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Modernist Fiction and Systemic Risk

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## **Anticipations of the Accident: Modernist Fiction and Systemic Risk**

**Paul Crosthwaite**

In the summer and early autumn of 2008, as the global 'credit crunch' intensified, resulting in the collapse, part-nationalization, or forced merger of numerous venerable financial institutions, a term usually confined to the arcane realm of financial economics became a fixture in the mass media: 'systemic risk'. This term captured the anxiety that, in an age of global interdependence, the spasms of a group of ailing banks might radiate outwards to destabilize the international banking system, the wider financial sector, and indeed the global economy as a whole. Though it is perhaps the most dramatic instance, the credit crunch of 2007-2008 is not the first crisis of recent decades in which the interconnectedness of the world economic system has been revealed as a potentially catastrophic vulnerability. Nor is this a situation confined to the age of modems, satellites, fibre optic cables, and automated, computerized trading. Though the technological infrastructure was less sophisticated, all the evidence suggests that the world was at least as 'globalized' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as in our own era, and that the level of systemic risk arising from this condition of globalization equalled or even exceeded that which confronts us today. The impetus for this essay derives from the fact that while there is an increasing recognition that the most aesthetically significant literary developments of this earlier period – signalled by the broad term modernism – were products of an age of globalization,<sup>1</sup> the place of systemic risk on the horizon of the modernist imagination has remained untheorized. Resituating modernist fiction within

the force-field of systemic risk, as I seek to do in this essay, reveals unexpected affinities between diverse texts, and offers new ways not only of understanding the novelistic innovations of the early twentieth century, but also of accounting for the continued currency of such innovations today. I posit globalization, of which systemic risk is such a significant consequence, as an interpretive category through which to analyse literary texts, but I also attempt to show how both the contents and the shifting receptions of these texts yield reciprocal insights into the concept of globalization itself, highlighting its complexity, contradiction, and multivalence.<sup>2</sup>

As I hope to demonstrate, much is at stake in the confrontation between the novelist and the phenomenon of systemic risk, but one question that exerts a particularly acute pressure is that of the author's reception and legacy. In a recent meditation on what he calls the 'risk of writing', Seán Burke notes the literary text's powerlessness 'to predict or programme its own audience and reception'. After its publication, a text is at the mercy of 'unforeseen events'; it risks being 'caught up in real-world catastrophes' that endow it with 'unintended meanings'.<sup>3</sup> One common outcome of a situation of this kind is for the text to be consigned irredeemably to the past, to be thought of, if at all, as a product of the time 'before', which has little or nothing to say to the time 'after'. At the other end of the spectrum of reception, a text may become meaningful in newly potent ways, even to the extent of being hailed as a 'visionary', 'prescient', or 'prophetic' anticipation of the event that has come to pass. Michael André Bernstein suggests that the position to which texts are assigned on this spectrum says little about their supposedly objective qualities – their myopia or foresightedness, their time-boundness or timelessness – and a great deal about the capacity of history to generate compelling but meaningless coincidences.<sup>4</sup> Under conditions of systemic risk this situation is both intensified and reconfigured. Most

obviously, the sheer scale and impact of the upheavals produced by these conditions is such that, in their wake, few texts will escape some alteration in the way in which they are read and discussed, and many will appear utterly transformed. Given, in addition, the increased frequency of large-scale crises, the prevailing tendency will be for ever greater numbers of texts to be rendered prematurely anachronistic.

Conversely, though, the fact that such crises are the products not merely of particular, specific, and contingent clusters of circumstances, but also of structural and systemic conditions endemic to the global economy as a whole, raises the possibility of a genuinely proleptic or anticipatory dimension being inscribed in the literary text, for the text would be able to foreground the near-inevitability of the next ramifying upheaval, even as it signaled the impossibility of predicting the place and time of its emergence with any precision. By drawing the logic of systemic risk into its own fabric, the text would thus at least partially guarantee its future timeliness or contemporaneity. In this essay, I will argue that an important aspect of the modernism of some key early twentieth-century novels – principally Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – lies in their adoption of a strategy of this kind. The Anglo-American orientation of my study is by no means arbitrary, since I wish to gauge the literary effects of systemic risk in the immediate vicinity of the twin 'poles' of global trade, commerce, and communications in the early twentieth century: London and New York. Nor is my focus on major texts by leading figures of the modernist canon indicative of a mere preference for the familiar and convenient; on the contrary, I will suggest that the continued currency and interest of these texts, their very 'canonicity', is itself born in

part of their projection of a future defined by global risk and instability – a future that in many ways resembles our own present.

