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Modernism in the Era of Human Rights

Over the past thirty years or so, modernist studies have largely been concerned with questions of culture and identity. Relations between "high" and "low" modernisms, like relations between modernism and sexual or gender identities, have received particular attention—as indeed has the interplay between various ethnic and national modernisms. In this paper I want to move away from this culturalist framework however, to attend to politics and philosophy. More especially I wish to concentrate on a topic which, I believe, usefully invokes the question of modernism's political heritage today. Without wishing to curtail our sense of the movement's variety and complexity, I aim to extend the quite familiar argument that it was in part defined by its abandonment of philosophical anthropology (then under the rubric "humanism") by showing how its anti-humanism was connected to a widely shared (though not of course universal) political logic subtending certain of its characteristic developments.[1] In addition, I wish to show that this logic was fundamentally recursive. For this branch of modernist thought and imagining, past epochs await their return. Indeed, here anti-humanism is not just of a piece with non-progressivism but with a (now lost) radical conservatism, which, as it turns out, joined the left to the right.

In making this case, I do not turn to historical or sociological concepts and contexts. Concepts like "autonomy," "alienation," "differentiation," which have been enshrined in the accounts of modernism that emerged out of Weber and Marx (e.g. in the work of Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson) are left aside. Nor are the thematics of poststructuralism reprised. Concepts like "the limit," "writing," "death," that appeared in the wake of Heidegger, Bataille and

[1] For work on this topic see Todd Avery, "'Above Life': Hulme, Bloomsbury and Two Trajectories of Ethical Anti-Humanism," in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, ed. Edward P. Comentale, Andrzej Gąsiorek (London: Ashgate, 2006); Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that is not Humanist emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

Blanchot bearing heavy philosophical loads, are not addressed either. Indeed my argument implies that neither of these approaches is especially helpful in thinking about modernism's underlying political logic in the form I'm describing. From our point of entry here at least, modernism was not an outcome of cultural differentiations. Nor is it most usefully thought of a modality in which language folded in on itself. Nor as a proxy for a metaphysics. It was rather a set of connections between, and articulations of, particular political, cultural and intellectual forces and zones creatively developed against certain of the period's most powerful social processes.

My reasons for turning from culture to politics and philosophy in a fairly positivist spirit are, as I say, presentist. I believe that the post-'68 politics which underpinned the cultural turn is now becoming exhausted, along with identity politics itself. Today, it is more useful to approach modernism in relation to the unified global system that we can call democratic state capitalism, which is widely seen to contain all cultural, social and political activity whatsoever.[2] And two ideological features of the current system seem to me especially important for our purposes. The first is contemporary society's capacity to undermine social critique. It is clear that critique, thought of as a mode of analytic judgment directed against social domination and injustice (and which was developed by both the left and the right after the first World War), is widely regarded as having lost its viability. At best it has become an endangered practice. After all, influential theorists like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze are more or less defined by their critiques of critique. Foucault, we may boldly say, historicizes critique of this kind away; Deleuze swamps it in his univocal metaphysics of spontaneity and virtuality.[3]

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[2] My own more detailed accounts of this widely-accepted judgment of the contemporary system is to be found in Simon During *Exit Capitalism: literary culture, theory and postsecular modernity* (London: Routledge, 2010), and *Against democracy: literary experience in the era of emancipations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

[3] For Foucault see Michel Foucault, "What is critique?" in *The Politics of Truth,* eds. Sylvère Lotringer and John Rajchman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997): 41-82. For Deleuze, see Paul Patton, "Deleuze and Democratic Politics," in *Radical Democracy: Politics between abundance and lack*, eds. Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 50-67. Patton makes an argument that Deleuze's concept of "becoming-democratic" in his later work is to be regarded as

And yet. The school of French sociology which has developed out of Pierre Bourdieu's work—and, in particular, Luc Boltanski—has recently reopened the question of critique. Proposing a so-called "sociology of critique" focused on ordinary social practices, Boltanski has attempted to show that complaints and critiques formulated by "people in the course of their everyday life" can "pave the way" for the "critical judgments built into theories of domination," that is for what he calls "metacritique."[4] His investigations lead him to argue that one (but only one) requirement for the passage from vernacular complaint to metacrique is the capacity to appeal to the idea that a particular situation "does not allow members [of society], or some of them, fully to realize the potentialities constitutive of their humanity" (10). Which is to say that the strengthening of critique may require "taking sociological and normative advantage of a philosophical anthropology" (10). As should immediately be apparent, this has significant implications for the decline of critique. And also, more narrowly, it contains implications for our capacity to connect to the modernist heritage just because modernism did effectively abandon philosophical anthropology under the rubric "humanism." Boltanski's research suggests that that heritage now stands as an obstacle to critique's revival.

