conrad’s novelistic imagination.
with his circles, Stevie seeks a symbolic language adequate to mediate his desire with the wider social world, but he can only imagine a form of compassion scaled to the individual—taking the world to bed with him. In the frustration of his straining mediatory imagination, Stevie is overcome with the dialectical counterpart of his sympathy: violent unrestraint. “The anguish of immoderate compassion was succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage” (SA 124). Stevie vacillates between these conditions in a rising state of inner turbulence and agitation before finally achieving a moment of achieved mediation—of successful calibration with his environment. Grasping “the view newly opened to his sympathies of the human and equine misery in close association,” Stevie finally achieves mediatory expression: “Bad world for poor people” (SA 125, 126).

What do we make of this brief mediatory success? Critics have generally seen this moment as a genuine—if temporary—aesthetic triumph.  But we must remember that this brief fulfillment is conditioned by its containment in Conrad’s wider structural irony. Retroactively placing the deceased Stevie within the anachronistic urban environment of nineteenth-century social fiction, Conrad highlights Stevie’s symbolic incompatibility with the “monstrous town” of twentieth-century London. If the social realism of Dickens gave aesthetic form to the division of labor and class dynamics of industrial London through a political aesthetic of sentiment and liberal pity, those formal dynamics have become mere index of pathological degeneracy in the modern world of The Secret Agent’s early chapters. Instead, The Secret Agent discloses the representational

---

292 See, for example, Arata: “Stevie does at last hit on the right formula” (“The Secret Agent (1907)” 188); Valente: “At the conclusion of the cab ride, Stevie gives voice to his crowning ethico-political epiphany” (“The Accidental Autist” 28).
exhaustion of high social-realist and naturalist forms that imagine the city as the adequate representational scale at which to register the social violence of modernity. Unwittingly implicated and exploded in a terrorist attack beyond the bounds of his own comprehension, Stevie registers a geopolitical horizon that exceeds the liberal sympathy of Dickens’ national class politics and whose indescribability his fragmented body can only negatively allegorize. Stevie’s exploded body desentimentalizes the liberal sympathy hermeneutic framework of Dickensian social realism, obviating the insufficiency of Bildung as symbolic form to an infrastructural modernity scaled to the geopolitics of terror.

We can thus begin to understand the essential relationship between Stevie as anachronistic Bildung and Conrad’s wider structural ironies and chronological disjunctions. Bildung, figuratively detonated within the narrative, is subsequently withheld from the relation between the novel and its reader. First demonstrating the insufficiency of Bildung as meaningful symbolization of social desire in modernity through the pathologized figure of Stevie, the novel then repudiates any sort of pedagogical vocation of cultural formation with its reader through an aggressive formal and textual irony that dissolves the bonds of sympathetic attachment and human recognition between narrative voice and reader. Even the pedagogical and cultural-formational potentialities latent in Stevie’s brief moment of aesthetic synthesis are overtaken by Conrad’s irony. But despite the inefficacy of Stevie’s own convulsive sympathy, it is undeniable that Stevie himself is an object of pity within the narrative of The Secret Agent—a hapless victim of forces that exceed his comprehension yet
implicate him within their violence. How do we reconcile this evident contradiction? If Conrad’s irony desentimentalizes the readerly pity that the novel otherwise solicits, what should we make of Stevie’s victimization? Besides the indescribability of modern social worlds that his exploded body negatively symbolizes, does Stevie have a positive meaning within the novel?

The effect of the novel’s dramatic irony—of the fact that we know Stevie will soon fall victim to a terrorist plot orchestrated by his brother-in-law that his liberal sympathy will be inadequate either to resist or to represent—pulls the reader’s imagination away from this chapter and towards the unnarrated scene of Stevie’s death. The jarring chronological shift that signals the cab ride chapter as set-piece and ostensible interpretive center of the novel at the same time discredits our impulse to read Stevie’s convulsive sympathy redemptively. Instead, this chapter’s haunting dramatic irony directs the reader’s imagination to the unnarrated aporia at the heart of The Secret Agent: the explosion at Greenwich Park. The explosion marks both the narrative event around which the plot of The Secret Agent turns and the site of Stevie’s exploded remains that hover at the margins, darkening the pathos of the cab ride chapter. Although the explosion itself is not narrated, throughout the novel we see characters like Winnie and Inspector Heat try to come to terms with the fact of a body so scattered that “they had to gather him up with the shovel” (SA 191). The interpretive recalcitrance of the bodily remains seems to fascinate Conrad not only as a literary-representational limit, but also a larger philosophical-conceptual one. “The fact of a man blown to bits,” Conrad admits in the Author’s Note, “could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way” (SA 229). As
Heat considers “the shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments,” Conrad draws the reader’s attention to the conceptual limit that distinguishes Stevie-the-person from a mere heap of matter (SA 65). The remains form “a sort of mound—a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” (SA 64). The unsettling quality of this image resides in the fact that it upsets the basic Levi-Straussian distinctions between nature and culture—nature and humanity—so constitutive to our familiar philosophical, literary, and quotidian orientation to the world. As Arata suggests, “For Conrad the image of a dismembered body is horrific because, among other things, it forces us to confront the ontological question of what constitutes the human.”

Stevie’s remains highlight the contingent marker between nature and culture, implicitly disclosing the extent to which these basic distinctions produce “humanity.” It is my view that in literally exploding the novel’s lone emblem of developmental Bildung, the novel instead reorients our attention to a different mode of subject formation—to the basic ontological distinctions through which human beings come to understand themselves as such. More to the point, The Secret Agent formally investigates the powerfully-structuring but also historical conditions through which these distinctions emerge. In this way, Conrad directs us to questions central both to contemporary media theory and to newer forms of philosophical materialism—questions regarding the relationship between human agency and its wider natural, social and media

---

environments. Stevie’s exploded body is only the most literal emblem of a wider question that haunts *The Secret Agent*: what is it that distinguishes the seemingly sovereign human subject from “a mere heap of matter”? How is it that the “dust of humanity” comes to distinguish itself from the "stream of life”? By what means does this humanity attain its particular capacities and agencies, and to what extent are they historically contingent? Is humanity the sovereign subject of history, or is there another, secret agent of which the seemingly sovereign subject is mere effect?

Returning, finally, to the question of totalizing irony posed by Howe at the outset of this section, we can newly appreciate the prescience of his complaint that “the sense of a They—whatever in the outer world imperils and destroys human life—is overwhelming; the sense of a We—whatever in ourselves can resist this enemy—is extremely faint.” Howe bemoans the novel’s lack of “some dramatic principle of contradiction, some force of resistance; in a word, a moral positive to serve literary ends.” But be misses the point in looking for a “we” when it is precisely that “we” which *The Secret Agent* works to unsettle. Howe is right that the novel destabilizes our sense of “they” and “we,” “us” and “them,” but he can only see this breakdown darkly, unable to grasp the possibility—the ontological openness—inherent in such a

---

296 Ibid., 96.
representational strategy. Taking us to the paradigmatic ontological limit of “humanity,” Conrad shows this border to be dynamically co-constituted with the material world, changeable and historical. Remembering Wollaege’s idea that the aesthetic form of *The Secret Agent* reflects “authorial efforts to master the audience,” it is my view that such a form does not to discipline its readers so much as to reveal the infrastructural forms on which even the media technology of the novel relies. It is Conrad’s commitment to locating an ethical narrative standpoint within the complexifying socio-technical forms of modern social life that characterizes his infrastructural modernism.297

Modern fiction relies on the spatialized sense of time and temporal simultaneity produced by Greenwich standardization. When jarring chronological shifts unexpectedly disrupt the novel’s stable chronicity, and the secure foundation of narrative standard time is pulled away, Conrad exposes the extent to which such chronicity is the assumed ground orienting our phenomenological experience of and assumptions about the text. If media theorists like Friedrich Kittler and Bernhard Siegert insist that the novel is one of society’s most powerful technologies for the domestication of the idea of the subject, then

---

297 It is this insistence on the material agency of infrastructure and other forms of mediation in the co-construction of subject and environment that differentiates my reading of infrastructural modernism from the Foucauldian emphasis on practices of social discipline encoded in nineteenth-century realist fiction influentially theorized by D.A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police*. Miller’s emphasis on the role of literary narrative in the active production of the modern liberal subject does bear a close affinity to my own reading of the constitutive role of media in the production of human agency in modernity. But whereas Miller is more interested in the processes of social discipline encoded into literary form, my reading instead emphasizes the ways that modernist texts process, theorize, and represent forms of mediation that both constrain and enable the agencies that we come to recognize as human. Miller, *The Novel and The Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
Conrad shows that the subject of novels is not the “whole human” of Bildung, but rather the organic outcome of certain infrastructure effects: standardization, municipal planning, novels. Like Ossipon walking the streets, the distinction between culture and media, person and thing, is often one of perspective. At the same time, Conrad can only present this infrastructural vision of the co-constructed relationship between human and world through forms of irony that are locked into categories of the individual human subject (ethical judgments and proclamations, the existential experiences of individual characters, the characterization of grotesque individual bodies). This inability to apprehend or to critique the modern world outside of the structuring perspective of the human is not an embarrassment for Conrad. Both the challenge and the promise of Conrad’s infrastructural modernism resides in the effort of his fictional form to find a perspective within human language and conceptual categories through which to critique the ontological permanence of seemingly stable distinctions between subject and object.

What a reading of The Secret Agent attuned to its infrastructural modernism demands is attention to the formal strategies through which the division of labor between what is and is not human—between subject and object—is processed and represented. In this chapter, I have sought to address this question through a reading of Conrad’s structural ironies, but the larger question remains: by what aesthetic concept or literary feature do texts negotiate the relationship between character and environment, subject and object? Contemporary media theory and philosophical materialisms have made this question timely, and expanding out of the more historicist use of the term in literary studies, this chapter has sought to expand the conceptual scope of “infrastructure” to
serve as a material and theoretical resource for conceptualizing this dynamic relation between subject and environment in modern literature: a way of representing and theorizing an increasingly mediated world. Infrastructural modernism allows us to conceptualize a world composed wholly neither of circulating objects and affects nor of intersubjective subjects impervious to the agency of objects and environment. Thus we can finally see the bizarre knitting machine that is the mechanistic, ironic plot-apparatus of The Secret Agent as an infrastructural aesthetic form with three vocations: (1.) To represent and critique institutions that produce social violence in capitalist modernity (2.) To register the manner in which those institutions, practices and technologies produce and circulate ontological distinctions through which “humanity” comes into focus (3.) To represent the division of labor between subject and object in a world multiply in flux.