### **Systemic Risk in the ‘First Age of Globalization’**

Globalization during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth was not just shallow and fleeting, but deep and durable. The growth of a world-wide network of fast cables and telegraph systems, in tandem with developments in railways and steamships, eroded some of the obstacles of geography and made it easier to organize transcontinental business. These networks supported huge flows of capital, technology, people, news, and ideas which, in turn, led to a high degree of convergence among markets, merchants, and bankers.<sup>5</sup>

As Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike’s overview suggests, this period was characterized by an escalating level of interconnectedness and interdependence. By the turn of the twentieth century, not only had the majority of the globe been explored and mapped by representatives of the western powers, but most inhabited areas had undergone some degree of modernization and development, which served to incorporate them into these global networks. The ever more densely interwoven web of connections that traversed the planet brought with it new anxieties. These were expressed by the English geographer H.J. Mackinder in an influential paper of 1904:

From the present time forth ... we shall ... have to deal with a closed political system, and none the less that it will be one of world-wide scope. Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit

of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism will be shattered in consequence. There is a vast difference of effect in the fall of a shell into an earthwork and its fall amid the closed spaces and rigid structures of a great building or ship.<sup>6</sup>

One of the chief means by which the effects of local upheavals rippled across this increasingly homogeneous and tightly circumscribed global space was via the new communication technologies. The rapid expansion first of cable telegraphy networks and later of wireless telegraphy and telephone systems made it possible to relay information almost instantaneously across the planet. This was a major factor in the establishment of World Standard Time in 1884. In his seminal study *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Stephen Kern argues that as a result of these developments,

the sense of the present was ... expanded spatially to create the vast, shared experience of simultaneity. The present was no longer limited to one event in one place, sandwiched tightly between past and future and limited to local surroundings. In an age of intrusive electronic communication 'now' became an extended interval of time that could, indeed must, include events around the world.<sup>7</sup>

Kern describes how, for example, news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 was rapidly transmitted to the European capitals, sparking continent-wide turmoil that would result in war.<sup>8</sup>

The potential of a particular crisis to assume international or even planetary proportions was substantially heightened in this period by the growing integration of the global economy. David Harvey suggests that the destabilizing effects of this process first made themselves plainly felt as early as 1846-47, when ‘depression ... swept out of Britain and ... quickly engulfed the whole of what was then the capitalist world’. These events proved that ‘Europe had achieved a level of spatial integration in its economic and financial life that was to make the whole continent vulnerable to simultaneous crisis formation’.<sup>9</sup> As Harvey goes on to suggest, though, the severity of this international depression was attributable not simply to the growing interdependence of the various national economies, but to a shift in priority between the two main spheres of capital accumulation: a shift from the predominance of the so-called ‘real economy’ or economy ‘proper’ (the realm of labour and the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities) to the ascendance of the financial sector (the arena of stock exchanges and bond, credit, and currency markets). The crisis of 1846-47 was triggered by a significant fall in the supply of a key commodity – food – as the result of a harvest failure, but it was enormously exacerbated by the bursting of speculative bubbles not only in foodstuffs but also in railway stock. According to Giovanni Arrighi, a shift in precedence from commodity to financial accumulation marks the beginning of the end of each systemic cycle of accumulation in the history of capital – in this case the end of the British cycle, which ran from the latter half of the eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The events of 1846-47 showed the first glimmers of this development, which would intensify throughout the remainder of the period. It also illustrated that as this process of financialization accelerated, any notion of the immunity or insulation of the ‘real’ economy from the fluctuations of the financial markets would

