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EXQUISITE SCHEMES:
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Abstract

This dissertation examines thematic and formal engagements with excess in the literature and aesthetic thought of the late British Empire, from 1890-1930. Attending to thematic representations of opulence and richness, invocations of luxury and extravagance, and formal experiments with superficiality and triviality, I locate these dynamic notions of excess in Anglophone literature and aesthetic thought (British, Anglo-American, Indian) from the end of the 19th century through the early decades of the 20th. The period from roughly 1890 to 1930 was marked by new heights of European imperial expansion—the British Empire having reached its fullest extent in 1922—as well as by an intensification of the trade in colonial commodities (gold, tea, coffee, gutta percha, diamonds, palm oil) that had taken shape just before the start of the 18th century, and by the onset of a global depression that would throw the wealth of Europe's *belle époque* into stark relief.

This project mobilizes "excess" as an aesthetic concept with which a number of writers and aesthetic thinkers productively engaged with the defining problems of a modernity underwritten by imperial expansion. I understand excess to be both a relational and an aesthetic concept; throughout this project I engage excess as a concept invested in making sensible the transgression of normative boundaries, especially where such boundaries are figured in economic terms. This study elucidates a strain of aesthetic experimentation from this period whose explorations of opulence and richness approach excess—the ideal of a value irreducible to the market, the expression of desires that overrun heteronormative logic—as a principle that evokes connections across a striking set of processes. Such processes include the forms of trade that bind the metropole to its colonies, but also the idea of sexual transgression, of the exploitation of colonial labor, and the violence that underwrites territorial expansion. This dissertation thus contends that a set of aesthetic experiments with figures of opulence and other forms of excess, constitute sites of critical attunement, among

artists and writers, to the imbrication of overproduction, overconsumption, and violence at the heart of the economy of the late British Empire.

Over three chapters, I analyze literary, theoretical, and in some cases visual texts in the context of economic, sociological, and administrative discourse. Taking an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the study of various media, I situate the arts of the British Empire at the turn of the 20th century within a burgeoning and interdisciplinary attention to excess. I investigate modernist and decadent concepts of aesthetic autonomy, for instance, in the context of contemporary attempts to theorize luxury in the social sciences. I excavate debates that surrounded the future of Indian art in 1920s India in order to contextualize a tense colonial art-historical discourse that understood Indian art and Indian life to be perfectly continuous—and that, for some, articulated the ideal of the limitless appropriability and pliability of Indian labor. This dissertation endeavors to systematically study the role of excess in late 19th-20th century Anglophone aesthetics within an imperial context.

Chapter 1 attends to the relationships between modernist art and the idea of luxury. At first glance, I suggest, the notion of luxury seems antithetical to much of Anglo-American modernist literary aesthetics, marked by a disdain for the vulgarities of commercial culture. And yet the idea of luxury embodies and even prefigures modernist claims to an aesthetic value that transcends the value system of the market. How, I ask, has the originary relationship between art and luxury become obscured in modernist aesthetic discourse? By recovering and reading key texts from a highly active social-scientific discourse on luxury that took shape in the late 19th century, I establish a context in which to address this question. Striving to protect an ideal of value against the phenomenon that historians now call the "democratization of luxury" in an increasingly wealthy 19th century Europe, theorists of luxury began to hold up art as a form of transcendent value irreducible to the market, and thus fundamentally distinct from luxury (where luxury was understood to be the products of

superfluous labor and unnecessary or over- consumption). Decadent art, however, typically resists such a distinction between art and luxury. While certain modernists eventually repudiate decadent style for its over-commitment to beauty, I argue that decadent art embodies a fundamental truth about the ways in which autotelic art—"art for art's sake"—depends on ideals of a value irreducible to the commercial commonplace that is modelled by the idea of luxury. The chapter then turns to an extensive reading of Henry James's 1896 story "The Figure in the Carpet," written during a time transition between decadence and modernism. Conceiving aesthetic experience in terms of immaterial luxury, "The Figure" dramatizes the continuities between autonomous art and luxury while also staging the dependencies that bound the ideal of transcendent luxury to colonial India.

In Chapter 2, I examine the complex discursive context surrounding a set of murals, sponsored and executed by the British Raj to decorate the interior of the New Delhi Secretariat Buildings. The Secretariat buildings—which housed the government of the Raj—had always been designed to accommodate murals. By 1922, however, the Raj had seized on the murals as an opportunity to direct the future of Indian art in their image. At the center of the chapter is the work and thought of William Ewart Gladstone Solomon, principal of the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, who had won this contract through his impassioned advocacy of the idea that art, life, and work are uniquely and holistically continuous in India. I read Solomon in the context of a longstanding aesthetic discourse in colonial India, which had advocated for social reform through an emphasis on the holism of artisanal labor in Indian society. I argue that Solomon's success with the Raj lies in the way in which he appropriated this arts discourse in ways that facilitated Raj efforts to better imagine, and mobilize, the disposability of the Indian labor force. At the end of the chapter, however, I examine the material excess and visual extravagance of the murals themselves, attending to the way in which these works seem to register a vitality that exceeds and undermines their ability to monumentalize a beautiful but also exploitable continuity between life, labor, and art. As I

demonstrate, these murals do not simply reflect the principle of barely-sublimated violence that informed British reveries about the nature of Indian art; they also attest to the ways in which violence and overproduction were imbricated, in British India, as related aspects of a will to excess that framed such projects as the Delhi murals in the first place.

Chapter 3 concerns the fictions of Ronald Firbank, an eccentric and itinerant British novelist of the 1920s. Firbank is often celebrated for his trivializing wit and camp sensibility, as well as for his highly itinerant lifestyle. And his work is also known for a thoroughgoing *superficiality*, eschewing the priorities of plot and character development in favor of arch dialogue, lavish description, and playful innuendo. In this chapter, I attend to the role of the superficial in facilitating Firbank's experiments with the exotic—and specifically with orientalist aesthetics and primitivism—in his novels of the 1920s. Critics and of Firbank have tended to praise the evasiveness of his style, which tends to hide its many allusions to homoerotic desire through innuendo, ambiguation, and other strategies that flippantly obscure—even negate—the presence of what lies "beneath the surface" of any given reference. Critics have also read Firbank's uses of the exotic as an appropriation of a certain stereotyping logic in imperialist ideology, which identifies sexual and racial difference as a means to negate the threat of what I call "erotic excess" (including homosexuality) to the integrity of empire. I argue that Firbank's exotic novels pursue explicit connections between the erotics of the surface as a formal and thematic principle, and the idea of racially-marked skin as a material instantiation of the eroticized surface. Firbank's infatuation with surface, I argue, both animates the allure of exoticized bodies and ambiguates the very distinctions—white and non-white, colony and metropole, person and thing—that sustain the "exotic" as a meaningful term.

In a coda, I examine the photography of Raghubir Singh, an Indian photographer active during the 1970s and 1980s. Influenced by modernism, Singh's practice fused a documentary approach to capturing the texture of Indian urban life with an interest in the spectacular possibilities

of vivid color. Singh remains widely celebrated as a pioneer of color photography, with many contemporary critics praising his handling of color for being luxurious and epicurean. In the coda, I ask why color registers as a form of luxurious excess for critics of Singh's work, many of whom also identify color as the means by which Singh transcends the "merely documentary." Given Singh's use of color as part of a desire to express a distinctly Indian, post-colonial approach to humanism, the comparisons to luxury elicited by his work return us to the critical promise—but also the ambivalence—of excess in modern aesthetics. For Singh, color as excess expresses resistance to the imperialist legacy of documentary and land-survey photography, while also ambiguating the distinction between person and thing that underpins his commitments to humanism.

Introduction

I. The arts of excess

It was an exhibition in the form of a question—or perhaps a question in the form of an exhibition: London's Victoria and Albert Museum opened *What is Luxury?* in April 2015, inviting museumgoers for the next six months to question their assumptions about the nature of luxury, an idea whose meaning varies across cultures and periods, but also between individual people. The exhibition displayed around one hundred mostly contemporary objects, many of which examined the conditions of life during times marked by impending climate crisis and a global exacerbation of income inequality. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between value, abundance, and scarcity was a common theme. The London-based Studio Swine contributed a set of small plastic objects [Fig. 0.1]—combs, trinket boxes—made from a tortoiseshell-like material that reveals itself upon inspection to be human hair encased in resin; as a handful of reviewers pointed out, human hair is one of so very few "natural resources that increases as the human population."[1] Collectively titled *Hair Highway*, these various resin pieces dramatize the disquieting proximity of luxury and the abject, representing an approach to the contradictions that underwrite luxury similar to that undertaken in Shane Mecklenburger's set of synthetic diamonds made from the carbon-derived materials like gunpowder and the ashes of cremated roadkill. The violence that lies beneath this drama of luxury's proximity to abjection is explored in yet more explicit terms in Aram Moordian's set of high-tech objects wrought from Australian gold [Fig. 0.2.], several of which were "encoded" (to be read by a

[1] The quotation appears to be a paraphrase from the artists, as it recurs in connection with *Hair Highway* in a number of other reviews and articles about the V&A exhibition.
See Katie Treggiden, "V&A's What is Luxury? exhibition questions the value of objects." Accessed July 5, 2020. https://www.dezeen.com/2015/05/02/victoria-albert-museum-london-what-is-luxury-exhibition-questions-value-objects/.

purpose-built device) with maps of indigenous songlines laid across landscapes now rendered uninhabitable by the gold mining operations that have proliferated in Australia since the 1880s.

These and other objects displayed at the V&A exhibition—a bejeweled ecclesiastical crown from 18th century Portugal, a dazzling chandelier made of hand-picked dandelion seeds embedded in LED lights—exemplify the fundamental intimacies between luxury and art, as well as the intimacies between the luxurious and the abject. But these objects also attest to the ways in which the question "what is luxury*?*" inevitably opens onto questions about a much broader notion of excess. The objects that comprise *Hair Highway*, or a diamond made of an armadillo found dead in the shoulder of a highway, occupy a position somewhere between exquisite refinement and ecological waste, even mass-produced abundance (Mecklenburger also makes diamonds out of discarded 1980s comic books). To contemplate the nature of luxury in the 21st century is not only to confront the realities of a globally interconnected world rife with wasteful forms of overproduction; it is also, as Moordian's gold objects make clear, to be confronted with the violent history of such economic interconnectedness—a history that extends back to the height of European imperialism in the 19th century, and to the acceleration of colonial resource-extraction in places like Australia (but also India, European colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, and elsewhere). The works of art exhibited by the V&A are embedded in a history of modernity marked by the legacies of colonial trade and imperial expansion. Indeed, at the heart of the many other questions posed in the exhibitions' (now archived) website—questions such as, what is value? How and why do different cultures value different things, at different moments in history?[2]—is the implicit question of how art both animates, and is animated by, a diffuse and highly variegated expression of an *excess* embodied as much in violence as it is in luxurious wealth.

[2] See the archived exhibition page, "What is luxury?" Accessed July 5, 2020. http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/what-is-luxury/what-is-luxury-about-the-exhibition/

This is a dissertation about excess. My fundamental argument is twofold. One the one hand, I propose that a dynamic and highly variegated concept of excess can help us to explain the interrelationship between a striking number of political, cultural, and economic processes at play during the height of British imperial expansion—that is, from roughly 1890 to 1930. These processes include an acceleration and intensification of the trade in colonial goods—and the normalization of middle-class access to products formerly reserved for the rich; and they also include an intensification of imperial expansion; the British Empire in fact reached its fullest extent in 1922. In my use throughout this study, "excess" names a capacious concept, one that stages the interrelationships between several expressions of a general will-to-surplus on the part of an acquisitive British Empire; these expressions include colonial violence, the overproduction and overconsumption of commodities, the production of lavish works of monumental artworks in the colonies, and the articulation of fantasies that treat colonial populations as repositories of an almost inexhaustibly abundant supply of labor. The first major component of my argument in this dissertation is quite simply that "excess" lends a useful element to our vocabulary for engaging with the cultural production of an Empire characterized, in general terms, by a drive to always *exceed* itself. I open with the V&A's *What is Luxury?* exhibition in part because its exploration of luxury—as one particular mode in which we experience excess, determined by economic value and by cultural practices of consumption—frequently gives rise to a much wider consideration of waste, violence, and labor. And frequently, the exhibition relates contemporary concerns about excess, in its diverse forms, to the history of imperial expansion and the processes of acquisitive resource-extraction that underwrote it.

The second major proposition of this dissertation, however, is that a certain strain of literary and aesthetic discourse that emerged during this period is marked by a self-conscious mediation of the proliferating forms of excess that characterize the culture of this period. By examining a set of

texts from across the British Empire and its sphere of influence—a story by Henry James, the discursive context surrounding lavish murals executed in colonial Delhi, a corpus of novels by the itinerant and eccentric English dandy, Ronald Firbank—I aim to trace the emergence of formal and stylistic experiments with opulence, luxuriousness, and the aesthetic ideal that the Victorians called the *exquisite*. The strain of aesthetic culture at the heart of this dissertation, then, is one whose development historically parallels the emergence of modernism, but which nonetheless registers the ongoingness of decadent and Aesthetic ways of thinking into the 20th century. Over three chapters, this dissertation strives to thicken our understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic cultures of the late British Empire—together with the various ideals it gave rise to, including autonomous art, the dream of the pure surface, and the hopeful dissolution of boundaries between life, labor, and art—and the forms of economic excess that drove cultural development during this period. Excess, throughout this dissertation, names a concept that gives sensible shape to any transgression of normative boundaries. My readings attest to the ways in which a strain of artists, writers, and aesthetic theorists of the late British Empire experimented with the aesthetic possibilities of excess in ways that both elucidated and cannily reproduced the logic of the culture in which they were embedded: the logic, that is, of an imperial culture marked by the simultaneous production and management of excess.

In his seminal essay "Modernism and Imperialism" (1988), Frederic Jameson explores the imaginative challenges that imperial expansion engendered for Europeans—and specifically for writers and artists—observing that

> Colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world—very different from that of the imperial power—remains unknown and

> unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the ways the system functions as a whole. […] Daily life and existential experience in the metropolis […] which is necessarily the very content of the national literature itself, can now no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself.[3]

Over the ensuing decades, scholars have often looked to the presence of colonial commodities in Victorian and Edwardian literature as objects of a special symbolic density. Suzanne Daley, for instance, has shown how a set of Indian commodities—cashmere shawls, diamonds, dresses of Bengali cotton—served to dramatize the exoticness of India, a colonial territory of growing importance to British prosperity, while simultaneously domesticating a reductive notion of Indianness within the world of bourgeois metropolitan life.[4] Elaine Freedgood, furthermore, has excavated strikingly complex yet submerged systems of metonymic reference in Victorian novels, showing how such seemingly unimportant details as mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* "symbolize, naturalize, domesticate, and internalize" the violent histories of resource-extraction in Madeira and the Caribbean, and the wealth it generated.[5]

The literature produced during this particularly intense period of imperial accelerationism (primarily though not exclusively British) could thus be said to be indelibly marked by the forms of wealth that empire made possible. In the wake of the Victorian novel, the British fin-de-siècle has come to be associated with cultures of yet-more explicit attention to the excessive and the

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[3] Frederic Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism." Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Edward Said, *The Modernist Papers* (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 50-51.
[4] See Suzanne Daley, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011).
[5] Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 35.

sumptuous: the inter-artistic phenomenon of decadence in England, for example, is known for its embrace of material as well as sexual excess, drawing on the imagery of the exotic—itself often embodied in consumer objects imported from the colonies—as it aestheticized contemporary anxieties about degeneration and decline. As early as 1893, the English critic Arthur Symons triangulated the disjointed style of decadent prose with its thematic obsession with luxury and its aestheticizing love of decay, describing decadent style as the product of "a civilization grown over-luxurious […] too languid for relief of action."[6] In his influential *Rule of Darkness* (1988), Patrick Brantlinger shows how the specifically English iteration of decadence was prefigured by late-Victorian anxieties about cultural decay, situating such anxieties amidst a growing sense of societal doubt about the consequences of "free trade doctrine."[7] Much recent scholarship on the relationship between modernism and decadence—Vincent Sherry, Kate Hext, Alex Murry—demonstrates that the formation of English modernism was in turn fundamentally shaped by decadence;[8] and as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 1, the decadent championing of "art for art's sake" corresponded with the representation, in works like Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1880) and Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), of what we might want to call "luxury for luxury's sake"—that is, the idea that the experience of luxury constitutes a worthy activity in itself, and provides a bulwark against the aesthetic and spiritual dullness of a vulgarized commercial world.

But while scholars have done much to show how 19th century aesthetic forms like the realist novel—and, later, its decadent iteration—are inflected by the contemporary influx of colonial wealth, few have explicitly situated the arts at the turn of the 20th century within the burgeoning and

[6] Quoted in Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.
[7] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism: 1830-1914* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 33.
[8] See e.g. the Introduction to Sherry, *Modernism*. See also Kate Hext and Alex Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

interdisciplinary attention to excess that emerged during this period. And yet what I recognize as a broad and highly variegated strain of intellectual interest in the nature, social function, and civilizational consequences of excess emerged in Europe during the late 19th century—unfolding not only in the arts, but in social-scientific and even governmental discourse as well. For one notable example, the late 19th century saw the rise in Europe of an interdisciplinary social-scientific attention to luxury that unfolded across sociological and political-economic thought. This discourse on luxury was, furthermore, staked partly in aesthetic concerns: economists of the fin-de-siècle strove to distinguish luxury from the privileged domain of art, while admonishing Westerners' growing dependence on colonial imports. For a very different example, British government administrators in India learned increasingly from a tradition in the colonial study of Indian art—one that held art, life, and labor to be uniquely continuous in India—as they developed imaginative models of the limitless appropriability and pliability of Indian labor; this sense of a total availability for labor would be monumentalized, in India, in the form of a series of lavish public murals painted with an abundance of gold leaf.

Elusive as it is, the concept of excess has been a frequent and consistent object of attention for literary scholars—albeit rarely treated in a systematic manner. *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks' landmark 1976 study of melodrama in the modern novel, argues that the conventions of melodrama—including emotive hyperbole and other elements in *excess* of standard narrative realism—framed a newly secularized approach to moral absolutes for writers like Balzac and Henry James. Brooks thus asserts in the very first line of his preface that his study is a "book about excess," although the work privileges a theorization of melodrama such that excess is never explicitly defined.[9] In the ensuing decades, excess had become an important concept for feminist scholarship:

[9] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), ix.

following Luce Irigaray's proposition that "woman is […] an excess of all identification to/of self," Barbara Claire Freeman identifies "the feminine sublime" as a domain of experience—explicable neither in the reductive terms of the aesthetic category nor of the "rhetorical mode"—in which "the subject enters into a relation with otherness […] that is excessive and unrepresentable."[10] A feminist interest in the disruptive power of excess—as that which is by nature beyond or irreducible to its frame—informs much subsequent scholarship on the place of excess in decadent as well as modernist prose stylistics (including the myriad celebrations of decadent queerness).[11] Brian Glavey's *The Wallflower Avant-Garde* (2015) highlights a fixation on ekphrasis—a practice that inevitably involves "excess, failure, and mimesis"—in a strain of modernist literary aesthetics, presenting modernist ekphrasis as a means by which writers critiqued the foundational assumptions that undergird identity.[12]

This dissertation contributes to a line of critique attentive to textual excess—where excess names those elements of a given text (indulgent detail, a surfeit of erotic expressivity, a commitment to style that interferes with the intelligibility of narrative) that resist or overrun the structural demands of genre, or narrative, grammar or semantics. My approach is framed partly by the work of French philosopher and economic thinker Georges Bataille, who sought throughout his career to explain the logic of "la part maudite," or *the accursed share*—his name for the excess energy that

[10] Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2.
[11] The idea of a fundamental relationship between decadent style and queer desire continues to mark scholarship on the politics of decadent aesthetics past the turn of the 20th century. See, eg., Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
For a recent study that transposes the concept of "decadence" as an analytic for contemporary feminist art, see Julia Skelly, *Radical Decadence: excess in contemporary feminist textiles and craft* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
[12] See Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). I quote from the abstract provided by Oxford Scholarship Online.

inevitably emerges and proliferates within all economic systems.[13] As I explore in the first chapter of this dissertation, Bataille had argued that this "share" of economic productivity always threatens to undo any given economic system, unless that portion be expended, or *squandered*, by way of such unproductive activities as art, non-procreative sex, conspicuous consumption, or war. This project engages excess—the idea of aesthetic experience as luxury in a story by Henry James, the presence of extravagant detail and extensive gilding in a monumental mural produced in British India, or the sumptuous and stylish frivolity that constitutes the aesthetics of the superficial in the work of Ronald Firbank—as the site of a vitality that critically exceeds the logic of the economic ordinary.

At the same time, I also wish to demonstrate how the expressions of excess that emerged, in a certain strain of late-19th to early 20th century literary and aesthetic discourse produced in the British Empire, were nonetheless embedded in an increasingly global economic system that thrived on expansion, overproduction, and overconsumption—in a word, on the generation of excess. Rather than reductively identifying excess with what we might call a critical ungovernability, my aim in this dissertation is to examine the ambivalence of aesthetic excess in the literary production of the late British Empire: that is to say, the ways in which formal and thematic representations of excess during this period reproduce some of the logic of imperialist ideology, while simultaneously calling this logic into question. Thus, for one example, Henry James's affirmation of the continuities between autotelic art and luxury in "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) draw on decadent exaltations of exotic commodities while frustrating contemporary efforts to extricate art from luxury. Similarly, the aesthetic extravagance of a gold leafed mural produced in British India—executed by Indian artists in tribute to the ideal of Indian submission to British rule—discloses a principle of excess inherent to the idea of the total availability of Indian labor, while simultaneously staging a vision of

[13] See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

opulence that seems, strikingly, to negate the idea of work. Both of these examples constitute what we might call ambivalence scenes of excess, by which I mean to designate excess's latent unruliness and its ready susceptibility to exploitation by imperial power. In essence, this dissertation is dedicated to better understanding this ambivalence and the mark that it leaves on the aesthetic production of the British Empire at the critical moment of its apogee and incipient decline.

II. Excess and empire in the fin-de-siècle and the early 20th century

A certain awkwardness besets the periodizing language that I have been deploying throughout this introduction—terms like "the late 19th to early 20th century," "1890-1930," "the British fin-de-siècle," etc. So far I've used these phrases in place of surer or more conventional literary-historical expressions, such as "modernism." This awkwardness is partly intentional: many of the texts at the center of this study bear an at-best oblique relation to Anglo-American modernism. Many of them embody the persistence of a fin-de-siècle sensibility well into the early decades of the 20th century. Indeed, none of the major figures that I discuss in this dissertation—neither Henry James, nor Ronald Firbank, nor W.E.G. Solomon, the art-nouveau obsessed educator and bureaucrat of British India—can be uncontestably recognized as modernists. As I explore further in Chapter 3, Firbank was more readily interpreted by his contemporaries as a "late flower of the 1890s." And the government-affiliated Indian arts scene to which I attend in Chapter 2 articulated its vision for the future of Indian art in constant opposition to the nationalist work produced by the now-celebrated Bengali modernist painters, such as Abanindranath Tagore and Jamini Roy. This dissertation thus concerns itself with an archive of texts whose attunements to excess and exoticism frustrate our ability to neatly identify them with modernism in any conventional sense; nonetheless, these texts lay a charismatic claim to their importance as products and mediators of modernity.

Indeed, Solomon's efforts to repudiate nationalist modernisms in India were staked precisely in a desire to transform the course of "modern Indian art."

In some ways, then, this project falls in line with the expansive view of modernism and modernity that Susan Stanford Friedman advocates, as she heralds a "planetary turn" in modernist studies. In Friedman's view, such a turn could allow us to recuperate the overlooked modernities of a geographically *and* historically diverse set of cultural moments; applying a more capacious definition of modernity as a societal condition of "transformational rupture and rapid change," Friedman argues that the Tang Dynasty of China (618-907 CE) experienced modernity on its own terms.[14] And by this account, "modernism" names any form of "aesthetic expressivity" that contributes to the shaping of a given modernity.[15] Although the stakes of my own study do not quite lie in the redefinition of modernism, I suggest that Friedman's transhistorical approach is helpful for framing the obliqueness with which the objects of this dissertation seem to relate to modernism. Of course, it has become commonplace to understand industrial modernity as entirely inextricable from European imperial expansion. Read as a *kind* of modernism, the decadent exoticism that characterizes the work of a figure such as Firbank could be said to index the lingering presence of Victorian civilizational logics well into the 20th century. Firbank's deployment of decadent aesthetics to frame a literary practice obsessed with the pleasures afforded by a world newly connected, at least for the metropolitan rich, by tourism, indexes the ongoing presence of a (hardly distant) Victorian modernity in the midst of an increasingly globalizing 20th century.

Paul Jay, whose account of a "transnational turn" in literary criticism is a major point of reference in Friedman's book, has argued insistently that the supposedly very postmodern

[14] Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), ix.
[15] Friedman, 52.

phenomenon that we call "globalization" in fact began with the intensification of transnational trade networks in the 15th century.[16] And as Benjamin Schmidt has noted, the aesthetic mode that we now readily recognize as the "exotic" took shape in late 17th century Dutch representations of Oriental and Caribbean commodities. Schmidt argues that these artistic representations—still lifes brimming with tropical fruits and globes perched on velvet drapes, allegorical prints featuring a seated Europa receiving bountiful gifts from afar—emphasized the pleasantness of exotic goods in ways that fundamentally contributed to a growing sentiment among Europeans that the outside world was friendly, pleasurable, and ripe for exploitation. And it is on this basis that Schmidt presents the exotic as an aesthetic category indispensable not only to the rise of a transnational trade in exotic commodities, but also to the emergent fantasy of a peaceable Europe connected by trade relations rather than by warring animosity.[17] Furthermore, this exoticism survives well into the 20th century—in Oscar Wilde's infamous love of peacock feathers and blue China, in Ronald Firbank's fanciful depiction of luxuriously peaceable Caribbean life, or in the colonial fantasy of India-as-artwork. By reading the exoticism that marks these texts as fundamental to their engagement with the economic conditions of late-imperial life, I strive to recuperate seemingly retrograde aspects of these texts' expressivity as fundamental to their modernity (without necessarily staking any particular claim to their "modernism").

At this point, then, I also wish to clarify what I mean in my use of two other terms whose definitions seem deceptively simple at a first glance: namely, imperialism and colonialism—terms that define the context in which I read expressions of excess in the aesthetic production of the late British Empire. To some extent, of course, my use of these terms is consistent with their

[16] See Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 34-35.
[17] See Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2015.

commonplace meanings in everyday language: "imperialism" familiarly refers to the guiding ideology of Europe's major imperial powers, albeit British in this particular case, whose political as well as economic policies relied on the expansion of their territory across the globe. In terms of we might call the *culture*(s) of imperialism, we note the sophisticated moral and spiritual arguments that emerged during the height of imperial expansion—disseminated across a striking variety of genres—to justify their occupation and domination of foreign lands. Colonialism, in turn, refers—in my own and in general use—to a principal strategy of imperialism, whereby imperial powers establish settlements in foreign lands that they subject to their direct rule—especially where such practices of invasive settlements justify themselves through recourse to the racist logic that non-European territories are either not meaningfully "inhabited" by anyone, or else inhabited by peoples insufficiently civilized to govern themselves. T

At the same time, however, Jameson's efforts to theorize the relationship between imperialism and modernism remind us that it has not always been considered so uncontroversial to assert—as I have done rather casually—that imperialism names a structure in which economic and political processes are coordinated. Unsurprisingly, Jameson identifies our contemporary assumption of a fundamental interrelationship between imperialist political structures (domination, subjugation) and economic practices (resource extraction, labor exploitation) with the influence of Marxist thought;[18] although by as late as the 1980s there still remained a certain orthodoxy that understood imperialism only in strictly political terms. (Jameson associates such an orthodoxy with Joseph Schumpeter, and with a general tendency to lose sight of politics in favor of moralizing and speculation about the violent tendencies of human nature). In Jameson's view, then, the very fact that "imperialism" registers in everyday language can be traced to a "restructuring" of historical

[18] Jameson, 46.

critical attitudes towards the notion of empire that emerged in the second half of the 20th century—where the realities of "neocolonialism, of decolonization accompanied by the emergence of multinational capitalism and the great transnational corporations" have provoked scholars to expand their understanding of imperialism beyond the historical frame of European territorial expansion from the 17th century through World War II.[19]

These restructuring developments are precisely what frame Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri's expansive concept of "empire," developed throughout their response to the omnipresent—and yet decentralized—presence of a developed capitalism across the entire globe: "Our basic hypothesis," as they propose, "is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire."[20] To be sure, the dynamics of this particular iteration of empire—that is, as the global reign of late capitalism in the wake of the decline of the nation-state—is beyond the scope of my project. But I would nonetheless argue that early 20th century aesthetic attunements to the excessiveness of empire—its overproductivity, but also its generation of forms of alterity that it could neither fully control nor completely manage—prefigure later images of an imperialism that would outlive the structure of any given imperial power. Furthermore, the role of the exotic in these manifestations of alterity—for James, a seemingly immaterial idea of "luxury" that nonetheless makes itself sensible and apprehensible in the context of an utterly disorienting (even deadly) trip to colonial India; for Firbank, a surfeit of erotic desire for raced skin so potent that it engages a reflexive awareness of its own fetishism—could also be said to anticipate critical attention in modernist studies to the ways in which, as Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel suggest,

[19] Ibid.
[20] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.

"white Anglo modernism is […] haunted by […] the repressed ghosts of an African modernity, an Atlantic modernity, a subaltern modernity."[21]

III. Method

My own commitments to the intersection of culture and imperialism are strongly informed by postcolonial scholarship that has followed Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, published in 1993.[22] In his influential chapter on the representation of space in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Said identifies a compelling set of parallelisms between the position of the manor in Mansfield and that of Sir Thomas Bertram's estate in Antigua (Sir Thomas owns Mansfield Park, before his son Tom inherits it). On the one hand, as Said argues, Austen's novel follows the self-sacrifice that protagonist Fanny Price must make—submitting herself to a kind of "indentured servitude" in the manor—in order to "earn the right" to live in Mansfield. Said highlights the parallels between this model of a progress-towards-wealth and the colonial endeavor by reading Fanny's "small-scale movements in space," as a measure of her personal advancement, against the "more open colonial movements of Sir Thomas." For Said, this parallelism is enforced in two distinct ways: most explicitly in the fact that the payoff of Fanny's self-sacrifice is her eventual inheritance of Sir Thomas's manor; but Said points out that this inheritance is always *also* an inheritance of colonial wealth—for Mansfield Park is sustained by the money that Sir Thomas is able to make managing his overseas plantation in the Caribbean. As Said writes:

[21] Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, "Introduction" to *Geomodernism: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, eds. Laura Dyole and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 3.
[22] See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Said's influence on subsequent developments in postcolonial scholarship is familiarly known, and attested to—for one very recent example—in the essays collected in *After Said: Postcolonial literary studies in the twenty-first century*, ed. Bashir Abu-Manney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

> Since Austen refers to and uses Antigua as she does in *Mansfield Park,* there needs to be a commensurate effort on the part of her readers to understand concretely the historical valences in the reference. […] According to Austen we are to conclude that no matter how isolated and insulated the English place (e.g., Mansfield Park), it requires overseas sustenance.[23]

Scholars like Freedgood and Daley fall in line with this kind of approach to the pervasive presence of empire in the novels of the 19th century—and indeed, for Freedgood the importance of an object like a mahogany desk in *Jane Eyre* lies precisely in the fact that it connects the world of the novel to the wider world of empire despite how "isolated and insulated" it is. For Freedgood it is important that the mahogany furniture at Gateshead dates to an earlier period—before the deforestation of Madeira and Jamaica that made way for the cultivation of profitable crops. Occupying the status of a century-old heirloom, an object of mahogany in the novel would thus point to the very ways in which colonial wealth becomes naturalized in Britain, and the history of its objects obscured.

Throughout the present study I draw on the forms of attention to the spatial as well as thematic attunements to empire that marks the literary production of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But I depart somewhat from Said's focus—and later, Freedgood's and Daley's—on the subtle ways in which empire makes itself detectable in the background of the literary text. Rather, this study engages works in which the realities of empire are of explicit importance, framing the ways in which these texts explore pressing aesthetic problems. Thus: in his efforts to imagine and develop a literary style marked by utmost superficiality, Ronald Firbank finds himself increasingly drawn to the founding tropes of a particularly touristic iteration of travel literature, while also finding himself increasingly enchanted by primitivist discourse and by the surface-level appeal of racialzied

[23] Said, 89.

skin. My aim is to show how such aesthetic explorations of the consequences of empire are themselves framed by broader discursive trends in economic, sociological, or social-reformist thought. Provoked by the enticements of primitivism, Firbank's experiments with the literary surface, I'll argue, draw us to the discursive densities that joined the social-scientific phenomenon of primitivism, economic approaches to the idea of the fetish, and administrative efforts on the part of the British Empire to project sexual deviance (homosexuality, in this case) onto the racially-marked other.

For another key example: the presence of British India looms large in James's "The Figure in the Carpet," a story in which an idealized apprehension of sublime aesthetic truth is resolvable only through the allusion—though not the direct representation—of one character's visit to Bombay. That character—Corvick, a literary critic—telegraphs his discovery to the narrator in two words ("eureka, immense"), following a passage of speculation on the part of the narrator and his wife about India's exotic sensual enticements, and the experience of sublimity to which they might give rise. From these details alone, we might propose a number of hypotheses—say, about the ways in which a specifically Indian image of the exotic helped to contour ideas of the sublime in modern British aesthetics (one might also think of TS Eliot's "shantih, shantih, shantih" at the end of *The Waste Land*). But by situating this story in relation to a set of tense contemporary debates about the nature of luxury and its relation to art—debates that were themselves occasioned by the intensification of intercontinental trade—we gain insight into a broader field of anxieties about the societal consequences of consumer excesses bolstered by the proliferation of colonial imports. James's advocacy of aesthetic apprehension as a kind of rarefied or immaterial luxury (an idea that James communicated explicitly) can thus be read in response to an active and at-times ambivalent discussion about the social value of excess.