Bringing this infrastructural humanism back to Howe’s reading of The Secret Agent, we can see that the novel’s utopian promise resides precisely in the breakdown of “them”

298 For an important example of this kind of historicist orientation to infrastructure in modernist studies, see Michael Rubenstein, Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). Rubenstein analyzes infrastructure through the heuristic of “public works”: public utilities that serve a common good outside of the capitalist motivation for profit, while still subtending the basic mechanisms and goals of capitalism (7). Rubenstein analyzes the particularly ambivalent status of infrastructure in the postcolonial state, focusing his analysis on the Irish state from 1922-1940, a period later than that of The Secret Agent. In contrast, I emphasize a less stable and codified apprehension of infrastructural mediation in an earlier moment in the history of media forms and technical systems. In this earlier moment before the conceptual disarticulation of what we have come to see as analytically-distinct kinds media objects (i.e., time standardization and newspapers), modernists like Conrad apprehended these infrastructural objects as sharing a new agency of mediation with a powerful role in the composition of modern social worlds and the production of human agency.
and “we”—but what we have to accept is that a changed world may entail an 
unrecognizable transformation of “us.”

To the car-window sociologist, to the man who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries,—to such men very often the whole trouble with the black field-hand may be summed up by Aunt Ophelia's word, “Shiftless!”[....]

So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of “swift” and “slow” in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

W.E.B. Du Bois: The Hesitations of Sociology

Over the past decade, historians of social thought have brought into focus W.E.B. Du Bois’ largely unrecognized role as “founder of American sociology.”299 Despite his structuring influence in shaping the trajectories of US sociology, however, Du Bois maintained an ever-shifting and ambivalent relationship to the academic institutionalization of modern social science. Du Bois worried that the disciplinary protocols of sociology were distorting the temporal horizon of human social life: compressing “the unravelling snarl of centuries” into “a few leisure hours,” domesticating

“the limits of human perfectability” to the Victorian timescale of liberal progress, cording the dynamism of social transformation into a static, typological grid. Nonetheless, despite his fluctuating relationship to the institutional academic apparatus, sociology provided a young Du Bois with his “first full self-reflexive formulation of a sense of vocation—as student and scholar in the pursuit of the human sciences…as they could be brought to bear on the study of the situation of the so-called Negro question.”

The nascent institutionalization of modern sociology energized Du Bois’ early career at the turn of the twentieth century, giving intellectual direction to his multi-faceted investigation of the symbolic, material, environmental and conceptual intractability of this so-called Negro question, the question of “how the category of the Negro qua Negro appeared on the stage of modern politics.” But into the twentieth century, Du Bois’ increasing frustration with and alienation from academic sociology informed his subsequent experiments in literary, historical, and autobiographical form in texts ranging from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to *Darkwater* (1920) and beyond. This chapter builds out of recent scholarly efforts to excavate Du Bois’ engagement with modern sociology not to cast him once again as lost architect of American sociology, but in order to show how Du Bois’ growing disaffection with academic sociology clarifies the intellectual motivations underpinning his literary experiments, offering a new interpretation of what Paul Gilroy has described as Du Bois’ “black literary

---

modernism.”

Excavating Du Bois’ efforts to think with, against, and through sociology explicates the intellectual stakes of Du Bois’ shift to literary experimentation at the turn of the century, revealing perhaps unexpected connections between Du Bois’ experimental sociological modernism and the wider aesthetic forms of infrastructural modernism.

As Nahum Dimitri Chandler has shown, “[a]cross the years of early 1898 through to the end of 1901,” Du Bois pursued a fastidious empirical-sociological research program, “constructing, distributing, and collating the results of numerous questionnaires and surveys on all aspects of the social life of this group; assuming responsibility for the organization of an annual conference in the ‘study of the Negro problems,’ …participating in…United States Census Bureau initiated studies of Negro American communities” at both the local and national level. Fresh off his doctoral research in sociology and economic history at Harvard and the University of Berlin, Du Bois maintained confidence regarding the relationship between empirical social research and ameliorative social reform. Upon accepting the directorship of the Atlanta Conferences in 1897, Du Bois “thought that pursuing the systematic study of social phenomena would enable both rational prediction and the deliberate modification of social action legitimated by a moral imperative.”

---

303 Chandler, introduction to *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, 19.
rational pursuit could reveal their elemental, structuring “truth”—the underlying laws governing human activity and behavior. For example, in a paper presented to the First Sociological Club at Atlanta University in 1897, “A Program for a Sociological Society,” Du Bois defines sociology as “that vast field of inquiry” which studies not “human action under all circumstances,” but rather “that human action which by its regularity gives evidence of the presence of laws.” These social laws refer to and authorize the conceptual horizon of “society,” the constitutive analytic unit of sociology and “simply a general name for the regularities of human action.” While sociology runs the risk of devolving into a “mass of partially digested facts,” Du Bois at this point was heavily invested in a scientific positivism that could yield “evidence of the working of scientific laws” in order to facilitate the realization of wider moral and political transformation.

Scholars like Morris, Judy, and Chandler have revealed the tremendous intellectual ambition animating the Atlanta Conferences, which Du Bois sought to organize as “as a hundred-year program of data gathering and analysis, divided into a series of ten decade-long studies in specified areas that coincided with developments in various disciplines of the human sciences.” Du Bois sought to collect epistemologically-distinct layers of empirical data that reflected the codifying organization of knowledge in the modern university—psychological, economic,

---

306 Ibid., 4.
307 Ibid., 3.
anthropological, and so on—in order to realize and facilitate the practical, socially transformative function of the university via the scientific analysis of racial discrimination and modern social environments. For Du Bois, then, “the question of the Negro’s social status in America was basically one of legitimate intellectual activity or method,” and this intellectual method was a powerful agent of transformative social change.309

Du Bois’ exhaustive, intensive brand of empirical sociology reached its apex with the publication of his magisterial *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). Hired by Susan Wharton of the Philadelphia Settlement Society in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania, Du Bois developed new empirical techniques to study the black population of the Seventh Ward at the turn of the century, undertaking extensive interviews with families, statistical surveys, archival research, and new kinds of ethnographic data-gathering techniques generated via participant observation.310 An explicit challenge to social Darwinist theories of black inferiority and racial essentialism, *The Philadelphia Negro* systemically develops structural and cultural frameworks to expose the role of discrimination and neglect in shaping the degraded social environments impoverishing Philadelphia’s black community, revealing “a silenced history of active indifference, deliberate deregulation, and a tactical passivity toward the material inequalities of capitalist expansion” that create a hazardous urban environment shaped by the

---

309 Ibid., 18.
differentiated distribution of disease, risk, and economic vulnerability.\textsuperscript{311} As Susan Mizruchi has shown, \textit{The Philadelphia Negro} undoes the “myth of Black morbidity” that functioned as “both the means to the containment of a Black labor force and a critical psychic measure, designed to feed the sacrificial appetites of an American capitalist culture.”\textsuperscript{312} Du Bois uncovers the interrelated forms of degradation that devalue and endanger black lives: a vicious capitalist cycle of discriminatory techniques and degraded environmental conditions that systemically entrench black pauperdom and expropriate black labor.

In a concluding “Final Word,” Du Bois circles back to reconsider his animating question—“What is the Negro problem?”—through the prism of nearly 400 pages of exhaustive empirical data.\textsuperscript{313} On the one hand, “Negro problems” are continuous with the familiar concerns of urban sociology, “the same difficulties over which the world has grown gray: the question as to how far human intelligence can be trusted and trained; as to whether we must always have the poor with us; as to whether it is possible for the mass of men to attain righteousness on earth” (\textit{PN} 385). But as Du Bois pursues these questions, his sociological investigation founders on the more basic, preliminary question of the \textit{subject} of sociology:

\begin{quote}
\indent \footnotesize
\end{quote}
Sociology, Du Bois recognizes, is subsumable into the wider question of “Humanity.” Is humanity a species-referent or something more narrow? Du Bois here apprehends that the category of “Man,” the liberal-humanist subject, mediates and authorizes which human beings are granted full access to “Humanity” in his late-nineteenth-century social context. War, technology, commerce and infrastructure have intensified human social connection—“the world has glided by blood and iron into a wider humanity”—but “still this widening of the idea of common Humanity is of slow growth and to-day but dimly realized” (PN 386). Rather than a set of social problems that empirical-sociological method can identify and reform, the “Negro problem” instead marks the conceptual-historical limit of this “wider humanity,” the inhuman residue of the human:

“Nineteenth-century Humanity,” Du Bois insists finally, is “the Negro problem.” And the problem with sociology is that its elemental analytic unit—“society”—is shaped by a liberal-humanist model of the Human-as-Man, as autonomous subject, from which black lives are willfully excluded, as the preceding 400 pages of social data undoubtedly affirm. What, then, is the function of sociology? Can it do anything but frame and entrench this wider conceptual impasse? In 1899, at the completion of a years-long
project of intensive sociological research, Du Bois is not yet able to reimagine or reframe this evident contradiction. Instead, the conclusion of The Philadelphia Negro suggests that the limits of late-nineteenth-century sociology merely trace the limits of a wider glitch in late-nineteenth-century “humanity.” What is needed, Du Bois asserts, is a wider “battle for humanity and human culture”:

[T]he battle involves more than a mere altruistic interest in an alien people. It is a battle for humanity and human culture. If in the hey-dey of the greatest of the world's civilizations, it is possible for one people ruthlessly to steal another, drag them helpless across the water, enslave them, debauch them, and then slowly murder them by economic and social exclusion until they disappear from the face of the earth if the consummation of such a crime be possible in the twentieth century, then our civilization is vain and the republic is a mockery and a farce. (PN 388)

However laudable its reformist desire or meticulous its methods, sociology is finally, it seems, complicit in—rather than critical of—a wider social logic deadly to black life. Du Bois here seems to anticipate Sylvia Wynter’s more recent theorization of “the sociogenic principle,” the framework that names and conceptually organizes what is and is not contained within the category of the human within a given culture or historical condition—the conceptual structures that fix and frame the human.314 For Du Bois’ “nineteenth-century Humanity,” this sociogenic principle refers to a liberal-humanist subject—“Man”—whose autonomous selfhood conceptually delimits whatever universality a so-called democratic “society” might claim at the dawn of the twentieth