have to be abandoned. The three most significant economic contractions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which began in 1873, 1890, and 1929, all stemmed from financial crises and proved to be ‘grim reaper[s] across all levels of society’.<sup>11</sup> These crises became capable of ‘diffusing economic instability’ ever more widely and rapidly as the new telecommunications channels (most notably the transatlantic telegraph cable, installed in 1866) synchronized the world’s markets.<sup>12</sup> The gradual development of these networks made ‘worldwide crises of confidence ... more nearly simultaneous’.<sup>13</sup> As Arrighi shows, the rise to dominance of a turbulent ‘space of flows’ encompassing the world’s financial markets was paralleled by the supersession of the British cycle by the US cycle, as Threadneedle Street in the City of London was replaced by Manhattan’s Wall Street as the preeminent processing point for these abstract transactions. Between them, these two vortices in the global space of flows formed what Charles Kindleberger calls the ‘major storm centres’ for six of the ten most significant financial crises in the period 1873-1929.<sup>14</sup> These crises tended increasingly to resemble what the French philosopher of technology Paul Virilio calls the ‘generalized’, ‘integral’, or ‘global’ accident – the accident that ‘would appear simultaneously to the world as a whole’.<sup>15</sup> The global accident is the realization of systemic risk. It is simultaneously contingent and inevitable: it is impossible to determine when or where it will be triggered, but while the economic and technological formations of globalization remain in place, it will continue, ineluctably, to arise. The spectre of the global accident, which appeared, for the first time, amidst the globalizing dynamics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, formed one of the key conditions of possibility for the emergence of modernist fiction in England and the United States.



## **Fiction and the Accident**

From the mid-nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth, many of the anxieties discussed above – anxieties about the impact of the new communication technologies, the growing interconnectedness of economic life, and the potential for cascading financial crisis or ‘contagion’ – were also key concerns for English and American novelists working in the traditions of literary realism and naturalism. These aspects of the work of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Reade, William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Maria Cummins, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Upton Sinclair, and others have recently received substantial critical attention.<sup>16</sup> For all their diversity of content, style, structure, and technique, the way in which the texts I am concerned with in this essay principally distinguish themselves from this body of work – the way in which they signal their recognition of the full pressures of contemporaneity and thus evince their modernism – is through the expanded and heightened scale on which their dramas of interdependence, risk, and crisis are imagined. Though, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was already apparent that socio-economic upheavals possessed a significant international dimension (as the crisis of 1846-47 indicated), the realist and naturalist modes were largely unable to conceive of the ramifications of these upheavals beyond the threat they posed to the internal stability and integrity of the nation. The modernist departure from this paradigm consisted of the development of modes of representation adequate to a social formation that was increasingly global and – as Fredric Jameson notes in his Arrighi-inspired essay ‘Culture and Finance Capital’ – increasingly abstract, fluid, and volatile.<sup>17</sup> This response is one aspect of a more general modernist engagement with the radically expanded and mystified horizons of existence that prevailed in this

period. In classic studies that remain highly influential, Jameson and David Harvey argue that modernism confronted the inability of the metropolitan citizen to apprehend or, in Jameson's phrase, 'cognitively map' relations of economic interdependence that extended in every direction across the vast expanses of the globe.<sup>18</sup> The emergence of systemic risk and the global accident were the most acute consequences of these unprecedented conditions. Harvey points to a relation between systemic risk and modernist representation when he claims that the new aesthetic modes registered, both formally and thematically, 'the insecurities of a shifting relative space, in which events in one place could have immediate and ramifying effects in several other places', as well as 'a reality in which two events in quite different spaces occurring at the same time could so intersect as to change how the world worked'.<sup>19</sup> In what follows, I will elaborate on this position in relation to some key works of English and American fiction.