An interdisciplinary approach thus allows me to more clearly situate aesthetic treatments of excess in wider discursive contexts. But I would also suggest that I am able to grant myself the latitude to work with texts across disciplines because the concept of excess is itself a fundamentally aesthetic concept—highly relative, and meaningful only in light of the visibility, or palpability, of a certain transgression of normative boundaries. "Excess," as thus study understands it, is a concept that we invoke to give a sensible shape to the transgression of norms. A melodramatic gesture in a novel by Balzac, or an overabundance of detail in a story by Ronald Firbank: these things register as excess to us only in light of an imagined limit. Such a limit can be understood in a few ways—for instance, either as the representational conventions of realism, or perhaps as the sense of plausibility that these conventions strive to achieve; Firbank's descriptive indulgences frequently exceed the reader's ability to understand what's going on in the narrative. Committed to the disruptive potential of excess—that is, the ways in which the transgression of boundaries can call the integrity of such boundaries into question—I refrain in this study from offering a systematic theory of excess as such, in part because I believe that a systematic account of excess is beyond the scope of a literary study of the narrowly delimited period that I consider here; and in part because I am less interested in what excess *is* than in how the idea of excess animated a set of encounters between literary texts and imperial structures during a specific period of British imperial history.

Instead of schematizing excess itself, then, I propose a somewhat idiosyncratic set of analytic concepts by which to examine manifestations of the excessive in literary and visual texts: these are luxury, the exquisite, and the superficial. Rife with overlap (luxuries are often described as exquisite; and the pleasure we take in exquisite luxuries is often superficial), these terms do not name a set of categories for a taxonomy of the excessive in the aesthetic culture of the early 20th century. Rather, I choose these terms because each is laden with the baggage of commonplace use in ways that help us to think aesthetic excess in the social, economic, or political contexts that give it meaning. The idea

of luxury, for instance, is inextricable from the debate over the nature of economic value; and the idea of the merely superficial turns out, perhaps surprisingly, to be deeply implicated in heteronormative and racist aesthetic values. And as we'll see, the exquisite—an extremely popular term in fin-de-siècle critical discourse—draws on the imaginary of the exotic (with which it shares its spatializing prefix) as it evokes and aestheticizes the idea of an imperfectly sublimated violence.

I draw much of my own use of the term "exquisite" from recent work by Grace Lavery. In one of very few rigorous theoretical engagements with the concept, Lavery remarks on the predominance of the exquisite in the rhetoric of British aestheticism, providing an account of the concept's constitutive contradictions:

> An exquisite object is *extremely* beautiful; it is also *weirdly* incomplete. It is also, as often as not, able to hurt its consumer or contemplator: "a cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure," Lord Henry Wotton tells Dorian Gray, because "it is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied"[24]

Lavery continues, however, to refine this point: for the exquisite is not reducible to the delectably unsatisfying, despite the subtleties of Wilde's "it leaves one," with its connotations of a lover departing in a taxicab (and in a billow of smoke). For Lavery, Wilde's cigarette also helps us to grasp a further contradiction of the exquisite: that it is both "high-intensity and low-intensity, unspeakably alien and yet remarkably familiar, intensely to be desired and yet easily obtained."[25] For Lavery's purposes, the cultural import of these contradictions becomes clearest through recourse to the term's etymology: from the Latin *exquiro*—to "seek out"—the term emerged in English in the 17th century, where it has always invoked *both* "an object whose preciousness depends on the distance

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[24] Grace Lavery. *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.
[25] Ibid., 4.

once has travelled to obtain it" and "an Oriental imaginary in which a tasteful formal arrangement is associated with an experience of some kind of pain."[26] Lavery's historicization of the exquisite frames my own investigations into the ways in which a set of state-sponsored monuments to British governmental benevolence India failed to fully sublimate the violence that subtended British governance in the first place.

As a final note on method, I wish to point out that this project relies on extensive archival research as it examines the rich discursive contexts in which excess emerges and circulates in British (and more broadly European) thought from the end of the 19th century through the first decades of the 20th. Research for the present study has led me to explore a set of archives, both physical and online. Chapter One works with a largely forgotten discourse on luxury, one that took shape among a group of economists and social-scientists—Henri Baudrillart, Émile de Laveleye, Henri Bouchot, Werner Sombart—who are seldom read today, and thus rarely feature in the contexts of literary criticism in the same ways as better-known sociologists like Marcel Mauss, Max Weber, or Emil Durkheim. In order to unravel the discursive densities at the interface between colonial administration and aesthetic thought in British India in Chapter Two, I consult an extensive series of Raj government documents—including memoranda, budgets, artist's statements, and essays on the future of Indian art penned by art teachers in application for funds. And in order to more clearly identify the role of exotic tourism in Firbank's negotiations of sexual expression, I consult a set of notebooks and letters; in these highly private texts, we observe Firbank making real-time decisions about the geographic and imaginative contexts (such as the exotic context of an imaginary North Africa) in which certain forms of desire can be conventionally voiced.

[26] Ibid., 5-6.

IV. Chapter outline

This project makes a point of hopping, like a skipping-stone, across geographic contexts and genres. In an effort to avoid a merely thematic treatment of imperial ideology in the aesthetic production of modernity under the British Empire, I attempt to follow the threads of excess as they lead into broader attunements to the scope and breath of empire. Thus, my discussion of James's preoccupation with British India and its supposed sublime excess follows into a chapter in which I examine how the myth of this excess took shape *in* British India, at the intersection between imperial policy and an eccentric discourse on the uniquely Indian continuities between art and living labor. Firbank eventually serves me as a figure whose self-displacements dramatize the deeply embedded relationships between luxurious excess and geographic boundedness in the ideology of the early 20th century. The argumentative structure of this dissertation is as follows:

The first chapter attends to the relationships between modernist art and the idea of luxury. At first glance, I suggest, the notion of luxury seems antithetical to much of Anglo-American modernist literary aesthetics, with its disdain for the vulgarities of commercial culture. And yet the idea of luxury embodies and even prefigures modernist claims to an aesthetic value that transcends the value system of the market. How, I ask, has the originary relationship between art and luxury become obscured in modernist aesthetic discourse? By reading key texts from a highly active social-scientific discourse on luxury that took shape in the late 19th century, I establish a context in which to address this question. Economic and sociological writers of the fin-de-siècle felt compelled to write against luxury, which they understood in terms of a tendency towards irrational overconsumption made possible by the glut of colonial imports spreading in European cities. Striving to protect an ideal of value against the phenomenon that historians now call the "democratization of luxury" in an increasingly wealthy 19th century Europe, these economists began to hold up art as a form of transcendent value irreducible to the market, and thus fundamentally

distinct from luxury. Decadent art, I claim, typically resists such a distinction between art and luxury, opposing vulgarity on its own terms by seeking ever-more exclusive objects of beauty.

While modernists like Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis would eventually repudiate decadent style for a suspicious (and effeminate) over-commitment to beauty, I argue that decadent art embodies a fundamental truth about the ways in which autotelic art—"art for art's sake"—depends on the exclusive refinement of an object of *true* (that is, not-yet-normalized) luxury. The chapter then turns to an extensive reading of Henry James's 1896 story "The Figure in the Carpet." James's text, I argue, thematizes the highest possible aesthetic experience—in this case, apprehending the principle of coherence within a fictitious author's oeuvre—in terms of grasping an immaterial luxury, where such apprehension takes place in colonial India, away from the view of the narrator. "The Figure" thus dramatizes the continuities between autonomous art and luxury while also staging the dependencies that bound the ideal of transcendent luxury to colonial India—and by extension, to the same imperial processes that underwrote luxury's "democratization" in the midst of the trade in exotic commodities.

The second chapter follows the governing aesthetic fantasy about India from James's story—the idea, that is, that India embodies a certain kind of sublimity. I examine the complex discursive context surrounding a set of murals sponsored and executed by the British Raj, to decorate the interior of the New Delhi Secretariat Buildings, which had been built in the 1910s following the relocation of the Raj capital from Calcuta to Delhi. The Secretariat buildings—which housed the government of the Raj[27]—had always been designed to accommodate murals. By 1922, however, the Raj had seized on the murals as an opportunity to direct the future of Indian art in their image, holding a competition for the highly lucrative murals contract that would lead to a

[27] The government of India still congregates in the Delhi Secretariat.

profusion of application-cum-essays outlining various art-college directors' vision for the colonial future of India. At the center of the chapter is the work and thought of William Ewart Gladstone Solomon, principal of the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, who had won this contract through his impassioned advocacy of the idea that art, life, and work are uniquely and holistically continuous in India.

My aim in this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, I read Solomon in the context of a longstanding aesthetic discourse in colonial India, which had advocated for social reform through an emphasis on the holism of artisanal labor in Indian society, and thus the capacity of artistic improvement to facilitate social improvement in Indian villages. The idea of Indian recalcitrance to Western labor practices had been a constant theme in British writing about India—and idea whose value some 19th century social reformers sought to uphold as they imagined more humane labor conditions on the subcontinent. On the other hand, then, I root Solomon's success with the Raj in the way in which he appropriated this arts discourse, contributing (perhaps perversely) to Raj efforts to better imagine, and mobilize, the exploitability of the Indian labor force. The Delhi murals, I argue, thus encode some of the contradictions of thinking life, art, and labor together: in their material excess—painted lavishly with gold leaf—they monumentalize a dream of the total exploitability of a laboring population to colonial dominance. At the end of the chapter, however, I examine this material excess, attending to the way in which the murals seem to register a vitality that exceeds and undermines their ability to monumentalize a sublime and exploitable continuity between life, labor, and art.

The third chapter examines the fictions of Ronald Firbank, an eccentric and itinerant British novelist of the 1920s. Firbank is often celebrated for his trivializing wit and camp sensibility, as well as for his highly itinerant lifestyle. And his work is also known for a thoroughgoing *superficiality*, eschewing the priorities of plot and character development in favor of arch dialogue, lavish

description, and playful innuendo. In this chapter, I attend to the experiments with the exotic—and specifically with orientalist aesthetics and primitivism—that mark Firbank's novels of the 1920s. of Firbank's critics have tended to praise the evasiveness of his style, which tends to hide its many allusions to homoerotic desire through innuendo, ambiguation, and other strategies that flippantly obscure—even negate—the presence of what lies "beneath the surface" of any given reference. Critics have also read Firbank's uses of the exotic as an appropriation of a certain stereotyping logic in imperialist ideology, which identifies sexual and racial difference as a means to negate the threat of what I call "sexual excess" (including homosexuality) to the integrity of empire. I argue that Firbank's exotic novels pursue explicit connections between the erotics of the surface as a formal and thematic principle, and the idea of racially-marked skin as a material instantiation of the eroticized surface. Firbank's infatuation with surface, I argue, both animates the allure of exoticized bodies and ambiguates the very distinctions—white and non-white, colony and metropole, person and thing—that sustain the "exotic" as a meaningful term.

In a coda, I examine the photography of Raghubir Singh, an Indian photographer active during the 1970s and 1980s. Influenced by modernism, Singh's practice fused a documentary approach to capturing the texture of Indian urban life with an interest in the spectacular possibilities of vivid color. Singh remains widely celebrated as a pioneer of color photography, with many contemporary critics praising his handling of color for being luxurious and epicurean. In the coda, I ask why color registers as a form of luxurious excess for critics of Singh's work, many of whom also identify color as the means by which Singh transcends the "merely documentary." Given Singh's use of color as part of a desire to express a distinctly Indian, post-colonial approach to humanism, the comparisons to luxury elicited by his work return us to the critical promise—but also the ambivalence—of excess in modern aesthetics. For Singh, color as excess expresses resistance to the

imperialist legacy of documentary and land-survey photography, while also ambiguating the distinction between person and thing that underpins his commitments to humanism.

Chapter 1:
Exquisite Schemes: Modernist Aesthetics and the Problem of Luxury

> The opposite of luxury is not poverty because in the houses of the poor you can smell a good 'pot au feu.' […] there is […] often great simplicity in luxury, but there is nothing in vulgarity, its complete opposite.
> — Coco Chanel, in a 1966 interview with Cecil Beaton

> I approve of luxury. I think we ought to be as elegant as possible.
> — Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady* (1881)

I. Introduction

Rogue, the New York-based avant-garde little magazine, debuted in March, 1915—a short five months before the so-called "War Number" of *BLAST*, two years behind the first issue of *Vanity Fair* in New York, and about a year before *Vogue* launched its British edition. Billing itself as "the cigarette of literature" in its subscription ads, *Rogue* was at once an avant-garde literary publication and a society magazine, enthralled as much by the sheer luxury of upper-class modern life as it was with the energies of the avant-garde. Texts by Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others, were printed alongside chic black-and-white illustrations, fashionable advertisements, and conventional features of society journalism. A full-page spread [Fig 1.1] from the August 1915 edition, for instance, prints Mina Loy's provocative poem, "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" next to a drawing credited to a certain Miss Tice—wryly titled "Virgin Minus Verse"—of a young woman *en déshabillé*, drawn in a balletic contrapposto with the simple linearity of a fashion plate. Madame Rogue herself, the magazine's editorial persona, offers an endorsement that rings like an advertisement: "Miss Tice's fastening garters look as though they could be set to music." With its characteristically decadent, altogether limp-wristed editorial sensibility, *Rogue* thus played with the continuities between high modernist writing and consumer luxuries. Its avant-garde offerings were often presented as discrete and alluring within the pages of the magazine as the

fashionable products in its advertisements. The magazine thereby hoped to capture that elusive essence of the contemporary that Madame Rogue, the magazine's editorial persona, calls "the perfume of modernity."

This chapter examines the fraught and at-times elusive relationships that join Anglophone literary modernism and the forms of excess modelled by the idea of luxury. *Rogue*'s success in mixing the avant-garde with the luxurious rests, of course, on those continuities that join modernism and modernity within the well-remarked temporality and desirable elusiveness of *la mode*.[1] And while there is something coquettishly parodic about *Rogue*, with its cartoon-like illustrations, its witty advertisements, its habit of contradicting its own messages from one issue to the next ("Advertise in ROGUE – *it doesn't pay*" reads one iteration of the magazine's ad for advertisement, while "Advertise in ROGUE—*it does pay*" reads another),[2] the intimacies between avant-garde aesthetics and the aesthetics of consumer luxuries to which *Rogue* alludes were well established in the early 1920s. We might think of Man Ray's surrealist Rayographs, for example, many of which were reproduced in *Vanity Fair*; As Bill Brown points out, *Vanity Fair's* publication of Ray's photograms—which equipped surrealist practice with a novel technique for animating the object—demonstrates a certain entanglement of the surrealist object "within the hyperproductivity and hypervisibility of the 1920s market in personal goods."[3]

An earlier example might also be found in W.B. Yeats' ritualistic 1916 play, *At The Hawk's Well*, the script for which was published for the first time in the March 1917 issue of *Harper's Bazar*.

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[1] For more on the relationships between fashion and modernity—as well as on the etymological linkages between modernism and *la mode*—see Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000).
Jessica Burstein makes a similar observation too in *Cold Modernisms: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012).
[2] I quote these lines from Burstein's discussion of *Rogue*; see Burstein, 163.
[3] Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 112.

As with Ray's photographs appearing in *Vanity Fair*, what strikes us here is not only the peculiarity of avant-garde aesthetics seeming to exist in perfect harmony with commercial culture; more strikingly, these scenes of coordination between modernism and highbrow advertising confronts us with the sense of an aesthetic continuity between the two. On the first page of Yeats' playscript in *Harper's* [Fig. 1.2], for instance, the text is framed by reproductions of the sumptuous *japoniste* costumes designed by Edmond Dulac for the play's debut performance, while subsequent pages surround the text with an array of print ads—one notable example of which features a large image of a lady's boot in patent leather [Fig. 1.3]. The point is not only that a certain seamlessness joins these two very different ways of appending images to the periphery of the text, but the fact that Dulac's watercolor paintings coordinate text and image in ways that inhabit and reproduce the format of the fashion magazine.

Seen this way, the charisma of early 20th century avant-garde art in the Anglophone world would seem to be nothing indeed without the glamour of the world of luxury commodities, a world of goods whose affective power—their seductiveness, the desires they elicit within us—was mediated by mass-cultural forms like the magazine, the advertisement, and the fashion plate. And yet this observation would also seem to sit uncomfortably with one tenet regarding modernism's relationship to mass culture—that is, that modernist and avant-garde aesthetics positioned themselves as fundamentally antipathetic to the commercial world of mass culture. In her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, for instance, Allison Pease asserts that "from its inception, modernism has defined itself—and has been defined by—its relation to mass culture";[4] and she immediately qualifies this relationship as one of opposition, noting for one example that 20th century theories of the autonomy of the work of art were rooted in the notional distinction between

[4] Allison Pease, "Modernism and Mass Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, 2nd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197.

art and mass culture. Of course, Pease also points to recent scholarly efforts to establish modernism and mass culture as "historically related and dialectically interdependent."[5] Nonetheless, as she observes, a certain self-segregation from the vulgarities of commercial culture is indissolubly integral to how modernism understood itself. How, then, are we to square modernism's opposition to mass culture with the altogether cozy intimacy between avant-garde aesthetics and mass media as we observe in *Harper's*, or *Vanity Fair*, or as reproduced in loving parody within the pages of *Rogue*?

The provocation of such an intimacy cannot be quite so easily answered in the terms of a "dialectical interdependence" between modernism and mass culture. For the employment of avant-garde aesthetics works precisely here to bolster these magazines' presentation of advertised goods as things that *do not belong* to mass culture—that is, as luxuries—while simultaneously grounding the magazines' claims to mediate a culture of exclusive refinement. Art and luxury share in the ideal of embodying forms of value that are irreducible to the market. Dave Beech neatly characterizes this irreducibility in terms of art's notional and venerable "economic exceptionalism."[6] Both perhaps aspire to the condition of what Nancy Cox calls "things beyond materiality," a term that she develops to explain the appeal of those "small luxuries"—exotic trinkets made in the colonies or from exotic materials, engraved snuff boxes, mantle clocks, decorative prints—that had become newly accessible to and widely desired by the middle classes of 18th and 19th century Britain.[7] And yet to take up Cox's illuminating terminology is to run into yet another paradigmatic problem for a strain of Anglophone modernism anxious to distinguish aesthetic value from market value. For

[5] Ibid. For a foundational book on modernism's tense relationship with the commodity, see Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). See also the anthology *Marketing Modernisms: self-promotion, canonization, rereading*. Eds. Kevin JH Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
[6] Dave Beech, *Art and Value: art's economic exceptionalism in classical, neoclassical, and Marxist economics* (Boston: Brill, 2015).
[7] See Nancy Cox, *Retailing and the Language of Goods: 1550-1820* (London: Routledge, 2016). Chapter 7 (141-158) deals with "small luxuries for ordinary people" in the early 19th century.

"small luxuries" would seem to denote precisely those middling objects of affected bourgeois taste that Ezra Pound would collect in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* under the dubious banner of "a tawdry cheapness":

> All things are a flowing,
>
> Sage Heracleitus [sic] says,
>
> But a tawdry cheapness
>
> Shall reign throughout our days.
>
> Even the Christian beauty
>
> Defects—after Samothrace ;
>
> We see *tó kalón*
>
> Decreed in the market place[8]

The passage follows something of a brief catalogue of implements of tacky bourgeois taste—tea gowns and a pianola—before it bemoans the cheapening of aesthetic ideals (*tó kalon* is Greek for "the highest beauty") under the influence of consumerism. This spirit of an anti-bourgeois austerity recurs across English modernist writing of the early 20th century, and drives a well-acknowledged animus towards the legacy of British Aestheticism and Decadence—an artistic tendency known, of course, for leaning on especially refined *small luxuries* as discrete and palpable exempla of art for art's sake. We remember Oscar Wilde struggling in perpetuity to "live up to" his blue china.[9]

Returning to the modernist antagonism toward Decadence, this chapter tracks the negotiation of value, in turn-of-the-century Anglophone aesthetic discourse, against transformations of the idea of luxury that took shape in the late 19th century. Cox's discussion of the popularity of

[8] Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (London: The Ovid Press, 1920), 11.

[9] Wilde is popularly known for saying this to a group of dinner guests on one occasion; the full quote is "every day I find it harder and harder to live up to my blue china." See Richard Ellmann's biography, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 43-44.

small luxuries alludes to what Christopher Berry calls the "democratization" of luxury among Europe's middle classes—a process that began in earnest in the 18th century, driven by imperial expansion and the ensuing intensification of colonial trade, and it went on to become a pervasive condition of European life by the end of the 19th century. Indeed, the process was in fact first theorized by social-scientists and economists of the fin-de-siècle and early 20th century, in a series of treatises—Henri Baudrillart's *Histoire du Luxe* (1880), Émile de Laveleye's *Luxury* (1889), Werner Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism* (1913), among others— that tended to understand luxury not only in terms of conspicuous bourgeois consumption, but also as the expression of an elusive human instinct towards accumulation and refinement beyond necessity. On the one hand, the decadent solution to the problem of luxury's "democratization" might not be too unfamiliar to us—consisting, of course, in the pursuit of rarer and yet-more exotic pleasures as famously embodied by the hedonist Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884). And yet later modernist excoriations of decadent style by such figures as Pound would ignore or obscure the deep intimacies that bound such proto-modernist ideals as art for art's sake to the idea of elusive luxury.

A certain tension would thus seem to exist between a particular modernist will to self-exemption from the economic commonplace and a distinctly modern idea of luxury, in light of a history of fin-de-siècle efforts to stake the transcendent value of art in its own distinction from the value system of the market. In what follows, then, I strive to better elucidate this tension between the modernist work of art and the concept of luxury through a reading of Henry James's 1898 short story "The Figure in the Carpet," a text engaged in a reflexive theorization of literary art at a moment of transition between decadence and modernism. Dramatizing the effort to grasp the principle of autonomy in a fictitious author's oeuvre, "The Figure in the Carpet" stages the most rarefied aesthetic experience as a kind of immaterial luxury, a "thing beyond materiality." James thus emerges as a theorist of luxury in his own right—and indeed, James expresses the apprehension of

the work of art in terms of the "highest experience of 'luxury'" in the 1903 Preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (1903). In "The Figure in the Carpet," however, James transposes this experience onto Britain's colonial exterior, staging its "eureka" moment in the midst of one character's sojourn to India. Negotiating the relationship between immaterial luxury and the exceptionalism of art in the colonial context, James's story thus maintains a view to the economic contexts that make rarefied art possible, while prefiguring critical attention to the dependencies that bound English aesthetic experience to empire from the fin-de-siècle through the 20th century.

II. Luxury and modernity

Thinking seriously about James as a theorist of luxury requires thinking seriously about *luxury*, which, as a concept and as cultural phenomenon, has certainly not been stable. The proposition that the experience of modernity is marked by general access to luxury goods should not strike us as especially controversial. Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello's wide-ranging *Luxury: A Rich History* (2016), for instance, opens its discussion of developments in turn-of-the century Europe by taking stock of the sheer luxuriousness of modernity as such; never, until the decades of transition between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th did so many Westerners have access to the luxuries of indoor plumbing, electric lighting and domestic heating. [10] Christopher J. Berry's *Idea of Luxury* (1994) remains one of the more frequently-cited books dedicated specifically to

[10] The broader aim of McNeil and Riello's book, however, is to argue for the historical contingency of the concept of luxury across time, keeping track of the striking historical and cultural variability of what counts as a luxury, and for what reasons. In this sense, the opening piece in their chapter on the late 19th century—which proceeds through the example of a luxurious bathroom—could be said to illustrate another dimension of the "democratization of luxury," insofar as it calls attention to the peculiar circumstances surrounding the luxuriousness of something as otherwise banal as toilets. For my purposes, I am largely interested in McNeil and Riello's account of the mainstreaming of luxuries like indoor plumbing in Europe and North America at the turn of the 20th century. See Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello. *Luxury: A Rich History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the idea of the "democratization of luxury" through the processes of imperial trade.[11] Although such supposed democratization was in no way incommensurate with the ongoing development, and increasing globalization, of certain structures of inequality, it marked a shift in the social experience of luxury in European countries, from the consumption of the court to a far more diffuse culture of refined consumption among the metropolitan bourgeoisie. Indeed, contemporary sources track the development of certain colonial commodities—cane sugar, tea, coffee—whose availability became so widespread, their consumption so normalized as elements of bourgeois culture, that they ceased to register as luxuries at all. One case in point is American economist Truman Palmer's 1917 report on the trade in cane sugar, titled *Sugar: Once a Luxury, Now a Necessity*.[12]

One of the consequences of luxury's democratization, in Berry's view, is the "demoralization" of luxury—that is, the growing tendency among economists to address the phenomenon of luxury on objective terms, rather than strictly as a category of moral evaluation (or more specifically of censure). The concept of luxury in Western thought has a long history in moral philosophy and political economy, where it tends to name problematic or irrational tendencies towards unnecessary or irrational consumption; Berry names Plato's *Republic* as the earliest major treatment of the topic—most explicitly in the thought experiment of the "fervid," or "feverish city" in Book II of the *Republic*. The allegory emerges through a dispute between Socrates and Glaucon; after Socrates presents a peaceable but extremely austere vision of an ideal city—one in which

[11] Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Of course, the normalization of "luxuries" like indoor toilets are not in themselves the objects or products of transcontinental trade; it is hardly the case that every object implicated in such a normalization is an exotic commodity good. Nonetheless, Berry cites Hamish Fraser's book, *The Coming of the Mass Market: 185-1914* (London: Palgrave, 1982), which argues that imperial accelerationism contributed significantly to the emergence of broad patterns in the pursuit of "better food, better clothes," etc. amongst Britain's middle classes. See also Berry, 6.
[12] Truman Palmer, *Sugar: Once a Luxury, Now a Necessity.* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Statistics, 1917).

citizens pursue nothing beyond their barest means, eating simple vegetarian foods and dressing themselves in utilitarian clothes Glaucon insists that human beings need certain luxuries to be content with their lives, including delicacies and sumptuous furniture. The ensuing dialogue quickly moves from an experiment in thinking the ideal city into an experiment in understanding the precise reasons why actual political communities—beset by the sheer obstinacy of human desire, as it were—fail to resemble ideal ones. For convenience's sake I'll quote Berry here, rather than Plato:

> Socrates elaborates by saying that we should not now be limited by the necessities that characterized the earlier or 'first' city. For example, painters and embroiders will have a place […] A physical extension of the city will now be required to accommodate the multitude of occupations which will be called into existence once the standpoint of necessity has been passed […]The most significant consequences of the city's luxurious condition is that it will generate warfare.[13]

In a manner typical of the general logic of *The Republic*—which, of course, consistently prefers to examine ethical questions in the context of the imaginary idealized city—this passage roots a striking number of civilizational impulses, from artistic creation to something like imperial expansion (through warfare), in the morally ambiguous need for material indulgences.

It is important to qualify what Berry means by the "demoralization" of luxury, however, as economic writers never fully abandoned the notion that luxury poses unavoidable moral questions. Writing as late as 1887, the Belgian political economist Émile de Laveleye described luxury as both "destructive to the individual and pernicious to society."[14] Rather, Berry is pointing to a gradual methodological development in the history of the European discourse on luxury—a shift from a

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[13] Berry, 49.
[14] Émile de Laveleye, *Luxury*. Trans. Unattributed. (London: Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), 2. I'll quote Laveleye in parentheticals hereafter.

moral-philosophical to an overwhelmingly political-economic treatment of the topic. And as Berry points out, many European intellectuals of the mid-late 18th century drew inspiration from Anglo-Dutch writer Bernard Mandeville's highly controversial *Fable of the Bees* (1714), which had argued—the way of a satirical parable, in verse, about a colony of bees—that egotistical indulgence and vice can ultimately drive broader economic development. The controversy of such an idea can still be noted in French aristocrat Alexandre-Jacques du Coudray's long poem, *Le Luxe* (1773), which condemns "l'abîme des vertus, la source des vices."[15] Nonetheless, Dutch economist Isaac de Pinto's far more friendly 1762 "Essay on Luxury" defines luxury quite modestly—perhaps deceptively so—as "the use which we make of riches and of industry, in order to procure an agreeable existence."[16] The definition is perhaps even deliberately vague, as though to anticipate the sheer variety of new kinds of consumer pleasures made possible by 18th century trade—coffee, tea, diamonds, tobacco—the pursuit of which, by European consumers, could be reasonably argued to support the expansion of empire. De Pinto indeed goes on to exalt the energies that surround luxury and the desires that it solicits, pointing to the British Empire as a model of imperial success driven by an energetic trade in luxurious goods.

Luxury quickly reveals itself to be very difficult to define, not least because of this twofold process of democratization and normalization. Berry's own struggles to define his object are perhaps symptomatic—at least in the sense that they rely on questions of relative utility instead of moral absolutes. In the introduction to *The Idea of Luxury*, he offers a seemingly intuitive definition that approaches luxury from the analytic of needs and wants. Berry sketches out three fundamental principles by which to understand the nature of a luxury good. First: a luxury good is characterized

[15] M le Chevalier du Coudray, *Le Luxe: Poëme en Six Chants* (Paris: Monoy, 1773).
[16] Isaac de Pinto, *An Essay on Luxury*. Trans. Unattributed. (London: T. Beckett and P.A. de Hondt, 1766). Original French edition published 1762.

by the fact that it must by nature fulfill one of the elemental requirements of human life—sustenance, clothing, shelter, and leisure or respite from work—but that it does so in considerable excess of necessity. Fine wine may be drunk as an especially indulgent alternative to water, and it would serve to quench our thirst in water's absence; but it would also be fatal to subsist *only* on wine for more than a few days. From this principle Berry establishes a second limitation: luxuries, he contends, are defined by their conferral of positive pleasures; and it would therefore be inappropriate to label as "luxuries" goods (such as private health services) whose purpose is to spare us pain or discomfort. And finally, Berry proposes that a luxury item counts only as a luxury item if it is understood to be widely desirable. Thus: you may not like truffles, but you recognize them to be a luxury; and while I may derive sublime pleasure from the occasional indulgence in a take-out pizza, neither of us would recognize this indulgence as a luxury in itself.[17] This same ambiguity, furthermore, besets the larger concept of excess, with which the concept of luxury is intimately proximate: one person's excessive use of salt may not seem excessive to that person; and similarly, typical habits of water consumption in a city like Chicago might not strike the Chicagoan as excessive or luxurious, while such habits might register as *both* excessive and luxurious to the inhabitants of a city that faces ongoing water shortages.

The sheer difficulty of defining luxury in modernity has since become the foundational problem for critical luxury studies, an interdisciplinary discourse that has emerged in recent

[17] Although one might easily argue to the contrary, of course. Several scholars, including Berry, have noted the increasing prevalence of the "luxury" as a keyword in the rhetoric of advertising since the 1980s, suggesting that the casualness with which minor quotidian indulgences are called "luxuries" in contemporary consumer society reflects the general pervasiveness of advertising language. Hence, I might well be inclined to think of cheap pizza as a luxury—especially if I normally avoid fatty foods, and find in the pizza something of a rare and special indulgence. We are faced again with the conceptual instability of "luxury" in the wake of its democratization; indeed, my inclination to think of pizza as a luxury would be precipitated by the establishment of the market in "small luxuries for ordinary people" that Cox discusses.

decades—represented in part by the 2016 publication of *Critical Luxury Studies* anthology, edited by John Armitage and Joanne Roberts, and in part by the publication—also in 2016—of a special edition of *Cultural Politics* on "The Spirit of Luxury."[18] (2016 seems to have been something of a watershed year for cultural-critical scholars of luxury; McNeil and Riello's book was published the same year, as was Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hoffmeester's anthology *Luxury in Global Perspective*).[19] In their contribution to their own anthology, Armitage and Roberts seek to lay out an "epistemology of luxury"—an effort that seeks "not merely to define luxury, but, rather, to explore how luxury is known, and, importantly, how this knowing is influenced by the rise to dominance of markets in the neoliberal era."[20] Armitage and Roberts note the nebulousness of the word "luxury" in contemporary parlance, blaming the overuse of "luxury" in advertising language for rendering the concept seemingly both overdetermined and entirely void of meaning. To match the overdetermination of luxury would then be the seeming multiplicity of the epistemic paradigms used to explain it: despite a gradual social tendency towards the demoralization of sumptuary goods, luxury remains explicable in moral terms (especially today, among critics of economic inequality), in economic terms, or as a mere rhetorical function of advertising language.

So far I have been tracking the destabilization of luxury in the wake of its democratization—where the democratization of luxury has also engendered its demoralization in economic thought. I therefore aim to show some of the ways in which the conceptual and interpretive difficulties noted by critics and historians like Berry, Armitage, and Roberts, can be seen to have been prefigured by a newly-scientific discourse on luxury that took shape in the late 19th century—debates from which a

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[18] See *Critical Luxury Studies*. Eds. John Armitage and Joanne Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). See also *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 1 (March 2016).
[19] See Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hoffmeester, eds., *Luxury in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[20] John Armitage and Joan Roberts, "Knowing Luxury" in *Critical Luxury Studies*, 26.

particular desire to distinguish luxury from art emerged. I suggest that the capacity of luxury to model the exceptionality of art as a kind of experience—as it does for James—appears to be compromised under the condition of luxury's normalization in European bourgeois society. My intention will be to show how economic writers ended up distinguishing art from luxury as they sought to propose forms of idealized value irreducible to the market—a notion that luxury could no longer unambiguously embody. First, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of this discourse, its moral stakes in repudiating luxury, and its growing attunements to the colonial violence that made the democratization of luxury possible.