---

century. At the conclusion of *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois does not suggest concrete strategies for social reform so much as begin to theorize a volatile but structuring relationship between *race* and *the human*: “nineteenth-century Humanity” not only *generates*, but *is constituted through* processes of racialization that hierarchize human beings into humans and nonhumans. While Du Bois is here unable or unwilling to reimagine a positive alternative to the liberal individual, a new research question glimmers in the margins: what different models of the human—sociogenic principles, we might say—are thinkable if we displace the conceptual centrality of the liberal self? Can we de-ontologize “nineteenth-century Humanity” and imagine a more inclusive, just, or livable modality of the human? And, finally, what is the proper disciplinary discourse, aesthetic form, or mode of address in which to think, theorize, and communicate these new sociogenic principles? For as Du Bois powerfully demonstrates in *The Philadelphia Negro*, neither empirical facticity nor liberal sympathy can penetrate the negligent indifference of the United States to black wellbeing:

> Other centuries looking back upon the culture of the nineteenth would have a right to suppose that if, in a land of freemen, eight millions of human beings were found to be dying of disease, the nation would cry with one voice, “Heal them!” If they were staggering on in ignorance, it would cry, “Train them!” If they were harming themselves and others by crime, it would cry, “Guide them!” And such cries are heard and have been heard in the land; but it was not one voice and its volume has been ever broken by counter-cries and echoes, “Let them die!” “Train them like slaves!” “Let them stagger downward!” (*PN* 387)

Du Bois here seems to anticipate Michel Foucault’s theorization of biopolitics as the power of the European state to “make live and let die.”

---

collected in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault argues that health and the disciplinary regulation of the physical body came to constitute a distinct modality of nonsovereign power in the nineteenth century. This biological management of the population increasingly defines the exercise of modern state power, which manifests as a kind of “State racism” that the state directs against itself. Achille Mbembe has more recently extended this Foucauldian politics of “letting die” to theorize a “necropolitics” distinctive to colonialism and repressive racial orders, a “generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” which continues to “constitute the nomos of the political space in which we still live.”

To what extent, then, does Du Bois in fact anticipate biopolitics or presage the conceptual lack that Foucault later fills? Rather than cast Du Bois as vague harbinger of Foucault’s theoretical elaboration, I want here to present a more dynamic, mutually illuminating relationship between Du Bois and Foucault. As we will see, Foucault clarifies the historical tensions and transformations that Du Bois’ experimental social theory mediates, while Du Bois’ infrastructural modernism suggests limitations inherent to Foucault’s biopolitical model of modern state power.

In the *Society* lectures, Foucault describes the emergence of a new type of disciplinary power that comes to overtake “the field delineated by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State” in the nineteenth century. This disciplinary power, Foucault insists, holds “modern” society together—it is this “tight grid of disciplinary

---

317 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 34.
coercions that actually guarantees the cohesion of the social body.”

Disciplinary power authorizes not a rule of law, but a *rule of the norm*—a “code of normalization” that “refer[s] to a theoretical horizon that is not the edifice of law, but the field of the human sciences.”

Disciplinary power, then, actualizes both the discourse of sociology *and* its referent—both the human sciences and the “normalizing society” subject to its academic-disciplinary gaze. This “code of normalization” deepens a binary structure that runs through society, codifying a discourse of race struggle, which over the course of the nineteenth century becomes the discourse of power itself: “a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage.”

The historical precondition of biopower, then, is the disarticulation of an autonomous “society” from the sovereign political unit of the nation-state. Foucault, then, provides an important theoretical frame for understanding the historical co-emergence of technological social extension and the modern social sciences that this dissertation has traced across the infrastructure era. Foucault argues that from the late-nineteenth-century into the present, the nation-state exerts political agency by weaponizing the biological purity of a now-autonomous “society” against its citizens: “It is no longer: ‘We have to defined ourselves against society,’ but ‘We have to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counterrace that we are,

---

318 Ibid., 37.
319 Ibid., 38.
320 Ibid., 39
321 Ibid., 61.
despite ourselves, bringing into existence.”

Racism thus emerges as a technology deployed by the state permitting the exercise of biopower—that which “make[s] possible the murderous functions of the state.” Foucault calls this political agency of social bifurcation “State racism”: “a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products….the internal racism of permanent purification, and…one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.”

Foucault’s lectures help to explicate two key issues underlying Du Bois’ growing distrust of the positivist empirical sociology of his doctoral training—his waver ing confidence in his professional vocation as sociologist-cum-social reformer expressed in the conclusion to *The Philadelphia Negro*:

(1.) The political entanglement of “society” and the nation-state. What is the proper political referent or conceptual horizon to contest systematic racial oppression if the political agency of the *nation* only emerges via the weaponization of a more dispersed *society*? Can close attention to the lower wards of Philadelphia capture within its conceptual-geographic-temporal frame the root mechanisms or social agencies that *explicate* the degraded social environments that such a sociology *chronicles*?

(2.) The entanglement of biopower and the human sciences, particularly sociology. Foucault’s lectures theorize more concretely Du Bois’ growing suspicion at the turn of the twentieth century that the conceptual frame of “society” was implicated in the very dehumanizing oppression that he sought to contest. The question that emerges of

---

322 Ibid., 61-2.
course is how, then, to contest? We will see that for Du Bois, a reinvigorated and politically transformative sociology needs to displace and provincialize liberal-humanist “society” itself, in search of a different sociogenic principle of the human and an alternative political mediation of collectivity.\(^3\) What, then, does this reimagined sociology look like?

Du Bois seeks to address these questions in the experimental literary-sociology of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), whose opening lines capture and convert these Foucauldian tensions into its central, animating argument:

> Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.\(^4\)

Du Bois reframes “the Negro problem” of *The Philadelphia Negro* into “the problem of the color line,” shifting his conceptual frame of reference from the racialized subject to the wider sociopolitical relationships that constitute that subject as such. Despite the

\(^3\) We will thus come to see the perhaps unexpected connection between Du Bois’ turn-of-the-century experimental sociology and Latour’s critique of the “sociology of the social.” Like Du Bois, Latour describes the politically-conservative humanism of nineteenth-century liberal-humanist models of “society”: “To put it broadly, society, this 19th century invention, is an odd transitional figure mixing up the Leviathan of the 18th century and the collective of the 21st. By asking society to do two jobs at once, that is, to make the collective traceable and to play the role of a substitute for politics, it has never been able to do either of them properly” (161-62). To contest the political limitations of “society,” we have to rethink the conceptual paradigms by which we apprehend collectivity: “[T]he social, as usually defined, is but a moment in the long history of assemblages, suspended between the search for the body politic and the exploration of the collective” (247). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2005.

historical continuities that link the oppression of African Americans at the turn of the century to longer histories of racial domination, Du Bois emphasizes the specificity of the Twentieth Century. What distinguishes the Twentieth Century is the Foucauldian-infrastructural disarticulation of “society” and “nation”—dispersing the political agency of racial domination into the color-line. The “problem of the color-line” challenges Du Bois’ readers to recognize the relationship between national and transnational vectors of social violence, mediations of political agency, and aggregates of collective solidarity.

The local racism that *The Philadelphia Negro* chronicles—brutalizing and pauperizing black communities in Philadelphia’s lower wards—is reframed as one instantiation of a wider global conflict.

First published in 1903 when Du Bois was 35 and still on faculty at Atlanta University, *The Souls of Black Folk* is a reframed and carefully composed collection of old and new writing. Five original pieces and an introductory “Forethought” frame nine previously-published (and slightly rewritten) essays. The chapters address a wide-ranging array of topics, perspectives, and experiences: post-Civil War race relations; the state of black education in the South; intensive sociological and economic analysis of Reconstruction-era policy; spirited polemic; short literary fiction; and autobiographical introspection, including an elegiac account of the death of Du Bois’ son. The individual essays comprising *Souls*, then, concatenate into a composite generic form blending history, sociology, eulogy, autobiography, economics, lyric poetry, cultural criticism, literary fiction and ethnographic anthropology. As we will come to see, this generic synthesis formally encodes and cues the reader to the kind of perspectival mobility and
conceptual flexibility that reimagining the conceptual referent of sociology—that reimagining “society”—requires.

Du Bois opens *Souls* by retraining the empirical-sociological gaze of *The Philadelphia Negro* upon himself. The opening paragraph of *Souls* reframes the alienation between self and world that this dissertation has traced across modernism—from the epistemic rift of the alienated consciousness described by Lukács to a praxis of domination subtending white supremacy:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.327 (SB 3-4)

This opening paragraph directs the reader’s attention not to the alienated subject, but rather to alienation itself—to the space of between-ness separating the self from its estranged world. The perspectival shift from the empirical sociology of *The Philadelphia Negro* is announced at the outset: “the Negro problem” is no longer a series of social issues to be investigated by the sociologist but is now experienced by the sociologist, who experiences himself as problem. Alienation is thus not only symptom, but also

evidence and investigative tool. Du Bois elaborates on the distinctiveness of this manner of alienation of self and world:

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (SB 4)

More than epistemic rift or Lukacsean meaning-loss, Du Bois’ image of the veil gives positive form to the alienation of the racialized subject. Du Bois’ schoolboy anecdote emphasizes the difference between the veil and capitalist alienation: the young Du Bois first recognizes himself as a racialized subject after his exclusion from the mechanisms of proto-capitalist trading-card-exchange that constitute the social world of the schoolhouse. The coherence of this society-in-miniature attains its conceptual coherence in Du Bois’ exclusion—its nineteenth-century sense of “humanity” predicated on the exclusion of its less-than-human other. This positive, thinkable, representable alienation of the veil affords Du Bois a literally mediating perspective on the relationship between self and environment—“between me and the other world.” And this perspective from the middle-space between self and world allows Du Bois to draw attention to (so as to one day transform) the very distinctions—nature/society, human/nonhuman—that racializing processes entrench and encode.
It is this perspective-shift from outside to inside the “Negro problem” that allows to Du Bois to reframe racial domination from empirically-observable phenomenon to a dynamic, dispersed, and highly mediated assemblage of relationships and pressures that adjudicate the category of “the human.” It is in this sense that we should recognize the Du Bois of Souls as an early theorist of what Alexander Weheliye has termed “racializing assemblages”: “ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west.”328 If modern sociology is one of those discourses, practices, infrastructures, and/or sciences that contribute to the exclusion of the nonwhite subject from the category of the human, as both Du Bois and Foucault suggest, then what is the proper conceptual framework, disciplinary discourse, or aesthetic form with which to represent and to contest the status quo of racial domination?

