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“A Profane Miracle”:
Modernity and the Accident in American Literature and Film, 1925-1934

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Christine McCulloch

Although much of the recent scholarship surrounding literary modernism and modernity has focused on speed, technology, and the novel pleasures these afford, few scholars have placed the techno-industrial accident at the center of their investigations. In response, “A Profane Miracle” makes a critical, interdisciplinary intervention in the field of American modernism, foregrounding the automobile accident as the site of newly convergent political, eschatological, and aesthetic paradigms that substantially revise and deepen our understanding of early twentieth century art, culture, and experience. Historicizing the project during the interwar period, when mass production and consumption of the automobile was at its height, I argue that the accident functions as a complex signifier through which the experience of modernity under mass industrial capitalism finds particularly cogent and powerful expression. Works by Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, King Vidor, and Zora Neale Hurston deploy the accident—both as a recurrent motif and structuring aesthetic—in an effort to expose the suffering and dysfunction inherent to capitalist modernization. As my analysis of the car crash victims in *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* reveals, this suffering is unevenly distributed across race, class, and gender lines. Taken together, these bound-to-rise, bound-to-fall narratives invite us to recognize the automobile “accident” as an intimation of larger systemic crimes which countervailing discourses of chance and personal catastrophe deliberately obscure. In so doing, my project challenges the discourse of ambivalence that characterizes much of the recent scholarship on the relationship between literary modernism and modernity, foregrounding the anguish necessary to incite social change.

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Introduction

“A Profane Miracle”: Modernity and the Accident in American Literature and Film, 1925-1934¹

MASON CITY.

To get there you follow Highway 58, going northeast out of the city, and it is a good highway and new. Or was new, that day we went up it. You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don't quit staring at that line and don't take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you'll hypnotize yourself and you'll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab, and you'll try to jerk her back on but you can't because the slab is high like a curb, and maybe you'll try to reach to turn off the ignition just as she starts to dive. But you won't make it, of course. Then a nigger chopping cotton a mile away, he'll look up and see the little column of black smoke standing up above the vitriolic, arsenical green of the cotton rows, and up against the violent, metallic, throbbing blue of the sky, and he'll say, "Lawd God, hits a-nudder one done done hit!" And the next nigger down the row, he'll say, "Lawd God," and the first nigger will giggle, and the hoe will lift again and the blade will flash in the sun like a heliograph. Then a few days later the boys from the Highway Department will mark the spot with a little metal square on a metal rod stuck in the black dirt off the shoulder, the metal square painted white and on it in black a skull and crossbones. Later on a love vine will climb up it, out of the weeds.

But if you wake up in time and don't hook your wheel off the slab, you'll go whipping on into the dazzle and now and then a car will come at you steady out of the dazzle and will pass you with a snatching sound as though God-Almighty had ripped a tin roof loose with his bare hands. Way off ahead of you, at the horizon where the cotton fields are blurred into the light, the slab will glitter and gleam like water, as though the road were flooded. You'll go whipping toward it, but it will always be ahead of you, that bright, flooded place, like a mirage. You'll go past the little white metal squares set on metal rods, with the skull and crossbones on them to mark the spot. For this is the country where the age of the internal combustion engine has come into its own. Where every boy is Barney Oldfield, and the girls wear organdy and batiste and eyelet embroidery and no panties on account of the climate and have smooth little faces to break your heart and when the wind of the car's speed lifts up their hair at the temples you see the sweet little beads of perspiration nestling there, and they sit low on the seat with their little spines crooked and their bent knees high toward the dashboard and not too close together for the cool, if you could call it that, from the hood ventilator. Where the smell of gasoline and burning brake bands and red-eye is sweeter than myrrh. Where the eight-cylinder jobs come roaring round the curves in the red hills and scatter the gravel like spray, and when they ever get down in the flat country and hit the new slab, God have mercy on the mariner.

—Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*

In a 2001 collection of essays entitled *Car Crash Culture*, editor Mikita Brottman observes that, “[i]n literature and film, crash culture finds its apotheosis in David Cronenberg’s dolorous adaptation of J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*” (Brottman xxxvii). Published in 1973, Ballard’s *Crash* is among the most disturbing—and yet, exquisite—novels of the postmodern period. Its “techno-apocalyptic” vision of “life in an accelerated culture of the image . . . revels in clinical depictions of the destruction of the body while engag[ing] the promise of new physicalities” writes reviewer Jay McRoy.² Cronenberg’s 1996 adaptation of the novel is similarly preoccupied with the violent intersection of sex, desire, speed, and technology. However, to emphasize these two works as consummate examples of the accident in literature and film is to overlook the long-standing history of “vehicular mayhem” in both genres (Brottman xxiii). Ballard’s novel and Cronenberg’s film instantiate a recurrent motif dating from the roughly coincidental advent of movies and motorcars.³ Early silent films like Cecil Hepworth’s *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Hepworth, 1900) and Robert W. Paul’s *The ‘?’ Motorist* (Robert W. Paul, 1906) depict carefully staged collisions that find their documentarian counterpart in “Actualities” like *Aeroplane Flight and Wreck* (Biograph, 1910).

This trend in popular entertainment, in turn, influenced the modern American novel. Automobile accidents figure prominently in the work of Booth Tarkington, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, Chester Himes, Zora Neale Hurston, James M. Cain, John Steinbeck, Robert Penn Warren, James Baldwin, Flannery O’Connor, and James Agee, to name a few. Postmodern representations of the car crash such as Cronenberg’s and Ballard’s are thus born of distinctly modernist literary and filmic traditions that, once explored *via the*

accident, substantially revise and deepen our understanding of early twentieth century art, culture, and experience. Ironically, these scenes of bodily rupture and mechanical wreckage are sites around which many of the issues of modernism coalesce—issues such as industrialization, urbanization, mass media and culture, and high modernist aesthetics. This dissertation examines the recurrence and signification of the automobile accident in modern American literature and film—particularly, its political, eschatological, and aesthetic implications. Drawing from theories of modernism, speed, and spectacle, in addition to material culture and history, I analyze the economics of its production, its association with class mobility, and the aesthetics of its representation, both in print and onscreen.

Although car crashes appear in a number of significant twentieth-century texts, I have chosen to historicize the project during the interwar period, when mass production and consumption of the automobile was at its height and the accident a novel—rather than “banal”—phenomenon, as it was later described by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard and Evans 313). In examining works by Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, King Vidor, and Zora Neale Hurston, I argue that the accident functions as a complex signifier through which the experience of modernity under mass industrial capitalism finds particularly cogent and powerful expression. Texts such as *An American Tragedy* (1925), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *The Crowd* (MGM, 1928), and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) deploy the accident—both as a recurrent motif and structuring aesthetic—in an effort to expose the suffering and dysfunction inherent to capitalist modernization. As my analysis of the car crash victims in these novels and films reveals, this suffering is unevenly distributed across race, class, and gender lines. Taken together, these bound-to-

rise, bound-to-fall narratives invite us to *re-cognize* the automobile “accident” as an intimation of larger systemic crimes which countervailing discourses of chance and personal catastrophe deliberately obscure. To sift through the wreckage littering these texts is to sift through the detritus of mass industrial capitalism and to find, therein, evidence of the violence and vulnerabilities it has systemically engendered.

I. Contemporary Criticism

In recent years, a number of exciting studies have emerged that engage the idea of the accident, be it automobile or otherwise. Ross Hamilton’s *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* (2007) traces the complex evolution of this concept, beginning with Aristotle and concluding with contemporary chaos theory. Hamilton contends that the theoretical foundations that underlie the idea of the accident shift radically after Descartes, along with related notions of modern subjectivity. This “cultural turn” constitutes the focus of Enda Duffy’s *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (2009), which examines the ways in which new speed technologies such as the automobile have restructured modern experience, simultaneously sating and arousing an appetite for the “polymorphous... thrill of velocity” (Duffy 4, 5). Duffy acknowledges that the “single new pleasure invented by modernity”—namely, speed—also carries with it new dangers and terrors, but devotes only a single chapter to the car crash (Ibid. 3). Like Hamilton, Duffy draws his examples largely from a European—as opposed to American—context. While earlier studies by Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach and Roger N. Casey do explore the fraught relationships between American literature, culture, and the automobile, they do not focus on the accident, in particular, as a salient trope and

structuring aesthetic.⁴ Karen Beckman's recent *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (2009) does just this, but in relation to film, exclusively.

Although I am indebted to the work of these scholars, my dissertation makes a critical, interdisciplinary intervention where theirs have not, in the overlooked fields of American literature and film produced during the interwar period. I argue that the automobile accident provides an apt metaphor for the volatile socio-historical context in which works like *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* were produced; through the rapid ascent of figures like Clyde Griffiths, Jay Gatsby, John Sims, and John Pearson, these texts register anxiety about accelerated social mobility—a phenomenon that applies not only to the rise (and attendant fall) of individuals under mass capitalism, but of nation states. Through the violent collisions that check—if they do not destroy—the material ambitions of their protagonists, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Vidor uncannily anticipate the stock market “crash” of 1929, while Hurston views its aftermath through the lens of the Depression. I argue that the accident victims claimed in these texts are most productively understood as casualties of the American Dream and, as such, demand that readers reflect upon why that Dream necessarily incurs casualties.

In this respect, my project is most closely aligned with Jason Puskar's *Accident Society: Fiction, Collectivity, and the Production of Chance* (2012), which charts the intersections between techno-industrial accidents, the rise of the insurance industry, and modern American fiction. Puskar argues that “American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced chance in new and specifically modern forms through narratives of spontaneous and blameless violence and that those narratives in turn

supported emergent modes of social organization” (Puskar 1). Foremost among these new modes of social organization was the insurance industry. Writers such as William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and James Cain “purported to detect and describe a radical instability at the heart of modern life, but in fact [...] produc[ed] that instability by modeling it in narratives of causeless and blameless catastrophe” (Ibid.). In Puskar’s view, the literature of the period was thus *complicit with*, rather than *critical of*, the aims of the insurance industry. This is because writers saw in its so-called “mutual society” the potential for new—and fundamentally egalitarian—forms of social solidarity and interdependence. While Puskar makes important contributions to this burgeoning field of study, I read the literature of the period quite differently. Texts such as *An American Tragedy*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* do not corroborate the aims of the insurance industry, but rather critique them. Through the recurrent motif of the automobile accident, these works identify “the common enemy around which [modern subjects] might unite” not as “chance,” but rather as systemically engineered violence which conveniently masquerades as such (4). Likewise, the car crash victims claimed in these texts do not constitute “a diverse constituency of the chance-afflicted,” as Puskar argues. Rather, they belong, specifically, to society’s poorest, weakest, most vulnerable, and politically disenfranchised demographics. Thus, while Puskar contends that modern American writers characterized “a great deal of violence as chancy in order to legitimize new modes of [social organization],” I argue precisely the opposite—namely, that modern American writers characterized the techno-industrial accident, in particular, as a form of deliberate,

systemic violence—and not a manifestation of chance—in order to critique those same modes of social organization (26).

Likewise, while most of the aforementioned scholars note their indebtedness to contemporary cultural critic and theorist of the accident, Paul Virilio, few engage his work in a substantive way. In fact, many dismiss it, as Karen Beckman does, for being alarmist and reactionary. In *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*, she writes:

While Virilio denies advocating a ‘millenarian catastrophism’ or taking ‘*a tragic view* of the accident for the purpose of frightening the masses, as the mass media so often do,’ and claims only to be ‘taking the accident seriously,’ one cannot help but find a resonance between his use of large, bold, and italicized fonts for key words—**finitude, media tragedy, live coverage, what is happening**—with the moralistic and apocalyptic discourses of homeland security and terrorism that mark the post-9/11 era. (Beckman 11-12)

Duffy similarly characterizes Virilio’s work as “renegade” and “cynical” (Duffy 43, 44). By contrast, “‘A Profane Miracle’” demonstrates the ways in which Virilio’s controversial claims about the mutually constitutive relationship between modernity and the accident are borne out in American literature and film produced during the interwar period. In particular, I examine his theorization of speed (what he calls the “dromosphere” in *The Original Accident*), the crisis occasioned for modern art and aesthetics as a result of proliferating speed technologies (discussed in *The Accident of Art*), and his critique of sound cinema (discussed in *The Vision Machine*), as each relate to the texts discussed in this study.

II. Virilio's Theory of the Accident

In his first sustained engagement with the subject, Virilio makes an important distinction between natural and artificial accidents. Natural accidents include floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc. Artificial accidents result from or involve technology. As soon as something is invented, the potential for its accident, likewise, comes to be. “The shipwreck,” writes Virilio, “is consequently the ‘futurist’ invention of the ship, and the air crash the invention of the supersonic airliner, just as the Chernobyl meltdown is the invention of the nuclear power station” (Virilio 5). While a study of natural accidents in the twentieth century could prove both useful and illuminating, this dissertation concerns itself with artificial accidents—specifically, the automobile accident as it is represented in literature and film. I have chosen to focus on this particular phenomenon because, as historian James J. Flink observes, “since its introduction in the United States in 1895, the motor vehicle has been the most significant force shaping the development of modern American civilization” (Flink 2). Indeed, it has “set the tempo of American life,” affecting “[p]atterns of courtship, residence, socialization of children, education, work habits, and use of leisure time,” in addition to being “the mainstay and prime mover of the American economy in the twentieth century” (Ibid. 2-3). Nevertheless, despite its “extensive and overwhelmingly favorable coverage in popular periodicals,” representations of the automobile in early twentieth century literature and film are far more cautionary (8). Rarely is this new technology invoked without the attendant threat—if not the direct manifestation—of its accident.

Virilio notes that although artificial accidents have a long and varied history, it is a sublimated one. The accident constitutes the hidden underside of invention; it is the

“shadow of our own intelligence” (Lotringer and Virilio 111). Because we are more interested in charting the history of our technological triumphs rather than the history of their failure, “the accident is censured” (Virilio 5). It has thus become the “*imperative responsibility*” of scholars to “expose accidents along with the frequency of their industrial and post-industrial repetition” (Ibid. 7). This is an admittedly odd call to action given Virilio’s concession that “the twentieth century did in fact swamp us with *mass-produced accidents one after the other*, from the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 up to the Chernobyl meltdown in 1986” (5). However, the mass media’s exploitation of the accident—its sensationalistic “aim of scaring the hordes” so as to turn a profit—has prevented us from “taking accidents *seriously*” (12). Virilio proposes a “Museum of Accidents” to correct this travesty but, as this dissertation demonstrates, such a “museography” already exists in the film and literature of the interwar period (25).

Like Ross Hamilton, Virilio contends that the first philosopher to “seriously” define and theorize the accident is Aristotle. The Latin word, *accidens* (“anything that happens; an occurrence, incident or event; anything that happens without foresight or expectation”), is derived from the Greek *συμβέβηκός*, meaning “an incidental attribute.”⁵ In the *Physics*, Aristotle uses the term in contradistinction to *καθ’ αυτό*, meaning “from itself,” or “that which is essential . . . to the very nature of the thing” (Coughlin xxv). For example, the fact that a man is black or white is accidental to his nature; that he is a biped is an essential quality. Virilio inverts this definition, claiming that the accident actually “*reveals the substance*” of a thing, thus exposing “the hidden truth” of our technological successes, in particular (Virilio 10-11).

For Virilio, this hidden truth is “the damage done by Progress” (Ibid. 11). In *The Original Accident*, he writes:

The positivist euphoria of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this ‘great movement of progress,’ would surely have to be one of the most insidious features of the bourgeois illusion aimed at covering up the fearful progression, as much industrial as military, in the mode of scientific destruction. (72)

In corroborating Virilio’s critique of “Progress,” the texts discussed here constitute an ideological opposition to the tenets—both political and aesthetic—of the Italian Futurists. As Garry Leonard observes, “As early as 1909, the Futurists [were] deliriously clear that future art [would] celebrate all that is modern in order to consume it in a ‘famished roar’ and power itself forward, in an ever accelerating manner, without brakes” (Leonard 229). Virilio makes the problems embedded in what Leonard describes as Marinetti’s “poorly examined euphoria” all the more explicit: “The slogan of the First Futurist Manifesto of 1909—‘*War is the only hygiene*’—led directly, though thirty years later [...], to the shower block of Auschwitz-Birkenau” (Virilio 29-30).⁶ American modernists like Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Vidor, and Hurston intuited this disastrous trajectory and attempted to counter it; as Sylvère Lotringer observes, “Artists and writers who came before WWII, ‘high modernists’ as they are usually called, [...] bore witness to the catastrophe ahead of time” (Lotringer and Virilio 22). I argue that their “witnessing” takes two principle forms: that of the automobile accident as a trope, and that of the techno-industrial accident, more broadly conceived, as an aesthetic.

Admittedly, Virilio’s apprehension regarding the introduction and assimilation of modern technologies is nothing new. In his 1954 essay “The Question Concerning

Technology,” Martin Heidegger explores the close affiliations between technology (*τεχνή, τεχνικόν*) and “the fine arts,” both of which belong to the act of “bringing forth,” “making,” and “revealing” (Heidegger 12). Nevertheless, despite their linguistic, conceptual, and practical kinship, “modern machine-powered technology... is incomparably different from all earlier technologies” because it makes “unreasonable demand[s]” upon the natural environment, natural resources, and human laborers, thus antagonistically “challenging” what the traditional arts more organically—and less destructively—“bring forth” (Ibid. 15). The consequences of this shift he deems “monstrous” (16).

Situated in the Heideggerian tradition, Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) explores how nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literature registers this “monstrous” cultural shift through a reactionary emphasis on pastoralism. However, even as this “tendency to idealize rural ways [...] recurs everywhere in our literature,” so does a “fascination” with its antitheses—namely, industrialization, urbanization, and the machine (Marx 7, 16). Although Marx’s study discusses the significance of different kinds of machines in American literature and culture (e.g. steamboats and automobiles), the train serves as the primary trope under investigation. The “disturbing shriek of the locomotive,” writes Marx, “changes the texture” of passages by Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Twain, and Henry Adams; “tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety” where formerly there had been “harmony, [...] withdrawal from the world, and peace” (Ibid. 16, 15). Though Marx offers a highly compelling study of nineteenth-century American literature and culture, Lynne Kirby reminds us that “railway travel

throughout Western nations declined in relation to the rise of the automobile in the 1910s and the car's mass acceptance in the twenties" (Kirby 5). Taking Kirby's observation as its point of departure, this dissertation extends—and substantially revises—Marx's work, arguing that it is the automobile *accident* that radically disrupts and challenges not only the pastoral ideal in modern American literature and film, but also false notions of urban utopia. As I demonstrate in my discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, the symbol of the train has been reappropriated by the mid-1920s to signify precisely the kind of "romantic" collectivism it once interrupted and opposed, according to Marx.

Other relevant studies addressing the fraught relationship between modernism and techno-industrial modernity include Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986). In it, Huyssen observes that "mass culture as we know it in the West is unthinkable without 20th century technology—media techniques as well as technologies of transportation (public and private), the household, and leisure" (Huyssen 9). Throughout this dissertation, I examine the rise of one technology in particular—namely, the mass production, consumption, and strangely ubiquitous destruction of the automobile—in relation to the work of high modernists like Fitzgerald and Hurston. In so doing, I address Huyssen's concern that:

While it is generally recognized that these technologies have substantially transformed everyday life in the 20th century, it is much less widely acknowledged that technology and the experience of an increasingly technologized life have also radically transformed art. Indeed [...] no other single factor has influenced the emergence of the new avant-garde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists' imagination [...], but penetrated to

the core of the work itself. The invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology and what one may loosely call the technological imagination can best be grasped in artistic practices such as collage, assemblage, montage, and photomontage. (Ibid.)

In the following chapters, I explore how other “artistic practices” such as jazz and pastiche register the “penetration” and “invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology.” For example, in my first chapter on *An American Tragedy*, I demonstrate the ways in which Dreiser’s decelerated narrative aesthetic works to counteract the too far, too fast rise of his protagonist and, in so doing, provide a defense of the author’s frequently criticized, slow and ponderous style. Similarly, in my discussion of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I argue that the fragmented and irregular nature of Hurston’s narrative contributes to a high modernist aesthetic of the accident which counters a commercial aesthetic of the assembly line inaugurated by Henry Ford.

This interest in the dynamic relationship between modern technology and modern art is shared by Virilio, although he is far less equivocal in his assessment of their mutual “transformation.” In *The Accident of Art* he claims that, “precisely at the time [of WWI] something started to crack; culture and contemporary art were deeply impacted by it” (Lotringer and Virilio 18). “Social trauma caused [aesthetic] figuration to diverge,” he writes; “art was mortally wounded like the rest,” it too, became a “victim” of the twentieth century’s serial production of “disfiguring events” (20, 22).⁷ While Virilio’s claims about the aesthetic crisis occasioned by modernity are intriguing and provocative, I do not agree that modern art has “failed,” although failure is one of its preoccupations (62). Rather, representations of the car crash—culminating, as we shall see, in an

aesthetic of the accident—signal art’s triumph in an increasingly mass-produced, mechanized society. This is because the accident is absolutely singular; it cannot be repeated. Consequently, art’s assimilation of the accident in modern forms such as jazz and pastiche can be read as an attempt to resist the overwhelming standardization—or, as Virilio puts it, “motorization”—of forces that characterize post-industrial life (58).

It is this argument, in particular, that distinguishes my work from Virilio’s, as well as from other recent studies that engage both the automobile and its accident. In radically disrupting Fordist patterns and routines, the automobile accident functions as a site of political and aesthetic resistance to modern industrial capitalism. As Rita Barnard observes in her essay, “Modern American Fiction,” many of the texts discussed in this study were produced during a time when “left-wing political movements were suppressed” (Barnard 44). The views many leftist writers espoused thus had to find coded means of expression. I submit that the techno-industrial accident serves as one such cipher. Both Theodore Dreiser and King Vidor were committed socialists and, as Seth Moglen argues, it is for this reason that Dreiser’s work, in particular, has been historically marginalized. In *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism*, he writes:

During the cold war, American literary critics singled out one strand of experimental writing for canonization and celebrated it as the most sophisticated response to the crises of the early twentieth century. This particular strand of modernist writing [...] tend[ed] to naturalize the destructive processes of monopoly capitalism, which [it] also astutely record[s]. (Moglen 27, 28)

Moglen contrasts this “melancholic” strain of modernism with another—namely, the work of leftist writers like Dreiser, Dos Passos, Hurston, and Langston Hughes who “did not systematically deploy naturalist literary strategies [in order to] mystify the toxic social forces” under which they suffered (45). Rather, they “sought to direct their anger at the social [and economic] formations that seemed to vitiate the possibility of love and social solidarity,” consequently “insist[ing] upon the historical specificity of the destructive social forces at work in modernizing America” (45-46). As historian James J. Flink and others have argued, the most formidable of these modernizing forces was—and, in many respects, remains—the automobile.

However, to claim that the automobile accident provides a particularly salient example of the “suffering that accompanied modern capitalism” loosely described by Moglen, one must first demonstrate the industry’s centrality to mass industrial capitalism as it developed in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century (xiv). As Flink observes, the car “has been the mainstay and prime mover of the American economy,” roughly since its introduction in 1893 (Flink 2). Although he notes the vast number of industries to which the automobile is related—e.g. steel, petroleum, plate glass, rubber, lacquers, etc.—John Urry details these “systemic interdependencies” more explicitly:

Automobility is [...] an extraordinarily powerful *complex* constituted through technical and social interlinkages with other industries, car parts and accessories; petrol refining and distribution; road-building and maintenance; hotels, roadside service areas and motels; car sales and repair workshops; suburban house

building; retailing and leisure complexes; advertising and marketing; urban design and planning; and various oil-rich nations. (Urry 33, 26)

Throughout the dissertation, I analyze the ways in which these systemic interdependencies register in the texts I discuss, both obliquely and explicitly. For example, not only does the protagonist of King Vidor's *The Crowd* work for an insurance agency, but he also spends his spare time coming up with advertising slogans for motor fuel—this before a close-up shot of a tire ad presages his own daughter's death in an automobile accident. It is the extended reach of this commercial-industrial “*complex*”—so brilliantly captured in Vidor's film—that causes Urry to characterize the car's dominance as “more systemic and awesome in its consequences than what are normally viewed as constitutive technologies of the global, such as cinema and television” (Ibid. 25).

While the automobile industry has certainly contributed to the development of global capitalism, Flink details the reasons for its unparalleled growth in the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Unlike in Western Europe, “an aura of optimism about the automobile prevailed [...] in the United States [at the turn of the century]”—an attitude not shared by the authors and filmmakers discussed in this study (Flink 21). “From the outset of its diffusion,” writes Flink, “the motor vehicle was given extensive and overwhelmingly favorable coverage in popular periodicals,” if not in high modernist literature and film (Ibid. 8). Combined with the facility afforded by interstate commerce, access to raw materials and industrial centers for manufacturing, and a growing labor pool, this “popular enthusiasm” for the car led to its secure position as a fixture of modern American life (9). After Henry Ford introduced the Model T in

1908, automobile production and consumption in the United States quickly outstripped that of France, Germany, and Great Britain. As Flink observes, “In 1913, the last year of peace and full production of cars prior to World War I, the United States accounted for some 485,000 units out of the world production of 606,124 motor vehicles” (25).

However, despite the successful development of ““a car for the great multitude,”” Ford’s original Model T still cost “\$825 for the runabout and \$850 for the touring car” (36, 37). It was thus another significant innovation of modern American capitalism that made its price ““within the reach of many”” (37). As Flink observes, the car’s dominance in the United States can be attributed to an “unprecedented extension of consumer installment credit to finance automobile sales” (189). “Although a few expensive items, such as pianos and sewing machines, had been sold on time before 1920,” writes Flink, “it was time sales of automobiles during the twenties that established the purchasing of expensive consumer goods on credit as a middle-class habit and mainstay of the American economy” (189). In his essay, ““The Famished Roar of Automobiles’: Modernity, the Internal Combustion Engine, and Modernism,”” Garry Leonard details the ways in which this contributed to a capitalistic “ideology of deferral, of the ‘not yet’ variety [in which] the point of actual accountability [is] permanently postponed. If the point of accountability is suddenly forced upon the mechanism, it *breaks down*” (Leonard 225, emphasis mine).

I submit that the texts discussed in this study foreground the automobile accident as a site of “sudden accountability” for the socioeconomic system under which cars, drivers, and crashes proliferate, though it is rarely seen as such. In this moment, something formerly unseen becomes visible; as Maurice Blanchot observes, ““Our horror,

our stupor, is our lucidity” (qtd. in Virilio 49). Although the term, itself, suggests a conspicuous lack of culpability, the “accident” actually reveals an otherwise obscure form of systemic agency. Its careful staging and representation in films such as *The Crowd* indicate that neither is the technology, itself, to be blamed, as Paul Virilio is wont to argue, nor are the individual operators of that technology. Although the court record for a 1921 manslaughter case states that “It is not the ferocity of automobiles that is to be feared, but the ferocity of those who drive them,” I counter that the automobile accident indicts what Enda Duffy describes as “the ever more ferocious regimes of capitalism” (Isenstadt 222, Duffy 238).

It is this focus on the larger socioeconomic import of the accident that distinguishes my work from other trauma-centric studies of modernity that focus on the individual. Sigmund Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* remains chief among these. Another “serious” theorist of the accident, Freud ultimately denies the possibility of the accident in speech, thought, or action. He writes: “Certain performances which are apparently unintentional prove to be well motivated when subjected to the psychoanalytic investigation, and are determined through the consciousness of unknown motives” (Freud 149). The psychoanalyst’s work thus lies in unearthing these motives and unconscious desires, making them apparent to the patient, and leading him/her to accept and assimilate—rather than deny and repress—them.

This applies even to those “performances” that are self-destructive in nature. In her introduction to *Car Crash Culture*, Mikita Brottman succinctly summarizes Freud’s theory of “the death drive” as follows:

According to Freud, the death drive is the urge that compels us to lean too hard against the stair rail we forgot was broken, to get in the way of oncoming traffic, to stand right underneath a shaky light fixture, to take a bend too fast. In other words, we are all responsible, albeit perhaps unconsciously, for the “accidents” that happen to us. (Brottman xxxiii)

In his response to J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*, Jean Baudrillard describes the automobile accident, in particular, as “the bricolage of the new leisure class’s death drive”—an idea aptly illustrated by Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (Baudrillard and Evans 313).

However, Brottman notes the difficulty of applying Freud’s formulation to the accident as defined by law. She writes: “...if the law were to take Freud’s reading of ‘accidents’ on board... [b]lame could not be attributed to anyone except the accident victim, for unconsciously causing the accident to happen” (Brottman xxxiii). Much of the work of this dissertation lies in challenging—and refuting—Freud’s theory of the accident; as my analysis of the car crash victims in *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* reveals, certain populations are more vulnerable to the vagaries of “chance” and “accident” than others. The deaths of working-class women like Myrtle Wilson and Roberta Alden, along with children and racial minorities like John Pearson, attest to newly emergent forms of victimization that are systemically—and not self—imposed.

As several critics of psychoanalytic theory have noted, Freud’s thinking is characterized by Eurocentric, heteronormative, paternalistic, and fundamentally bourgeois assumptions about sex, gender, social transgression, and desire; in attempting to espouse—and naturalize—a universal theory of human consciousness, he fails to

acknowledge the degree to which his own notions of the individual and the family are socially constructed to serve very specific political and economic ends. Consequently, a study of the accident grounded in Freudian modes of analysis would necessarily privilege its significance to—and for—the individual over that of the greater collective. As Enda Duffy astutely observes, the car crash most often registers as “an intimate kind of disaster. It touches individuals, [it is] a personal tragedy” (Duffy 200). However, when considered “cumulatively, car crash statistics point to mass slaughter. The two discourses veer off from each other: between the personal and the local nature of a given crash and the magnitude of the overall reality, the connection is remarkably seldom made” (Ibid.). This dissertation constitutes an effort to make precisely such a connection; rather than subsuming the social significance of the automobile accident to discourses surrounding individual consciousness and desire, I emphasize the degree to which the former determines the latter under modern industrial capitalism. Indeed, the prominent place modern advertising occupies in the work of Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Vidor suggests that our desires are increasingly *manufactured*, as opposed to organic or innate. So, too, are the means through which they might be satisfied.

As Ronald Levaco observes in his introduction to *Kuleshov On Film*, classic American texts such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *McTeague*, *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* critique “the obsessive, bourgeois drive towards amassing individual wealth;” they are “materialist studies in the futility of self-aggrandizement” (Kuleshov 20). To this list, I add *The Crowd* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, and maintain that the automobile accident provides the best vehicle for advancing that critique. As Gary Leonard observes, under modern American capitalism “we need to buy

because we work and we need to work because we buy; they both require one another and they both make the other necessary” (Leonard 228). While the aforementioned novels and films aptly illustrate this self-perpetuating cycle, the automobile accident profoundly disrupts it, causing the engines of material acquisition and class ambition driving their protagonists to sputter and seize. In so doing, it forces readers and viewers to think critically about the most powerful myths dominating American thought and culture during the first half of the twentieth century. As Leonard observes, these include “the myth of progress; the myth of efficiency; the myth of satisfaction; the myth of perfectibility, [...] and the myth of coherency” (Ibid. 223, 224). The accident effectively debunks these myths; in littering their texts with the mangled bodies and immobilized vehicles of would-be social climbers, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Vidor, and Hurston challenge national narratives of progress, prosperity, and optimism, offering, in place of these, an altogether different myth and governing sensibility: anguish.

Broadly speaking, anguish is characterized by the sense that *things could have been different*; its mood is decidedly subjunctive. Unlike the feeling of foreclosure that accompanies despair, wherein one succumbs to powers well beyond one’s control—to the necessary and inevitable—anguish torments the mind with alternative possibilities, scenarios, outcomes, and endings. One might argue that despair follows in the wake of natural deaths, disasters, and accidents, whereas anguish accompanies “the artificial accident” as defined by Virilio. In *The Accident of Art*, he makes precisely this distinction: “I say things that are extreme, but I can’t stand it when people turn me away and say: ‘You’re just a pessimist.’ They say I am in love with despair. Horseshit. All they have to do is read my books!” (Lotringer and Virilio 72). Indeed, reading Virilio’s

work indicates that he is deeply anguished; like the modernist writers and filmmakers discussed in this study, he rejects both nihilism and ambivalence in favor of “a hope that reaches beyond hope” (Ibid. 111).

What, precisely, is this hope? In *The Original Accident*, Virilio expresses an “urgent need” to begin “reversing a trend that consists in exposing us to the most catastrophic accidents deriving from technoscientific genius”—be they industrial or ecological (Virilio 23). We must, for example, question our desire “to fly thousands of passengers at the same time in one and the same air carrier” at ever accelerating speeds across ever increasing distances, as well as the ends to which such travel is bent (Ibid. 14, 22). “[W]here,” he asks, “[does] the qualitative (if not quantitative) progress lie in such loopy overkill?” (22). Given the considerably higher rate of car—as opposed to plane—crash fatalities, such questions may be equally applied to traffic on the ground.

For John Urry, the hope is simply for alternative modes of transport and existence, which he sees as inextricably intertwined. In proposing new models for urban design and development, mass transit, and energy allocation and consumption, he usefully reminds readers that our particular “mode of mobility is neither socially necessary nor inevitable”; its development was, itself, an accident (Urry 27). So, too, was the rise of modern industrial capitalism, which the automobile industry largely structures and subtends. In this dissertation, I argue that literary and filmic representations of the accident invite readers and viewers to think critically about the larger engine of which the automobile is an integral part—to question both its machinations and its malfunctioning. We must ask, as Garry Leonard does, “‘why’ [the system] *is*, or why it is the particular way it is in the first place” (Leonard 226). In so

doing, ““A Profane Miracle”” challenges the discourse of ambivalence that characterizes much of the recent scholarship on the relationship between literary modernism and techno-industrial modernity, foregrounding the anguish necessary to incite social change.

¹ Lotringer, Sylvère, and Paul Virilio. *The Accident of Art*. Tr. Michael Taormina. New York: Seiotext(e), 2005, 63.

² McRoy, Jay. “Wounds of Opportunity: J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*.” *M/C Reviews* Apr. (2001).

³ Karl Benz patented the first internal combustion engine in 1886. Nine years later, Auguste and Louis Lumière produced “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat.”

⁴ See Dettelbach, Cynthia Golomb. *In the Driver’s Seat: A Study of the Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1974, and Casey, Roger N. *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.

⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶ Virilio, Paul. *Art and Fear*. Tr. Julie Rose. London: Continuum, 2003.

⁷ Virilio fails to note the degree to which photography spurred this movement away from classical “figuration” in the static arts.

Chapter One:

Violent Intersections: Accident, Copies, and Acceleration in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*

Man [is] a mechanism... and a badly and carelessly driven one at that.

—Theodore Dreiser

Despite the critical acclaim and popularity that attended the initial publishing of Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel, *An American Tragedy*, it received sporadic scholarly attention during the following decades.¹ In a 1963 essay entitled "Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*: A Critical Study," Richard Lehan marvels at the fact that, to date, "there is only one detailed critical study of Dreiser's [novel]"—namely, F. O. Matthiessen's "Of Crime and Punishment," published in *Theodore Dreiser* (Lehan 187). Lehan claims that this is because the New Critics of his era found Dreiser's novel "ponderous, his themes explicit, [and] his characters representative," thus making "a critical study a contradiction in terms" (Ibid.). Likewise, Dreiser's biographer, Richard Lingeman, concedes in his otherwise laudatory introduction to the 2000 Signet Classic edition of *An American Tragedy* that Dreiser's style is "slow, ponderous, almost archaic at times, and sprinkled with solecisms. The first part of the novel, describing Clyde's childhood and young manhood, would benefit from cutting" (Lingeman xv). Given the greater portion of the novel's focus on Clyde Griffiths's reinvented life in Lycurgus, Roberta Alden's ambiguous drowning, and Clyde's subsequent murder trial, it is difficult to understand the relevance of our protagonist's petty work at Kansas City soda fountains and hotels, his early romantic dalliances, or a brief automobile excursion to Excelsior Springs. However, had Book One of Dreiser's novel been trimmed (or, as it is in George Steven's 1951 screen adaptation, *A Place in the Sun*, cut altogether), the persistent theme of doubling that both Lehan and Lingeman recognize as one of its most compelling aesthetic

features would have been considerably weakened.² Lingeman observes that “Dreiser’s narrative method is to create characters who have their counterparts or ‘doubles’ in the lower or higher classes,” while Lehan explores the ways in which “the meaning of one scene” is consistently tied to “another which it foreshadows” (Lingeman xiii, Lehan 187).

The car accident occurring at the conclusion of Book One thus serves as a crucial precursor to later events—in particular, the murder at Big Bittern. The fatal crash, elaborated over the course of an entire chapter, also suggests that it is not strictly ambition, class stratification, and social climbing upon which Dreiser meditates throughout the novel, but the *speed* at which social ascension—and its reverse—can occur during the interwar period. Despite Paul Virilio’s provocative claims about the accelerated culture of modernity, rarely are questions of speed and inertia brought to bear upon discussions of class mobility.³ Fictional representations of the automobile accident such as Dreiser’s thus invite further reflection about the relationships between speed, violence, and the social “upstart” (AAT 143).⁴ In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Dreiser’s decelerated narrative aesthetic simultaneously engages and critiques new speed technologies such as cinema and the automobile, in order to counteract the too far, too fast rise of his protagonist.