III. Thinking luxury in the 19th century

The discourse on luxury in late 19th century Europe—largely in France and Belgium, though not exclusively—shows itself to be far less concerned with classifying certain kinds of goods, than in identifying and evaluating the reasons why people spend unreasonable amounts of money on apparently useless things. French sociologist Henri Baudrillart's four-volume *Histoire du Luxe* (1880), Belgian economist Émile de Laveleye's *Luxury* (1887), French historian Henri Bouchot's *Le Luxe Français* (1893) and eventually German sociologist Werner Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism* (1913) constitute diverse approaches to the analytic of luxury, but each treatise shares in a certain will to rid itself of the encumbrance of defining what an object of luxury looks like; each prefers instead to approach luxury as a problem of consumption and production beyond reasonable limits of necessity or utility. Sombart articulates one reason for such a hesitation early in his treatise: for although he offers a straightforward definition of luxury goods as "refined goods," which is to say, "goods treated above that which is needed to make [them] ordinarily useful," he just as quickly concedes

that almost any manufactured object might fit this description.[21] The wooden handle of a hammer doesn't *need* to be varnished to be usable, and yet even the cheapest hammer will likely have a varnished handle—but the thing is hardly a luxury good.[22]

In light of the apparent impossibility of adequately defining luxury *goods*, Sombart and his predecessors thus strive to understand luxury in much broader terms—as something of a transhistorical principle, either of human behavior or activity. Baudrillart, for instance, dedicates the first two chapters of his *History* to determining the nature and earliest historical expressions of a primal *instinct de luxe*. For Baudrillart, this "luxury instinct" can then be broken down into three further impulses, which include the need to distinguish oneself socially ("vanity"), the love of pure sensual pleasure ("sensuality"), and the urge to decorate the world around us (the "instinct for ornamentation"). This schematic ends up somewhat circular for Baudrillart; his rhetoric begins to look clumsy as he attempts to distinguish between luxury itself and more productive expressions of the *luxury instinct*—an important example of which, as I'll discuss shortly, is art. Baudrillart thus attempts to identify luxury's perniciousness through a kind of semantic doubling—locating the moral danger of the luxury instinct not in the "refinements" to which it gives rise, but in the "refinement upon refinement" that follows from the illusory idea that the material world can infinitely satisfy our desires:

> Certes la matière est finie par sa nature, et la sensation est bornée comme elle. Mais l'homme se fait l'illusion qu'elle ne l'est pas. Il lui semble que jamais une jouissance ne lui a procuré

[21] Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism*. Trans. W.R. Dittmar. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 60.

[22] This is my example, not Sombart's. Sombart does occasionally illustrates his study with references, via primary sources, to various luxurious indulgences in 16th-19th century Europe; on p. 107, he quotes an anecdote from a certain Pierre de Cadet who tells of his newly wealthy father spending 14,000 livres (a year's income for a middle class household) on a pair of spectacles. But Sombart does not as a matter of method explore the definition of luxury through imaginary examples or limit-cases—such as my varnished hammer.

> tout ce qu'elle peut donner, et quand il en a épuisé une, il court après un autre plaisir. Les raffinements se raffinent, et ils en appellent de nouveaux.[23]

Laveleye, who cites Baudrillart extensively, similarly takes up the idea that even bourgeois luxury consumption reflects some transhistorical, primal, even *primitive* impulse; as he argues, in the first of his many attacks on bourgeois European women through recourse to a racist comparison between South Pacific Islanders and pre-historic peoples—a rhetorical move that expresses a general social-Darwinist tendency to find the seeds of atavism and degeneracy within extreme over-sophistication.[24] As Laveleye writes:

> Women still love to pierce their ears to hang from them certain stones, or to surround their necks with beads or small pieces of metal, as in the Isles of the Pacific, or in the days of pre-historic man. Every year they seek some new mode of rendering their garments more inconvenient and more costly. How shall we set about curing this infirmity, this relic of primitive barbarism? (10).

I want to make two observations here. First, I suggest that we can observe a tension within the discourse on luxury from Baudrillart through Sombart: on the one hand, these writers approach luxury in terms of a transhistorical impulse, inclination, or tendency; and on the other hand, they display a certain will to the economic calculation of labor exploitation, appetite for material pleasures, and sheer waste, that makes luxury a moral or civilizational *problem*. In other words, the

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[23] Henri Baudrillart, *L'Histoire du Luxe: de L'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*. (Paris: Hachette, 1880), 6. This passage has been translated and quoted in full in Laveleye's *Luxury*: "Matter is in its nature finite, and sensuality, like it, has also its limits. But man cherishes the illusion that this is not so. It seems to him that he has never sucked out all the sweets of enjoyment; and when he has exhausted one form of pleasure, he runs after another. Every refinement of delight admits of still further refining, and another must always be ready when the last has ceased to charm. See page 13.

[24] See, e.g. Patrick Brantlinger's discussion of the Victorian adventure novel and its articulation Darwinian ideology in Chapter 8 of *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 227-253.

discourse on luxury that emerged in late-19th century France is marked by a tendency to understand luxury's nature as something irreducible to any economic system, while illuminating luxury's moral value through recourse to a calculation of unnecessary labor hours, wasted material, and even the density of intimacy that joined the upper-class consumer to those workers whose labor made their indulgences possible. In my second chapter, I'll show how agents of the British Empire negotiated the visibility of colonial violence in India in part by aestheticizing the role of colonial labor in maintaining British luxury.

The second observation I want to make is that this tension is framed, at least in part, by the somewhat staggering scale of transnational trade that had supported the acceleration of luxury's "normalization." Consider Laveleye's illustration of how primal the luxury instinct is, positioning the colonized Pacific Islander as exemplum *par excellence* of the atavistic urge to decorate one's body. For Laveleye's purposes, this primitivizing example both anticipates and inflects his return (a mere ten pages later) to the topic of fashion:

> Now-a-days society everywhere has the same general style of dress, but the fashions, especially among women, change every spring. A famous dressmaker invents a new cut, and from Paris to Shanghai, from London to San Francisco, everyone will adopt it, discarding the costumes of the previous year (20).

This passage is striking as a kind of iteration of Laveleye's earlier scene of the origin of fashion. Both passages strive to condemn fashion as immoral and wasteful, in part by constructing a set of shameful intimacies: in the first instance, between modern women, their prehistoric ancestors, and the idea of the Pacific Islander charged with embodying the atavistic persistence of the prehistoric. The second iteration of Laveleye's commentary on fashion—the drama of the "new cut of dress" as it makes its way across the world—thus thickens this sense of transnational intimacy, joining Paris, London, San Francisco, and Shanghai in an entangled network of wasteful circulation. So here we

have two iterations of the *global*—the globality of universal and primal human inclinations, and the incipient globality of modern trade—with the latter positioned as a consequence of the former.

To be sure, I don't want to insist too strongly or too generally that every attempt to theorize luxury as something like a drive, or instinct, or motor of economic development (themselves three different concepts) trades in a primitivizing imaginary underscored by colonialism. But I would point out that the uncanniness of the intimacy that binds the Western consumer to the colonial *other* is an important fact for these economists. Following a table that tracks the rising slave population of certain European colonies from 1700 to 1831, for example, Sombart makes the wry observation "that the pretty little damsels of Paris and London were able to mobilize [a] vast black army to satisfy their whims." with the coy diffidence of a false deferral of judgment, he calls this fact "an intriguing thought."[25] While the transnational dimension of the trade in luxuries recedes from view in Baudrillart and Laveleye, and receives only some attention from Sombart, my aim here is to establish a sense of anxiety in the face of proto-global trade as integral to how these thinkers are imagining and figuratively discussing the "universalism" of the luxury instinct. A sense of worry at the incomprehensibly large scale of colonial trade (the damsels of Paris linked, shamefully, to the "black army" of their exploited counterparts in the Caribbean) could thus be said to inflect—if at times only in the background—the tension between a will to excavate the economically irreducible character of luxury as an expression of primal desires that exceed rationality (what Mark Featherstone would call luxury's "aneconomic" character),[26] and the economic contexts that make luxury visible, meaningful, and worthy of urgent theoretical attention.

[25] Sombart, 125.
[26] Mark Featherstone, "Luxus: A Thanatology of Luxury from Nero to Bataille." *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 1 (March 2016).

This very tension marks Laveleye's treatise throughout. In a passage that decisively distinguishes luxury-as-such from the object *of* luxury, for instance, Laveleye sets forth a provocative assertion in the definition of his subject: that, at its most extreme, the consumption of a luxury shamelessly stages the destruction of its object. Intending to demonstrate that "the extreme of luxury is that which destroys many days of labor without bringing any rational satisfaction to the owner," Laveleye illustrates his case with the image of a young socialite at a ball, wrecking her dress as she tears up the floor:

> The queen of the ballroom destroys in the mazes of the waltz a lace skirt worth 10,000 francs: there you have the equivalent of 50,000 hours of labor, and labor of the most tedious kind, fatal to the eyes, destroyed in a moment (4)

Laveleye roots this example in the intuitive idea that luxury represents an extreme form of disproportionateness—in this case, between the surfeit of labor required to produce a good, and that good's relative frivolity. Laveleye's rhetoric extends this disproportionateness by giving it a temporal scale. 10,000 francs (approx. 5,500 USD) pays 50,000 working hours, expended spectacularly in one night of lively dancing; such an injustice of proportion even takes on an almost biblical resonance where Laveleye points out that so much lacework is "fatal" to the maker's eyes. Then again, while the root of the problem remains for Laveleye an exaggerated and historically unspecific idea of feminized extravagance, the skirt registers as *a* luxury only under the condition that it took 50,000 hours of unhealthy labor to produce in the late 19th century, and could be bought only at a shamefully profligate expense. Unsurprisingly, lace has by now become decidedly *democratized* in ways that would then obviate the skirt's exemplarity for Laveleye: a clip on Youtube from the popular series *How It's Made*, for example, shows a massive machine producing yards upon yards of silk lace within minutes.

What is notable in Laveleye's case, however, is that he anticipates the potential objection that technological advances might soon alleviate the labor required to produce any given luxury product. In a chapter dedicated to the question "is luxury necessary for the sake of keeping machinery employed?" Laveleye reconstructs and attempts to refute "one of the doctrines of orthodox Political Economy": according to the commonplace view that "machinery economizes labor," the increasing perfection of machinery should naturally result in the obsolescence of an ever-increasing amount of labor; by this argument, a society produces "new wants" in order to maintain a steady demand for human labor. Laveleye thus characterizes this pro-luxury view as follows: "It thus appears that the indefinite expansiveness of wants is indispensable, for without it the indefinite progress of science and mechanics must suppress an ever-increasing number of workers."

So far I have attempted to give an impression of the ways in which a modern discourse on luxury has found itself troubled—by the conceptual challenges posed by a category whose members refuse to be stably defined, and by the twofold moral problem of wasteful consumption and the colonial exploitation that makes such waste possible (although this attunement to colonial violence is complicated by the racist rhetoric of atavism, which problematizes the intimacy between the West and its others on the grounds that such an intimacy threatens to undo Western civilization). For the remainder of this section I want to examine the emergence of art in the midst of so much moral hand-wringing. But my point is precisely that this moral handwringing is what frames the discussion of art for these thinkers—where art comes to the service of redeeming the notion of value beyond the economy. Indeed, Laveleye's first mention of art takes place in the context of his exploration of labor-saving machines.

Laveleye's rejoinder to the classical position on the necessity of luxury—i.e. that luxury reflects economic progress, the emergence of new wants to match society's ability to make better things—takes recourse to the moral argument that we must learn how to better direct the expression

of our desires, of what Baudrillart would call the *instinct de luxe*. The proliferation of machinery might either lead to the obsolescence of labor—and with it, a structural need for the ruling classes to come up with ever more extravagant demands in order to keep labor employed—or, conversely, it might lead to a period of unprecedented *leisure*, where the obsolescence of labor gives way to a society free from the distracting demands of fulfilling its needs.[27] Were we only to curtail the impulse to overconsume (and overproduce), Laveleye speculates, we might all be able to enjoy things of truly transcendent value—like each other's friendship, the beauty of nature, and the beauty of works of *art*:

> Machinery, producing more quickly, can ensure to us *either* more products or more leisure. I maintain that, when our rational wants are satisfied, what we need is not to create a superfluity for the satisfaction of spurious needs, but to apply our leisure to the cultivation of our minds and to the enjoyment of the society of our fellows, and of the beauties of nature and art. (53)

To be sure, Laveleye is hardly the first thinker to speculate about the utopian promise of technology in this way. But in the context of the many arguments against consumption beyond necessity that he articulates throughout his treatise, these remarks might seem surprising: for they posit something of a possible post-industrial future, in which pleasure and desire have absolute reign in the absence of the urgency of fulfilling one's needs. The placement of "art" at the end of the three-item list suggests that the transformation of a society of "spurious needs" into a society of more rational pleasures

[27] For more on the confluence of aesthetic and economic thought in late Victorian England, see Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Crucial to Gagnier's argument is the emergence of a concept of the subject—one that took shape at the intersection between new trends in the economic theory of value, and new arguments about the autotelic supremacy of beauty in British Aestheticism—as characterized by the insatiability of its desire.

would enable artistic creativity to thrive as the domain of supposedly *unnecessary* production and consumption that we *should* indulge in.

In fact, art presents something of a stumbling block for these theorists of luxury, who struggle to position art somewhere between the principle of excess as a transhistorical motivator of human progress, and the perniciousness of luxury as this principle's inevitable consequence (if left unchecked, at least). Art is treated *simultaneously* in these texts as an expression of luxury, and as an important exception to the normal order of luxury consumption, where luxury consumption is understood in terms of morally problematic excess. This is the case for Baudrillart, who endeavors to distinguish art from luxury in terms that preserve the unavoidable proximities between the two. Consider a quotation from the unattributed translation of Laveleye's *Luxury*, which reproduces the following paragraph—along with several others—verbatim from Baudrillart's book:

> Art has for its aim the realization of the ideal of beauty, or, again, the reproduction of certain forms. Luxury has but one object; to make a display. The object of art is essentially disinterested; that of luxury essentially selfish. The beauty itself, which is the goal passionately sought by the true artist, always looking for perfection, what does it mean to the devotee of luxury?[28] Nothing but what glitters. The luxurious pay for art by the yard and by the pound: they buy its masterpieces as they lavish money on jewels and stuffs (19).

The terseness, even the anxiousness of this passage attests to the difficulty of truly distinguishing between elevated and vulgar expressions of the *instinct de luxe*. The vulgar bourgeois ("the luxurious") can buy masterpieces just as well as they can purchase jewels and "stuffs"; the realities of the market in ostentatious goods are such that the broad notion of luxury goods serves as a common denominator of all three of these categories. The distinction between art and luxury thus reveals

[28] This is not a misquote; it appears as though Laveleye's translator has reproduced the sentence structure of Baudrillart's original French.

itself to be a matter of cultivated perception, of an attunement to a transcendent value that supersedes that of the market.

Beauty is the name that Baudrillart gives to this value, alongside his predecessor Laveleye. And yet for Henri Bouchot, another historian who cites Baudrillart extensively, the ability to distinguish truly transcendent beauty from the ostentatiousness of luxury presents its own difficulties. For while luxury, in Bouchot's view, expresses an "egotism" that threatens the integrity of art, in his historical account of the relationships between the rise of luxury and the decline of the First French Empire he expresses an anxiety at the ability of luxurious ornament to "flatter, imitate, and eventually exceed" the formal rigor of works dedicated to disinterested beauty rather than to sumptuous ostentation.[29] Art thus emerges for these writers as a fraught, even a dubious model of a possibly *redemptive* form of the expression of the "luxury instinct"; positioned as the antithesis of luxury, art would here present an economically irreducible value—disinterested beauty—as the highest expression of a human will-to-excess that is itself irreducible to the economy as such. Or, at least art offers this kind of value for those capable of appreciating beauty in the face of vulgarity: for it is in the possibility of distinguishing true beauty from ostentation that Baudrillart stakes his anxious critique of "the luxurious" bourgeois consumer. And it is in his momentary hopefulness for a future society more cultivated and more rational than his own, that Laveleye stakes his utopian vision of a world spent in pleasant contemplation of beauty in the company of others.

IV. Decadent rarities, modernist anti-Decadence

[29] Henri Bouchot. *Le Luxe Français: L'Empire* (Paris: Libraire Illustrée, 1893), 4.
In Bouchot's original French: "Mais le luxe est égoïste, il veut vivre et bien vivre, sauf à passer condemnation sur le mauvais goût. Il se mit donc sans trop protester aux orders de l'art officiel; il en vint à le flatter, à l'imiter, à le dépasser même aussi."

This distinction that emerged in fin-de-siècle sociological discourse between beauty and what we might call *mere luxury*—that is to say, luxury as it exists under the dubious condition of its democratization—has more familiar contemporary parallels in the literary aesthetics of decadent fiction. For one ready example, one can easily read Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884)—the most iconic work of French decadent fiction, and a major source of inspiration to Oscar Wilde and others—as a drama of the intensification of aesthetic receptivity under the exigencies of luxury's normalization in modern France. Before I move on to discuss Huysmans in detail, then, I wish to emphasize the historical fact that a social-scientific discourse on luxury was beginning to articulate ideas about beauty, as a value irreducible to the economic status of its object (be it a luxury or not), at the same time that decadent writers began to pursue ideals of art for art's sake through the exemplarity of luxury objects.

Despite the effort to extricate art *from* luxury on the part of such thinkers as Baudrillart, Laveleye, and Bouchot, decadent writers exalted beauty as they strove to understand the autotelic nature of art in ways that accommodated art's inevitable intimacy with luxury. We might then read the thematics of luxury in decadent fiction as reiterating the need to mark beauty from vulgarity—with vulgarized luxuries positioned as impediments to one's the ability to make such a distinction—while nonetheless reinstating a fundamental link between art and *true* (that is, non-normalized) luxury. My aim in this relatively brief section is to show how decadence achieved this "reinstatement" by way of the exotic—where the exotic expressed the possibility of attaining a true experience of luxury, while simultaneously alluding to the colonial realities that supported such experience. I will discuss the interrelationships between exoticism and the 20th century legacies of decadence through my readings of Firbank in my third chapter; at present, I want to suggest that modernist anti-decadent antipathy emerges in the wake of an awareness, on the part of decadent writers such as Huysmans, of the simple but troubling truth that autotelic art depends on luxury.

Huysmans avoided much discussion of beauty, and yet the form of epicureanism modelled in *À Rebours* would constitute a major inspiration for emerging decadent writers, and especially Wilde. The preface to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) famously concludes by exalting beauty in terms that carefully distinguish it from the economic considerations of necessity and utility:

> We can forgive a man for making a useful
> thing as long as he does not admire it. The
> only excuse for making a useless thing is that
> one admires it intensely.
> All art is quite useless.[30]

My aim in this brief section is thus twofold. Treating *À Rebours* as an exemplary decadent text, I want to show how Huysmans' pursuit of luxury under the condition of its democratization leads to a decisive but ultimately spurious separation between autotelic aesthetic experience and the realities of the market. And secondly, I want to show how certain modernist attempts to express an autotelic aesthetics ended up rejecting decadence *and* the supremacy of beauty in ways that obscured any link between luxury and art—and thus also between autotelic art and the economic contexts that made its experience possible in the late 19th century.

We are treated to something of a wish-list of splendid things in the early chapters of *Á Rebours*, as the decadent epicurean Des Esseintes daydreams about the decorative accoutrements and pieces of furniture that he plans to put up all over his home. Moving quickly from taking stock of Des Esseintes actual possessions—a few expensive books and some "rare flowers"—into something of a reverie of opulence, this passage neatly typifies the richly detailed catalogues of *objets de luxe* that fill the novel:

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[30] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), xxiv.

> Des Esseintes was not deeply concerned about the furniture itself. The only luxuries in the room were books and rare flowers. He limited himself to these things, intending later on to hang a few drawings or paintings on the panels which remained bare; to place shelves and book racks of ebony around the walls; to spread the pelts of wild beasts and the skins of blue fox on the floor; to install, near a massive fifteenth century counting-table, deep armchairs and an old chapel reading-desk of forged iron.[31]

When the English critic Arthur Symons called *À Rebours* a "breviary of the Decadent movement," he was referring to the work's sustained depiction of a solipsistic—even misanthropic—hedonism as a committed way of life.[32] Oscar Wilde famously sought to emulate this refined hedonism in his own life, while perhaps delegating to characters like Dorian Gray those elements of a Huysmans-esque *vie décadente* too indulgent to be enacted in reality.[33] But there are other ways in which *À Rebours*, with its many catalogues, can be read as a kind of guide or manual. For one, the novel stages an inversion of what we recognize as the normative priorities of 19th century realist fiction in ways that provoke us to think about how material objects can either quicken or dull our senses. Writing about the Victorian novel in terms that could be applied just as well to Balzac,[34] Elaine Freedgood contends that while "the Victorian novel describes, catalogs, quantifies, and in general showers us with things […] we have learned to understand them as largely meaningless: the protocols for reading the realist novel have long focused us on subjects and plots; they have implicitly enjoined us *not* to interpret

[31] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, trans. John Howard (New York: Lieber & Lewis, 1922), 37. Subsequent passages from *À Rebours* will quote this edition in parentheticals.
[32] See Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1919), 255.
[33] For more on Huysmans' sheer influence on English Decadence—and particularly on Wilde—see George A. Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans'* À Rebours *and English Literature.* (New York: AMS Press, 2001).
[34] Consider e.g. Barthes' discussion, in "The Reality Effect," of the myriad objects in the background of Balzac's novels, which contribute to the general "effect of reality" by virtue of their *not* being important in themselves. See Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

many or most of its objects."[35] Huysmans' novel would thus seem to rejoin such a boorishly *unaesthetic* tendency, famously (infamously) reducing narrative plot to the very process by which its protagonist learns to pay proper attention to the specialness of exceptional objects.

Of course, *À Rebours* is not so much invested in exploring the importance of attention to objects in general, as it is in dramatizing the cultivation of the aesthete's power to appreciate and discern which objects are worthy of engagement. And while the novel betrays a curious aversion towards the word "beauty," one of the most significant keywords for the classification of things worthy of Des Esseintes' contemplation is "rare," an adjective that occurs with considerable frequency throughout the novel. Connoting the sense of exoticism and singularity that accrues to the idea of the "rarity" together with the elusive nature of all things "rarefied," the adjective expresses the specialness of the accoutrements with which Des Esseintes surrounds himself. He cultivates "rare blooms," and collects "rare balms" from Arabia in order to make his own perfumes; in one particularly infamous moment in Chapter 5, he receives a tortoise, which he quickly decides to encrust with "rare stones"—the poor creature only to be discovered dead shortly thereafter, its little body "having been unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed upon it" (89). And indeed, in a passage that perhaps epitomizes the Decadent doctrine of the supremacy of artifice, Huysman's narrator contemplates the skill with which master perfumers manage not only to imitate, but to improve the fragrance of natural flowers:

> Thus, with the exception of the inimitable jasmine which it is impossible to counterfeit, all flowers are perfectly represented by the blend of aromatic spirits, stealing the very personality of the model, and to it adding that nuance the more, that heady scent, that rare touch which entitled a thing to be called a work of art (169-70).

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[35] Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel.* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

With this rather subtle evocation of the "rare touch" of artistry, Huysmans hints at a continuity between the preciousness of an object of true luxury, and the transcendent status of those few objects genuinely "entitled to be called work[s] of art." And yet Huysmans elsewhere undermines this connection between two orders of rarefied singularity, now associating the supposed artistry of imitation with a sense of irredeemably cheap vulgarity:

> Every epicure nowadays enjoys, in restaurants celebrated for the excellence of their cellars, wines of capital taste manufactured from inferior brands treated by Pasteur's method. For they have the same aroma, the same color, the same bouquet as the rare wines of which they are an imitation, and consequently the pleasure experienced in sipping them is identical. The originals, moreover, are usually unprocurable, for love or money (45).

"Every epicure nowadays": this phrase, exemplary of Huysmans' free indirect discourse, illustrates with considerably clarity the ways in which the democratization of luxury generates the passion to pursue the truly luxurious, the truly rare, the truly exotic. Furthermore, this passage is one of relatively few in the novel that make explicit the *social* stakes of Des Esseintes' experiment—which turns out to involve a desire to distinguish himself from the vulgar bourgeois "epicure" as much as it involves his pursuit of rarefied experiences. In Huysman's case, the vanishing horizon of a luxury that would confer a sense of true distinction—both on the level of its uniqueness as an object of experience, and as a means to self-distinction from vulgar society—can thus be seen to provoke such a committed aesthete as Des Esseintes to seek out objects of ever-increasing rarity, where the rare and the exotic become interarticulated.

The notion of the exotic in *À Rebours* can indeed be read in light of the spatial imaginary that subtends the distinction of Des Esseintes' luxuries from the world of the market. After retreating to suburban Fontenay, attracted by its "immun[ity] to the noisy rabble," Huysman's protagonist spends the rest of the novel receiving and indulging in a steady stream of delivered luxuries that materialize

seemingly from nowhere, borne on visiting carriages. Huysmans' careful construction of a world of spatial remove from the economy should in turn frame our approach to the insistent place of the exotic in this novel, as exemplified by, say, Des Esseintes' "light and diaphanous Chinese porcelains," his Arabian perfumes, or the Morocco leather he uses to paper his walls. Des Esseintes in fact eschews "oriental stuffs and rugs" which had become "cheapened and ordinary now that rich merchants can pick them up at shops and auctions"—despite their distant provenance. In this view, the true exotic rarity is not necessarily something from afar, but more properly something from the imagined elsewhere of vulgar economic life.

And yet Huysmans pointedly dramatizes the impossibility of such a separation between refined pleasure, material luxuries, and an outside world structured by economic activity. Paris is nearby; all those carriages—one of which brings a physician, in fact—have to come from *somewhere*. Huysmans calls attention to the spuriousness of Des Esseintes' absolute self-isolation in part by staging his protagonist's steady physical decline. The novel concludes with Esseintes' forced re-entry into Parisian society, dejected and thoroughly alienated, but also snobbishly aloof. Such an ending underlines the fact that *À Rebours* is not committed to presenting hermetic aesthetic contemplation as something that must take place in isolation from the economic world.

Des Esseintes' increasing illness serves us as an example *par excellence* of the notional disease associated with decadence in the rhetorics of several avant-garde movements that took shape in early 20th century Europe. Marinetti's call to arms to "murder the moonlight" above Venice, for instance, pathologizes the city's romantic languor as paralysis, calling for the bold destruction of its "passéist" monuments:

> The city of Paralysis, with its henhouse cackle, its impotent prides of truncated columns, its pulled up cupolas that bring forth commonplace and petty statues, the whimsy of cigarette

hazes that curl above childish bastions seemingly offered to a slap . . . it disappears behind us, dancing to the rhythm of our swift steps.[36]

In his 1913 manifesto, "Destruction of Syntax – Radio Imagination – Words-in-Freedom," Marinetti in fact addresses luxury directly, which he holds to be an ambiguating element in what is otherwise a list of seemingly desirable changes wrought to the modern psyche by industrial modernity. Beneath a "love of the new and the unexpected," for instance, Marinetti provides "Contempt for love (sentimentalism or lechery) produced by greater freedom and erotic ease among women and by universal exaggeration of female luxury."

Two observations can help us to better understand the stakes of luxury in emerging modernist rejections of decadence in Europe. First: Marinetti exemplifies a suspicion of beauty that animated a particularly bombastic strain of early 20th century writing, much of which positioned itself against decadence and against the dandified subject of decadent prose.[37] Wyndham Lewis brashly calls upon the world to "BLAST" the "Britannic Aesthete," in the first (1914) of his Vorticist manifestoes. Secondly, then, I suggest that we might read a nervous excoriation of decadence, on the part of modernists like Lewis, Marinetti, and Pound, as expressions of a desire to rethink aesthetic autonomy in terms other than the doctrine of art for art's sake, and to promote values *other than beauty*—such as pure or abstract form, or perhaps functionality—that certain modernists stage their own extrication of art from luxury.[38]

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[36] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Let's Murder the Moonlight!" *Futurism: An Anthology*. Eds. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 55.

[37] For more on modernist rejections of beauty, see Lesley Higgins, *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Higgins situates anti-Aesthetic rhetoric—Pound, Lewis, T.E. Hulme—in the context of turn of the century homophobia; she thus argues that the "cultivation of ugliness" as a means to aesthetic transvaluation served to displace forms of misogyny and homophobia. The "cult of ugliness" is a phrase coined by Pound.

[38] For a study of a very different context in which modernists strove to extricate their work from luxury, see Robin Schuldrenfrei's account of the controversies surrounding the luxuriousness of

This notional taint of luxury at the heart of autotelic art also informs Frederic Jameson's diagnosis of the status of aesthetic autonomy in Theodor Adorno's posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). As Jameson asserts in a passage in *Late Marxism* (1990), Adorno's work finds itself frequently beset by the tacit recognition that, in class society, "art [is] luxury and class privilege."[39] Indeed, for Jameson, Adorno's worries about the ontology of art under capitalism assume the nearly religious rhetorical contours of a profound *guilt*, of "the sheer guilt of Art itself in a class society." This works on two levels in Adorno's thought: on one hand, his own commitment to the critical potential of art is itself beset by guilt in the face of art's status as a luxury, leading him to theorize a distinction between art as a whole and the individual work, such that the individual work's critical potential rests in its self-distinction from art as a whole.

On the other hand, as Jameson argues, Adorno also inscribes this sense of guilt in the individual work of art's own critical self-recognition—with guilt, once again, figured as an ontological condition of art in class society. What follows in Jameson's account is thus an attempt to locate the autonomy of the work of art in its coming to terms with the Original Sin of luxury, in whose recognition the work might at least "recover a certain authenticity":

> In this sense, the guilt with which all works of art are suffused will be one of the mediations by which the otherwise monadic work is profoundly and internally related to the otherwise external social order.[40]

Bauhaus products in Germany. Schuldenfrei compellingly shows how the egalitarian political ambitions of those associated with the Bauhaus seemed to be compromised by the nature of market demand for design goods. Robin Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism: Architecture and the Object in Germany, 1900-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2018.

[39] Frederic Jameson. *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), 130.

[40] Ibid.

It is important here to parse autonomy from individuation, and both ideas from the issue of the work's "otherwise" monadism: the seeming monadism of Art is in this case an illusory effect of its false hermeticism as a distinct and privileged domain of refined production—of art qua luxury, in short. The promise of the individual work's ascension to critical autonomy thus resides in its potential to become something *more* than just art—which it does, ultimately, by abolishing its supposed monadism in the name of true social engagement. In addition to standing as the affective texture of the knowledge by which certain objects of luxury actualize themselves as autonomous art, Adorno's guilt here seems to invoke the thorny and unequal social relations that sustain art in the first place. But how might we understand the relationship between autotelic art and luxury in terms other than those of guilt, or the corruption of a "taint" or "stain?" How might we recuperate this relationship into our understanding of the theorization of autotelic art in turn-of-the-century Anglo-American aesthetic discourse? And how indeed might autotelic art's awareness of its own indissoluble relation to luxury be seen as the very source of its critical potential, its ability to shed light on the conditions of its production and reception?

V. The Figure in the Carpet

In this final section, I address these questions by returning to the final years of the 19th century—and to an Anglo-American writer who can be understood as a theorist of luxury in his own right. That writer, of course, is Henry James, whose stylistic engagements with the aesthetics of the *light touch* position him at a crucial period of transition between the luxuriousness of British Aestheticism and modernist experimentation. James's novels are memorable for their attention to the material as well as the affective details of upper-class Transatlantic life, works like "The Figure in the Carpet" and *The Golden Bowl* evoking objects of luxury in their very titles. "I approve of luxury," Henrietta Stackpole asserts, about midway through the first volume of *A Portrait of a Lady*; "I think

we ought to be as elegant as possible." Furthermore, James is no less notable for taking luxury seriously as an aesthetic principle, often conflating the very apprehension of a difficult, elusive, and delicate work of art with the attainment of a similarly elusive, even immaterial object of luxury. Indeed, the 1909 Preface to James's novel, *The Wings of the Dove* (1903) effects this identification of luxury and aesthetic experience in terms that are themselves beguilingly elusive:

> The enjoyment of a work of art, the acceptance of an irresistible illusion, constituting, to my sense, our highest experience of "luxury," the luxury is not greatest, by my consequent measure, when the work asks for as little attention as possible. It is greatest, it is delightfully, divinely great, when we feel the surface, like the thick ice of the skater's pond, bear without cracking the strongest pressure we throw on it. The sound of the crack one may recognise, but never surely to call it a luxury

As I aim to demonstrate, however, James's 1896 story "The Figure in the Carpet" offers an especially sustained engagement with the intimacies between literary art and the notion of luxury. The story concerns the efforts of its unnamed narrator, a literary critic working for a middlebrow magazine, to discover the secretive organizing principle of author Hugh Vereker's oeuvre. James's narrator embarks on a feverish quest that proceeds from Vereker's intimation not only that his works possess a sublime coherence—which he expresses as an "exquisite scheme," or as "a figure in a Persian carpet"—but also that this principle of coherence has evaded all other critics. The story thus offers a reflexive commentary on the nature of literary art, on the question of aesthetic autonomy, and on the limits of interpretation. But by presenting literary apprehension in terms of objects of luxury—chief among which is a Persian carpet, of course— the story also stages the most intense aesthetic experience in terms of "grasping" of an elusive, indeed immaterial luxury. This immateriality is key for James, who displaces the apprehension of Vereker's secret onto colonial India, where antagonist Corvick (a rival critic for a rival paper) discovers the "figure" without ever

divulging it either to the reader or to the narrator. "The Figure in the Carpet" thus anticipates a certain tense recognition of the relationship between art and luxury in 20th century aesthetics, while prefiguring more recent critical attention to the dependencies that bound aesthetic experience to imperialism during the British fin-de-siècle.

James in fact employs two objects of deeply familiarized luxury—familiar almost to the point of cliché, in fact— to serve the governing metaphors of the story: in addition to the rug in the story's title, novelist Hugh Vereker struggles to explain the enigmatic essence of his literary art in the figure of a pearl necklace—or, more specifically, "the very string…[his] pearls are strung on." Playing self-reflexively on the opacities and frustrations between artist and critic, this is one of James's more amusing stories, in which the very categorical contours of Vereker's great authorial principle—described, in sequence, as both a "little trick" and an "exquisite scheme"—are no more possible to describe than their instantiation in his oeuvre. Wavering between the conspicuous concreteness of the word "thing," and the vague abstractions he calls upon to explain it, Vereker thus trips over his own description:

> By my little point I mean—what shall I call it?—the particular thing I've written my books most *for*. Isn't there for every writer a particular thing of that sort […] the very passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely? Well, it's *that*.[41]

This passage divulges some of James's well-acknowledged debts to late Victorian Aestheticism: Vereker's sense of what animates the work of literature recalls a firmly Aestheticist way of thinking, the "flame of art" being a clear nod to the "hard and gem-like flame" of the impassioned aesthetic life as described in the conclusion to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873).[42] Given the story's evident

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[41] Henry James, *Complete Stories: 1892-1898* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 579.
[42] See Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford Unuversity Press, 2010).