In Souls, Du Bois decenters the structuring sociogenic principle of liberal humanism through what Chandler describes as a “two-fold epistemological frame, in which the Negro people would be studied in terms of their environment, especially the “social” environment, an order that I call systemic and in terms of their internal development, an order that I call experiential.”329 Chandler schematizes this two-fold epistemology across Du Bois’ two major turn-of-the-century texts: the “systemic”

328 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 3.
sociology of *The Philadelphia Negro* and the “experiential” literary form of *The Souls of Black Folk*. While I agree with Chandler that Du Bois destabilizes the singular humanist frame of the human sciences in order to reckon with and convey “the excessiveness of the lives of Negroes to traditional ontology” at the turn of the twentieth century, I think we can destabilize his literary-historical framework and recognize the immanent dynamism of this “two-fold epistemological frame” *within* the representational logic of *Souls*.\(^\text{330}\)

Despite its multigeneric, literary-experimental form, *Souls* does not eliminate so much as reframe the environmental-empirical sociology of *The Philadelphia Negro*. *Souls* recontextualizes these modes of economic analysis, sociological fieldwork, historical analysis, and statistical description with varying modes of literary description: the sorrow songs, lyric poetry, short narrative fiction, autobiography and the travelogue. Often within a single paragraph Du Bois combines numeric empirical fieldwork—“Over eighty-eight per cent of them—men, women, and children—are farmers”—with lyrical and poetic appeals to the reader: “and yet it loves and hates, it toils and tires, it laughs and weeps its bitter tears, and looks in vague and awful longing at the grim horizon of its life,—all this, even as you and I” (*SB* 109, 108). Du Bois interpellates both himself and his reader via the first and second person—the self-evident selfhood of both reader and author quietly testifying to the laborer’s lack, a sort of literary-figural measuring stick of the full personhood denied the agricultural class of the Jim Crow South. Du Bois does not linger in poetic appeal or willfully solicit the reader’s sympathy, but rather continually recontextualizes the experiential-personal in terms of the systemic-environmental. Du

\(^\text{330}\) Ibid., 84
Bois pivots between these modes—the “environmental” and “personal”—in order to generate the seemingly paradoxical effect of “intimate contact with the masses”—the recognition that “each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul” (SB 103, 108). What Du Bois hopes to convey throughout Souls are the environmental conditions that structure and authorize the emergence of liberal-humanist selfhood as such. Du Bois seeks representational form for the liberal-humanist sociogenic principle-in-action—the racializing assemblages that adjudicate the humanity or inhumanity of the racialized subject. This goal—to represent the environmental factors that condition the emergence both of literary subjectivity and socially-recognized personhood—leads Du Bois to develop a composite generic structure and “two-fold epistemological frame” that give new sociological-literary form to the character-environment complex of infrastructural modernism.

Chandler is certainly right that we can schematically map this “two-fold epistemological frame” onto Du Bois’ turn-of-the-century transition from the systemic-environmental sociology of The Philadelphia Negro to the literary-experiential semi-autobiography of The Souls of Black Folk. But the limitation of this historical model is that it leaves these two axes (systemic/environmental and experiential) unresolved and separate within Du Bois’ sociological method—never quite addressing the intellectual-imaginative task posed by the conclusion of The Philadelphia Negro: a genuinely transformative sociological method not shaped by a liberal-humanist sociogenic principle, not beholden to the autonomous self as measure of humanity. Souls develops a literary-sociological form that tries to break free from this sociological frame, but the
question still remains: How do these insights regarding the embeddedness of sociological discourse within bourgeois models of the human-qua-subject transform the very discipline of sociology? To what extent is it possible to reimagine the disciplinary protocols and conceptual framework of modern sociology through the representational project of Souls—that transcends the conceptual limitations and brutal inhumanity embedded in “nineteenth-century Humanity”?

***

In October 1904 Du Bois attended the Congress of Arts and Sciences in St. Louis, an intellectual conference convened in conjunction with the 1904 World’s Fair. While Du Bois was not invited to present his own research at the conference, he did meet with Max Weber (agreeing to contribute to a German journal of which Weber had recently become editor). The cumulative impact of the conference—the meeting with Weber, the work that was presented, and his own inability to participate—had a strong impact on Du Bois, and in the aftermath he composed “Sociology Hesitant,” a short, polemical reflection on the epistemological contradictions and theoretical possibilities latent in modern sociology. The essay, unpublished in Du Bois’ lifetime, was thought to be lost for decades and was only rediscovered in the Du Bois archive at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the past 20 years. In his introduction to the essay, Chandler notes its singularity within Du Bois’ wider archive—“no other text in Du Bois’ vast

---


242
production…addresses itself to this order of metatheoretical reflection and claim.” One of the first texts written by Du Bois after the publication of Souls, “Sociology Hesitant” clarifies the intellectual terms of Du Bois’ shifting relationship to academic social science and helps to explicate the epistemological, theoretical, and representational stakes underpinning Du Bois’ turn to experimental literary-sociological form. A crucial task both for Du Bois scholarship and modernist studies is to uncover and unpack how the epistemological-conceptual upheaval outlined in this essay informs the representational strategies and modernist aesthetic forms that Du Bois develops in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The essay begins with an assertion of sociology’s widening epistemological confusion: “The Congress of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis last summer served to emphasize painfully the present plight of Sociology.” More than methodological disagreement, Du Bois has grown increasingly “conscious of a fundamental confusion of thought at the very foundations of our science” (SH 271). Sociology, Du Bois insists, has confounded two distinct objects of study: human activity in its material concretion and social patterning and laws, “the lines of rhythm that coordinate certain of these actions.” (SH 272). Du Bois traces the titular “hesitation” to the originary nineteenth-century architects of academic sociology, who were “strangely hesitant as to the real elements of

---

332 Chandler, introduction to *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, 17.
Society which must some time be studied—were they men or cells or atoms or something subtler than any of these?” (SH 272). What Du Bois contests is that positivist sociology has taken the “abstraction” of “Society” as its governing unit of study, rather than the real unit of “Human Action,” the individual in its relational matrix (SH 272). Sociology has become the domain of “metaphysical wanderings—studying not the Things themselves but the mystical whole which it was argued bravely they did form because they logically must” (SH 273). Positivism indexes for Du Bois a failure of mind and method to apprehend the world in its material concretion. Rather than get closer to “Things themselves,” positivist concepts and sociological abstraction only solipsistically describe themselves. Modern sociology does not describe “Human Action” or the relationship of human beings to their material environment so much as describe the measurement protocols of scientific reason—these sociologists can “only limn a shadowy outline of the meaning and rhythm of human deed to be filled in when scientific measurement and deeper study [come] to the rescue” (SH 273). If sociologists have confounded “Things” with “Thoughts of Things” and “the real element of Society” with “the genesis of our social ideas,” then what accounts for sociology’s ongoing “hesitation”? Why is this real element of society so difficult to apprehend? Sociology founders, Du Bois insists, “on the constitutive element of the “incalculable” that distinguishes human activity from other kinds of relationality and that exceeds the “rule and rhythm” of deterministic, structural social law (SH 274). Du Bois describes a constitutive paradox at the heart of modern sociology:

And yet how much so even the formulation of such a science seemed unthinkable, just as insistently came the call for scientific knowledge of men. The new
Humanism of the 19th century was burning with new interest in human deeds; Law, Religion, Education—all call men to study of that singular unit of highest interest—the Individual Man. A Categorical Imperative pushed through all thought toward the Paradox:

1. The evident rhythm of human action.
2. The evident incalculability of human action. (SH 275)

Du Bois describes the paradoxical conceptual framework of a nineteenth-century humanism that simultaneously asserts the incomparable value and higher mysteries of individual experience while pursuing a positivist scientific account of human activity and behavior. What sociology requires, Du Bois insists, is a framework that can apprehend the distinctiveness of “human will” without displacing human activity from its social context and material environment:

If this is a world of absolute unchanging physical laws, then the laws of physics and chemistry are the laws of all action of stones and stars, and Newtons and Nortons. On the other hand, for a thousand and a thousand years, and today as strongly as, and even more strongly than, ever, men, after experiencing the facts of life, have almost universally assumed that in among physical forces stalk self-directing Wills, which modify, restrain, and redirect the ordinary laws of nature. The assumption is tremendous in its import. It means that from the point of view of Science this is a world of Chance as well as Law; that the conservation of energy and correlation of forces are not universally true, but that out of some unknown Nowhere burst miraculously now and then controlling Energy. So utterly inexplicable are the facts thus assumed that they are seldom flatly and plainly stated. Protagonists of “free” will are found to be horrified deniers of “Chance.” And strenuous defenders of orthodox science are found talking as though the destinies of this universe lay largely in undetermined human action—indeed they could not avoid such talk and continue talking. (SH 275-76)

This passage on first glance appears to reproduce the nineteenth-century humanism that Du Bois supposedly contests: projecting “self-directing Wills, which modify, restrain, and redirect the ordinary laws of nature.” But Du Bois contains this individualistic element of human activity within a wider heuristic of “Chance” that recontextualizes the
“incalculable” element of human agency within the wider forces of nature: a miraculous
burst of “Energy” coplanar with “the laws of physics and chemistry…the laws of all
action of stones and stars, and Newtons and Nortons.” Chance, then, is prior to Law: it
both decenters humanist reason and displaces the self-describing measurement tools of
sociological positivism. As Ronald Judy lucidly glosses, Du Bois here struggles in an
uncertain way for a “language with which to articulate the enactment of an intelligence
that exceeds the limits of reason but does not diminish or enthrall human thinking. This is
an intelligence that is heterogeneous to that of the human—it is about the human but not
of the human.”334 In order to fulfill its vocation as an authentic science of the social, what
sociology requires is to develop a new conceptual framework that transcends the
paradoxical obfuscations of liberal-humanist “society” and that coordinates the domains
of sociology and physics:

What then is the future path open before Sociology? It must seek a working
hypothesis which will include Sociology and physics. To do this it must be
 provisionally assumed that this is a world of Law and Chance. That in time and
space, Law covers the major part of the universe but that in significance the area
left in that world to Change is of tremendous import….We would no longer have
two separate realms of knowledge, speaking a mutually unintelligible language,
but one realm and in it physical science studying the manifestation of force and
natural law, and the other, sociology, assuming the data of physics and studying
within these that realm where determinate force is acted on by human wills, by
indeterminate force. (SH 277-78)

Du Bois’ privileged heuristic of “Chance” reframes the Lukacsean historical model of
lost transcendence (a prior fullness of meaning fragmented and dispersed by the
alienating agency of modern social relations): “Instead of regarding the phenomena of
social dissolution as the effects of the loss of an antecedent homogeneity—one that by
definition and circumstance necessarily excluded the Negro—Du Bois takes as his point
of departure the immanent circumstance of disjunction, or fundamental incongruity of
heterogeneous processes” (34).
Du Bois seeks a social metaphysics that is also a metaphysics of inorganic “nature”—that can apprehend the distinctiveness of human activity and its incalculable agency within the same conceptual frame as physical science and natural law. Thus, repairing the constitutive paradox at the heart of humanism transforms the very organization of knowledge: a “reconciliation of the two great wings of Science…which will give scope to historian as well as biologist” (SH 278). Finally, then, Du Bois insists that we approach sociology not in search of the structural laws of “Society,” but rather in search of the incalculable agency that might transform it: “Sociology then, is the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct” (SH 278).