The second, more widely canvassed, feature of the contemporary global system's ideological structure which is relevant to modernism's relation to philosophical anthropology relates less to the system's insufficiencies than to efforts to surmount them. One of that structure's struts is the notion that all human beings possess human rights. At least in theory, these rights are independent of particular national legal, constitutional or policing arrangements. To put it simply, the global order, including where it generates precarity and immiseration, promises some of its victims justice by instituting and upholding such rights. These rights, in turn, depend on a particular account of human nature. That is what makes them precisely *human* rights, and allows them to be taken as more than artifices. Were they to be widely conceived just as legal fictions for instance, their power would decline.

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oppositional to actual democracies in place but as Patton's excellent analysis makes clear this opposition does not itself involve critique of actual conditions.

[4] Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: a sociology of emancipation,* trans. Gregory Elliott (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 6.

An ever enlarging library criticizes human rights both on conceptual and on functional grounds.[5] But such criticisms will not be rehearsed here. It is enough to say that human rights are now, *de facto*, integrated into the machinery of global juridical apparatuses just because they can be affirmed outside of specific legal and administrative regimes: that is because they are moral rather than political or legal, to use Samuel Moyn's distinction. Which is to say that their weakness is also their strength. (In the literature this is called the "human rights paradox.") So when modernism targets these rights' philosophical anthropological or humanist basis we have again to ask: What attitude should we take to historical modernism today if it stands apart from or even against an important element in proclaiming justice in our current global system? Are we indeed to think of modernism as oppositional to human rights discourse? Or, on the contrary, might the human rights regime, predicated on paradox, have something to learn from the modernist hollowing out of human substance? Or can we somehow hold these positions together? One way at least to begin to approach these questions concerning critique and human rights is to attempt to enrich our sense of modernism's political logic in relation to that philosophical anthropology which, as I say, girds both critique and human rights. That is my task here.

We can begin by examining a relatively recent document—a manifesto produced by the French League for Human Rights on the occasion of their centenary in 1998.[6] The League was established in defense of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish French army officer who in 1898 was wrongly imprisoned for treason. The

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[5] For the classic case for human right's failure to be sufficiently connected to actual political sources of power and influence, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: new edition with added prefaces* (New York: Harcourt and Co, 1972). For a more recent, influential critique of human rights out of European theory, see Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means without Ends: notes on politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Ninetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 15-29. For an excellent literary critical book which is skeptical about the current human rights regime, see Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

[6] This document can be found at this url: http://www.ldh-france.org/1998-MANIFESTE-ADOPTE-A-L-OCCASION

Dreyfus affair formed at an important moment in modernism's emergence, since, as has often been remarked, it was then that public political debate was made available to unaligned critical intellectuals who thus became, amongst much else, vehicles for modernist as well as critical ways of thinking and acting.[7] At the same time, however, the League is one of the incubators of modern human-rights-based law and politics. Indeed, the philosophical anthropology that originally underpinned this politics remains in place, rather muted perhaps, in the 1998 document.

This is clearest when the League declares that, although today private life can be interfered with in ways that fail to respect human rights, private life itself provides a weak sanction for rights discourse, since it is so closely aligned to individualism, and, as the manifesto puts it, "individualism destroys the citizen in the individual." Instead of "individuality" then, the League aims to "develop the autonomy of persons" so as to search out new ways of living together which might bind human universality to social and cultural diversity. This appeal to the *person* refers not just to a legal concept but back to a twentieth-century theory, so-called personalism, in which the person was defined against, on the one side, the individual as imagined by liberalism, and, on the other, the fraternalist comrade as imagined by socialism. Philosophically, and to cut a long story short, the personalist person was invented in the thirties in the wake of Jacques Maritain's Thomism to stand against both the communist cadres and the capitalist individual. In Maritain's formulation of a "new humanism," which was intended to "re-make anthropology" the person was deemed to be bearer of qualities granted by the Christian—or better the orthodox Catholic—God.[8] More concretely, Maritain wished to

> find the rehabilitation and the "dignification" of the creature not in isolation, not in the creature shut in with itself, but in its openness to the world of the divine and superrational; and this very fact implies in practice a work of sanctification of the profane and temporary; it means,

[7] The classic account remains Christophe Charle, *Naissance des "intellectuels" 1880-1900* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).

[8] Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (London: The Centenary Press, 1940), 7.