Aesthetic heritage[43], it seems suitable that the most concrete figures for the little point should be objects of recognizable Edwardian luxury. Both hint at the exclusiveness and the rarity, not only of literary beauty, but of its discerning accessibility to apprehension (a word derived ultimately from the act of grasping with one's hand). Hugh Vereker's little point is a luxury, in its simplest sense, because it presents itself as the object of a delicate but palpable beauty, highly sought after, and exclusive in its choice of owner. But the point is also a luxury in another sense: as a reflexive emblem of storytelling, the point also embodies the rich superfluity of James's story itself, which shows through a sly refusal to divulge the secret at its center. Although the narrator's friend Corvick eventually discovers the nature of the point while travelling in India, his two-word telegraph ("Eureka. Immense.") only obscures things further. And with Vereker's eventual introduction of a third illustrative figure for the point—that of buried treasure—James plays rather snidely with the story's reflexive superfluity, associating the desire for a meaning deeper than the surface of the text with the vulgarities of genre fiction.

If it is the instability of a scale that shifts from the schematic to the diminutive that characterizes Vereker's point/scheme, then such an indeterminacy of magnitude, in turn, troubles the point/scheme's position as something that might either be exclusively owned and guarded, or publicly available to anyone who knows how to look for it. Although Vereker later insists to the narrator that the very existence of his little point be kept a secret, he also suggests that it lies in plain sight, immanent within his project. At first glance, it seems as though the various awkward exchanges between the writer and his critic serve almost as a parable of the wrong-headedness of that common but misplaced belief that the meaning of a work of fiction is a secret, discrete from

[43] For more on Henry James's relation to British Aestheticism, see Jonathan L Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990).

other aspects of the text, and lying in wait of critical discovery. But Vereker indulges happily in the language of "buried treasure," further linking the exquisiteness of literary richness to that of tangible albeit elusive luxuries. The invocation of buried treasure anticipates the frenzied hunt that drives the narrator and his colleagues towards the key to Vereker's art. And it's the narrator's friend Corvick who finally discovers it, perhaps in an oblique allusion to the carpet's eastern provenance, while traveling in India.

The interpretive challenges presented by "The Figure" have made the story iconic of James's playful and yet deeply serious reflexivity, read as a parable of the always fraught relationship between novelist and critic (and with an implied popular readership for Vereker's novels). Attempts to define the nature of James's secret-in-plain-sight—as something like an allegory of literary meaning itself—have been published regularly since at least the middle of the 20th century.[44] Most famous among these might be Wolfgang Iser's essay on James's tale, which serves as the preface (or, more properly, as a substitute for the preface) to his 1978 book, *The Act of Reading*[45]. Iser argues there that James's story, in its refusal to divulge the secret of the figure itself, teaches us how to rethink meaning as the result of a communicative process between text and reader. The phrase "exquisite scheme" thus invokes only the self-contained structure of the work (as individual text or as an author's *oeuvre*), but also the schematics that sustain the relationship between text and reader itself. As M.A. Williams puts it:

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[44] See for instance Leo Levy, "A Reading of the Figure in the Carpet." *American Literature* 33, no. 4 (January 1962). Levy's reading locates Vereker's figure in the relation of intimate attention that binds author to reader, which engenders meaning as a collaborative process.
is paradigmatic of a Levy also points to an overabundance of critical analysis of the story at the beginning of his article.

[45] Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

> Iser is preoccupied with the manner in which the schemata of the fictional text stimulate, and are energized by, the receptive commitment of the reader. […] The figure in Hugh Vereker's carpet is the structure of his works—this line of argument is similar to Todorov's—but such structures must be creatively perceived and fulfilled by the critical reading public.[46]

Some of this sense of the "schemata of the fictional text" carries through in Pascale Casanova's more recent *World Republic of Letters*, another book whose introduction—in what we might take as a knowing allusion to Iser—works through a careful reading of James's story. As a prefatory metaphor for Casanova's investigation into the occluded structures of inequality that undergird what is called world literature, the notion of the figure in the carpet helps to establish her book's attunement to the systemic totality of literature as such (together with its pretentions to globality):

> […] to extend James's metaphor, the 'superb intricacy' of the mysterious work finds its expression in the overall pattern—invisible, and yet there for all to see—of all the literary texts through and against which it has been constructed. It is the global configuration of the carpet—that is, the domain of letters, the totality of what I call world literary space—that alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts[47].

Given the story's iconicity, it is unsurprising that critics have produced countervailing interpretations of the figure's nature over the years. Stephan Mussil has attempted to move away from the position that the figure in the carpet might be best understood in terms of a social relation. Motivated in part by the story's emphatic insistence that the figure is something concrete and graspable, Mussil rather

[46] M.A. Williams, "Reading 'The Figure in the Carpet': Henry James and Wolfgang Iser." *English Studies in Africa* 27 (1984): 112.
[47] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, Trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 3.

focuses on the eponymous figure's recursiveness. "The Figure in the Carpet," he reminds us, is the title of James's story itself; and if we get carried away thinking that we're even more lost than the narrator, without any access to Vereker's fictitious oeuvre, we might take a step back to recognize that the figure really *does* lie in plain sight, to the extent that it might name something about the text at hand—which is to say, of course, James's story.[48] Mussil's at times hair-splitting closeness of attention to the text thus explicates a tentative account of literary autonomy that posits meaning as a process of "recursive disclosure," by which the text methodically excludes any reliance on what lies outside of it.[49] "The meaning of the story," is, say, "that the meaning inheres within the story."[50]

My aim is not to settle these questions, but rather to draw attention to the way in which the luxuriousness of James's story—its elusiveness, embodied in objects of refined and expensive luxury—mediate its scalar oscillations between a sense of the "schematic" and the preciousness of something very small. James's figures of a precious yet self-sufficient autonomy always give way to an invocation of the schematic in this story: not the pearls, but the invisible string that provides the armature of their arrangement; not even the carpet, but the pattern within it. James's story advances a theory of art that locates the being of the literary work precisely in its status as an object of luxury. The rather exasperating exchange early in the text, in which Vereker has to deny the narrator's

[48] Stephan Mussil, "A Secret in Spite of Itself: Recursive Meaning in Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet.'" *New Literary History* 39, no. 4 (Autumn, 2008).
It bears noting, however, that other scholars have resisted the temptation to read self-reflection as the "key" to understanding James's story. Self-referentiality, as J. Hillis Miller argues, is an idea that nonetheless presumes the possibility of *extra-referentiality*, and so cannot be held up in itself as a critical refusal or subversion of realist conventions of meaning-making. For Miller, the critical work of "The Figure in the Carpet" consists not in its reflexivity, but in the way in which it "mimes" an unreadability latent in all realist fiction.
See J. Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet." *Poetics Today* 1., no. 3: *Narratology I: Poetics of Fiction* (Spring 1980): 112.
[49] Mussil, 795.
[50] Bill Brown, "Reweaving the Carpet: Reading Stephan Mussil Reading James." *New Literary History*, 39, no 4 (Autumn 2008).

reductive attempts to define the point (not "some idea about life," not "some sort of philosophy," still not some "preference for the letter P") trains us to luxuriate on the surface of things; because the truth is not that there is no treasure, but that the treasure simply isn't buried. We might say that the story's insistence on the "secret in plain sight" thus reroutes our desire to comprehend the object towards the simpler pleasures of being in intimate proximity with it. In this way, "The Figure in the Carpet" provides not only a model of art, but of critique as well. The remaining pages of this chapter will examine this imbrication of schematic order and aesthetic autonomy, which, I'll suggest, James's canny invocations of luxury allow us to explore.

A creeping element of administrative logic informs the shape of the figure in the carpet, which James presents as something that oscillates between the minuteness of the little point and the elaborateness of an exquisite scheme. Echoing Flaubert, and the exacting demands of *le mot juste* under which he labored (as well as anticipating Ezra Pound's austere program for a new poetry), Vereker explains that his figure "governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma." The obsessiveness with lexical exactitude that marks this description encourages us not to take the verb "govern" lightly—although the principle of *le mot juste* itself breaks down over the course of the sentence, as "every word" gives way to punctuation marks, even to minute parts of certain letters (little points in the most literal sense). Vereker is, of course, spinning his wheels a little here; after parrying away the "cheap journalese" in which the narrator attempts to come to grips with the great big secret, this sentence comes in the wake of one of Vereker's most strained attempts to express the utter concreteness of his principle. But we nonetheless find the strange but salient echo of bureaucratic pedantry—the language of crossed t's and dotted i's—seeping through the cracks of this more exasperated example of the novelist's self-theorizing. For a brief moment, the aesthetic intricacy embodied in the notional exquisite scheme seems to mirror the blandly mechanical intricacy of bureaucratic management. Or, to put it differently, Vereker's assertion that a

secret principle governs his work leads into his momentary lapse into a starkly managerial rhetoric. What might we make of this?

Let us return to the scene of Corvick's discovery. In Chapter VI we learn that Corvick takes up a position as the editor of a "great provincial paper" in colonial Bombay, and that it is after spending some time there that he discovers the nature of the elusive figure. Despite what registers as a certain mundaneness in Corvick's new position for a British newspaper in India (a strong sense of mediocrity adheres both to Corvick and to the narrator), the narrator and Corvick's wife Gwendolyn Erme indulge in some exoticizing speculations as they wonder how Corvick might have suddenly arrived at such a realization:

> But fancy finding our goddess in the temple of Vishnu! How strange of George to have been able to go into the thing again in the midst of such different and such powerful solicitations!

To which Gwendolyn replies:

> He hasn't gone into it, I know; it's the thing itself, let severely alone for six months, that has simply sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle. He didn't take a book with him—on purpose; indeed he wouldn't have needed to—he knows every page, as I do, by heart. They all worked in him together, and some day somewhere, when he wasn't thinking, they fell, in all their superb intricacy, into the one right combination. The figure in the carpet came out (592).

A few dizzying propositions intermingle in this exchange. Both the narrator and Gwendolyn seem to say that Corvick's discovery must have required a surfeit of ascetic energies—not only an ability to "go into the thing" despite the sensual delights of India and their "powerful solicitations," but also his refusal to even bring Vereker's books along with him. Then again, both characters understand Corvick's discovery through complementary motifs of familiar orientalist (though here specifically

Indian) sublimity—on one hand, a Hindu temple, and on the other, a springing tigress. The figure of the tigress, furthermore, emblematizes Corvick's passivity in the face of Indian exoticness as much as in the face of Vereker's work, this passivity being the very condition of his discovery. The superb intricacy of the figure thus falls into place under the paradoxical conditions of a surrender to the splendor of one's exotic surroundings, and of a careful ascetic negation of them.

It bears pointing out that Corvick's supposed negotiation between ascetic self-control, and passivity in the face of the exotic, echoes prominent conventions for British representations of India during the late 19th century. In a period marked by the interrelated processes of expanding administrative control and increasingly detailed colonial mapping and reconnaissance of the entire subcontinent, Pramod K Nayar suggests, such genres as the British sporting memoir—in which rich Englishmen trek up the Himalayas, or chase boars and tigers through the jungles of Bengal—began to recast the labor of colonial knowledge-production as a kind of luxurious leisure. And at the center of these narratives was a new type of knowing subject, which Nayar calls the "sporting luxuriant,"[51] whose navigation of an administrated India played with the notion of the exotic unknown that had drastically receded between the Mutiny and the establishment of the Indian railway system by the 1890s:

> The response to this increased technological and cartographic conquest and *familiarity* is the search for the 'extreme exotic' landscape. […] The extreme exotic is marked by a rhetoric of authenticity and highly subjective experience. The extreme exotic is the quest for thrills and dangers in a landscape that is harsh, threatening and inconvenient. […] It is both an attitude and a strategy of exploration.

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[51] Pramod K Nayar, *English Writing and India, 1600-1920: Colonizing Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 135.

To the sporting luxuriant, the pursuit of Orientalized luxuries strives to perpetuate the uniqueness of a colonial world made banal (to the English) through the routinized bureaucracy of administration. His play with the push and pull between administrated familiarity and exotic mysteriousness resembles something like a game of fort-da: here, the luxuriant is a figure that momentarily resurrects the perilous exhilaration of the unknown if only to re-inscribe it within the discourse of colonial administration.

Corvick may not be a sporting luxuriant, but Nayar's argument brings to light the regulatory impulse already inherent in British fantasies about Eastern luxuriousness during the expansion of administrative presence in the first few decades of the Raj. This is what I seek to point out in James's story: we might resolve the supposed paradoxical conditions of Corvick's discovery by reading his asceticism, placed alongside his receptivity to India's sensual solicitations, as part of a certain regulatory process—one that simultaneously domesticates the excess of the exotic and maintains its allure. As I have tried to argue in this chapter, it is precisely this simultaneous regulation and animation of excess that defines the character of luxury—and that in turn figures the enigma of autonomous art. In such a story as "The Figure in the Carpet," the management of excess is an ever-present theme, visible from the very outset of the story in the indeterminacy of the figure's scale—its schematic elaboration always larger than just Vereker's fictitious body of novels. James's momentary focus on British India, however, makes cannily explicit the continuities between administrative and aesthetic forms for the regulation of excess during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

I want to conclude by highlighting a bizarre, but revealing, ethnographic document produced in British India, and published only half a decade before James's story. A certain *Short History of the Lives of Bombay Opium Smokers* (1890s, unattributed) moves, from a census-based statistical account of the distribution of private opium use in India, to a remarkable case-by-case sketch of a few hundred

Bombay-based opium users. In almost every case, the smoker is described as taking opium as a "private luxury"; in general, the study hopes to counter what it sees as British misconceptions about the drug (in the name of maintaining the highly profitable opium trade) by demonstrating the overall fitness and soundness of the men interviewed. A typical interview extract looks like this:

> Sekh Mahomed Sekh Hussein, a big, strong man, said: I was born in Bombay and am 38 years of age. I am a fireman in the service of the P. and O. Company and earn from Rs. 18 to Rs. 20 a month. I have smoked chundool as a luxury on and off, for the past eight years. I smoke two annas worth a day. When I go to sea I take dry opium. I work nine hours a day. My health is good and so is my appetite. I am married and have two children.[52]

Such momentary glimpses of the lives of the poor offer a rare opportunity for encounter with subjects who might otherwise have lived their lives in total anonymity. But if it is the private enjoyment of luxuries that offer the richest sense of these men's interiority (endowing them with pleasures unrelated to their professional and familial statuses), these pleasures also are what condition the amassment of so many hundreds of interviews, made to appear uniform by the constant repetition of the term "luxury" throughout. A certain contradiction inheres in these descriptions, not unlike that which grounds Corvick's great discovery: over so many hundreds of extracts, the repetition of the term "luxury" carries an effect so utterly banal that it begins to reek of poverty.

Two interpretive possibilities present themselves in the wake of this peculiar piece of unattributed colonial ephemera: on the one hand, the document's argument against the negative reputation surrounding opium rests on the rhetoric of the democratization of luxury. Opium is here

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[52] This comes from *A Short History of the Lives of Opium Smokers*. The book betrays very little information about the circumstances of its publication, beyond the obvious fact that it was published in India, and the fact that it refers sporadically to Indian newspaper articles published in the 1890s.

presented as a luxury that poses little risk to its users' health, in large part because these men take it in disciplined moderation. On the other hand, this document hints at an easily-overlooked relationship between the normalization of luxury and a colonial will-to-regulation that operates precisely by disciplining the colonial subject's indulgence in sensual pleasures. The rhetoric of the document—as it frames the answers it records from its interview subjects—conveys the relative harmlessness of moderate opium use by presenting the small luxury of opium as conducive to productivity: Sekh Mahomed Sekh Hussein works nine hours a day, raises his children, smokes a cheap quantity of opium, maintains a healthy appetite. Relatedly, then, the document could also be said to disrupt the stereotype of Indian luxuriousness that informs James's story: while James commits to an exotic India as a means to figuring art, and aesthetic apprehension, as a luxury beyond materiality, a contemporary account of Indian labor alludes to the ways in which a thoroughly banalized a luxury can be implicated in the very maintenance of colonial productivity.

Coda: Bataille and the critical life of luxury in the 20th century

Somewhat infamously, the most sustained philosophical engagement with luxury to have emerged in 20th century Europe is surely Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1949), which represents the culmination of a career-long theoretical engagement with the idea of excess. It's a work that reveals an unexpected continuity with such figures as Baudrillart, Laveleye, and Sombart, who had advanced theories of the compulsive *instinct de luxe*. The complexities of his theory bear explanation in some detail, and illuminate a certain ongoing attention to the critical value of luxury and excess in the half-century that followed the publication of "The Figure in the Carpet." Central to Bataille's philosophy is an interest in how economic systems struggle to regulate our relationship to a material world whose vitality is always excessive; Bataille's economic theory thus gives way to a

kind of cosmology, as he posits that the Earth is saturated with a glut of vital energies that come to us inexhaustibly from the sun:

> Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The immediate limitation, for each individual or each group, is given by the other individuals or other groups. But the terrestrial sphere (to be exact, the biosphere), which corresponds to the space available to life, is the only real limit. […] The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion.[53]

This cosmic model of solar energy is at the foundation of Bataille's major contribution to economic thought: namely, the notion of a *general economy*, which describes Bataille's much-expanded view of the system in which energy circulates, both on our planet (where it comes from an inexhaustible source) and throughout the universe. Bataille in fact proposes the concept of general economy as a means to critique the conceptual limitations of a "restricted" view of economy, in which the idea of economy is narrowly confined to the world of human activity, labor, commodities, and money.

Strikingly, Bataille deploys the term "luxury" to denote a range of unproductive modes by which excess energy demands to be spent. And he schematizes the most basic forms of luxury into three categories: eating, death, and sexual reproduction. These categories allow for an analysis of the logic of a natural world driven not only by a sort of *élan vital*, but also by the pressure and limitation of other life. But these three categories in fact iterate an earlier set of categories that Bataille had developed in his essay on "The Notion of Expenditure" (1933)—and in that essay, Bataille is careful to isolate artistic activity as one of the most significant practices by which human societies channel and express an otherwise unruly excess of vitality; in the essay, Bataille divides artistic activity into

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[53] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume 1: Consumption,* Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 30.

two forms of luxurious expenditure,[54] noting that most works of art take part in both: on the one hand, works of art embody a "real" (or "material") expenditure of expensive, or even inexpensive materials—paint, wood, marble, but also the toes of a ballerina, or perhaps the elbows of a painter; on the other, he invokes Aristotle in suggesting that works of art facilitate a "symbolic" expenditure when they allow us to experience cathartic emotions. Art and luxury, once again indissolubly bound.

In light of James's story, however, I want to point to the ways in which luxury figures something like a self-regulatory or governing principle within general economy—something at once analogous to, and yet in fundamental excess of, the human economies that make possible such luxurious phenomena as art, religious ritual, and war. This idea becomes clearer when Bataille pauses, in *The Accursed Share*, to address the problem of poverty. Poverty, Bataille concedes, seems to present a certain problem to general economy, which otherwise imagines the world as endlessly saturated with energy. He suggests that inconsistency posed by poverty can be solved through a shift in scale, from that of the vulnerability of "particular existence," to that of "general existence." A striking picture of global economic interdependency thus emerges, according to which the particularity of "extreme poverty in India" can only be understood through its dependence on "the excesses of American resources." What follows from this observation amounts almost to an appeal to economic justice:

> The problem of extreme poverty in India cannot immediately be dissociated from the demographic growth of that country […] India's possibilities of industrial growth cannot themselves be dissociated from the excesses of American resources. […] On the one hand, there appears the need for an exudation; on the other hand, the need for a growth. […]

[54] Bataille's use of the word "expenditure" in "The Notion" would be more or less replaced by "luxury" in *The Accursed Share*; the terms have almost-identical meanings. See "The Notion of Expenditure," trans. Alan Stoekl, in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 167-181.

> General economy suggests, therefore, as a correct operation, a transfer of American wealth to India without reciprocation.[55]

Bataille's language has a term for the "transfer of wealth without reciprocation"; alongside so many other forms of the unproductive loss of resources, it figures a kind of luxury. In this strange and arresting passage, we might catch a glimpse at an almost-utopian image of a world governed by the self-regulating logic of a general economy. It's a strikingly unusual moment in the history of thinking luxury, in which luxury is speculatively and counterintuitively imagined as a means to a fairer and more just global distribution of wealth.

[55] *The Accursed Share*, 39.

Chapter 2:

Drawing from life in Colonial India: W.E.G. Solomon, Living labor, and Modern Indian Art in the Early 20th Century

I. Indian art under the Raj

King Porus of the Punjab talks with Alexander the Great in one of four murals [Fig. 2.1] that decorate the dome of London's India House, built in 1931 to house the consular offices of the British Raj.[1] The painting depicts a mutually respectful encounter between East and West, one enshrined in Indian legend: Porus, having suffered defeat at the Battle of Hydaspes, maintains his chivalrous composure; Alexander is in turn so impressed by the Indian king's magnanimity that he returns his kingdom to him.[2] Executed in 1932 by a team of Indian artists using a distinctly hybrid style that blends the two-dimensional figurative aesthetics of the Rajput miniature—expanded on a massive scale—with the lavishness of art nouveau, the painting formally underscores its thematic evocation of a harmonious meeting of occident and orient. Situated against a vacant but sumptuous background of gold leaf, the Indian and Greek figures are further linked together in stylistic harmony, most of them sporting shining golden armbands. The painting is, of course, also a scene of aesthetic sublimation: the figures' differences—cultural, historical, hegemonic—are overwhelmed by the exquisite material richness of the painting, which in this case feels almost compensatory, as though the gold were offered in reparative payment for still-ongoing humiliations for which Alexander and Porus are a pale and imperfect allegory. Few monumental buildings pay homage to the paternalistic ideal of *Pax Britannica* as emphatically as the lavish India House, and the Porus-

[1] India House today houses the Indian High Commission to the UK. The building was designed by Herbert Baker, co-architect of New Delhi under Sir Edwin Lutyens.
[2] The legend is recounted on these terms in a set of explanatory notes sent to Raj offices in London before the murals were unveiled.
Communiqué titled "India House Mural Paintings," April 1932, Department of Industries and Labour, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India.

Alexander mural dramatizes with an uncanny poignancy the imperialist dream of incipient peaceability across the British-administered world.[3]

The India House murals represent the culmination of a decade of intensive state intervention into the shaping of modern Indian art. Throughout the 1920s, the British-led Government of India—the Raj—aggressively pursued public arts projects as it jockeyed for cultural supremacy against the rising nationalist movement, throwing large sums of money behind monuments to its own ideals for what modern India ought to look like. Pulling state-affiliated art school directors and other experts into its fold, the Raj used public arts projects—especially murals—as opportunities to recenter public discussion about the present and future state of modern Indian art and culture. Despite being produced by a relatively unknown group of students from Bengal, the hybrid style seen in the India House murals in fact reiterates the motif developed by students of the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay for the murals in the recently-built New Delhi Secretariat buildings, which had been completed in 1928 following six years of financial setbacks. The Bombay School had risen to prominence with the Raj under the directorship of critic and impresario William E.G. Solomon, who had won favor with Raj officials for developing a new approach to Indian painting that blended traditional decorative practices with a committed emphasis on "drawing from life."[4] By taking up an established discourse, reaching back to the mid-19th century, that held Indian art to sustain a unique continuity between art, artisanal labor, and life itself, Solomon was highly effective at arguing for the capacities of Indian art to model the very future of British India, and its place within an Empire on

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[3] For an authoritative study on the aspirations of the British Empire and the emergence of "Pax Britannica" as a rhetorical figure, see James Morris, *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch), 1980.

[4] See Partha Mitter's discussion of Solomon and the Delhi and India House murals in *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

the verge of an unprecedented greatness.[5] Disseminated in letters to Raj officials, essays, and in his many manifesto-like books, Solomon's unique repurposing of social-reformist arguments about the nature and possibilities of Indian art would come to dominate Raj arts patronage.

Focused on the contexts and consequences of Solomon's ascendancy under Raj arts patronage, this chapter excavates the complex ideological ties that bound the discourse of Indian art reform to the biopolitical processes of civic modernity under the early 20th century Raj. By reading across an interdisciplinary archive of art reform treatises, government memoranda, and works of art, I track the emergence of "modern Indian art" in British India, from its earliest origins in 19th century arguments for art reform, through its place in the administrative rhetorics surrounding a series of three major Raj-sponsored art projects in the 1920s. These projects encompass Solomon's supervision of an "Indian Room" installation at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley, alongside the murals in the Delhi Secretariat and eventually in India House. These three works represent the most crucial projects in the shaping of a short-lived official style for modern academic art under the Raj, and their inter-relationships are dense and complex: the Raj began to pursue the idea of executing lavish murals within the Secretariat in the early 1920s; Edwin Lutyens, chief architect of New Delhi, had made the first move in 1922 by proposing a fellowship scheme for Indian art students to be brought to Delhi. Solomon proceeded that same year to write impassioned letters to the Raj boasting of his school's success with mural paintings. India's preeminent art school was by then still the older Calcutta School of Art, however—and it was not until the British Empire

[5] I draw much of my understanding of this discursive context from Saloni Mathur's study of the ways in which a certain idea of India as decorative, beautiful, and fit for exploitation was produced in the 19th century. Mathur identifies a series of key scenes—including the display of Indian craftsmen at work in London department stores such as Liberty—in which she observes the emergence of a late Victorian fascination with a supposed innate artistry on the part of Indians. She stakes the origins of such fascination in a number of imperial contexts, including the art-reform discourse that is one of the objects of this chapter. See Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Exhibition of 1924 that Solomon was able to prove his school's worth by taking charge of an "Indian Room" installation to demonstrate the talent and promise of India's arts students.

By situating Solomon's efforts in a long context of public debate about the state of Indian artisanal labor, and its nominal identity with Indian art, I'll argue in what follows that Solomon's aesthetic philosophy drew its successes from the fantasies it sustained about a sublime inextricability, unique to India, of art, labor, and life itself. British India was in fact in the midst of a crisis of labor in the early 20th century—faced not only with the residual effects of a population shortage incurred by the Deccan famine of the 1870s, but more crucially with a dearth of laborers either adequately skilled or even *willing* to work in India's expanding network of industrial factories. The 1931 *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* definitively confirmed the nature of a problem already proposed by the 1918 report of the *Indian Industrial Commission*, and in Vera Antsey's study of *The Economic Development of India* (1929):[6] that the conditions of modern industry were destined to be unattractive to Indian laborers accustomed to agriculture and the small-scale production of handicraft.[7] Analyzing Solomon's successes in the context of this crisis, I suggest, reveals both the persistence and transformation of artisanal labor in the fray of modernization in India; for the notion of Indian labor's recalcitrance to industrialization reiterates one of the most important tropes of Indian art reform discourse.

Solomon's aesthetic interventions invite us to relate the developing stakes of "modern art" in India to the political implications of "drawing from life" in a colonial context that increasingly necessitated the appropriation of living labor. Although Solomon's writing was not explicitly

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[6] See Vera Antsey, *The Economic Development of India* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929).
[7] "The long hours passed in the uncongenial, if not unhealthy, surroundings of a factory, from which the labourer returns at night to a dirty, crowded and unsanitary hovel […] are most unattractive to a man accustomred to rural life." *Indian Industrial Commission*, quoted in Margaret Read, *The Indian Peasant Uprooted: A Study of the Human Machine* (London: Longman's, Green, & Co. 1931), 23.

concerned with the problems raised by the industrial labor shortage, the fruits of his thought—from treatises to murals—embody a new vision for a colonial future in which art and work are smoothly integrated with life itself. In taking up an established discourse of Indian art as that which subsumed and imbricated life and labor, Solomon thus mobilized modern Indian art as a model of the inexhaustible appropriability and pliability of Indian laboring bodies. And yet, as I demonstrate at the end of this chapter, the program for official art informed by Solomon's ideas ends up manifesting a set of contradictions on the level of the actual work: for the sumptuousness of India House, the Delhi murals, and the India House murals express a sense of opulence that would seem antithetical to the dream of an infinitely exploitable labor force. Such formal opulence is frequently matched by the thematic expression of gorgeous indolence, as well—the Delhi murals, for instance, are rich with scenes of idle languor and of beautiful human figures relaxing in aesthetic contemplation. A commitment to the inter-articulation of life and labor under the sign of "Indian art" would thus seem to give way to a sense of vitality that overruns Solomon's erstwhile commitments to art as a model of the exploitability of Indian labor.

In this chapter, I argue that the works of art produced under Solomon's tutelage (and, later, his influence) evidence a certain contradiction at the heart of Raj administrative practices, which mobilized aesthetic models based in extravagance as a means to express their ambitions for the dominance of labor. Extravagant art, one might say, does a curiously poor job of attesting to the smooth operationality of a colonial machine. What, then, are we to make of the prominence of a visual style grounded in opulence as it mediated a set of colonial ambitions? By excavating the rich discursive context from which Solomon negotiated his vision of Indian art and of the nascent "Bombay revival," I propose some answers to this question. Ultimately, I suggest that we can clarify the stakes as well as the failures of Solomon's experiments in terms of the ambivalence of the "exquisite," an important category in English aesthetic discourse during the 19th and early 20th

centuries. A term intimately tied to the orientalist imaginaries of Imperial Europe since the 17th century, the word is derived from that Latin *exquiro*—to seek out—and has an etymological as well as connotative relationship to the *exotic*, with which it shares its spatializing prefix; as Grace Lavery argues, pointing to the description of Ottoman torture methods in 17th century English prose, the oldest conventional understanding of the exquisite in English referred to "an Oriental imaginary in which a tasteful formal arrangement is distinctively associated with an experience of some kind of pain."[8]

The exquisite also has a well-known currency in the critical rhetoric of British Aestheticism, where it connotes an imbrication of exoticism, a level of refinement that verges on excess, and a sense of imperfectly sublimated violence. As an analytic framework, the exquisite makes visible a pattern in 19th and 20th century art and literature by which certain works attempt to sublimate—without ever fully losing sight of—the political and economic realities that provided art's conditions of possibility. By attending to the exquisite design aesthetics of the three monumental artworks at the center of this study, I identify in their characteristic sumptuousness a certain critical limit to the totalizing program of colonial labor. This limit is figured in the form of a vitality embodied in leisure and aesthetic contemplation—a sense of vitality that, as I will demonstrate, allows us to perceive the ways in which these works resist the aesthetic sublimation of colonial violence. Again I quote Lavery, whose theoretical treatment of the exquisite is perhaps the most thorough in recent criticsm of modern English aesthetics: "An exquisite object," she argues, "is *extremely* beautiful; it is also *weirdly* incomplete. It is also, as often as not, able to hurt its consumer or contemplator."[9]

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[8] Grace Lavery, *Quant, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 5-6.
[9] Ibid., 2.

This notion of the exquisite—as a category marked by an ambivalent combination of beauty and violence underwritten by an Orientalized exoticism—frames my interpretation of the three monumental projects at the center of this study. The exquisiteness of the Indian Room, the Delhi Murals, and the Indian Murals, I argue, disclose the imbrication of a set of processes at work in the late Raj, including a diffuse colonial agenda to better appropriate the labor capacity of Indians, a governmental will to the production of Indian culture in its own image, but also a principle of violence that the Raj was able neither to fully sublimate nor to suppress. By attending to the exquisite design aesthetics of these works themselves, then, I identify in their characteristic sumptuousness a certain critical limit to the totalizing program of colonial labor. This limit is figured in the form of a vitality embodied in leisure and aesthetic contemplation—a sense of vitality that, as I will demonstrate, allows us to perceive the ways in which these works resist the aesthetic sublimation of colonial violence.

II. Exquisite labor

In the previous chapter, I examined the position of luxury at the intersection between decadence and modernism. The present chapter continues my commitment to elucidating the ways in which excess animates the arts of the early 20th century British Empire. More specifically, this chapter positions the exquisite as an aesthetic framework in which we might rethink the position of labor within the modernizing processes of modernity under British (though broadly European) imperialism. In so doing, however, I also suggest that attunement to the exquisiteness of 20th century art allows us to remark certain subterranean intimacies between modernism and British Aestheticism—shedding light, in this case, on the place of labor in joining Aestheticist and modernist conceptions of an ideal continuity between art and life. Arguments for art reform in British India drew much from the work of Aesthetic thinkers like John Ruskin and William Morris,

who had upheld handicraft and decorative artwork as critical alternatives to the alienated labor conditions incurred by Victorian industrialism. Authorities such as Solomon and colonial architect Herbert Baker (deputy to Edwin Lutyens in the design of New Delhi) learned much from other late 19th century aesthetic ideals as well, especially the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But it is the ideal of an art-life continuity rooted in idealized labor—as well as in a historicizing emphasis on the origin of "the arts" in disciplined ways of doing and making—that most firmly positions the activities of the Bombay School at the threshold between Aestheticism and modernism.