I. Accident

As Lehan and Lingeman have observed, the climax of Book One, the “grave catastrophe” toward which it moves with inexorable force, is the car crash occurring in Chapter 19 (AAT 184). This, in turn, anticipates the climax of Book Two—namely, Roberta Alden’s drowning at Big Bittern. Both scenes of violence take place outside the city limits in a quasi-Hobbesian state of nature, and both claim young women as their

victims.⁵ More importantly, both incidents fall within the purview of the accident—an unstable category of human action and event that, as I shall demonstrate, offers a useful means of reevaluating the novel’s central preoccupations—specifically, the fraught relationship between individual agency and social determinism. The accident, commonly understood as a breach of the individual’s will or desire, becomes, in Dreiser’s world, the site of the will eclipsed by the machinations of a capitalistic socioeconomic order. The result is a troubling inversion: in such a world, manslaughter becomes the capital crime of the individual and murder, as evidenced by Clyde’s execution, the crime of capital (or, put more accurately, of the capitalistic state).⁶ As Mandy Merck observes, “Dreiser regarded [America] as the real author of his protagonist’s misfortune. Written in its Jazz Age, [...] the novel [...] both constitute[s] and [is] constituted by the convulsions of the nation state that is its antagonist and its theme” (Merck 5).

Not only is the automobile accident central to the first section of the novel, but cars and “motoring,” in a more general sense, are important throughout *An American Tragedy* as symbols of wealth, social status, sexual prowess, and personal freedom (AAT 51). Noting that the “time setting” of the story is curiously vague—Dreiser omits any exact dates or references to the Great War—Paul A. Orlov cites the “major role that automobiles play in [the novel]” as evidence that it is set in the 1920s (Orlov 68). Indeed, as historian James J. Flink observes, the interwar decade witnessed unparalleled growth in the American automobile industry, with “the market for new cars reach[ing] saturation in the late 1920s” (Flink 56). “By the time the Model T was withdrawn from production in 1927,” he writes, “over 15 million units had been sold”—roughly twenty times the number of units sold in 1916 (37). Dreiser’s ubiquitous references to the

automobile—to “handsome cars of various builds and colors” and to the leisure activity of “automobiling”—reflect the rapid proliferation of this new technology in the social life and culture of the period (AAT 363, 169). More significantly, Orlov contends that cars figure prominently in the most pivotal moments of Clyde’s life. After the fatal crash in Kansas City, Dreiser deliberately stages Clyde’s first encounter with Sondra in “a closed car of great size and solidity” (AAT 349). “[H]ere she was as lovely as ever,” our hero marvels, “seated in this beautiful car and addressing him, apparently” (AAT 351). Orlov contrasts this with Clyde’s later glimpse of the “extremely dilapidated” Alden farmstead, which he passes while “motoring north [...] to take advantage of an early spring weekend” at the Finchley’s lake house (AAT 492). Both events, contends Orlov, “intensify [Clyde’s] desperate desire to escape Roberta and the bleak world she symbolizes” (Orlov 68).

In the first of these examples—namely, the accident occurring on the drive back from Excelsior Springs—we see evidence of a newly emergent youth culture in which cars, in particular, offered unprecedented access to a variety of experiences. In his 2009 study, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Enda Duffy describes the automobile as a “radically hybrid commodity: its use value, as it turned out, far from being superseded or obscured by its exchange value, rather, complemented it... [the car] made ‘use’ of itself into a complex of experiences which the consumer had not known she had desired” (Duffy 118). Included in this new complex of experiences is the somatic thrill induced by speed, the extension of privatized space, and increased personal mobility. Duffy notes that, because automotive transport has become so commonplace, it is difficult to “recapture the excitement of those who drove the first cars or saw one raise

the dust on a village street, for whom twenty-five miles an hour was intensely fast” (5). Set, however, in the heyday of the industry, *An American Tragedy* bespeaks the novelty of the automotive experience, as is aptly illustrated by Clyde’s excursion to Excelsior Springs in the “borrowed” Packard.

Despite his reservations about how the vehicle is obtained, “so fascinated was he by the thought of riding in such a fine car with Hortense and with all these other girls and boys that he could not resist the temptation to go” (AAT 139). In keeping with the persistent association of cars with leisure during the first quarter of the twentieth century, “with ‘touring’ and with the fashionable habits of ‘resort’ living,” the youngsters set out for the Wigwam Inn, which was “really a combination of restaurant and dancing parlor and hotel” overlooking a river (Orlov 124, AAT 138). As the group speeds farther and farther away from Kansas City, Clyde finds himself “quite fascinated by the idea of travel which appeared to be suggested by all this—distant travel. It was all so different from his ordinary routine” (AAT 140). Freed from the imperative to “rise, dress, and march” in the service of others—be they Green-Davidson guests or Griffithses—Clyde here experiences the novel pleasures of autonomy and mobility—of moving outside his ordinary, class-and-labor-bound routine (AAT 56). This pleasure simultaneously literalized and metaphorized by the automobile, itself. As Orlov notes, the Packard, in particular, was “*the* main symbol of automotive excellence in America during the nineteen teens and the ‘roaring twenties’: it was a true status symbol and the car of presidents, celebrities in all fields, of the ‘rich and famous’” (Orlov 225). The Packard “has class” and Clyde imagines that, as its passenger, “he belongs to the class it has.”⁷

In his essay, “An American Tragedy, or the Promise of American Life,” Walter Benn Michaels elaborates this “slippery class erotics” in relation to Sondra Finchley’s questionable desire for Clyde (Michaels 88). Sondra develops an interest in Clyde because being with him allows her to imagine “the possibility of belonging to more than one [class at the same time]—or, rather, of a single person embodying the moment of crossing” (88). Sondra, Michaels argues, does not want “so much to move from one class to another as to experience the phenomenon of class in the context of class mobility, to experience through class difference her own ‘class’” (89). She is, in effect, *slumming it*. Because Clyde and his cohort *do* desire to move from one class to another, however, their experience of class mobility carries with it altogether different connotations (and, Dreiser suggests, dangers). The automobile excursion provides not only the “borrowed” experience of class mobility (they do not own the car), but also the illusion that their movement from one class to another can occur with unimpeded rapidity.

For speed they do. The narrator observes: “The car was speeding at breakneck pace over snowy white road and between white fields. In fact, Sparser, considering himself a master of car manipulation as well as the real owner of it for the moment, was attempting to see how fast he could go on such a road” (AAT 140). Believing the vehicle’s performance to be inseparable from his own performance of masculinity, social dominance, and sexual prowess, Sparser illustrates Duffy’s claim that, “from its first outing, the automobile fostered and came to represent [...] the interface of sexual desire and technology” (Duffy 112). As Flink more modestly describes it, the automobile established new “patterns of courtship” for its younger proprietors (Flink 3). Noticing that some of his passengers have “drawn their girls to them in affectionate embraces,”

Sparser is “not to be outdone in gallantry by the others, [and] he now put one arm about Laura Sipe while he guided the car with the other” (AAT 140). Hortense, likewise, “made no particular protest [when Clyde] put his arm about her and drew her to him” (AAT 140). Had there not been four other couples in the Packard (and here, Dreiser might have overstepped the bounds of plausibility), one wonders what other advances might have met with little protest. As F. Scott Fitzgerald observes in his 1931 essay, “Echoes of the Jazz Age”:

The first social revelation [of the era] created a sensation out of all proportion to its novelty. As far back as 1915 the unchaperoned young people of the smaller cities had discovered the mobile privacy of that automobile given to young Bill at sixteen to make him “self-reliant.” At first petting was a desperate adventure even under such favorable conditions, but presently confidences were exchanged and the old commandment [of modesty] broke down. (Fitzgerald 14-15)

Dreiser’s staging of these flirtations in the vehicle thus confirms Roger N. Casey’s claim that automobiles—and automobiling—are profoundly gendered entities. In his seminal study, *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature*, he observes:

Since maintaining an auto in the early days of motorcars did require considerable physical strength, men quickly began to see automobiling as inherently masculine. With the car, a man could be in control of a machine, the opposite of what he often experienced at work in an industrial job. Thus, the car became an important contributor to the psyche of male dominance. (Casey 9)

Sparser demonstrates this by asserting himself as the alpha male, enacting an aggressive masculinity that contrasts sharply with Clyde’s emasculated, hesitating nature—“Don’t

you think it's dangerous for us to be going out in this car?" he asks Ratterer (AAT 138).

It is for this reason that Sparser attracts the attention of Hortense. Despite the fact that he seemed "more worldly-wise... more materialistic, less romantic [and] more direct" than Clyde, Hortense nevertheless feels compelled to playfully discourage Sparser's advances, thereby enacting a demure femininity (AAT 142, 151).

Here Duffy's analysis of a comparable scene in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) might be productively brought to bear upon Dreiser's work. "In chapter 7 of 'The Maiden,'" he writes, "Hardy describes how the teenage and gullible Tess tries not to be frightened by the cad Alec d'Urberville, who drives her downhill at full speed in his dogcart" (Duffy 119). Duffy claims that the "use of speed [in this scene] was cast by Hardy as terror tactic in a vile seduction. The speed fiend (Alec) is a corrupt villain; the refusal of the thrill of speed by the lowly heroine (Tess) symbolizes the self-preservation of her sexual innocence" (119). In Dreiser's scenario, "the rakish, ne'er-do-well" Sparser assumes the role of speed fiend and villain; his aggressive sexual advances towards Hortense are countered by her—admittedly, false and affected—modesty (AAT 140). In both texts speed stands for a "caddish masculinity, its refusal for demure innocence" (Duffy 119).

The rehearsal and consequent reification of these gender roles serves as a necessary precursor to breaching them; a series of transgressive activities such as drinking, dancing, and "sporting" outside directly follows the group's arrival at Wigwam Inn. The trip to Excelsior Springs thus serves as the last in a series of ritual initiations sanctioned by Clyde's new cohort. Youths like Ratterer, Higby, and Hegglund "had already been inducted into certain forms of libertinism and vice which were entirely

foreign to Clyde's knowledge and set him agape with wonder and at first even with timorous distaste" (AAT 57). It is under the powerful influence of these peers that Clyde takes his first alcoholic drink at Frissell's, attends his first dance, visits his first prostitute, and makes his first unchaperoned excursion outside of Kansas City. What is most striking about these rituals—and made particularly evident in the last example—is their close alignment of leisure, sex, and violence. As theorist of the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen, observes: "leisure, considered as an employment, is closely allied in kind with the life of exploit"—be it material or sexual (Veblen 34).

The ostensible "climax" of the afternoon is reached "when after several more dances and drinks, the small river and its possibilities was [sic] again brought to the attention of all by Hegglund, who, looking out of the windows, suddenly exclaimed: 'What's de matter wit de ice down dere? Look at de swell ice. I dare dis crowd to go down dere and slide'" (AAT 146). Tempted by this dare, the group sets off "pell-mell" for the frozen water where they proceed to play "crack the whip" (AAT 146). The thrill of this game lies in its violent manipulation of the last links in a human chain; Clyde watches as Hortense and Sparser:

...in falling, skidded and rolled against each other to the edge of the shore where were snow and leaves and twigs. And Hortense's skirts, becoming awry in some way, moved up to above her knees... And Laura Sipe, having fallen in such a way as to trip Higby, who had fallen across her, they also lay there laughing and yet in a most suggestive position, as Clyde thought. He noted, too, that Laura Sipe's skirts had been worked above her knees. (AAT 147)

After a few more rounds, Clyde eventually finds himself “thrown down and spun around the ice like [a] curling iron... entangled with these others [so that] Lucille Nickolas was lying across his knees face down in such a spanking position that he was compelled to laugh” (AAT 148).

These passages presage the true “climax” of the afternoon—namely, the automobile accident—in which, “amid a crash of glass and the impacts of their own bodies, the occupants [of the vehicle] were thrown down in a heap” (AAT 159). Dreiser describes the gruesome scene with a coroner’s precision:

Sparsen and Laura Sipe, being in front, were dashed against the wind-shield and the roof and knocked senseless, Sparsen, having his shoulder, hip, and left knee wrenched in such a way as to make it necessary to let him lie in the car as he was until an ambulance arrived. He could not possibly be lifted out through the door, which was in the roof as the car now lay. And in the second seat, Clyde, being nearest the door to the left and next to him Hortense, Lucille Nickolas and Ratterer, was pinioned under and yet not crushed by their combined weights. For Hortense in falling had been thrown completely over him on her side against the roof, which was now the left wall. And Lucille, next above her, fell in such a way as to lie across Clyde’s shoulders only, while Ratterer, now topmost of four, had been thrown over the seat in front of him. (AAT 159)

In uncanny anticipation of J.G. Ballard’s 1973 novel, *Crash*, Dreiser exposes the orgiastic carnality underlying the new semiotics of the automobile and its accident. Mark Seltzer describes this phenomenon in his 1992 study, *Bodies and Machines*, as the “miscegenation” of the natural and the technological that “makes up the American body-

machine complex,” or “the intimate *coupling* of bodies and machines” (Seltzer 21, 4, 13). Unlike Ballard, however, Dreiser presents this “cultural turn”—so described by Enda Duffy—as unambiguously destructive, rather than potentially generative (Duffy 4).⁸

Additionally, “crack-the-whip,” unlike motoring, is a comparatively innocent, harmless game that doesn’t require money (although the group approaches both activities with the same naïve levity). Consequently, despite the fact Clyde and his cohort begin their excursion likened to an innocent “company of young satyrs and nymphs of an older day,” they soon find themselves buried beneath the warped metal and broken glass of this distinctly modern technology, wrecked by their own desires (AAT 146). The scene aptly illustrates Theodor Adorno’s provocative claim that “Fun is a bath of steel” (Adorno 103). It is likewise fitting—and ironic—that Clyde’s fear of losing his position at the Green Davidson as a result of the accident, of having “all his fine world stripped from him before he could say a word,” is described as a “grinding [pain], like a macerating wheel to his flesh” (AAT 163).

Clyde’s future is jeopardized not only by the stolen and wrecked vehicle, but also by the fact that, upon their hasty return to Kansas City, Sparser hits a pedestrian. The language Dreiser uses to describe the hit-and-run preceding the final crash is telling:

Just as [Sparser] neared the corner and was about to turn at high speed, swinging close to the curb to do so, a little girl of about nine, who was running toward the crossing, jumped directly in front of the moving machine. And because there was no opportunity given him to turn and avoid her, she was struck and dragged a number of feet before the machine could be halted. (AAT 156-157)

Note the subtle shift from Sparser as the active subject of the first sentence to “the moving machine.” The little girl “was struck and dragged” by “the machine,” not by Sparser, himself. Seltzer argues that the aforementioned “miscegenation” of the natural and the technological results in an “erosion of the boundaries that divide persons and things, labor and nature, what counts as agent and what doesn’t” (Seltzer 21). Cultural critic Paul Virilio would be quick to add that this suspicious erasure of individual agency is also a direct result of the “break-neck speed” at which certain technologies operate (AAT 155).

In his 2005 study, *The Original Accident*, he writes: “Speed suppresses not only Relatedness [i.e., the natural relations between both subjects and objects]... but also Reason... [the] acceleration of reality tends to reverse the principle of responsibility” (Virilio 88, 90). Referencing Virilio’s work in his 2009 study, *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History*, Ross Hamilton summarizes the problem thus: “Virilio’s concern is that exposure to [speed] technologies induces a voluntary blindness to the implications of events that damages any sense of responsibility for individual actions, and [that] this ‘love of radical mindlessness’ is replacing (or has already replaced) philosophical introspection” (Hamilton 3). Immersed in a culture profoundly shaped by the rapid proliferation of these new speed technologies—it is not only the rise of automobiles, but also film that Virilio has in mind—Clyde’s character aptly illustrates the triumph of “radical mindlessness” over “philosophical introspection.”

In his essay, “Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience,” Julian Markels describes Clyde as having about him a quality of “unquestioning submission” (Markels 434). He struggles to take responsibility for his role in the automobile accident—and,

later, in Roberta's drowning—because he is “unequipped to anticipate or judge his experience[s]”; his is a story about the movement from “inarticulate... undifferentiated human experience” to “consciousness” (442, 434, 447). Although Markels claims that this deficiency is unique to Clyde's character—after all, he possessed “a soul that was not destined to grow up” and “lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that ... [would allow] for [his] direct advancement”—F. Scott Fitzgerald argues that this psychological immaturity pervades the licentious, indulgent postwar period about which Dreiser writes (*AAT* 193). In “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” he characterizes the “ten-year period that [...] leaped to a spectacular death in October, 1929” as:

...an age of excess [...] when the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight. This was the generation whose girls drammatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste. May one offer in exhibit the year 1922! That was the peak of the younger generation, for though the Jazz Age continued, it became less and less an affair of youth. (Fitzgerald 13, 14-15).

Orlov corroborates these claims, observing that 1920s America witnessed an unprecedented explosion in “youth culture”: “Clyde and his contemporaries are shown (from the time he is sixteen) to enjoy a degree of unchaperoned freedom—and a desire to use it in dancing, drinking, driving, and partying, often far from their homes—quite expressive of the postwar decade's youth rebellion and hedonistic culture” (Orlov 68).

The phenomenon of speed—both literally and metaphorically speaking—is integral to this culture. Fast cars find their counterpart in “fast girls”; pointing to a “blonde woman of about thirty” who enters the hotel “bedecked with furs,” Ratterer whispers to Clyde: ““See her? There’s a swift one. I’ll tell you about her sometime when I have time. Gee, the things she don’t do!”” (AAT 51). Alternatives to the accelerated culture of modernity are, likewise, present in the novel. Dreiser’s narrative method, his “slow and ponderous style,” counters Clyde’s accelerated, elliptical vision of success, thereby suggesting that the fully “conscious” subject capable of philosophical introspection and moral judgment asserts itself in moments of hesitancy, stillness, silence and pause. The activities most conducive to this assertion are reading and walking; the activities that are least conducive are movie-going and motoring.

Admittedly, the severe physical and psychological trauma that he has suffered renders Clyde incapable of philosophical introspection immediately following the accident. But several months later, when thinking back upon the crash, Clyde denies any responsibility for “that slain child in Kansas City,”—again, not the child Sparser slew (AAT 216). In a candid (although pseudonymous) letter to his mother, he writes: “I didn’t do anything wrong that time, myself. Really I didn’t, although the papers said so—just went along. But I was afraid they would punish me for something that I didn’t do. I just couldn’t come back then. I wasn’t to blame...” (AAT 185-186). While Clyde’s innocence is more credible in this case than it is in the case of Roberta’s death, his flight—his concern only for himself and his future—is nonetheless incriminating.

II. Copies

This brings us to the persistent theme of doubling deployed by Dreiser throughout the novel. Given the thematic and structural parallels between the conclusion of Book One and that of Book Two, Julian Markels's claim that "none of the mountainous information about Clyde's early life is even relevant to explain the murder" is surprising (Markels 441).⁹ Revisiting both scenes, Richard Lehan observes the way in which Dreiser's language is repeated—at times, verbatim—in certain passages. Like the fateful trip to Big Bittern, Clyde's excursion to Excelsior Springs is described in portentous terms:

The day, a late January one, was inclined to be smoky with lowering clouds, especially within the environs of Kansas City. It even threatened snow at times... [As they drove,] dark vignettes of wood went by to right and left. Fields away, sentinel hills rose and fell like waves. A wide-armed scarecrow fluttering in the wind, its tall decayed hat awry, stood near at hand in one place. And from near it a flock of crows rose and winged direct toward a distant wood lightly penciled against the foreground of snow. (*AAT* 139, 140)

This, Lehan argues, mirrors the description of Grass Lake: "It was black and dark like tar, and sentineled to the east and north by tall, dark pines—the serried spears of armed and watchful giants, as they now appeared to [Clyde]—ogres almost—so gloomy, suspicious, and fantastically erratic was his own mood in regard to this" (*AAT* 550). Likewise, the aforementioned "flock of crows" anticipates "the bird that cries so ominously before and after the death of Roberta... [so] connect[ing] the incident at Big Bittern with the incident of the fatal auto trip in Kansas City" (Lehan 189). The "waves" of snowy hills might also be said to anticipate Roberta's watery grave.

It is strange that, given his close attention to Dreiser's language, Lehan fails to recognize another direct parallel between the conclusion of Book One and that of Book Two. The final paragraph of Chapter 19 describes our hapless hero:

...taking to the open fields... crawling upon his hands and knees at first in the snow south, south and west, always toward some of those distant streets which, lamplit and faintly glowing, he saw to the southwest of him, and among which, presently, if he were not captured, he hoped to hide—to lose himself and so escape... (AAT 165)

Echoing this language—at times, word for word—the final paragraph of Chapter 47 details Clyde's flight thus: "He must go west and then south... [the] youth making his way through a dark, uninhabited wood, a dry straw hat upon his head, a bag in his hand, walking briskly and yet warily—south—south" (AAT 566). His westerly movement, in both cases, is worth noting. As Frederick Jackson Turner and R.W.B. Lewis have argued, the American West represents a deeply mythologized frontier of endless opportunity and freedom which, for Clyde, leads (albeit, indirectly) to "the misery and the punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment" he would otherwise evade (AAT 165).¹⁰ While passages such as this appear to confirm the commonly leveled critique that Dreiser's prose is clumsy and redundant, I argue that it rather constitutes a conscious and deliberate *formal* attempt to slow, stymie, and impede his protagonist's headlong vision of success. More explicit than implicit, however, is the author's critique of the cultural mythology which informs Clyde's vision. As Richard Lehan observes: "It is ironic that the American dream should be associated with the westward movement, for

as the Griffiths family moves westward—from Grand Rapids [...] to San Francisco—they get poorer and poorer” (Lehan 190).

More important than the direction of Clyde’s flight, however, is the very act of flight, itself. Clyde’s desire to escape overwhelms any sense of personal responsibility for or obligation to the accident victims (one of which, he intended to murder). Emerging from the overturned vehicle in Kansas City, Clyde “was thinking that he too must get out of this as quickly as possible. A child had been killed; a car stolen and wrecked; his job was most certainly lost; the police were in pursuit and might find them there any minute” (AAT 160). Similar thoughts cycle through his mind after the canoe capsizes: “But he must get out of this—out of this! He must” (AAT 606). Both responses illustrate Paul Orlov’s claim that, “[f]ar from causing Clyde to revise his goals and behavior, the car crash that closes book 1 (suddenly ending the whole first phase of his life) merely redirects the path—and then ironically hastens the pace—of his pursuit of a new, securely successful identity” (Orlov 118).

Where Clyde is deficient in recognizing these parallels, the reader is invited to become proficient. Citing the work of Warner Berthoff, Jason Puskar argues that the literary production of accidents often serves as a kind of “moral rigging” or “carefully contrived ropework designed to hoist an ethical lesson by the novel’s end” (Puskar 32).¹¹ Although Puskar is here referring to the work of William Dean Howells, Dreiser can be said to share his predecessor’s interest in the pedagogical value of the accident. In the first letter to his mother after the car crash, Clyde appears to have learned the lesson embedded therein. He writes: “I’ve got a lot more sense now, anyhow, I see things different than I used to... I don’t want to go back to the hotel business either if I can help

it. It's not so very good for me—too high-flying, I guess. You see I know a lot more than I did back there" (AAT 186). This knowledge is quickly forgotten, however. Within two months of mailing the letter, Clyde lands a job at Chicago's Great Northern hotel. His dreams of a materially "successful" life obscure any sense of the danger that pursuing such a life has already entailed (AAT 186). As Puskar observes, "an important difference between Dreiser and Howells lies in Dreiser's preference for moments in which [...] small accidents propel long-term patterns of ascent or decline" (35).

Astutely appealing to the language Dreiser uses to describe the automobile accident, Donald Pizer similarly argues that Books One and Two consist of "parallel major cris[es] which Clyde is unable to resolve and which eventually crush him under [their] weight" (Pizer 247). Although he believes himself "well set upon the path that leads to all blisses," Clyde's social, economic, and even psychological advancement are continually obstructed (AAT 28). These obstructions, if unforeseen by Clyde, are well anticipated by the reader. Pizer writes: "Dreiser's intent in Book One was not only to anticipate almost every aspect of Clyde's character in Books Two and Three but to create that sense of inevitability in Clyde's later thoughts and actions which is one of the most powerful effects of the novel," endowing it with "that level of intensity which we associate with great tragic art" (235, 234).

Despite these parallels, however, the automobile accident differs from the accident at Big Bittern because "Clyde does not undertake the first with murder in mind" (243). Although, at the "cataclysmic moment" in which Clyde might effectively rid himself of Roberta, he is seized by "a sudden palsy of the will"—he lacks "courage—[or] hate or will sufficient"—his hesitancy does not fail to bring about the desired end (AAT

563). Roberta, noticing the “strangeness,” “the eerie unreason [...] of the scene” crawls toward Clyde “since he looked like he was about to fall forward in the boat—or to one side and out into the water” (AAT 563). This repulses Clyde, causing him to “fling out at her, but not even then with any intention to do other than free himself of her—her touch—her pleading—consoling sympathy—her presence forever—God!” (AAT 564). Despite its ambiguities, this passage leads Lehan to conclude that: “Clyde is really innocent of murdering Roberta. As Dresier carefully tells us, Clyde does not have the strength of will to murder her, and he strikes Roberta unintentionally with the camera” (Lehan 191).

The fact that Clyde deals the decisive blow with a camera is significant. As he persuades himself and, in turn, seeks to persuade the jury, a camera was a perfectly reasonable object to have taken on a sight-seeing excursion. But the camera ought to remind the reader of the persistent theme of doubling throughout the novel—of the fact that the murder, itself, is a copy. Down to the straw hat he purchases in Utica, Clyde essays to duplicate the drowning he reads about in *The Times-Union* newspaper:

ACCIDENTAL DOUBLE TRAGEDY AT PASS LAKE—UPTURNED CANOE
AND FLOATING HATS REVEAL PROBABLE LOSS OF TWO LIVES AT
RESORT NEAR PITTSFIELD—UNIDENTIFIED BODY OF GIRL
RECOVERED—THAT OF COMPANION STILL MISSING. (AAT 505)

Immediately after reading the article, Clyde begins to entertain this as a “noiseless, pathless, quarelless solution to all his present difficulties [...] if only such an accident could occur to him and Roberta” (AAT 507). Although he vacillates between feelings of horror and repulsion at the thought of “orchestrating” such an accident until the very

moment of Roberta's death, he nonetheless pursues "the way of the Lake" with diabolical calculation despite its blundering execution (*AAT* 537).

The differences between the car crash concluding Book One and Roberta's drowning notwithstanding, Dreiser's frequent and deliberate use of accidents throughout *An American Tragedy* contribute significantly to the novel's naturalism. As Orlov observes:

[N]aturalism holds that people have little or no free will because their nature and conduct are shaped (at least largely) by forces within them (heredity) and/or outside of them (environment—in the natural or social sense of the word, or both). This means that the naturalistic outlook sees the individual's life governed by chance events, a "fate" of determining forces, or both. And so this viewpoint basically renders life amoral, while also suggesting that human life is more animalistic than semidivine. (Orlov 79)

Markels, likewise, notes Dreiser's "method of arranging the episodes of his plots in order to dramatize with perfect coherence that absence of foreordained purpose in the universe, and its corollary, the hegemony of chance, of which he speaks so awkwardly in his philosophical writings" (Markels 443). This "hegemony of chance" belies the limits of individual agency; Dreiser views man as "a waif and an interloper in Nature, [which desires only] to work through him. [He has] no power to make his own way."¹²

Such views run contrary to the very "ethos" of the period as described by Martha Banta in her 1993 study, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen and Ford*. The culture of scientific management established by Frederick Winslow Taylor and elaborated by Henry Ford "prefers regularity to carelessness, habits

to nature, predictability to mystery, decent conduct to romance, and rational principles to wild facts” (Banta 12). The very genre of literary naturalism—albeit in its later stages by 1925—can thus be seen, through its emphasis upon chance, accident, and contingency, as an interrogation of the impulse to bring “order, rationality, and efficiency out of the disorder, the irrationality, and the wastefulness of the times” (ix).

III. Acceleration

Much of Clyde’s folly lies in the reckless pace with which he endeavors to climb the social and economic ladder, as well as his inability to recognize the precarious nature of his lofty perch once it is attained. Book One details Clyde’s transition, within the space of a few weeks, from abject poverty to seeing “all at once, economic independence for himself” (AAT 41). Dreiser describes Clyde cycling through a series of odd jobs—paper delivery boy, working in the basement of a five-and-ten-cent store, soda fountain assistant, etc.—in which his wages climb from \$5 per week to \$12 per week (AAT 26). Of course, this is nothing compared to the tips he soon earns at the Green Davidson, “averaging from four to six dollars a day—not less and sometimes more,” in addition to a salary of “fifteen dollars a month and board” (AAT 37). Although he does, at one point, envision the kind of slow-and-steady socioeconomic advancement encouraged by Benjamin Franklin, Founding Father of America’s protestant work ethic, Clyde is too ambitious and too impatient. He reflects:

He would work and save his money and be somebody... However, the trouble with this particular position [at Kinkle’s drug store], as time speedily proved, was that much as it might teach him of mixing drinks and how to eventually earn

twelve dollars a week, it was no immediate solvent for the yearnings and ambitions that were already gnawing at his vitals. (AAT 29)

Clyde desires “immediate” gratification and, surprisingly enough, finds it.

Upon securing the position as a bellhop, Clyde “hurried out [of his interview], thrilling from head to toe... Could it be possible that he would be admitted to such a grand world as this—and that so speedily? Could it really be?” (AAT 35). His work at the hotel precipitates “an enormous change in Clyde’s life,” for which he is wholly unprepared (AAT 43). As Ellen Moers argues, Clyde is not sufficiently suspicious of his “Aladdinish” transformation (Moers 280).¹³ He does not recognize fortune’s turning—or, as the case may be, “grinding [and] macerating”—wheel (AAT 163). The automobile accident abruptly concluding Clyde’s life in Kansas City serves as an allegory for the potentially disastrous consequences of his driving ambition, after which the same trajectory essentially repeats itself.

Fleeing Kansas City in a box car, Clyde “essay[s] one small job [after] another, in St. Louis, Peoria, Chicago, [and] Milwaukee—dishwashing in a restaurant, soda-clerking in a small outlying drug-store, attempting to learn to be a shoe clerk, a grocer’s clerk, and whatnot; and being discharged and laid off and quitting because he did not like it” (AAT 185). Presented, again, with the possibility of learning a trade and “making a moderate living,” Clyde rejects this in favor of the fast money he can earn as a bellhop at the Great Northern (AAT 185). Forgetting his earlier reservations about the hotel business, Clyde returns to the world of the socially and materially “elect,” hoping, somehow, to enter their echelons (AAT 192). It is here that he accidentally runs into his wealthy uncle and so secures a position at the Griffiths’ collar factory in Lycurgus. After working for only

two months in the basement shrinking room (literally, the bottom rung of the corporate ladder), Clyde is promoted, experiencing the “sudden jump in salary,” professional responsibility, and social stature for which he has longed (*AAT* 267). Clyde assumes that, “[t]o be sure, [Gilbert and his uncle] must think something of him, or they would not choose to do all this for him and so speedily” (*AAT* 267). Implied in this language is the threat of implosion, collision, catastrophe. Because violence and speed are inextricably linked—as Virilio observes, increased speeds increase the violence of an impact—the emphasis, throughout *An American Tragedy*, upon Clyde’s accelerated class ascension braces the reader for his impending destruction. Moers observes: “Nothing in Clyde’s story is more tragic or more American than his too early, too swift, and too magical transport to [upper class life]” (275).

Interestingly, Moers echoes the views of conservatives who countered the radical social change sought by some Progressivists during the 1920s. “[P]olitical gradualists,” writes historian John Whiteclay Chambers, “believe[d] in classical political economy, laissez-faire, the unregulated marketplace, and a mechanistic type of gradual progress [...] measured ‘not by days and years but by generations and centuries in a life of nations’” (Chambers 109).¹⁴ In many respects, this political faction was responding to the rapid proliferation of overnight financial success stories witnessed during the period. Figures like John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and the fictional Jay Gatsby bespoke not only the postwar boom in various industries, but also the volatility of the capitalist market. We see this perspective represented, in the novel, by Samuel Griffiths, who “had been long in climbing up to his rank” (*AAT* 246). Sergei Eisenstein, who had planned to make a film of *An American Tragedy* that never came to fruition, claims that

this, in fact, produces “the difference in attitude towards Clyde adopted by his uncle and his cousin, respectively.”¹⁵ While Samuel Griffiths represents the “still prevail[ing] patriarchal democratic spirit of the fathers, who have not forgotten how they themselves came to the town in rags to make their fortunes,” Gilbert belongs to “the succeeding generation [which] is already approximating a money aristocracy.”¹⁶

Contrasts such as these contribute to Dreiser’s well-documented critique of the nefarious “rags-to-riches” myths popularized by Horatio Alger. As Pizer observes: “Although he made his way up from humble origins by the classic formula of luck and pluck, Dreiser’s later awareness of both the rarity of the rise and the pervasiveness of the Alger myth of success contributed to the bitter caricature of that myth in *An American Tragedy*” (Pizer 3). Orlov, in turn, elaborates the manner by which “Dreiser heightens the ironic disparities between Clyde Griffiths’ story and an Alger hero’s by introducing plot elements that suggestively *mirror* those found in a typical ‘bound-to-rise’ book” (Orlov 120). These “plot elements” include the ironic (because frequently inverted) use of “fortuitous circumstance,” accidental meetings, and “magical events” such as the “restoration of a fortune to which [the hero] has been unjustly deprived” (122).

It is important to recognize, however, that this bound-to-rise myth is promoted not only by the Alger stories, but also by the cinema. “An invention of the period eclipsed only by the auto,” writes Orlov, “was the motion picture business” (29). That Clyde is deeply influenced by this new medium is evident. He spends his soda fountain wages at the adjoining movie theater and envisions Hortense as a kind of starlet who “would flicker before him as upon a screen” (*AAT* 114). Roberta, likewise, fashions her honeymoon wardrobe after that of a screen heroine’s. As Mandy Merck observes, the

courtroom scene is also “specifically compared to a movie set, with the ambitious prosecuting attorney seeing himself as its star” (Merck 3). More importantly, when contemplating the various means by which he might appease (and so escape) Roberta, Clyde recalls “some possible fake or mock marriage such as he had seen in some melodramatic movie—a fake minister and witnesses combining to deceive some simple country girl” (AAT 487). According to Merck, this reference makes “the cinema itself [...] an accessory to crime” (5).

Not only is film invoked in a general sense throughout *An American Tragedy*, but Dreiser also appeals to the specific editing technique of montage—particularly in relation to Clyde’s inner monologues. By this I do not mean the dialectical use of montage advanced by Sergei Eisenstein, but rather the montage sequence as it is commonly deployed in classical Hollywood cinema to effect the narrative telescoping of events. Take, for example, the manner in which our hero observes and internalizes the “moving panorama of the [Green Davidson] lobby” (AAT 49):

...very often one of these young [female guests] was accompanied by some male in evening suit, dress shirt, high hat, bow tie, white kid gloves and patent leather shoes, a costume which at that time Clyde felt to be the last word in all true distinction, beauty, gallantry, and bliss. To be able to wear such a suit with such ease and air! To be able to talk to a girl after the manner and with the sang-froid of some of these gallants! What a true measure of achievement! No good-looking girl, as it then appeared to him, would have anything to do with him if he did not possess this standard of equipment. It was plainly necessary—the thing. And once he did attain it—was able to wear such clothes as these—well, then was

he not well set upon the path that leads to all blisses? All the joys of life would then most certainly be spread before him. The friendly smiles! The secret handclasps, maybe—an arm about the waist of someone or another—a kiss—a promise of marriage—and then, and then! (AAT 28)

Here we are given a veritable montage of Clyde's imagined future—a disjointed succession of images (close-ups, even) from which the connective tissue of real time, effort, and labor is conspicuously absent. He thus illustrates Robert B. Ray's contention that "the sustained use of narratively motivated abridgements [in classical narrative film] encouraged the spectator to regard the vast majority of his own waking hours as insignificant—indeed, all hours that did not fit immediately into some ongoing 'plot'" (Ray 47).