> in the spiritual order, the discovery of the *ways of childhood* whereby "the humanity of God our Saviour" […] finds, with fewer human trappings, a readier way into man, and causes more souls to enter into his hidden task of suffering and vivifying; it involves, in the moral and social order, the discovery of a deeper and fuller sense of the dignity of the human person, so that man would re-find himself in God refound, and would direct social work toward an heroic ideal of brotherly love, itself conceived not as a spontaneous return of feeling to some illusory primitive condition, but as a difficult and painful conquest of civic virtue helped by grace. (6-8)

The new humanist person, whose humanness has been stripped and reconstituted and who has passed through a recursive progress towards childhood is confident that she is an incarnated image of God, and thus able fully to affirm her value as an autonomous and rational member of a community without borders—"in the world but not of it" to take one formula of the time.[9] To use Tracy Rowland's phrasing, personalism insisted upon a pneumatologically grounded relation between *logos* or human rationality, the *ethos* of social institutions, and *nomoi* or the principle of self-cultivation, all here passed through a basically romantic concept of chilhood.[10] The personalists ultimately drew their theory from Thomas Aquinas, but at least in practice there was little in their idea of the person that could not ultimately be reconciled to the Kantian free agent or to nineteenth and twentieth-century humanism more generally. As Samuel Moyn has shown in his history of twentieth-century human rights, that is how Maritain came to provide the philosophical basis of the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration which, to this day, secures human rights internationally.[11] The international legal system today is able to ascribe rights to persons just because the personalist concept of the person was granted such credence in the postwar international settlement. Which means that that concept is by no means obsolete.

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[9] See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory,* 2nd edition (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 237, and also Geroulanos, *Atheism that is not Humanist,* 123.

[10] Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 100-1.

[11] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 64-5.

Wilde

Against this background, we can approach what I am calling modernism's fundamental logic in relation to philosophical anthropology by examining Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." That this text not only shares something with Maritain but occupies an important place between Matthew Arnold and T. E. Hulme makes it more useful to our purposes rather than less, since it can be understood as providing a hinge between older humanisms, their modernist undercutting and the personalism to come. If not quite modernist itself, it begins to outline the political terms on which at least one branch of modernism (thought more strictly) was to develop.

Wilde begins by declaring his commitment to socialism (which he uses as an approximate synonym for communism) on the grounds that socialism will harbour no moral economy based on altruism, duty or sympathy. The prohibition of private ownership, along with technological mechanization, will make these qualities obsolete. But Wilde's main purpose is to argue a case for an anarchist socialism in which the state is just a voluntary association for organized labour. He thus distinguishes himself from what he calls authoritarian socialism, in which the state administers civil society—a situation in which, he says, "the last state of man would be worse than the first."[12] That's because statist socialism, with its inevitable hierarchies and bureaucracies, would threaten what will thrive in anarchist socialism, namely "true personality:"

> It will be a marvelous thing—the true personality of man—when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always be meddling with others, or asking them to like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of

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[12] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1912), 6.

> man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child….
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> "Know thyself" was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, "Be thyself" shall be written. And the message of Christ to man was simply "Be thyself." That is the secret of Christ (6).

Although the ways in which this anticipates Maritain in its recursive return to childhood and Christian underpinnings are clearly apparent, its radical individualism stands against the personalist "person." And what in the end separates Wilde's individualism from both Christianity and organicism is the radical minimalism of its anthropology. Individuality here has no moral or intellectual qualities: it simply *is*. It will know everything because it knows nothing. And this minimalism is possible not just because of Wilde's recognition that people are socially formed, but because of his aestheticism. Art is "the only real mode of Individualism the world has known" (41). Furthermore, art's defining mood and intent are not the "dignity" of human-rights discourse but "joy and beauty" (85), qualities that need presuppose no substantive anthropology.

At this point, Wilde's argument for an aestheticized radical individualism reveals its local, political agenda—its status, indeed, as critique. It is positioned first against journalism and public opinion; second, against society's domination by material interests, and third, against representative liberal democracy which Wilde considers to be "the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people" (31). Public ownership of industrial means of production along with the withering of the state are the conditions of possibility for a harmonious society of pure autonomous personalities who need not accommodate themselves to social networks and norms but are instead committed to difference, being and art. In such a society appeal to human rights would be otiose, not just because (as a philosophical tradition has it) one person's right is another's duty, and not just either, because a personal right is just another form of property, albeit of a legal and incorporeal kind, which requires a state—or state-like—legal apparatus to

enforce it, but because human rights imply a substantive humanness.[13] Duties, property, statism, and substantive humanness are, of course, what vanish from Wilde's heterodox socialist society.