Versions of an ideal continuity between art and life sustained by a concept (or an imaginary) of idealized labor can also be found across European thought in the early 20th century, despite a well-known modernist animus towards the dandified idea of a "life for art's sake" infamously embodied in figures like Dorian Gray (indeed of Wilde himself) and J.-K. Huysmans' character Des Esseintes.[10] Le Corbusier famously turned to the idiom of industrial optimization when he asserted that a house was a "machine for living in," uniting art and life under the rubric of a perfected, efficient form of smooth operationality.[11] Herbert Read, a more direct descendant of the British Aesthetes, returned to the Classical notion of the arts as disciplined practices of refined work when he set out to formulate a program for "education through art."[12] In arguing that the appreciation and production of fine art could sharpen our perception of the world around us, Read advocated for a notion of art that was fundamentally linked to *techne* and at the intersection between living, feeling, thinking, and working.[13]

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[10] Paul Sheehan proposes a modernist transformation of "life for art's sake" into a notion of *continuity* between art and life. See Paul Sheehan, *Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.
[11] See Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986).
[12] See Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943).
[13] Read elaborates these claims in an essay titled "Art and Life," published in the September 26, 1959 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Lastly, I suggest that the exquisiteness of modern Indian art registers the prominence of a certain principle of excess within the otherwise rationalizing processes of modernity under the Raj—and especially of the fundamental copresence of violence and reckless expenditure underlying Raj policy. Indian political economists and historians of the late colonial period have consistently identified various forms of excess, including agricultural and industrial overproduction, the over-exportation of Indian goods to Europe, and excessive governmental expenditure, as operative principles in the colonial management of the Indian economy. In a series of open letters to then-Viceroy Lord Curzon, penned in 1900, Bengali economist Romesh Chunder Dutt blames "ruinous expenditure" for colonial India's exacerbated susceptibility to devastating famines, the most recent of which had occurred in Bengal between 1876-1877.[14] Jadunath Sarkar, in a 1909 treatise on *The Economics of India*, makes a similar argument that the exploitation of Indian goods, in the form of an "excess of our exports over our imports," contributed to the perpetuation of an Indian subordinacy to British power.[15] Tirthankar Roy discusses this ironic condition of India under the British, whereby the administrated overproductivity of India's industries, coupled with extravagant governmental expenditure on imperial expansion, engendered widespread famine and harsh austerity for many native commoners; Roy calls this irony "the paradox of the Raj."[16]

"Exquisite," that so-very-Aesthetic adjective, occurs abundantly and casually in the writings of art reformers, where it evokes the elusive principle of a perfection exhibited *par excellence* in works of traditional Indian craft. Unsurprisingly enough, it's a favorite word in E.B. Havell's *Ideals of Indian Art* (1911) and *A Handbook of Indian Art* (1920), where it describes artistic finesse in addition to a certain "exquisite" taste that motivates the intuition of Indian artisans. The word appears,

[14] Romesh C. Dutt, *Open Letters to Lord Curzon on famine and land assessments in India* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900), xvi.
[15] Jadunath Sarkar, *The Economics of India* (Calcutta: S.K. Laniri, 1909), 49.
[16] Tirthankar Roy, *How British Rule Changed India's Economy* (London: Palgrave, 2019), 2-3.

furthermore, with great regularity throughout Owen Jones's foundational sourcebook on *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856); and in his study of *The Industrial Arts of India*, scholar and social reform advocate George Birdwood marvel at the "exquisite skill" of Indian cabinetmakers. The first report of the Advisory Committee on Mural Paintings in New Delhi, reviewing preliminary sketches for the Secretariat murals, praises the "exquisite color and line" achieved by students of the Bombay School.[17]

In Solomon's *Bombay Revival*, however, the single occurrence of the word describes not a work of art but a "chain of fealty" that binds artisans to their sovereign patron. As Solomon writes, in a passage that compares Raj patronage to that of the Florentine Medicis:

> The position of Art in India is considerably worse than the situation of Art in Italy before Cosimo de Medici concentrated in his own munificent person the rejuvenating power of Patronage, and res-established that exquisite chain of fealty and devotion which can attach the young artist to the monarch. The broken links of this chain can certainly be restored in a country where discipleship is still understood, and where respect for the teacher is only next in importance to reverence for parents (66-67)

In the following sections, I set out to trace the transformation of an ideal of Indian art that began with an emphasis on the holistic integrity of Indian artisanal practices, and ended with the upholding of Indian art as the very model of a totalizing colonial fealty.

III. Labor and modernity in colonial India

This chapter takes part in an established line of inquiry into the ways in which the stimulation of art and culture has historically served to entrench colonial power. In his own study of

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[17] Report of the Advisory Committee on mural paintings in New Delhi, 1928, Department of Industries and Labour, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India.

the circumstances surrounding the New Delhi and India House murals commission, Partha Mitter shows how Raj advocacy of figurative realism allowed British officials to cast the modernist experiments of nationalist artists of the Calcutta School of Art as regressive and traditionalist. Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1989), which examines the colonial origins of disciplinary English studies, provides an analogous examples of cultural dominance in British India.[18] Furthermore, Saloni Mathur's rich study of cultural display in colonial India allows us to apprehend the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, in which Solomon's students presented their work, as a striking embodiment of the "ideological role of display-based cultural forms—paintings, photography […] and scientific and architectural imagery—in the knowledge practices of Empire."[19] Lastly, this study draws much from Debora Silverman's three-part essay series on the Congolese origins of Belgian art nouveau style—which, as she argues, stages (but also suspends) the notional struggle between civilization and barbarity through its dazzling use of motifs based on elephants, whips, and sinuous rubber vines.[20]

To be sure, this chapter owes its greatest debt to Mitter, whose work represents the most sustained art-historical investigation into the context surrounding the Delhi and India House murals. I also follow Mitter in analyzing Solomon's Indian Room together with the murals, for it was the Indian Room at Wembley and its companion text—*The Bombay Revival*—that would cement Solomon and his school's status with the Raj. My departure from Mitter is a matter primarily of disciplinary difference, and secondarily of archive: I endeavor here to closely read the archive of aesthetic and bureaucratic rhetorics that made these artworks possible; and as a result, I consult a

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[18] See Gauri Viswanathan. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India.* (NY: Columbia UP, 1989).

[19] Saloni Mathur. *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*. (Berkeley: U California P, 2007). 7.

[20] Deborah Silverman. "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Art Nouveau." *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011) .

range of art-reform treatises and governmental communiqués that do not fall within Mitter's purview. Such a difference in approach, however, shifts the attention of my own study away from Mitter's—that is, away from the stakes of "contested nationalism" and towards broader questions of contested modernity in the final decades of British rule. Mitter, largely invested in tracking the movements that would lead (for better or worse) to the *triumph of modernism* in the wake of Indian independence, presents Solomon's artistic legacy as the "swansong of imperial patronage" (223)—a move uninterested in fully considering the lasting implications of Solomon's own ambitions for artistic modernity in India, and which gives little room in which to examine the possible critical potential of the actual works produced under his tutelage.

Taking a different approach, I suggest that a fuller sense of the significance of the works produced under Solomon's influence is possible if these works are read within the fraught context of modernizing developments in the late Raj, and specifically of the doubtful place of labor in the fray of colonial modernity. These developments include the elaboration of a biopolitical system of colonial governmentality—comprised of a range of disciplinary institutions, such as schools, hospitals, art academies, and government bureaucracies—and the newly consolidated forms of administrative power that this system enabled. Established in 1858 at the end of the Indian Mutiny, the Raj replaced the patchy and inconsistent rule of the British East India Company (sometimes called the Company Raj) with its inconsistent and regionally variable collection of colonies and client states. Possessed of a newly consolidated power in the subcontinent, it proceeded to undertake a series of modernizing bureaucratic and infrastructural reforms over the second half of the 19th century. The Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, for instance, was founded in 1857, and it was in 1864 that the formerly private Calcutta Arts School was nationalized. These social and bureaucratic reforms underpinned liberalizing developments in British India, and were synchronous with the gradual development of industrial manufacture alongside a massive expansion of such existing

industries as resource extraction, agriculture, and the cultivation of natural materials. Postcolonial and subaltern studies have produced separate accounts of the trajectories of historical modernity, and of biopolitical liberalism, in colonial and postcolonial India.

To give an account of the nature of modernity in India has, of course, been a persistent aim of the postcolonial study of culture on the subcontinent, and one of the originary intellectual tasks of subaltern studies. Postcolonial historians and historiographers of India, including Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, have typically sought to critique the very concept of modernity and its organizing presuppositions—most crucial of which is the imposition of a totalizing and homogenous chronology of world history—a chronology profoundly Eurocentric in nature, and mediated by what Chakrabarty calls the "global historical aspiration" of capital itself.[21] Reacting along similar lines to the colonial appropriation of India's past—whereby precolonial history is reduced to the position of a precursor to a modernity only possible via Western intervention, even if such intervention would eventually by superseded by national independence—Guha has argued emphatically for the right to an indigenous "historiographical self-determination."[22] Guha finds himself often compelled to tarry with Hegel, for whom the concept of Reason in History is not only an abstraction of the inevitable progress of (an Enlightenment determination of) Reason as a world-historical impetus, but also an embodiment of abstraction-as-such as one of the principal means by which the totalizing force of Reason overcomes local and specific historical processes.[23]

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[21] Chakrabarty contrasts the monolith of a homogenous, capitalist modernity against a stereotype of a chaotic and confusing chronological multiplicity in India, a place where people seem to live "in several centuries simultaneously." Chakrabarty's aim, particularly in his chapter on Marx's concept of abstract labor, is to recover the texture of a historical specificity in Indian life that resists both the "life history" of capital as well as the Eurocentric presupposition of (in this case, multiple and simultaneous kinds of) Indian backwardness. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 50.
[22] Ranajit Guha. *History at the Limits of World-History.* (NY: Columbia UP, 2002) 2.
[23] See e.g. the 6-page introduction to *History at the Limits*.

By resisting the claims to universality of a concept such as Hegelian Reason, many postcolonial critics have "argued for a more granular, materialist attention to the specific logics at work in shaping modernity in British India. Tracking the role of statistical sciences in mediating the dominance of the Raj, for example, U. Kalpagam asserts that British India exemplifies a case *par excellence* of colonial biopolitics. And by revealing the easily-overlooked relationships between various administrative processes—the foundation of institutions of public health for instance, alongside the national census and the development of a Raj department for labor—she thus identifies the epistemic foundations of governmentality under the Raj, with its de-individualizing approach to "rule by numbers."[24] Kalpagam works within a decidedly Foucauldian framework, striving to identify the rise of the biopolitical amidst the elaboration of Raj institutions of bureaucratic management—drawing on Foucault's formulation of the biopolitical as a system of rule expressed not through disciplinary force, but through the administrative management of a *population* subject to institutions of knowledge-production (medical science, demographics, statistics) and bureaucratic discipline (schools, universities).[25] Kalpagam, however, notes a strange inconsistency in most historical studies of the governmental operations of the Raj: that while historians have done "prodigious" work to analyze the formation of the colonial state, its expansion, and its relation to modern political philosophy, relatively few have examined the administrative operation of the Raj through a critique of biopolitics.

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[24] See U. Kalpagam. *Rule by Numbers: Governmentality in Colonial India*. (Lanham MD: Lexington Press, 2014).

[25] What appears here to be a certain contradiction—the biopolitical as the systematization of post-disciplinary power, but expressed through disciplinary institutions—reflects Foucault's own interest in the continuousness of forms of political structures over the course of change; the biopolitical does not consist in a complete rupture with more violent forms of political rule, but more specifically a transformation or restructuring.

Guha and Chakrabarty might be among those that Kalpagam would charge with a scholarly prodigiousness that nonetheless ignores to a fault the specific methodologies of Foucauldian critique; *Provincializing Europe*, for instance, contains no mention of "biopolitics." My aim here is certainly not to correct any supposed oversight in postcolonial scholarship. I do, however, want to suggest that biopolitical and subaltern-studies approaches to Indian modernity might be reconciled by carefully attending to the place of labor in the totalizing ideology of the Raj. Chakrabarty's Marxist interpretation of the gradual universalization of Western historical time—through the mediation of capital, whose own aspirations to universality are predicated in part on the possibility that all values might be compared on the basis of labor time—is explicitly concerned with the intertwining of life and labor in British India. Chakrabarty often emphasizes the stakes of modernity in the state appropriation of life itself, contesting the universalizing pretensions of a Eurocentric historicity that has proceeded in India through "the transformation of life-worlds into labor and history." In a chapter on the Marxian concept of abstract labor to which I will later return, Chakrabarty examines the central importance of labor time—and thus of labor—as the form of mediation through which capitalist historicity sublates whatever local differences it encounters. In this account, the totalizing process of the abstraction of labor has at its very center an investment in the state appropriation of life itself.[26]

IV. Art and labor, art and life

The notion that Indian art was in need of serious government-supported reform had arisen in social reformist discourse in India just before the Mutiny, and typically addressed itself to a consolidated Indian government marked by newly interventionist administrative practices and

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[26] Chakrabarty, 67.

economic policy. The fact that Indian art renewal was treated as a matter primarily of social reform in the late 19th century is key; for many social critics of the early Raj, most of whom were British, Indian art was something of a byword for Indian *artisanship*, where Indian artisanship was itself a term capacious enough to subsume most forms of traditional craft labor. For the most part, this approach sought pointedly to resist the encroachment of a modernity figured in terms of the arrival of industrialization. For writers such as Owen Jones, George Birdwood, and Henry Sumner Maine, India still exhibited vestiges of a traditional culture of labor that, for Ruskin and Morris, had not existed in Europe since the middle ages. The emergence of "modern Indian art" in the aesthetic rhetoric of the Raj begins in this resistance to capitalist modernity—a fact that has contoured an idiosyncratic and at times paradoxical career for the concept of modern art in India.

The precarious position of art on the field of contestation over the future of a modernizing India finds a particularly eloquent expression in a 1909 essay by the Ceylonese art historian and philologist Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Raising the issue of India's future in terms of messianic anticipation, Coomaraswamy asks a question that he immediately answers: "Where is our William Morris? Probably the time for his coming is not ripe."[27] Coomaraswamy wrote "The Functions of the Schools of Art in India" in response to an article published earlier that year by Cecil Burns in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (Coomaraswamy provocatively reuses Burns' title).[28] Burns, then principal of the Sir. J.J. School of Art[29] in Bombay, had bemoaned what he saw as the current "decadent" state of Indian art and craftsmanship, and argued in his essay that British-administrated

[27] Coomaraswamy, "The Functions of the Schools of Art in India." *Art and Swadeshi.* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1913).
[28] Burns, "The Functions of the Schools of Art in India." *Journals of the Royal Society of Arts.* (June 18, 1909).
[29] Officially "Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art," and spelled inconsistently in English in the early 20th century; most writers of the period (and the still-active school's own website) prefer the initials.

art schools might revitalize India's traditional arts by "transforming them from an aggregation of isolated craftsmen to organized and skillfully directed combinations of workmen."[30] Deftly attuned to Burns' condescending imperialist predispositions—and particularly to what he took to be the latter's tacit premise that India is a "*savage* country, which it is England's divine mission to *civilize*"[31]—Coomaraswamy points out that the most significant reasons for the evident stagnation of Indian art was, in fact, that India was not yet a sovereign country, confident in its heritage and possessed of its own destiny. Advocating for the restoration of full Indian control over domestic arts institutions, he thus moves on to appeal more broadly for Indian national independence, whose success as an idea would be measured by the trajectory of Indian art reform:

> Is the compelling movement within the country, which we call Nationalism, strong enough for the Herculean task before it, the conversion of a generation of parasites into a nation of Orientals? Every word of the answer to this question will be faithfully recorded in the progress or decline of Indian art.[32]

An anxious, even doubtful thread runs through this question, and finds expression in Coomaraswamy's startlingly disdainful characterization of Indians as "parasites," feeding off the legacy of past traditions and Western influence. His most emphatic prescriptions for the future of India thus read as haunted by *probably-not-ye*t temporal condition of its aesthetic revival, summed up in the dubious figure of "our" William Morris, with its faint connotations of a surreptitious Englishness stalking about in Indian clothing.

Before examining the works produced under Raj sponsorship in the 1920s, then, it is important to provide a context in which to understand the rise of modern art as a concept in

[30] Burns 637.
[31] Coomaraswamy, 53.
[32] Ibid., 55.

administrative discourse—a concept that built on a governmental appropriation of a decades-long social-reformist interest in the salvaging of Indian artisanal traditions.[33] Once these ideas reached Solomon, they had become greatly transformed, from a speculative attunement to the possibilities of Indian art, to a colonialist fantasy that positioned a totalizing idea of Indian art as a model of the labor potential of Indians in service to the Empire. Advocates for the reform of Indian art in the late 19th century tended to articulate their claims on the basis of a pair of entangled premises: one of these was that Indian art was identical to Indian artisanship, and thus at the backbone of traditional craft industries; while another, relatedly, held art to be so deeply engrained within Indian life—within religious rituals, or the songs that animate the dullness of repetitive work—as to be inseparable from it. These axioms helped shape the rhetoric of anti-industrial critique, but they also tended to inform a critical disposition whose resistance to industrial expansion had less to do with the emancipation of laborers than with the optimization of labor through the configuration of more ideal conditions for industry. "Modern Indian art" emerges in the early 20th century within rhetorical assertions of the service that Indian cultural traditions may provide to the Empire; but it is a figure underwritten by a longstanding tendency to regard art as a form in which labor and life are deeply imbricated.

We witness the entanglement of artisanal reform and the question of the optimization of colonial labor as early as the mid-19th century, in architect and historian Owen Jones' summary of the Indian contribution to the Great Exhibition of 1851 at London's famous Crystal Palace. The Indian display at the Great Exhibition constitutes the first major example of the self-contained, microcosmic cultural display of India's staggering foreignness, but also its dazzling richness and the

[33] For more on the discursive contexts for modern art in India—and the ways in which nationalist artists contested the norms set by colonial school-directors and social-reformers—see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

prospect of its immense economic potential, which could be pondered on a manageable scale.[34] Jones had in fact organized the Indian display at the 1851 Great Exhibition while at work on his authoritative *Grammar of Ornament* (1856)—a richly illustrated historical sourcebook on ornamental patterns and motifs from across the world. Although the section on Indian ornamentation (subdivided into Islamic and "Hindoo" styles) constitutes only one among twenty chapters dedicated to enumerating the governing rules of culturally variable decorative traditions, Jones is careful to call attention to the economic specificities of artisanal labor in India that make the country's art so beautifully refined. Praising the "gorgeous contributions of India" on display at the Crystal Palace, he notes the particular "unity of design" within Indian art (alongside contributions from other countries with Islamic-influenced artisanal traditions) "amid the general disorder everywhere apparent in the application of Art to manufactures" within the West.[35]

Having written substantially on Arabian, Moorish, Persian, and Turkish ornamental styles, Jones is clearly more interested here in the stylistic and economic conditions that broadly characterize all (if not most) of the arts of the Islamic world than in the uniqueness of Indian art itself. Nonetheless, Jones dedicates an unusual amount of speculative attention to the rejuvenating possibilities of Indian art, which belongs to a culture on the precipice of a totalizing British takeover. Considering that Jones's treatment of other Oriental styles largely relegates non-Western practices to a condition of historical defunctness, or at least of non-modernity—where, say, all of "Chinese Ornament" might be compared to "Medieval" and "Baroque" European styles—it is notable that he emphatically stresses Indian art's continued "harmony with the present." For a moment, Jones even inverts his normal paradigm for comparing European art—whose styles vary more historically than

[34] Saloni Mathur makes this argument about the Crystal Palace and similar exhibitions in *India by Design.*

[35] Owen Jones. *The Grammar of Ornament.* (London: Day & Sons, 1856). 78.

geographically—to its non-Western others, suggesting that it is European decorative art that currently lags behind the times:

> Whilst in the works contributed by the various nations of Europe, there was everywhere to be observed an entire absence of any common principle in the application of Art to manufacturers,—whilst from one end to the other of the vast structure there could be found but a fruitless struggle after novelty, irrespective of fitness, that all design was based upon a system of copying and misapplying the received forms of beauty of every bygone style of Art, without one single attempt to produce an Art in harmony with our present wants and means of production—the carver in stone, the worker in metal, the weaver and painter […]." (78)

In a passage marked by admittedly tortuous prose, Jones characterizes modern, industrial manufacture as not only artless, but somehow regressive—stuck in "fruitless struggle after novelty" rather than any true commitment to live up to the "present wants and means of production."

The most influential treatise on the nature of Indian art and its exemplarity for the improvement of labor conditions is *The Industrial Arts of India* (1880), by the Anglo-Indian naturalist, Raj official, and cultural scholar George Birdwood.[36] The treatise provides a wide-ranging and systemic view of many different artistic traditions—including such plastic arts as painting, sculpture, and silverwork, alongside Vedic literature and even Hindu ritual practice. The titular phrase is curious, occurring nowhere in the body of the text itself. But the term registers Birdwood's thoroughgoing commitment not only to identifying the decorative principles of Indian design aesthetics, but to noting the complex labor conditions under which Indian art is traditionally

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[36] See Mathur, pp. 30-32, for an extensive discussion of Birdwood and the importance of *The Industrial Arts of India* during the late 19th century.

produced. For Birdwood, these conditions were sustained by an ecosystem of connected rural villages, in which Indians lived in harmony with each other and with their work.

A certain ethical confusion between a desire to protect Indian laborers, and a desire to exploit their suitability to "the present wants and means of production" was nonetheless commonplace throughout late 19th century reformist discourse, present but tacit even in some of the period's most critical arguments against imperial exploitation. Birdwood, for instance, insists that typical Western distinctions between art and industry do not apply well to India, a place in which the majority of manufacturing had been traditionally undertaken by artisans in small villages. It is perhaps on this basis that Birdwood argues that "everything in India," being traditionally hand-made, "is a work of art";[37] and it is perhaps on the same basis that he would later claim that "there is no fine art in India."[38] But despite his committed advocacy against exploitation, the first edition of his treatise—written just three years after the conclusion of the Deccan famine—features an appendix full of print advertisements for local art traders, the most jarring of which promises the sale of household idols once owned by families that the famine had left dispossessed:

> Mssrs. Proctor & co. have in their possession nearly the whole of the Hindoo Gods as illustrated in the Guide. The FAMINE, which devastated certain parts of INDIA last year, having forced the HINDOOS to part with even their family Gods.[39]

This advertisement sits among several others in the book's appendix, advertising art galleries trading in Indian jewelry, furniture, and sculpture, alongside educational textbooks and household products (toothpaste, macassar oil, hand cream).

[37] George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India.* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), 131.
[38] Birdwood makes this claim in in response to a paper by E.B. Havell on the possibilities of arts administration in India. See George Birdwood, "Fine Arts in India." *The Royal Society of Arts* 58, no. 2898 (March 4, 1910): 425-426.
[39] Birdwood, 349.

Birdwood's essentially socio-economic argument for the role of Indian artisanship in facilitating better labor conditions gave way to a profusion of treatises and manifestoes on the nature of Indian art at the turn of the century. He had a considerable influence on Calcutta Art School principal E.B. Havell, for instance, who cites him extensively in his 1912 *Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India*. Havell, Solomon's primary rival for the attention of the Raj, occupied a position somewhere between British paternalism and a sympathy for the nationalist movement; although he never renounced fealty to the Government (his employer, as the director of a state-operated art college), his own writings frequently defend the integrity and importance of native artistic traditions. In 1920, his reissued *Ideals of Indian Art* extended the arguments towards the question of artistic "revival" that he had articulated in the 1910s, urging Indian artists—along with all those who presided over art school curricula—to rediscover medieval Indian methods of craftsmanship.[40] Havell credits Birdwood, in a 1910 essay published in *The Royal Society of Arts*, with single-handedly persuading Raj education officials to respect the aesthetic as well as economic value of traditional Indian crafts.[41]

I will attend closely to a set of art reform texts, and their own articulation of the relationship between art and labor, in the following section; in the meantime, I want to signal that responses to the crisis of Indian industrial labor reiterate a trope of Indian recalcitrance to industrialization that has strong roots in art reformist discourse, where Indian artisanal traditions are typically positioned as an insoluble limit to the achievement of modernity in India. British anthropologist Margaret Read works within this vein in *The Indian Peasant Uprooted* (1931), a pointed critique of the callous tone of the report of the 1929 *Royal Commission on Labour*. For Read, who rails against the industrial

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[40] See Ernest Binfield Havell, *Ideals of Indian Art*. (London: John Murray. 1920) (first ed. 1911).
[41] E.B. Havell, "Arts Administration in India." *Royal Society of Arts* 58, no. 2895. (February 4, 1910): 274-296.

reduction of persons to the status of "human machines," one of the most brutal aspects of industrial development in India was the way in which it imposed a Western modernity upon a population whose native customs could not accommodate it. The Indian factory laborer was thus caught up in the vertigo of an incompletely realized modernity, standing "between the old light and the new…dazzled by the headlights of the new age."[42] Before I move on to discuss Solomon in context, then, I suggest that "modern Indian art" in India cannot be fully understood outside of the context of a colonial conception of modernity fundamentally rooted in questions of labor—a conception that unfailingly inflects development in colonial aesthetic discourse as well.

V. Modern Indian art

To be sure, what I have been calling *art reform discourse* in India was, in the 19th century, more protectionist than progressive; its view of a viable future for India rested on the hopeful retreat of British industrialism and either the preservation or revival of traditional artisanship (depending on context). By the 20th century, however, contestation over the capacities of Indian artisanship to support a changing empire gave way to an active interest in the ways in which government might directly foster "modern art" as such. The use of the term modern is indeed far from commonplace in 19th century Indian art writing, and for Birdwood—who had drawn a strict opposition between Hindu religious crafts and the existential threat of "modern life"—it might appear to be a contradiction in terms. The phrase "Modern Indian art" becomes commonplace in colonial Indian arts discourse only in the early 20th century, and it occurs most frequently in the context of speculation about the country's future. But I would point out that rhetorical uses of the term

[42] Read, x.

"modern Indian art" reflect an ambivalence that perhaps results from the anti-modern orientation of much of 19th century art reform discourse.

In a chapter on the "Adaptation of Indian Art to Modern Life," in *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India* (1912), for instance, Havell anticipates and resists the kinds of arguments that would later characterize Solomon's proposals for the application of Western techniques to Indian painting, asserting instead that a modern Indian national spirit can emerge only after the restoration of pre-industrial practices of artisanal labor:

> But the only way [an end to the corrupting influence of Western "materialism"] can be brought about lies in giving back to Indian art its old place in Indian life and Indian religion: in adapting it to the new conditions and the new mode of life. Art must always be moving with the times, for real art is the expression of the thought of the times.[43]

For his part, Solomon suggests in *The Bombay Revival* that governmental patronage is the first step in the historical process "in which Modern Art has developed";[44] and a mere few pages later he quotes British MP Sir George Lloyd, who had praised the Bombay school for "assimilating to the national genius the best in modern Art" through the expansion of its ceramic and carpet weaving workshops (71). At the end of the book, Solomon even uses italics to emphasize the distinctly modern character of his students' achievement, which in turn stake a certain claim to the future of India itself:

> The collection—the first England has seen of *Modern* Indian Art for the British Empire Exhibition—is now on its way to Wembley Park, and everywhere one feels the vibrations of

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[43] Ernest Binfield Havell, *The Basis of Artistic and Industrial Revival in India.* (Madras: Theosophist Office), 1912. 18.

[44] William Ewart Gladstone Solomon, *The Bombay Revival of Indian Art* (Bombay: Sir J.J. School of Art, 1924), 71.

that Imminent Indian Spirit of Achievement, like the strugglings of the enormous Roc-infant, about to burst its shell (119, original italics)[45]

There's a sense of unbounded energy to this passage, which pins the possibilities of India's future, not unjustifiably, on the "Imminent Indian Spirit of Achievement," a spirit surely best demonstrated, in Solomon's view, by the craft practices of a handful of Bombay art students.

I want to return here briefly to the question of the relationship between the aesthetic program of the Bombay School and modernism—especially given that a version of modernism had emerged in Calcutta in the 1910s, and much of it with the help and support of E.B. Havell's school. It's important to distinguish between what was called "modern Indian art" by Raj-sympathetic experts and what scholars more readily recognize as the phenomenon of modernism in India—a phenomenon closely linked to nationalist subcultures, especially in Bengal. Indeed, scholars familiar with the history of what is called "modern art" in India might think sooner of the Bengal Renaissance, and the related Bengal school of visual art, than of state-sponsored developments in the 1920s and '30s. Painters such as Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and others, have enjoyed canonization, in India and abroad, as anti-colonial visionaries who deployed experimental visual methods—many of which were learned from the practices of the European avant-gardes—as means of resisting the aesthetic predominance of imperialism. For his part, however, Solomon was unwilling to see in the output of the Calcutta School much other than a backwards-facing "Orientalism"—a term he often used, rather reductively, to describe the experiments with *japonisme* made popular by Abanindranath Tagore.[46] Solomon's own commitment

[45] The roc is a giant bird of Arabian mythology, with an Indian cognate in the birdlike Garuda figure of Hindu myth.

[46] A blend of the two-dimensional aesthetics of the Rajput miniature and the Japanese woodblock print was characteristic of the visual style of Abanindranath Tagore and others of the Calcutta School in the 1910s. Mitter explains that this melding of styles reflected a nationalist interest in

to artistic modernity, I suggest, further complicates the ambivalence of "modern Indian art" towards modernism-as-such—in this case by articulating a program for artistic modernity rooted in a distinct opposition to the experimental practices of Indian nationalists.

By the standards of any 20th century avant-gardiste, of course, it is surely Solomon's own innovations that should strike us as retrograde, with their emphasis on realistic life-drawing in the service of a decorative aesthetic reminiscent of Art Nouveau. And yet Solomon's rhetoric begins to approach the discourse of modernism, with its emphasis on newness and the brash rejection of tradition. Sometime in March 1921, for instance, he sent a typewritten essay to officials at the Raj Education Department, in which he submits his appeal for the Secretariat murals contract. Titled "Indian Art and New Delhi," his letter-cum-essay is exuberant in its visionary energies, as well as in its competitive undercutting of its rival school in Bengal:

> It seems as though Indian Art were now standing trembling upon an "undiscovered country" lovely beyond the imaginings of the West, urged so far on her journey by forces which we can but guess, but which, if she is now given a helping hand to cross the border line, will impel her to deliver a message of incalculable value to the world.
>
> It is necessary to dwell on these points because between the art methods of Calcutta and Bombay there is admittedly a marked divergence of thought. If as unfortunately seems likely the Calcutta movement, based on a beautiful archaic convention, has reached the limits of its expression, the new movement in Bombay which takes Nature as its only inspiration, is

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exploring pan-Asian alternatives to the sensibilities of the West, although much of the modern art produced in Calcutta was strongly influenced by the contemporary European avant-gardes. Solomon, for his part, was unable to see past the "orientalism" and "traditionalism" of these experiments with *japonisme*.

founded on principles so broad and fundamental as to be capable of almost unlimited development.[47]

A commitment to the new, a brash rejection of "beautiful archaic convention," a certain spirit of adventure that ventures forth into lands unknown: these are recognizable, if general, characteristics of modernist rhetoric. But Solomon nevertheless confounds any would-be modernist inclination in his essay when he suggests, peculiarly, that the new movement in Bombay "takes Nature as its only inspiration." One could immediately dismiss this apparent contradiction by rejoining that Solomon simply did not participate in modernism; but the phrase is confounding on a deeper level, too, for nothing in the overwhelmingly artificial aesthetic output of the Bombay School—its richly ornamented murals, its sumptuously decorated room installations, its highly stylized paintings of lifelike Hindu gods—would suggest that the movement took the reflection of nature to be its *highest* commitment. So what is this concept of "Nature" and what is its true place in Solomon's philosophy?

Solomon may have had a few things in mind. On one hand, William Morris had influentially promoted the notion of a relationship between art and nature in terms more capacious than simple mimesis in "The Lesser Arts" (1877), where he argues that the beauty of a work of decorative art depends not on its imitation of nature, but on the work's "accordance" with it: given that "Everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly," Morris elaborates that a work is "beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her."[48] On the other hand, given that Solomon's text strives to makes much of his reputation—an application for funding, after all—his appeal to nature only fully

[47] William Ewart Gladstone. Solomon, Letter titled "Indian Art and New Delhi," March 1921, Department of Education, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India.
[48] William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*. (London: Penguin, 2004). 234.

makes sense as a reiteration of his well-known commitment to drawing and painting from life. Life and nature are hardly the same thing, but Solomon deploys an implicit notion of life that resembles Morris's conception of Nature—which is to say, as a force or impetus to which art should attune itself, and not as a domain of concrete phenomena that art might merely represent. Such a concept of life is coded specifically Indian for Solomon, and it is elucidated throughout Solomon's many references to the famous Buddhist murals inside the Ajanta caves (circa 5th-6th century BCE) in Maharashtra. Solomon praises these ancient murals for embodying a spirit of indigenous talent that the Bombay School was on the very precipice of rediscovering. He thus alludes throughout the essay to a vital "spirit of Ajanta," which he conceives as the underlying *élan* that "animates the Indian of today," and can be observed to be "working progressively forwards […] in terms of modern thought and feeling." Solomon's essay-letter to the Raj is admittedly less than theoretically precise, but in its rhetoric we can trace an emergent notion of drawing from and *on* life as a kind of alchemy by which "Nature" becomes art.

I read such pronouncements not necessarily as evidence of Solomon's overlooked modernism, but rather as symptomatic of certain proximities between the discourse of modernism and the ideological program of colonial modernization. This relationship has, of course, been much examined already; scholars on modernism acknowledge a range of intimate relations between modernism and the imperial project. We are now critically attuned to the ways in which modernist writers as Woolf, Conrad, Joyce, and Eliot responded to the conditions of empire. Additionally, scholars have also sought to show how the foundational practices of modernism—the critique of the bourgeois subject, narratological resistance against linear chronology and normative temporality—emerged against the backdrop of European imperialism, the wealth and developments it generated, and the specter of its imminent decline.

Although much of the critical literature on modernism and empire—or the distinct but related question of "modernism and colonialism"[49]—engages with the established canon of Euro-American Anglophone modernist writing, the contributors to Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel's *Geomodernisms* anthology have sought to identify "alternative genealogies" of modernist aesthetics by engaging with the cultural production of spaces beyond the Euro-American metropole.[50] The contributors to this anthology thus undertake the twofold project of reanimating "unsuspected modernist experiments" while sensing the traces of ghostly presences that haunt "white Anglo modernism," including "the repressed ghosts of an African modernity, an Atlantic modernity, a subaltern modernity" (3). Anglophone modernisms too narrowly committed to a normative cosmopolitan perspective (white, bourgeois, Western, male—in any combination), thus risk forgetting the transnational conditions of modernity that makes such a perspective possible. These conditions include such familiar phenomena as—say—the European trade in African masks, but also the very repression of other kinds of modernities that might have flourished were it not for the disruptions of European colonialism.