Max Horkheimer expresses a similar anxiety about the effects of montage on viewers in a 1942 letter to Leo Lowenthal:

You will remember those terrible scenes in the movies when some years of a hero's life are pictured in a series of shots which take about one or two minutes, just to show how he grew up or old, how a war started and passed by, a[nd] s[o] o[n]. This trimming of an existence into some futile moments which can be characterized schematically symbolizes the dissolution of humanity into elements of administration. Mass culture in its different branches reflects the fact that the human being is cheated out of his own entity which Bergson so justly called "durée."¹⁷

This "trimming of existence into some futile moments which can be characterized schematically" is repeated, later in the novel, when Clyde imagines the plot trajectory of

his burgeoning relationship with Sondra: “Blue water—white sails—tennis—golf—horseback riding—driving... And kisses—kisses—kisses!” (AAT 499). Dreiser invokes this familiar filmic technique in order to contrast it with his own narrative technique—a technique, as is evidenced by the novel’s staggering length, sharing more in common with Henri Bergson’s notion of “durée.” Clyde’s accelerated and elliptical vision of success—again, a vision profoundly influenced and encouraged by the Horatio Alger tales in addition to film—is countered by Dreiser’s decelerated narrative aesthetic.¹⁸

Few critics have failed to comment upon the author’s “slow, ponderous, almost archaic” style, in which the ellipses delineated by dashes above (“The secret handclasps—an arm about the waist of someone or another—a kiss—a promise of marriage—and then...”) are elaborated with painstaking detail (Lingeman xv). In his 1926 review of the novel, H.L. Mencken describes *An American Tragedy* as “a shapeless and forbidding monster—a heaping cartload of raw materials for a novel, with rubbish of all sorts intermixed—a vast, sloppy, chaotic thing” containing “literally dozens of” chapters that “could be spared” and that “incommode the action.”¹⁹ In addition to the first book—deemed wholly superfluous in George Stevens’s adaptation—the second book devotes ten lengthy chapters to Clyde’s life in Lycurgus before he even meets Roberta Alden or Sondra Finchley—arguably, the two most important characters in the novel aside from Clyde, himself. F.O. Matthiessen offers a somewhat more generous reading of the novel’s encyclopedic scope, claiming that the “qualifications that clog the prose are also a chief source of Dreiser’s strength. To a greater extent even than in his earlier books he was determined to hold on with un-relaxed tenacity until he had given the full record [of characters and events]” (Matthiessen 206). Given that Dreiser’s novel

follows its protagonist from the age of twelve to his death at roughly the age of twenty, elaborating every small and seminal event that befalls him in-between over the course of three books and one-hundred chapters, he appears to have succeeded.

By all accounts, Dreiser's narrative method is thus understood as one that stymies an accelerated trajectory of action. In so doing, his style demands of the reader precisely that quality which Clyde lacks: patience. Of Dreiser's literary milieu, Enda Duffy observes:

By the 1890s, the anxiety of much high literary production to distance itself from the rising tide of mass-market railway novels and a litter of commuter writing manifested itself not only in little overt concern for new technologies in such texts but more fundamentally in a textual pace that was itself slow, contemplative, and anything but geared to speed. It is in such works, by Thomas Hardy and Henry James, for example, that when speed is granted an entrée, it is analyzed with all the caution and, mostly, disapproval that suggests a fear of what is to come mixed with an awe at its prospects. In high literature of the twentieth century, speed, when it was regarded at all by serious writing, was treated with an almost puritan suspicion. (Duffy 119)

As an inheritor of the realist literary tradition exemplified by writers like Hardy and James, Dreiser clearly demonstrates this tendency. Take, for example, the following passage in which Clyde and Roberta anticipate the "wild convulsive pleasure" of another night together: "Days, when both, having struggled in vain against the greater intimacy which each knew that the other was desirous of yielding to, and eventually so yielding, looked forward to the approaching night with an eagerness which was a fever embodying

a fear” (AAT 344). The tortuousness of Dreiser’s writing here rivals that of James; fittingly, in a passage about the young couple’s swift abandonment to “the wonder and delight of a new and more intimate form of contact” (i.e., sex), Dreiser “clogs” his prose with the moral “scruples,” “protests,” and hesitancy his characters have all too easily abandoned (AAT 344). Desire, he suggests, moves faster than language. Through his stacking of subordinate clauses (which, in turn, pepper his prose with commas), as well as his penchant for lists, lengthy descriptions, and seeming digressions, Dreiser positions the realist novel as a brake—rather than a boon—to rash action, impetuosity, and material ambition. In this respect, he can be said to share Virilio’s belief that “our slowness is our power” (Lotringer and Virilio 107).

Reflecting upon the mass media, Virilio expresses concern about “the abrupt telescoping of facts and the collision of events once successive that have become simultaneous, despite the distances and time lapses necessary to their interpretation” (26). That Dreiser’s novel is based on the widely publicized 1906 trial of Chester Gillette is common knowledge. Less commonly observed is Orlov’s contention that, “in transcending the mere surface details of newspaper stories to create the artistically shaped, more deeply truthful story presented—as large as life—in the novel, Dreiser finally *criticizes* his very sources in the supposedly objective press” (Orlov 64). In this way, Dreiser anticipates Virilio’s similar critique of a sensationalized media culture that “aim[s] to scare the hoards” so as to turn a profit, and labors, instead, to demonstrate that “the ‘facts’ of a case like Clyde’s are not only explained in too limited a way by newspapers, but also become *distorted* for the sake of selling papers” (Virilio 12, Orlov 65). Dreiser’s “slow, ponderous” narrative style interposes “the distances and time

lapses” necessary to the interpretation of Clyde’s story; readers are made to exercise the “high modernist” virtues of reflection, contemplation, and patience that contemporary culture threatens to atrophy.

These virtues are exercised not only in the activity of reading, but also in the activity of walking. An activity with a long history—not only in European literature and culture, but also in American letters—the walk is suggested, throughout *An American Tragedy*, as an imperiled ritual integral to the cultivation of Clyde’s moral and spiritual self. In 1862, Henry David Thoreau describes “the art of Walking” as an exercise in “absolute freedom” from the deadening constraints of society; the “chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in... the Walker—not the Knight, but the Walker Errant” (Thoreau 260-261). If not a Walker Errant *per se*, it is while walking that many of the more transformative and morally laden events of Clyde’s life transpire. Upon returning home from work one afternoon, Clyde accidentally witnesses his mother—arguably, his moral compass in a novel that nevertheless resists and critiques conventional morality—seeking out his disgraced sister, Esta, and so learns of her condition. Clyde’s only pleasure, when he first arrives in Lycurgus, is taking long walks along its finer avenues, during one of which he chances to meet Sondra Finchely riding in “a beautiful closed car of great size and solidity” (AAT 349). Likewise, Clyde and Roberta’s early courtship consists of innocent walks that are later exchanged for sexual trysts in her private apartment. Perhaps most significantly, it is his trembling “shuffle” to the electric chair with which Clyde’s story concludes (AAT 930).

Prior to this, however, Dreiser describes Clyde’s compulsion to go for a walk—and, in so doing, clear his conscience—after he has contemplated murdering Roberta:

[Traveling] up Wykeagy Avenue, along Central Avenue, out Oak, and then back on Spruce and to Central again, [he felt] that he was walking away from the insinuating thought or suggestion that had so troubled him up until now. And, after a time, feeling better, freer, more natural, more human, as he so much wished to feel—he returned to his room, once more to sleep, with the feeling that he had actually succeeded in eliminating completely a most insidious and horrible visitation. (AAT 508-509)

Clyde's humanity is restored through the meditative practice of walking; his self-directed perambulation liberates him—however briefly—from “the evil hint of an evil spirit” (AAT 506).

Ross Hamilton's *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* details the evolution of the walk as one intimately associated with the evolution of the accident. Beginning with St. Augustine's tormented pacing in his mother's garden wherein he chances to hear the disembodied voice that commands him to read the Bible and so incites a revelation, Hamilton charts a complex history of walking through the twentieth century, concluding with the aleatory walk of the French surrealists. This history includes stories like Oedipus' accidental encounter with his father on the road to Thebes and Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, as well as autobiographical accounts like Rousseau's transformative fall on the road to Vicennes. Despite their varied historical contexts, the walk, in each case, provided for the possibility of “sublime illumination;” like the surrealist practice of aleatory writing, it “opened the mind to contingency” (Hamilton 276). “For [André] Breton,” writes Hamilton, “[the] chance encounters that occurred on his nondirected walks through Paris formed an experience based on a state of

expectancy. He was a flaneur awaiting a disruption of the surface of life, the appearance of [a] ... sublime accident” (276).

Dreiser’s novel suggests that the meditative practice of walking, as well as the larger culture supporting it, is increasingly threatened by the “motoriz[ed] forces” of modernity (Lotringer and Virilio 58). As Duffy observes: “Modernist literature, from Eliot’s *Prufrock* to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Kafka’s *The Trial*, as well as Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, returns obsessively to the figure of the city pedestrian, the *flâneur*, at the very moment when the car was taking over the city” (Duffy 21). It is thus no coincidence that the only casualty of Book One’s car accident is a pedestrian—if not a *flâneur*—and that, as of 2000, “two out of every five automobile-related deaths [were] caused by pedestrians making hazardous forays into the road” (Brottman xv). Likewise, the *flâneur*, characterized by Baudelaire as a highly sensitive subject acutely aware of his environment, is, as Lynne Kirby observes, gradually replaced by a “neurasthenic subject... anticipating, [and] yet, immune to shock” (Kirby 7). This, she argues, is a result of “forces [and technologies] that destabilized and unnerved the individual” while providing the simultaneous illusion of security (7). A phenomenon inaugurated by the train and its “mechanical double,” the cinema, this spectatorial passivity is also encouraged by the culture of the automobile (2). Dreiser states: “Man is a mechanism... and a badly and carelessly driven one at that” (Dreiser 458).

Herein lies the novel’s “tragic” element as well as its distinctive “American-ness.” In the final analysis, Clyde Griffiths is a rather pathetic creature—unoriginal, unreflective, and unrelenting in his pursuit of material success. As Matthiessen observes: “There has hardly ever been a more unheroic hero than Clyde, and Dreiser did everything

he could not to build him up” (Matthiessen 203). Despite Pizer’s claim that his “significant qualities are finely fictional in the sense that they arise out of a particularized and distinctive temperament and background,” Clyde Griffiths is an archetype (Pizer 237). His story is the story of Chester Gillette—however greatly modified—and Gillette’s, in turn, is the story of countless other youths driven to similarly desperate acts as a result of the national obsession with wealth. In his essay, “I Find the Real American Tragedy,” Dreiser asserts that “between 1895 and this present year [1935] there has scarcely been a year in which some part of the country has not been presented with a crime of this type” (Dreiser 7). As Orlov notes, “[e]lsewhere in the essay, he refers more moderately and precisely to his ‘studies [over the years] of some seventeen cases of this kind’” (Orlov 57). That the crime, itself, has become a “type”—serially produced much like the collars manufactured at the Griffiths’ factory or the Model T’s rolled off Ford’s assembly line—is deeply unsettling. Murder, once the ultimate act of individual transgression and endowed with a perverse kind of heroism if cleanly and cleverly executed, is now the blundering, mechanistic response of the masses. Although many critics have commented upon Dreiser’s original intention to title the novel *Mirage*, it is also worth noting his declination to name the novel after its protagonist as he did *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) or even *Sister Carrie* (1900). Clyde’s tragedy ranks as one among many.

¹ See Salzman, Jack. *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*. New York: David Lewis, 1972.

² *An American Tragedy* was originally adapted for the screen in 1931 by Josef von Sternberg. Dreiser’s screenplay (co-authored by Samuel Hoffenstein) includes a condensed version of Book One.

³ For a discussion of Clyde’s rapid class ascent, see Moers 271-285, Orlov 113-114, and Pizer 3.

⁴ Dreiser, Theodore. *An American Tragedy*. New York: The Library of America, 2003. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

⁵ Admittedly, the 11-year-old girl killed in the car accident is much younger than Roberta.

⁶ Although both murder and manslaughter refer to the act of homicide, the latter is distinguished by a lesser degree of intentionality than the former. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of

manslaughter according to “the modern interpretation” and usage of the word circa 1601: “*Manslaughter* is committed in English law when one person causes the death of another unintentionally by culpable negligence or as a consequence of some unlawful act, or does so intentionally but under provocation, while suffering from diminished responsibility, or else in pursuance of a suicide pact. In Scotland the term corresponding to *manslaughter* is ‘culpable homicide’. In U.S. law, *manslaughter* is the lowest degree of criminal homicide, the term denoting the causing of death by culpable recklessness or negligence.”

⁷ Walter Benn Michaels offers this formulation regarding Hortense’s fur coat in his essay, “An American Tragedy, or the Promise of American Life.”

⁸ Karen Beckman observes that, in “Ballard’s introduction to the French edition of the novel, [...] he specifically asserts the cautionary nature of the crash.” Ballard later “retracted his defensive moral claims about *Crash*,” stating that “I went wrong... in that introduction... [when] in the final paragraph, which I have always regretted, I claimed that in *Crash* there is a moral indictment of the sinister marriage between sex and technology. Of course it isn’t anything of the sort. *Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point” (6). Beckman is here quoting Day, Aiden. “Ballard and Baudrillard,” 290.

⁹ Of the few critics who have attempted to establish direct links between the car accident in Kansas City and the drowning at Big Bittern, the work of Richard Lehan, Donald Pizer, and Paul A. Orlov remain the most compelling.

¹⁰ See Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*. Ed. George Rogers Taylor. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1972. See also R.W.B. Lewis’ *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1959.

¹¹ Here Puskar quotes Berthoff, Warner. *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919*. New York: Free P, 1965, 54.

¹² Qtd. in F.O. Matthiessen’s “Of Crime and Punishment,” 205.

¹³ William Phillips has also written extensively about the *Arabian Nights* imagery in *An American Tragedy* in his essay, “The Imagery of Dreiser’s Novels.” *PMLA* 78 (December 1963): 572-585.

¹⁴ Chambers is here quoting a 1912 speech by corporate lawyer and former secretary of state, Elihu Root.

¹⁵ Eisenstein, Sergei, qtd. in Matthiessen, 195.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, 214.

¹⁸ Dreiser’s view of cinema evolved throughout the course of his career. As David Seed observes in *Cinematic Fictions: The Impact of the Cinema on the American Novel* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2009): “Dreiser does not share Fitzgerald’s apocalyptic gloom that the movies will supersede the novel [particularly in the 1920s]; however, he is clearly trying to work out the relation between the two media... Much later, in 1936, as the mass media proliferated, Dreiser began to take a gloomier view of the future of the novel” (153).

¹⁹ Qtd. in Orlov 44.

Chapter Two

Myrtle as Martyr: Perversions of the Sacred and the Profane in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Till recently we thought we had lost the experience of death. Now that we no longer know what life is, we may feel the need to put death on display.

—Sylvère Lotringer

Unlike Dreiser's ambiguously dated epic, *The Great Gatsby* takes place during the summer "of twenty-two" (*GG* 3).¹ As Ronald Berman observes, it is a highly "contemporary" novel—a vivid recreation of the author's "contemporary world"—abounding in "a remarkable amount of things manufactured, marketed, advertised, and consumed" during the period (Berman 1). Among "the spoils of production" signaling "a new, expansive economy" and a changing "mental landscape" is the automobile (2, 1). From Gatsby's lavish parties, at which "the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive," to George B. Wilson's modest repair shop, automobiles—and, in particular, the automobile accident—occupy a significant discursive space within Fitzgerald's narrative (*GG* 40). While this is also true of *An American Tragedy*, that which the automobile and its accident signify in *The Great Gatsby* is markedly different. Unlike Clyde Griffiths, who struggles unsuccessfully to secure his place in the upper echelons of society, Fitzgerald's characters—in particular, Nick, Gatsby, the Buchanans, and Jordan Baker—have *arrived*. The conspicuous consumption of commodities ranging from cars, hydroplanes, and motorboats to elegant clothes, finely furnished homes, and the servants who maintain them is not something at which these characters gape in envy or awe, but rather something at which they "yawn" (*GG* 12, 53). Even Nick, who works "in the bond business" and rents a cheap, "weatherbeaten cardboard bungalow" situated squarely between two mansions, casually counts among his possessions "a dog—at least I had him

for a few days until he ran away—and an old Dodge and a Finnish woman” (*GG* 3). Drawn in stark contrast to this elite social set are characters like George Wilson, who services automobiles but does not own one, himself. That he is anxious to buy Tom’s coupé—“When are you going to sell me that car?” he asks with pathetic persistence—suggests his inferior class status and sexual impotence; as Patricia Bizzell observes: “[Wilson’s] position as defeated rival for Myrtle is underscored by a feeble gesture of emulation—he covets Tom’s car” (*GG* 25, Bizzell 777).

The automobile accident, likewise, serves a different function in Fitzgerald’s work. Whereas Dreiser’s naturalistic use of accidents—automobile and otherwise—believes the limited control of man over his fate in a mechanistic world increasingly governed by the depersonalized forces of mass capitalism, the car crashes punctuating *The Great Gatsby* indicate precisely the opposite—namely, the unlimited power of the wealthy to manipulate those forces to their own “careless” ends; to determine their fate as well as the fate of others; to conceal, rather than reveal, the extraordinary extent of their agency (*GG* 180).² More importantly, Fitzgerald’s novel suggests that the continued hegemony of the wealthy characters is predicated upon the routine sacrifice of their lower- or working-class counterparts in culturally sanctioned rituals of violence, the most prominent—and yet deceptive—of which is the automobile “accident.” Drawing from Georges Bataille’s work on expenditure and sacrifice, I will demonstrate how Myrtle Wilson’s death figures as a ritual sacrifice that reunites the formerly fractured communities of East and West Egg. The narrator’s pointed use of religious language and imagery in his description of the collision presents Myrtle as a sacrificial victim, thus illustrating Paul Virilio’s claim that “the technological progress of capitalistic societies

[is] to be indexed by the sacrifice of consumers” (Virilio 85). Her death, likewise, restores an element of the sacred to a society increasingly dominated by the profane. For Bataille, this is “the world of *reason*, of *identity*, of *things*, of duration and calculation”; elsewhere, he defines the profane in relation to “the world of science and the machine” (Bataille 40, 46). Finally, I argue that Myrtle’s sacrificial death reopens Nick’s “temporarily closed out [...] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” and enables him to record “the history of [that] summer” in 1922 (*GG* 2, 5).

I. Accident

As Dan Coleman observes in his essay, “A World Complete in Itself: Gatsby’s Elegiac Narration,” Jay Gatsby’s death is less the climax of Fitzgerald’s novel than part of its dénouement: “The destruction of his defining dream nearly complete, there is not much of Gatsby’s story left to tell... Nick’s description of Gatsby’s death feels almost like an epilogue” (Coleman 228). The question presents itself: Why does the death of a secondary character—namely, Myrtle Wilson—function as the novel’s climax, rather than that of the protagonist after whom it is titled? Why does the violent hit-and-run that kills Myrtle provide a sense of narrative resolution and cathartic release? In answer to these questions, I submit that Myrtle’s death is most productively situated, not within the context of the unforeseen or aberrant accident, but within the context of ritual sacrifice as described by Georges Bataille. As such, it rescues Fitzgerald’s novel from H.L. Mencken’s critique that *The Great Gatsby* amounts to little more than “a glorified anecdote”; through Myrtle’s sacrificial death, both Fitzgerald and his narrator attempt to restore some degree of order, intimacy, and spiritual gravitas to a world grossly lacking in each (qtd. in Claridge 156).

Before turning to Bataille's theory of expenditure and sacrifice, I want to briefly discuss the anthropological work from which it is derived—namely, Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, published in 1925. In it, Mauss describes ritual sacrifice as it is practiced in “‘primitive’ societies” as a privileged kind of gift exchange (Mauss 1). Unlike the gift exchanges that occur between men, sacrifice consummates a contract with “the spirits of the dead and [with] the gods, [who] are, in fact, the real owners of the world's wealth” (13). Through sacrificial offerings, a community returns the sacrificial object—or, in some cases, subject—to its origin and “incites the gods to be generous towards them [in the future]” (12). For example, when the Koryak tribes of northwest Siberia “[throw] the remains of [a] festival sacrifice [...] into the sea or cast [it] to the winds, they return [it] to [its] original home in an effort to insure that all the game killed that year, [will] return again the next” (13).

In his 1949 work, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille elaborates Mauss's theory of sacrifice, resituating the practice within his own contemporary economic context. Of particular interest to Bataille is the idea that: “It is always the purpose of sacrifice to give destruction its due, to save the rest [of the community] from a mortal danger of contagion. All those who have to do with sacrifice are in danger, but its limited ritual form regularly has the effect of protecting those who offer it” (Bataille 68). This deliberately enacted violence also has the effect of strengthening the internal bonds, or cohesion, of the community. As Michael Richardson observes, sacrifice has “a transgressive function [for Bataille]: it represent[s] a collective crime that [binds] the community together and help[s] regulate its internal violence, placing it in harmony with cosmic forms” (61). Finally, sacrifice is only possible in cultures that have achieved an

economic state of “unproductive expenditure” (69). That is to say, a state in which the activities of production and consumption exceed “the minimum necessary for maintaining the conservation of life and the continuance of productive activity” (70). The prodigal has replaced the provisional. If this so-called “advanced state” does not call to mind Fitzgerald’s roaring twenties—described in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age” as “an age of excess,” with the “whole race going hedonistic [and] deciding on pleasure”—then perhaps Bataille’s examples of unproductive expenditure will (Fitzgerald 14, 15). These include “luxury, mourning rites, wars, cults, the building of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, the arts, [and] perverse sexual activity (that is, what is turned away from genital finality)” (Bataille 70). For Bataille, sacrifice cannot be separated from cultures characterized by unproductive expenditure; indeed, it is the only form of *productive* expenditure available to them because it “involves a consecration of pure loss” (61). Sacrifice atones for and expends—or, put more accurately, “destroys”—“surplus” energy, of which money is simply one “form” (75, 77).

Although such forms of sacrifice—and in particular, human sacrifice—are no longer operative, both Mauss and Bataille claim that “the same morality and economy are at work, albeit less noticeably, in our own [contemporary] societies” (Mauss 2). Likewise, because the need to “give destruction its due” is still with us, violent rituals are frequently staged within art (Bataille 71). In his essay, “On the Idea of Expenditure,” Bataille likens the project of sacrifice to the project of the poet, claiming that both are engaged in “communication and construction by means of loss” (71). It is my objective, here, to demonstrate how a modern perversion of the sacrificial practices that Mauss describes—and Bataille recouperates—is at work in *The Great Gatsby*. Although it is a

fairly common practice in literary criticism to “apply” the work of a cultural theorist to literature, thereby illuminating the latter, in this case, I find the reverse to be equally useful and compelling. *The Great Gatsby* both illustrates and clarifies Bataille’s fragmentary and esoteric reflections on the subjects of ritual sacrifice and expenditure.

That Myrtle’s death figures as a ritual sacrifice rather than a chance occurrence or unintended accident is suggested, first, by the sheer quantity of car wrecks recounted in the text, and, second, by their progressively destructive quality. As the reader will recall, the first party that Nick attends at Gatsby’s mansion concludes with the “bizarre and tumultuous scene” of a minor crash, which counts as its only casualty the “amputated wheel” of a new coupé (*GG* 55). That the evening culminates in a wreck accords with its overall tenor, striking a final note that will resound throughout the novel (*GG* 47). With the acute sensitivity to mood and scene that characterizes his narrative voice, Nick recounts the way in which the guests’ spirit of “spectroscopic gayety” abruptly turns sour (*GG* 45). From the “weeping” serenade of a drunken chorus woman to viciously quarreling couples, he watches as “even Jordan’s party, the quartet from East Egg, were rent asunder by dissension” (*GG* 51, 52). In one of the many mechanical metaphors that punctuate the text, Nick describes one slighted wife who, “after attempting to laugh at [her husband’s flirtation with a young actress] in a dignified and indifferent way, *broke down entirely*,” much like the “wreck of a Ford” collecting dust in Wilson’s repair shop (*GG* 52, 25; emphasis mine).

Although Jeffrey Steinbrink reads this scene as evidence of the characters’ tenuous place in an “entropic universe” where all systems, including human experience, tend “inexorably toward atrophy, dissipation, and ruin,” the automobile accident directly

following Nick's observation suggests just how quickly—and violently—this dissipation can occur in a motorized age (Steinbrink 159). Life's "long decline" is increasingly accelerated toward its end, thus corroborating Paul Virilio's claim that we have succumbed to a kind of "dromospheric pressure"; modern political economies are governed not by individuals, but by a "dromocracy of machines [which] produce systematic destruction" (Virilio 100-101).

We see this aptly illustrated by the "havoc" Nick encounters upon exiting Gatsby's mansion:

Fifty feet from the door a dozen headlights illuminated a bizarre and tumultuous scene. In the ditch beside the road, right side up, but violently shorn of one wheel, rested a new coupé which had left Gatsby's drive not two minutes before. The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel, which was now getting considerable attention from half a dozen curious chauffeurs. However, as they had left their cars blocking the road, a harsh, discordant din from those in the rear had been audible for some time, and added to the already violent confusion of the scene. (*GG* 54)

As is the case with the automobile accident occurring in *An American Tragedy*, Fitzgerald's language suggests a suspicious erasure of individual agency—it is not the inebriated driver of the car who "accounts for the detachment of the wheel," but rather "the sharp jut of a wall."

More significant than this, however, is the curious scrambling of human and mechanistic modifiers attributed the subjects—and objects—of the scene. Nick describes "half a dozen fingers pointed at the *amputated* wheel," which was no longer "joined [to

the car] by a *physical bond*” (GG 55, 56, emphases mine). Its maimed state endows the “new coupé” with a kind of bodily integrity, and it is the violation of this anthropomorphized wholeness that elicits the “shock” and “awe” of “the crowd—it was now a crowd,” as Nick insists (GG 55). But neither are the “half a dozen fingers” joined to the bodies of the bystanders. Like the driver of the car, who emerges from the wreck “gradually, *part by part*, a pale, dangling individual... pawing tentatively at the ground with a large uncertain dancing shoe,” the human subjects present at the scene are narratologically dismembered; Nick’s language renders the accident victims—as well as the bystanders—mechanistic, interchangeable in their parts, and strangely diffused of organic life (GG 55, emphasis mine).

Passages such as this illustrate the profanation of the body as described by Paul Virilio. In *The Accident of Art* Virilio’s collocutor, Sylvère Lotringer, observes that “[o]riginally art had to do with the sacred” (Lotringer and Virilio 50). However, “we’ve [now] reached a point where all the distinctions are being leveled, public and private, science and art, not to mention the distinction between sacred and profane” (30). According to Virilio, this is because moderns no longer recognize the human body as something sacred: “We went from the sacred body—whatever body it is: saint, Messiah, angel, etc.—to the profane body” (51). Lotringer concurs, turning to the “visual arts of the 1980s” in order to illustrate this transition:

One symptom of this [shift] was the extraordinary interest accorded to bodies in the visual arts in the 1980s... It was much less a rediscovery of the body than a sort of farewell to any permanence it once used to have. Now [...] fragmentation

has become [the] new reality and the body a mere logo game: changing parts that no longer seem to make up a whole. (51)

Fitzgerald's novel suggests that the "fragmentation" to which Lotringer refers began well before the 1980s. As both Dan Coleman and Ronald Berman demonstrate, disembodiment is an aesthetic motif that persists throughout *The Great Gatsby*. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg "look out of no face," Meyer Wolfsheim wears the "finest specimens of human molars" as cufflinks, at Gatsby's parties, one finds "hair shorn in strange new ways" and, in his kitchen, "the juice of two hundred oranges [is extracted] in half an hour if a little button is pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb" (*GG* 23, 73, 40, 39). Coleman argues that "Nick's recurrent use of synecdoche casts a spell of inexplicability" over the narrative (Coleman 220). Berman concurs, claiming that:

When the narrative [...] homes in on eyes, breast, hand, nose, or other organs there is a dissociation of the whole. Throughout the novel named or viewed parts of the body (Myrtle's "nerves," McKee's "cheekbone," Tom's "flat hand," Dan Cody's "empty face") exist independent of purpose—or imply the absence of relationship. (Berman 140-141)

To this, I would add that Nick's emphasis on "the simultaneity of [...] parts" rather than a unified whole also has the effect of articulating class difference between the characters (Coleman 220). It is primarily the novel's lower-class characters that are presented in a maimed or partial form, inhabiting *real* bodies that suffer *real* injury, while the wealthy characters enjoy a rarified, disembodied existence impervious to suffering. For example, Myrtle Wilson, a lower-class character who, as Coleman observes, is "given to us fully realized in all her bodily magnificence," is seen "bleeding fluently" on more than one

occasion, while the wealthy Gatsby “transcends not only the fact of his body but the limitations of physical law altogether: in the real world, the shot that killed a man floating on an air mattress would likely puncture the raft and leave him lying at the bottom of the pool” (*GG* 38, Coleman 215, 229). Instead, “Nick sets him spinning impossibly through a world disengaged from what we know of how things work” (Coleman 229). Like the “ghostly celebrit[ies]” that frequent his parties, Gatsby “is given to us ‘at large and unrelated’ in a way that leaves him much freer to slip from the realistic and into the allegorical”—or abstract and disembodied—realm (*GG* 106, Coleman 215).

The freedom afforded by wealth and its consequent disembodiment is clearly reflected in Nick’s description of the automobile accident cited above. Divested of a physical body, the “ghostly... apparition” of a driver is concurrently divested of the potential to be hurt—to suffer in any substantial (i.e., corporeal) way. Indeed, even the driver’s passenger, “Owl Eyes,” dismounts from the vehicle without so much as a scratch, “looking from the car to the tire and from the tire to the observers in a pleasant, puzzled way” (*GG* 54). Coleman observes: “In Gatsby’s universe, a driver can emerge from a crash not only unscathed but oblivious to the fact that he has shorn a wheel off his car” (Coleman 222). As the other accidents recounted in the novel demonstrate, this is not true of those who inhabit George and Myrtle Wilson’s universe.

It is at this point that Nick’s description of the “violent” and “confused” scene takes a curious turn. Rather than emphasizing the potential danger of the collision, he foregrounds the comedic absurdity of the situation as evidenced by the blithe obliviousness of the accident “victims”:

Blinded by the glare of the headlights and confused by the incessant groaning of the horns, the apparition stood swaying for a moment before he perceived the man in the duster.

“Wha’s matter?” he inquired calmly. “Did we run outa gas?”

“Look!”

Half a dozen fingers pointed at the amputated wheel—he stared at it for a moment, and then looked upward as though he suspected that it had dropped from the sky. (*GG* 55)

As was noted previously, the disembodied quality of the driver, or “apparition,” renders him invulnerable to bodily injury. But this sense of invulnerability is also psychological. Unappreciative of the potential severity of the accident, he inquires “calmly” after its cause. When told, emphatically, that the “*wheel’s* off,” he nevertheless insists on “put[ting] her in reverse” and “back[ing] out” (*GG* 56). In his analysis of early representations of the car crash, Enda Duffy argues that, “when cars were [first] bought as indulgences by the rich and were marketed as a technology of adventure, the crash was often treated as comedy, a hilarious ‘spill’ that brought the driver up short against a heifer or a sycamore” (Duffy 201). He elaborates the “discourse of comedy and jollity that surrounded car crash accounts in the early days of automobilism” as follows:

In this period, when many drivers were rich hobbyists and thus models of the new consumers, a crash or “tumble” was seen as one of the thrills, portrayed mostly with a certain wryness, of a conspicuous display of the extended free choices afforded the rich. The comic discourse of the crash characterized a dream of choosing the novel experience [of motoring], of choosing to exercise its

possibilities in the wildest, most freewheeling ways—and never having to pay a penalty for it. (207)

Although Duffy is here referring to the cartoons and illustrations in weekly magazines such as *Punch*, *Tidbits*, and *Petit Journal*, as well as to early silent films such as *The Automobile Accident* (Bioscope 1912), Fitzgerald's unnamed driver exhibits the same nonchalant attitude as these wealthy "hobbyists." He incurs no penalty for his "self-serving insouciance [and] downright carelessness about causing harm to others" and survives the little "spill," suffering no more than a bad hangover the next day (218). Through this accident and the others that follow it, the novel suggests that the citizens of East and West Egg, along with their party-crashing counterparts in Manhattan, are protectively ensconced by wealth, "buoyed up" by their affluence much like Daisy and Jordan are first seen "buoyed up" upon the "enormous couch" in the Buchanan's drawing room, invulnerable to those forces—natural and mechanical, alike—that tear less fortunate mortals asunder (*GG* 8).

Take, for example, the second automobile accident recounted in the text. More of a near-miss than an actual collision, this mishap occurs after Nick meets Jordan at "a house-party... up in Warwick," where Jordan "left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it" (*GG* 58). It is this lie that triggers Nick's memory regarding the "curious conversation [they] had about driving a car" at that same party:

It started because she passed so close to some workman that our fender flicked a button on one man's coat.

"You're a rotten driver," I protested. "Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn't drive at all."

“I am careful.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Well, other people are,” she said lightly.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“They’ll keep out of my way,” she insisted. “It takes two to make an accident.”

“Suppose you meet somebody just as careless as yourself?”

“I hope I never will,” she answered. “I hate careless people. That’s why I like you.” (*GG* 59)

That the anonymous man Jordan grazes with her borrowed car is a “workman” is significant, as is the glaring implausibility of the incident. Had she “flicked a button” on one of Gatsby’s lavishly dressed guests—for example, the gushing Lucille, whose “gas blue [gown] with lavender beads” cost “two hundred and sixty-five dollars”—Jordan might have expressed some concern, if not remorse (*GG* 43). But, as is the case with Gatsby’s “eight servants, including an extra gardener, [who] toiled all day with mops and scrubbing brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before,” the laboring classes are virtually invisible to Jordan and her ilk, their suffering, negligible (*GG* 39). She takes the matter “lightly,” trusting those she exploits to “keep out of her way.”

Strangely enough, they do. More disturbing than Jordan’s flippant attitude is the narrative’s complicity with that attitude—its consistent conference of physical invulnerability and moral impunity upon the wealthy characters. Like Daisy, they hover “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor”—a fact made particularly evident by

the next automobile accident described in the text (*GG* 150). Filling Nick in on Daisy's history with Tom, Jordan recalls:

I saw [Tom and Daisy] in Santa Barbara when they came back [from their honeymoon], and I thought I'd never seen a girl so mad about her husband... It was touching to see them together—it made you laugh in a hushed, fascinated way. That was in August. A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night and ripped the front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken—she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa Barbara Hotel. (*GG* 78).

The pattern of “vehicular mayhem” (to borrow a phrase from Mikita Brottman) structuring the novel is now well-established. The “enormously wealthy” Tom Buchanan emerges from the wreck unscathed while his less fortunate—and less fortunéd—mistress suffers both personal injury and public humiliation (Brottman xxiii, *GG* 6). Unable to skip town like Tom and Daisy and so leave such scandals behind her, the unnamed chambermaid presages the kind of fate to which her double, Myrtle Wilson, will be even more mercilessly subjected. Through this accident, Fitzgerald suggests that the working class, the poor, and the impoverished are much more at the mercy of chance than the wealthy.

It is worth noting that this cooptation of chance is “reinforced” by the rapid growth of various “bureaucratic apparat[i]”—so described by Enda Duffy—undergirding Fitzgerald's roaring, reckless twenties (Duffy 235). The systemization, implementation, and enforcement of traffic laws, as well as the rise of the automotive insurance industry, indicate the degree to which public and private agencies had begun banking, quite

literally, on “careless people” (*GG* 180). Of the insurance industry, in particular, Duffy observes:

Car insurance marked an advance in the history of insurance generally—an extremely interesting form of economic speculation—in that here more than ever what was being insured against was the potentially reckless behavior of the motorist rather than the potential damage to, or loss of, property or even life. All new technologies, especially new technologies of transportation, involve the possibility of new kinds of accidents, and new forms of insurance arise to speculate on them. The imbrication of economic speculation in technology’s dangers, the insurers’ insistence that monetary value can be placed on life and limb, and the willingness to tacitly insure reckless behavior reached an intensity with car insurance such that the driver-speeder is implicitly guaranteed that he can relinquish much of a sense of personal liability for his own actions while driving, however grim the consequences. (Duffy 236)

Certainly the grimmest consequence of the “reckless behavior” described in Fitzgerald’s novel is the hit-and-run that kills Myrtle Wilson near the end of Chapter VII.

In this moment, the tension that has been building throughout—and, in particular, during the heated confrontation at the Plaza Hotel that “broiling” August afternoon—reaches an apex, after which it is followed by a strangely cathartic sense of release (*GG* 114). By this time, Gatsby’s “career as a Trimalchio” is over and his affair with Daisy in full swing (*GG* 113). Deciding that it’s too hot to remain at the Buchanans’, Daisy impetuously insists: “Let’s all go to town!” (*GG* 118). Tom reluctantly agrees to her suggestion, but not to Gatsby’s: ““Shall we all go in my car?”” (*GG* 121). ““You take my

coupé and let me drive your car to town,” Tom replies—a proposition decidedly “distasteful to Gatsby,” but to which he does not object (*GG* 121). When Tom forcibly pushes his wife toward the car—“Come on Daisy... I’ll take you in this circus wagon”—she moves defiantly “out from the circle of his arm,” and joins Gatsby: “You take Nick and Jordan, we’ll follow you in the coupé” (*GG* 121).