Wilde's essay suggests (if it does not fully develop) what I am calling modernism's underlying political logic. For it, true being is accessed just as a disruption of and break with established human connections, which are here parsed politically as democracy, and culturally as journalism. That disruptive break happens in the name both of ontology (that is, of basic reality and truth), and of an individualism which is almost anthropologically weightless. The theory's various components—an ontological rather than anthropological ethical grounding, a politics of radical disruption of actually-constituted social order; and an ethics aimed at maximum individual autonomy which depends neither on duty or sympathy—all hang together. This line of thought develops two of the three components modernism's political logic, namely (a) a radical break with established conditions in the name of (b) a minimally mediated connection to ontology that makes no appeal to substantive humanness. But here an extensive social recursivity is avoided, even if a reversal towards childhood is imagined. After all, Wilde is still a progressivist, and it is this, we can note in passing, that helps constitute him as less than a fully-fledged modernist just as it helps him maintain a positive relation to critique.

Bergson

Arguably, Henri Bergson undertook the most influential exploration of non-anthropological personality from within something like modernism's political logic as I am describing it. From his perspective, philosophy was primarily directed towards allowing us to apprehend the full force of human freedom. It represents a break both with empiricism and idealism, insisting on radical discontinuities between matter and consciousness, between time and space and also between language and experience. Bergson's primary move is to identify life itself with what he thinks to be a primary ontological element—time. But time for him is not divisible: it is sheer flow (*durée* as he called it) capable of constant differentiation from within itself—capable of radical breaks—which

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[13] See Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: their origin and development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 2.

can only be accessed by consciousness through what he calls intuition. Considered not from an epistemological but from ethical or practical point of view, intuition can be understood as the emanation of a creative force available only in rare moments, usually of decisive action. It does not engage representations, concepts, or constative language. Rather it happens where consciousness and being share qualities. And intuitions do ethical work by liberating us first from the routinization of action embedded in bodily habits; second from language's necessarily clumsy abstraction of experience, and then more broadly from ordinary life's practical needs; third, by allowing us to integrate our various ideas, words, feelings into a single posture towards—or, better, *in*—the world. Intuition is a worlded way of being in—being true to—*durée.*

The ethics which requires us to access our interiority in such intuitions reveals what Bergson, like Wilde, calls our personality. But again as was the case for Wilde, it turns out that this personality has no substantive, fixed qualities. Indeed, like philosophy itself it is open towards "the inhuman and superhuman" as Deleuze puts it, in a phrase that nonetheless again returns us to Maritain's God-centered new humanism.[14] At any rate, self-presence as accessed in creative acts of intuition stands at odds with individuality, which is embedded in the world of representations. As does Wilde, Bergson makes an aesthetic turn. Duration is best evoked in art, and, as Bergson's followers came to think, especially in what we would call "modernist" art and literature.[15] But, as was not the case for Wilde, the Bergsonian individualized flow of deep consciousness, to which no representations are commensurate, also exists as memory, a cord in which the past is continuous with, and forms, the present. So Bergsonsonasm connects the radical break with convention and the everyday to deep memory.

Bergson's leap beyond language, habit and practicality into a concept of the future as capable of radical newness and, at the same time, into an interiority without knowable qualities except vitality itself, is then strangely, a leap into

[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 29.
[15] See Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and A. E. Pilkington, *Bergson and his influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) for Bergson's impact.

something like an organic vital tradition. At this point a third element is added to our understanding of modernism's political logic. The break in the familiar, inherited regime or ethos—whether in a Bergsonian intuition or as a consequence of a Wildean socialist revolution—only leads to a newness which is also a return to the old. It does so as it accesses society's ontological stand-in, something "deeper" than, something forgotten in, the ordinary—childlike or Christlike being for Maritain and Wilde, organic vital memory or pantheistic spirit for Bergson. It is, in short, recursive.

So it is perhaps strange that Charles Péguy once suggested that only a more careful study of Bergsonism could lead to a useful preparation for social revolution on the grounds that Bergson alone understood the modes in which consciousness was bound to radical newness.[16] But the intellectual who applied Bergsonism to revolutionary politics most carefully was Péguy's one time friend and follower—Georges Sorel. And in him, modernism's subtending political logic of the kind we are describing does indeed stand more fully revealed.