Aspects of the issues I am interested in are features of various works of Anglo-American modernism. They are evident, for example, in the anxieties surrounding the expected 'smash' of an insurance company in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910); in Edward Ashburnham's uncanny sensitivity to the fluctuations of the stock market in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915); in the triangulation of the global economy between Britain, Germany, and the United States in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920); and in the depiction of a small Midwest community exposed to the global economic and financial turmoil of the 1890s in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923). As I have indicated, however, it is in exemplary texts by Conrad, Woolf, Dos Passos, and Fitzgerald that I will explore the strategies adopted by novelists in this period to evoke the new reality of a world in which, as Harvey puts it, 'events in one place could have immediate and ramifying effects in several other places'. I will

explain, too, how it is that these narratives not only respond to the coalescence of a state of systemic risk, but also orientate themselves towards its future outcomes in the shape of the global accident. Given the limitations of space, it will be possible to do little more than survey the broad contours of these texts, but I hope, in doing so, to demonstrate the potential that this historical formation, and the theoretical position I derive from it, hold for an enriched understanding of Anglo-American modernist fiction.

In Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, as Christina Britzolakis observes, 'the time-space imaginary of global modernity, anchored in the imperial capital itself, appears intensely vulnerable to actual and symbolic destabilization'.<sup>20</sup> The plot of the novel centres around an attempt by the Russian authorities to manufacture a terrorist bombing that will instil such shock in the European bourgeoisie that strict international anti-dissident measures are imposed. Given that the objective of the operation is to launch a wave of fear across the continent via the news dissemination channels of the emerging mass media, it is entirely appropriate – as Britzolakis and Con Coroneos suggest – that the target should be the Greenwich Observatory, the centre of a system of world time established precisely as a response to the new capacity of events to take effect over large distances in short intervals.<sup>21</sup> The Russian diplomat who orchestrates the bombing also seeks to exploit the Observatory's world-wide renown – the fact that 'the whole civilised world has heard of Greenwich'<sup>22</sup> – to generate a 'global event'.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, if, as Mark Eyeington remarks, 'the centralization of the world's time via the Greenwich meridian ... effectively defined London as the centre of nineteenth-century global capitalism', then an attack on this site constitutes 'a blow at the global capitalist political order'.<sup>24</sup>

In an essay of 1923, Conrad describes the thorough exploration, mapping, and integration of global space in terms of pervasive solar illumination. ‘This earth’, he writes, is ‘girt about with cables, with an atmosphere made restless by the waves of ether, lighted by that sun of the twentieth century under which there is nothing new left now, and but very little of what may still be called obscure’.<sup>25</sup> This sun is a pitiless version of the benevolent orb that, in the familiar words of John Wilson, ‘never set’ on the dominions of the British Empire – a notion repeated, with requisite irony, in *The Secret Agent* (p. 169). In this context, it is worth recalling that the other purpose of the Greenwich Observatory at the turn of the twentieth century, besides its demarcation of the prime meridian of world time, was, of course, the telescopic exploration of the solar system and the further reaches of the cosmos. Emphasizing this, the Russian diplomat in *The Secret Agent* describes the target of the bombing as ‘astronomy’ (p. 27). A subtle chain of associations that runs through the novel establishes the distant bodies and constellations of the celestial realm as analogues for the vast and inscrutable networks of the capitalist world-system. The determining influence of this system on the experience of daily life is figured by the presence of a looming, bloated sun, which hangs ominously over the dingy London streets where the action takes place. As Alex Houen and Michael Whitworth suggest, this image also taps into scientific discourses of the time that posited the sun’s entropic destiny of grotesque expansion lapsing into terminal exhaustion as akin to the rhythms of capital.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the interconnecting circles – suggestive of ‘a rendering of cosmic chaos’ – obsessively inscribed by Stevie, the mentally disabled young man who will be blown up whilst unwittingly delivering the bomb to its target, evoke the infinitely complex contours of the world-system. To an observer they appear as ‘the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable’ (p. 36).<sup>27</sup> Following Stevie’s accidental

death as part of an attack on the very core of this system, the grief of his sister, Winnie, is described in appropriately planetary terms: ‘she kept still as the population of half the globe would keep still in astonishment and despair, were the sun suddenly put out in the summer sky by the perfidy of a trusted providence’ (p. 194). A total solar eclipse – a mysterious and awesome occurrence for the ‘premodern’ inhabitants of the world – evokes both the desolation of familial loss and the prospect of a catastrophic disruption of the circulatory processes of global capital.