What ultimately inhibits sociologists’ ability to measure Chance is “the new Humanism of the 19th century” that scales and measures the world to “the Individual Man.” This human-scaled individualism produces “a philosophy of history with modest and mundane ends, rather than eternal, teleological purpose”—that cannot conceptualize, image, or project a meaningfully transformed relationship among humans and their wider world (SH 273). For Du Bois, to reimagine sociology is to redistribute the epistemological division of labor between historian and biologist—to extend the timescale of historical analysis beyond the imaginative horizon and embodied lifespan of the liberal subject. But what are the politics of this sociological-conceptual upheaval, and what are its literary forms? How can a social theorist like Du Bois actualize or communicate these new conceptual frameworks to readers and the wider world? Du Bois recognized that the dominant discourse of liberal protest fiction and antiracist polemic relied on intersubjective sympathy for this kind of representational-communications
technology. The representational challenge posed by both “Sociology Hesitant” and *The Souls of Black Folk* is that both texts problematize and renounce nineteenth-century models of liberal-humanist sympathy as valid tools to contest racial oppression. As we have seen, Du Bois (like Foucault) believed that the nineteenth century marked a watershed historical moment via the global-technological emergence of an autonomous “society” and the complementary conception of the “self”:

The nineteenth century was the first century of human sympathy,—the age when half wonderingly we began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself; when clodhoppers and peasants, and tramps and thieves, and millionaires and-sometimes-Negroes, became throbbing souls whose warm pulsing life touched us so nearly that we half gasped with surprise, crying, “Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of hopelessness? Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?” And then all helplessly we peered into those Other worlds, and wailed, “O World of Worlds how shall man make you one? (SB 164)

The sympathetic reconciliation of selves and society promises an unprecedented democratic potential that is ultimately deformed by white supremacy. The mutual recognition of selfhood is denied to the racialized subject who can only “helplessly” peer into “those Other worlds” and ask how to be made “man.” The problem with sympathy is that—like sociology—it is coterminous with the liberal-humanist sociogenic principle. What both *Souls* and “Sociology Hesitant” seek to describe is an alternative model of the human—and of freedom—not rooted in the mutual recognition of selfhood as a basis for twentieth-century politics, literary form, and social theory. We can return, finally, to the passage with which this chapter opens:

To the car-window sociologist, to the man who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries,—to such men very often the whole trouble with the black field-hand may be summed up by Aunt Ophelia's word, “Shiftless!” They have noted
repeatedly scenes like one I saw last summer. We were riding along the highroad to town at the close of a long hot day. A couple of young black fellows passed us in a mule-team, with several bushels of loose corn in the ear....As we passed we noticed an ear of corn fall from the wagon. They never saw it,—not they. A rod farther on we noted another ear on the ground; and between that creeping mule and town we counted twenty-six ears of corn. Shiftless? Yes, the personification of shiftlessness. And yet follow those boys: they are not lazy; to-morrow morning they’ll be up with the sun; they work hard when they do work, and they work willingly. (SB 116)

Du Bois here figures an uncertain relationship to sympathy. The invocation of Stowe’s Aunt Ophelia summons the intersubjective sympathy of liberal protest fiction. But the politics of liberal pity can only be weaponized against these black laborers. Mirroring the racist abolitionist Ophelia, the mutuality of sympathetic recognition is blocked; the narrative politics of spectacular melodrama or emotional cathartic connectivity is impossible. Du Bois neither bemoans the observers’ lack of sympathy nor asks for more. In a reading of this passage, Molly Hiro argues that Du Bois seeks to summon a form of readerly sympathy that can communicate the feeling of … multilayered oppression.”

Hiro suggests that “we might imagine Souls as a kind of sociology of cross-racial sympathy….a reflection of [Du Bois’] conviction that emotions, too, ought to be conceived as among the data that sociology should interrogate.” But I would argue that Du Bois’ target here is sociology itself, or at least the car-window sociology of positivist social typification: a model of sociology that gains disciplinary authority by transforming social observations on par with Ophelia’s facile racial typecasting, quietly converting white supremacy into epistemological objectivity. This kind of car-window sociology—

---

336 Ibid.
shaped by the sociogenic principle of liberal personhood ventriloquized by Stowe—converts what is essentially racist surveillance into a scientifically acceptable intellectual activity while establishing the sociological onlooker as safely insulated from the “other world” that it observes.

Another way of framing this argument is to suggest, contra Hiro and many other readers of this passage, that Du Bois is not trying to solicit sympathy but rather giving form to what Simone Browne has more recently termed “racializing surveillance”: “a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race.” At the turn of the twentieth century, we can, I believe, sense Du Bois recognizing sociology as a form of social control coplanar with more overt enactments of racializing surveillance that “rely on … techniques in order to reify boundaries along racial lines, and, in so doing, [reify] race.” In this way, the Du Bois of Souls and “Sociology Hesitant” seeks to devise new methodological protocols that excavate “the sedimented synchronic and diachronic relationality of the Negro,” replacing “the Negro” as biological given with the conceptual, infrastructural and political vectors of racialization that constitute the raced subject as such. Du Bois de-ontologizes “the Negro” from social Darwinist fact to the relational “conglomerate effect” of Weheliye’s racializing assemblages and Browne’s racializing surveillance, of which we should recognize Du Bois as an early theorist.

---

338 Ibid., 17.
339 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 20.
340 Ibid.
Like Du Bois, both Weheliye’s racializing assemblages and Browne’s racializing surveillance theorize race as *relational* and *infrastructural* (in the wider sense of “infrastructure” that this dissertation has developed, referring both to material technology and symbolic conceptual structures).

Du Bois thus displaces the self-and-society model that conceptually structures both liberal-humanist sympathy and empirical sociology in order to redirect his sociological gaze to the *processes of racialization* that mediate the relationship between self and world, reframing race not as reified essence or type but rather a complex process of social differentiation projected on the human body. To reframe sociology through biology, as Du Bois suggests in “Sociology Hesitant,” is to theorize the primacy of racialization in the adjudication of personhood and to contest a Foucauldian biopolitics that imagines “an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization.”

As Weheliye insists: “There can be no absolute biological substance, because in the history of modernity this field always already appears in the form of racializing assemblages.”

But if Du Bois de-reifies “the Negro” into the assemblage of sociopolitical forces that allocate human beings into the “human” and “less-than-human,” then blackness is not essence but *sign*. Blackness—“never closed and always under contestation”—signifies an ever-shifting assemblage of power structures that adjudicate and hierarchize the human. Du Bois gives form to a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” in which the racialized

---

341 Ibid, 4.
342 Ibid., 65.
body signifies the inhuman remainder of “nineteenth century Humanity,” of “Man,” of the liberal-humanist sociogenic principle, of white supremacy. 344

Finally, then, we can see that what Du Bois dramatizes in Souls and theorizes in “Sociology Hesitant” is the ongoing and dynamic relationship between biology and infrastructure in shaping both the signifying power and the matter of the body. Defying the racial determinism of social Darwinism and car-window sociology, Du Bois’ social metaphysics of Chance recombines biology and history in order to draw on the evolutionary temporality and transformability of the de-individuated body—the body apprehended in evolutionary time. Can the epistemological recombination of biology and sociology—of “nature” and “society”—displace the liberal subject and project a new mediation of collectivity, a new conception of freedom? In his essay “Evolution of the Race Problem” (1909), Du Bois contends:

What the age of Darwin has done is to add to the eighteenth century idea of individual worth the complementary idea of physical immortality of the human race. And this, far from annulling or contracting the idea of human freedom, rather emphasizes its necessity and eternal possibility—the boundlessness and endlessness of possible human achievement. Freedom has come to mean not individual caprice or aberration but social self-realization in an endless chain of selves[]. 345

Du Bois seeks a new kind of political subject: not the autonomous self of “individual caprice,” but rather the collective and generational “endlessness of possible human achievement.” Darwin opens the human to its “physical immortality”—to an evolutionary


252
temporality than exceeds the measure of the individual subject. As Kyla Schuller has argued, Du Bois’ turn to biology “embedded African Americans in time, overturning one of the key registers of antiblackness that suspends bodies in eternal and unchanging flesh.”

Returning to this chapter’s second epigraph, this evolutionary horizon of future transformability is the real “meaning of progress” that corrects the woeful organization of sociological knowledge scaled to the self. Du Bois thus develops a sociology not of unchanging Law but of Chance—the element of human plasticity and latent social transformability that culture, science, and technology can activate and engage. As Schuller has shown in her discussion of Du Bois and nineteenth-century impressibility discourse, “Du Bois’ notion of culture is itself a legacy of impressibility, a framework in which culture becomes somatic over time.”

If Schuller, Weheliye and Browne each invite us to think of Du Bois as precursor and early theorist of assemblage theory, in which the body materializes and race signifies the compound interplay between soma and environment, then how do those insights guide us to rethink the social function of literature?