Sorel

Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1906) was read widely in France and beyond, not least through T.E. Hulme's and Benedetto Croce's translations of the book into English and Italian respectively. Written from an anarchist Marxism position only superficially similar to Wilde's, it argued that capitalism could no longer be destroyed by a Leninist revolution now that socialist parties had committed to reformism. What was required to interrupt democratic capitalism was a "proletarian" (i.e. a general, open-ended and, most of all, *violent*) strike ultimately aimed against state power which, in contradistinction to the "political strike" that merely served already instituted interests, acquired the status of a "myth," to use Sorel's term of art. As myth the general strike was a moment when a social imaginary (an idea of what a good society would be for instance) was condensed into pure praxis, to use Stathis Gourgouris's vocabulary.[17] It also displaced critique (as Walter Benjamin noted in his tellingly named response to Sorel, "Critique of Violence") that kind of peaceful and merely thoughtful

[16] Pilkington, *Bergson and his influence*, 54-5.
[17] Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think? Literature as theory for an antimythical era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 102.

activity pursued, as Sorel put it, by "intellectuals who have made it their profession to think for the proletariat."[18] Benjamin contests Sorel not so much by critiquing him as by appealing to divine violence as a stronger force than proletarian revolution and the mythical violence which belongs to it. Divine violence does not protect "mere life," especially as it has been sacrilized under humanist legal regimes. It protects absolute Justice (151). For Benjamin, divine (or sovereign) violence is therefore not caught up in recursion, in the secular "cycle" of history which is instituted by the struggle between instituted, mythical law and its opponents. It strikes under the guise of contingency: a justice whose order and reason we cannot know from where we live. Otherwise put, Benjamin is invoking a modernist theo-politics that turns not back to history as Sorel still does, but out to distant Paradise, whose instrument revolutionary violence may be. And he slyly asks of Sorel: can we be sure whether revolutionary violence is indeed mythical or divine?

In Sorel, however, the general strike as myth functioned in effect as the political form of a Bergsonian intuition. Based neither on rational reflection nor on prudential calculation, it could break down what Sorel called bourgeois society's "artificial worlds"— whether utopian or ideological. Indeed, like Benjamin's, Sorel's politics were not progressive: Sorel had no belief in emancipation: he argued that no one could predict the future after the strike. The strike was not a vehicle of absolute justice. Its purpose was just to preserve social energy, or what Sorel sometimes chillingly called "virility." So Sorel posited a limit to the future's contingency in order to preserve those social autonomies that could resist capitalism's globalizing integrative and passifying force:

> The danger which threatens the future of the world may be avoided if the proletariat hold on with obstinacy to revolutionary ideas, so as to realize as much as possible Marx's conception. Everything may be saved if the proletariat, by their use of violence, manage to re-establish the division into classes and so restore to the bourgeoisie something of its energy [...] Proletarian violence, carried on as pure and simple manifestation of the sentiment of class struggle, appears thus as a very fine and heroic thing; it

[18] Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and other Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 148.

> is at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization: it is not perhaps the most appropriate method of obtaining immediate material advantages, but it may save the world from barbarism.[19]

It is at this point that Sorel's revolutionary autonomism secures modernism's political logic clearly for conservatism. The revolution, as a political intuition, is a break in normality so as to connect society to fundamental vital forces, which are those first of "production" under the control of the proletariat, and then, of civilization itself. In the end, the strike was in the interest of a *civilized* post-individualist industrialism. In that way, it too is recursive: it leads "backwards," though not, of course, to child-like being or to organically embodied traditions. Civilization here adheres to a corporatist (if also agonistic) society. It is a quality of a society in which each class is autonomously bound to its own culture. In such a society, thought, art and letters are not messed up by social disorder and longings. There too church and state share sovereignty (267-68). It is in these terms that Sorel can underpin both the radical left—today's autonomy movement for instance—and the radical right—Carl Schmitt's insistence on friend/enemy distinction as definitive of the political for instance. Indeed Sorel's own career was to demonstrate the fungibility of left and right once the ideal of humanist progress has been abandoned from inside modernism's political logic.

In his appendix to the second edition of *Reflections on Violence,* Sorel directly addresses the question of philosophical anthropology or what he calls the theory of "eternal man." There he cites Joseph de Maistre's comment, emerging from counter-revolutionary Christian orthodoxy, that "there is no such thing as *man* for the world. I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians etc but as for *man* I declare that I have never in my life met him. […] A constitution that is made for all nations is made for none." (260) Sorel accepts this anti-humanist argument if only with an important neo-Kantian qualification. He contends that "eternal man" is neither a truth nor a myth but rather a useful "artifice of our understanding" (263). As such the concept has been a constitutive element of the social and political forces which he opposes. That is to say the doctrine of "eternal man" has been articulated by those seeking to *integrate* society as a

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[19] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85.

fundamentally secular, prudential, utilitiarian system based on democratic solicitation of general consent, and which attempts to transcend politics itself.[20]