Solomon's relevance to the ongoing efforts to rethink the relationship between modernism and imperialism belongs to the latter part of this twofold project: that Solomon's casual use of rhetorical tropes that we might readily associate with modernism call attention to the perhaps-subterranean intimacies between two particularly important strains in Anglo modernist thought—in this case, the related principles of vitalism and an ideal continuity between art and life—and an

[49] Begam and Moses discuss this difference in their introduction to *Modernism and Colonialism*. One of the most common ways to distinguish imperialism from colonialism is to view imperialism as an expression of power from from the metropolitan center, while colonialism has more to do with the local concerns and political operations of faraway colonies. See the introduction to Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses, eds. *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Imperial Literature, 1899-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[50] See Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel. *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005).

imperial imaginary committed to the labor potential of colonized life. On one hand, Solomon's rhetoric indexes the strange applicability of even the most pointed arguments for the cultivation of non-modern labor practices—Morris, Birdwood, Maine—to imperialistic speculation about the future of a modern colony on the verge of discovering its own productivity. On the other hand, however, his rhetorical proximities with modernism challenge us to imagine the spectral presence, in modernist aesthetic ideology, of the desires and protocols bound up within a distinctly *Indian modernity* under British rule, whose conditions include the liberal ideal of *Pax Britannica*, the ambivalent status of a semi-autonomous colony in the grip of colonial control, and—as I demonstrate in the following section—the fantasy of an inexhaustible human labor force. The metaphor of the "undiscovered country"[51] is equivocal in Solomon's use, and roots the radical newness of Indian art in the imaginary of imperial expansionism: in one gestures, it evokes the unimaginable potential of the new Indian art, and the unconquered spatiality that figures the limit of Empire—and that Empire strives to overcome.

VI. The Bombay revival of Indian art

Solomon's essay to the Department of Education anticipates his later attempts to frame Indian art as a unique model of the incipient greatness of British India. Solomon undertook a set of strategic steps to increase his chances of winning the Delhi murals contract, and the most notable among these was the publication of *The Bombay Revival of Indian Art*, in which his praise for his own school is accompanied by detailed accounts of the different workshops under his tutelage. As I've

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[51] A phrase borrowed from Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy, where it famously describes death. It is unclear to me why Solomon uses this phrase, or at least why he draws attention to its being a quotation. The phrase appears to have taken on a life of its own by the mid-19th century, however. In his influential report on *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), for instance, journalist Henry Mayhew describes himself as "a traveler in the undiscovered country of the poor."

mentioned earlier, the book was initially printed as a brochure to accompany the Indian Room installation at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, held in the London suburb of Wembley. As Mitter points out, Solomon's success at Wembley came as a result of a significant amount of jockeying: space in the Exhibition was allotted for the display of the work of Indian art students, and Solomon had first to convince another arts official—Lionel Heath, president of the Mayo School of Art in Lahore—to secure a place for him on the selection committee for Wembley. Solomon was able to win his students a commission for an entire furnished room to be designed and assembled in India and then shipped in pieces to England; although it would join a broader collection of student artwork that reflected the predominance of the "orientalist" style popular in Calcutta, the Room proved to be a decisive moment for Solomon.[52]

The Room was contained within a small space inside Bombay Court, itself a mere quarter of the exhibition's monumental Indian Building complex. Solomon explains in *The Bombay Revival* that the Room was the collaborative project of several of his most senior students, including painters, ceramicists, glass-blowers, carpet-weavers, and other artisans. The nascent "Bombay Revival," he explains, was not simply a question of the adoption of experimental methods in Indian painting—although Solomon makes much of his introduction of life drawing, or "drawing from life," to his school's curriculum. Rather, Solomon anticipates the emergence of an entirely new and holistic approach to art, one rooted in Indian art's sublime limitlessness, its identity with craft, and indeed its all-pervasiveness in Indian life itself:

[52] See Mitter, 191-94 for more on the Solomon's "uphill battle" against the predominance of Calcutta at Wembley. Mitter demonstrates that the Wembley commission was in some sense the first stage of escalation of tensions between Solomon and Havell over the Delhi murals commission. Solomon would win out largely on his success in advocating for the merits of his naturalistic approach to painting, while Havell would detract him and his students—in essays published such culture magazines as *Rupam*—with "schoolboyish" technique.

> Art in Europe is often a thing which one can localize. In India Art is a limitless thing. It cannot be imprisoned within circumscribing walls. It is around us; it pervades—it perfumes the air we breathe; it haunts our waking hours; it spangles with a thousand stars our drab and weary dreams. It is an Idea blazoned everywhere in potent pigments, made manifest everywhere through vehicles of flesh and fabric (2).

One of the more commonly reprinted promotional photographs [Fig. 2.2] might be seen to capture the Room's insistent stylistic harmony. An ornate writing desk, accented with Rajput-style architectural features in carved Malabar teak, occupies the focus of the image, flanked on either side by a set of figurative paintings in a mixed Indian and Western styles. A similar melding of styles, suggesting in this case the influence of William Morris [see Fig. 2.3], plays across the painted ceiling trim and on the panels of *pietra dura* in the wainscot, while further elements—such as the *veena* instrument played by the female figure in one of the paintings (probably a representation of the goddess Saraswati), or the collection of empty perfume bottles on the small side table, gesture beyond the visual towards aural and olfactory effects.

Despite Solomon's claims to formal novelty, of course, the Indian Room reiterates the imperial exhibition-display as a genre in which to apprehend the capacities of a colonized culture's productivity, albeit in miniature. Moreover, The Indian Room and *The Bombay Revival* both work to coordinate the two closely related principles within the form of modern Indian art that had slowly taken shape throughout the 1920s, and that inherited the intellectual tradition of late 19th century art-reformist thought. One of these is the notion that Indian aesthetics provide a context—liberating for a Western artist, and based on an innate Indian affinity for beauty and decoration—in which hierarchical distinctions between fine arts and decorative craft no longer hold; while the other is that the nominal identity of art and craft labor supports a far broader, even totalizing, identity of art with life itself.

For Solomon, however, the totalizing potential of art—its capacity to subsume everything under itself—ends up serving as a kind of model of imperial power itself, and especially of imperial power's potential to command the labor of a populace whose very being was bound up with a sacred commitment to the artful practice of everyday life. In *The Bombay Revival*, Solomon expresses the notion that India's sacred art-life continuity might lay the foundation for a speculative new imperium through a rhetorical displacement, by which reveries about the future of modern Indian art reveal themselves to be reveries about the future of the Empire itself. In the conclusion of his book's introduction, Solomon writes:

> The Room is the work of young men who have not as yet learned to measure either their own limitations or capacities. It is as it were a welter of early potentialities; it is the citadel of Hope; not the temple of Victory. […] But the art loving visitor will read in this exhibit a message from […] a land where the Worlds of Reality and of Fancy are still united […] a land whose young men have given of their best to this work as their tribute to the *Idea* inherent in the Mighty Empire of which they are such gifted and interesting citizens.[53]

Whereas we had previously encountered the "idea blazoned everywhere in potent pigments" as an expression of Indian art's refusal, in the *horror vacui* of its all-pervasiveness, to admit any hierarchical distinction between what we would now call fine art and decorative art—or art and craft—the present quotation suggests a much deeper continuity, even an identity, between Indian art and Indian life. But Solomon's use of the word "idea," furthermore, upholds Indian art as an ominously imperious category, under which both art and life might be abstracted and then subsumed: for here we find the idealism of art transposed into "the *Idea* inherent in the Mighty Empire," to which the Indian contributes by virtue of his very inability to distinguish art from life, reality from fancy, work

[53] Solomon, *Bombay Revival,* 9.

from non-work. The Room's promise as a tribute to "the Mighty Empire" only makes full sense in light of this "*Idea*," articulated somewhere at the intersection between an exceeding, even sumptuous aesthetic fullness, and imperial power marked by the promise of its limitless expansion.

For Solomon, the principle of art's overruling identity with everything else conditioned a fairly rampant investment in subsuming Indian bodies under the rubric of art's insoluble primacy—an investment reflected in his frequent illustrations of Indian laborers as picturesque, themselves decorative elements of a grand design. The notion of an Indian art-life continuity, for instance, guides the fairly flagrant exoticizing tendencies of *The Bombay Revival*, a text that takes frequent delight in describing the decorative effects of Indian villagers wearing colorful saris and turbans. In one moment in the text, for example, Solomon imagines the inner life of an idealized Indian painter, who finishes his long day's labor in a beautiful daydream:

> He is on his way home, and we overtake him on the path to the Gate, reddened by the evening sun as it slants through the luxurious cocoa palms and banyan trees of the School's celebrated Compound. With his umbrella in one hand, some small twining flower in the other, and eyes that still seem to ignore realities and to be fixed in retrospect upon those marvelous monkeys, elephants, buffaloes or birds that he has been engaged all day in weaving into his delightful designs, he goes on his way humming an Indian air, carrying with him to his scanty board and simple blanket the burden of that lofty thralldom which is his joy (7).

It's an altogether kitschy scene; the merry painter—whistling, flower in hand—is as picturesque as the scenery that surrounds him. It is as though this passage had entreated us to picture palms, banyans, monkeys, and elephants placed all together on the same delightful canvas; we might even find ourselves so charmed by this picture that we fail to notice, or to notice the gravity of, the stark poverty of the painter's actual living conditions, with the scanty board on which he sleeps, and the

simple blanket that covers him. At the very least, we are meant to be convinced that the artisan himself is content enough with the joy of his own work to mind the poverty of his living situation.

But beyond reiterating the rather familiar imperialist fantasy of the picturesque Other, we note here the operation of an aesthetics of sumptuousness—of excess—as the organizing principle of the aesthetic totality communicated by Bombay-style Indian art.[54] The coordination of art and life here does more than to suggest an identity between laborer and labor, artist and art; it overcomes both within a totalizing whole characterized by an exceeding richness—"luxurious," as Solomon notes. Consider this arresting passage in the middle of *The Bombay Revival*, where Solomon presents a rather beautiful description of his school's carpet workshop—which, in this case, happens to be largely staffed by young boys. In Solomon's description of the carpet factory, however, the very bodies of the workers dissolve, disintegrated under the awesome labor of the whole:

> Behind the loom on which the numerous colours are slowly taking shape and design, squat a row of very small boys with very bright faces and sparkling eyes. The master crouches on the ground in front of the loom poring over the squared cartoon of the carpet design which is spread before him, shouting aloud the colours and numbers of the threads […] All he can see of his assistants is the puncturing of deft little fingers between the threads of his loom (26).

We might quickly note that this description makes much of the inseparability of loom from body, of finger from thread, and of worker from article. But such a conceit goes further here: fragmented—

[54] It remains commonplace, even today, for non-Western peoples to be described in association with such exoticizing tropes as vibrant colors and spice. A foundational scholarly treatment of this phenomenon Said's *Orientalism*. Said pays attention to the specific role of the picturesque in orientalist rhetoric in a few places: in one passage, he critiques the report of Lord Cromer, a British official in Egypt, who asserts that "the mind of the Oriental, like his streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry"; elsewhere he notes the penchant for the depiction of "picturesque characters" in orientalist fictions by the likes of Pierre Loti, Marmaduke Pickthall, and a few others. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 38 and 252.

indeed, evoked only in the metonymy of their fingers—the bodies of the young carpet weavers are themselves the substance of the design. Their fingers become the closest thing this passage provides to a description of the design itself; quite literally, they constitute the figures that emerge between the threads of the loom. This rhetorical use of Indian workers' bodies as the very substance of an ornamental design in turn provides the logical conclusion of a pattern of description that had preceded the passage—in which Solomon remarks, with sentimentalizing delight, on the gem-like sparkle of the boys' eyes, their charmingly diminutive size. And yet Solomon punctuates the human cost of this conflation of person and artwork towards the end of his book, in which he notes—all too casually—that the majority of carpets produced south of Bombay at the time were made by prisoners.

VII. The exquisiteness of the Delhi and India House murals

An ornate tableau [Fig. 2.4] illustrates the traditional duties and activities of the Vaishyas, the traditional Hindu merchant caste, in one panel among the eight that play across the dome of the Indian Chief's Waiting Room in the North Block of Delhi's Imperial Secretariat complex. The painting features a young man lounging on a divan, examining a heap of jewels on a brass charger placed at his feet; one of two women seated on the floor, dressed more modestly in their black saris, holds up a hand to him as though in mid-speech. Two servant figures crowd the left side of the frame, their backs bent with work. The image dissolves into a seascape dotted with tiny ships. G.H. Nagarkar, the painter behind the murals in the Waiting Room—among other sections of the building—explains in an artist's statement sent to officials in the Department of Industries and Labour, that the women are foreign traders, the man a wealthy merchant judging the quality of wares brought to him from afar. Among the four panels dedicated to depicting the functions and

occupations of the Hindu castes, the Vaishya painting most dramatically reflects the ornateness of its composition on the level of theme: the jewels sparkle on their gleaming plate, the merchant man at the center of the tableau luxuriating on his divan.

Nagarkar's designs for the dome of the Waiting Room depict the four castes as well as the four phases of life in the Hindu tradition—also known as the Ashramas—and together make up a depiction of the "Social Polity of the Ancient Aryans." Joined by running borders decorated with intricate floral scrollwork, the paintings present a lavishness that Nagarkar's rather sober descriptive statement doesn't mention (Nagarkar, one among seven artists, was tasked with producing explanatory notes on all of the murals). Nonetheless, a material as well as stylistic richness joins together all of the murals in the North Block of the imperial capital complex, many of which make heavy use of gold leaf. One of the several lunettes set in the niches below the main dome offers a particularly dazzling example: an allegory of *Poetry* [Fig. 2.5], the painting depicts a beautiful young woman, not unlike those painted by Alphonse Mucha a few decades earlier, lost in thought beside a peacock fanning its blue and green feathers; the gold-leafed background shows through in small but prominent patches amidst the branches of a lush tree. References to Art Nouveau seem hardly accidental in the Secretariat Murals, all of which—like Mucha's most celebrated work—mediate between the allegorical and the strictly decorative. Indeed, a more explicit reference to Mucha can be observed in F. Fyzee-Rahamin's untitled depiction [Fig. 2.6] of an angelic figure descending from the sky, wings half-open around a gorgeously bejeweled body. Fyzee-Rahamin's painting is clearly based on a preparatory design [Fig 2.7] for the Delhi murals—an allegory of *The Gupta Period*, executed a few years earlier in watercolor by Bombay student V.G. Shenoy. As Mitter observes, the student painting had been directly inspired by one of Mucha's posters.[55]

[55] Mitter, 185.

Debora L. Silverman's history of the origins of Art Nouveau in imperial Belgium offers one inroad into apprehending the politics of the Delhi (and, later, India House) murals' deployment of a distinctly Art Nouveau sense of sumptuous detail. In a study largely focused on architectural and decorative objects, Silverman remarks on the extensive use of Congolese raw materials in early Art Nouveau—including elephant ivory and central African hardwoods, which in turn supported stylistic experiments with forms evocative of the African exotic. She thus calls attention to the strikingly consistent thematization of specifically African natural forms within so many *objets d'art* produced in late 19th century Brussels: pieces of furniture and stained glass windows arranged in the shape of elephant heads, elephantine wallpaper motifs, wooden bannisters whose sinuous forms resemble tangled rubber vines, and whose suggestion of dynamic movement in turn evoked the hippo-hide whip used to beat native laborers. Presenting Belgian Art Nouveau as a kind of "imperial modernism"—a term that in her use names a domain of artistic production that mediates modernity and its constitutive tensions—Silverman thus argues that Art Nouveau style stages a spectacular confrontation between the forces of civilization and those of barbarity—a confrontation ambiguated in Belgian Art Nouveau, in that it figures both the supposed savage frightfulness of Belgium's colonial *heart of darkness*, as well as the savage conditions under which agents of the Belgian Empire forced Congolese natives into disciplined productivity:

> Decorative arts and architecture, then […] suggest that stylistic forms of modernism in Belgium expressed a displaced encounter with a distant, but encroaching, imperial violence—the return of the repressor in visual form (139).

In many ways, of course, the Delhi murals reprise the aesthetic of sumptuous extravagance that informs the Indian Room—although the latter seems diminutive by comparison with its mural counterparts. Read alongside *The Bombay Revival*, these murals further disclose the aesthetic logic by which the sumptuousness of art can be made to express the supremacy of a *subsumptive*

administrative apparatus—which it to say, an administrative system organized around the forced submission of its subjects to the demands of colonial labor. The two words are indeed cognates, both being derivatives of *sumptus*, Latin for "expenditure," which provides the origin for several other English words, including "consumption." For the remainder of this chapter, I attend to the thematic as well as formal—which is also to say, material—sumptuousness of the Delhi and India House murals, which instantiates expenditure as one of the ruling principles by which modern Indian art negotiates between aesthetic totality and the labor that supports it. Indeed, these murals trade in the same assertion of totality as the Indian Room, striving along very similar lines to express the vibrancy of India's imminent greatness through exquisite displays of gold and other precious materials.

In some cases, the sumptuous decorative detail of the murals even does some work of underwriting their thematic claims to harmony and totality. I alluded to this dynamic briefly at the beginning of this chapter, in relation to the King Porus mural in India House: acting almost as a financial guarantee, it is often the elaborate decoration between figurative depictions that carries across the sense of social totality that had informed the projects' designs in Delhi, as well as in London's India House. This is especially true of the series of rather beautiful pendentives in the Octagonal Hall, which chart the "eight phases of life" according to the Hindu tradition, from birth through worldly renunciation (sannyāsa), and eventually to death. In each work, a human figure at a different stage of life is depicted in the center of a circle, surrounded by decorative scrollwork that joins the paintings together. For the *Childhood* [Fig. 2.8] piece, the scroll-work is described, in subdued terms, as "just a plain ornamental design of lines and colour intended to represent the child mind"; by moving through the "not-yet floral" scrollwork of the *Student Days* mural, we arrive at the lush flowers surrounding the couple in the *Love* painting [Fig. 2.9].

It would be easy to describe these paintings as yet another instance of the totalizing comprehension of life within art—of a process that the opulence of these Raj-organized murals both expresses and materially instantiates. A child sits at play with his toy within a red circle, enmeshed in the cosmic order of the human life cycle, itself connected via the lavishness of ornamental scrollwork arching its way around the doorframes of the India House; this pattern is reiterated eight times, establishing a harmony not only among these eight iterations of the indomitable order of the human life cycle, but also with the architectural structure of the administrative building itself. But I want here to highlight a certain tension at the heart of these works of art produced under the Raj, in the name of artistic modernity: that for all the effort that Raj art-modernizers undertook to model a principle of the extractability of Indian labor, the artworks themselves tend to thematize a surrender to exquisite leisure and aesthetic contemplation (this is especially true of the Indian Room, with its trans-medial invocation of music and perfume). How are we to square the ambitions of these murals, as reflections of a program to imagine colonial labor potential, with the sheer idleness at the heart of these paintings? With the inactivity of the lovers, luxuriating in the sensuous idleness of their intimacy? One finds sumptuous leisure wherever one looks: in the recumbent Vaishya trader, selecting jewels from a display laid upon a purple carpet; even in the allegory of Poetry itself, which represents the very labor of art through the image of a young woman, bedecked in jewels, gazing in languid contemplation at the splayed feathers of a peacock.

Chakrabarty offers some guidance on addressing this tension through his observation that the Marxian concept of abstract labor, in the way it encounters human life as a critical limit to capital's will-to-appropriation, ends up "creating the grounds of [capital's] dissolution."[56] In a relatively brief chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, he attends closely to the concept of abstract labor

[56] Ibid. 50.

through a set of close readings from *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. Abstract labor, of course, is one of the central principles of capitalism according to Marx; the term names the extraction of work from any individual body or activity, such that it can figure as a fungible quantity of labor time to which a relative value may be assigned. For Chakrabarty, however, abstract labor is fundamental to the *historiography* of capital as well—which is to say, to the ways in which capital writes its past and future on its own terms, and erodes local and cultural differences in order to "extract a common and homogenous unit of value" (50). Chakrabarty's aim throughout the chapter, however, is not to describe capital's sublation of historical difference into itself, but rather to identify in the concept of abstract labor a critical limit to capital's sublational logic. And indeed, abstract labor haunts laboring bodies with the spectral possibility of their redundancy, of their eventual replacement with machines.

Chakrabarty thus identifies "life" as the surprising locus of capital's self-critique—for it is life and living labor that embodies a "'standing fight' against the process of abstraction that is constitutive of the category 'labor'" (60-61).[57] He moves on to cite Marx himself, whose metaphors frequently betray the influence of 19th-century vitalist thought—whereby, for instance, labor is the "yeast" that allows for the "fermentation" of capital, or abstract labor a commodification of the neuro-muscular, energetic life-force of the worker herself. As Chakrabarty elaborates, the vitality of labor in turn becomes the condition of its ability to resist the totalizing trajectory of capital as a world-historical force:

> These vital forces [required for work and sustained by food and water] are the ground of constant resistance to capital. They are the abstract living labor—a sum of muscles, nerves, and consciousness/will—which, according to Marx, capital posits as its contradictory

[57] Chakrabarty attributes the phrase "standing fight" to Hegel; on page 60 he formulates the same point in more Hegelian terms by stating that Marx allows us to understand life as a "'standing fight' against the possibility of the dismemberment with which death threatens the unity of the living body."

> starting point. In this vitalist understanding, life, in all its biological/conscious capacity for willful activity (the "many-sided play of muscles"), is the excess that capital, for all its disciplinary procedures, always needs but can never quite control or domesticate (60).

In the modern arts of the late British Raj, life—in all its capacity to embody the boundlessness of an empire-to-come—reveals an ultimate refusal to conform to the aesthetic dictate that it model the inexhaustible appropriability of Indian labor. Rather, the sumptuousness of the Indian Room, the Delhi Murals, and the murals in India House manifest a vitality that exceeds even the totalizing framework of an imperialist imbrication of art, life, and work. These scenes of leisure, painted across the interior walls of the Raj's administrative offices, could thus be said to prefigure something like the very dissolution of labor.

As expressions of an aesthetic style grandiloquent of its own material richness, the murals thus disclose something of the ambivalence of the exquisite—the ambivalence, that is, of an aesthetic mode whose dedication to excessive refinement tends to brush up against a certain violence. The sheer expense of public art in the last decades of the Raj was an open secret among the Indian public, and an object of bitter resentment. When documents concerning an elaborate scholarship program to support the painters of the Delhi Murals leaked in 1925, the nationalist press erupted with scandal. A contemporary issue of the *Bombay Chronicle*, for instance, published the scheme papers with two particularly breathless headlines: "Indian Art: A Threat to its Future. A Secret Official Scheme. Huge Waste of Public Money," reads the first, with while the second elaborates bitterly on the "Threatened Future of Indian Art." The squander incurred by the Delhi and India House murals would have been palpable to Indians, and the histories of the works themselves are dotted with delays incurred by the outbreak of the First World War and the onset of

the Great Depression. Nonetheless, the murals in the Delhi Secretariat were afforded a total budget of 40,000 rupees in 1927—roughly $885,000 in contemporary US dollars.[58]

The murals express a thematic consciousness of such expense. Wrought of paint and gold, they manifest a material richness that attests to the ambitions of an imperial power soon to see its own collapse. Amplified through orientalized figures of splay-feathered peacocks and jewels, and of ancient Indian soldiers standing bare-chested, their golden armbands sitting in dazzling contrast against their dark-colored skin, it's an especially exquisite richness. But it is in this same richness, I suggest, that we might locate these works' critical ambivalence. For while the extravagance of these works expresses the sense of a vitality that overruns any attempt to yoke life to labor, this effect of extravagance is itself mediated by a sumptuousness that unfailingly indexes an imperial will to the exploitation of Indian resources (along with labor). These murals thus offer two intimately related expressions of an excess that overruns aesthetic sublimation: they dramatize the refusal of life to be bound within the structure of a monument to Empire and its productive capacities, and they allow a glimpse at an order of imperial violence that refuses to make itself invisible. The critical challenge of "modern Indian art," formed over decades of a tense interlacing of life and labor, is to apprehend the simultaneity of these two aspects of excess in the shaping of modernity in British India.

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[58] Finalized Scheme for the Encouragement of Indian Artists by Providing Facilities for Decoration of Buildings in New Delhi, 1927-1928, Department of Industries and Labour, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India.
Data on the currency conversion obtained through the "Historical Currency Converter" hosted by historicalstatistics.org. Accessed July 14, 2020.

Chapter 3:

A Wild of Weird Delights: Ronal Firbank and the erotics of the surface

I. Vellum

In the early months of a flirtatious correspondence that would last four years, Carl Van Vechten opens a letter to the elusive and itinerant novelist Ronald Firbank with a word of thanks whose exuberance encroaches upon the sordid:

> Dear Gay genius,
>
> Merci, mille fois, for the splendid Odette, bound in baby-skin, or so I would imagine, so ivory and tender it appears, and I am very much touched by your sending me your own copy.[1]

Van Vechten is referring here, in July of 1922, to Firbank's self-published 1905 fairy tale *Odette d'Antrevernes*, a small run of which the author had bound in a luxurious vellum cover. Such initial flirtatiousness would soon give way to matters of business. Van Vechten quickly decided to oversee the 1924 publication in New York of Firbank's latest work—a primitivist novel titled *Prancing N*gger* (at Van Vechten's suggestion), set on a fictitious Caribbean island. But for the first six months of their correspondence the men simply traded photographs and copies of each other's works, with the calfskin *Odette* serving as a curious but consistent object of Van Vechten's sublimated affections. He is moved to jealousy, for instance, when a friend shows him a (cloth-bound) first-edition copy; and in the next two letters, he all but begs to receive one in vellum.[2] With Van Vechten's ascription of

[1] Letter from Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, 12 July 1922. Carl Van Vechten Collection of Papers, Henry W. and Albert. A Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, New York, USA.

[2] Van Vechten asks for the "vellum *Odette*" a handful of times in previous letters. I differ here from Kate Hext's assessment that the word refers to Japanese vellum paper. Hext discusses Van

something indeterminate about the binding—"baby-skin, or so I would imagine"— the book's material surface would thus seem to register the corporeal texture of a flirtation that never made itself quite explicit in writing. And indeed, the two men would never meet before Firbank's death, at only forty, in 1926.

But the vellum likely excited Van Vechten for another reason. In its sumptuousness, the translucent book might have struck him as an emblem *par excellence* of the ideal of the surface in Firbank's oeuvre, a body of work marked by its thematic and stylistic commitments to the extravagantly superficial. Few objects perhaps testify as eloquently to Firbank's stylistic achievement of text *as* surface; a typical Firbank novel reduces plot and character to a two-dimensional minimum in favor of fashionably arch dialogue and lavish descriptive detail. "I am a symphony of black, green, and gold," proclaims Lady Agnes Charters of "A Study in Temperament" (1905), from atop her "Louis XIV chair," comparing herself to a Whistler painting as she inspects her jewel-laden fingers.[3] Reproducing that elusive combination of adoration and mockery that suffuses camp depictions of femininity, such a passage testifies to Firbank's success in navigating the expression of queer sensibility under a regime of homophobic repression; even the most censorious reader would fail to find anything "beneath the surface" of Firbank's camp. Moreover, such evasiveness is embodied by the vellum *Odette*, too: for the "baby-skin" registers not the trace of an illicit corporeal encounter, but rather of its virtuality—like a token of the author's own flesh in the absolute absence of his body. Firbank's style is indeed at its funniest, but also at its most melancholic, when its outrageous

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Vechten's mention of the vellum only in passing, by way of remarking on the lingering presence of Firbank's influence on Van Vechten even after his death; Van Vechten, Hext points out, insisted that his novel *Spider Boy* (1928) be printed on "Japan vellum paper." For my part, I'd emphasize that Van Vechten's July 1922 letter demonstrates a clear enchantment with the book's parchment binding—some surviving examples of which still maintain their perhaps eerily soft texture. See Kate Hext, "Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Cal Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank." *Modernism/ modernity* 27, no. 1 (January 2020): 178.

[3] Ronald Firbank, *The New Rythum and Other Pieces*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1962), 19.

frivolity intimates a sense of aching nothingness beneath the thin screen of its wit, its innuendo, its play of surfaces. It's the sort of prose that a certain kind of old-fashioned critic might warn against *reading too much into*.

By the time he began his correspondence with Van Vechten, however, Firbank's work had become motivated by an increasing fascination with the exotic, and with the capacity of exoticized bodies—"Orientals" in lavish costumes, black Caribbean islanders imagined to live in nudity—to efface the distinction between person and decoration.[4] *Prancing N*gger* represents Firbank's most sustained experiments with racial fetishism: his self-described "negro novel," *Prancing* takes place on a fictitious Caribbean island republic, following Mrs. Ahmadou Mouth and her family as they abandon their lives of idyllic nudity in pursuit of social prominence in the capital city. More daring in its exploration of homoerotic innuendo than some of Firbank's previous works, the novel adroitly blends his characteristic camp sensibility with the primitivism then sweeping European artistic culture, as well as with references to the sensuality of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. But for Firbank, the novel was never actually *about* the Caribbean at all. In a letter to Aldous Huxley, he announces his intention to "go to the West Indies to live among the Negroes, so as to collect material for a book about Mayfair."[5] And when Van Vechten asserts, in his preface to the novel's first edition, that "The Mouth family […] are as decorative as Firbank's more familiar English duchesses," his

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[4] The view that non-Western peoples are picturesque or colorful is a fantasy foundational to Orientalist discourse. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, notes the penchant for the depiction of "picturesque characters" in orientalist fictions by the likes of Pierre Loti, Marmaduke Pickthall, and a few others. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 38 and 252.
See also Anne Anlin Cheng's essay on "Ornamentalism," which tracks the ways in which the stereotypical association between "Asiatic femininity" and ornament has served to inscribe a certain notion of inorganic thinglines within Western concepts of racial difference.
Anne Anlin Cheng, "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 44, No. 3 (Spring 2018).
[5] Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British colonial allegory and the paradox of homosexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). 178.

equation addresses the ambivalent position of blackness in the world of *Prancing*, whose exoticism functions as something like a thin veil for a displaced commentary on English manners. Part of the pleasure that the text offers lies in the ambivalence that pervades the work's louche and sultry atmosphere, or its frequent references to figures like the "bwam-wam bwam-wam" boys who parade their bodies in public parks.

This chapter examines the aesthetics of the superficial in Firbank's exotic novels—from the Orientalism of *Santal* (1921) and *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1922) through the primitivism of *Prancing* (1924) and *The New Rythum* (unfinished; begun 1925). Firbank's exotic novels might be seen as the culmination of his experiments with superficiality, joining his infatuation with style to the trope of raced and eroticized skin. Indeed, Firbank's fascination with race inflects the language of his black characters in *Prancing* and *The New Rythum*, who speak in an inventive, highly stylized, and highly inaccurate rendition of Afro-Caribbean dialect. At the same time, however, Firbank's committed frivolity undermines the otherwise intuitive idea that his raced characters really represent black people. The sheer suggestiveness of Firbank style, with its constant innuendoes, allows for an ever-present sense of doubt about who or what is really being described—a sense of doubt always underlined by the insinuation that the exotic is possibly a stand-in for something far closer to home. Thus: Cuna is Mayfair (but also nowhere), while a black male prostitute on a fantastical island may be a stand-in for the altogether more outrageous suggestion of a London rent boy.[6] In this chapter, I argue that Firbank's infatuation with surface both animates the allure of exoticized bodies and ambiguates the very distinctions—white and non-white, colony and metropole, person and thing—that sustain the "exotic" as a meaningful term.

[6] I'm inclined to agree here with Ellis Hanson's reading of the Bwam-wam boys as male prostitutes. See Ellis Hanson, "The Queer Drift of Firbank" in *Decadence and Modernism*. Eds. Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 118-134.

Participating in a contemporary spirit of experimentation with the novel form, Firbank's preoccupation with superficiality can be read in relation to the ideal of the abstract or "pure" surface within the arts of early 20th century Europe. Anne Anlin Cheng has traced the trajectory of this ideal across an expansive modernist archive that includes Virginia Woolf's description of life as a "semi-transparent envelope," and the white-on-white experiments of Malevich.[7] Cheng studies the history of the surface in modernist aesthetics, both as an embodiment of abstract form and as an idealized alternative to the body. In Cheng's view, the modernist fascination with the surface has occluded origins in racial fetishism, and in the apprehension of race as a form of superficial (or *epidermal*) visibility.[8] She excavates such origins by attending to the reception of a figure like Josephine Baker, whose choreographic uses of her own nudity inspired contemporary comparisons between her skin and inorganic matter—and especially to gold and bronze.[9] Judith Brown has pursued a similar approach in her work on primitivism, deploying the term "primitive glamor" to caption the disquieting seductiveness with which primitivist art—Baker's performances, collages by Hannah Höch, novels by Wallace Thurman—present the primitive body at the nexus between colonial commodity and human subjectivity.[10] The emergence of the surface as an object of variegated

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[7] Anne Anlin Cheng. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.
[8] "Epidermalization" is Frantz Fanon's coinage, and refers to the ways in which the racist imposition of inferiority becomes inscribed on the surface of the black subject's skin. Fanon uses the word "epidermis" and its various inflections ("epidermal racial schema," the "epidermalization of inferiority") to call attention both to the extreme superficiality and the self-evident visibility of race within racist ideology. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).
For one approach to racial visibility treated as a specifically *superficial* phenomenon, see also the "Surface Effects" chapter in Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).
[9] Cheng, *Second Skin*, 117.
[10] In Brown's words: "Rather than simply pandering to the financial dictates of a white racist audience and its colonial fantasies, glamor—whether emerging out of orientalist or Africanist primitivism—offered a mode of objectification based in the pleasure of losing the self."
See Judith Brown, *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 126-127.

aesthetic attention in the early 20th century might thus be understood to be continuous with—perhaps even *precipitated* by—a more general intensification of the visibility of racial difference made possibly by the proliferation of photography, ethnographic documentation of life on the fringes of empire, and the trade in colonial commodities.[11]

Following recent scholarship on the history of the surface in modernism, my aim is to situate Firbank's superficiality in a broader imperial context, paying attention to the ways in which Firbank's confrontations with the limits of the expressibility of gay desire were underwritten by a set of conditions that included racism alongside the upper-class affordances of tourism. In what likely remains the most sustained critical discussion of Firbank published in the last twenty-five years, for instance, Christopher Lane notes Firbank's peculiar habit of using racial difference as a cipher for non-normative sexuality—a habit informed by a tendency in European racist discourse to project libidinal excesses onto non-white others. Reading, in Firbank's geographic self-displacements, the imprint of his history of wandering across Europe, North Africa, and the Caribbean, Lane thus attributes to Firbank a critical "Anglophobia"—his term for Firbank's habit of satirizing British mores from the context of distant and often imaginary locations. By calling attention to a more diffuse principle of "displacement" in Firbank's fictions—a term by which Lane names the correspondence between Firbank's wandering and the ambivalence of the geographic and racial markers that Firbank attaches to his characters and settings—Lane presents Firbank's work as a critical negotiation of desires "unamenable to the imperial project." Lane thus also positions Firbank's eroticism in light of historian Ronald Hyam's contention that "the driving force behind empire building was… the export of surplus emotional or sexual energy."[12]

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[11] Cheng makes an argument on these lines about the manifold conditions that gave rise to Primitivism.