Du Bois’ social metaphysics of chance—of somatic impressibility and social transformability—transfigures the function of literature from a technology of liberal sympathy to an agent of mediation—to a media technology that seeks to overturn the liberal-humanist sociogenic principle that disciplines bodies into “nature” and “society,” human and nonhuman. The concluding “Afterthought” of The Souls of Black Folk is a

---

347 Ibid., 189.
prayer that transfigures both book and world into a mutually transformative nature that reaps a socially transformative harvest:

Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed The End. (SB 200)

Du Bois prays that his literary sociology persists into the Darwinian social time described above—that his cultural text can interact with and shape the “physical immortality of the human race.” Punning “leaves” mediate culture and biology—whose epistemological entanglement signals the realization of “human brotherhood” in some future-to-come.

Unlike The Philadelphia Negro, Souls concludes not stalled in the paradoxical inhumanity of liberal humanism but rather in a future-oriented appeal for a conceptual upheaval that can dissolve and reimagine the sociogenic principle of “nineteenth century Humanity.” The conceptual, representational, and generic flexibility of literary form affords Du Bois the aesthetic tools to theorize the imaginative conditions of genuine social transformation that he can only subsequently codify in the sociological discourse of “Sociology Hesitant.” We need to recognize Du Bois’ experimental literary sociology, then, as another instance of infrastructural modernism—as a modernism that understands itself as media, with a vocation to represent and reimagine the relationship between nature and society. The question that remains, then, is does there exist a mode of freedom in the present not reducible to liberal-humanist recognition, or the laws of the liberal state, but that entails a form of emancipation from those very sociogenic modalities of the
human? It is this desire to imagine and to represent and a positive alternative to the liberal-humanist political imaginary that connects the sociology of Du Bois to the fiction of Charles Chesnutt, who adapts a Du Boisian critique of nineteenth-century sympathy to the form of the realist novel.

Charles Chesnutt: The Infrastructural Character of Law

Any interpretation of the political meaning of the term people ought to start from the peculiar fact that in modern European languages this term always indicates also the poor, the underprivileged, and the excluded. The same term names the constitutive political subject as well as the class that is excluded—de facto if not de jure—from politics.

What is the relationship between the law and the people who comprise its subjects? Giorgio Agamben has challenged the false universalism projected by the democratic concept of “the people,” highlighting a fundamental aporia at the heart of both the term and the politics of popular sovereignty that it legitimates. What interests Agamben is not simply the suggestively overdetermined resonance of “the people,” but more so what its doubled referent—both “the constitutive political subject” and “the class that is excluded”—reveals about the operations of sovereignty in democratic politics. For Agamben, the concept of “the people” both obscures and sustains “the fundamental biopolitical fracture” at the heart of modern democracy. Agamben theorizes these two competing referents of “the people” in terms of part and whole: “It is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a part as well as what cannot belong to the whole in

---

which it is always already included.”

The evidently totalizing and inclusive “whole” of “the people” is revealed to be partial, to be constituted through a fundamental exclusion—an exclusion that “cannot belong” but that is nevertheless “always already included.”

Democracy is only the most contemporary form of sovereignty in a long—mostly unchanging—history of sovereign power, dating back to ancient Rome. For Agamben, the inability to recognize the persistent and foundational operation of sovereign power through the creation of bare life accounts for the lack of genuinely transformative political change: “Only a politics that has been able to come to terms with the fundamental biopolitical split of the West will be able to arrest this oscillation and put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and cities of the Earth.”

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the manner in which Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) both registers and rethinks the “the fundamental biopolitical fracture” that Agamben describes. Chesnutt perceives the fundamentally racial line on which the splintering force of the biopolitical fracture is drawn in the turn-of-the-century American South and registers how that fracture is both reinforced and reflected through a liberal-humanist political imaginary. While Chesnutt’s novel imagines and wishes that a different configuration of those political and legal forms could undo the violence of the Jim Crow South, *The Marrow of Tradition* suggests that a more fundamental transformation must first occur: before the African American appeal to law can hope to be efficacious, Chesnutt ultimately asserts the need to redefine the

---

349 Ibid.
350 Ibid.
351 Ibid., 34.
(seemingly universal) subject of that law—the sociogenic principle of “Man,” of liberal individualism that differentially hierarchizes between the human and nonhuman.

Based on a deeply corrupt and violent political upheaval in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898, Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* chronicles how a small group of influential white supremacists manipulate the law, the truth, and public sentiment in order to expel the city’s racially-integrated government from power. Launching a concerted campaign against the city’s “Negro Domination,” this group orchestrated a brutal coup on election day, attacking and murdering non-whites in the streets. The federal government ultimately did nothing to prevent or to punish this violent outburst of racist and regressive violence against not only a part of its population, but also its systems of local governance and political representation. Visiting Wilmington two years later, Chesnutt was dismayed at the retrospective portrayal of the riots. Rather than the hysterical outburst of racial hatred that he perceived them to be, the Wilmington riots were cast by the press as an order-producing revolution against African-American unruliness. A significant motivation underwriting *The Marrow of Tradition*, then, is to re-tell more accurately the story of the Wilmington riots—to reveal the deep-seated and profoundly violent racial prejudice that Chesnutt believed to be their ultimate motivation. If one of Chesnutt’s primary goals in *The Marrow of Tradition* is to set the historical record straight, however, a key question emerges: why obscure the historical referent through fiction? Why not write a competing historical account? Why write a novel? I propose that it is through the more speculative, non-propositional aesthetic space of the novel that Chesnutt is able both to theorize the relationship between racism and the law and to re-imagine alternative
social and political transformations outside of the appeal to liberal state. In fictionalizing his account of an indexical historical referent, Chesnutt exposes the mutually-reinforcing relationship between racism and US juridical apparatus in the Jim Crow South—revealing the futility of an African-American appeal to law prior to a more fundamental redefinition of the supposedly universal subject of that law.

Chesnutt’s novelization of the Wilmington riots (fictionalized as “Wellington”) is deeply interested in the relationship between law and racism as mediated by the everyday experiences and lived practices that the law both legitimates and solidifies through habit. Especially significant for Chesnutt was the landmark 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which instituted the separate-but-equal principle. Chesnutt engages most fully with the *Plessy* decision in an early scene in *The Marrow of Tradition* in which Dr. Miller, the novel’s evident protagonist and emblem of the black bourgeois professional is forced into a “Colored” train car despite his professional standing and white colleague. Chesnutt describes Miller’s entrance to the car:

> The car was conspicuously labeled at either end with large cards, similar to those in the other car, except that they bore the word "Colored" in black letters upon a white background. The author of this piece of legislation had contrived, with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause, that not merely should the passengers be separated by the color line, but that the reason for this division should be kept constantly in mind. Lest a white man should forget that he was white,—not a very likely contingency,—these cards would keep him constantly admonished of the fact; should a colored person endeavor, for a moment, to lose sight of his disability, these staring signs would remind him continually that between him and the rest of mankind not of his own color, there was by law a great gulf fixed.352

---

352 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 56. Further references to this text hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and *MT*. 258
Highlighting the conspicuousness of the placards distinguishing “White” from “Colored,” Chesnutt emphasizes that Jim Crow segregation operates through a binary semiology that persistently asserts the distinction between black and white. By demonstrating the pervasiveness of these literal signs of segregation, Chesnutt shows how blackness comes to be coded as “disability” and takes on the power of signification itself. Ultimately, the logic and semiology of separate-but-equal takes on a structuring psychic effect—the “law” “fix[es]” between the races “a great gulf,” inculcating the sense of a foundational ontological difference between black and white.

Of course, it is not strictly evident through the signs themselves—through the act of distinguishing black from white—that the logic of Plessy, of separate-but-equal, is continuous with the hysterical racial violence of the Wilmington riots, but this is what Chesnutt’s novel systematically demonstrates and asserts. Just two chapters before Miller’s experience of racial segregation on the train, Chesnutt shows Major Carteret, one of the organizers of the coup and editor of the white-supremacist newspaper, at work writing an editorial just after the birth of his first son:

Taking for his theme the unfitness of the negro to participate in government,—an unfitness due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially to his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race,—the major had demonstrated, it seemed to him clearly enough, that the ballot in the hands of the negro was a menace to the commonwealth. He had argued, with entire conviction, that the white and black races could never attain social and political harmony by commingling their blood; he had proved by several historical parallels that no two unassimilable races could ever live together except in the relation of superior and inferior. (MT 31)

Chesnutt asserts the epistemological impossibility of “separate-but-equal.” Once the races have been distinguished—once a “great gulf” has been fixed by law between them—they
will always exist “in the relation of superior and inferior.” Chesnutt reveals the ways in which the racial distinction codified and ontologized by law comes to take on a series of significations outside of law proper. Once blackness has been separated from whiteness, it can more powerfully represent “limited education,...lack of experience,...criminal tendencies, and...hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race.” Race becomes a hermeneutic for political organization—with the capacity to legitimate claims as to who should have power over whom. It is in this way that Chesnutt’s reading of *Plessy* produces a legal-political divide in the social body analogous to what Agamben describes as the biopolitical fracture both constitutive of and obscured by “the people.”

In his reading of Chesnutt’s novel, Bryan Wagner identifies a pervasive epistemology of racial violence throughout *The Marrow of Tradition*. For Wagner, Chesnutt presents the white supremacist coup as the result of the increased visibility of the black middle class that cannot be assimilated by the whites into “the visual field” of the city. The African-American middle class “provokes an epistemological crisis that is simultaneously a crisis of white identity.” In this sense, Wagner suggests that we can understand racial violence in the Jim Crow South “as an attempt to repair the damaged epistemology of white supremacy.” What makes racial segregation and violence so pervasive and persistent, then, is that “racial violence is not simply about political strategy or economic self-interest. Indeed, racial violence is nothing less than the

---

354 Ibid.
prerequisite for the very possibility of white identity.”355 If, as Chesnutt suggests, racial violence is continuous with legal segregation (i.e., if the Wilmington coup is continuous with the daily segregating practices of “separate-but-equal”), then a revision to the law that would genuinely ameliorate the condition of racial violence would require a fundamental change in the construction of identity—from what Wagner calls “white identity” to some new configuration of identity and human relationship not constituted along the racial biopolitical fracture. At the most basic level, for Chesnutt, this epistemological transformation requires a direct attack upon the forms of racial distinction formed through legal decisions like Plessy, which, as Walter Benn Michaels explains, rendered all social conflict as racial conflict: “The fundamental social distinction articulated in these decisions and ratified in Plessy was not the distinction between classes but the distinction between races….The great contribution of Jim Crow racism was its ability to represent all social conflicts as essentially racial and this to represent state-sponsored segregation as the way to resolve those conflicts.”356 What Benn Michaels and Wagner both emphasize is the manner in which the law both produces and sustains forms of racial identity that lead irrevocably to forms of racial violence. Chesnutt elaborates a similar insight in The Marrow of Tradition, which, as we will see, meditates at length on the mutually-reinforcing relationship between racial violence and the law in the Jim Crow South.