In Europe, Sorel knows that the Catholic church has been the strongest historical enemy of this bourgeois politics. He argues at some length that its orthodox wing was correct to refuse the secular social order, to resist all forms of Erastianism, and to insist on social "diremption"—i.e. on a divided, non-organic society. The Lutheran Reformation, which Sorel regards as the modern bourgeois order's origin, was in error in supposing that a direct mystical relation to God could be realized by the people at large. Such relations were more properly reserved to the monastic way of life as the pre-Reformation church understood it. Hence Sorel advised the revolutionary proletariat to learn from Lutherism's failure: those who promise that the radical syndicalist movement can "merge" into "the economico-juridical life of the whole of society" are dangerous.[21] Instead workers should continue to believe in a "division of function," exactly loyal to the distance between the pre-Reformation monastic and secular orders. To repeat, for Sorel, society is never properly a whole. Nor are persons unified substances: as we know, they can only access life's ontological basis by decisively and violently acting out intuitions/myths towards an almost wholly open future. The dismantling of a substantive concept of human nature allowed monastic asceticism to be replaced as a breeding ground for ontological access by the workers' externality from democratic capitalism's ideological machinery. It was this that Sorel's politics aimed at preserving ultimately in the interests of an older—non-modern—civilization.

Conrad

My last example of a modernist evacuation of philosophical anthropology is Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1903). I have chosen this particular novel because it is where Conrad addresses the relation between politics and society most carefully. His other political novels—*The Secret Agent* and *Under Western*

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[20] One might think of Sorel's theory as a "negative anthropology" to use Stefanos Geroulanos's term, which would have Sorel proposing that human nature is revealed just in the will to negate. But I think it more accurate to think of Sorelian politics not driven by such a will as by an effort to connect to a social equivalent of Bergson's *élan vital*.

[21] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 278.

Eyes—although in many ways more directly connected to revolution and Sorelian political violence (and no less anti-humanist) are more restricted in their reach, and, in the end, less ambitious. It is in *Nostromo* that one can catch sight of Conrad's own commitment to modernism's political logic most clearly.

Nostromo is set in Sulaco, a remote provincial port in the fictional Central American country of Costaguana. Sulaco is modernizing: railways and telegraphic communication are being established. US finance capital has been attracted in order to develop a silver mine. Some of Sulaco's politicians appeal to democracy at least in the Caesarist form developed in France by Napoleon III. By the novel's end, organized marxian labourism has appeared too. Yet Sulaco is also strangely non-modern since the system of autonomous castes characteristic of Spanish comprador colonialism remains in place. All this means that Sulaco is faintly allegorical of contemporary European politics and political economy while also indicating something like its opposite. This doubleness evokes the fungibility of conservatism and radicalism in the period (which, as we have seen, Sorel's career demonstrates), and it is this that allows the novel to express modernism's political logic as I have been outlining it. For in *Nostromo*, as in Sorel, revolutionary action leads backwards to autonomy and corporatism. And it once again joins this logic because it has evacuated philosophical anthropology.

To elaborate this reading, I need to present the novel's plot. Sulaco contains a silver mine which has long been left idle. It is owned by an English settler family whose wealth has been extorted from them by corrupt politicians in the Costuangan capital, which is separated from Sulaco by a rugged mountain chain. Charles Gould, the family heir, restarts the mine, this time in the form of a public company funded by American finance capital. He does so in order to right the wrongs done to his father, but also because he believes that the mine's enormous profits—"material interests" as he calls them—will in the end secure "law, good faith, order, security" in Costuanga.[22] Gould's is a form of capitalist materialism then: for him (as for Sorel) a mode of production shapes and stabilizes society. The mine, however, is a success for more accidental reasons too—because it

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[22] Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*, ed. Martin Seymour Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1984), 100.

calls upon the resourcefulness and charisma of an individual, an Italian immigrant nicknamed Nostromo, who oversees the stevedores who ship the silver out. With Nostromo's help, Charles can use the mine's profits to establish a parliamentary oligarchy under the control of old comprador families, a constitutional settlement which is named "Blancism."

Costaguana soon returns to its old ways. The corrupt, low-life adventurers, General Montero, and his brother Pedrito, successfully mount a coup against the Blancists, and determine to seize the mine, which is just about the nation's only source of export income, for their personal gain. The novel tells an exciting and exotic story in which Sulaco's oligarchy ultimately resists the Monterist coup. Their success primarily depends on an alliance between an orthodox Catholic priest and a bandit chief, an alliance, that is to say, which stands outside modern progressive politics. Yet here too individuals play key roles in preserving Sulaco for the Blancists, and the novel's modernist thinking is clearest when it describes their motives and actions.