[12] Lane 2. See also Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Extension* (London: Batsford, 1976), 136.

In what follows, I aim to show how Firbank both reproduces and reconfigures, or transposes, the logic of what Cheng calls "the modern surface." Firbank's ambivalence with regard to the true object of his references allows for a proliferation of corporeal presences that his style maintains—but also playfully equivocates—on the level of its texture. (We can think of the vellum *Odette* as something like a proxy for Firbank's own skin; this is perhaps why the cover presented seemed to embody such a charismatic surface for Van Vechten). In this sense, Firbank's interarticulation of racial fetishism and surface takes place on the register of the textural rather than the visual. Indeed, Firbank could be said to prefigure the shift from an "optic" to a "haptic" understanding of the "materiality of the image" that theorist Giulana Bruno speculatively calls for.[13] Lane's essay has done much to establish a link between Firbank's will to the expression of gay desire, and the pressures of a British homophobia embedded in a broader program for the management of sexual excess. By focusing more specifically on Firbank's commitments to the surface, this chapter pursues an expanded view of the excessiveness of his style. Nothing in a Firbank novel is quite what or where one expects it to be, a fact that upholds the camp convention of "seeing the world in quotation marks."[14] Firbank's will to ambivalence gives rise, in turn, to the experience of a richly-layered, resonant sensuality—one expressed through texture, accommodating the insinuation of London rent boys and aristocratic ladies alongside "Hodeidah girls" and nude black islanders. It's in this sense of richness that I locate the excessiveness of Firbank style—especially where this richness of sensual evocation serves to resonate his more general thematic love of luxury and lavishness.

I proceed in what follows through three principal steps: after situating Firbank both against and in relation to the discourse of the surface in the early 20th century, I lay out an analysis of the

[13] Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2014), 3.
[14] See Susan Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).

surface as a guiding principle of Firbank's work, identifying the stylistic procedures by which Firbank constructs text *as* surface. Examining entries from Firbank's handwritten writing journals, I examine the ways in which his configurations of the exotic developed through a tense negotiation of the literary uses to which he could put his experiences abroad. To this extent, I take up the importance of what Lane calls "displacement" as a practice that joins Firbank's stylistic and personal or practical proclivities. In the final section, however, I turn to scenes in Firbank's primitivist experiments in which an erotic obsession with black bodies allows for glimpses of an alterity that exceeds his style's attempts to appropriate it.

II. Firbank and the modern surface

There at least two truths critically acknowledged when one deals with Firbank: first, that *almost* nobody writes about him—not now, not in his lifetime—and second, that he is radically, indefatigably, undeniably unique. These axioms would seem in turn to reinforce one another; Firbank's critics, few as they may be, have often pointed to his idiosyncrasy as a limitation to the ongoing effort to situate him in the context of 20th century trans-Atlantic literary culture. His oeuvre betrays an evident proximity to a number of intertwined phenomena in early 20th century literary culture with which it cannot be fully identified: these include both primitivist modernism and the persistence of 1890s camp, as made popular by such figures as Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm. That persistence complicates something as seemingly straightforward as periodization: the American writer Edmund Wilson described him, alongside Van Vechten, as a "late flower of the nineties"; and Van Vechten himself would credit Firbank with the peculiar achievement of "being 1890 in 1922"—

an achievement that Van Vechten describes as "almost queer."[15] In an essay published in *Abinger Harvest* (1936), EM Forster preferred an entomological metaphor over a botanical one, comparing Firbank to a beautiful little insect too delicate to withstand the plodding heaviness of criticism—and thus likening any serious study of Firbank to the graceless act of "breaking a butterfly, or a beetle, upon a wheel."[16] Firbank has become something of a cult figure, praised by those who appreciate his unmistakable and yet elusive style. Only in Firbank do characters call each other "très gutter" behind each other's backs.

Unsurprisingly, then, Firbank has been largely taken up by critics with commitments to queer or gay studies in 20th century culture. Those interested in recovering Firbank as an overlooked British modernist have thus emphasized either his position in the interstices between Wildean decadence and a fully-realized modernist practice (Deutsch),[17] or the challenging way in which his work seems to negotiate these modernist literary effects as themselves the products of a queer literary sensibility (Barnhill, Adams, Mayer).[18] A 2020 article by Kate Hext positions Firbank style as a provocatively camp alternative to the high seriousness of modernism, drawing attention to the

[15] "To be 1890 in 1890 may be considered almost normal; to be 1890 in 1922 is almost queer" is the complete sentence. Van Vechten here inhabits Wilde's idiom with a studied, almost uncanny accuracy. Although it appears as though Van Vechten's preface has not been reprinted in any edition of *Prancing* since 1924, the phrase "to be 1890 in 1922" has since taken on a life of its own amongst critics of Firbank and Van Vechten alike. See e.g. Kristen MacLeod's essay Van Vechten, "The Queerness of Being 1890 in 1922," in Hext and Murray's *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* anthology, 229-250.

[16] EM Forster, *Abinger Harvest*, (London: Edward Arnold & Co.), 1936.

[17] See David Deutch, "Robust Bodies and Social Souls: Reassessing Ronald Firbank's Effeminate Queer Men." *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2015).

[18] See also Sarah Barnhill, "Method in Madness: Ronald Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot*." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 32, no. 3 (1989).

Two other recent (or somewhat recent) essays, each of which aims to root Firbank's style in a gay sensibility, have been collected in *Critical Essays on Ronald Firbank*,. Eds. Gill Davies, David Malcolm, and John Simons (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2004).

See in particular Donald Adams, "Ronald Firbank's Radical Pastorals" and Jed Mayer. "The Artificial Covnersation of Ronald Firbank"

striking similarities between a passage of descriptive prose in *The New Rythum* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922):

> It was the hour when ring-eyed travellers from the violet South emerge from the Central Terminus to be caught up in the great nocturnal pleasure-stream of New York. Driving exuberant citizens from the bright-lit restaurants, dandy mechanics, holding some one word tight in their linnet-heads—Astor? Belasco? Criterion? Hackett?—must here slacken down, often for only a battered taxi-cab or a common lorry (89).

As Hext notes, fragments of *The Waste Land* ring across this passage, including Eliot's famously evocative description of the "violet hour," or the "taxi throbbing waiting" at the time of day at which, in Eliot's terms, "The eyes and back/ Turn upward from the desk." And yet, as Hext points out, Firbank's prose eschews the elegiac tone of Eliot's poem. Mrs. Rosemerchant had in fact just feigned illness in order to escape the opera; she speeds through the "nocturnal pleasure-stream of New York" largely so that she can make it to a party just in time to hear a crucial bit of gossip about her husband.[19]

Joining scholars like Hext in breaking with a critical tendency to read Firbank as indefatigably idiosyncratic, this chapter makes a few modest propositions in focusing attention on Firbank's "principle of the surface."[20] On the one hand, I propose that Firbank's interest in the aesthetic possibilities of the surface would root him firmly in a history of trans-medial developments in 20th century aesthetic culture. Scholars in recent years have focused on the multivalence of the surface as a concept that seems to join abstraction and material structure. Giuliana Bruno, for instances, attends to the surface of the image—canvas, screen, page—in order to theorize structures like "the visual" (as well as the literary, the acoustic, the tactile, one images) as phenomena that

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[19] See Hext, 177 for her discussion of references to *The Waste Land* in *The New Rythum*.
[20] Lane also uses this term in passing to discuss Firbank's affinities with Wilde. See Lane, 178.

"manifest themselves materially on the surface."[21] Such theoretical investment in the surface, however, is rooted in a history of modernist critique. Janet Ward's authoritative 2001 study of *Weimar Surfaces* returns to 1920s Germany as the scene of the emergence of mass culture as a culture of "surface values"—drawing surprising connections between the superficiality of mass consumerism and the modernist tendency to make "content yield to form."[22] Furthermore, a recent article by Chad Bennet shows that what Bruno hails as the hopeful movement from an "optic" to a "haptic" theory of the materiality of the image has, in some sense, been precipitated by Stein's experiments with superficial texture in *Tender Buttons*.[23]

Focused on Firbank's superficiality, this chapter contributes to a line of what we might call modernist "surface-thinking" by tracking the ways in which Firbank style is materially inflected by the *spatiality* of an early 20th century world structured by European colonialism. This approach can allow us in turn to more concretely integrate the relationship between personal itinerancy and flighty prose style that has always been a constant preoccupation to his few but dedicated critics. Firbank is noted for having spent almost all of his adult life living in "an endless succession of hotels and furnished rooms" as he traveled between continental Europe, North Africa, and the Caribbean.[24] It has since become commonplace to link these displacements to the texture of Firbank style, and strikingly in terms evocative of the surface: Ellis Hanson has recently proposed the notion of "queer drift" as a rubric under which to inter-articulate Firbank's wandering and the stylistic evasiveness of

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[21] Bruno, 3.
[22] Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.
[23] Chad Bennet, "Scratching the Surface: *Tender Buttons* and the Textures of Modernism." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 73, no 1. (Spring 2017).
[24] *The New Rythum* 15-16

prose addressed only to those who *catch its drift*.[25] The capriciousness of Firbank's itinerancy bears, in turn, not only on the explicit content of his fiction—with their suggestive and oftentimes fantastical settings—but also on the way in which these texts confuse and conflate their sense of settings. Cuna-qua-Mayfair is only one case in point; no less ambiguous is the amalgam of aristocratic England, a nostalgic version of the pre-war Balkans, and the sparse suggestions of Tunisia that comprise "The Land of the Dates" in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1922). Firbank style thus constantly roots the pleasures of 20th century exoticism in the altogether superficial spatial imaginary of colonial tourism.

It is certainly Firbank's itinerancy that frames his dalliances with primitivism, a dalliance that began to take shape as his travels oriented themselves increasingly around Cuba and Jamaica. Marianna Torgovnick's *Going Primitive* has been foundational in establishing the relationship between the early 20th century ethnography and sociology of primitive societies (Malinowski, Mauss, even Freud) and the primitivist tendencies of European art. In Torgovnick's account, aesthetic primitivism constitutes a modernist reaction to what Lukács had called "transcendental homelessness"—a complex condition of alienated rootlessness in a modernity founded on the fragmentation of community, the abandonment of the sacred, and a suspicion of the concept of the absolute.[26] By this logic, the primitive embodies the antithesis of transcendental homelessness: primitive societies exist in communion with nature, beautifully at one with the rhythms of human sexuality, and attuned to the natural rhythms of work and leisure. It makes sense to read Firbank in

[25] Hanson's prose exhibits a playfulness to match Firbank's; see for instance the initial exposition of "drift" with which he opens his essay on page 118: "Ronald Firbank adrift: his never sounding quite at home anywhere and yet his being always exquisitely and unassailably himself […] however unreadably he seemed to others. This paradox of solipsism and borderlessness defines not only the accounts of […] his habitual tourism, his accommodating every foreign influence into his queer Englishness, but also his stylistic tendency to parataxis, non sequitur, and languorous indirection."
[26] Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1991), 188. See also György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, Trans. Anna Bostock. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974).

this light—for Firbank is nothing if not *homeless*; and his work can be said to reproduce the logic of primitivism as Torgovnick sees it—wherein the Westerner's desire for "the primitive" turns out to be little other than the narcissistic pursuit of something of which modernity had robbed him, especially where this something is a lost experience of uncomplicated and unalienated sexuality. Furthermore, the self-proclaimed desire to "live among the Negroes" betrays a striking affinity with the ethnographic method of participant observation (such as was taken up by Malinowski in his studies of Polynesian societies).

At the same time, Firbank's explicit engagements with primitivism, reached for an earlier frame of reference than—say—Picasso, or even Josephine Baker. Firbank self-consciously aligned himself with primitivist art in *The New Rythum*, where he used the neologism "Gauguinish grace" in *The New Rythum* to describe the beauty of a young black man. Firbank's affinities with Gauguin bear explanation, and I suggest that they hold the key to understanding the significance of primitivism for Firbank. Most relevant to the study of Firbank is the surprising ambiguity of cultural reference in Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. Kirk Varnedoe elucidates these ambiguities in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue for MoMA's 1986 *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*—a seminal event in the art-historical study of modernist primitivism. Varnedoe begins his essay by noting how very little native art is actually documented in Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, which display a rather careless mix-and-match inclusion of objects that Gauguin had either bought in shops across over Polynesia, or had seen in photographs from Southeast Asia and even Central America.[27] In one painting, an inscribed wooden board from Easter Island sits imperiously behind the artist's young Tahitian wife, who

[27]Kirk Varnedoe, "Gauguin" in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Vol. 1*. Ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 1986. 179-210.

poses demurely in Western dress;[28] and the entire composition of his *La Orana Maria* (1891) turns out, remarkably, to be based on a relief from a 9th-century Javanese Buddhist temple.[29] Varnedoe's explanation of this multiplicity of reference is complex, and rooted in Gauguin's opposition to the prevailing tendency of late 19th French ethnology to view the "Primitive" as a relic of an antediluvian life before the advent of civilization. Gauguin, to the contrary, was enchanted by the frank sexuality of life in Polynesia precisely because it *was* civilization, albeit a form of civilization uncorrupted by the taint of modernity and its various regimes of sexual and anti-hedonic repression.[30]

To be sure, I see no reason to believe that Firbank had any interest in (and likely an at-best superficial awareness of) these debates. But his use of "Gauguinish" indexes a shared interest in a very *superficial* approach to Primitivism. To use the terms I have been using to discuss Firbank, we might say that the exotic in Gauguin is the product of a certain interest in displacement: set in Tahiti, a painting presumably depicting the adoration of the Virgin turns out to draw its form from a Buddhist miniature found in Java.[31] Gauguin's mythology is restless in the comparisons that it draws across cultural traditions.

My point is not that Gauguin's refusal to limit himself to local detail is somehow compromising (as though a "pure primitivism" would be possible, or even desirable), but rather that Gauguin's particular version of primitivism can be seen to prefigure Firbank's habit of presenting

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[28] The title of this painting is *Marahi Metua no Tehamana* (1893), depicting Gauguin's adolescent wife in a French-style dress. Varnedoe discusses this painting, and its curious inclusion of an Easter-Island inscription, on pages 187-188.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Varnedoe makes this claim partly by positioning the Tahitian paintings as the culmination of a "primitivism" that began with Gauguin's depictions of Breton peasants. A similar interest in the preservation of ancient ways of life connects the two groups of paintings, he contends. The Tahitian paintings would therefore represent not so much the beginning of Gauguin's "primitivism," as the result of ongoing experiments with primitive customs newly animated, in the South Pacific, by the erotic allure and liberatory promise of primitive sensuality.
[31] *La Orana Maria* is Tahitian for "Hail Mary."

certain peoples as ciphers for others. "Gauguinish grace" might then be understood in light of a set of paintings whose ever-displaced cultural references nonetheless divulge a certain consistent sensuality—one staked in the richly depicted flesh of Tahitian islanders. Indeed, to the extent that Gauguin's paintings could lay any claim to documentary fidelity, in light of so much cultural incoherence, we would have to locate the principle of their realism within the nude and semi-nude skin of the women that he so indulgently painted. Here I would try to avoid relying too much on a structural correspondence between Gauguin's superficial investment in nude skin and Firbank's own commitments to the surface. But we could provisionally say that the *Gauguinish* indexes a will to mobilize the self-evident sensuality and desirability of racialized skin as a kind of anchor for an otherwise confused set of cultural references—such confusion being deliberate, on Firbank's part.

Lastly, any attention to the idea of the literary surface might bring to mind the critical methodology that Steven Best and Sharon Marcus call "surface reading" in their influential essay introduction to the Fall 2009 issue of *Representations*. Seeking to move beyond (or away) from a paradigmatic critical suspicion, according to which meaning—especially as ideology, or as psychological truth—is understood in terms of depth, Best and Marcus argue for new interpretive practices attuned to the significance of the surface *as* a surface, and not as that which must be penetrated by a critic too single-mindedly inclined to plumbing a text's dark and secret depths. I want to point out the challenging proposition that superficiality might in fact require something other than surface reading. Firbank's surfaces resist one of the most fundamental guiding assumptions about the nature of the surface in Best and Marcus's essay: namely, that the materiality of the surface is identical to the *presence* of the surface—or, as Best and Marcus put it, that an investigation into the surface-matter of the text involves a critical attunement to "what is evident, perceptible, [and] apprehensible; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense,

has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth."[32] As I demonstrate in the following pages, the challenge of reading Firbank's surface is not to attune ourselves to what is manifestly present, precisely because Firbank's surfaces are characterized less by presences than by absences, or by the mere *insinuation* of presence.

III. Mapping Firbank: surface, style, structure

Early in Firbank's 1922 novel *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, the socialite Laura de Nazianzi—later to be canonized, sometime after the novel ends[33]—makes a peculiar and utterly Firbankian plea to God:

> "Oh! Help me heaven," she prayed, "to be decorative and to do right! let me always look young, never more than sixteen or seventeen—at the *very* outside, and let Yousef love me—as much as I do him. And I thank you for creating such a darling, God (for he's a perfect dear), and I can't tell you how much I love him; especially when he wags it! I mean his tongue…Bless all the sisters at the Flaming-Hood […] (18).

Sadly, Laura's prayer will go unfulfilled, her secret love for the handsome Prince Yousef unrequited. At first glance, Laura's identification of "doing right" and "being decorative" follows the basic formula of a Wildean joke, with its queer-coded confusion of ethical and aesthetic priorities. As Evelyn Waugh notes in an essay dedicated to parsing the elusive elements of Firbank style, the two authors shared near identical sources of "raw material," both choosing to write about "rich, slightly decadent people" (*slightly*?) and their glittering but stultifying world of operas, society functions, and aristocratic drawing rooms.[34] For Waugh, however, Firbank's style differs sharply from Wilde's in its cynical anti-sentimentality, an attitude that Firbank expresses through the depiction of irredeemably

[32] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 9.
[33] The work's subtitle is "Being a Record of the Life of St. Laura de Nazianzi."
[34] Evelyn Waugh. "Ronald Firbank" *Life and Letters* II, no. 10 (March 1929): 192

selfish characters endowed with fundamentally petty motives. According to Waugh's scheme, then, Wilde's humor is ornamental (wit as that which accentuates basically sympathetic human portraits), while Firbank's is "structural"; Firbank the baroque to Wilde's rococo.[35]

Given that Waugh cites "a certain intemperance in portraiture"—that is, a tendency towards excessive descriptive embellishment—as another characteristic element of Firbank style, we might be left a little confused as to how Waugh maintains the distinctions between his essay's organizing binaries—Wilde and Firbank, baroque and rococo, structure and ornament. Waugh himself might have found the subtlest wit in Laura's altogether peculiar prayer in the first of three ellipses that mark the passage, distracting Laura's prayers with the implication of several especially naughty thoughts.[36] Laura's ellipsis trains our attention from the punning innuendo of "wagging it" onto the yet more suggestive implication of her immediate silence. Itself embodying a kind of surface, the ellipsis thus gestures towards a far more profane confusion of (divine) love and sex, on the part of the young supplicant, than a dick joke ever could. Following Waugh, then, we note that the ellipses that mark Laura's prayer could also be said to constitute an element of structure, a form of connective tissue throughout this and other passages. Through a reading of *The Flower*, this section attempts to more fully elucidate Firbank's idiosyncratic production of text *as* surface, where surface also conjoins style and narrative structure.

Firbank works within an idiom of superficial triviality that had been especially popular in fin-de-siècle English decadent writing. Laura's desire to "be decorative" bears a particularly strong echo

[35] Waugh, ibid.

[36] Waugh draws his own example, however, from Firbank's 1920 play, *The Princess Zoubaroff*. Nadine introduces her husband Adrian to Blanche, who responds—"genially"—with "I think we've slept together once?" In response to Adrian's cool "I don't know," Blanche cuts in to say "at the opera. During *Bérénice*." Waugh's point is a little opaque, but he seems to suggest that the effect of Blanche's pun is preempted by Adrian's much more cynical "I don't know," which is itself too contextually specific to be seen as a formulaic joke.

of some of Max Beerbohm's prescriptions in his highly influential "Defence of Cosmetics," which was published in *The Yellow Book* in 1894.[37] Beerbohm's lightly satirical essay tracks the growing popularity of makeup, presaging in the "pervasion of rouge" the final triumph of artifice over nature, and of the mask over the soul.[38] A constant object of Beerbohm's playful scorn is the idea that the human face reflects or expresses a personality more profound than superficial appearance, a problem he defines as "the tristful confusion man has made of soul and surface."[39] Beerbohm thus proceeds to suggest that we might achieve new heights of human beauty if we were only to learn to treat the face as yet another surface for the elaborations of artifice: "too long has the face been degraded from its rank as a thing of beauty to a mere vulgar index of character or emotion."[40] Given the essay's popularity, it's entirely likely that Firbank read it; his novels certainly display an especially acute attention to facial expressions, along with physical gestures, and poses. The first line of *Prancing* gives us a picture of "Miss Miami Mouth, looking gloriously bored." In *The Flower*, His Weariness, Prince Yousef wears a face that "even as a child lacked innocence, [and was] of the *magnolia* order of coloring." (3) The royals of *Flower* perform "the smile ascending" when appearing in public, and assume, in each other's company, "the posture of the dying intellectual."

If Beerbohm helps us to understand Firbank's approach to character—more surface than soul, surely—we should also note that elements of plot tend to be divulged, in Firbank's fictions, as essentially trivial effects of a stylistic playfulness centered on a parody of aristocratic gossip. To piece together the relatively sparse elements of plot in *The Flower*, for instance, doesn't require anything like the labor of chronological re-arrangement—as might another modernist novel, like Djuna

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[37] Max Beerbohm, "A Defence of Cosmetics" (New York: Dodd, Mead & co., 1922).
[38] Given that Beerbohm's "Defence" was published in *The Yellow Book*, it makes sense to qualify our understanding of the extent of its irony. In other words, this may be satire—but it's nonetheless a loving one.
[39] Beerbohm, 5.
[40] Ibid., 11.

Barnes' *Nightwood*; it requires, much more simply, that the reader follow a few threads of gossip as they weave their way across the royal court. One example from *The Flower* merits a fairly detailed account: very early on, the king and queen of Tolga, another of Firbank's imaginary countries, receive royal guests from the "Land of the Dates." When the Queen of the Land of Dates—regaining her composure after a moment of entranced admiration of the royal china—proclaims that her own country is entirely free of fine china, the King of Tolga declares incredulously that "I could not be more astonished [...] if you told me that fleas had been found at the Ritz." The king's remark immediately catches the ear of a certain Lady Something, who, having been "blandly listening," misquotes it to a young man seated next to her. We find later that the rumor has spread so quickly that the Ritz has completely emptied out; and by the very end of the novel, we hear second-hand that Princess Elsie of Tolga has mounted a lawsuit against the beleaguered hotel for decades of deceptively sub-standard service. In a novel that shies away from anything close to a moral, the drama of fleas at the Ritz perhaps offers a rather funny illustration of the consequences of the *merely superficial*.

As insistently trivial as it may be, the spread of the Ritz rumor constitutes one of the most concrete plotlines in the novel. Then again, the nature of the rumor *as* a matter of plot is ambivalent: in this case, Firbank only gives us scenes of gossip marginal to the activities of the text's central figures, while anything as materially significant as an actual consequence—the rumor's spread beyond the court, its unfortunate impact on the famous London hotel—takes place well beyond the frame of the narrative. Gossip doubles, we might say, as a structuring element and as a vehicle for an autotelic play of style: while gossip may be the vehicle by which major but nonetheless frivolous elements of the plot unfold, the pleasures yielded by this novel are those of gossip for gossip's own sake. Rumor is a privileged site in which *The Flower* imbricates style, structure, and surface. Rumor, after all, figures a form of information that circulates freely between those who share it, unmoored

from any certain relation to the truth. In *The Flower*, the spread of the rumor of the Ritz is given a peculiar typographical representation in the form of a series of extended ellipses of gradually decreasing size, which are divided by erratically-placed exclamation points and question marks:

> “Did you hear what the dear king said?”
>
> “No.”
>
> “It’s almost too appalling…” Lady Something replied, passing a small, nerveless hand across her brow.
>
> “Won’t you tell me though,” the young man murmured gently, with his nose in his plate.
>
> Lady Something raised a glass of frozen lemonade to her lips.
>
> “Fleas,” she murmured, “have been found at the Ritz.”
>
> “…………..!...............?.......!.....!!!” (11)

As with Laura’s distracted prayer, the precise meaning of these ellipses (or ellipsis-like structures) is ultimately obscure; but the most immediate effect of the final line of dialogue in this exchange is the general sense of silent commotion—of a number of eavesdropping courtiers registering a mix of shock and incredulity. Ungrammatical, opaque, and entirely suggestive, the set of ellipses qua typographic literalization of the spread of gossip characterizes rumor as a kind of surface—in this case, as a set of de-personalized reactions linked together on a flat plane of indiscriminately placed periods. Such ellipses enable us to apprehend surface as both style and structure, appearing at once as a structural concretization of gossip as a stylistic convention, and as a stylistic effect of the *The Flower*’s use of gossip as its most integral structuring principle.

These ellipses are exemplary of the ways in which Firbank produces text as surface. And they also give us something of a handle on the flagrant queer sensibility of Firbank’s fictions as that which lies, in plain sight, on the surface of the text. The whole drama of the fleas is typical of Firbank, in that it constitutes a narrative procedure that not only unfolds beyond the frame of the

narrative, but whose very unfolding is quite *beside the point*, insofar as what really matters is the wonderful and archly campy ridiculousness of the many sly comments and half-buried moments of overheard dialogue from which such a drama is deduced. Indeed, the observation that Firbank's campy ostentation is a matter of surface-level stylistics—his texts being largely bereft, except in a few cases, of explicit mention of non-heterosexual desire or intimacy—further inclines us to reach for a more nuanced interpretive approach than what we might call a diagnostic hermeneutics, which would find evidence of the author's sexuality within his prose. Rather, I suggest that we might return to Bruno's work to illuminate the ways in which surface stages a certain coordination of "sensibility" and a commitment to maintaining the haptic texture of an erotic orientation.

Bruno makes this connection subtly; throughout her book, she uses the term "sensibility"—filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai's affinity for fashion, the shared "sensibility" of museum and cinema as spaces of public cultural engagement—in a manner consistent with ordinary use. But Bruno also hails Anni Albers' 1965 essay, "Tactile Sensibility," for establishing a crucial link in the theoretical study of textiles: the link, that is, between the material conditions of fabric—its "movability" and "adaptability," among other attributes that Albers gathers under the rubric of textile's "surface play"—and the forms of sensate, tactile, and emotional *sensibility* that such material conditions support.[41] Much scholarship of the past three decades has rigorously bolstered the intuitive idea that camp is deeply imbricated within a gay or more broadly queer sensibility, however we choose to define camp (as a style? An ironic posture? A sensibility in its own right?).[42] Read in light of Bruno's arguments for the hapticity of the surface, we gain a certain purchase, in turn, on the provocation of Firbank's elliptical style: to use Albers' terms, Firbank's wit could be said to lie in its "movability"

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[41] Bruno, 92. See also Anni Albers, "Tactile Sensibility" in *Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 71.

[42] For a foundational anthology on the nature of camp and its relationship to gay male life, from early modern Europe through the late 20t century, see Moe Meyer, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994).

and "adaptability"—that is to say, its ability to divulge and conceal both homoerotic innuendo and the underlying inclinations of camp sensibility. What emerges is thus a delightful—but confounding—play of surfaces, manifesting a sense of omission ("ellipsis" is derived from a Greek word for "omission") that paradoxically makes its presence felt. At its cheekiest, Firbank style operates through elliptical suggestion of the mere *suggestion* of improper intimacies, or of the consummation of illicit desires.

IV. *The Flower* and *Santal*

It appears to be the shock of another kind of transgressive coupling, however, that animates *The Flower*'s most extremely elliptical paragraph. Towards the end of the novel, Laura offers a second prayer—pleading, in this case, to be rid of a gnawing bitterness at the fact that her love-interest, Yousef, had apparently absconded with "a *negress*":

> It is terrible; for I did so love him………………….
>
> ……………………………………………………..
>
> ……………….and oh how could he ever be with *a negress*?..
>
> ……………………………………………………….
>
> …..…Pho……………………………………………
>
> ………………...…….I fear this complete upset has considerably aged me………………………………
>
> .………But to thee I cling……………………...(52)

Unlike the shorter ellipses that, these over-extended ellipses dominate Laura's prayer, swallowing it like a black hole and lending it the comically ambiguous suggestion of, as Hanson writes, thoughts

"too outrageous even for words."[43] The sheer scale of Laura's evidently forced silence thus suggests a transgressivity that runs afoul of the supposed impropriety of interracial intimacy, lending the word "*negress*" a certain ambiguity as a possible euphemism (or at least a substitution) for a yet-more unacceptable tryst. Amidst a sea of periods that would seem to nullify the semantic value of any of Laura's individual expressions, the italics here equivocate between pointed emphasis and the effect of something like a set of scare-quotes. Whichever way one takes it, then, the locus of speculation is pointedly absent: if under the erasure of a dubious italicization, the *negress* is a screen for something that dare not speak its name; and if the italics are meant to mark the term as a barbed epithet—well, she's absconded already, anyway.

I want to return briefly to Lane—for Lane, as I have indicated earlier, offers a sustained reading of the ways in which racial difference functions, in Firbank, as a kind of proxy for homosexuality. In Lane's view, then, Firbankian "Anglophobia" describes the [?] interrelationship between Firbank's use of fantastical fictitious geographies and his tendency to characterize racially-marked characters as embodiments of non-normative sexuality. Hence, as Lane observes, Firbank's stylistic "displacement[s] of cultural norms" tend to "accompany a shift in terrain."[44] Lane's attempts to thereby present Firbank as an ultimately anti-colonial writer, however, leads him to treat Firbank's participation in racist stereotypes almost apologetically. For one example, Lane quickly moves beyond his acknowledgment of Firbank's "ambivalence about racial difference"—an ambivalence evidenced by Firbank's tendency to reproduce colonial fantasies of irreducible difference that linked racialized bodies to excessive sexuality—in order to suggest that Firbank's "analogy between blacks

[43] Hanson, 122.
[44] Lane, 179.

and homosexuals […] nonetheless implies that they share similarities as marginal and repressed components of colonial society."[45]

I suggest that attention to the logics of Firbank's surface aesthetics gives us a more nuanced purchase on the relation between Firbank's queerness and what we might call the anti-imperial, or at least the Anglophobic, strain in his writing. One clue comes from Lane's tarrying with Ronald Hyam's contention that "the driving force behind [British] empire building was… the export of surplus emotional or sexual energy." Lane rather wittily calls this the "haydraulic" model of desire—whereby which empire operates as a machine whose suppression of sexual desire allows erotic energies to be more productively expressed in different ways. Rejecting this model, Lane suggests that the British imperial project inevitably engenders and encounters a whole range of "unamenable" desires, whose threat to the integrity of imperial power requires careful discursive management. Primitivism, of course, may be seen as one set of discursive practices by which the threat (but also the allure) of non-western sexuality might be managed—in part through the racialization of colonial subjects and their sexual norms, and in part through the production of an irresolvable dialectic between the modern disciplined subject and its sexually unrestrained, premodern other. For homosexual men of the fin-de-siècle and the early 20th century, sexual tourism figured another means for the discreet management of desires unacceptable in the metropole. Firbank, in fact, compiled the majority of his notes for *The Flower Beneath the Foot* while traveling in Tunisia.[46] Passages such as Laura's prayer, in which the racialized body appears under a set of stylistic conventions firmly linked to a subdued innuendo, thus opens a narrow aperture onto an imperial structure of erotic regulation that expresses itself through a notable concern with surfaces. Seen this way, the

[45] Ibid.
[46] Firbank's novel *Santal*, set entirely in North Africa, features frank references to male prostitution. Firbank's biographers remind us, however, that it is unclear whether Firbank actually solicited prostitutes in North Africa (or indeed ever engaged in any sexual activity whatsoever).

critical thrust of Firbank's novels resides not in his identification of affinities between a range of minor subject positions—black, homosexual, colonized—than in his making explicit a colonial logic according to which the visibility of various forms of difference are managed spatially, across Empire's literal surface.

Firbank was actually at work on two novels during his stint in Tunisia and Algeria: *The Flower* was at first a side project while he worked on *Santal*, a fable-like novel set in North Africa that he planned and wrote entirely over the course of his months-long sojourn. A fairly clichéd exercise in Orientalist fantasy, *Santal* follows Cherif, a pious Muslim orphan boy, on his quest to meet a desert-dwelling hermit said to possess prophetic powers. The narrative ends on an ambiguous note, closing with a prayer for mercy as Cherif finds himself thirsty and afraid in the middle of the Sahara, having paid a stranger to lead him by camel to this mysterious hermit. Perhaps following the example of André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902), Firbank presents North Africa as a space of errant eroticism and languid sensuality. The work's title is derived from the French word for sandalwood incense, which Firbank would describe in a letter as "a perfume of the East."[47] And in fact the nature of Cherif's imminent peril at the close of the novel—Cherif left dehydrated and at the mercy of a strange man—is further ambiguated, in fact, by the novel's sparse but salient mentions of male prostitution—also part of the novel's attempt to evoke a general sense of a louche Eastern sumptuousness; the very first page makes an ominous reference to a man rumored to have "amassed vast wealth […] in the traffic of handsome youths."[48]

As Firbank's most—indeed, his *only*—serious (that is, non-ironic) mature work, *Santal* stands out in comparison to *The Flower* for the earnestness with which it explores religious devotion, the

[47] Miriam Benkowitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1969), 187.
[48] Ronald Firbank, *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1961), 479. Subsequent quotations from *Santal* in parentheticals—all quoted from this edition.

nature of beauty, and the appeal of young men and boys. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Firbank scholars have made so little of *Santal*'s umbilical relation to *The Flower*, given that both texts draw from the same source material—in this case, Firbank's observations of local detail while traveling in North Africa, which would be transformed into a loose set of disjointed writing notes in his handwritten journals [Fig. 3.1]. Notes for lines and phrases that would find their way into *Santal* even share space—sometimes alternating line-by-line—with notes that would later inform *The Flower*. The introduction to the first US edition of *The Flower* hints, somewhat apocryphally, that Her Gaudiness the Mistress of the Robes, who presides over the court of Tolga, was inspired by a particularly outrageous-looking French woman spotted at an "Algerian supper-club."[49] In a 1923 letter to Carl Van Vechten, Firbank would later recount that his purpose in *The Flower*, as in *Santal*, was to capture the elusive specificity of a rare perfume: "[*The Flower*'] parfum is what concerns me most, & if it is exotic & elusive & bafflingly embaumé, the gardener (poor dear) will be glad"[50]

The relationship between *The Flower* and *Santal* presents a particularly compelling case of Firbank's style registering a contextually-specific negotiation of the expressible. In the notebooks, we note the same raw material—touristic observations made in North Africa—framed in distinctly different ways. Ultimately, these stylistic differences are underwritten by geographic differences: *Santal* takes place in a phantasmatic North Africa, in which a certain indulgence in non-normative sensuality is permissible, while *The Flower* is set in a world far closer to home (albeit nonetheless wildly fantastical). *Santal*'s world of Orientalist sensuality thus permits scant homoerotic references; *The Flower*, conversely, pays the price of its satirical cheek with an elliptical neutralization of its

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[49] Benkovitz, 209.