355 Ibid., 332.
Chesnutt most forcefully demonstrates the constitutive racial violence built into the law in the chapter “How Not to Stop a Lynching,” in which Miller and Watson seek legal recourse to prevent the impending lynching of Sandy. Watson initially implores the sheriff to intervene, but “‘he has a white face and a whiter liver. He does not dare call out the militia to protect a negro charged with such a brutal crime.’” (MT 191). Miller then suggests seeking the intervention of the federal government, but Watson points out the impossibility of their plea being heard—the government “‘must be informed through designated channels. It never sees anything that is not officially called to its attention. The whole negro population of the South might be slaughtered before the necessary red tape could be spun out to inform the President that a state of anarchy prevailed’” (MT 192). Watson ultimately contends that the authority of the law is secondary to that of white power—that the law is a tool of white prejudice: “‘When the color line is drawn, if they choose to stand together with the rest of their race against us, or to remain passive and let the others work their will, we are helpless,—our cause is hopeless’” (MT 192).

This conclusion is confirmed by the white judge to whom Watson appeals as a last resort:

He admitted that lynching was, as a rule, unjustifiable, but maintained that there were exceptions to all rules,—that laws were made, after all, to express the will of the people in regard to the ordinary administration of justice, but that in an emergency the sovereign people might assert itself and take the law into its own hands,—the creature was not greater than the creator. He laughed at my suggestion that Sandy was innocent. “If he is innocent,” he said, “then produce the real criminal. You negroes are standing in your own light when you try to protect such dastardly scoundrels as this Campbell, who is an enemy of society and not fit to live. I shall not move in the matter. If a negro wants the protection of the law, let him obey the law.” (MT 192-93)
If Chesnutt’s novel presciently anticipates Carl Schmitt’s theorization of sovereign power as “he who decides on the exception,” then Chesnutt here asserts that this sovereign power is ultimately a white one. The “sovereign people” that Judge Everett invokes contains the same biopolitical fracture that Agamben describes, here constituted through binary racial semiology. The judge himself describes the law as the instrumental tool of a seemingly universal and unified “sovereign people” that is revealed by Chesnutt to be white power. In this passage, Chesnutt exploits not only the aporia contained within ordinary usage of “the people,” but also an aporia in the judge’s use of “the law.” In his concluding sentence, Judge Everett invokes two different senses of the law—“if a negro wants the protection of the law” (i.e., the right to due process and a fair trial) he must first “obey the law” (i.e., not violate the set of prescribed legal rules). Chesnutt reveals the ways in which this first sense of the law is denied to African Americans, even as they are subject to “unjustifiable” forms of violence like lynching at the hands of whites—whites who are in this case not forced to maintain this second sense of “the law.” In his reading of this moment in Marrow, Andrew Hebard contends that Chesnutt’s novel theorizes a “state of abandonment” in which “the state relinquishes its monopoly on violence…and the limits of the state are both marked and erased.” For Hebard, this state of abandonment is distinct from Schmitt’s state of exception in that “unlike a state of


exception where the state remains the exclusive source of extralegal violence, the state
instead permits violence without being its author.” Hebard’s reading helps us to see the
manner in which the law is strategically instrumentalized by a white semi-sovereign
“society” in Chesnutt’s novel—allowing state officials to participate in extralegal,
“unjustifiable” mob violence, “but not as representatives of the government.”

But if the law is strategically instrumentalized by white power in *The Marrow of Tradition*, we can also identify competing moments in which it seems that Chesnutt imagines a different set of laws and corresponding political forms—a law that is not subject to the racial biopolitical fracture. We see this most powerfully in the revelation that the parents of Janet Miller (Dr. Miller’s mixed-race wife) were married. Olivia Carteret’s shameful secret is not that her father had an extramarital affair with a black mistress, but rather that he *married* her. In the eyes of the law, Janet and Olivia are sisters. If with this uncovered secret marriage, Chesnutt seems to symbolize an alternate, utopian law—a legal-political alternative to the constitutively racist biopolitical fracture of the Jim Crow South—then the larger structure of the novel ultimately undoes the potent potentiality of this suppressed past. For we can’t neglect the manifold ways in which that secret marriage is ultimately repressed and Janet withheld from her rightful inheritance through the machinations of Olivia. The marriage legally occurred but was not recognized. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, law is not only the tool of white sovereign power, suspended instrumentally as in Schmitt and Agamben—the law is also actively

359 Ibid.
360 Ibid.
attacked and suppressed from outside the seat of official legal authority in order to maintain the logic of white supremacy. We can see this most clearly in an early complaint of General Belmont to Major Carteret:

“Things are in an awful condition! A negro justice of the peace has opened an office on Market Street, and only yesterday summoned a white man to appear before him. Negro lawyers get most of the business in the criminal court. Last evening a group of young white ladies, going quietly along the street arm-in-arm, were forced off the sidewalk by a crowd of negro girls. Coming down the street just now, I saw a spectacle of social equality and negro domination that made my blood boil with indignation,—a white and a black convict, chained together, crossing the city in charge of a negro officer! We cannot stand that sort of thing, Carteret,—it is the last straw! Something must be done, and that quickly!” (MT 33)

Despite segregating mandates like *Plessy*, the legal-political structures of the city have accommodated the inclusion of an African-American justice of the peace and police officer, and it is this legal-political inclusion that constitutes the “Negro Domination” that the white supremacists attack. Despite Chesnutt’s imaginative longing for a different form of law—for a more just law not split by a racist biopolitical fracture—*The Marrow of Tradition* ultimately resists the notion that such a change could efficaciously ameliorate racial violence like that of the Wilmington riots. A more just law would simply be attacked like the racially-inclusive forms of local government overrun by the white supremacist coup. Rather than revise a law that will always be subject to the suspensions, instrumentalizations, attacks, and repressions of white supremacy, in *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt ultimately asserts the need to redefine the evidently universal subject of law before any African-American appeal to law can hope to be efficacious—to imaginatively project an alternative to the sociogenic principle embedded within and shaping the political imaginary of the US juridical assemblage.
If Chesnutt is skeptical that a change in law is adequate to the amelioration of racial violence, then can we find an alternative model of politics in *The Marrow of Tradition*? We can begin to address this question by returning to a question posed earlier: if one of Chesnutt’s primary goals in *Marrow* is to set the historical record straight regarding the Wilmington riots, why obscure the historical referent through fiction? As we have seen, Chesnutt imagined his novel as a direct response to the manner in which the Wilmington white supremacist coup had been portrayed in the press: as the order-producing suppression of a black race riot. However, rather than write a competing journalistic or historical account, Chesnutt chose to write his corrective in the form of a novel. We can begin to understand this decision by examining Chesnutt’s treatment of the press and print journalism in *Marrow*. As we have seen, in Chesnutt’s novel Major Carteret makes his living as editor of *The Morning Chronicle*, the local mouthpiece for Wellington’s white supremacist political party. Chesnutt frequently provides the reader with extended excerpts of Carteret’s racist editorials, and he devotes sustained attention to the workings of the newspaper in the chapter “The Necessity of an Example,” in which Carteret, McBane, and Belmont meet immediately after the murder of Polly Ochiltree, intuitively recognizing the white woman’s death as an opportunity to advance their political agenda through the newspaper: “These three resourceful and energetic minds, representing no organized body, and clothed with no legal authority, had so completely arrogated to themselves the leadership of white public sentiment as to come together instinctively when an event happened which concerned the public, and, as this murder presumably did, involved the matter of race” (*MT* 180). Chesnutt draws attention both to
the political influence and to the lack of legal authority of these men, again emphasizing the constitutive extralegal element of racial violence, working through the management and manipulation of “public sentiment.” Of course, “public” here functions similarly to Du Bois’ “society” and Agamben’s “people”—claiming a political representativeness built upon foundational, racial exclusions. But if the white-supremacist public understands itself as a “public” through a binary racist epistemology, then Chesnutt here suggests that this public is roused to action through sentiment manipulated largely through fiction. Over the course of “The Necessity of an Example,” Chesnutt depicts the manner in which the white supremacists manipulate the fact of Polly’s death to fabricate a story designed to rouse the outrage of the white public to its highest pitch:

This event, the Chronicle suggested, had only confirmed the opinion, which had been of late growing upon the white people, that drastic efforts were necessary to protect the white women of the South against brutal, lascivious, and murderous assaults at the hands of negro men. It was only another significant example of the results which might have been foreseen from the application of a false and pernicious political theory, by which ignorance, clothed in a little brief authority, was sought to be exalted over knowledge, vice over virtue, an inferior and degraded race above the heaven-crowned Anglo-Saxon. If an outraged people, justly infuriated, and impatient of the slow processes of the courts, should assert their inherent sovereignty, which the law after all was merely intended to embody, and should choose, in obedience to the higher law, to set aside, temporarily, the ordinary judicial procedure, it would serve as a warning and an example to the vicious elements of the community, of the swift and terrible punishment which would fall, like the judgment of God, upon any one who laid sacrilegious hands upon white womanhood. (MT 185)

If, for Chesnutt, the “separate-but-equal” legal imperative of Plessy figures blackness as degraded, as inferior to whiteness, then the violated “white womanhood” of this passage is its pristine antithesis. Carteret depicts this innocent whiteness as urgently under attack by the black enemy. This racial attack can function as “only another significant example”
because, as McBane asserts, “All niggers are alike” (MT 181). The white mob asserts its sovereign authority to suspend the law in the name of a higher law—a higher law that Chesnutt demystifies as hysterical race prejudice, whiteness threatened by the increased social and political influence of the black middle class. Chesnutt suggests that the editorial’s success in arousing public sentiment is related to its fictional elements—perfectly constructed to figure both a coherent white identity under attack and an equally coherent black antagonist.