Sulaco's first rescuer is the mine's doctor, Dr Monygham, who had once been tortured by a Costaguanan dictator and had falsely confessed to political crimes. As a result he has become a cynic, living in self-ascribed shame, believing the worst of everybody. Monygham does, however, idolize Charles Gould's neglected wife, and this enables him to redeem himself and to risk his life to help save the mine after the Monterist coup. For all that, he achieves social redemption without losing his cynicism. In particular, he continues to reject human nature as a basis for predictable and rational action, to hang on to the view of the world which allows him to remark that if Charles Gould is only sure of himself, then "he is sure of nothing" (269). Rather Monygham acts out of a platonic love for Mrs Gould which is, however, curiously ungrounded. His love for her does not express any inner moral qualities in him; it draws on no anthropology, has no place in society and involves him in no real relationship. Rather it is directed mutely towards its object's resignation and passivity. But it is not an illusion either. It is there. It is enacted. It is real. In effect, his love is Monygham's personal Sorelian myth, achieved in decisive, redemptive, life-risking action carried out in a world which lacks rational order, transcendence and, most importantly, human substance.

The second man who saves Sulaco is Nostromo, who also acts resolutely and inventively to rescue the silver mine from Monterist depradations, in the process resisting even the appeals of a devout friend on her deathbed to find a priest to administer her the last rights, a refusal that later preys on him. And unlike Monygham, Nostromo becomes corrupted as he rescues the mine. At the dead of night, he and a companion, Martin Decoud, ship a cargo of silver out of the port to prevent it falling into rebel hands. They bury it on the Great Isabel, an unvisited island in the harbour. Nostromo then leaves Decoud behind on the island until he can return. Abandoned to utter solitude, Decoud's personality unravels and he commits suicide. As soon as Nostromo realizes that his companion is dead, he decides to steal the silver himself. In the extremity of that decision, Nostromo's body becomes "untenanted," occupied by "an outcast soul," and this is what acts. That outcast soul is, nonetheless, Nostromo's own since, as has already become clear, he lives not in relation to his interiority, to a new humanist, Bergsonian or Wildean personality, but externally, for his reputation. He is, in fact, enormously vain.

But Nostromo's vanity too has become disenchanted. He has realized that his heroic labours on behalf of the Gould mine and the oligarchs are simply exploitative. None of his social superiors care about him: they have left him for dead. And, speaking materially, they have not paid him enough for him properly to provide for himself:

> The magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action, sat in the weary pose of a hunted outcast through a night of sleeplessness as tormenting as any known to Decoud, his companion in the most desperate affair of his life. And he wondered how Decoud had died. But he knew the part he had played himself. First a woman, then a man, abandoned each in their last extremity, for the sake of this accursed treasure. It was paid for by a soul lost and by a vanished life. The blank stillness of awe was succeeded by a gust of immense pride. There was no one in the world but Gian' Battista Fidanza, Capataz de Cargadores, the incorruptible and faithful Nostromo, to pay such a price. (416)

He takes his reward, paid for by others' lives, in lieu of the wages he should have earned, even if more out of a sense of hurt vanity than of labourist injustice since the affirmation of human equality and dignity required to judge the mode of production unjust is not sanctioned here. The point is that, without a moral or spiritual personality, he can only ratify himself through others, and take pride in the heroism of profiting from other's deaths, at least for a moment. Despite all this, however, Nostromo retains his heroic qualities. He is Sulaco's saviour after all. In short, he becomes a case study of the moral failure consequent upon possessing strong capabilities in a society (like our own) without just order, and, more importantly, of the limits proper to judgments of these failures in the absence of a philosophical anthropology. He is a potentially revolutionary hero without qualities trapped in a mimesis of himself.

The third man to save Sulaco is Martin Decoud, a young oligarch, intellectual and poet (an admirer of the South American Parnassian poet and close friend of Mallarmé, José Maria de Heredia) who has been living a flaneur's life in Paris, and has recently returned home out of love for Antonia Avellanos, a passionate Blancist. Decoud is an ironist in the proto-modernist dandy mode: "no occupation is serious, not even when a bullet through the head is the penalty of failure" he declares (170). That is not true of his love, which, like Monygham's, is mythical rather than expressive and social. It is he who decides to establish Sulaco as a Blancist irredentist state, not out of political conviction but because of his love for Antonia.

Decoud dies before seeing his state established. In the isolation to which Nostromo leaves him with silver on the Great Isabel, he discovers he lacks sufficient interior substance to survive:

> On the tenth day, after a night spent without even dozing off once…the solitude appeared like a great void, and the silence of the gulf like a tense thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands, without fear, without surprise, without any sort of emotion whatever. Only towards the evening, in the comparative relief of coolness, he began to wish that this cord would snap. He imagined it snapping with a report as of a pistol—a sharp, full crack. And that would be the end of him. He contemplated that eventuality with pleasure, because he dreaded the sleepless nights in

> which the silence, remaining unbroken in the shape of a cord to which he hung with both hands, vibrated with senseless phrases, always the same but utterly incomprehensible, about Nostromo, Antonia […] and proclamations mingled into an ironical and senseless buzzing. In the daytime he could look at the silence like a still cord stretched to breaking-point, with his life, his vain lie, suspended from it like a weight (414).