This promiscuous scrambling of cars and couples is significant not only because it leads to a fatal error—namely, Myrtle mistaking Gatsby’s car for Tom’s and its passenger, Jordan Baker, for Tom’s wife—but also because it suggests the degree to which the manufacturing practice of interchangeable parts has come to inform social relationships.³ Like the engines and axles rolled off of Ford’s assembly line, the affair has become a *standard component* of bourgeois life. The “orgiastic future” Nick fears is already upon him (*GG* 182). Additionally, women, like vehicles (or the interchangeable components of vehicles), figure as little more than material accessories to the men in the novel. As Patricia Bizzell observes:

Daisy... is barely a real woman at all, but instead she symbolizes wealth, the ultimate goal of pecuniary emulation; she is the ‘golden girl’ whose ‘voice is full of money.’ Gatsby will not be another casualty in the battle of the sexes; he will be disillusioned because he will treat Daisy as a material possession, the ultimate acquisition, and attempt to use her as a bridge to the abstract world of his ideal.

(Bizzell 779)

This attempt fails, of course, when Tom exposes Gatsby’s dubious past and underhanded dealings, shattering the “complete faith in him” that both Nick and Daisy had wishfully harbored (*GG* 130). Foreshadowing the terrible accident that follows this scene, Nick

describes how “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice,” leaving behind “only the dead dream [of a future with Daisy]... as the afternoon slipped away” (*GG* 148, 135).

Tom’s triumph over his rival is fully consummated when he orders his wife to “‘start on home... in Mr. Gatsby’s car’” (*GG* 135). Here, he reverses the earlier scenario in which Daisy had insisted upon riding with Gatsby. Reassured that “whatever intentions, whatever courage [Daisy] had had, were definitely gone,” Tom pawns his wife off to the now inconsequential Gatsby, insisting “with magnanimous scorn”:

“Go on. He won’t annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over.”

They were gone, without a word, snapped out, made accidental, isolated, like ghosts, even from our pity. (*GG* 135)

That Daisy and Gatsby are here likened to “ghosts” is significant given the car in which they depart. Although Gatsby’s Rolls Royce has received considerable critical attention, the fact that one of the 1922 models produced by the British luxury car manufacturer was called the “Silver Ghost” (followed, in 1925, by the “Phantom I”) has not. Placing Gatsby and Daisy in this particular model suggests Fitzgerald’s canny knowledge that the insignia of wealth is not simply to abstain from physical labor—as Thorstein Veblen observes, “Manual labor, industry, whatever has to do with the everyday work of getting a livelihood, is the exclusive occupation of the inferior class[es]”—but to escape the trappings of a body entirely (Veblen 8). Protectively ensconced by the “Silver Ghost,” Gatsby’s “golden girl” is absolved of responsibility for the horrific crash that kills Myrtle Wilson. Her agency, like the body in which it is located, is displaced onto the machine

and rendered invisible. As Enda Duffy observes, “the ghostly non-presence of the perpetrator” in the accident that ensues contrasts sharply with the narrator’s “intense focus on the specific materiality of the victim through the pornographic eye on body parts” (Duffy 244). Divested thus of physical bodies, individual agency, and moral responsibility, Daisy and Gatsby start out on the “portentous, menacing road” back to East Egg before Tom, Nick, and Jordan follow (*GG* 136). The ironic literalism of Nick’s observation, “So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight” is confirmed by the corpse they shortly encounter (*GG* 136).

Michaelis, however, arrives first on the scene. Drawn by the “loud and scolding” racket he hears coming from Wilson’s garage, “the young Greek” witnesses Myrtle “rush out into the dusk, waving her hands and shouting—before he could move from his door the business was over” (*GG* 138). Imagining the scene as Michaelis would have found it, Nick describes the fatal collision as follows:

The “death car” as the newspapers called it, didn’t stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend. Michaelis wasn’t even sure of its color—he told the first policeman that it was light green. The other car, the one going toward New York, came to rest a hundred yards beyond, and its driver hurried back to where Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust.

Michaelis and this man reached her first, but when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth

was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long. (*GG* 138)

This violent collision is the fifth—and only fatal—automobile accident occurring in the novel. As Sigmund Freud famously observed, “Accumulation puts an end to the impression of chance” (qtd. in Virilio 12). Myrtle’s death is well anticipated by the reader; as Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach observes: “the incident must have been shocking [for Gatsby]—not so for Fitzgerald. From the very beginning, he has been preparing the reader for the inevitability of a fatal accident by having Nick describe cars (other than Gatsby’s) in terms of death and decay” (Dettelbach 131). That readers are psychologically (perhaps, even physically) braced for this crash does not conform to our general understanding of the accident as something sudden, unexpected, or unforeseen. In his study, *Culture of Accidents*, Michael Witmore notes the pervasive “assumption that what happens by chance or accident cannot be known in advance” (Witmore 59). However, Fitzgerald’s careful and deliberate emplotment of accidents throughout the novel—indeed, they punctuate the text at regular intervals much like the chorus of a profane hymn—deprives them of a truly “accidental” quality, subsuming them to a larger narrative of calculated expenditure and religious sacrifice.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of this is the scene’s histrionic staging. The image of Myrtle kneeling in the road, “mingl[ing] her thick dark blood with the dust” suggests the theatricality of religious ritual and sacrifice; her implausible genuflection consecrates an otherwise secular scene. Roadside attraction here becomes roadside icon. Taking her inaugural place among “the pantheon of auto-disaster victims” described in J.G. Ballard’s 1973 novel, *Crash*, Myrtle aptly illustrates Mikita Brottman’s claim that

“the car crash victim has become a style of saint” (Ballard 221, Brottman xxxvii). The mingling of her “thick, dark blood” with the “dust” invokes the libations and expiations frequently prescribed by sacrificial ritual, in addition to the familiar verse from Genesis 3:19: “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” In sharp contrast to the subsequent paragraph, Myrtle here achieves a kind of corporeal wholeness; as Dan Coleman observes: “the agency suggested by Myrtle’s kneeling and mingling almost overwhelms any sense of her devastation” (Coleman 226).

Nevertheless, this sense of agency is immediately undercut. The subsequent image of her “left breast [...] swinging loose like a flap,” exposing “the heart beneath,” illustrates Bataille’s notion that ritual sacrifice is also “the *communication of anguish*”: it is “the introduction and the maintenance of rupture in the very center, in the heart of humanity... [through which] the movement of worlds is bound and is ruptured” (Bataille 65). Fitzgerald’s emphasis on rupture, movement (i.e. “her left breast was swinging loose like a flap”), and the particular life-giving organs of heart and breast—read by Enda Duffy as suggesting “a hint of crash pornography”—more compellingly illustrates Bataille’s claim that “[i]t is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening onto the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite” (Duffy 244, Bataille 62). Duffy’s reading of “the anomalous details about breast and mouth,” which the narrator “flashes [...] before us with a whiff of yellow journalism prurience,” “relish[ing] in their luridness,” can also be read as a searching attempt to rediscover Bataille’s notion of a “lost

intimacy”—a sense of the individual as something “holy, sacred, and suffused with anguish” (Duffy 244, Bataille 63, 69).

That Myrtle embodies these qualities—in other words, that she is a suitable sacrificial victim—is, for Bataille, contingent upon her having been formerly divested of them. He writes: “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use had made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*” (Bataille 66). Although initially evoking a vivid female subjectivity—when he first glimpses Myrtle, Nick is struck by her “immediately perceptible vitality” and “sensuous[ness],”—our narrator’s description of the tedious evening passed in her apartment suggests the degree to which Myrtle Wilson has been “withdrawn from immanence, [...] subjugated, domesticated, and reduced to being a thing” (*GG* 25, 31, Bataille 63).

Once they arrive in Manhattan, Myrtle’s vital energy is bent toward consumption; she immediately buys “a copy of *Town Tattle* and a moving-picture magazine, and in the station drug-store some cold cream and a small flask of perfume” (*GG* 27). Later, she announces: “I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer” (*GG* 37). So thoroughly conditioned is she by the objects that surround her—with each costume change, Myrtle’s “personality had also undergone a change”—that she inadvertently becomes one, herself (*GG* 30). Nick likens her to a mechanical figurine “revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air” (*GG* 31). Such descriptions aptly illustrate Bataille’s claim that, “[o]nce the world of things was posited, man himself

became one of the things of this world, [and] it is this degradation [that] man has always tried to escape. In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy* from the first” (Bataille 63). As the consummate degraded consumer, Myrtle Wilson is thus the appropriate sacrificial victim for the “cruel rite” of the car crash that constitutes the climax of the novel. As Bataille observes: “The project of sacrifice thus becomes the project of returning that which has been objectified, or rendered an object, to a state of vital subjectivity” (63). That Myrtle is successfully “restored to the immanence whence [she] came” through her violent, sacrificial death is made evident in the use of language and imagery which echoes our narrator’s first description of Myrtle. Her flesh, “damp with perspiration” recalls the “intense vitality” Nick recognized in her initially, “as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering”—indeed, the word “vitality” is repeated in both instances (*GG* 138, 31, 25).

To identify Myrtle Wilson as the novel’s scapegoat and her death as the sacrificial ritual around which prior and subsequent events revolve is to present an alternative to Thomas J. Cousineau’s comparable reading of *The Great Gatsby*. In his 2004 study *Ritual Unbound*, Cousineau contends that “the emotional impact of [Fitzgerald’s] novel and its moral complexity arise primarily from the sacrificial ritual that it stages” (Cousineau 112). However, he identifies the sacrificial victim, or “scapegoat” as Jay Gatsby, claiming that it is his death that serves the ritual function of reuniting a community formerly “divided into rivalistic factions” (132). He writes: “Gatsby does literally die in place of Daisy, who was responsible for the accident in which Myrtle Wilson was killed. He also dies in place of Tom Buchanan, who may have been killed if he had not directed George Wilson to Gatsby, as the car’s real owner” (124).

Cousineau's discussion of ritual sacrifice appeals to the work of René Girard rather than Georges Bataille, and emphasizes the notion that "the purpose of a ritual involving sacrificial expulsion is to prevent the spread of other, more destructive forms of violence that would threaten the well-being of the community as a whole," as well as the "implicit rule that requires that an innocent outsider be substituted for the real yet untouchable culprit" (134, 136, 132).

As cogent as Cousineau's argument is, several factors challenge his reading and suggest that it is Myrtle Wilson—whose name shares a linguistic affinity with the word "martyr"—and not Gatsby, who serves as the scapegoat in Fitzgerald's novel. For example, although he is clearly excluded from the "distinguished secret society" of old money to which Daisy and Tom belong, Gatsby is still less of an "outsider" to this community than the working-class Myrtle Wilson (*GG* 18). Likewise, despite being termed a "holocaust," Gatsby's death is more productively situated within the context of a botched revenge tragedy than that of religious ritual or sacrifice (*GG* 163). Indeed, the narrator's repeated use of the word "accident" in describing this scene—"A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface [of the pool] was enough to disturb [the raft's] accidental course with its accidental burden"—as well as his curious evasion of the same term in relating Myrtle's death suggests that it is she, and not Gatsby, who figures as the victim of a ritual (which is to say, deliberate and deliberated) sacrifice (*GG* 163). According to Nick, Myrtle's death is "a tragic achievement" (*GG* 156).

Additionally, it is difficult to say that Gatsby's murder provides the same sense of narrative resolution or cathartic release that attends Myrtle's violent end because it was not preceded by the same degree of heated tension and conflict. Bataille writes:

“Sacrifice *is heat*, in which the intimacy of those who make up the system of common works [i.e. the social group] is rediscovered” (68, emphasis mine). Unlike the “stifling” weather and equally “broiling” rivalries that “hover on the edge of combustion” in Chapter VII, an ambient “cool[ness]” pervades the final chapters of Nick’s narrative (*GG* 114, 137). The day of Gatsby’s death is marked by a “sharp difference in the weather [as] there was an autumn flavor in the air” and the tensions that brewed between the characters have been resolved, however questionable that resolution may appear (*GG* 153). Gatsby, himself, is said to have “lost the old warm world [...] for living too long with a single dream” and “shiver[s]” before entering the pool (*GG* 162).

The subsequent image of his body revolving “slowly” amidst a “cluster of dead leaves” also lacks the “upsurge of life... the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening onto the unknown” that Bataille claims is “the common business of sacrifice” (*GG* 163, Bataille 62). Likewise, the “yellowing trees,” “frightening leaves,” “grotesque rose[s],” and “scarcely created grass” of his garden suggest that Gatsby cannot be “restored to immanence”—to Bataille’s state of vital “animal or plant substances”—because he never belonged to this state to begin with (*GG* 162, Bataille 63). Unlike Myrtle—whose name, as Dan Coleman observes, is also homonymic with the tree and so suggests a sense of being organically “bound to the earth”—Gatsby “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (Coleman 217, *GG* 99).

Finally, Cousineau’s claim that Gatsby’s sacrifice re-solidifies a community “divided into rivalistic factions” is troubled by the sparse attendance at his funeral (Cousineau 132). As Nick observes, “Nobody came” (*GG* 175). After Myrtle’s death the characters in the novel congregate; after Gatsby’s, they scatter. Tom and Daisy “had

gone away early that afternoon, and had taken baggage with them;” they “left no [forwarding] address” and didn’t “say when they’d be back” (*GG* 165). Jordan, likewise, resumes the “uncertainty of her own movements between hotels and clubs and private houses,” and Nick eventually returns home to the “Middle West” (*GG* 155, 177). It is only their mutual implication in Myrtle’s death that gives the characters a sense—however fleeting it may have been—that their lives are inextricably intertwined, their fate, one shared in “common.” As Michael Richardson observes, sacrifice has “a transgressive function: it represent[s] a collective crime that [binds] the community together, and help[s] regulate its internal violence, placing it in harmony with cosmic forms” (Bataille 61).

That Myrtle’s death is an intentional “crime” is difficult to prove conclusively, despite George Wilson’s conviction that she was “murdered” (*GG* 159). Indeed, much of the novel’s richness is derived from the categorical instability surrounding Myrtle’s death. The fact that Daisy was driving Gatsby’s car (which Myrtle mistook to be Tom’s) prompts Nick to reflect with alarm: “A new point of view occurred to me. Suppose Tom found out that Daisy had been driving. He might think he saw a connection in it—he might think anything” (*GG* 145). No such *conscious* “connection” is present, however. That Daisy unwittingly runs over her husband’s mistress is ironic, at best, and darkly comedic, at worst. Nevertheless, she is implicated—that is to say, witting—in her refusal to pull over or assume any responsibility for the accident. Arriving upon the scene, himself, Tom laments: ““The God damned coward! [...] He didn’t even stop his car”” (*GG* 142). Had he been present, Gatsby would not have corrected Tom; when he admits to Nick that Daisy had, indeed, been driving, he hastily adds: ““but of course I’ll say I

was” (*GG* 144). Nick, Daisy, and Gatsby are now bound by their complicity with this alibi; what might have been an individual act of manslaughter becomes, increasingly, the “collective crime” Bataille describes.

Having thus established the sacrificial quality of Myrtle’s death, as well as her selection as the appropriate victim, the question remains: What does Myrtle’s sacrifice achieve? As was stated previously, Myrtle’s violent death reunites the formerly fractured community that—however “careless[ly]”—brought it about (*GG* 180). We are left with the intimate image of Tom and Daisy:

...sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale. [Tom] was talking intently across the table at her, and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement. (*GG* 146)

Rarely seen “in the same frame,” to borrow a metaphor from film, prior to this (unless, of course, they are fighting), Daisy and Tom are reunited as a consequence of Myrtle’s death—wed, once more, to a common purpose and to each other. Excluded from this intimate scene, but keeping his sacred “vigil” over it nonetheless, is Gatsby (*GG* 146). Nick, in turn, watches him watching them. The—admittedly, brief—return of this otherwise “careless” cohort to a state of peaceful vigilance is enabled by Myrtle’s sacrificial death and accounts, in part, for Nick’s curious description of the fatal crash as a “tragic achievement” (*GG* 180, 156).

More important than the cohesion of the community, however, is the cohesion of Nick’s narrative. I submit that Myrtle’s sacrificial death predicates Nick Carraway’s ability—not to mention his constantly questioned motivation—to record “the history of

[that] summer” at all (*GG* 5). As Bataille observes: “In order that in me this existence given to men cease to be unprofitably closed and *communicate*, it was necessary that another die before me” (Bataille 64). Although H.L. Mencken characterized Fitzgerald’s novel as “no more than a glorified anecdote,” the narrator feels a profound need to communicate something to his readers through it, and constantly draws attention to the act of his own telling (qtd. in Claridge 156). “Reading over what I have written so far, I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me,” Nick writes, later commenting: “Now I want to go back a little and tell what happened at the garage after we left the night before” (*GG* 56, 156). The fact that that which he endeavors to communicate to his readers amounts to little more than a series of “riotous” parties and motoring excursions lends support to Mencken’s and, later, Cousineau’s, claim that the anecdotal plot “simply cannot support the weight of morally serious interpretation that it would like to invite or that so many of its critics, in their turn, would like to bestow upon it” (Cousineau 111).

However, the sacrificial quality of Myrtle’s death—the way in which Nick recuperates it from the impoverished discourse of the accident and places it (however erroneously) within the more meaningful context of ritual sacrifice—checks Mencken’s criticism. The working-class Myrtle Wilson is proffered on the altar that is Nick Carraway’s narrative; by imputing her senseless, accidental death with sacrificial significance, he attempts to restore meaning and moral order to a world grossly lacking in both and to purchase, for the future, some reprieve from the cynicism that lack has engendered.

Although Nick admits that “what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams [...] temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men,” two years later that interest is reopened (*GG* 2, 164). His personal investment in Gatsby’s story—like the bonds in which he deals—has matured and the novel, itself, constitutes a kind of “cashing in” on what is profitable about this curious “existence given to men.” Despite his claims to the contrary—after that summer, Nick writes, “the East was haunted for me [...], distorted beyond my eyes’ power of correction”—Myrtle’s death enables Nick to see what is truly valuable—or, in Bataille’s words, of a “precious nature”—in Gatsby, Myrtle, and himself (*GG* 178, Bataille 65). As if addressing Fitzgerald’s “provincial[ly] squeamish” narrator, who “wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart,” Bataille writes:

You must discover in anguish what you possess of a most precious nature, what you, consequently, must communicate to your fellow beings and, through this, what you must magnify without measure. Without sacrifice, anguish would only be what it is—I mean what it appears to be to the sick individual—it would not be the *heart* in which the movement of worlds is bound and is ruptured. (65)

Fitzgerald’s novel is very much about Nick’s movement through a kind of personal anguish to a position—or perhaps more accurately, to a perspective—from which he can effectively narrate what lies “in the very centre, in the heart of humanity,” if not in the general, humanist sense that Bataille’s language suggests, then at least *for him* (Bataille 65).

Simply put, this is a desire for community—for intimate relationships transcending corrupt “business gonnegtion[s]” or clichéd affairs (*GG* 71). For all his

distanced irony, broken romantic engagements, and insistence upon being “a single man,” Nick is a social creature (*GG* 3, 42). Descended from the tightly-knit, Midwestern Carraway “clan,” he values things like hospitality, generosity, gratitude, honesty, and loyalty even if he does not always exhibit these qualities, himself (*GG* 3). A “reserved” champion of the homespun “cardinal virtues” scarcely found among his “careless,” selfish, individualistic cohort, Nick finds himself quite out of place in the northeast (*GG* 2, 60, 180). Indeed, he calls Long Island “one of the strangest communities in North America” because, as he quickly comes to discover, it is hardly a community at all (*GG* 4). He has traded the “provincial” country “of wide lawns, friendly trees” and, presumably, friendly neighbors for an island crowded with “one hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and lustreless moon” (*GG* 3, 178). At least, this is how “West Egg, especially, still figures in [his] more fantastic dreams” (*GG* 177). In the manner of “El Greco,” Nick imagines “four solemn men in dress suits [...] walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles with cold jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman’s name, and no one cares” (*GG* 178).

Contrast this with the following account of his—however romanticized—“Middle-West”:

One of my most vivid memories is of coming back West from prep school and later from college at Christmastime. Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the dim old Union Station at six o’clock of a December evening, with a few Chicago friends, already caught up into their own holiday gayeties, to

bid them a hasty good-by. I remember the fur coats of the girls returning from Miss This-or-That's and the chatter of frozen breath and the hands waving overhead as we caught sight of old acquaintances, and the matchings of invitations: "Are you going to the Ordways'? the Herseys'? the Schultzes'?" and the long green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands. And the last murky yellow cars of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad looking cheerful as Christmas itself on the tracks beside the gate.

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again. (*GG* 176-177).

Here, Nick expresses the sense of belonging to a community—of, as Bataille puts it, “intimacy between him and his world” in a novel largely about restless, uprooted individuals who have forsaken that intimacy if they ever knew it at all (Bataille 43). His repeated use of the pronoun “we” suggests the collective identifications and affiliations fostered, not only by his experience of the Midwest, but by train travel. As John Urry observes, automobiles initiated a cultural shift away from the “public timetables” and “shared space” that structured railway travel to “personalized, subjective temporalities” and privatized space “as people live[d] their lives, increasingly, in and through their car(s)” (Urry 29).

Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel, *The Waves*, registers this cultural shift in a passage that echoes Nick's Midwestern reverie in *The Great Gatsby*:

Meanwhile as I stand looking from the train window, I feel strangely, persuasively, that because of my great happiness (being engaged to be married) I am become part of this speed, this missile hurled at the city. I am numbed to tolerance and acquiescence. My dear sir, I could say, why do you fidget, taking down your suitcase and pressing into it the cap that you have worn all night? Nothing we can do will avail. Over us all broods a splendid unanimity. We are enlarged and solemnized and brushed into uniformity as with the grey wing of some enormous goose (it is a fine but colourless morning) because we have only one desire—to arrive at the station. I do not want the train to stop with a thud. I do not want the connection which has bound us together sitting opposite each other all night long to be broken. I do not want to feel that hate and rivalry have resumed their sway; and different desires. Our community in the rushing train, sitting together with only one wish to arrive at Euston, was very welcome. But behold! We have attained our desire. We have drawn up at the platform. Hurry and confusion and the wish to be first through the gate into the lift assert themselves. But I do not wish to be first through the gate, to assume the burden of individual life. (TW 80)

It is the burden of an “individual life” under which Nick chafes. He is, after all, in “the bond-business”—literally, the business of selling bonds for “Probity Trust” and, figuratively, the business of forging bonds between the other characters (GG 3, 56). As Michael Tratner observes in his 2001 study, *Deficits and Desires: Economics and*

Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Literature, Nick Carraway's chosen profession is "a detail little noted by critics" (Tratner 11). Both Nick and Gatsby "make their living by getting other people to lend money," one, via legal transactions and the other, illegally (11). Where Tratner reads Nick as the means by which Gatsby hopes to "move from illegitimate to legitimate bonds" in his [i.e., Gatsby's] personal—if not in his professional—life, I read Nick as more simply and generally engaged in the project of cementing the bonds within his diegetic community and, failing that (which he does), among his readers (74).

In his brilliant essay on Wallace Stevens' 1919 poem, "Anecdote of the Jar," Frank Lentricchia argues that communities of readers and writers, oral storytellers and their audiences—even politicians and their constituents—are forged largely through the strategic use of anecdote. Referring to the narrator in Stevens' poem, but in terms that apply equally to the narrator of Fitzgerald's "anecdotal" novel, Lentricchia writes:

Anecdotes would appear by their very nature to depend on a stable outside narrative, given and known, but in fact—and most dramatically in their written, highly literary style—they work at critical turning points of cultural crisis when the outside narrative seems to be slipping away and its ideological energy is at its lowest ebb. The anecdotalist's role (or desire) is to represent but by way of retrieval and re-creation. To tell us what we think we already know is an effect of the genial style (trick) of his rhetoric—a literary bonding proleptic, he hopes, for the social and historical bonding that he wants to resuscitate and whose absence is the trigger of his little storytelling. The anecdotalist's act of memory is generative, critical, and cautionary: his implication is always let us remember

together, take it to heart, see the bigger picture. The anecdotalist is therefore necessarily a deliberately cryptic teacher; he knows that what he wants he can't achieve alone; his largest hope is to engender an engaged readership whose cohesion will lie in a common commitment to a social project and the sustaining of life therein. (Lentricchia 381)

Lentricchia's repeated references to literary, social, and historical "bonding" sheds additional light on Nick Carraway's chosen profession; his claim about "turning points of cultural crisis" in which the anecdote becomes a particularly powerful means of "retrieving" the past and restoring a "stable outside narrative" speaks to the markedly unstable socio-historical context in which Nick finds himself and to which "the old euphemisms" and traditions no longer apply (*GG* 108).

His [i.e. Nick's] work—the project of narrating this particular story and of relating these particular anecdotes—is thus akin to the work of the poet as described by Lentricchia, and the work of the poet is, incidentally, "directed towards the same aim as sacrifice" according to Bataille (49). He writes: "Both sacrifice and a poem [...] *bestow sight* on what, within the object, has the power to excite desire or horror" (43). That which "excites desire and horror" is the "sacred;" that which denies or represses these elemental passions is "profane" (46).

Ultimately, Nick's anecdotal narrative is an attempt to recover that which is sacred in a world increasingly dominated by the profane—for Bataille, "the world of *reason*, of *identity*, of *things*, of duration and calculation;" elsewhere, he writes: "the world of science and the machine" (40, 46). This is precisely the world that dominates Fitzgerald's novel; where Nick would have preferred to meditate upon "Kant[']s church

steeple,” he finds “nothing to look at [...] except Gatsby’s enormous house, so [he] stared at it for half an hour” (*GG* 89). Likewise, the only eyes that “brood over” the “obscure operations” of men are not divine, but steadfastly secular, they belong to Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, “a wild wag of an oculist [who] set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens” (*GG* 23). To transform this world—to recover its sanctity and imbue it with a more transcendent vision—is no small undertaking. As Bataille observes, “it is paradoxical and especially difficult to speak about the sacred in an age when, in the common life of humanity altogether, it no longer has more than an almost secondary importance” (46). Sacrifice, likewise, no longer has a place “in the common life of humanity,” which has “reached the point where to put a man to death has ceased to be acceptable (and this [has put] an end to the custom)” (49). Consequently, both the “sacred” and “sacrifice” are relegated to the sphere of representation—of narrative. Here (as Aristotle has argued in the *Poetics*), one can approach “what is fascinating and violent” without incurring real injury or suffering real pain (46). In Fitzgerald’s novel, it is Myrtle’s sacrificial death that provides cathartic access to the “sacred” as defined by Bataille, erstwhile drawing attention to the decidedly bourgeois values of “security and comfort” which obscure it (47).

II. Automobiles

That these pernicious values permeate the world Nick Carraway describes has been well-documented. That they find their most salient inflection through representations of the automobile has not. In a brief essay entitled “Somewhere West of Laramie, on the Road to West Egg: Automobiles, Fillies, and the West in *The Great Gatsby*,” R.A. Corrigan argues that automobiles and, in particular, 1920s automobile

advertising, are important “clues to understanding the novel itself” (Corrigan 155).

“Fitzgerald chose the cars of his characters carefully with symbolic intention,” writes

Corrigan (155). He elaborates this symbolism as follows:

Nick Carraway, the unobtrusive narrator of *Gatsby*'s story, drives “an old Dodge.” It was probably gray. Daisy Fay, as a young virgin, “dressed in white and had a little white roadster.” In words which virtually describe Tom Buchanan, the Jordan [Motor] Company declared that the Playboy model was “a Brawny thing” with a hint of “saddle and squirt.” (157)

In contrast with Tom's “easygoing blue coupé,” which the Jordan Playboy ad copy claims “is like old money—old treasures—good taste without display, and judgment that is rare,” *Gatsby*'s Rolls Royce is “a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns” (*GG* 125, 64).

Like his “colossal,” “spanking new” mansion—“a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy”—*Gatsby*'s “circus wagon” of a car bespeaks the ostentatious vulgarity of “the newly rich” (*GG* 5, 121). As Corrigan observes, “*Gatsby* longed for [refined] judgment but seemed to have had just a little too much chrome on everything” (154).

The pointed contrast between Tom's old money elitism and *Gatsby*'s Johnny-come-lately status is further underscored by the following exchange: “I've heard of making a garage out of a stable,” Tom says to *Gatsby* while giving him a tour of the Buchanan grounds, “but I'm the first man who ever made a stable out of a garage” (*GG* 119). Too wealthy and well-established to need to flaunt the spoils of “new money,”

Tom “the polo player” embodies the distinctions of an older, landed aristocracy (*GG* 106). Like Jordan’s “dignified” entourage at Gatsby’s party, he “represent[s] the staid nobility of the country-side—East Egg condescending to West Egg” (*GG* 45). Gatsby, meanwhile, “[hasn’t] got a horse” (*GG* 104). “I used to ride in the army,” he says when invited to join Tom’s friends on horseback, “but I’ve never bought a horse. I’ll have to follow you in my car” (*GG* 104). The suggestion is ludicrous and indicates Gatsby’s exclusion from that “distinguished secret society to which [Daisy] and Tom belonged,” along with the rest of East Egg (*GG* 18).

Not only are the characters, themselves, constructed and understood through their relationship to this new commodity—as Ronald Berman observes, “[e]ach car has a social character to confer”—but the external world in which they live is, likewise, rapidly reshaping itself to accommodate (and proliferate) the automobile (Berman 18). Nick inhabits a suburban landscape marked by “roadhouses” and “wayside garages where new red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light” (*GG* 21). “Very good roads around here,” notes a visitor to Gatsby’s mansion (*GG* 103). As historian James J. Flink observes, the passage of the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act and the 1921 Federal Highway Act transformed “the primitive road network of 1910... into an interconnected system of concrete highways by 1930” (Flink 170). Even Manhattan is changing. The “tumult of the elevated” now competes with the “‘jug-jug-*spat!*’ of a motorcycle” and the “dark lanes of the Forties [are] five deep with throbbing taxicabs” (*GG* 136, 68, 57). In *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile and American Literature*, Roger N. Casey describes postwar America as “a vast motorscape” (Casey 4). The automobile and its related industries also register more obliquely in the novel, as the Buchanans’ home formerly “belonged to

Demaine, the oil man,” and Gatsby, himself, claims to have derived part of his fortune from “the oil business” (*GG* 8, 91).

This shifting geographical and cultural landscape furnishes a new language—new metaphors for experience—that Fitzgerald consistently deploys throughout the text. In contrast with his reckless and impulsive cohort, Nick describes himself as “slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on [his] desires” (*GG* 59). When he later realizes that it is his thirtieth birthday, he muses: “Before me stretched the portentous, menacing road of a new decade” (*GG* 136). Stopping at Wilson’s garage for gas on their way to the city, Nick, Jordan, and Tom find the “hollow-eyed” proprietor “all run down” (*GG* 123). Such language suggests the degree to which machine culture has penetrated modern consciousness, reframing the “mental landscape” of the period as one across which we are driven—and, if Jordan, Daisy, or Tom happens to be at the wheel, “careless[ly],” at that (*GG* 180).

In his *Notebooks*, Fitzgerald appeals to similar automotive metaphors to frame the devolution of his relationship with Zelda. Luis Giron Echevarria quotes the following passage in his essay, “The Automobile as Central Symbol in F. Scott Fitzgerald,” in an effort to demonstrate the significance of this new technology for the author, “both in fiction and in real life”:

They rode through five years in an open car with the sun on their foreheads and their hair flying. They waved to people they knew but seldom stopped to ask a direction or check on the fuel, for every morning there was a gorgeous new horizon... They missed collisions by inches, wavered on the edge of precipices and skidded across tracks to the sound of the warning bell. Their friends tired of

waiting for the smash... One could almost name the day when the car began to sputter and slow up. (Echevarria 74-75)

Such passages corroborate Theodore Hornberger's observation (made in 1930) that no other commodity has "had the language-molding force of the automobile;" its intimate "relation to the social fibre of our age" has resulted in a "situation [that] is probably without parallel in the history of linguistics" (Hornberger 272-273). Ronald Berman elaborates this claim by invoking other examples of modern technology that inform Fitzgerald's novel:

Mechanism is an insistent part of Fitzgerald's perception... we proceed by the movement of the "standard shift" within a universal geometry traced in air; observe human "straining" at a gas pump whose own rhythm never changes but which enforces the symbiosis of flow and hand; hear the noon whistle's reminder that Catullus was right. We even have "brakes" on our "desires" and there is an eternally ringing telephone that measures human relationship inversely by duration. (Berman 95, 89)

As Berman notes elsewhere, Fitzgerald's "mechanistic perception" is also heavily influenced by film.

Nevertheless, these mechanical metaphors compete, throughout the text, with another well-recognized trope. As W.J. Harvey observes, nautical imagery abounds in Fitzgerald's novel. He writes: "at Gatsby's parties Nick notes 'the sea-change of faces and voices and colour' and is 'rather ill at ease among the swirls and eddies of people'; at these parties Tom says one meets 'all kinds of crazy fish' and later protests that people will 'throw everything overboard'" (Harvey 97). Additionally, characters "drift" about

restlessly; cocktails “float” among party guests; and breezes “ripple” over the Buchanans’ “wine-colored rug, making a shadow upon it as wind does on the sea” (*GG* 67, 40, 8).

More significant than these examples is the novel’s lyrical conclusion: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (*GG* 182). Harvey reads these metaphors as suggestive of “the potent cliché” upon which the novel is based—namely, the “universal human” impulse “to deny [the] fact[s] of life and try to make the ever rolling stream [of time] flow back up-hill” (97, 98). What he fails to recognize, however, is that Fitzgerald’s persistent use of nautical imagery is, itself, nostalgic.

Considered within its actual temporal context—namely, the age of the automobile—the novel’s appeal to Melvillean tropes (for example, Nick’s identification with those “Dutch sailors” who “first” turned their gaze upon “the fresh, green breast” of this continent) belies an atavistic longing not unlike the tendency of high modernists to, as Enda Duffy argues, “return obsessively to the figure of the *flâneur* at the very moment when the car was taking over the city” (*GG* 182, Duffy 21). Leo Marx concurs, stating that “[i]n *The Great Gatsby*, as in *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, the machine represents the forces working against the dream of pastoral fulfillment” (Marx 357).

That said, Fitzgerald’s novel differs from the other works to which Marx and Duffy refer in that there is little pedestrian activity in the novel. Conversations are had over the purr of running motors; Nick reflects on the events of a given evening “as [he] drove away;” the courtship between Daisy and Gatsby develops in “out-of-the-way places to which they had driven in her white car;” Tom’s “instinct” is exercised by “step[ping] on the accelerator;” and all “drive on toward death through the cooling twilight” (*GG* 20, 153, 125, 137). The plot, itself, is organized around a series of

progressively “disconcerting ride[s]” to and from the city rather than meditative or aleatory walks within it (*GG* 65). As R.A. Corrigan observes, Fitzgerald “initially considered titling the novel *On the Road to West Egg*” (Corrigan 155).

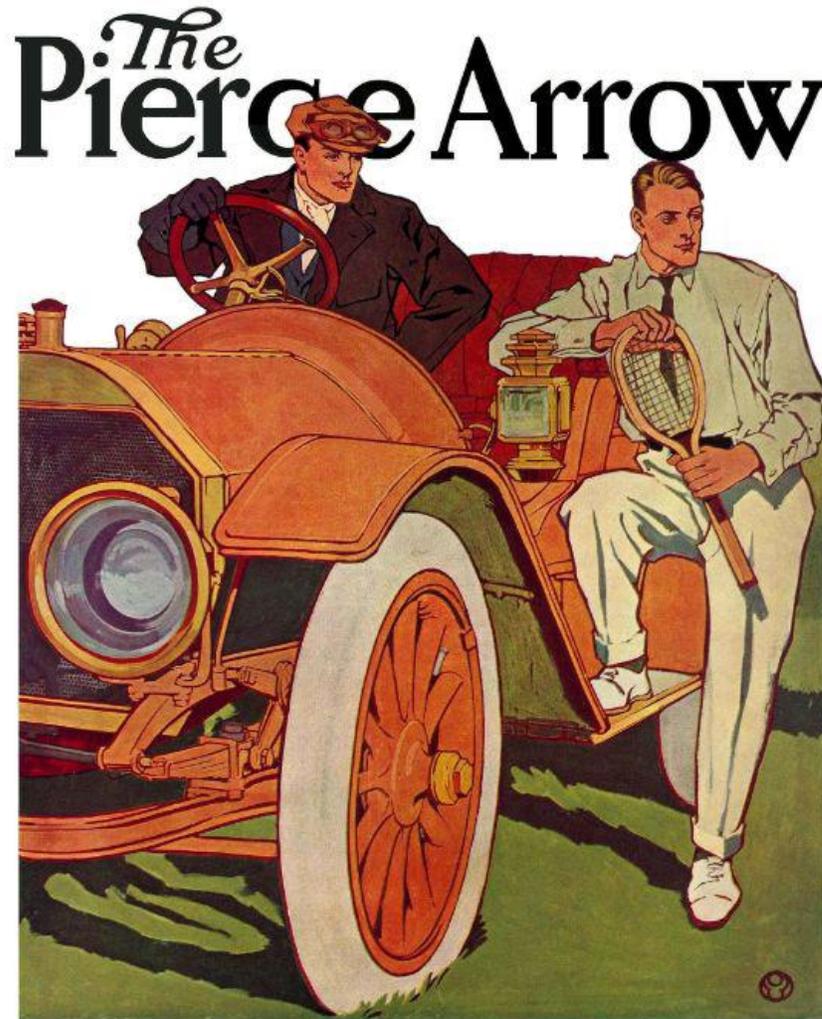
The first of these “disconcerting rides” is worth examining in some detail. Nick writes: “At nine o’clock one morning late in July, Gatsby’s gorgeous car lurched up the rocky drive to my door and gave out a burst of melody from its three noted horn” (*GG* 63). Gatsby is calling on Nick, for “the first time,” to invite him to lunch in Manhattan (*GG* 64). He then strikes one of his many poses—the latest in a now familiar “series of successful gestures” which render him “gorgeous” (*GG* 2):

[Gatsby] was balancing himself on the dash board of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand. (*GG* 64)

As Harvey observes, Gatsby is frequently characterized by “formal poses” that invoke “something theatrical or religious” (Harvey 99). For example, Nick describes Gatsby:

...standing in the moonlight outside the Buchanans’ house, rapt in ‘the sacredness of the vigil’; Gatsby in his own temple-cum-roadhouse between ‘the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell,’ or above all, Gatsby stretching out his arms towards the green light that is the vain promise of his future. (*Ibid.*)

While these “moments of suspended time” are laden with religious connotations, if not explicitly religious language (e.g. “vigil” and “host”), the first passage cited above invokes something more profane than sacred (Ibid.). Gatsby is here imitating the most secular of texts—the automobile advertisement. Take, for example, the following ad for the luxury Pierce Arrow automobile, published in a 1910 issue of *Life Magazine*:⁴



Like the lantern-jawed men of leisure pictured in this ad, Gatsby endeavors to strike a comparable balance between unaffected languor and assertive, masculine ownership.