[50] Letter from Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, Jan 17 1923 from Bordighera. Cited also in Benkovitz, 210.

bawdiest elements. The notebook that Firbank dedicated to both projects allows us to observe his real-time stylistic negotiations. One especially remarkable page reads as follows:

> Elsie?
>
> Mlle Maley blushed at being discovered peeping ~~under~~ below the loose-covers of the chairs, to examine the Gobelins-tapestries beneath
>
> Panther-person?
>
> A passion for –
>
> Brilliant restraint
>
> "circumcised" chapeau
>
> I'm out for Joy, dear.
>
> Mosque
>
> Blue mother-of-pearl—the prince was away excavating Chodorlahomor, a faubourg of **Sodom.**[51]

This could be a page from any of Firbank's (surviving) writing notebooks, all of which contain jotted-down phrases and brief bits of dialogue, with virtually no description of plot or character. What stands out here is the striking cross-pollination between *The Flower* and *Santal*: it's hard to say what "panther-person" means (apparently so for Firbank as well, given the question mark), but a certain Countess Yvorra does appear in *The Flower* "looking quite Eastern […] in the skin of a blue panther"; meanwhile, the desert landscape of *Santal* is itself full of jackals, lions, camels, and other exotic animals. For the most part, this page shows a certain alternation between notes for one novel,

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[51] [Santal and The Flower Beneath the Foot] Holograph notebook. Ronald Firbank Collection of Papers, Henry W. and Alber A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, New York, USA.
Firbank writes the word "Sodom" in a larger, heavier, and more embellished hand than any other on the page.

and notes for the other, but the distinction begins to blur by the very end: surely, the blue mosque where protagonist Cherif offers his prayers, in *Santal*, has a doppelganger in *The Flower*'s absurdly named "Church of the Blue Jesus." And yet the small descriptive phrase that follows mention of *Santal*'s blue mosque—the interior of whose dome is decorated with mother-of-pearl tiles—leads immediately, via a single elongated stroke of the pen, into one of the most outrageous lines in *The Flower*, in which it is announced that a certain prince has begun excavating the ruins of a "*faubourg* of Sodom" for "objets d'art" (3).

Although *Santal* and *The Flower* are distinct enough projects to warrant significantly different stylistic approaches, the notebook stands out as the record of a stylistic *bifurcation*, one that stems specifically from a negotiation of relative expressibility that unfolds, curiously enough, on spatial terms. Firbank merely bypasses the tension between these two contradictory stylistic impulses, of course, by following each into a separate book. Here, however, we observe Firbank attempting to resolve such a tension in the cheeky invocation of a fantastical space, one shot through with perverse undertones: not even the biblical Sodom, in fact, but one of its *suburbs*.[52] I draw attention to this page from his notebook, however, not just because it is funny, or because it would seem to show the extent to which Firbank was capable of amusing himself—the word "Sodom" written so gravely bold, without any other reader to ever see it. Rather, I would point out that Firbank's stylistic negotiation between *Santal* and *The Flower* allows us to note a certain bathos in the latter novel. Privy to the real-time parsing of material observations into those fit for an Oriental fantasy and those fit for a court satire, we can also trace Firbank's anxious desire to maintain some sense of corporeal presence in his writing—the presences, perhaps, of the various men whose names he religiously

[52] Firbank appears to have derived the name "Chodorlahomor" from the Book of Genesis (14), which mentions a king by that name.

recorded in his journals. Firbank ends up with a superficial solution, a distribution of certain details across the variegated surface of an imaginary geography.

V. Gauguinish grace

Firbank's posthumously published and still-unfinished novel, *The New Rythum*, is another work that betrays a surprising North African origin. Set entirely in New York, the novel reflects Firbank's growing curiosity about America and its culture of (pre-prohibition) hedonism— although he refused to visit the country, and, in keeping with his usual habits, claimed to have conjured up his vision of New York in Egypt while staring into a distant mirage on a Nile cruise.[53] Perhaps this admission accounts for the vagueness of Firbank's opening description, which all in all provides few concrete details under the sign of a "pink and elusive evening towards the break of Easter":

> Zephyr and Flora caressed New York, yearned above her parks and gardens, brooded above her budding avenues (awakening young chestnut-leaf and drowsy lilac), rippled that way, this way, all caprice, eventually cutting an elfin caper with a night above the aloof façade of Mr. Harry Rosemerchant's residence on Riverside (71).

We might admittedly be anywhere here—in any city, at least. Firbank thus [?] orients us better in the next paragraph, in which we spy on Lionel, Mrs. Rosemerchant's "very young, very blond, and very dissipated-looking chauffeur," daydreaming of his ambition to "win stardom as a boxer" while his mistress decides between two sets of diamonds to wear to party that evening. "Sometimes a blossom would open, bloom, and perish," the narrative explains, "while Mrs. Rosemerchant changed her gown." Presenting the sex appeal of youthful aspiration on the part of a working-class but

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[53] See Benkovitz 289-90, citing a 1925 letter from Firbank to Van Vechten. It also appears, from the letters of this period, that the alcoholic Firbank's main reason for avoiding a trip to New York was his disdain for Prohibition and its limitations.

knowingly charismatic young man—it's not a bad evocation of what 1920s Manhattan would have signified, especially for a timid Englishman like Firbank.

The New Rythum is indeed organized around this fascination with the exotic sex appeal of America—and, like *Prancing*, which I will discuss shortly, *The New Rythum* negotiates its expression of the erotic allure of the exotic in reference to blackness. And yet *The N*ew *Rythum* is marked by a certain tension between its commitments to realizing some kind of depiction of upper-class Manhattan, and the primitivizing fetishism that it deploys at crucial moments of erotic intensity. Consider the altogether bizarre scene that takes place at the very beginning of the novel, in which Mrs. Rosemerchant finds herself suddenly aroused as she waits for her industrialist husband to return from work:

> From the articles on the bed he was apparently not yet home.
>
> "It's naughty of him how he slaves," she reflected, lifting his evening trousers to her cheek; their slight, provocative fragrance recalled the pinkish Poinciana-flowers around Palm Beach: "Great giant, I love you," she murmured, turning in some confusion at the sound of muffled merriment behind her (74).

The prose is typical of Firbank, richly detailed as to evoke local American color—the flowers of Palm Beach, in this case. But the fashionable *chicness* of this prose is immediately interrupted by Coco, the young black servant boy who observes Lady Rosemerchant while squatting on the floor:

> "I swear by all de church spires ob New York city—by all dose church spires I take no more than three drops; sh'o, surtainly! Den yo' come in an' rub y'u cheek to Misteh Rosemerchant's trews an' date just staht me laffin."
>
> "Little savage, be gone," Rosemerchant exclaimed: to be surprised, unawares, in a primitive gesture, was decidedly vexing.

The whole exchange is racist, primitivizing, and profoundly inaccurate in its transcription of African-American dialect. But it also strikingly literalizes the way in which Firbank's novels interarticulate the exotic and the erotic. Coco's "primitivity" is momentarily displaced onto Mrs. Rosemerchant, who finds herself caught "in a primitive gesture." Furthermore, the supposed crudity of Coco's dialogue exposes the nature of Mrs. Rosemerchant's gesture in terms far more direct than the altogether delicate narrative description of pink flowers in Palm Beach: did we just witness a white socialite *sniffing her husband's pants*? Firbank turns again to Coco to amplify the eroticism of the scene; "Sh'o Mass Harry he dat han'some, I could kiss his pants meself" (74). One assumes that Firbank imagined a certain shock, on the part of his anticipated British readers, at his knowing use of the Americanism "pants."

Blending Firbank's campy knack for the overly-sophisticated and an interest in the primitive that he had explored in *Prancing*—which I will discuss in very short order—*The New Rythum* thus dramatizes, rather than attempting to resolve, its constitutive tension between camp suggestiveness and the erotic simplicity of exoticized blackness. Indeed, one of the most charismatic scenes of such a tension occurs at the novel's abrupt ending. In what reveals itself to be a moment of comic misapprehension, Bernard, a dandyish white American socialite, calls out, from an apartment window on New York's Upper East Side, to a black man selling fruit on the street:

> Well; I guess I shall do my triple utmost, he returned, observing in the offing a young negro lad, in the fruit-packing line, with whom he had a slight previous acquaintance. Struck by his Gauguinish grace, he crossed the room to where he was standing:
>
> "I want to paint you *nu*."
>
> "New?"
>
> "Yes, *nu*; will you pose to me?" (107)

Linguistic ambiguity here negates the promise of an encounter with corporeal nudity, offering something of a cheeky and reflexive comment on Firbank's own method, which also turned scenes of cruisy solicitation (you! *Nu*!) into art. But the mechanism of Bernard's flirtation with the fruit-seller thus hinges on a notion of an unbridgeable difference rarely seen in Firbank.[54] As a result, however, the scene's eroticism is quickly dissipated. With Bernard and his counterpart left speaking across purposes, and on different registers, the titillating possibility that we might witness this servant's "Gauguinish" nudity (if only by proxy, or through a description of the finished work) gives way immediately to a sly commentary on the novel's own pretentions to formal or stylistic novelty: the "New" of the work's title, itself followed immediately by the cheap novelty of an exotic misspelling of the word "rhythm." In a novel so flippantly willing to make expressive use of black bodies, this scene would seem to figure a certain dead end—the black fruit-seller suddenly so profoundly different from Bernard that the tantalizing possibility that we might see him *nu* is foreclosed. What are we to make of this?

The remainder of this chapter attends to Firbank's primitivism as the culmination of his experiments with the exotic surface. *Prancing* and *The New Rythum*, Firbank's two novels that work within the aesthetic framework of primitivism, configure a far more explicit relationship between geographic and corporeal exoticism—or, perhaps, between skin and space—than any of his previous work. And nowhere is this relationship more explicitly illustrated than at the climax of *Prancing N*gger*, when an earthquake strikes the entire island of Cuna, throwing society into momentary disarray. Although the disaster indirectly causes the death of Bamboo, whose girlfriend Miami Mouth is one of the novel's three-or-so main characters (an extremely rare moment of pathos in a

[54] One important exception would be Mrs. Yajñavalkya, the eccentric and exotic black nurse in *Valmouth* (1921). *The New Rythum* isunique, however, in presenting scenes of explicit flirtation between white and black characters.

Firbank novel: Bamboo finds himself knocked into the sea, where he is reportedly devoured by a shark), it is from the perspective of Miami's dandyish younger brother Charlie that we experience the earthquake itself. We find him on the city's main Avenue, shooing off a throng of snack vendors, when the ground seems to slip from underneath him:

> "Go away; I can't be bodder," Charlie was saying, when he seemed to slip; it was as though the pavement were a carpet snatched from under him, and looking round, he was surprised to see, in a confectioner's window, a couple of marble-topped tables start merrily waltzing together.
>
> Driven onward by those behind, he began stumblingly to run towards the Park. It was the general goal. Footing a little ahead, two loose women and a gay young man (pursued by a waiter with a napkin and a bill), together with the horrified, half-crazed crowd; all, helter-skelter, were intent upon the Park.
>
> Above the Calabash-trees, bronze, demoniac, the moon gleamed sourly from a starless sky, and although not a breath of air was stirring, the crests of the loftiest palms were set arustling by the vibration at their roots.
>
> "Oh, will nobody *stop* it?" a terror-struck lady implored.
>
> Feeling quite white and clasping a fetish, Charlie sank all panting to the ground (128).

In many ways, the earthquake illustrates Firbankian displacement: far from an apocalyptic event, the earthquake precipitates a scene not of social unmaking, but of temporary reconfiguration; everyone scatters to the Park, for shelter from falling debris. The mechanism of the earthquake itself is figured as the manipulation of a surface—a carpet, pulled, like a physical-comedic gag, out from below the feet of Cunans going about their ordinary business. And in Charlie's case, such an agitation of the surface of the Earth engenders a moment of peculiar racial ambiguation: even taken literally, as a reference to what Charlie perceives as his own terror-stricken pallor, the phrase "feeling quite white"

sits awkwardly at odds with his blackness. Charlie is, after all, the youngest member of a family in which people call each other "n*gger love" without a hint of self-conscious irony.

Prancing's earthquake scene remains one of Firbank's most studied, especially for its description of the behavior of people—Cunans and expats alike—in the grand public park where they head for safety. In typical Firbank fashion, something as vulgar as a disaster should hardly deter people from their leisure, and far less from a special opportunity to form new and discreet trysts:

> A crowd, promiscuous rather than representative, composed variously of chauffeurs (making a wretched pretense, poor chaps, of seeking out their masters), Cyprians, patricians (these in opera cloaks and sparkling diamonds), tourists, for whom the Hodeidah girls would *not* dance that night, and bwam-wam bwam-wams, whose equivocal behavior, indeed, was perhaps more shocking even than the shocks, set the pent Park ahum. Yet, notwithstanding the upheavals of Nature, certain persons there were bravely making new plans.

Hanson is one among several scholars to have analyzed the scene in the park as one of a "queer sociality," subtended by the unpredictable machinations of natural forces bigger and more powerful than human society. The earthquake thus presents a rare occasion for a social mixing marked by "promiscuity" rather than by norms.

Prancing is a sore point for Firbank scholars, many of whom find themselves compelled either to apologize for it (as Lane does), or to avoid discussion of the novel altogether, tacitly dismissing it as a "distasteful curiosity."[55] Some critics find a kind of workaround in using the title *Sorrow in Sunlight*, under which *Prancing* was published in the UK—Firbank's original working title for the project. It was Carl Van Vechten, perhaps anticipating his own eventual publication of a novel titled *N*gger Heaven* in 1926, who suggested the lurid and frankly racist title for the work's first, US

[55] This phrase is Hanson's.

edition, although "Prancing N*gger" is an epithet that Mrs. Mouth affectionately uses with her husband throughout the novel. I am interested neither in apologizing for *Prancing*'s obvious participation in racist attitudes, nor in calling critical attention to it. Rather, the conclusion of this chapter suggest that Firbank's primitivism offers a striking example of Firbank's style encountering its own limits. Although *Prancing* and *The New Rythum* deploy the ethnic fetishism that had underpinned much of Firbank's other work, these novels also dramatize their own investments in fetishism, registering a certain limit of racial difference that Firbank's style is unable to dissolve or assimilate.

We might pay closer attention here to the first part of the earthquake scene. Despite this scene's exemplarity as a model of Firbank style, the earthquake also stages moment in which Firbank's prose seems to draw attention to its own mechanics. Charlie's racial status is, of course, not so much ambiguated as displaced, externalized through the figure of the fetish that he clasps in the midst of his panic. Manifested seemingly out of thin air, furthermore, the fetish serves not only as a temporary proxy for Charlie's displaced blackness, but as an emblem of the novel's own ambivalent and fetishistic attachment to blackness in the first place. The use of the word "fetish" is indeed unusual as an example of primitivizing vocabulary in this novel, which thrives on a sly mobilization of black skin and tropical scenery as a veil behind which it engages in an otherwise typical Firbankian satire of English aristocratic manners. A reader informed by Marx might even notice a peculiar resonance between Charlie's religious fetish and the brief description of the marble-topped tables "waltzing" in the nearby café. For Marx evokes a dancing table in his section on the fetishism of commodities in the first volume of *Capital*, in which he imagines a table that, once transformed into a commodity, "stand[s] on its head, and evolve[s] out of its brain grotesque ideas

far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will."[56] Charlie manages to just barely dodge a sign-board for "Pure Vaseline" as he sinks in terror to the ground. Such resonances may be purely accidental. But evidence of a developed, late-stage capitalism in Cuna-Cuna further emphasizes the importance of racial fetishism to the construction of an idyllic world that soon reveals itself to be no less modern than, say, Mayfair.[57]

Set within a presumably modern nation-state, *Prancing* thus has difficulty balancing primitivist sensuality with a more a typical Firbankian satire of upper-class manners. For all its investments in the evocation of a paradisiacal island in which people live in frank and beautiful nudity, the novel is quick to abandon its idyll within the first 30 pages, as the Mouth family move to the capital city of Cuna-Cuna. Miami Mouth, whom we had first encountered "nude, but for a girdle of creepers" (she quickly removes this, actually, once it begins to attract bees), soon complains at the prospect of living fully clothed in the city. And while banter in made-up dialect between members of the Mouth family never fully disappears, the city introduces a host of new characters who speak in a style more typical of Firbank's Europeans. The island thus very quickly comes to resemble London, or Firbank's fictional land of Tolga. Or even Cuba, or Haiti: Cuna is remarkable for being an independent island republic, a fact that sits at odds with the colonial gaze that supports primitivist aesthetics, with its organizing trope of uncivilized simplicity.

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[56] Karl Marx. *Capital Volume 1*. Trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 163-4.

[57] Scholarship on the phenomenon of primitivism has identified the crucial influence of primitivizing ethnography, and the 19th century trade in primitive objects in Europe, on Marx's conception of the fetish. One notable example is William Pietz's seminal trilogy of essays on the origin of the fetish in Western thought. Beginning with an account of the word's origin in late medieval Portugal (in the word *feitiço*, meaning "witchcraft" or "magic"), Pietz surveys the history of the term's transformations and its eventual entanglement with Western colonialism and with an imperialist desire to project, onto colonized subjects, certain primitive modes of relating to the object world. "It is […] in the surprising history of [the word 'fetish'] as a comprehensive theoretical term indispensable to such crucial thinkers as Comte, Marx, and Freud, that the real interdisciplinary interest of 'fetish' lies."
Se William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring, 1985).

On the one hand, the island nation of Cuna, like Firbank's other fantastical fictitious spaces, could be said to operate as yet another space in which homoerotic sensibilities might be more safely or more discreetly played out. "Ever so lovely are the young men of Cuna-Cuna," offers the narrator at the beginning of Chapter XI, "but none so delicate, charming, and squeamish as Charlie Mouth." (126). But Firbank complicates this sense of Edenic sensuality by calling immediate attention to its postcolonial history:

> Charlie found himself in Liberty square.
>
> Here, the Cunan Poet, Samba Marcella's effigy arose—that 'sable singer of Revolt.' Aloft, on a pedestal, soared the Poet, laurel-crowned, thick-lipped, woolly, a large weeping Genius, with a bold taste for draperies hovering just beneath; her one eye closed, the other open, giving her an air of winking confidentially at the passers-by.
>
> "'Up Cunans, up! To arms, to arms!'" [Charlie] quoted, lingering to watch the playful swallows wheeling among the tubs of rose-oleanders that stood around (126-7).

It's a remarkable passage; here, racialized exoticism— "thick-lipped, woolly"— is deployed awkwardly in the description of a revolutionary poet whose oeuvre is exemplified for us in a bold injunction to resist colonial rule with violence. The notion of Cuna's independence aids Firbank in the development of an idyllic and pointedly *non*-English space—not only far away from Britain, but far from the imperialistic imposition of its overbearing norms. But Cuna's extra-imperial position also undercuts the colonial gaze that otherwise structures *Prancing*'s imaginary [?] of abundant nudity and primitivist bliss. This passage thus produces a strange tension in *Prancing*'s aesthetic, adding an uncanny sense of cultural autonomy to an island that had theretofore been made available to the reader as exotic and passive.

This tension does not turn out to be resolvable. A novel schizophrenically obsessed with *both* the raw beauty and civilized refinement of a family of "primitives," *Prancing*'s contradictions are most

saliently embodied in Charlie, the character who most perfectly embodies both a sense of primitive ease in his sexuality and a sense of dandyish over-refinement. And yet just at the moment when Charlie begins, by reciting a line of nationalist poetry, to articulate a kind of self-awareness as a postcolonial subject, an earthquake undermines his character and makes visible the fetishizing operations that had produced him. At the moment when *Prancing*'s construction of a fetishized alterity seem too overbearing, too powerful, too assertive for the narrative to maintain its coherence, *Prancing* pulls the rug out from beneath its own feet.

Coda: *Egypt: Native Artisan*

A single photograph [Fig. 3.2] can be found pasted to the interior back cover of the 12-page large-format sketchbook that Firbank dedicated exclusively to keeping notes for *Santal*. The photograph shows a young boy, sixteen or so, applying detail to a clay amphora with a long and fine-tipped paintbrush. Much about the scene suggests Classical influence: the boy's face in profile, together with the sculptural effect of stark light hitting the pleats of his linen cloak, give the effect of a Greek or Roman relief. He is obviously North African; his hair is black and tightly curled, and he wears not a tunic but a typical Maghrebi bournous, seemingly huge, which falls away from his right shoulder (although if one were to look only at the exposed parts of his body—head, neck, right shoulder, upper chest—one might note a resemblance to a conventional bust of Antinous, with its similarly downturned head). The image is thus a hybrid, both Neoclassical cliché and anthropological specimen: "Egypt: native artisan," reads an English caption found on other copies of the image that circulated in the early decades of the 20th century.[58] The lower-left corner bears the trademark of

[58] A copy of the photograph with this caption, dated to 1910-1920, is indexed by Europeana Collections (europeana.eu) under ID 341567. This copy appears to be in a collection in Girona, Spain.

Rudolf Franz Lehnert and Ernst Heinrich Landrock, two German photographers, based primarily in Tunis but with a secondary studio in Cairo, who were active throughout North Africa in the early decades of the 20th century. By 1910, the pair had established a recognizable portrait style, which blended elements of the anthropological document with conventions of Neoclassical and Orientalist painting.

None of Firbank's other surviving writing notebooks contain photographs, and the inclusion of one in the *Santal* notebook raises a few questions. Was this boy a point of reference for Cherif, with his "tiny head like the proudest of camels, and forlorn, profound eyes that had vision in them" (479)? Perhaps an inspiration for "Ibn Ibrahim," described passingly in Firbank's notebook as "a slender dove-eyed boy"? The photograph is certainly among the more chaste, and thus more discreet, examples of Lehnert and Landrock's images of male and female North African adolescents and young adults, which were better known for exhibiting varying degrees of nudity [see Fig. 3.3].[59] Although we can't be entirely certain that Firbank had seen any others, we do know that Lehnert and Landrock typically sold their photographs in complete album sets, and that these sets were popular tourist items for European visitors to the Maghreb.[60] And, more to the point, the fact that the German photographers were able to trade in such a seemingly contradictory aesthetic—the almost-pornographic, the picturesque, and the documentary mixed together—rested on a longstanding tradition of attributing a languid and exotic sensuality to North African life. As Joseph Geraci notes, the tunic slipped over the shoulder is a particularly consistent device by which Lehnert and Landrock instilled in their photographs an "erotic sensibility" while simultaneously staking

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[59] For more the importance of Lehnert and Landrock's nude photos to the culture that had grown around clandestine sexual tourism in early 20th century North Africa, see Michel Mégnin, "André Gide, Rudolf Lehnert, et la poésie arabe: Images et réalité de la pédérastie en terre d'Islam" *Bulletin des Amis d'André Gide* 33, no. 146 (April 2005).
[60] Geraci, "Lehnert and Landrock of North Africa." *History of Photography* 27, No. 3. (2003): 294.

claims to the felicitous representation of authentic Maghrebi life.[61] *Egypt: native artisan* might thus be read as a point of reference for the erotic sensibility of *Santal* itself, which is similarly perceptible only through subtle allusive details.

I dwell on this photograph in part as an opportunity to return to another object, for which I see *Egypt: native artisan* as surprisingly analogous—namely, the vellum book cover for *Odette*, that had borne the material imprint of Van Vechten's and Firbank's long-distance flirtation. To apprehend this photograph as something like a cipher for *Santal*'s subdued queer sensuality demands that we attend to the significance of its subject's exposed skin: it is, after all, the bare shoulder that would stand in metonymic relation to an altogether more salacious photographic corpus. The photograph's entirely peripheral and yet materially substantial relation to *Santal* (collected as part of the novel's raw material) invites further comparison to the vellum book cover for *Odette d'Antrevernes*, with which I began this chapter; the photograph indeed constitutes the literal inner cover of Firbank's principal notebook for *Santal*.[62] If such a comparison seems tendentious, I would point out that Firbank in fact first conceived of *Santal* as a rewriting of *Odette*, as he states in a 1920 letter to his mother, written from from Algiers: "I want to rewrite Odette in an Arab setting—a child seeking Allah—I shall try & make the descriptions of scenery beautiful & keep the whole thing as simple as possible."[63] The two works share a fairly similar basic narrative: *Odette*, too, concerns the fate of a pious young child, naïve enough to trust strangers who threaten to corrupt her innocence.

Like the vellum that had so excited Carl Van Vechten with its textural ambiguity, this image is thus most significant for its expression of a purely *virtual* fleshliness; it concretizes the just-barely-palpable texture of a homoerotic sensuality that pervades the background of *Santal*, in part by virtue

[61] Ibid., 296
[62] Firbank also made a few notes for *Santal* in the dedicated notebook for *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, which he had also planned during his 1920-21 travels in North Africa.
[63] Quoted in Benkovitz, 187.

of its metonymic referentiality (not to mention its discretion), but also in part by virtue of its suspension between an epistemic and a pornographic gaze. Indeed, the image gestures discreetly towards, without quite disclosing, the peculiar affinity between colonial ethnography and salacious tourism. It's a fetish, surely—an emblem of a certain erotic investment in the Maghreb, one that shapes *Santal* the way it had shaped *L'Immoraliste*. But, in its discretion, it also reveals a strange set of affinities with Firbank style itself: generically ambiguous (ethnographic document? Neoclassical portrait?), unwilling to fix itself as belonging wholly to any place or context, it figures a surface from which a certain fantasy of exotic sensuality emanates, and onto which the very same fantasy might be projected.

Coda: Raghubir Sing and the Postcolonial Afterlife of Aesthetic Excess in India

Set in a market stall in the Kashmiri city of Srinagar, Raghubir Singh's 1979 photograph, "Fruit Seller" [Fig. 4.1] stands out amidst his extensive corpus as a particularly rich example of what Mia Fineman calls the Indian photographer's "opulent use of color."[1] The image depicts a shopkeeper and what we presume to be his teenage and infant sons. Both are seated—the fruit seller squat behind a colorful array of oranges and apples, a weary look on his face; the teenage boy just outside the stall, appearing to shout something inside as he cradles the baby. In such an otherwise humble marketplace tableau, it is indeed the dazzling oranges, on their beds of iridescent fuchsia paper, that suggest an opulence that would overrun the grey shabbiness of the photo's setting. The fruits seem to glow with a certain indifference to their drab surroundings—even to their own commonplace ordinariness, as though encouraging us to register a punning slippage between color and merchandise: not just oranges, but *oranges* (along with reds and yellows and electric pinks). Singh's "Fruit Seller" thus seems to cannily anticipate a rather consistent critical tendency to associate his handling of color with a kind of luxury: in one essay, Arjun Appadurai credits Singh with capturing the "luxuriance of things" in urban Indian life;[2] Fineman, elsewhere in the essay already quoted, lauds the photographer's "epicurean handling of color";[3] and in a review of one of Singh's published photography books journalist P.C. Smith remarks on the "extravagance" of color in Singh's corpus asserting that photographer's "colors are too lavish to seem 'documentary.'"[4]

A technically innovative and formally sophisticated use of color constitutes Singh's major contribution to 20th century art photography. All of his major works were produced in India, most

[1] Mia Fineman, *Raghubir Singh: Modernism on the Ganges* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 28.
[2] Arjun Appadurai, "The Thing Itself," *Public Culture*, Vol. 18, Issue 1 (2006), 17.
[3] Fineman, 16.
[4] P.C. Smith, "The Colours of India: Raghubir Singh," *Art in America, Vol. 88. No. 3 (2000)*, 99.

of them having been published in large-format books that focus on a major Indian city or region: Benares (now Varanasi), Calcutta, Bombay, Rajasthan. Working within a tradition of black-and-white photography in India with strong roots in the methods of the colonial topological survey—from mid-19th century British photographers John Murray and Samuel Bourne, to the work of Singh's mentor and friend, the modernist French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson—Singh came to view color as a site in which Indian and Western aesthetics might be reconciled. The use of color photography thus allowed him to reject what he viewed as the overbearing Manicheism of black and white aesthetics, with their obsession with death, their tacit disdain for the material world. For Singh, color more accurately captured the fullness of life as understood and experienced in Hindu society, where the spiritual complexities of reincarnation demand as variegated a means of representation as possible[5]. Color, then, also bridged the divide between documentary fidelity and formalist experimentation with the material possibilities of the medium. In an enigmatic statement in a 1976 interview, for instance, Singh theorizes photographic color as pure form: "In black and white, the gray scale [sic] provides the form," he writes, whereas "in color, color itself is form."[6]

Singh's experiments with color return us to the complex entanglement of colonial forms of administrative knowledge-production, the aesthetic negotiation of modern Indian art in British-administered India, and the colonial trope of Indian luxury that I had examined in chapter Two. Such contextual density is registered by Raghubir Singh's own negotiations of a distinctly Indian photographic practice: Singh's most formative aesthetic model was Cartier-Bresson's 1948 photographic series on Jaipur, which itself bore aesthetic debts to mid-19th century colonial travel and reconnaissance photography (John Murray, in fact, had been introduced to photography while

[5] Fineman, 25-27.
[6] William Gedney, "Raghubir Singh: The Reality of Color," *Modern Photography*, Vol. 40 (October, 1976), 143.

serving in the Army of the East India Company).[7] Furthermore, critical appraisals of Singh's "lavish" depictions of city-dwellers amid brightly-colored merchandise, or of village women in kaleidoscopic assemblages of vividly colorful sarees, also remind us of a longstanding trope of Western reveries about India, which tend to receive scenes of Indian life as intrinsically ornamental—as though even the most ordinary, even the most austere, scenes of the everyday could be made to function as metonymies of the richness in diamonds, silks, and other resources that had underwritten European colonization in the first place.

The luxury of color in Singh's work, however, suggests a more fundamental relationship between the idea of luxury and certain formal logics that we might associate with modernism. Read against Singh's own injunction that color *is* form, such a photograph as "Fruit Seller" allows us to apprehend the aesthetic effect of luxuriousness—the charisma of attractive goods, the wave-like, sloping pinks that comprise the theater of their display—as a residue of the work's attainment of a certain kind of formal autonomy. Or, put differently: in this photograph, it's the fruits that gesture towards the alchemical movement from documentary realism to the formal purity of color and composition, their colors providing for the photograph's capacity to exceed its documentary function. And indeed, the image attains its formal autonomy by staging what might otherwise seem to be ornamental colors—color being quite *beside the point*, given that the human figures are meant to be the true figurative subjects of the photograph—in a complex scene of metonymic invocation, by which the oranges seem to stand in for form itself, and by which the human figures thus stand in for the eventuality of their own negation.

[7] See for instance the biographic reference for Murray on the website of the Getty Museum, accessed on 12 July, 2020: http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1468/dr-john-murray-british-1809-1898/

Singh's transformation of color photography can thus be seen to register the postcolonial afterlife of the forms of excess I have been tracking throughout this dissertation. With a view to the colonial origin of photography in India—as a medium of surveillance, as a means to "documentary" knowledge-production—Singh mobilizes aesthetic excess in all its ambivalence: for the sense of chromatic opulence that so strikingly exceeds the documentary framework of "Fruit Seller" would seem to borrow its charisma from that of the commodity. In other words, if "Fruit Seller" dramatizes the capacity of aesthetic excess to radically transcend the frame of the text, this particular version of excess betrays an evident intimacy with the aesthetics of commercial display. In light of Appadurai's praise, we can thicken our sense of the ambivalence of Singh's practice: for if Singh registers the "luxuriance of things" in urban Indian life—a democratic flattening of person and object—his photographs frequently remind us that the very idea of such luxuriance is mediated by the visibility of industrial hyper-productivity in urban Indian life. The oranges do not belong to such hyper-productivity quite like Singh's other marketplace scenes, which feature heaps of merchandise amidst buzzing crowds of people. Rather, the chromatic liveliness of the oranges—emphasized as well by the no-less vivid magenta of the wrapping paper, which functions as a kind of stage—seems to communicate something of the ways in which the spirit of the fetish commodity can inhabit scenes as traditional as the family-run market stall.

To square Singh's investment in "the luxuriance of things" with his commitments to a "palpable humanism," I suggest, involves thinking through his uses of chromatic excess—thinking, that is, through the ways in which his use of color exceeds the restraints of documentary realism. Expressing a sense of vitality that inheres neither in an image's human subjects, nor the objects on display, Singh's color calls into question the integrity of distinctions such as that between person and thing. In my chapter on Firbank, I examined the ways in which a thematic and formal treatment of excess can overrun, and thus reveal the instability of distinctions such as that between person and

thing. The challenge of Singh's corpus lies in the ambivalence of this vitality that he animates through the use of chromatic excess—a vitality rooted both in an idiosyncratic and firmly anti-imperial sense of Indian mythology, and in the aesthetic legacy of imperialist ways of seeing and knowing. Singh's corpus attests to the ongoing productiveness of aesthetic excess as a site in which to explore, contest, and rethink the legacies of empire and its ideological and economic processes.

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