Like Nostromo, then, Decoud lacks human qualities. But unlike Nostromo he takes no pride in his own image as reflected back to him by others' admiration. His important connections to the world are metaphysical or existential, not social. They are, in a loose sense, Mallarméan: Being is a void, contingency reigns, chance is to be mastered, language is another form of silence. But they are also Bergsonian just because Decoud intuits his vital relations rather than analyses or understands them: indeed he conceives of them through the Bergsonian metaphor of a "cord" binding him to the world. Yet for him, of course, that world has always been without sense or purpose or order. Now, abandoned and alone, it is abuzz with meaningless phrases that turn his stream of consciousness into nonsense. Without a personality, without personhood, disconnected from ontology itself, he dreams of death. And he does indeed at last, snap the cord and shoot himself.

Thus the man who invents the idea of the separate state of Sulaco and who acts decisively to create it, does not do so because he believes in its value or purpose, or even because he cares, like Sorel, for energy and intensity. He does so, as I say, out of his love for Antonia just as Monygham acted out of his love for Mrs Gould. Decoud's love too is intentional rather than expressive: contingent, an act of imagination. Mythic. Decoud, then, reveals the limits of modernist politics: his sense of human substance's voiding means that he can't connect either to Being or to history so that his intuitive leap into something like a political revolution turns out to be a leap into meaningless death.

And yet, at the level of state politics, his action has saved the old Blancist, corporatist, oligarchic comprador regime. In a stunning recursive turn, his modernist subjectivity enables the survival of the old order.

At this essay's beginning I expressed the hope that I might clarify current relations between the modernist evacuation of philosophical anthropology and those practices of critique and affirmations of human rights which are in large part dependent on that anthropology. But I am conscious of being less than successful in this. What I have shown instead is how deep the opposition between modernism and rights-grounding philosophical anthropology goes. All the way down, it would appear. In one of its guises at least modernism is a conservatism which, unable to affirm human substance, nonetheless imagines connections between our own epoch which recognizes itself as modern and progressive and epochs which have little truck with modernity and progress. So how to move forward? Two possibilities present themselves.

First, we might take one side over the other: either philosophical anthropology over modernism, or modernism over philosophical anthropology. On the face of it, I would suggest, our preference would have to be for a philosophical anthropology which can underpin progressive practices and concepts that matter to us today in ways we cannot easily dismiss. But, as far as I am concerned, modernism's anti-anthropological political logic also solicits our support just because it imagines revolution against received and hegemonic social and cultural conditions and does so in the name of a voided reality rather than of human substance, in the name, we might even say, of secular truth. And because it reveals certain limits of the global human-rights democratic capitalist order as it now is. To discount our memories of a way out of this order, however mythic, is to impoverish our collective imagination. So, at the very least, there is no easy choice between human rights discourse and modernist political logic.

The second possibility, then, is to be twofaced. To hold on to anthropologically-grounded human rights, critique *and* the modernist evacuation of human substance. This does not involve upholding "incommensurable" concepts simultaneously, in the way recently suggested, in a rather different context, by Dipesh Chakrabarty in an essay which helped inspire this one.[23] After all, political anthropology and modernism are not simply incommensurate: they are, for the political logic that I have been describing here, in *opposition*. The two-

[23] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial studies and the challenge of climate change," *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1-18

facedness I am recommending involves, rather, supporting humanism in some contexts and the modernist hollowing out of human substance in others. (It is, then, a mode of "anti-humanist humanism.") In particular, supporting human rights as citizens, that is, where we connect to sovereign legal and political institutions as currently constituted (however we may judge them) as well as where we recognize that rights have moral force just because they transcend instituted legal and political apparatuses. And supporting something like the modernist will to recursive revolution without appeal to philosophical anthropology imaginatively as intellectuals, which means in practice, as academics or at any rate in a quite thick relation to the academy. This of course involves an uncomfortable and impassible tension—a contemporary mode of traditional esotericism or accommodationism by which what one "believes" in some contexts is not required to cohere with what one "believes" in others. What one believes as a citizen is not what one believes as an intellectual or academic. But that tension is perhaps best regarded as expressing the contemporary global system's internal contradictions as well as its external limits. The gap between the present and modernism (which has now become one of our "vital traditions" after all) can be understood as a form of democratic capitalism's internal incoherencies, a fomenting sliver of ambiguity and confusion in which the possibility of critique still lurks, at least for the brave and enterprising.