The twenties ushered in what might be called the cult of “casualness”—indeed, the word appears everywhere in Fitzgerald’s novel—and it is precisely this elusive quality that

Gatsby lacks. It is probable that advertising shaped (if it did not create) this cult, and ads like these that Gatsby unsuccessfully aped. As Nick observes, his theatrical gestures and “elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (GG 48). In *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*, Ronald Berman indicates that “many ads of the twenties are [...] socially instructive,” providing tips for those who found themselves, like Gatsby, “on the margins of class” (Berman 19). Fitzgerald, likewise, worked briefly in the industry and “took quite seriously the techniques and even the claims of advertising—he did not differentiate it from the rest of ‘culture’ and indeed he used it to enormous advantage in a novel about people whose energies are often bent toward consumption” (17). Berman also notes that the July 1922 issue of *Vanity Fair*, published when Fitzgerald was composing *The Great Gatsby*, devotes more advertisements and text to the automobile than to any other commodity.

Nick then shifts his attention from the man to the car, whereupon Gatsby comments: “‘It’s pretty, isn’t it, old sport?’” (GG 64). The elaborate description of the car’s exterior—a “rich,” “bright,” “triumphant” configuration of nickel, chrome, and steel—concludes with the following description of its interior: “Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town” (GG 64). The automobile, as figured in Fitzgerald’s novel and as advertised during the nineteenth-teens and twenties, functions as an extension of the bourgeois interior.⁵ This complex cultural, architectural, and psychological phenomenon—first described by Walter Benjamin and later elaborated by critics like Julia Prewitt Brown—is characterized by an “obsession with ownership, security, and the desire to reclaim a more stable prior condition” (Brown 13). Brown observes that “the Latin root of the word *bourgeois*... is

burgus, meaning *fortress*,” and works, throughout her study, to demonstrate the ways in which the bourgeois interior functions as a “protective cover designed to shield [the modern subject] from the shocks of urban life” (xii, 14). Additionally, she argues that it is behind the “screen or cushion provided by his domestic interior and its objects [that] the bourgeois seeks and finds his [own] identity” (14). Brown’s thesis is aptly illustrated by the domestic interiors described throughout *The Great Gatsby*—from the Buchanans’ “bright, rosy-colored” sitting room to Myrtle Wilson’s tacky apartment, “crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it,” to Gatsby’s maze of “Marie-Antoinette music rooms, Restoration salons,” and “period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers”—all of which function to protect (and reflect) their owners (*GG* 8, 29, 92).

While Brown’s analysis of the bourgeois interior as it is represented in 19th and 20th century British literature is thorough and illuminating, I argue that the “hermetic,” “architecturally framed,” domestic spaces to which she refers—wherein “the pursuit of comfort is itself a sign of agitation and unrest”—should be extended to include the automobile (7, 10, xii). As Jean Baudrillard and Arthur B. Evans observe, “the car is [...] the appendix of an immobile domestic universe” (Baudrillard and Evans 314). Gatsby’s Rolls Royce is equipped with every amenity; its “hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes” function as mobile miniature closet, kitchen, and garage (*GG* 64). Like a house, it is also “terraced” and contains a “conservatory” (*GG* 64). It is not surprising that the machine here resembles (and appends) the home given that the home is concurrently evolving to resemble the machine. As Brown observes, Le Corbusier’s writings of the 1920s reconceptualize the house as “a machine for living in” (Brown 104).⁶

In keeping with period advertisements that emphasize the automobile owner's ability to express his individual taste and "personality" through custom paint and upholstery, the "green leather" interior of the car—chosen, presumably, to remind Gatsby of the green light blinking on Daisy's dock—counts as one of the many "enchanted objects" with which he surrounds himself and so protects his inviolable dream (*GG* 94).⁷ Likewise, Roger Casey's observation that "Gatsby's (and his culture's) narcissism is clearly reflected in the labyrinthine mirrors of his automobile" corroborates Brown's claim that the bourgeois subject loves to see himself reflected everywhere and in everything—hence, the proliferation of "family photographs and relics, [...] monogrammed towel[s]," etc. (Casey 51, Brown 2).

However, the automobile's function as an extension of the bourgeois interior carries with it insidious consequences. The aestheticization of the machine—its association with the comfort, stability, and even silence of the home (as automotive technology advanced, hard-tops replaced open vehicles, engines were designed and manufactured to be less noisy, suspensions, more shock-absorbent, etc.)—obscures certain aspects of its reality—namely, the volatile interplay of speed, mass, individual manipulation, and environment. As Garry Leonard observes, "There is a contradiction [...] between the elegant exterior [of the car] and the controlled bomb it surrounds and without which it would have no function" (Leonard 222).⁸ It is the accident that reveals this explosive reality; as Enda Duffy argues: "The [car] crash [...] marks a flash bespeaking the intrusive *revenge of the real* on a culture whose pleasures are built on the dream of escaping the illusionary world of consumerist simulation while still wishing for its cosseting promised security" (Duffy 203, emphasis mine). Julia Prewitt Brown

concurr, arguing that the protective insularity of the bourgeois interior frequently provides little more than an “*illusion of security*” (Brown 20). The bourgeois subject is still vulnerable to those forces he would otherwise guard against (e.g. natural disaster, industrial accident, disease, decay, death, etc.)—indeed, he is rendered all the more so because he falsely believes himself to be *invulnerable*. Additionally, Brown argues that it is the bourgeois subject’s willingness to perpetuate this illusion that “distinguishes [him] from the tragic figure” (22). His refusal “to expose himself to suffering” precludes not only pain, but also the possibility for heroic action (22).

As I have argued, the bourgeois anti-heroes of Fitzgerald’s novel rather subject a lower-class surrogate to the suffering they are unwilling to endure, themselves, but which they recognize as being necessary to insure the futurity of their privileged socioeconomic status. Just as Nick’s “grandfather’s brother [...] sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the [lucrative] wholesale hardware business that [his] father carries on today,” so Fitzgerald sends Myrtle Wilson to the front lines of the novel’s deeply entrenched class warfare, sacrificing her life so that the lives of others might be spared (*GG* 3). Although Richard Lehan argues that it is primarily Tom and Daisy who profit from the suffering and victimization of the lower classes, the exploitation of which enables “the Buchanan way of life [to] go on,” I submit that Nick derives a “separate but equal” kind of benefit from Myrtle’s suffering insofar as there exists a reciprocal relationship between her sacrificial death and his ability to narrate (Lehan 79).

Returning, however, to Nick’s first “disconcerting ride.” Despite the considerable pleasure he experiences riding in Gatsby’s car—“[w]ith fenders spread like wings, we scattered light through half Astoria”—Nick grows increasingly uncomfortable as Gatsby

launches into his personal history (*GG* 68). The drive, itself, literalizes Nick's movement from "incredulity" to the belief that Gatsby's story "was all true" (*GG* 67). "We hadn't reached West Egg village," writes Nick, "before Gatsby began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee of his caramel colored suit" (*GG* 65). Gatsby's unconvincing gestures parallel Nick's own skepticism at the beginning of both the "threadbare" tale and the desolate drive; however, "as [they] neared the city," Gatsby's "correctness grew," along with Nick's faith in his seemingly fantastic narrative (*GG* 66, 68). Once they cross "over the great bridge," our narrator's opinion of Gatsby is completely—if falsely—restored and he experiences a rush of adrenaline:

Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world. (*GG* 69)

Nick's fragmented, impressionistic language appeals to the new paradigm of visuality instituted by speed technologies beginning with the train and followed, a few decades later, by cinema and the automobile.

However, the pleasure he experiences—according to Enda Duffy, "the novel emotional, psychic, and somatic possibilities raised by the conjunction of the technological prosthesis of the automobile and the human organism"—is shadowed, throughout the novel, by the dangers of its excess (Duffy 113). "When quickness [e.g. *vie*, *vif*, *vitesse*] means life," writes Duffy, "its excessiveness, its misuse, means death" (Duffy 209). Just after crossing the bridge into the city, Nick observes:

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of Southeastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby's splendid car was included in their somber holiday. (*GG* 69)

This description of the “somber” funeral procession, ostensibly juxtaposed with Gatsby's “splendid car,” in fact, suggests the profound likeness of the two spectacles. As Robert Casey observes: “From the onset of the novel, Fitzgerald capitalizes on the potential of the automobile to embody decay and dying” (Casey 51). The pleasures afforded by this new technology are closely attended by its potential dangers; death is frequently associated with—or signified by—the automobile. For example, when Daisy asks Nick if those she knew in Chicago miss her, he replies: ““The whole town is desolate. All the cars have the left rear wheel painted black as a mourning wreath, and there's a persistent wail all night along the north shore”” (*GG* 10).

Not only does Fitzgerald invoke the automobile to intimate individual death or personal tragedy, he also appeals to this new technology to suggest a pending social apocalypse. Take, for example, the next “motorists” Nick and Gatsby encounter on their way into the city:

As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

“Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge,” I thought; “anything at all...”

Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (GG 69)

As Peter Gregg Slater observes, a “heightened awareness of ethnic differences does constitute a significant element in [Fitzgerald’s novel],” and the “bluntest proclamations [...] of ethnic affiliation and ethnic rivalry are put forth by Tom Buchanan” (Slater 53-54). However, Slater’s subsequent claim that Nick does not “approve of Tom’s indulgence in blatant chauvinism and prejudice... refer[ring] to notions of an ethnic Armageddon as ‘stale ideas’ and consider[ing] Tom’s miscegenation rhetoric to be ‘impassioned gibberish,’” is troubled by the passage cited above (Slater 54).⁹ It would seem that Nick does fear an “ethnic Armageddon,” and recognizes the automobile as a formidable weapon in the new order’s arsenal. His anxiety belies the destabilization of a formerly fixed social order by the mutually constitutive forces of mass capitalism, class mobilization, and mass-motorization. Henry Ford’s Model T, for example, instituted what Enda Duffy describes as “a politics of access;” the automobile “was offered to citizens based on their ability to pay” rather than on their race, ethnicity, or gender (Duffy 7). Historian John Whiteclay Chambers corroborates this claim, arguing that industrial capitalism carried with it the “radical [...] potential for building coalitions of consumers across class and ethnic lines” (Chambers 107).

In *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, Warren I. Susman describes this development as fundamentally “utopian” (Susman xxix). He writes: “[M]any saw in the promise of the new [consumer] culture a solution to fundamental human and social problems, a new world of fulfillment and even liberation” (xxix). However, Nick’s uncomfortable recognition of the democratizing effects of mass capitalism and mass production results in his scathing critique of

consumer culture (a critique made most evident in his description of the visit to Myrtle Wilson's apartment), as well as his profoundly "ethnocentric interpretation of the American dream" (Slater 59). Slater observes:

Whereas the Dutch [sailor's] version of the American dream was available to any human who happened to come along at that moment in history, and Gatsby's version can be aspired to by anyone with the requisite imaginative potency, Nick's version is exclusive and provincial. It is basically limited to affluent Middle Western Americans who are white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, or willing and able to be acculturated to WASP modes. (Slater 59)

It is Nick's failed "acculturation" to the East that prompts his reversion to this "exclusive and provincial" version of the American dream—in particular, his "unadaptab[ility]" to the perverse rites and violent rituals through which the communities of East and West Egg are purged of racial, ethnic, and class contaminants (*GG* 177).

Rejecting the "anaemic poverty" of the profane world of "things" (so described by Bataille) and the people who have become indistinguishable from them—it is important to note that that which incriminates certain characters in the novel is their interchangeable identification with certain objects; Gatsby is identified as the "owner of the yellow car;" George Wilson suspects his wife of having an affair after he finds the "small, expensive dog leash" Tom had bought her—Nick returns home to the Midwest, but feels compelled to relate the story of that "crowded summer" nonetheless (Bataille 46; *GG* 158, 56). Bataille writes: "In its simplest form, the sacred is essentially communication" (42). If, as Dan Coleman argues, Nick's narration is "elegiac," it is because that which he [Nick] recognizes as sacred is a thing of the past—namely, a sense of "intimacy between him

and his world,” between him and others (Coleman 207, Bataille 43). This “intimacy” is encroached upon and usurped by a number of modern evils, and chief among them—in Fitzgerald’s novel, anyway—is the automobile. “Haunted” by the deaths of Myrtle and Gatsby, and by “the East,” with its “constant flicker of men and women and machines,” Nick opts for something more “commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (*GG* 57, 182). Although in brief, prefatory remarks that might escape the attention of the reader, Nick writes: “the history of that summer really begins on the evening I drove over [to East Egg] to have dinner with the Tom Buchanans” and ends with “[his] trunk packed and [his] car sold to the grocer” (*GG* 5, 181).

¹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

² Admittedly, Dreiser’s novel does address the power of the upper classes to avoid the kind of fate to which Clyde, because of his lack of capital, is subjected. But the story is largely told from Clyde’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of the Lycurgus Griffithses or the Finchleys, etc. Fitzgerald’s focus on the wealthy inhabitants of East and West Egg thus exposes a different facet of the same social problem—namely, class in American culture.

³ To clarify, the manufacturing practice of interchangeable parts resulted from an effort to standardize and streamline production. Henry Ford shifted away from earlier models of automobile manufacturing in which cars were “assembled from jobbed-out components by crews of skilled mechanics and unskilled helpers at low rates of labor productivity” to a new system of mass production at his Highland Park plant (Flink 41). There, Ford made “[his] own crankcases, axels, housing, and bodies,” each component being just like another, rather than ordering them from independent, “artisanal” machinists and assembling them a single unit at a time (Flink 58).

⁴ Pierce Arrow Automobiles. Advertisement. *Life* 17 February 1910.

⁵ It is worth noting that the automobile figures quite differently in American literature and film produced after the interwar period. For example, it serves as the makeshift mobile home of the impoverished Joad family in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and as a conscious repudiation of bourgeois values in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (Columbia Pictures, 1969).

⁶ Brown is here quoting Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999, 407.

⁷ Interestingly, Henry Ford did not believe in the aestheticization, or customization, of the machine. He viewed the automobile as a purely pragmatic commodity; his Model T, the design for which changed minimally over the nineteen year course of its production, was only offered in the color black and reflected Ford’s commitment to the “large-volume production of... [a] single, static model at an ever decreasing unit price” (Flink 37).

⁸ In this essay, Leonard details the way in which the internal combustion engine “requires explosion and repetitive rupture to produce smooth, continuous, forward motion” (222). As such, it contains what one might describe as a *controlled accident*.

⁹ Later in the essay, Slater concedes that “Ultimately, Nick’s awareness of ethnicity is [...] overlaid by an unstated belief in the superiority of his own type” (55).

Chapter Three

Reflecting on the Medium: Cuts and Collisions in King Vidor's *The Crowd* (MGM, 1928)

All that was distinctly the chance of life and death [once...] belonged to God; and no doubt it was law, though it seem[ed] chance. But what I object to is this economic chance-world in which we live, and which we men seem to have created.

—William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

King Vidor's silent film, *The Crowd* (MGM, 1928), takes its place alongside *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby* in tracing the rise and fall of a young, male protagonist whose ambitions are checked, at roughly every turn, by circumstances least conducive to their realization. Like these novels, a car crash constitutes the film's climax, after which its hero, John Sims (James Murray), suffers from severe depression, followed by the loss of his job, his family, and, quite nearly, his own life. It is precisely this "pattern of misfortune [that] runs through the lives of the film's main characters" which makes Robert Lang hesitant to classify *The Crowd* as a traditional melodrama (Lang 114). In *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*, he defines the genre—particularly in its early configurations à la Griffith—as one in which "a moral truth is always asserted, a sense of justice, of right and wrong, is established, and a casting of blame is always achieved" (Ibid.). However, "[w]ith no clearly identifiable villain in the film, *The Crowd* threatens to pull the rug out from beneath even melodrama's traditional supports—a rock-firm belief in the *idea* of good and evil and a demonstration of justice prevailing" (112). Lang attributes this generic reformulation to the fact that, after WWI, "[l]ife still had its problems, but now it was harder to lay the blame for those problems at someone's feet. Villainy [became] harder to *figure*" (106). Rather than suffering at the hands of a cruel or evil individual, Sims finds himself

opposed by complex “ideological” forces; his is a struggle against the “the structural reality of the American class system” under mass capitalism (106, 107).

While the issues *The Crowd* engages are indeed complex—“too complex,” according to Lang, “for the melodrama to comprehend”—I submit that a villain *is* identified in the film, and that its figuration is tied explicitly to the automobile accident that claims the Sims’s daughter’s life (114). The modern evils with which Vidor wrestles—read by Lang as having “an abstract, almost allegorical quality”—find their most concrete expression in the automobile accident that constitutes the climax of the film (130). While Lang is right to assert that this villain “is no longer personified,” it is nonetheless expressly identified as the exploitative relations of production under mass capitalism and the conditions of life that result from them (116). That the fatal collision is not recognized as the signature of this systemic villainy—that it is framed, linguistically, culturally, and conceptually as an *accident*—is mass capitalism’s masterful “Sleight O’ Hand.” As Paul Virilio observes, “one catastrophe can hide another” (Virilio 28). Consequently, we must always ask ourselves: “Accident or sabotage?” (Ibid. 21).

In concurrence with other critics who have written about *The Crowd*, Lang identifies the inimical forces at work in the film—what I have called its systemic villains—as “the industrial-capital complex,” “mass society and consumer culture,” and “the dialectical relation of production and reproduction” (Lang 123, 121, 112).¹ The question presents itself: how does one represent these—admittedly, abstract and overwhelming—forces, as well as the crushing pressure they exert on the average individual? More importantly, how does one represent such forces, *visually*, in the very medium—namely, narrative Hollywood cinema—that is part and parcel of selfsame

system? As Lang observes, melodrama is a particularly conservative genre; while it is occasionally “animated by [...] revolutionary impulses,” the form “attempts to remedy wrongs within existing institutions” rather than overturn those institutions altogether (Ibid. 118). Nevertheless, I argue that Vidor succeeds, not only in identifying and indicting those institutions responsible for his hero’s suffering, but in giving such institutions concrete representation through the automobile accident. Consequently, to read the fatal collision as little more than an example of “melodramatic excess” or the first in a series of misfortunes that befall the Simses “by chance” is to overlook the deliberate intimations of this systemic crime—and not personal catastrophe—which precede it (116).

The first of such intimations occurs early in the film, when Vidor’s camera closes in on John Sims’s desk at the Atlas Insurance Company. Rather than crunching numbers like his colleagues, we find our hero brainstorming ideas for an advertising contest. As the newspaper clipping he holds indicates, a “One Hundred Dollar Cash Prize” will be awarded to the “GENIUS” who comes up with a “Name for Our New Motor Fuel.” On a sheet of paper, Sims has jotted down “Petrol-Pep” and “Jazz-o-lene.” Clearly pleased with the latter slogan, he bides the last few minutes of his workday by slowly collecting his papers and notes. In terms of the film’s diegesis, this scene reveals the degree to which Sims is ill-suited to the tedious monotony of his job. Vidor presents him as a creative type with some modicum of “genius,” however banal the purposes to which that genius is bent. On a structural level, this scene is profoundly ironic. As the death of his daughter later reveals, the euphemistic slogans Sims delights in contriving fuel a potentially destructive industry. One wonders how Sims might react to his own wordplay

when racked by real grief after the collision. As Paul Valéry observes, “the accident is the appearance of a quality of something that was hidden by another of its qualities” (qtd. in Virilio 6).² In this case, the quality of absolute stasis—later seen in the immobilized vehicle and in the little girl’s limp body—is hidden by the quality of movement, of “pep” and “jazz.” While the automobile embodies both qualities—that is to say, it enables both movement and stasis—Paul Virilio argues that our focus should be on the latter, on that which characterizes the accident. He writes: “for us today, *the accident reveals the substance* [of a given technology]” (Ibid. 10).

A second intimation of the impending accident (which Virilio contends is always with us) occurs on the Sims’s honeymoon excursion to Niagara Falls. Seated together on the train, the nervous and besotted newlyweds flip through *Liberty* magazine. Vidor offers a close-up shot of an advertisement that reads: “One of these Model Homes is Located Near You.” Although John eagerly assures Mary (Eleanor Boardman) that “That’s the home we’re going to have, Honey... when my ship comes in,” later scenes reveal that the spacious, suburban mansion featured in this ad is meant to contrast sharply with the Sims’s cramped—even squalid—flat. As James Sanders observes:

[In his attempt to create] an unvarnished portrait of working class life in New York, Vidor insisted on a blunt, homely setting: a one-room tenement apartment, its shabbiness epitomized by a bathroom toilet bowl visible from almost every corner. Upon screening the film, MGM’s Louis B. Mayer flew into a rage over Vidor’s telling detail. It would have been too costly to reshoot the picture, but a stern screen decree was issued: *never* again would a toilet be visible in any MGM film. (Sanders 158)

Through these marked contrasts between American life as it is advertised and American life as it is lived, Vidor establishes the pattern of disillusionment that structures the film, in which the naïveté, optimism, and ambition that characterizes John Sims—and, by extension, the “American Everyman” he was cast to represent—are consistently undercut.³ As Raymond Durgnat and Scott Simmon observe, many of Vidor’s films, including *The Crowd*, closely associate “aspiration with disillusion, confidence with tragic waste, [and] thwarted energy with spectacular morbidity” (Durgnat and Simmon 2). The texts discussed in this study suggest that such juxtapositions find particularly apt illustration in the automobile accident. However, rather than characterizing the modern grotesquerie that is the crash by a kind of Bakhtinian ambivalence, Vidor seeks to incite anger—even outrage—in his viewers by identifying the “cloak-and-dagger villain” responsible for thwarting his hero’s ambitions. It is, in no vague terms, the socioeconomic system under which Sims labors, along with countless others. While this system encourages and affirms John’s “go-getting” qualities, it does so largely to exploit them, ensuring all the while that the kind of life for which he strives will remain well beyond his reach. As Lang, himself, observes, “the great gap between [capitalist] ideology’s demands and what is rewarded or even possible in mass consumer society registers painfully in [the character of] John Sims” (Lang 125). That the psychic wounds the middle- and working-classes suffer at the hands of this “castrating” system also register physically—even fatally—is foreshadowed by the subsequent image Vidor presents (Ibid. 119).

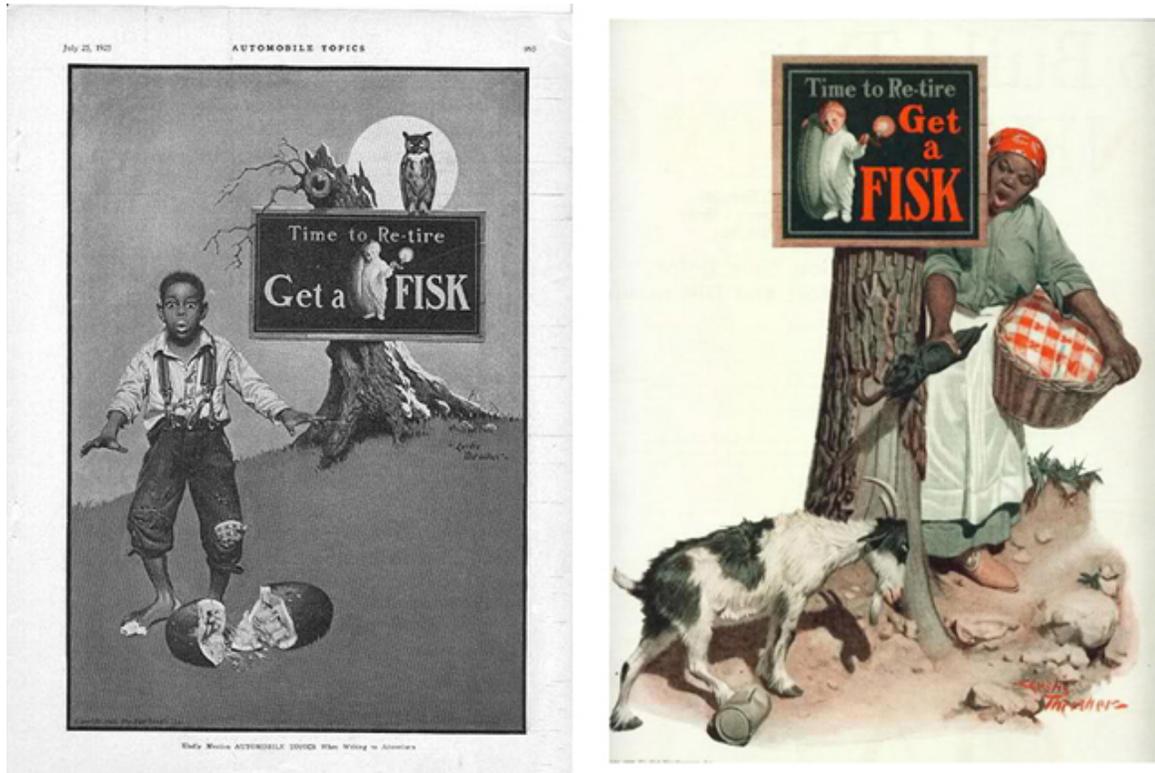
Here, John flips to the next page in the magazine. A close-up shot reveals the following advertisement for Fisk automobile tires:



The ad copy, “Time to Re-tire,” causes the demure Mary to blush as it is, coincidentally, time for the Simses to retire to the sleeping car. Sensing her embarrassment, John quickly turns the page. However, when the porter then asks if the couple would like their bed made up for the night, Mary tentatively nods. While critics like Lang and Miriam Hansen have noted the ways in which “commercial images proliferate in the film’s *mise-en-scène*,” this particular ad has received little attention (Hansen 109).⁴

Part of a campaign series that ran from roughly 1914-1962 and featured illustrations by popular artists like Norman Rockwell, the Fisk advertisements picture a young child in pajamas, holding a candle in one hand and a large car tire in the other.⁵ This image is often embedded within a larger image—in this case, a horse peeks over a

fence, on the opposite side of which clamor several barking dogs. The advertisement's double discourse is somewhat confusing unless one considers it alongside other Fisk ads which feature the same "embedding" technique:⁶



In each example, the larger image framing the Fisk ad features a diegetic scenario in which an animal or minority figure is forced to retire or, perhaps more accurately, *retreat* from some kind of threat. These antagonistic, outdoor encounters contrast sharply with the quiet, cozy, thoroughly domesticated image of the Fisk toddler.⁷ In depicting separate—and hardly equal—scenarios, the ads compound the intractable bifurcation of the American class system under mass capitalism; those pictured in the diegetic image cannot afford tires—much less, automobiles—and the consumer at whom the ad is directed is reassured that his/her world is at a comfortable remove from the primitive struggles of “others,”—indeed, that it is a different world altogether. For this consumer,

“Re-tiring” means settling in for a good night’s sleep (presumably, in an elegant suburban home like the one featured in the previous advertisement) or purchasing new car tires; for those pictured in the framing image, “Re-tiring” means something far more literal and far less “romantic.” More disturbingly, the Fisk ads insinuate that the wealth, power, and security of the upper-classes—i.e. the demographic at which the ad is targeted—are predicated upon the endangerment, retreat, and defeat of the lower—indeed, lowest, as many of these ads suggest that animals and racial minorities are interchangeable—classes.

While John Sims clearly *identifies* with the bourgeois world of the embedded Fisk image, his reality is, in fact, more aligned with that of the horse, the boy, and the Mammy figure—an alignment suggested by Vidor’s own ingenious embedding technique. For just as the Fisk ad of the little boy is embedded within the diegetic image of the struggling, victimized, and even satirized “social underling,” so the Fisk ad, *as a whole*, is embedded within Sims’ story of class struggle and conflict. The last two terms of the ratio—i.e. the politically, socially, and economically exploited and John Sims—are thus equivalent. Of course, Sims fails to recognize this equivalence, thus illustrating Miriam Hansen’s claim that, after WWI, a new class of white-collar workers emerged “whose working and living conditions in effect made them proletarian [...] yet who deny any commonality with the working class by flaunting a worn-out ideology of bourgeois individualism” (Hansen 105).⁸ Their denial is aided, in large part, by the commercial advertising industry, which actively cultivates false, upper-class identifications and deliberately dissuades—even sabotages—working-class solidarity. It is my aim—and, I argue, Vidor’s aim—to consider this commonplace tactic as criminal. While John Sims

can afford to buy *Liberty* magazine, he cannot afford to buy the commodities advertised therein. The accessibility—indeed, the very ubiquity—of advertising during this period falsely implies the accessibility of the advertised products.

John's real relationship to the commodities advertised in *Liberty* magazine—and, by extension, to the intractable relations of production and consumption under mass capitalism—is acutely revealed in a much later scene. Not until we witness the death of his daughter in an automobile accident does the canny relevance of this Fisk tire ad become clear. It is now 1927 and, although the Simses have been married for five years and had two children, John has enjoyed little success at the insurance firm where he works. The \$8 raise he receives is insufficient to meet the demands of a growing family; only a stroke of unexpected good fortune promises to liberate the Simses from financial strain. As Vidor's intertitle informs us: "Everybody wins a prize in their lifetime... somehow. And \$500 came to the Simses... all at one time!". This reward doesn't exactly come out of nowhere, however. While playing with his children at the beach, John "feel[s] another advertising slogan coming on." Juggling a handful of apples, he proclaims: "*Sleight O' Hand! The Magic Cleaner!* How's that for a darb?". At Mary's insistence, John mails the slogan to "The Holland Cleaner Company" and receives a reward.

Even so, this dramatic reversal in the Sims's fortune is, as Robert Lang argues, framed more as a sudden chance occurrence—indeed, it is almost an accident—rather than as the result of hard work, over time, in an established career. Like *An American Tragedy*, *The Crowd* illustrates postwar America's rapid "transition from an older [...] Calvinistic producer ethic with its emphasis upon hard work, self-denial, [and] savings

[to] the new, increasing demands of a hedonistic consumer ethic: spend, enjoy, use up,” described by Warren I. Susman in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Susman 123). The automobile not only enabled this transition, but is emblematic of it. Concurrently, its *accident* can be said to represent the violent intersection between these older and newer “ethics.” As Durgnat and Simmon observe, Vidor’s work frequently explores “three American attitudes often treated as incompatible: the Puritan ethic, Emersonian transcendentalism, and a secular, enterprising dynamism” (Durgnat and Simmon 16). The automobile accident constitutes a locus at which these vectors converge; its wreckage offers an index of the physical destruction and spiritual disfiguration wrought by blind faith in techno-industrial progress, commodity worship, and a kind of willed amnesia regarding America’s “older Calvinistic producer ethic.”

For this reason, viewers should hesitate to ascribe the fatal collision that immediately follows this scene of the Sims’s unexpected good fortune to chance—or unexpected *misfortune*—as does Lang. Vidor’s close-up shot of the Fisk advertisement earlier in the film invites a more complicated reading. Although the Sims’s daughter is a minor character whose name is not given (the Sims’s son is simply referred to as “Junior”), the young actress cast in the role (Alice Mildred Puter) bears a striking resemblance to the child featured in the Fisk ad. Both are fair-haired, cherubic toddlers dressed in white garments.⁹ Vidor’s medium shot of the Sims’ daughter just before she runs into the street at her parents’ behest impresses this resemblance upon the viewer once more before the collision, after which we are left with the image of her body lying face-down in the center of a gathering crowd. Puter’s white jumper makes the black tire

marks crudely stamped across her back all the more visible; the circular formation of the crowd visually echoes and conceptually compounds those forces—both concrete and abstract—by which she was trammled, thus linking this event with Fisk advertisement featured earlier in the film:



The question presents itself: what are those forces? As was stated previously, *The Crowd* identifies and indicts what Enda Duffy describes as “the ever-more-ferocious regimes of capitalism” (Duffy 27). While abstract in nature, these regimes claim real victims. In imprinting her body with the mark, or insignia, of one of the most ubiquitous commodities—and, by extension, proliferative industries—of the period, Vidor presents the young Sims girl as a casualty, not only of urban-industrial society, but of the consumer-driven culture that subtends it. As Hansen observes, Vidor’s protagonist is characterized by “a consumerist subjectivity” (Hansen 108).

This manifests itself most pointedly in the scene directly preceding the automobile accident. Mary is itemizing the family’s expenses when John enters the apartment, proudly announcing that he has “brought home the bacon.” In a fit of near hysteria, the couple tears into numerous packages, dancing around the room and gesticulating wildly before rushing to the window and eagerly calling their children

home. It is the sight of their new toys that causes John Jr. and his sister to run into the busy street; as Hansen explicitly puts it, “[Sims] wins a contest for an advertising slogan which results in a binge of consumption that gets the baby girl killed” (Ibid. 103). Few critics have established a causal link between the fatal collision and the socioeconomic context in which it occurs—indeed, which prompts it. In so doing, Hansen—and, I would add, Vidor—invites us to recognize (i.e. *re-cognize*) the automobile accident as one of the many “injuries inflicted by capitalist modernization” described by Seth Moglen in *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Moglen xv).¹⁰

This is further suggested by the fact that Sims’s daughter is run over by what appears to be a delivery truck. While its snarling driver is, perhaps, the closest thing *The Crowd* has to a “personified” villain, we must ascribe his haste to the unrelenting demands of commerce. Indeed, as Vidor’s iconic urban montage suggests early in the film, New York is a city of ceaseless traffic—be it the traffic of pedestrians, automobiles, streetcars, trains, or ships. This traffic—particularly when shot from a high-angle or aerial position, as Vidor’s cameraman does—is, in turn, revealed to be part of the vast machinations of a capitalist economy. As Enda Duffy argues, the modern capitalistic state is primarily “concerned with velocities of movement—of goods, people, money, and power—that is with, speed” (Duffy 23). Aided in no small part by Carl Davis’s frenetic orchestral score, Vidor’s dynamic Manhattan montage aptly illustrates the “velocities of movement” to which Duffy refers. As Sims’ ferry nears the pier, Vidor cuts to a high-angle shot of West 45th Street, in which dizzying streams of New Yorkers vie with the traffic of cars and buses. Through a series of lap dissolves, one particular throng of

pedestrians morphs into another and yet another. Read by James Sanders as an effort to capture “the excitement and sense of possibility that has drawn Vidor’s everyman, Johnny Sims, to the city,” these shots also suggest the ghostly transience and anonymity of urban life (Sanders 41). Likewise, the use of lap dissolves can be seen as visual allusion to the Fordist principle of interchangeability—not only of parts, but of human laborers.

In his 1973 book, *On Filmmaking*, Vidor describes how these street scenes were shot:

I believe in filming *The Crowd* (1928) I was one of the first directors to journey from California to New York to shoot scenes with actors working on city streets and to use the normal flow of pedestrians and traffic for atmosphere. Most of the scenes were photographed through a hole cut in the rear curtain of a delivery truck which we parked at an advantageous point at the curb. The brief rehearsals were all worked out by myself and two assistants, one of whom dressed in the costume favored by truck drivers and leaned against the tailgate of the truck in order to relay messages inconspicuously inside. Arm signals prevailed. In about ten days of shooting we employed no extras for the street scenes, nor do I recall that anyone detected what was happening.