What characterizes the newspaper as a media technology in Chesnutt’s novel is the manner in which it necessarily corresponds to the pervasive legal and political forms of the public for whom it is written. For Chesnutt, the newspaper editorial is written and read along the ideological grain—within and subject to the dominant epistemological structure of its social context. But if, as I have suggested above, Chesnutt ultimately desires to redefine the evidently universal subject of democratic law, then the media technology of the newspaper is inadequate to the task—fundamentally structured by the dominant sociogenic principle that Chesnutt aspires to critique and transform. Despite the constitutive fictiveness underwriting Chesnutt’s newspaper editorial, only the more speculative conceptual flexibility enabled by the aesthetic—in this case, the aesthetic form of the novel—affords the epistemological perspective adequate to the genuinely transformative political critique to which Chesnutt aspires.

We can supplement our understanding of the political in The Marrow of Tradition by considering Chesnutt’s novel alongside Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the relationship between politics and aesthetics through “the distribution of the sensible” in
The Politics of Aesthetics. Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” The division and apportionment of those parts and positions through the “distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity” dictates who can participate in the political community and in what manner. For Rancière, it is through the aesthetic distribution of the sensible that the structure of politics in a community is determined:

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around what has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time….Artistic practices are “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.

Aesthetic forms produce not only forms of art, but also forms that “inscribe a sense of community.” Ultimately, then, the aesthetic is a space in which forms of social epistemology are formed and inscribed—a space in which the artist can open up an epistemology distinct from that which is legally or politically imposed. It is this mode of speculative epistemological openness that Chesnutt does not find in the newspaper editorial of Carteret. Rather than construct a propositional counter-argument to the fabricated and extralegal claims of the white supremacists (formed through a binary epistemology of racial violence), in The Marrow of Tradition Chesnutt engages the more

---

362 Ibid., 8.
363 Ibid.
364 Ibid., 9.
speculative, non-propositional aesthetic space of the novel in order to re-imagine alternative social and political transformations outside of the appeal to the liberal state and the socially-dictated epistemology of the racial biopolitical fracture.

We can look to the final chapters of *The Marrow of Tradition* for an especially revealing example of this type re-imagined political epistemology—a positive if speculative alternative to the liberal-humanist sociogenic principle—made available through the aesthetic. In the wake of the Wellington coup, Carteret’s son Dodie falls severely ill, urgently requiring a tracheotomy that only Miller is able to perform. But Miller’s only son has been shot to death that same day in the course of Carteret’s white supremacist riot. Carteret visits the Miller home, imploring the doctor to save his son’s life, but Miller rejects his appeal, satisfied with the righteousness of this dismissal. Carteret begrudgingly agrees, acknowledging the justice of Miller’s refusal in a seemingly transformative moment or cross-racial identification:

> Carteret possessed a narrow, but a logical mind, and except when confused or blinded by his prejudices, had always tried to be a just man. In the agony of his own predicament,—in the horror of the situation at Miller's house,—for a moment the veil of race prejudice was rent in twain, and he saw things as they were, in their correct proportions and relations,—saw clearly and convincingly that he had no standing here, in the presence of death, in the home of this stricken family. Miller's refusal to go with him was pure, elemental justice; he could not blame the doctor for his stand. He was indeed conscious of a certain involuntary admiration for a man who held in his hands the power of life and death, and could use it, with strict justice, to avenge his own wrongs. In Dr. Miller's place he would have done the same thing. Miller had spoken the truth,—as he had sown, so must he reap! He could not expect, could not ask, this father to leave his own household at such a moment. (*MT* 320-21)

Carteret finally sees through “the veil of race prejudice” to acknowledge that he and Miller share a fundamental value system and sense of justice, ultimately conceding that
he too would have turned himself away—that “he would have done the same thing.” And it is not only Miller and Carteret who share these values: “Young Evans felt the logic of the situation, which Carteret had explained sufficiently. To the nurse it was even clearer. If she or any other woman had been in the doctor's place, she would have given the same answer” (MT 322). These shared values initially appear to be the potential basis for a transformed cross-racial understanding—the means with which to bridge the racially-construed biopolitical fracture. But this shared sense of justice—the product of a “narrow,” “logical” mind—does nothing to transform the relationship between the two families, the two races. The sense of “justice” motivating this evident reversal of racial prejudice is in fact still trapped within the binary epistemology that sustains racist violence. In this “logical” mode, both men understand justice to be the protection of “their own”—their own family, their own race. Both Carteret and Miller recognize a legal conception of personhood rooted in property, fully continuous with the sociogenic principle of bourgeois “Man.” We can now begin to trace more clearly the relationship between the familial and the political plots that coexist and compete within The Marrow of Tradition. Chesnutt suggests that the possessive and racially enclosed structure of the Southern bourgeois family is continuous with the binary political structure of the Jim Crow South. Both derive from the same “nineteenth-century Humanity” comprised of sovereign liberal subjects that Du Bois contests in The Philadelphia Negro. If this bourgeois familial structure is the conventional representational object of the realist novel as aesthetic form, then Marrow critiques the racially enclosed family as the basis for political and ethical epistemology—the epistemology of both Miller and Carteret.
Ultimately, this possessive-familial political imaginary is transcended by Janet Miller, William’s mixed-race wife and the half-sister of Olivia Carteret. It is Janet who advises her husband to save Dodie’s life and who finally, at the novel’s climax, offers an alternative to the binary epistemology that has up until this moment structured and motivated the entirety of the novel’s plot. When Olivia visits her half-sister and implores her to save her son’s life and grant William permission to perform the surgery, Janet expresses her exasperated and pained outrage: “‘For twenty-five years I, poor, despicable fool, would have kissed your feet for a word, a nod, a smile. Now, when this tardy recognition comes, for which I have waited so long, it is tainted with fraud and crime and blood, and I must pay for it with my child's life!’” (MT 329). Olivia—assuming that her request has been denied and following the same logic as her husband, Dr. Miller, Evans, and the nurse—can only cede “‘It is but just’” (MT 329). But as she turns to leave, Janet stops her:

“Stay—do not go yet!” commanded Janet imperiously, her pride still keeping back her tears. “I have not done. I throw you back your father's name, your father's wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them,—they are bought too dear! ah, God, they are bought too dear! But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have your child's life, if my husband can save it! Will,” she said, throwing open the door into the next room, “go with her!” (MT 329)

In this final outburst, Janet offers a different kind of recognition than that offered by her sister. Olivia denies Janet “sisterly recognition” on a racial basis, withholding from her half-sister both her inheritance and acknowledged inclusion within the bourgeois family structure. Janet offers an alternative form of recognition, not rooted in the sisterhood of the bourgeois family, but on a different conception of “humanity” constituted not by
sympathy or possessive individualism, but rather by deeply-felt experience of suffering. Janet does not ask Olivia to recognize her injury or demand her rightful inclusion in the family qua nation. Rather than demand recognition or sympathy for her own wounded familial attachments, Janet opens the door to a political imaginary of non-possessive reciprocity that defies the liberal-humanist individualism that her husband (and nearly every other character) espouses throughout the novel. Crucially occupying the symbolic position of the mixed-race character, Janet ultimately offers an epistemological perspective that transcends the racial binary structuring the ethics of every other character in the novel’s social field—even her husband William, the novel’s evident emblem of civic virtue and racial progress.

*Marrow* devotes the majority of its narrative attention to the decent, socially ascendant Dr. Miller. Chesnutt casts Miller as the protagonist-hero of a liberal antiracist novel premised on gradual inclusion and racial uplift. William—emblem of bourgeois respectability, moral integrity, and fiscal responsibility—imagines himself as the protagonist of liberal meritocracy:

> He liked to believe that the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time, and that when a colored man should demonstrate to the community in which he lived that he possessed character and power, that community would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good. (*MT* 65)

William “possesses character”—both figuratively and narratively—on the condition of his possessive liberal individualism. He aspires to heal his community, but his actions do not transform so much as entrench the very social logic of liberal individualism that denies sisterly recognition to his wife and dehumanizes Wellington’s black laboring
class. At the climax of the novel, then, Chestnutt undoes the logic of realist characterization in which narrative attention imparts protagonistic significance. Despite Miller’s evident centrality to the novel’s first 300 pages, Janet wrests the novel’s narrative agency at the climax, enacting a genuinely transformative political imaginary rooted in material, embodied pain, rather than a possessive individualism whose injuries demand recognition from the liberal state—a logic enacted by both her husband and the white supremacist Carteret. Why, then, does Chesnutt play this narrative trick? Why highlight Miller and marginalize Janet only to reverse their narrative-symbolic roles on the novel’s final page?

William and Janet embody two competing sociogenic principles, or political modalities of the human. William’s liberal individualism—consistent with the US social world that he inhabits and in which he thrives, and that he shares with nearly all of the novel’s other characters—grants him a kind of figural legibility and coherence within the narrative world of *The Marrow of Tradition*. It is in this way that the “character” that he possesses is figurally responsive to his environment—understood in *Marrow* as the infrastructural quality of the law qua sociogenic principle. But *The Marrow of Tradition* is ultimately a critique of Miller’s wounded logic of possessive individualism—as well as his faith in gradual inclusion and democratic progress. The cross-racial sympathetic recognition on which such a political imaginary relies is unavailable to black laborers like Sandy who are dehumanized and live in a permanent state of exception. Thus, at the novel’s conclusion the seemingly marginalized Janet wrests narrative agency and characterological depth, as she realizes (even if only momentarily and within the confines
her home) an alternative modality of the human rooted in shared suffering and material pain rather than the sympathetic recognition of possessive individualism. What Marrow dramatizes, then, is the infrastructural-environmental agency of the law to condition the emergence of personhood, the legibility of character. Chesnutt offers the novelistic-representational complement to Weheliye’s insight that the US juridical assemblage—the law—“continues to be one of the chief instruments in creating and maintaining the racializing assemblages in the world of Man.”365 If this is the case, then merely to appeal to the law or demand recognition from the liberal state is to allow for the dehumanization at the heart of “nineteenth-century Humanity”—the adjudication of the human from the less-than-human—to continue uncontested. Chesnutt breaks realist convention and formally redistributes narrative agency and protagonism in an effort to dramatize the dynamic and co-constitutive relationship between legal infrastructure and the very conditions of personhood.

365 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 82.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Barrows, Adam. The Cosmic Time of Empire: Modern Britain and World Literature.


-----.


-----.


-----.


-----.


-----.


-----. “The Machine Stops.” In *Selected Stories*, edited by David Leavitt and Mark


284


285


Saint-Amour, Paul K. Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form.


-----, “Seeing It Whole: Staging Totality in Social Theory and Art.” The Sociological


Winseck, Dwayne R. and Robert M. Pike. Communication and Empire: Media, Markets,