For some perambulating walking shots we constructed what appeared to be three packing boxes mounted on a rubber-tired push cart, but inside we hid a camera operator with his tripod-mounted camera. (Vidor 22)

This technique, which Vidor refers to as a kind of “subterfuge” in his 1952 autobiography, *A Tree is a Tree*, contributes significantly to the film’s realism (152). In

so doing, it also reveals reality's contrivances. As Duffy observes, "human subjects" are largely unaware of their role "as *actors* in a 'dynamic' capitalist economic milieu" (Duffy 35, emphasis mine). The ostensible chaos of so many individual lives, when viewed from the elevated perspective Vidor offers us, belies a rather chilling systemic choreography. Cued by the clocks and schedules that dominate postindustrial life, the flow of traffic is directed—even balletic. Of a comparable street scene, Miriam Hansen writes: "John's first encounter with Mary, for instance, is embedded in an elaborate sequence in which female office workers peel out of a revolving door one by one to be picked up by their male dates waiting on the sidewalk—a routine worthy of a Busby Berkeley musical" (Hansen 104). Through these scenes, Vidor suggests that individual movement within the "capitalistic economic milieu" is not self-directed or spontaneous, but orchestrated—even mechanical. As Durgnat and Simmon observe, viewers get "a sense of the crowd as a dauntingly impersonal mechanism, swelling and subsiding in machine-speed routines" (Durgnat and Simmon 79). On his first date with Mary, even John, himself, quips: "Look at that crowd! The poor boobs.... all in the same rut!".

The militant lockstep in which mass capitalism binds its subjects is a central preoccupation of *The Crowd*, as are the means—however painful—by which one might escape. Like Fitzgerald, Vidor suggests that the automobile accident most acutely reveals our collective bondage to this system and, in so doing, promises to liberate us from it. For this reason, Paul Virilio characterizes the accident as "a positive event or element—not positive in the sense that it is pleasant to watch a bridge collapse, or a building crumble to pieces," but because "it reveals something important that we would

not otherwise be able to perceive. In this respect, it is a profane miracle” (Lotringer and Virilio 81, 63).

Although he suffers from profound grief and depression following the death of his daughter, it is this “profane miracle” that catalyzes John’s emancipation from the institutions and individuals that actively oppress him. With unexpected loss—however painful—comes clarity. As Andreas Huyssen observes, Russian avant-gardistes like Sergei Tretyakov “saw shock as essential to disrupting the frozen patterns of sensory perception;” indeed, it is the “prerequisite for any revolutionary reorganization of everyday life” (Huyssen 14). Unable to concentrate on his work at the insurance firm, John is scolded by his supervisor. He then flies into a rage, exclaiming “To hell with this job! I’m through!”. Characterized by many critics as an inadequate, emasculated, “failure,” this scene demonstrates John aggressively—even heroically—asserting himself.¹¹ In renouncing the system that undermines not only his masculinity, but his humanity, Sims reclaims his agency. As Robert Lang observes: “Under capitalism [...] the individual’s sense of worth cannot be achieved in productive labor” (Lang 9). While quitting his job presents new difficulties—chief among them, continuing to support his family—John acquires a sense of self worth from this decision that is to be distinguished from the excessive arrogance he exhibits early in the film. This is seen, again, when he refuses to accept a “charity job” from his bullying in-laws. Like his friend Bert (Bert Roach), who has advanced to the upper echelons of the Atlas Insurance firm, these “hulky, bowler-hatted brothers” (played by Daniel G. Tomlinson and Dell Henderson) represent the corporate establishment which Sims now formally rejects (Durgnat and Simmon 83). In disrupting the “frozen patterns”—not only of his daily life, but of his

psychic state—the accident provides an aperture through which Sims dimly perceives an alternative mode of existence; it provides precisely the “insight, consciousness [and] self-recognition” that Hansen claims Vidor’s protagonist lacks, however fleeting the realization of these qualities might have been (Hansen 105). As Virilio observes: “We have never made advances except through catastrophes. [...] We advance from inside the horror of abomination. And we advance because we bring [the accident] about, and we refute it” (Lotringer and Virilio 85).

Sims’s—and, by extension, Vidor’s—refutation of the accident (i.e. the automobile accident, the historical accident that is mass capitalism) can also be seen in *The Crowd*’s film aesthetic. As Andreas Huyssen observes:

While it is generally recognized that [modern] technologies have substantially transformed everyday life in the 20th century, it is much less widely acknowledged that technology and the experience of an increasingly technologized world have also radically transformed art. Indeed [...] no other single factor has influenced the emergence of the new avant-garde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists’ imagination [...], but penetrated to the core of the work itself. The invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology and what one may loosely call the technological imagination can best be grasped in artistic practices such as collage, assemblage, montage, and photomontage. (Huyssen 9)

A particularly deft execution of “the art of montage” to which Huyssen refers, *The Crowd*’s accident scene bespeaks not only the lacerating effects of mass industrial capitalism, but also the erasure of the causes of those effects. Beginning with a medium

shot of John and Mary at the window and concluding with a high-angle shot of John carrying his daughter's body inside, this climactic scene lasts roughly one minute and contains seventeen cuts. Shots of John and Mary are interposed with long and medium shots of the children, the street, the approaching vehicle, its driver, Puter's body, and the swarming crowd. The actual moment of collision is not directly depicted or seen, but rather implied by the Sims's horrified expressions.

The Crowd thus conforms to the "normative patterns" of depicting screen violence in the pre-Production Code era as described by Stephen Prince (Prince 18). He writes: "Much film violence throughout the silent period has an overtly theatrical quality and mode of presentation. It is shown in full-figure framings, with the camera at a comfortable distance from the action, and the victims [...] behave as they might on the stage" (Ibid. 12). While regional censor boards were largely focused on depictions of violent and criminal behavior, the depiction of violent events—such as automobile accidents—was also subject to scrutiny. As Prince argues, filmmakers had to be careful when representing "brutality or gruesomeness," particularly when children were involved, and victims were not to be "shown as suffering pain or anguish" (25, 27). As contrasted with the automobile accidents graphically described in *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby*, the collision depicted in *The Crowd* is rather sanitary. Nevertheless, while conspicuously lacking in blood, flayed bodies, and mangled machines, Vidor's film aesthetic—his brusque stylization of the accident—conveys the violence he was not at liberty to represent. Rapid-fire cuts subject viewers to a kind of visual trauma comparable to the psychological trauma John and Mary experience upon witnessing this horrific event—to say nothing of the physical trauma their daughter

experiences. Likewise, the actual moment of collision is not depicted, as it constitutes that “dimension of represented violence that exceed[s] existing screen boundaries” in much the same way that traumatic experiences are said to exceed the bounds of language (18).

Interestingly, in her analysis of “the early trope of the crashing car,” Karen Beckman argues that automobile accidents constitute a moment wherein silent cinema is *forced* to appeal to other discourses such as language and sound (Beckman 28). Taking as her examples Cecil Hepworth’s *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900) and *Explosion of a Motorcar* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900), along with Robert W. Paul’s *The ? Motorist* (Robert W. Paul, 1906), Beckman claims that these directors’ resort to cuts, gags, and special effects at the moment of collision belies the limitations of the medium, of representation, and of visual perception, itself. For example, when the speeding automobile featured in *How It Feels to Be Run Over* careens directly toward the camera, Hepworth cuts, at the moment of pending collision, to a series of cryptic intertitles: “?? / !! / ! / Oh! / Mother / will / be / pleased.” Beckman reads this succession of “single, white, hand-drawn words and punctuation marks” as a moment wherein cinema concedes its own limitations, yet attempts to transcend them via recourse to another medium—namely, language (Ibid. 30). She writes:

[Film] here turns to writing less to communicate a joke than to exceed itself.

Though cinema’s inherent and ever-expanding hybridity may ultimately prevent it from successfully colliding with or exceeding its constitutive, formal limits (those limits are always too fuzzy), it is in this space of attempted *collision with other*

media that one becomes aware of film's ability to expand into its own "outside."
(44, emphasis mine)

While Beckman's argument is compelling and can be applied to the accident not-quite-depicted in *The Crowd*, the difficulty of directly representing the collision that claims the Sims's daughter's life also bespeaks the difficulty of directly representing the—often, violent—machinations of the socioeconomic order precipitating her death, along with those of countless others. The invisibility of the automobile accident is akin to the invisible hand of the market which, as Beckman observes, penetrates "every area of human existence," yet remains curiously inculpable for its sleights (3).

Nevertheless, while Vidor obscures—even omits—the moment of actual impact, his brusque editing of the accident sequence does more than conceal. As Garry Leonard observes, "At the heart of Eisenstein's theory of montage is 'collision'; one image collides with another and the resulting explosion is the 'third term' resulting yet different from either of the two images that provoked the collision" (Leonard 222). In the case of *The Crowd*, the abstract "third term" implied by the collision of the delivery truck with Sims's daughter is the "historical disintegration and fragmentation" that, as Miriam Hansen argues, constitutes the crisis of modernity (Hansen 110). Paul Virilio, likewise, frames this crisis as "the fractalization of the concept of identity (national, communal)," as a result of which "nothing is whole any more" (Virilio 98). He attributes this fractalization to the "social traumas" induced, not only by WWI, but also by industrial capitalism (Lotringer and Virilio 20). "Disfiguring events happened in the 20th century," he writes, "nothing but disfiguring events" (Ibid.). The language of modernism is thus the language of the accident. Rife with metaphors—many of them, mechanical—of

rupture, fragmentation, failure, collision, conflict, injury, and loss, both discourses suggest the erosion of faith in a stable, teleological narrative, be it personal or historical.

As Garry Leonard observes:

Everyone who attempts to define modernity, no matter how much they disagree, seems to concede that it involves a somewhat unpredictable cycle between pressure and rupture. The pressure, while exerting great force that creates increased productivity, is also liable to produce the very rupture that robs it of all its force. Lyotard puts it this way: “Modernity, wherever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality—a discovery linked to the intersection of other realities.” (Leonard 226)¹²

More often than not, the intersection of these—increasingly, accelerated—“realities” is a violent one. Consequently, although artists and critics, alike, might have appealed to other metaphors in their attempts to articulate the complex process of 20th century modernization (and they did), the automobile accident provides a particularly salient illustration of the intersections, collisions, and ruptures to which Leonard and Lyotard refer. Vidor makes recourse to this *particular* “disfiguring event”—as do Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Hurston—because it exposes what Kristin Ross describes as “the dysfunction and suffering inherent to capitalist modernization” (Ross 22). To this, I would add the suffering inherent to capitalism’s concomitant agenda of privatization, which was aggressively advanced by both the automobile and insurance industries.

The violent and unexpected loss of his daughter clearly “breaks” John Sims, after which he finds himself alone in his suffering. Although a large crowd gathers in the apartment while the little girl lies in a coma, it eventually dissipates. As Vidor’s intertitle

informs us: “The crowd laughs with you always... but it will cry with you only for a day.” A subsequent shot of John and Mary riding in the back seat of a cab during the funeral procession shows their alienation even from each other: they sit far apart, staring somberly out of opposite windows. As Robert Lang observes: “The crowd (modern urban existence) provides no sense of community in the old sense of offering one a place within an order” (Lang 126). John is isolated in his loss and in his grief; we do not see him bolstered by any close-knit religious or secular communities, nor does he observe traditional mourning rituals, such as wearing a black armband or hanging a black wreath upon his door. In this way, Vidor suggests that those social structures which might have supported the Sims family, be it emotionally or financially, have become inaccessible or obsolete.

Thus, despite the fact that the car crash constituting the film’s climax is not directly depicted and its victim appears to suffer little “pain or anguish,” this is hardly true of the main protagonist. As Robert Lang observes, John Sims is beset “first by soul-destroying labor and then by unemployment” (Lang 112). He suffers from profound grief and depression, neither of which is assuaged or even accommodated by his harsh urban environment. In this way, *The Crowd* can be said to meditate, throughout, on more insidious forms of systemic violence that—while entirely visible—are rarely recognized as such. Although these forms of violence are not as sudden, graphic, and outwardly disfiguring as the automobile accident that claims the Sims’s daughter’s life, they take an equally exacting inward toll on their—often, unwitting—victims. In making this the surreptitious focus of his film, Vidor troubles and even radically revises one of the foundational principles of the medium itself—namely, spectacle. He invites the viewer,

again and again, to marvel at the ordinary rather than at the extraordinary. *The Crowd* endeavors to make visible what Siegfried Kracauer describes as “the imperceptible dreadfulness of normal existence” under modern industrial capitalism (Kracauer 101). According to contemporary reviewer Rose Pelswick, the film succeeds: “Vidor is a mental vivisectionist. He has developed the theme of mediocrity with X-ray cruelty. Don’t miss seeing *The Crowd*. Coming from the Hollywood mill, where one Cinderella story is turned out after another, *The Crowd* is a picture that will leave an impression long after you have seen it” (qtd. in Vidor 154).

In his seminal essay, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” Tom Gunning contends that cinema before 1906 “was not dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium” (Gunning 56). Rather, early films by Smith, Méliès, Porter, and Lumière share an exhibitionist tendency that privileges spectacle over storyline, tricks and special effects—what Gunning calls “the magical possibilities” of the new medium—over realism, and a direct engagement with viewers that consistently “rupture[s] [the] self-enclosed fictional world” of the film over “diegetic absorption” (Ibid. 58, 57, 59). Gunning borrows the term “attraction” from Sergei Eisenstein and defines it as follows: “An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to ‘sensual or psychological *impact*’” (59, emphasis mine).¹³

Foregrounding the car crash as the cinematic attraction par excellence, Karen Beckman demonstrates how early silent films like Cecil Hepworth’s *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900), *Explosion of a Motor Car* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900), and Robert W. Paul’s *The ‘?’ Motorist* (Robert W. Paul, 1906) corroborate Gunning’s claims. Both

directors make extensive use of tricks, gags, and special effects in an attempt to shock and surprise viewers; the “narratives” plotted by these short films are loose, at best.

Gunning argues that, with the arrival of feature-length films in 1913, cinema became thoroughly “*narrativiz[ed]*” (Gunning 60). It is within this later tradition of classical Hollywood cinema—and, more specifically, of melodrama—that Vidor’s film is situated. Nevertheless, Gunning contends that “the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others” (Ibid. 57). While *The Crowd*’s climactic collision certainly appeals to this earlier cinema of attractions, the focus of the film, throughout, is upon the spectacle of urban-industrial life as it is lived “above ground,” in plain view. Upon the film’s release, reviewer Harold Weight observed:

The Crowd will live long after *The Big Parade* is forgotten. Why? Because it is a story of real life. It is a cross-section of the life of one of the crowd, his joys, trials, and troubles. Its raw realism reminds one of von Stroheim, but through the whole there runs a touch of comedy that keeps the production from sordidness. (qtd. in Vidor 154)

Weight’s review suggests that what is striking about Vidor’s film is its innovative rendering—indeed, its innovative conception—of *the spectacle of the real*, of the extraordinary quality of ordinary, working-class life. As Miriam Hansen argues, this situates *The Crowd* “squarely in a tradition of American films dramatizing the plight of the ‘common man’ (‘populist’ films), associated with directors such as Griffith, Vidor and Capra” (Hansen 103).¹⁴

Through its emphasis on the spectacle of the real, the ordinary, and the everyday, *The Crowd* challenges the primacy of the event in film, as well as in other media. Commonly perceived as singular and discrete, the event is distinguished from other phenomena—most notably, slower historical processes—by its brief duration or temporality. Appealing to the work of French historian, Fernand Braudel, Kristin Ross characterizes the event as “headlong, dramatic, and breathless” (Ross 4).¹⁵ For this reason, events enjoy a privileged place in human consciousness insofar as they provide ready-made points of reference for the organization of individual memory as well as historical narrative—indeed, of any narrative taking place in time, without which narrative is, itself, unthinkable. While Vidor notes that, in drafting the script with Harry Behn, he “simply listed the important things that happen to the average man. He is born, goes to school, comes of age, gets a job, meets a girl, falls in love, marries, has a baby, needs more money, has another baby and more expenses, perhaps hard luck and tragedy, perhaps good luck and happiness, [and] finally dies,” *The Crowd* devotes equal attention to the tedium of daily life that interposes these seminal events (Vidor 146). Thus, we can forgive him for occasionally committing the heinous offense Max Horkheimer describes in his 1942 letter to Leo Lowenthal—namely, the “trimming of an existence into some futile moments which can be characterized schematically,” wherein “the human being is cheated out of his own entity which Bergson so justly called ‘durée’” (qtd. in Jay 214). Like Dreiser, Vidor preserves this sense of “durée” by devoting considerable screen time to the less “eventful” aspects of the Sims’ life.

For example, John and Mary’s courtship, marriage, and honeymoon to Niagara Falls constitute roughly 19 minutes of the film. This extended montage—the very thing

Horkheimer critiques—is counterbalanced by the 24 minutes devoted to their life as struggling newlyweds in a cramped apartment. In these scenes, John and Mary bicker over the kinds of issues that plague all couples. After a particularly contentious argument over breakfast one morning, Sims storms out the door, exclaiming: “Take it from me, marriage isn’t a word... it’s a *sentence!*” Similarly, Vidor follows the 3 _ minute, sentimental, soft-focus scene depicting the birth of the Sims’s son with a 7 minute scene depicting their less-idealistic-than-realistic family excursion to the beach. As Durgnat and Simmon observe: “What distinguishes Vidor’s film from its genre is the way it captures [the] everyday tensions of marriage and unemployment, the deadening habits of an office routine, even the commonplace dreariness of romance. Only the slimmest of traditions existed for such an examination” (Durgnat and Simmon 80).

The office building sequence occurring early in *The Crowd* provides one of the most powerful illustrations of the deadening, white-collar routine to which Durgnat and Simmon refer. Cutting from distant, aerial shots of Manhattan’s bustling harbor and towering skyscrapers to a low-angle shot of a downtown office building, Vidor’s camera pivots slowly to reveal the building’s massive, architecturally uniform, and implacable surface. The viewer’s gaze is then directed upwards, scaling slowly over rows of evenly spaced windows—a pattern of seemingly endless repetition given that the face of the building fills the entirety of the frame. In his 1972 book, *On Filmmaking*, Vidor describes how this sequence was shot: “On location in New York, with a hidden camera we photographed the entrance to a large insurance company building at 8:45 in the morning. [...] I started the camera on its upward tilt to show the stark symmetry of the structure” (Vidor 164). In his essay, “William Dean Howells and the Insurance of the

Real,” Jason Puskar argues that “insurance architecture” in the early twentieth century reflects the industry’s most “ambitious” effort to “achieve greater visibility” (Puskar 42).

He writes:

Despite [its] size and power, insurance encountered a problem shared by many other service providers, that of its own material invisibility. With no obtrusive material infrastructure such as railroad tracks, church buildings, or the massive but mostly symbolic bank safe looming behind the teller, insurance too easily receded from consumers’ awareness. Insurers addressed this problem by creating an army of insurance agents, pouring money into advertising, and funding lavish, monumental architecture in America’s largest cities. (Ibid. 41-42)

In order to capture the truly monumental quality of the Equity Life Insurance building on film—while simultaneously undercutting that which it represents—Vidor made recourse to a made-to-scale model:

The trick department constructed a miniature twenty-one-story building about twelve feet high which was laid flat on a stage floor. Over this a camera bridge on wheels was rigged, which permitted the camera to move upwards to the selected floor. Then a windlass arrangement lowered the camera close to one window behind which was a lighted, still photograph of the 200 desks with the 200 clerks. A lap dissolve to the interior long shot made it seem as if the camera had passed through the window. (Ibid.)

This interior shot is one of the most iconic shots in classical cinema. Just as the building’s countless windows fill the frame of the previous exterior shot, so endless rows of desks fill the frame of this high-angle interior shot. The individuals laboring at them

appear small and indistinguishable, thus illustrating the degree to which the Taylorist principles of uniformity, efficiency, and repetition have penetrated the white-collar working world. Vidor writes: “At each desk a clerk would be seated performing the mechanical routine of his job” (Ibid.). Here we see Frederic Jameson’s observation about “the return of sameness over and over again, in all its psychological desolation and tedium” aptly illustrated (Jameson 16).

In *Celluloid Skyline: New York City and the Movies*, James Sanders notes Billy Wilder’s homage to this exquisite sequence in *The Apartment* (The Mirisch Co., 1960). Cutting from an exterior shot of the “Consolidated Life Insurance Company” to an interior shot of the “Ordinary Policy Department, Premier Accounting Division,” Wilder emphasizes the way in which:

...the character of the exterior continues seamlessly within... The grid of identical desks that fills the sprawling office floor reminds us of nothing so much as the repetitive window grid of the exterior—almost as if the façade had been turned on its side and brought indoors. We can no more locate [the protagonist’s] desk amidst this endless sea than we could have found the nineteenth floor amidst the vast matrix of windows outside. Perfection has indeed been achieved. Perfect anonymity. (Sanders 135)

While Wilder is clearly citing *The Crowd* in this scene, Sanders argues that he is doing so with a “distinct advantage” that Vidor lacked—namely, the influence of the post-WWII “International Style, whose reliance on abstract, repetitive modules could not help but reinforce the most alienated impression of corporate life. The office in *The Crowd* was simply a large space with lots of desks; the office in *The Apartment*, with its endless grid

of ceiling lights and columns, expands the field of desks into an entire universe of repetition” (Ibid.). Sanders’ slighting of Vidor’s technical and conceptual innovations in this sequence is troublesome, if not entirely misguided.¹⁶ Although *The Crowd* predated the International Style, it postdated the equally powerful work of Russian constructivists.

While many critics have detailed the influence of German expressionism on *The Crowd*, few have noted its visual affinity with this contemporaneous aesthetic movement. As described by Christina Lodder, constructivism is distinguished by its bold, architectonic stylization; it foregrounds stark color contrasts, geometrical abstraction, and angular, industrial images.¹⁷ Although some of these qualities are shared with—and influenced by—expressionism, constructivism advances an overtly political agenda. As Victor Margolin observes:

In the “Productivist Manifesto,” an early Russian Constructivist document written by Alexander Rodchenko and his wife, Varvara Stephanova, in 1920, a connection was made between ideology and the constructive organization of materials by the artist. The manifesto posited the necessity “to attain a synthesis of ideological and formal aspects” in order that the artist’s work have some practical application to social life. The authors rejected the art of the past and advocated “communist forms of constructive building” based on a systematic manipulation of materials. (Margolin 28).

Briony Fer, likewise, emphasizes the ways in which constructivism “opposed and negated the strategies associated with Realism” in order to awaken a revolutionary consciousness and spur social change (Fer 15).

Expressionism, by contrast, provided a means of externalizing an individual's psychic state; as Robert Kolker observes, "German expressionists defied the conventions of 'realism' [...] by turning the image into an artifice of madness" (Kolker 4). Indeed, Durgnat and Simmon read *The Crowd's* frequently cited "expressionistic staircase" shot in precisely this way (Durgnat and Simmon 85). In this scene, the camera's low-angle positioning at the upper landing of the stairwell creates a tunneling effect that is accentuated by the sharp, diminishing lines of the paneled walls. As Sims slowly ascends the stairs, one has the sense that he is moving through a kind of psychological vortex toward the unseen, darkened space of death. As Angela Dalle Vacche observes, "by not showing the father's room and by holding the shot steadily on John, Vidor underlines the idea that losing someone is comparable to standing on the edge of a psychological precipice" (Dalle Vacche 222).

However, Vidor's use of straight lines, sharp contrasts, distorted perspective, and iris shot framing also recall the "techniques of ruler-and-compass drawing" that informed early Constructivist works (Fer 23, 30). In *On Filmmaking*, Vidor explains how he achieved the striking visual effects that characterize this scene:

Forced perspective was [...] used in *The Crowd* to achieve a tunnel-like effect. A young boy, at the death of his father, felt the approaching burden of new responsibilities and this was symbolized by having him slowly climb a very long stairway. The stairway we built was actually a long one but the walls apparently surrounding it were only painted in forced perspective on a flat surface at the bottom of the stairs. (Vidor 70)

Vidor makes recourse to the same techniques in a later scene—namely, the birth of Sims’ son. He writes:

In my film *The Crowd* I showed a scene of an expectant father in a hospital corridor. We wanted the hallway to look much longer than it was practical to construct on a studio stage, so we made each successive doorway shorter. At the far end of the set, door frames were only about 4 _ or 5 feet high. To keep these small doors from being betrayed by full size people we employed little people, even a few dwarfs, to work in the back of the set. (Ibid.)

While doing the “expressionist” work of externalizing the protagonist’s emotional and psychological state, Vidor’s consistent manipulation of the materials comprising his sets suggests the constructivists’ “conception of their potential as active participants in the process of social and political transformation” described by Christina Lodder (Lodder 1).

What is also striking about Vidor’s constructivist tableaux—and, in particular, the exterior/interior office grid sequence—is its relatively slow pacing. Modulating from the frenetic squeal of violins and frequent cuts that accompanied the Manhattan montage to *The Crowd*’s foreboding theme as Vidor slowly pans the exterior of the Equitable Life Insurance building, one gets a sense of the incremental spiritual corrosion of the many lives contained therein. Although Paul Virilio argues that violence—and, in particular, the accident—is “inseparable from *the speed with which it unexpectedly surges up,*” David Sterritt’s analysis of the fatal car crash in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1963 film, *Contempt*, argues that we often overlook the violence inherent in slower processes (Virilio 12). In describing the quality of “peacefulness and repose” that paradoxically characterizes Camille and Jerry’s violent deaths, Sterritt turns to biologist Lewis Thomas, who

observes “that although everything in the world dies, plants do it so gracefully that we hardly think of the process as death” (Sterritt 230). Some assaults on human life—and, Vidor suggests, on the human spirit—are so subtle and gradual that they are virtually imperceptible. Through its haunting musical score and longer takes, this sequence of shots exposes the violence inherent in what Warren I. Susman describes as “the technological and bureaucratic organization of life” (Susman xxviii).

Though qualitatively and quantitatively different from the discrete and spectacular “event,” Vidor suggests that both phenomena are equally destructive. When Vidor returns, again, to the large interior of the Atlas Insurance Company after the death of Sims’s daughter, we see our hero racked by grief. Disheveled and smoking, he sits at his desk and struggles to concentrate on his work. Through a series of superimposed images, Vidor indicates that Sims is plagued by the memory of the collision; he sees his little girl running across the street, hounded by the approaching vehicle. These visions are intercut with images of the numbers that Sims attempts—in vain—to tabulate. Eventually, two of these figures (the number “9”) begin spinning much like the wheels that trampled his daughter. Vidor’s alternation between the two discourses—namely, that of the accident and that of the bureaucratic institution purporting to guard against it—illustrates the egregious conflation of human life with material compensation. In his discussion of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (Paramount Pictures, 1944), Gerd Gemünden describes the insurance industry as “a state within a state, creating its own rules and striving for autarchy” (Gemünden 49). Given the name Vidor chooses for Sims’s firm (i.e., The Atlas Insurance Co.), it appears to have succeeded in this endeavor. Insurance is the mythological titan that subtends the modern world. As Paul Virilio observes,

“industrialized societies have, over the course of the twentieth century, intensified anxiety and increased major risks” (Virilio 23). Insurance companies were quick to recognize this and profit from it; “faced with the ubiquity of risk,” writes Virilio, “the issue of *fear management* becomes crucial” (Ibid. 16, emphasis original).

In his discussion of Wilder’s film, *Germünden* draws a parallel between the film and the insurance industries, reading “*Double Indemnity*’s portrayal of capitalism and the insurance business as an allegory of the increasing commercialization of Hollywood” (*Germünden* 49). Although numerous critics have drawn productive parallels between the experience of driving an automobile and that of viewing a film, persuasively illuminating the similarities that exist between the “passive” *consumption* of both technologies, it is also worth examining the degree to which the newly emergent film and automobile industries mirrored one another at the level of *production*. In collaboration with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Janet Staiger details the production practices that came to govern the Hollywood film industry during its classical period, arguing that the relatively uniform “group style” that emerged after 1917 is largely the result of a historically specific “mode of production” (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 87).

Characterized by the principles of “increasingly subdivided labor, [...] interchangeability, standardization, and assembly,” Hollywood’s mode of production was not unlike the “factory system [...] used by a Ford plant, and [the industry] often praised its own work structure for its efficient mass production of entertaining films. The employment of a mass-production system fulfilled the owners’ goals of profit maximization” (Ibid. 90). Although Staiger notes that studios were also under pressure to

“differentiate [their] product as the firms bid competitively for a consumer’s disposable income,” the production practices she describes contributed, nevertheless, to a more or less standardized style. Thus, aforementioned reviewer Rose Pelswick refers to “the Hollywood mill” churning out “one Cinderella story after another” just as one might refer to the Model Ts rolled off the assembly line at Henry Ford’s factory in Highland Park (qtd. in Vidor 154).

Astutely noting the “patterns of seriality” that recur throughout *The Crowd*, Miriam Hansen describes the ways in which John Sims, in particular, appears “in relation to group figurations of which he is only a more or less identical element” (Hansen 104). In addition to the opening office shot, she cites “the group of boys, early on in the film, sitting on a fence (one black kid among them) and their adult counterpart, the group of fathers-to-be waiting in the hospital (one black man among them)” (Ibid.). Such images, writes Hansen, “evoke the Fordist model of product standardization and the concomitant dequalification of workers, [thus suggesting] an analogy with the assembly line and Taylorized methods of production” (Ibid.). Drawing from the work of Siegfried Kracauer, Hansen aptly notes the “decisive role” that photography and photographic media—such as film—play in this culture of sameness, standardization, and repetition (106).

Significantly, the “patterns of seriality” to which Hansen refers actually depict Gilles Deleuze’s repetition *with a difference*. In so doing, they expose the socio-historical conditions prompting the cultural imperative for sameness. As John Whiteclay Chambers observes, the United States experienced unprecedented population growth during the first two decades of the twentieth century, “the most visible increase [in

which] came from immigrants [arriving] between 1900 and 1915” (Chambers 75). Many of these immigrants settled in northeastern cities, the growth of which was compounded by the internal migration of thousands of people, many of whom were African American, from depressed rural areas. This sparked a reactionary “nativist” movement which “sought to limit the flow of immigrants and preserve the traditional ethnic mixture of the American population” through legislation such as the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 (Ibid. 77).¹⁸ Both acts, which limited the number of immigrants to 3 and then 2 percent of the number of immigrants from a given country already living in the United States as of 1890, favored northern Europeans.

While Vidor’s American “Everyman” is not an immigrant, he is, as Durgnat and Simmon observe, “a stranger from the virtually WASP Midwest” who must adapt to life in the big city (Durgnat and Simmon 83). Early scenes of Sims’ childhood, set in a quaint—even pastoral—small town, contrast sharply with Vidor’s depiction of Manhattan. Despite being shot on the street in front of the Sims’ large, Victorian house, these opening scenes do not feature a single automobile. Rather, Vidor’s Fourth of July parade is comprised of pedestrians, cyclists, carriages, and wagons; the ambulance that later arrives for John’s father is, likewise, drawn by horses. While the young Sims experiences some difficult transitions during this time (1900-1922)—chief among them, the death of his father—Vidor suggests that these experiences are mitigated by the sense of community and security fostered by small town life.

As Gerd Gemünden observes, “the experience of the modern metropolis is,” by contrast, “one of alienation, menace, and uncertainty” (Gemünden 39). In this way, *The Crowd* engages another aspect of the nativist movement to which John Whiteclay

Chambers refers—namely, urban reform. This self-professed “social justice movement” was led, in large part, by women who endeavored to make cities—and, in particular, ethnic ghettos—“cleaner and healthier” (Chambers 114, 128). In his essay, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” James R. Barrett argues that this was part of a larger, nationalistic project which “encoded notions of domestic orthodoxy” and “urged [immigrants] to maintain new American standards of living in diet, hygiene, and infant and child care” (Barrett 1013). While effecting much needed improvements in city sanitation, urban reform activists also promoted a kind of “cultural homogeneity;” as Chambers observes, “the social control movement represented a coercive effort by old-stock Americans to impose a uniform culture based on their values” (Chambers 114). The twenties recast personal hygiene as a public issue; one’s cleanliness—or lack thereof—became an indication of one’s relationship to Vidor’s metaphorical “crowd.”

As Barrett observes, it was Henry Ford who “launched the most ambitious” of these social programs at his Highland Park plant (Barrett 1003). He writes:

Accepting the prevailing Progressive notions that environment shaped one’s behavior and attitudes, Ford engineers established a Sociology Department to remake the lives of their immigrant workers and win them over to thrift, efficiency, and company loyalty. Case workers fanned out into Detroit’s working-class neighborhoods, ready to fight for the hearts and minds of immigrant auto workers. They investigated each worker’s home life as well as his work record, and one could qualify for the Five Dollar Day incentive pay only after

demonstrating the proper home environment and related middle-class values.

(Ibid.)

The “proper home environment” was an immaculately clean one; proper “middle-class values” manifested themselves in personal habits like bathing, shaving, brushing one’s teeth, and washing one’s hands. If employees met these standards, they were allowed to attend the Ford English School, “a language and civics program for the company’s immigrant workers, part of Ford’s ambitious Five Dollar Day corporate welfare program” (996). Upon completing their education, these employees were honored in an elaborate graduation ceremony held every year on the Fourth of July, the birthday, not only of our nation, but also of John Sims. “Ford’s director of Americanization,” writes Barrett, “describe[d] the scene” as follows:

All the men descend from a boat scene representing the vessel on which they came over; down the gangway representing the distance from the port at which they landed to the school, into a pot 15 feet in diameter and 7 _ feet high, which represents the Ford English School. Six teachers, three on either side, stir the pot with ten foot ladles representing nine months of teaching in the school. Into the pot 52 nationalities with their foreign clothes and baggage go and out of the pot after vigorous stirring by the teachers comes one nationality, viz, American.

Lest anyone miss the point, each of the workers emerges from the pot dressed in an identical suit and carrying a miniature American flag. (Ibid.)

In her 1995 study, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Kristin Ross details the comparable “consolidation of a Fordist regime in France in the decade or so before 1968” (Ross 6). She links the rapid modernization of

postwar France to an unprecedented demand for “‘mature’ consumer durables”—chief among them, the automobile (Ibid. 4). More importantly, Ross reads postwar French modernization as a “means of social, and particularly racial, differentiation; a differentiation that has its roots in the 1950s discourse on hygiene” (11). Quoting from a 1956 essay by Roland Barthes, she argues that the country’s “deep national psychic need [at this time] is to be *clean*: ‘Decay is being expelled (from the teeth, the skin, the blood, the breath)’: France is having a great yen [*fringale*] for cleanliness” (72). Ross reads these “postwar purges (called *épurations* or ‘purifications’)” not only as an attempt to “rid the nation of the traces of German Occupation and Pétainiste compromise,” but also as an effort to distinguish modern France from recently decolonized, newly independent nations like Algeria (74). She writes: “France can’t be dirty and backward, because that is the role played by the colonies. But there are no more colonies. If Algeria is becoming an independent nation, then France must become a *modern* nation: some distinction between the two must prevail” (78). That distinction, she argues, was achieved through an aggressive cultural emphasis on hygiene.

As is indicated by the work of Chambers, Barrett, and, more recently, Joshua L. Miller, the United States was engaged in a similar “project of redemptive hygiene” roughly three decades prior to post-WWII France, although the historical conditions prompting it were somewhat different (75).¹⁹ And, just as a “glance through books of [1950s France] engaged in examining lived, social reality (those other early chronicles, with Barthes, of the everyday) reveals a striking fact: when each of the authors turns to a discussion of the new role played by advertising in postwar society, he uses as his primary example advertisements for laundry soap,” so *The Crowd* is curiously

preoccupied with hygiene and cleanliness (Ibid). In fact, Vidor's use of this trope is rivaled only by that of the automobile.

One of the earliest running jokes in the film relates to John's obsessive hygienic habits; when leaving the office to meet Bert and the "pair of wrens [he has] dated up for Coney Island," John stops by the restroom. He spends enough time at the sink to prompt several comments from his coworkers: "Washin' 'em up, Sims?", "Takin' a wash, Sims?", "Scrubbin' 'em up, Sims?", "Chasin' the dirt, Sims?". Annoyed, John retorts: "You birds have been working here so long that you all talk alike!". Ironically, it is he who conforms to the ubiquitous social mandate for cleanliness. This comedic trope is reprised on the train to Niagara Falls. Stopping by the restroom before he meets Mary in the sleeping car, John performs a fairly elaborate preening routine. After stripping down to his undershirt and admiring his physique in the mirror, he gargles with alcohol, washes his face and hands, and brushes his hair. Two older gentlemen look on with great amusement, one nudging the other and commenting: "From the way he's dolling up... he must expect to walk in his sleep." *The Crowd's* preoccupation with cleanliness is likewise seen in John's winning slogan for "The Holland Cleaner Company," and in his subsequent job selling vacuums. Pointedly set in the New York suburbs, this scene shows John going from door to identical door, where he is repeatedly rejected. "[T]here's no use trying to sell vacuums," he later tells his wife; "Everybody already has one." Recalling Dreiser's Sondra Finchley, whose family made their fortune manufacturing the very same commodity, Vidor indicts the spiritual vacuity of consumer culture and exposes suburbia as a sterile and culturally homogenous place not unlike the city. It is the accident—be it industrial or aesthetic—that profoundly disrupts these Fordist "patterns of

seriality,” consequently liberating us from them (Hansen 104). This is because the accident is absolutely singular; it cannot be photographed or reproduced. Rather, it is staged and *insinuated* via complex cutting and editing; as Karen Beckman argues, the actual moment of impact remains beyond the scope of the medium.

In conclusion, to interpret *The Crowd*—and, in particular its accident scene—as an index and an indictment of the physical, psychological, and spiritual injuries inflicted by mass capitalism is to counter several scholars’ claims that the film is characterized by an attitude—and an aesthetic—of “ambivalence.”²⁰ As Miriam Hansen observes:

When, after much delay, MGM finally released *The Crowd* in February of 1928, exhibitors had the choice between two different endings; seven different endings had been scripted, two were actually shot and distributed in separate reels. In one version, the hero’s journey of downward mobility is reversed by an overnight success in advertising which restores the family to harmony and respectability in a sentimental Christmas tableau. [...] The other, now familiar ending [...] dampens the bland optimism of the first, but is nonetheless intended as a happy one.

However, in their particular cinematographic choreography, the final shots of *The Crowd* give the lie to any simple closure, ending the film on a note of ambivalence if not unwitting cynicism. (Hansen 102)

However, the ending of the film is more than unwittingly cynical or ambivalent; it is anguished. Vidor’s final shot of the hysterical vaudeville audience, wherein everyone laughs in unison just as the employees of Atlas Insurance Co. labor in unison, aptly illustrates Virilio’s claim that “the standardization of the industrial age will make way for [the] synchronization of collective emotion” (Virilio 69). This highly reflexive closing

shot also implicates *The Crowd*'s audience in a deeply disturbing—and not ambivalent or ambiguous—way. Who, exactly, is the joke on?

Nevertheless, “ambivalence”—and not anguish—is the stance that much contemporary criticism on modernism takes. In particular, the relationship of literary and filmic modernism to modernity is characterized as one of ambivalence. Wary of exhibiting what Karen Beckman describes as a reductive “moralism” which “disdainful[ly] condemn[s] a range of qualities [and] concepts [...] that have come to be associated with [mass culture] and capitalism,” scholars often advance the argument that modernist texts simultaneously resist and reify the dominant systems—social, political, and economic—in which they are produced (Beckman 3). Taking their cue from Andreas Huyssen, who claims that there is *not* “a fundamental separation between [Adorno’s] culture industry and modernist art,” but rather a “hidden dialectic,” such arguments privilege nuance and complexity over what Durgnat and Simmon describe as “the knockdown non-ambiguity of agitprop” (Huyssen 19, 9; Durgnat and Simmon 12). Indeed, this is the kind of charge frequently leveled against Paul Virilio. As Karen Beckman observes:

While Virilio denies advocating a ‘millenarian catastrophism’ or taking ‘*a tragic view* of the accident for the purpose of frightening the masses, as the mass media so often do,’ and claims only to be ‘taking the accident seriously,’ one cannot help but find a resonance between his use of large, bold, and italicized fonts for key words—**finitude**, **media tragedy**, **live coverage**, **what is happening**—with the moralistic and apocalyptic discourses of homeland security and terrorism that mark the post-9/11 era. (Beckman 11-12)

However, to take up this line of argument is to deny the radical—even revolutionary—impulses animating works like *The Crowd*. It is worth noting that the film’s working title, *One of the Mob*, was rejected by producer Irving Thalberg for being “too suggestive of ‘a capital-labor conflict’” (Durgnat and Simmon 85). As Durgnat and Simmon observe: “In the finished film, ‘capital’ remains justly invisible, but Vidor does reduce the desk set to an assembly line and brings on those unemployment queues” (Ibid.). I submit that he does more than this; though not as explicit in advancing an overtly political agenda as *Our Daily Bread* (King W. Vidor Productions, 1934), *The Crowd* is a socially conscious film that endeavors to “free [humanity] from the shackles of fear and suffering that have so long bound it with iron chains” (31).²¹ It is Vidor’s deft manipulation of what he renders visible and invisible, spectacular and spectral that makes this endeavor a successful one.

¹ See also Hansen, Miriam. “Ambivalences of the ‘Mass Ornament’: King Vidor’s *The Crowd*.” *Qui Parle* 5.2 (Spring/Summer 1992): 102-119, and Gemünden, Gerd. *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder’s American Films*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008, 130-135.

² Valéry, Paul. “La Crise de l’intelligence.” *Cahiers 1894-1914*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987, 229.

³ In his 1952 autobiography, *A Tree Is A Tree*, Vidor describes how he went about casting Murray—then an unknown Hollywood extra—in his first leading role: “We thought that if we could put an unknown actor in the leading part the film would carry much more conviction and present the documentary flavor we hoped to achieve. In my mind I formulated a picture of an average young man who, though not unattractive in appearance, was ‘just one of the crowd.’ I started to search for a physical counterpart of this mental image” (Vidor 146).

⁴ Both Hansen and Lang mention the Fisk ad, but do not discuss it at length.

⁵ The original advertisement was painted by artist William Tilley.

⁶ Fisk Automobile Tires. Advertisement. *Automobile Topics* 25 July 1925.

⁷ While the majority of Fisk tire ads employ this embedding technique, they do not always depict animals or racial minorities retreating from threatening forces. For example, one ad features a twenties-era flapper “retiring” from a night of dancing, while another features a cop sleeping in front of a Fisk ad tacked to the wall of the police station.

⁸ Hansen is here summarizing Siegfried Kracauer’s 1929 work, *Die Angestellten (The Salaried Masses)*, which she claims “provides an illuminating intertext to Vidor’s film.” For another compelling comparison between Kracauer and *The Crowd*, see also Gemünden, 130-135.

⁹ Although it was widely assumed that the child pictured in the Fisk ad was a little boy, a relative of William Tilley, the artist who painted the ad, writes that his [i.e. William Tilley’s] daughter, Dorothy Helen

Tilley, was “the model for the popular Fisk ad campaign.” See *The Kittendorf Family Memory Project*, <http://the-office.com/kittendorf/examples.htm>.

¹⁰ Throughout this work, Moglen’s frequent references to “social crisis and collective injury”—elsewhere described as “the bewildering forms of loss and injury that are systematically inflicted by the social orders in which we live”—remain vague and unspecified (xiv, xviii). I submit that the automobile accident provides a concrete example of precisely the kind of injury and suffering Moglen describes.

¹¹ See Lang 120, Durgnat and Simmon 83, and Hansen 105.

¹² Leonard is here quoting Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

¹³ Gunning is here quoting Eisenstein, “How I became a film director.” *Notes of a Film Director*. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, n.d., 16.

¹⁴ It is worth noting *The Crowd*’s influence on later Italian neorealist films like Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (Excelsa Film, 1945) and Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (Produzioni De Sica, 1948), both of which are indebted to Vidor’s pioneering efforts (see Sanders 334).

¹⁵ Here, Ross cites Braudel, Fernand. *On History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

¹⁶ The visual effects Vidor achieved without a large camera boom or zoom lens are remarkable; the sense “of anonymity and alienation, [...] of a single human soul lost in an ocean of ‘ordinary policy’” for which Sanders praises Wilder belongs, first and foremost, to Vidor. In *On Filmmaking*, Vidor notes “how useful a zoom lens would have been on the exterior shot and a large boom on the interior,” but, at that time, both were “only a dream in some ingenious craftsman’s mind” (165, 164).

¹⁷ See Lodder, Christina. *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1983.

¹⁸ Leaders of this nativist movement included the Immigration Restriction League, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the American Federation of Labor. Prior to the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, these groups pressured Congress to enact an English literacy test for all immigrants seeking citizenship, which was passed in 1917.

¹⁹ See Miller, Joshua. *Accented America: The Cultural politics of Multilingual Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

²⁰ See Durgnat and Simmon 1, Lang 117, and Hansen 102.

²¹ This statement is excerpted from the Vidor Village investment brochure.

Chapter Four

An Aesthetic of the Accident: Pastiche and Narrative Disfigurement in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

Yard chock full of roses in no set pattern.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

Like the other works discussed in this study, Zora Neale Hurston's 1934 novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, deploys the now familiar trope of the automobile accident in order to expose what Kristin Ross describes as “the dysfunction and suffering inherent to capitalist modernization” (Ross 22). In particular, it examines the impact of industrial modernity on African-Americans living in the rural South during the first decades of the twentieth century. As Leif Sorensen observes, “Hurston's textual production in the thirties is explicitly and directly concerned with theorizing, representing, and staging characteristically black modes of engagement with modernity” (Sorensen 5). Indeed, the novel's allusive title suggests that “the fruit of [technological] Progress” invariably contains a corrosive worm that, as Paul Virilio argues, threatens “a complete reversal” not only in the life of Hurston's protagonist, but “in the orientation of humanity” (Virilio 10, 52).¹ In staging the violent collision of John Pearson's car with a speeding train, Hurston raises the same question posed by Virilio: “[W]hat value, in fact, can progress have when it not only denatures but literally exterminates the person or people who are, [as] they say, its ‘beneficiaries’?” (Ibid. 96). However, even as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* attests, through the motif of the accident, to the failures paradoxically provoked by the period's techno-industrial achievements, it also indicates the ways in which modern art—and in particular, the modern novel—has productively rerouted and assimilated the ethos of the accident into new aesthetic forms such as pastiche. Hurston's high modernist

aesthetic of the accident counters a commercial aesthetic of the assembly line inaugurated by Henry Ford.

I. Hurston's High Modernist Aesthetic

In a study on one of Hurston's southern contemporaries, William Faulkner, Peter Lurie observes that high modernism is frequently characterized by its "formal innovation[s] and fragmentary narrative structure"; in privileging "tension and discontinuity" over "accessibility and narrative coherence," it rejects the Aristotelian unities of time, space, and perspective that informed 18th and 19th century European novels, in particular (Lurie 8, 21). Although Hurston is not often included in shorthand lists of modernism's most prominent practitioners—e.g., Joyce, Woolf, Stein, Toomer, Dos Passos, and Faulkner—she should be. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* deploys many of the experimental strategies more commonly associated with novels like *Ulysses*, *Cane*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and Hurston's own *tour de force*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While her debut novel hardly demonstrates the kind of stylistic virtuosity for which *Their Eyes* is roundly praised, it nonetheless marks Hurston's early efforts at some of the same techniques she would later come to perfect—namely, free indirect discourse, fragmented narration, polyphonic composition, and pastiche. In this chapter I aim, first, to situate *Jonah's Gourd Vine* within the high modernist tradition and second, to establish a link between the formal innovations that characterize this literary movement and the techno-industrial accidents that occurred with such frequency—both within and without—one of its most exemplary texts.

This may seem counterintuitive given the fact that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is frequently categorized as a classic *Buildungsroman*. As Rita Dove observes in her

Foreword, “John, an unlettered but determined young man, ventures forth to make his fortune. What he learns of the world and his own nature form the trajectory of his life and the novel” (*JGV* vii).² Like most works that fall within this genre, John’s story is filtered through the voice of a third-person, omniscient narrator “who neither indulges nor condemns the actions of her characters” (*JGV* xiv). However, the novel’s idiosyncratic aesthetic counters—and frequently subverts—the conventions commonly associated with this genre. As Robert Hemenway observes: “The novel is less a narrative than a series of linguistic moments representing the folk-life of the black South” (Hemenway 192). These “linguistic moments” include common colloquialisms, chants and rhymes, African myths, folk songs, spirituals, prayers, sermons, ceremonies, and anthropological glosses. Hemenway’s claim that such inclusions “serve poorly [their] novelistic context” overlooks the possibility that writing a traditional novel was not Hurston’s objective (*Ibid.*). As Gary Ciuba astutely observes: “Although *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* has typically been criticized because Hurston’s love of language overwhelms her plot and characterization, the novel seems more artfully constructed if language—spoken and heard, written and read—is understood as central to the plot and characterization” (Ciuba 120). It is worth noting that such metafictional conceits are taken for granted in the case of high modernist works like *Remembrance of Things Past*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Why should Hurston be chastised for using the novel as a platform for formal experimentation, as these authors did?

Admittedly, situating Hurston’s work alongside such texts is somewhat problematic. As Geta LeSeur observes in her 1995 study, *Ten is the Age of Darkness*:

The Black Bildungsroman, African-American and African West Indian literature “cannot be defined by parochial frames of reference and value that are derived from traditions (White and European) from which Black people have been largely excluded” (LeSeur 2). Consequently, Langston Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, and Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* “cannot be grouped” with novels like *Great Expectations*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *The Sound and the Fury* because they were produced under “a different set of sociological and historical contexts” (Ibid. 21).³ In “enunciating the special condition” of Africans in the United States and the British Caribbean, the black bildungsroman distinguishes itself from novels by nonblack authors both in its “content and [in its] presentation” (Ibid. 30, 21). In his more recent article, Leif Sorensen concurs, arguing that many of the white writers to whom LeSeur refers represent a metropolitan-centered, masculinist, and deracinated “discourse of modernity” to which Hurston’s work provides an “alternative” (Sorensen 3). As a black woman relegated to “the margins of US modernity,” Hurston “challenges the monopoly of interpretive power that Northern Europeans and white North Americans hold on the category of modernity by positing black folk culture as a rival alternative modernity, not a partial, lacking, or failed modernity” (Ibid. 11, 4). Sorensen champions “the dynamic... relational account of lived modernities on the periphery” in Hurston’s novels over the bland “universalism” espoused by those at its perceived center (5, 17).

While the claims of LeSeur and Sorensen are compelling, the refusal to consider Hurston’s work—and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, in particular—within the tradition of high modernism has subjected it to undue criticism and misreading.⁴ Likewise, as Roland

Williams observes in his astute review of LeSeur's book, "situat[ing] Caribbean [and] African-American tales of youth at the margins of their social orders [...] shortchanges their achievement" and "slight[s] instances of intertextuality affecting a host of narratives fashioned [...] by blacks as well as others" (Williams 221). Finally, the impulse to set Hurston's work apart from that of other modernists ignores the unilateral effects of industrial-capitalist modernization on virtually all subjects during the first half of the twentieth century—effects with which modern American literature is deeply and directly engaged. Man's displacement—and, all too often, annihilation—by the machine occasions a new humanism that subordinates issues of race, gender, and class to larger questions about the nature of life and death in postindustrial modernity.

I argue that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* explores these questions, both implicitly and explicitly, through the modernist aesthetic practice of pastiche. In his 2007 study on the subject, Richard Dyer loosely defines the term as follows:

[P]astiche is a particular principle of combination. A number of other words are or have been used in roughly the same way: amalgam, bricolage, collation, Creole, eclecticism, hybridity, motley, [and] syncretism. [...] The central notion is that the elements that make up [pastiche] are held to be different, by virtue of genre, authorship, period, mode, or whatever and that they do not normally or perhaps even readily go together. (Dyer 9, 10)

It is this "promiscuous mixing of elements" for which Hurston's novel drew—and continues to draw—criticism (Ibid. 10). As several critics have observed, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is an amalgam of autobiographical, fictional, and ethnographic material. The Pearson's turbulent marriage is modeled after the relationship between Hurston's parents;

likewise, Lucy's deathbed exchange with her daughter, Isis, mirrors Hurston's last encounter with her own mother as she recounted it in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Hemenway also observes that, "even though Hurston's first novel was published prior to *Mules and Men*, it was written after she had completed [her] folklore research" and contains many traces of the anthropological material she had collected (Hemenway 160). John Pearson's lengthy final sermon, for example, "was taken almost verbatim from Hurston's field notes" (Ibid. 197). While Hemenway is clearly of the opinion that these elements "do not normally or readily go together" within the context of a traditional novel, Leif Sorensen observes that "borrowings from ethnography and from the aesthetics of non-Western cultures are hallmarks of high modernist style" (Sorensen 21).

Although Sorensen makes an important point, one must also acknowledge the degree to which the Harlem Renaissance shaped this selfsame style. As Patricia Yaeger observes, "In 1930, America was [...] in the midst of another intellectual movement, the New Negro Renaissance, a literary movement that rayed out from Harlem in the 1920s but was hardly restricted to the Northeast" (Yaeger 45). Through its use of pastiche, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* attests to the enduring influence of the movement's foundational text—namely, Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925). An anthology composed in the modernist mode of assemblage and collage, *The New Negro* contains essays, poetry, artwork, and fiction by a number of different authors, including Hurston.

However, even as Hurston draws upon the formal innovations of the Harlem Renaissance, she re-appropriates certain aspects of the movement in order to comment upon—and critique—the effects of a rapidly modernizing U.S. South on black individuals, couples, families, and communities. As Robert Hemenway observes,

Hurston's literary and political investments were not shared by those she contemptuously referred to as the Harlem "niggerati" (Hemenway xiv). The question then arises: what, exactly, are those investments and how might they inform her aesthetic practices?

In his essay, "The Music of God, Man, and Beast: Spirituality and Modernity in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*," Anthony Wilson offers a compelling answer to these questions:

For Hurston, [...] ever a proponent of an almost primitivistic "pure art" of the folk against the politicized "propaganda" of Locke, DuBois, and the New Negro, the "progress" of modernist philosophical and intellectual understanding was always deeply suspect, representing at least as much loss as gain to African-American culture, identity, spirituality, and true self-expression. (Wilson 65-66)

A sentiment emphatically shared by Paul Virilio, Hurston's suspicion of "progress" becomes most evident in her representation of modern technologies. Throughout *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the author draws sharp contrasts between the homespun, communal quality of John's early life on the Pearson plantation and his increasingly isolated, adult life in the rapidly modernizing Eatonville. Indeed, it is a railway journey that facilitates his transition from rural "spots and places" to the (comparatively) big city and a violent car crash that ends it (*JGV* 103). Although, in the interim, John does manage to find "[g]ood times, good money, no mules and [no] cotton," this comes at no small price (*JGV* 103).

Of the many passages that employ pastiche to illustrate the former—namely, the kind of small, agrarian-based community from which our protagonist hails—the most exemplary is Hurston's lengthy description of the annual cotton harvest feast:

That was a night. Hogs roasting over the open pit of oak coals. Negroes from three other plantations. Some brought "likker." Some crocus sacks of yellow

yam potatoes, and bushels of peanuts to roast, and the biggest syrup-kettle at Pearson's canemill was full of chicken perleau. Twenty hens and six water-buckets full of rice. Old Purlee Kimball was stirring it with a shovel.

Plenty of music and plenty of people to enjoy it. [...]

So they danced. They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it. The great drum that is made by priests and sits in majesty in the juju house. The drum with the man skin that is dressed with human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone and speaks to gods as a man and to men as a God. Then they beat upon the drum and danced. It was said, "He will serve us better if we bring him from Africa naked and thing-less." So the buckra reasoned. They tore away his clothes that Cuffy might bring nothing away, but Cuffy seized his drum and hid it in his skin under the skull bones. The shin-bones he bore openly, for he thought, "Who shall rob me of shin-bones when they see no drum?" So he laughed with cunning and said, "I, who am borne away to become an orphan, carry my parents with me. For Rhythm is she not my mother and Drama is her man?" So he groaned aloud in the ships and hid his drum and laughed.

"Dis is jes lak when Ah wuz uh girl," Amy told Pheemy and offered her body to the voice.

Furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa, but whose soul sung around a fire in Alabama. Flourish. Break.

Ole cow died in Tennessee
Send her jawbone back to me
Jawbone walk, Jawbone talk
Jawbone eat wid a knife and fork.
Ain't Ah right?

CHORUS: Yeah!

Ain't Ah right? Yeah!

Hollow-hand clapping for the bass notes. Heel and toe stomping for the little one. Ibo tune corrupted with Nango. Congo gods talking in Alabama.

If you want to see me jabber
Set me down to uh bowl uh clabber
Ain't Ah right? Yeah!
Now, Ain't Ah right? Yeah!

Ole Aunt Dinah behind de pine
One eye out and de other one blind
Ain't Ah right? Yeah!
Now, Ain't Ah right? Yeah!

“Looka dat big boy uh yourn, Amy!” Zeke Turk urged. “Didn’t think he knowed how tuh dance. He’s rushin’ de frog tuh de frolic! And looka ‘Big ‘Oman,’ dat gal dancin’ wid ‘im. Lawd, she shakin’ yonder skirt.”

Wisht Ah had uh needle
 Fine ez Ah could sew
 Ah’d sew mah baby to my side
 And down de road Ah’d go.

Double clapping—

Down de road baby
 Down de road baby
 It’s killing mama
 Oh, it’s killing mama.

Too hot for words. Fiery drum clapping.

“Less burn dat old moon down to a nub! Is dat you, Pheemy?”

“Yeah Lawd. Mah head is tilted to de grave, but Ah’ll show y’all Ah ain’t fuhgit how. Come on out heah, Dink, and help Ole Pheemy do de Parse me lah.”

“Heel and toe. Don’t call no figgers.”

“Aw yeah, less call figgers. Go ‘head Bully, but don’t call it lak you call for white folks and dey go praipsin ‘cross the floor lake dey stepping on eggs. Us kin dance. Call ‘em, Bully.”

“Awright, choose yo’ partners.”

“Couples tuh yo’ places lak hawse tuh de traces.”

“Sixteen hands up!”

“Circle four.”

“Ya’ll ain’t clappin right. Git dat time.

Raccoon up de ‘simmon tree

Possum on de ground

Raccoon shake dem ‘simmons down

Possum pass ‘em round.”

The fire died. The moon died. The shores of Africa receded. (*JGV* 28-31)

Not only do the shores of Africa recede, but so, too, the story of John Pearson. Indeed, it is this passage to which Hemenway refers when lamenting the fact that the “book works at cross-purposes; it is a story of individual character in which language directs one away from the individual and toward the documentation of a communal esthetic. [...] There is no preparation for the intensity of feeling; yet the rhythmic ceremony is intended to symbolize John’s dilemma” (Hemenway 198, 199). For this reason, Hemenway’s experience as a reader is one of “frustration” (Ibid. 198).

However, reconsidering *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as an example of high modernist pastiche alleviates such frustration and exposes Hemenway’s approach to the novel as misguided. The above combination of dialog, fragmented narration, African folklore, history of the Middle Passage, song, and dance aptly illustrates Dyer’s claim that pastiche

“set[s] side by side supposedly disparate performance traditions (speech, music, dance, spectacle)” in an effort to generate art that is “encompassing, heterogeneous, [and] multivocal” (Dyer 10, 21). As Dyer observes, this has significant political implications. Pastiche constitutes a site of “cultural resistance to, [and] even a subversion of, the homogenizing thrust of dominant white cultures, locally and globally” (Ibid. 21). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the automobile industry—along with Henry Ford’s concomitant sociopolitical agenda of “Americanization”—aided the homogenizing cultural thrust of the 1920s and 30s in no small part. It is this which Hurston’s heterogeneous text responds to and resists. Inchoate and inconsistent passages like the one cited above exemplify what Peter Lurie describes as “the *anti-utilitarian* play of language and form” that characterizes high modernism, pitting it against the principles of standardization and efficiency that characterize machine culture, or an aesthetic of the machine (Lurie 3, emphasis mine).⁵ Nevertheless, while antithetical to the machine and machine culture, pastiche shares much in common with the techno-industrial accident. Both rely, fundamentally, on the collision of foreign parts; although one is staged and the other, spontaneous, both exhibit the qualities of unpredictability, interruption, and excess.

For example, the enticing list of the food various characters bring to the harvest feast achieves “the sense of profusion”—as opposed to industrial streamlining—at which pastiche aims (Dyer 20, 19). As Dyer observes, in “breaking free from the control of narrative, of refusing the boundaries of media and genre,” Hurston immerses her reader in the smells, flavors, sights, and sounds of the scene and “creates the feeling of abandonment to diversity, astonishment, surprise, tumult, and chaos” particular to pastiche (Ibid. 19). Likewise, framing the entire passage within the context of a feast

hearkens back to the root of the term, itself. “[P]astiche,” writes Dyer, “comes from Italian ‘pasticcio’, which, in its earliest recorded use, meant a pie. The idea of a mixed dish—meat and/or vegetables plus pastry—was then applied to art” (8).

Among the many “disparate elements” included in this “mixed dish” is Hurston’s reference to the Middle Passage. Here, the individual narrative of John Pearson is subsumed by the greater narrative of history; we see Cuffy “naked and thing-less” as he “groaned aloud in the ships” that violently “tore [him] away” from home, family, and humane, autonomous existence (*JGV* 27, 28). Where Hurston might have deployed the common literary technique of the flashback, she opts, rather, for what Dyer describes as the “syncretic cosmology” advanced by pastiche (19). Multiple geographical and temporal contexts are evoked at once: “Furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa, but whose soul sung around a fire in Alabama. [...] Congo gods talking in Alabama” (*JGV* 30). While one might be inclined to read such confluences as articulating the complex—and, as W.E.B. Du Bois argues, painfully divided—racial identities of African-Americans living in the U.S. South after reconstruction, I find Patricia Yaeger’s claim that critics “need to reassess black subjectivity as a site of struggle” compelling—particularly as it relates to Hurston’s work (Yaeger 38).

In accordance with the sentiments expressed in her 1928 essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” the harvest feast passage presents black culture and subjectivity as sites of celebration. Though fully conscious of a shared history of enslavement and continued exploitation, these individuals are “not tragically colored”; where “great sorrow” might have been “damned up in [their] soul[s],” Hurston reveals joy—even Cuffy “laugh[s]” at his own cunning (*JGV* 30). As Robert Hemenway observes, “the quality I feel is most

characteristic of Hurston's work [is] racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings” (Hemenway xii). However, he fails to link this sense of plenitude to Hurston's aesthetic practices. It is precisely through her appeal to a genre that “draw[s] upon a vast range of indigenous and foreign sources”—namely, pastiche—that Hurston succeeds in characterizing black subjectivity not by deprivation or division, but by surfeit (Dyer 16).

In so doing, Hurston actualizes the ““emancipatory potential”” of pastiche as described by Dyer (Ibid. 20).⁶ He writes: “At its best, pastiche demonstrates that self-consciousness and emotional expression can co-exist, healing one of the great rifts in Western aesthetics and allowing us to contemplate the possibility of feeling historically” (Ibid.). At the harvest feast, Hurston's characters clearly *feel historically*; the agonies of the Middle Passage are both remembered and relived, as are the ravages slavery wrought upon black families:

Wisht Ah had uh needle
 Fine ez Ah could sew
 Ah'd sew mah baby to my side
 And down de road Ah'd go.

Double hand clapping—

Down de road baby
 Down de road baby
 It's killing mama
 Oh, it's killing mama. (*JGV* 31)

At its worst—which is to say, evacuated of the historical content and consciousness that Hurston evinces here—pastiche is “trivial or pointless” (Dyer 9). While this has caused many critics to dismiss the genre as “derivative, craftless, undisciplined, confusing, indigestive, [...] in short, a mess,” Dyer—and, I would add, Hurston—labors to demonstrate that these qualities are “not intrinsic to it” (Ibid. 20).

Consequently, while passages such as this disrupt—and, as Hemenway argues, distract readers from—the central narrative, Dyer notes that “strong textual contrasts, shifts in affective register, [and] a sense of interruption” are some of the staple characteristics of pastiche (17). He writes: “The interruptions of extraneous elements, most often jokes or witticisms, [...] both remind the reader that the text is not to be taken straight-facedly and reinforce the sense of stylistic flow of the text by the very departure from it” (58). Given this, it seems necessary to reevaluate Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s claim that Hurston “shifts back and forth between her ‘literate’ narrator’s voice and a highly idiomatic black voice... effortlessly [and] seamlessly” (*JGV* 214). Rather, the seams in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* are highly visible; the contrasts, jagged; the interruptions, deliberately pronounced. As Rita Dove observes, “*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* has [...] transitions that jog, [and] a little too much ‘local color,’” both of which “interrupt narrative flow” (*JGV* xiv).

Interruption is, likewise, a defining feature of the accident—be it aesthetic, technological, or psychological. In his interview with Paul Virilio, Sylvère Lotringer observes:

In your previous books you brought out the importance of the interruption. If we didn’t blink, we wouldn’t be able to see. [...] Interruption is what allows us to

take our distance and reclaim our consciousness... Interruptions wake us up from the delusions of control. This is also the function you attribute to the accident. It forces us to think. (Lotringer and Virilio 109)

In her essay on Alice Walker's use of pastiche in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Bonnie Braendlin similarly notes "the abrupt and visionary apprehension[s]" occasioned by narrative interruption and discontinuity (Braendlin 56).⁷ Like the techno-industrial accident, pastiche "disconcert[s] readers and suggest[s] revolutionary possibilities for dismantling hegemonic discourses at the level of the individual narrative text" (Ibid. 62).

One of the most abrasive—and intriguing—interruptions in Hurston's novel occurs in Chapter 19. Shifting abruptly from the story of John's second marriage to the conniving Hattie, Hurston's narrator observes that "A fresh rumor spread over the nation. It said war. It talked of blood and glory—of travel, of North, of Oceans and transports, of white men and black" (*JGV* 147). The paragraphs that follow record a candid exchange between two anonymous interlocutors about numerous topical subjects—e.g., race relations in the Jim Crow South; the Great Migration; the conflicting sociopolitical programs of Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois; African Americans' deployment overseas and the reluctance of many to return to "de farm" after serving as soldiers; even sex (*JGV* 149). This expertly rendered dialogue is, itself, interrupted by the following narratological meditation:

World gone money mad. The pinch of war gone, people must spend. Buy and forget. Spend and solace. Silks for sorrows. Jewels to bring back joy. The factories roared and cried, "Hands!" and in the haste and press white hands

became scarce. Scarce and dear. Hands? Who cares about the color of hands?

We need hands and muscle. The South—land of muscled hands. (*JGV* 149)

Here, the fragmentation characteristic of pastiche is visible even at the level of the sentence. Hurston's clipped, alliterative phrases—"Silks for sorrows," "Jewels to bring back joy"—parody the jingoistic, postwar materialism that corrupts not only her protagonist, but the country, as a whole. Hurston alludes, likewise, to Booker T. Washington's problematic program of economic solidarity—"In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress"—leveling a subtle critique of its tepidity even as she flexes her own muscles as an artisan of the word. In so doing, she supports Dyer's claim that pastiche advances a fundamentally egalitarian—as opposed to hierarchical or separatist—ideology.

Later passages describing John's experience as a railroad laborer in Sanford, as well as his climactic final sermon, make use of the same technique. As Dyer observes, pastiche is not only combination, but imitation. It frequently "involves the quotation/imitation of prior works," but deliberately "deforms the style of its referent: [pastiche] selects, accentuates, exaggerates, concentrates" (Dyer 8, 56). Hurston's protagonist does precisely this in retelling the biblical history of creation, from the Book of Genesis through the Book of Revelations. In an effort to garner the sympathy of his angered and disapproving congregation, John emphasizes the "wounds of Jesus," which were received in "'the house of [his] friends' Zach 13:6" (*JGV* 174). His "Pagan poesy" is infused with images and metaphors that depart significantly from "de text," but not so far as to become "indistinguishable from it" (*JGV* 141, 121). In addition to scripture,

John's language draws from the daily life and experience of his parishioners: God swings "the hammers of Creation [... down] upon the anvils of Time," "De Moon" is said to grab "up de reins of de tides," a tempest of stormy clouds "bed[s] de waters like a road-plow," and the Final Judgment is framed as a violent collision between "de damnation train" and "Jesus [standing] out on her track like a rough-backed mountain" (*JGV* 175, 176, 178, 180, 181). Through his race, class, region, and labor-specific language, John successfully subverts a paternalistic, white version of Christianity "that for centuries marginalized unconventional identities" (Dyer 20).⁸ As Bonnie Braendlin observes, "pastiche [...] provide[s] women and ethnic authors with a means of appropriating genres to represent individual and group beliefs, values, and versions of reality in conflict with those of the dominant culture and traditional canon, both of which marginalize Otherness" (Braendlin 50).

Although critics like Peter Kerry Powers, Gloria Cronin, and Anthony Wilson have effectively demonstrated Hurston's fraught—and frequently, hostile—relationship to Christianity, none comment upon the ways in which "her suspicion that the Christianity of her youth was a weak and tepid [...] answer to the problems facing modern African Americans" manifests itself, at a formal level, in her work (Powers 230).⁹ According to Dyer, one of the crowning achievements of pastiche is its ability to (re)conceive of art—be it literature, music, film, theater, or painting—as grounds on which the artist "stage[s] 'a battlefield of cultural myths;'" in juxtaposing "perceptions and beliefs from different religious traditions," an altogether new, "overarching belief system" frequently emerges (Dyer 20, 19). In the case of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, what emerges from the adept use of pastiche in John Pearson's final sermon is neither the

emasculating “model of Negro subservience, silence, and long-suffering” that, as Powers observes, writers of the Harlem Renaissance rejected, nor is it the unadulterated faith of his West African ancestors (Powers 230). Rather, John draws selectively from multiple traditions in an effort to move, persuade, and inspire his audience. Herein lies “the originality of the African American for Hurston,” writes Gary Ciuba; ““While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, [...] everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use”” (Ciuba 126).¹⁰ In an attempt to address—if not reconcile—the conflicting ancient and modern, Western and non-Western, Afro and Anglo, and spiritual and secular ideologies that characterize his congregation, John delivers an all-encompassing, pastiche-inspired homily which, in turn, generates “a mighty response” from the audience (*JGV* 181).

As Robert Hemenway and Peter Kerry Powers observe, white, contemporary critics of the novel found such oratorical flights implausible. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson, Hurston writes:

I suppose you have seen the criticism of my book in *The New York Times*. He means well, I guess, but I never saw such a lack of information about us. It just seems that he is unwilling to believe that a Negro preacher could have so much poetry in him. When you and I (who seem to be the only ones even among Negroes who recognize the barbaric poetry in their sermons) know that there are hundreds of preachers who are equaling that sermon weekly. He does not know that merely being a good man is not enough to hold a Negro preacher in an important charge. He must also be an artist. (Qtd. in Hemenway 190)

Hemenway underscores Hurston's sentiments, stating that "[t]he preacher as poet is the dominant theme in the novel, and it is the quality of imagination—his image-making faculty—that always redeems John's human failings" (Ibid. 193). This is yet another reason why *Jonah's Gourd Vine* should be considered alongside high modernist works like *Remembrance of Things Past*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *To the Lighthouse*. In many respects, the modernist novel belongs more to the tradition of the *Kunstlerroman* than the traditional bildungsroman. "The *Kunstlerroman*," writes Geta LeSeur, "is similar to the bildungsroman except that the protagonist often is a developing artist or is in the process of forming an artistic sensibility" (LeSeur 26). In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Robert Louis Gates, Jr. contends that this quest for self-authorship is, in turn, one of the central themes of African-American literature. Hurston's novel thus belongs to the "esthetic matrix of black folk culture" as described by Robert Hemenway *and* to the matrix of literary modernism. In so doing, it demands that critics reconsider the tendency to define these matrices as opposed and/or mutually exclusive (Hemenway 195).

Through her use of pastiche, Hurston has produced a novel that resists commodification—which is to say, easy billing as an autobiographical novel, a classic bildungsroman, or a socially conscious protest novel in the tradition of Richard Wright. As did the iconoclastic Hurston, herself, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* shrugs off what Peter Lurie describes as the "pressure[s] of conformity, homogenization, and the market"—a defining characteristic of high modernism and of pastiche (Lurie 6). It even anticipates postmodernism, which Lurie describes as "a populist blending of high and low art" (Ibid. 5). Like the violent accident that concludes the story of John Pearson, *Jonah's Gourd*

Vine is characterized not by digression, but by dynamism. As Gary Ciuba observes, the novel “is more than something [to be] read. It is actually witnessed” (Ciuba 129).

Hurston’s language evokes rather than explicates; in this pastiche of song, dialogue, image, and sound, the narrator acts more as a participant “calling figures” than as a detached observer (*JGV* 29). By turns inspired, sublime, and undisciplined, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* exceeds any given genre’s ability to contain it.

II. Pastiche as a Reappropriation of the Techno-industrial Accident

Although critics like Andreas Huyssen have postulated a relationship between pastiche and industrial modernity, only Paul Virilio has linked it, explicitly, to “the flagrant nature of the [technological] disasters” concomitant with the development of both (Virilio 14). As Julie Rose observes in her preface to Virilio’s *Art and Fear*:

A realist to the core, Virilio will always be the first to make certain connections. For example, others before have attacked modern art’s dance of the seven veils, the stripping of art’s subjects and materials down to the bare bones of an insubstantial representation. But it is Virilio who names the process violence, pinpoints the fear that subtends it and makes the connection between this violence and the violence of the battlefields of the Great War, for example, when the first abstract canvases appeared and the human figure was literally and figuratively blasted to bits... No one else has traced this twin genealogy of art and science that has so much to do with the ‘routine horrors’ of the last hundred years. (Virilio vii-viii)

Indeed, Virilio reads modern art as having been “horribly impacted” by the “motorized forces” of modernity—among them, the automobile, film, and technologies of war

(Lotringer and Virilio 58). In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, he claims that “art, too, has been a victim” of the “technological revolution” (Ibid. 22). “We are entering the period of the *total accident*,” he writes; “Everything has been damaged in the accident... everything that constitutes the world has experienced an accident, and this [is] *without exception*. [...] Art [has been] mortally wounded with the rest, and we haven’t recovered from this wound” (34, 22). While many critics are inclined to dismiss Virilio’s rather extremist stance—for example, he writes that “the arts of the 20th century are a disaster, and they don’t acknowledge it”—he substantiates such statements with compelling examples (60). In *Art and Fear*, he observes that abstract painter Mark Rothko’s “reluctance” to represent the human figure resulted from that fact that ““*using human representation [after Cubism] meant mutilating it*”” (Virilio 37).¹¹ For Virilio, modern art thus constitutes the site, trace, or deliberate *evasion* of the techno-industrial accident—which, as he argues in *The Original Accident*, includes modern machine warfare.

So, too, with the modernist novel. In particular, the use of pastiche by modernist writers like Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Toomer, Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hurston can be said to “mutilate” traditional conceptions of the novel, the long poem, etc. Disparate voices, genres, literary styles, and stories are brought together in an ostensible whole, but it is precisely—and paradoxically—a consistent aesthetic of fragmentation and rupture that “unifies” works such as *The Wasteland*, *Cane*, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. As Sylvère Lotringer observes, the impact of industrial modernity upon art “can only be inferred from the display of the parts” (Lotringer and Virilio 41). Virilio concurs, stating that, “[i]f the so-called old-master art remained *demonstrative* right up until the

nineteenth century with Impressionism, the art of the twentieth century became ‘*monstrative*’ in the sense that it [reflected] the *shattering effect* of mass societies” (Virilio 35). From the fragments famously shored up against our ruins, we infer something that was once whole. In Virilio’s—admittedly, totalizing—account, modernism figures as a kind of scar left behind by the collision of the modern subject with the ever-accelerating forces of industrial-capitalist modernization. Like all prelapsarian paradigms, this former state of “wholeness” is a fictive one, but no less powerful for being so.

Dyer describes pastiche in terms that apply, equally, to the accident—be it mechanical or otherwise:

Pasticcio often aims to look random, to create the feeling of abandonment to diversity, astonishment, surprise, tumult and chaos. [... It] cannot be contained by elements of rhythm, narrative, or design. There is often a sense of spilling over the edges of a pattern, of breaking free from the control of narrative, of refusing the boundaries of media and genre. [...] The contrasts and clashes of style, the pushing at and beyond the boundaries of balance and structure, the sense of surprise, shock, chance and disorientation, propulsive flow heightened by rupture, all these can feel energetic, exuberant, tonic. (Dyer 19-20)

For this reason, Karen Beckman argues that our tendency to “discipline the crash” must be resisted (Beckman 11). Similarly, readers must resist the impulse to discipline Hurston’s iconoclastic novel. “Experimental novels,” writes Bonnie Braendlin, “are often misunderstood and unappreciated because they lack a reassuring ‘readability,’ that is, continuity and clarity that reinforce ‘our own knowledge... [and] our own culture’”

(Braendlin 46).¹² Like the accident, “they destabilize the security of our ideological positions, prompting us to ask, ‘how total, how coherent, continuous, rational, how whole, how secure we are in our culture’” (Ibid.). As with any experiment, be it literary or technological, one incurs the risk of failure. Recalling the disappointment expressed by Robert Hemenway upon reading *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Braendlin concedes that “reading an experimental text [...] can be both ‘frustrating and exhilarating’” (58).¹³ Reconsidering *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* within the context of modernist pastiche minimizes the latter experience and amplifies the former.

While Virilio is unequivocally condemnatory of such experimentation, he overlooks the progressive, emancipatory, and egalitarian political ideologies they frequently advance. As a marginal—and often, marginalized—aesthetic practice, pastiche espouses a set of values altogether different from those imposed by the dominant culture. Among other things, it champions heterogeneity, improvisation, spontaneity, adaptability, and experience. It is performative rather than proprietary, positing the work of art as an “event” rather than as a “thing.” In borrowing, sampling, and even thieving its content from various sources, pastiche actively undermines modern capitalism’s aggressive agenda of privatization. As Frederic Jameson observes, pastiche can be considered as “an indictment of consumer capitalism” (Jameson 117).

One can see a similar critique at work throughout *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Just as God cuts down the prophet, Jonah, so Hurston cuts down her protagonist for his unabashedly materialist ambitions—themselves, a byproduct of the rapidly modernizing, postwar South. “World gone money mad,” observes Hurston’s wry and wary narrator, “The pinch of war gone, people must spend. Buy and forget. Spend and solace” (*JGV*

149). Indeed, John buries his own grief after Lucy's death in the mire of moral "weakness" and material "vice"; he acquires two more wives, countless mistresses, "twenty-seben houses," a Cadillac, and a "huge roll of bills in his pocket" (*JGV* 141, 189, 194). Although John fervently prays that God might "keep his path out of the way of snares and bear him up lest he bruise his feet against a stumbling stone," the last image the narrator offers of the proud but fallen preacher suggests that this prayer has gone unanswered: "The engine struck the car squarely and hurled it about like a toy. John was thrown out and lay perfectly still. Only his foot twitched a little" (*JGV* 190, 200).

As Bonnie Braendlin observes, the traditional *Bildungsroman* "constructs a subject as the end product of a process of choosing among various roles defined by the discourses [of education, religion, the law, and the media] and thus privileges ideologies of individualism and autonomy" (Braendlin 51). Drawing from the work of Franco Moretti, she claims that "the goal of *Bildung* in its bourgeois capitalist historical context is, for Anglo-European society, the integration of its sons and daughters into their designated societal spheres, the workplace and the home, respectively, and, for the developing individual, a happy state of harmony dominated by 'the feeling that the world is *his* [or *her*] world" (Ibid.).¹⁴ However, each of the works discussed in this study challenge the conventions of the classical *Bildungsroman*—even as they pattern themselves after it—suggesting that the modern world belongs to something (and) someone else entirely. Paradoxically, one's "choices" under mass industrial capitalism are, in fact, limited. Clyde Griffiths, Jay Gatsby, John Sims, and John Pearson are less "autonomous" agents than they are co-opted consumers. *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* thus take their respective places

alongside works like *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *McTeague*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, which, as Ronald Levaco argues, critique “the obsessive, bourgeois drive towards amassing individual wealth”; they are “materialist studies in the futility of self-aggrandizement” (Levaco 20). This critique is most effectively leveled through the recurrent trope of the automobile accident, to which each of these writers and filmmakers appeal.

However, as a female member of a minority group, Hurston also recognizes the liberating potential in Virilio’s claim that the accident—or an ethos of accidentalism—threatens to make “all substance[s], whether natural or manufactured, contingent” (Virilio 72). Race and gender are not essential, immutable qualities, but rather accidents of birth that needn’t dictate the course of one’s life thereafter. The accident allows Hurston to subvert the essentializing discourses that surrounded issues of gender and race in the Jim Crow South—discourses that persist to this day. As Peter Kerry Powers observes: “Hurston’s work announces the end of ‘masculinity’ as an exclusively male preserve, indeed, imagines an end to the masculine/feminine divide. Recognizing these blurred gender codes in Hurston’s work allows [...] for a greater appreciation of Hurston’s literary men, men who are, ironically, not so much images of masculinity. Rather, they are men made in the image of Zora Neale Hurston herself” (Powers 243).

The same can be said of Hurston’s racial ideology. In her celebrated anthropological work, *Mules and Men*, Hurston offers a uniquely playful and subversive account of racial origins:

“Long before they got thru makin’ de Atlantic Ocean and haulin’ de rocks for de mountains, God was makin’ up de people. [...] He give out eyes one day. All de nations come up and got they eyes. Then He give out teeth and so on. Then He set a day to give out color. So seven o’ clock dat mornin’ everybody was due to git they color except de niggers. So God give everybody they color and they went on off. Then He set there for three hours and one-half and no niggers. It was getting’ hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set in de cool. So he sent de angels Rafield and Gab’ull to go git ‘em so He could tend some mo’ business... They all jumped up and run on up to th’ th’one... [and] God hollered ‘Git back! Git back!’ And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, ‘Git black,’ and they been black ever since.” (*MM* 29-30)

In this account, blackness is neither a curse nor a coronation; it is the result of a misunderstanding—indeed, it is a kind of cosmic accident. Such playful revisions pointedly counter discriminatory biblical accounts of racial difference. As E. Franklin Frazier observes:

Not only did Christianity fail to offer the Negro hope of freedom in this world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him [by white missionaries] tended to degrade him. The Negro was taught that his enslavement was due to the fact that he had been cursed by God. His very color was a sign of the curse which he had received as a descendant of Ham. Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the Negro should be the servant of the white man and that he should always be a “hewer of wood and a drawer of water.” (Frazier 115)

Like Alice Walker, Hurston moves away from what Bonnie Braendlin describes as “the somber tone [...] of tragic realism [toward] comic pastiche” (Braendlin 61-62).

Braendlin argues that “laughter is essential” to this movement because a lack thereof compounds “the self-absorption of contemporary life” under mass capitalism (Ibid. 62).

In addition to her use of humor and pastiche, Hurston challenges the self-absorption cultivated under mass capitalism by pitting her protagonist against the formidable force of the machine. As Dyer observes, “pastiche [is] made through a combination of contextual and paratextual indications” (Dyer 3). Like the other works discussed in this study, post-industrial modernity constitutes the paratext with which Hurston’s novel is principally engaged. While recent scholarship by Leif Sorensen, Patricia Yaeger, and Martyn Bone emphasizes the economic and materialist dimensions of Hurston’s work, the relationship between the forces of industrial-capitalist modernization and Hurston’s aesthetic practices remains unexplored. I submit that the violent collision that claims John Pearson’s life is directly related to the pastiche-inspired aesthetic running throughout *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. That is to say, the “contemporary social crises” which Hazel Carby claims are “discursive[ly] displaced” in Hurston’s work are, in fact, formally foregrounded (Bone 756).¹⁵ The novel’s uneven stylistic topography reflects the cultural and socioeconomic turbulence of the period. As Peter Kerry Powers observes: “The first decades of the twentieth century were years of tremendous upheaval in the American experience... [and] nowhere was this upheaval felt more acutely—as both an opportunity and a cause for anxiety—than among African Americans” (Powers 229).

Like William Faulkner, Hurston indexes the “anxiety” produced by the encroachment of industrial modernity into the rural South through the recurrent trope of the train. However, as Patricia Yaeger observes, “African and Anglo Americans often experienced a world of similar objects—but from within completely different cultural and semiotic systems” (Yaeger 36). For Faulkner, “the train becomes an emblem of the disappearing ‘wholeness’ of a mythic southern experience—a space devouring monster, a force ruining the southern wilderness” (Ibid. 35). Likewise endangered are the racial hierarchies that Faulkner’s regressive, “pastoral” vision of the south “does not eviscerate,” but rather “crystallizes” (Ibid.). By contrast, the train in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* represents something altogether different. Although John’s first encounter with a locomotive terrifies him, his first journey by rail is filled with awe and excitement:

They bought their tickets and John sat in a railway coach for the first time in his life, though he hid this fact from his traveling mate. To him nothing in the world ever quite equaled that first ride on a train. The rhythmic stroke of the engine, the shiny-buttoned porter bawling out the stations, the even more begilded conductor, who looked more imposing even than Judge Pearson, and then the red plush splendor, the gaudy ceiling hung with glinting lamps, the long mournful howl of the whistle. John forgot the misery of his parting from Lucy in the aura of it all. That is, he only remembered his misery in short snatches, while the glory lay all over him for hours at a time. He marveled that just anybody could come along and be allowed to get on such a glorified thing. It ought to be extra special. He got off the train at every stop so that he could stand off a piece and

feast his eyes on the engine. The greatest accumulation of power he had ever seen. (*JGV* 104)

Significantly, only “the Negro mayor [in Eatonville] fill[s] John with almost as much awe as the train had” (*JGV* 107).¹⁶ Both are emblems of Progress. As Yaeger observes, “the train’s historic meaning for southern black men and women” was one of promise and escape from “the scarcity and immobility of the sharecropping system” (Yaeger 35). Indeed, the Great Migration was largely enabled by this technology. As Hurston’s inspired account of this movement attests: “The wind said North. Trains said North. The tides and tongues said North, and men moved like the great herds before the glaciers” (*JGV* 148). Eventually, the mass exodus of laborers from the South made “‘de white folks [...] worried too. Houses empty eve’ywhere. Not half ‘nough people tuh work de farms—crops rotting in de ground. [...] Dey talkin’ ‘bout passin’ laws tuh keep black folks from buying railroad tickets. Dey tell me dey stopped a train in Georgy and made all de colored folks git off’” (*JGV* 149-150). Even so, “the State, County and City all over the South could do little to halt the stampede” (*JGV* 151).

Additionally, Yaeger observes that “Hurston does invaluable work in associating the train’s jazzy rhythms with folk traditions (‘Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Opelika-black-and-dirty! Opelika-black-and-dirty! Ah—wah-ooooon,’)” (Yaeger 35). Referencing Alan Lomax’s *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Yaeger observes that the railroad chants Hurston records were also “loaded with labor history” (Ibid. 48). As one man Lomax interviewed put it, “‘Singing comes according to what job you’re doing. Now you take lining track, that singing was just a rhythm that the labor[er] used in keeping time and getting the track lined like the bossman wanted. [...] I mean that it was just a part of the

way we men set up to work, to get the job done” (Ibid.).¹⁷ Echoing the pastiche of folk songs Hurston offers early in the novel and anticipating the lyrical sermon she records later, those passages documenting railroad labor chants, songs, and rhythms provide a bridge between John’s ostensibly disparate experiences as a sharecropper in rural Alabama and as a railroad laborer in the more urban environment of Sanford, Florida:

The straining men would bear down on the lining bars and grunt, “Hanh!”

“Hanh!”

“Got de number ten!”

“Hanh!”

“Got de pay-car!”

“Hanh!”

“On de rear end.”

“Hanh!” (*JGV* 106)

Likewise, at a formal level, these seeming interruptions and digressions actually endow the novel with aesthetic continuity.

Finally, John’s incredulity that “just anybody could come along and be allowed to get on such a glorified thing [as a locomotive]” confirms Lynne Kirby’s claim that trains constituted a uniquely egalitarian space in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She writes: “[Trains] bring together for a brief period individuals from all walks of life” (Kirby 3). While “European trains reflected social divisions in car design and in providing individual cars for individual classes, American trains were theoretically classless” (Ibid. 5). Unlike the highly privatized automobile, this “technology was seen as a promising terrain for integrating the masses into a social whole, for leveling

differences in a ‘democratic’ space” (Ibid. 7). Hurston thus appears to share Fitzgerald’s—and Woolf’s—sense that public transport cultivates a communal ethos that is altogether different from the individualistic ethos advanced by the automobile. Given this, one might argue that it is John Pearson’s choice to exchange the former for the latter—indeed, he is last seen driving, alone, in a brand new Cadillac—which Hurston pointedly critiques.

Nevertheless, while Yaeger and Kirby’s observations about the democratic and emancipatory qualities of the train are compelling, we must remember that, in the context of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, it is this “iron monster” that violently kills Hurston’s protagonist (*JGV* 177). Likewise, John Pearson’s grueling labor at the tie camp confirms Kirby’s claim that, despite its gestures toward integration, the railroad industry compounded “institutionalized racism [through its] dependence upon African American and Chinese workers for lowly railroad labor” (Kirby 7). Pullman cars, for example, “depended on the use of newly freed slaves as low-paid porters, thus continuing an overt master-servant practice rooted in whites’ perceptions of their own status” (Ibid. 5). While, as Yaeger observes, “[w]orking on the railroad line [allows] John Pearson [...] to send money home, and this money creates the conditions for another set of migrations,” the south’s racially exploitative labor system required that he leave his family to begin with. Life as a house servant and bookkeeper on Alf Pearson’s plantation was not economically sustainable, and the need to provide for his growing family—ironically and tragically—fractured it.¹⁸ The recurrent theme of absent fathers in African American literature and culture is thus no accident or individual failing. Rather, Hurston presents it

as an inevitable consequence of the racially exploitative economic system under which black men and women labor.

In John Pearson's final sermon, the train figures not as an instrument of liberation, but of destruction and "damnation" (*JGV* 160). "[L]oaded wid cargo goin' to hell," this "cow-catcher" runs "at break-neck speed" into the side of Christ (*JGV* 181).

Armageddon is similarly envisioned as a violent collision between "'de two trains of Time'" which "'wreck de burning axles of de unformed ether'" (*JGV* 181). Such images presage John's own death; as Gary Ciuba observes, "The Reverend Pearson finds the climactic metaphor of his homily [later] coming to perverse life. As the novel's many snake images converge in this final mechanical worm, the *deus ex machina* cuts down the vine of the preacher who has never completely appropriated the texts on which he preached" (Ciuba 130). By contrast, Peter Kerry Powers reads the collision as Hurston's final condemnation of John Pearson's misguided religious convictions:

At the end of the novel, after a long life of philandering and repentance, John dies in a wreck after having fallen one last time into infidelity after a long period of faithfulness. [...] Shoving [his paramour] in a ditch, he desperately drives away toward home, accusing himself as "False pretender! Outside show to the world!" He further swears that he will now have "Faith and no questions asked." In short, John gives himself over to the discourses of sin and damnation that Hurston elsewhere finds exasperating. The wreck happened not as John flees marriage and Christian convention but as he embraces some of the most basic conventions of a conservative Christian morality. (Powers 240)

While the text supports the readings of both Ciuba and Powers, situating Hurston's novel within a larger study that examines the automobile accident as a recurrent motif in novels and films from the interwar period demands that readers think through the use of this trope more carefully. John Pearson's fatal crash does not merely bespeak his individual failings, nor do his final, spiritual reflections expose the impotence of the religion to which he ascribes. Rather, Hurston stages this crash in an effort to represent postindustrial modernity as a period of, as Patricia Yaeger puts it, "struggle, crisis, cultural emergence and emergency" (Yaeger 44). In configuring John Pearson's death as a violent collision between the two most formidable technologies of the 19th and 20th centuries, she aptly illustrates Yaeger's claim that "southern literature, at its best, is not about community but about moments of crisis and acts of contestation, about the intersection of black and white cultures as they influence one another and *collide*" (Ibid. 38, emphasis mine). Consequently, Hurston can be said to share Paul Virilio's concern that the business of techno-industrial "Progress" is, in fact, "the production of mass destruction" (Virilio 71).

Even so, Hurston's indictment of technology is freighted with implications that Virilio overlooks. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* exposes "the barbarism moving within advanced societies" described by John Armitage (Virilio 12). Where Armitage appeals to the example of Auschwitz, Hurston can be said to raise the specter of slavery in the United States. As E. Franklin Frazier observes: "Negro slaves [...] became the creators of wealth that made the flowering of capitalism possible in the nineteenth century" (Frazier 15). Advancements in technology only exacerbated the evils of this dehumanizing system. For example, "with the invention of the cotton gin, which enabled American

producers to supply the increased demands of English manufacturers, the importation of Negro slaves was accelerated” (Ibid.). While Virilio concedes that it is not possible to “put the brakes on the acceleration of technical progress,” Hurston’s debut novel suggests that it is possible to document—and thereby, preserve—life as it was lived before, alongside, and under the driving forces of capitalist modernization (Virilio 88).

¹ As Rita Dove observes in her “Forward” to the novel, Hurston’s title alludes to Jonah 4.6-8: “And the Lord God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from this discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered” (*JGV* x-xi).

² Hurston, Zora Neale. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1990. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

³ While LeSeur offers a reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an example of the African-American female bildungsroman, her study does not address *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

⁴ For accounts of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*’s critical reception see Hemenway 193-194, and Ciuba 132, 119. Ciuba cites Bernard W. Bell, Robert Bone, Trudier Harris, Robert Hemenway, and Nigel H. Thomas as “criticiz[ing] the way that Hurston’s interest in folk culture takes precedence over concerns for plot and character in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*” (132). He also observes that Hurston’s male contemporary, Richard Wright, faulted her for failing to write an “overtly political” social protest novel (119).

⁵ Indeed, Hurston suggests that this Taylorist emphasis upon utility extends even to the psychological formation of modern subjects. In lamenting that a man can no longer “utilize hisself” under the matrix of industrial modernity, John Pearson betrays the sad fact that he thinks of himself primarily as an agent of utility (*JGV* 125).

⁶ Dyer is here quoting Hoesterey 25.

⁷ Braendlin is here quoting Felski, 142.

⁸ Dyer is here quoting Hoesteray 29.

⁹ See also Cronin 48-71, and Wilson 64-78.

¹⁰ Ciuba is here quoting Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* 58.

¹¹ One could also argue that it was not cubism so much as the advent of photography that profoundly affected figurative painting.

¹² Braendlin is here quoting Federman, 27.

¹³ Braendlin is here quoting Belsey, 106.

¹⁴ Braendlin is here quoting Moretti, 68.

¹⁵ Bone is here quoting Carby, 182.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that, although numerous critics discussed in this study (e.g. Georges Bataille, Guy Debord, Tom Gunning, and Paul Virilio) present compelling—and often, universalizing—claims about the nature of “spectacle,” Hurston reminds readers that this is a culturally relative concept. To John Pearson, the sight of a school house for black children, a train, and the Potts’ place send him reeling; to someone like Alf Pearson, these things are commonplace—even quaint.

¹⁷ Yaeger is here quoting Lomax, 72.

¹⁸ Admittedly, John also sought work at the tie camps in order to escape the aftermath of his repeated infidelities.

Conclusion

These were the days before automobiles and nobody worried about accidents.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

In *The Original Accident*, Paul Virilio argues that a study of the accident will necessarily entail a study of “our relationship to death and the impulse towards it, it is [...] a matter of scrupulously examining *our relationship to the end*, to all ends, in other words to finiteness” (Virilio 12). Each of the works discussed in this study meditate, throughout, on the relationship of both man and art to finitude—indeed, to death. In particular, they examine the ways in which industrial modernity has changed our relationship to “the end”—to death and finiteness. As the highly reflexive final line of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* reads, “With the drumming of the feet, and the mournful dance of the heads, in rhythm, it was ended” (*JGV* 202). The question presents itself: What has ended? Likewise, what is mourned? I submit that, through the recurrent motif of the car crash, *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* raise the specter, not only of outmoded ways of life, but also of outmoded forms of death and dying. Whereas, in the mid-nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson figured death as a “kindly” coachman who “slowly drove, He knew no haste,” Zora Neale Hurston has him speed toward her protagonist, “strik[ing] [his] car squarely and hurl[ing] it about like a toy” (*JGV* 200).¹ The poet’s pastoral vision—“We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain/We passed the Setting Sun”—has been eclipsed by the menacing urban environments seen in Vidor’s *The Crowd*; Fitzgerald’s culture of “carelessness” has all but replaced Dickinsonian “Civility.”

While representations of—and metaphors for—death are mercurial literary phenomena deserving of their own book-length study, it is worth briefly examining some

other examples from 19th century literature, aside from Dickinson's poem.² Consider the deathbed scenes in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Leo Tolstoy's 1886 novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. In each work, the protagonist's "natural death" is prolonged and belabored. The once vibrant little Eva "grown thinner, and her skin more transparent, and her breath shorter," announces to Tom that she is "going to the spirits bright [...] *before long*" (UTC 227).³ When the day arrives, she looks at those gathered around her with "the calm, comprehending gaze of a soul half loosed from its earthly bonds; it was evident she saw, felt, and appreciated, the difference between the two" (UTC 250). She then sends for the household servants and implores them to lead Christian lives, that she might see them again in heaven:

It is impossible to describe the scene, as, with tears and sobs, they gathered round the little creature, and took from her hands [the locks of hair that] seemed to them a last mark of her love. They fell on their knees; they sobbed and prayed, and kissed the hem of her garment; and the elder ones poured forth words of endearment, mingled in prayers and blessings, after the manner of their susceptible race. (UTC 252)

Eva's decline thereafter, though rapid, was "so bright and placid [...]—by such sweet and fragrant breezes was the small bark borne towards the heavenly shores,—that it was impossible to realize that it was death that was approaching" (UTC 254).

Similarly diagnosed—though at the age of forty-five—with "an illness said to be incurable," Ivan Ilych suffers "for some weeks" before dying (Tolstoy 758).⁴ "With this consciousness [of impending death]," observes the narrator, "and with physical pain besides the terror, he went to bed, often lying awake the greater part of the night" (Ibid.

778). Such meditations, however terrifying, are not afforded the accident victim; “Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying,” and prepared for this eventuality, as did his family and friends (781).⁵ While hardly as painless and “placid” as little Eva’s passing, Ivan Ilych’s prolonged illness similarly forces him to confront and contemplate his own mortality: “Whether it was morning or evening, Friday or Sunday, made no difference, it was all just the same: the gnawing, unmitigated, agonizing pain, never ceasing for an instant, the consciousness of life inexorably waning but not yet extinguished, the approach of that ever dreaded and hateful Death which was the only reality” (786).

Though artificially staged and somewhat histrionic, these scenes illustrate Søren Kierkegaard’s claim that the sickness unto death is, itself, a blessing. The dying—as well as his/her beloved—are given adequate time in which to atone, make amends, undergo religious conversion, or experience spiritual revelation. Consequently, death brings with it a sense of peace and closure. Tolstoy’s narrator observes: “...as is always the case with the dead, [Ivan Ilych’s] face was handsomer and above all more dignified than when he was alive. The expression on the face said that what was necessary had been accomplished, and accomplished rightly” (760). Little Eva’s face, likewise, bore “no ghastly imprint,—only a high and almost sublime expression,—the overshadowing presence of spiritual natures, the dawning of immortal life in that childish soul” (*UTC* 256). Contrast this with Myrtle Wilson’s mangled visage in *The Great Gatsby*: “The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long” (*GG* 138).

Somewhat less strained in its treatment of the natural—as opposed to artificial—death is Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.⁶ The narrator’s account of a

deathbed vigil, at which the entire community gathers to honor a passing elder, contains what I believe to be one of the most beautiful sentences in modern American literature: “One could scarcely step for the candles” (*DCFTA* 166).⁷ Man’s relationship to death, as it is articulated in this novel, is contemplative, reverent, slow, and ceremonious. When the visiting Father Vaillant “beckoned a woman he knew well, Concepción Gonzales, and asked her what was the meaning of this,” she “whispered that the dying Padre would have it so” (*DCFTA* 166). Father Lucero, to whom she refers, sets the stage—though not necessarily the terms—of his own death; his last wishes are honored by the attendant villagers. In a later passage, an “old Navajo” comments to the protagonist, Father Latour, that “men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things” (*DCFTA* 289). The prevalence of the automobile accident, as both a literary trope and lived reality, corroborates this claim and suggests that men travel faster not only in life, but also, to death. As Rita Barnard astutely observes, Cather’s historical romances are drawn in stark—and deliberate—contrast to contemporaneous jazz age novels by Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She writes: “Willa Cather [...] deploys some of the techniques of the modern novel—its sharpness, its attentiveness to point of view and structure—to voice a criticism of modernity and celebrate what she saw as the anti-materialist values of a pioneer aristocracy” (Barnard 45). While Barnard is here referring to works like *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, such anti-materialist values are even more pronounced in the case of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, wherein both Father Latour and Father Vaillant have taken vows of poverty.

The psychological, cultural, and geographical landscapes of *The Great Gatsby* could not be more different from those of Cather’s novel. As was discussed in Chapter

II, its perversions of the sacred and the profane are pronounced. While Cather's villagers labor to construct local houses of worship in which "every stone [...], every handful of earth in those many thousand pounds of adobe, was carried up the trail on the backs of men and boys and women," Fitzgerald's novel confirms Roland Barthes' observation that "cars today are the exact equivalent of the Great gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (*DCFTA* 101, Barthes 88). Consequently, automobiles also serve as the altar upon which "offal" like the working-class Myrtle Wilson is violently proffered.

Death in the modern novel, like the countless deaths precipitated under modern industrial capitalism, is abrupt, inglorious, and, increasingly, artificial (as opposed to "natural"). Truncated, likewise, are the rituals of mourning which subtend it. In *The Great Gatsby*, Myrtle Wilson announces her intention to buy "a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave that'll last all summer"—presumably, so she won't have to visit it more frequently to pay her respects (*GG* 37). Mere months after the death of his daughter, John Sims' colleagues at the Atlas Insurance Company berate him for being unable to focus on his work. By contrast, John Pearson's parishioners scold him for failing to mourn the death of his wife, Lucy: "'Yo' wife ain't been dead but three months, and you done jumped up and married befo' she got col' in her grave!'" (*JGV* 138). As Seth Moglen observes, this failure to adequately mourn one's loss results in "a melancholic psychological paralysis" that damages individuals as well as society (Moglen xiv). He argues that "[o]ne of the principle tasks of any culture is to develop—and adapt—strategies of grieving" (*Ibid.* xviii). Works like *The Great Gatsby* and *The*

Crowd suggest that the grieving strategies practiced by those living in the United States during the interwar period are either endangered or inadequate.

Finally, even if a given character's life is not claimed in a car crash and the bereaved fail to mourn their loss, death in the modern novel is nonetheless frequently framed as violent, unexpected, or accidental. Consider Thomas Sutpen's murder at the hands of the poor sharecropper, Wash Jones, in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), after which his mutilated corpse is catapulted from the wagon that carries him to his grave. A decorated war veteran like Jay Gatsby, Colonel Sutpen might have suffered a purposeful, dignified death in the Civil War. Instead, he meets a far more ironic—and pathetic—end. I remember, likewise, catching my breath when May Wellend was abruptly excised from Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920). With no previous intimation of this event, the narrator observes that the protagonist, Newland Archer, “had been what was called a faithful husband; and when May had suddenly died—carried off by the infectious pneumonia through which she had nursed their youngest child—he had honestly mourned her” (*TAOI* 243).⁸ My shock was even more pronounced upon the unexpected death of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In a parenthetical aside, the narrator observes: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly in the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (*TTL* 128).⁹ Just as one is wholly unprepared for the car crash—as Virilio puts it, for “*the speed at which it unexpectedly surges up*”—so the modernist writer insures that his/her reader is unprepared for death and loss in the modern novel (Virilio 12).

To some extent, this simply belies the fact that rarely do we meet death on our own terms; as Sylvère Lotringer observes, “death always comes from the outside” (Lotringer and Virilio 18). For the bereaved, it is almost always untimely. The abrupt, violent, and accidental death also makes us more aware of life’s profound fragility, impressing upon readers and viewers the irrational and unpredictable nature of experience. However, the techno-industrial accident challenges this assumption in important ways. If, as Mark Seltzer argues, the machine serves as an extension of the modern subject, then this form of death is self-authored.¹⁰ We—and not Dickinson’s “kindly” coachman—are in the driver’s seat. As Virilio observes: “Inordinately enhanced, human power transforms itself into a cause of ruin” (Virilio 32).¹¹ There is an insidious evasion of responsibility in the very notion of *deus ex machina*. Taken together, the novels and films discussed in this study expose and, to varying degrees, indict our complicity in the socioeconomic system under which automobiles and their accidents proliferate. As Honoré de Balzac observes in his preface to the *Human Comedy*, “The Social State contains chance events that Nature does not permit” (Balzac I: 9).¹²

Although Virilio’s notion of the manufactured, or “mass produced” accident appears to be a contradiction in terms, statistics indicate that it is not (Virilio 5). In *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Enda Duffy observes that, “when the *Titanic* sank, 1,552 passengers were drowned. In the following year, 1913, in the United States alone 4,200 people were killed in car accidents. (Now almost 40,000 die annually in car crashes in the United States.) It has been estimated that up to thirty million people have died in car crashes in the twentieth century” (Duffy 200). For this reason, he refers

to the automobile accident as a “quotidian inevitability”; elsewhere, Jean Baudrillard characterizes it as “banal” (Duffy 200, Baudrillard and Evans 314). How and why have we become reconciled to this shift from the accident as a possibility to the accident as a probability?¹³

King Vidor’s *The Crowd* suggests that the false sense of security provided by insurance companies encourages our collective complacency in no small part. However, this self-same industry actively cultivates the anxiety which subtends its existence, casting our environment as one of ubiquitous risk and exploiting the discourses of chance, hazard, and catastrophe which derive from it. As Paul Virilio observes: “[I]n the course of the twentieth century, the accident became a heavy industry” (Virilio 12). Insurance agencies have been quick to capitalize upon this inadvertent industry and, as Virilio later notes, increasingly derive the majority of their profits from “artificial,” as opposed to “natural,” accidents (Ibid. 23). Consequently, “the idea of protection haunts and takes up the whole of life” (42). However, under mass industrial capitalism, “protection” increasingly refers to one’s ability to provide material compensation for unintended injury and loss. Directly following the violent collision that kills John Pearson in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the engineer conducting the train that hit him muses:

“Damned, if I can see how it happened. [...] He musta been sleep or drunk. God knows I blowed for him when I saw him entering the track. He wasn’t drunk. Couldn’t smell no likker on him, so he musta been asleep. Hell, now I’m on the carpet for carelessness, but I got witnesses I blowed.” (JGV 200)

His immediate concern is his own liability, rather than the welfare of others.

Perhaps this is because the victims claimed in these texts are cast as precisely that—"Others." An inventory of the car crash victims in *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crowd*, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* reveals that chance and accident are, in fact, discriminatory phenomena. The deaths of working class Myrtle Wilson (and here, one might include poor Roberta Alden, even though she did not die in an automobile accident), children like John Sims's daughter and the little girl killed in *An American Tragedy*, and racial minorities like John Pearson, suggest that the injuries inherent to capitalist modernization are not unilaterally inflicted. Rather, certain demographics are more vulnerable to what Seth Moglen describes as "the destructive effects of modern capitalism" than others (Moglen xiii). Self-determination is tied to capital. As figures like Clyde Griffiths, George and Myrtle Wilson, John Sims, and John Pearson demonstrate, those without it struggle more to navigate the storms and shoals of life than to chart their own course. *An American Tragedy*, observes Mandy Merck, "is an anti-American novel whose main character [is] far more a creature of events than their creator" (Merck 2). Of Hurston's protagonist, the narrator similarly observes: "John's destination was purely accidental" (*JGV* 103).

These characters also recover less quickly—and comfortably—from setbacks than do figures like the Lycurgus Griffithses, the Finchleys, the Buchanans, and Alf Pearson. As Mike Featherstone observes, "It is not only the poorer countries which suffer higher rates of [automotive] casualties and effects on their GDP, but motor vehicle crashes have a disproportionate impact on poorer people everywhere, as they comprise the majority of casualties and lack ongoing support in the case of long term injuries" (Featherstone 18).¹⁴

Not only are the car accident victims compiled in these texts casualties of the American Dream, they attest to the fact that the American Dream necessarily incurs casualties.

While a considerable number of scholars have explored modernity's profoundly altered relationship to death and dying within the context of war fiction, variously indexing the psychosocial traumas induced by modern machine warfare, the daily, "domestic" traumas suffered alongside this global carnage remain unexplored. As Sigfreid Kracauer observes: "We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on us. We are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life" (Kracauer 5). While the automobile accident is frequently classed within this category (and therefore dismissed), I argue that it also functions as a complex socio-historical cipher—quite possibly the most telling evidence of the larger political, cultural, and economic catastrophe that is capitalist modernization. The sheer prevalence of the car crash—both as a literary trope and as a lived (if one is lucky) phenomenon—demands that we reevaluate T.S. Eliot's concluding formulation in the 1925 poem, "The Hollow Men":

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

*Not with a bang but a whimper.*¹⁵

Taken together, the novels and films discussed in this study suggest precisely the opposite: *This is the way the world ends*—not with a whimper but a bang.

¹ Dickinson, Emily. "Because I could not stop for Death." *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964, 177.

² For a study of death as it is figured in 19th and 20th century British literature, see Stewart, Garrett. *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

³ Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

⁴ Tolstoy, Leo. "The Death of Ivan Ilych." *The Art of the Short Story*. Ed. Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwyn. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006, 758. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

⁵ Admittedly, much of Tolstoy's novella levels a critique of how Ivan, his wife, and his colleagues respond to both his illness and his death.

⁶ Though published in 1927, the novel is set in the 1850s.

⁷ Cather, Willa. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1990, 166. All further quotations will be taken from this edition.

⁸ Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. Ed. Stephen Orgel. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

⁹ Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1981.

¹⁰ See Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

¹¹ Virilio is here quoting Henri Atlan. *La Science est-elle inhumaine?* Paris: Bayard, 2002.

¹² Balzac, Honoré de. *La Comédie humaine*. Ed. Pierre-George Castex. 12 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1976-81, I:9. Also qtd. in Bell, David F. *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993, 5.

¹³ As Enda Duffy observes, "Now almost 40,000 die annually in car crashes in the United States. It has been estimated that up to thirty million people have died in car crashes in the twentieth century. Each year of the twentieth century adds at least a half million more" (200).

¹⁴ Here Featherstone cites the *World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention* (WHO, 2004: 6).

¹⁵ Eliot, T.S. "The Hollow Men." *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1963, 77.

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