These circulations – and their potential destabilization – are also integral to Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. Ann Banfield suggests that the narrative conveys the effects of ‘modern technologies of communication’<sup>28</sup> as they are described by Woolf in an essay of 1927:

The streets of any large town [are] cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited by a different human being who ... is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pass through the roof and speak aloud of battles and murders and strikes and revolutions all over the world.<sup>29</sup>

Offering a slightly different emphasis, Jennifer Wicke argues that the text registers the ‘global history’ of capitalist market relations.<sup>30</sup> It is attuned, she suggests, to the ‘fractured global rhythms’ and ‘chaotic nature’ of a market that, by the early twentieth century, is ‘recognizable as a preternaturally sensitive organism ready to ramify the smallest shock throughout its limpid, limbic system’ (pp. 19, 11). This market defies ‘description, in that it is no longer equatable with realist or entirely rationalist models of representation’ (p. 11). As both Banfield and Wicke suggest, these bewildering

conditions of interconnectedness and instability are principally evoked through Woolf's experimental stylistic and formal techniques. Fredric Jameson argues that the inability of the metropolitan citizen to imagine the 'unrepresentable totality' of the imperial world-system prompts modernist novelists to adopt a mode of 'cinematographic perception' that, in its mobility and impersonality, transcends any singular subjective perspective.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, in *Mrs Dalloway* the fluid and dematerialized circulations of information and capital, and their capacity to weave dispersed individuals into relations of interdependence, are enacted by a narrative voice that, functioning as a 'mobile camera of vision',<sup>32</sup> wends its way into and between the consciousnesses of the various characters. This inchoate and intangible state of interrelatedness is expressed, too, by the mysterious, near-telepathic sympathies – or 'odd affinities'<sup>33</sup> – which develop between characters who never meet, as when Clarissa Dalloway finds, in the absence of any apparent commonalities, that she feels 'somehow very like' a young man of whose suicide she has just learnt (p. 204). As Wicke argues, 'such a mode of collective consciousness [is] a phenomenon of the everyday world, however hard it may be to explain in everyday language. This phenomenon is encountered in everyday life as the experience of "the market"' (p. 12).

In Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, the assimilation of individuals into an abstract constellation of economic and financial relations is similarly captured by both the 'cinematographic' peregrinations of the narrative voice and the many eerie coincidences, synchronicities, and affinities that transpire between the text's characters. In comparison with *Mrs Dalloway*, however, Dos Passos' novel is more overtly shot through with the ramifications of these developing conditions. It explicitly dramatizes the experience of life in a world where 'dollars whine on the

radio' and 'all the cables tap out dollars'.<sup>34</sup> The narrative is set between the late 1890s and early 1920s, and displays much evidence of the extreme volatility that beset the American and world economies during that era. In the opening chapter we encounter a character who has seen his 'savings bank [go] bust', leaving him with 'nuttin but a bankbook for my trouble' (p. 20). Later we hear of a recent real estate 'crash' (p. 37) and meet a destitute and self-deluded alcoholic who, in an earlier incarnation as 'the Wizard of Wall Street', 'played the market ... for ten years' and 'only took a cropper three times' – until, of course, 'the last time' (p. 138). The novel's most sustained account of a financial crisis, however, concerns the panic of 1914. In the summer of that year the outbreak of the Great War motivated Britain and other European powers to sell US railroad stocks and bonds and use the proceeds to acquire gold from the American banking system. The rapid outflow of gold from the United States prompted speculation that the country would abandon the international gold standard, speculation which led, in turn, to a collapse in the value of the dollar and mounting turmoil on the world's financial markets.<sup>35</sup> In the febrile atmosphere of this period, characters in *Manhattan Transfer* describe Sarajevo as 'the place that set the wires on fire' and worry that 'the cables are so choked up you cant [*sic*] get any news through' (p. 211). They speak of a 'crazy' mood in the Chicago trading pits (p. 211) and 'big failures' and 'panic' (p. 206) on Wall Street, which is going 'plumb to hell' (p. 199). 'Conditions', they fear, will be 'affected all over the world' (p. 206). The New York Stock Exchange closed at the end of July 1914 (as various characters in the novel argue that it must [pp. 199, 212, 216]), remaining inactive for over four months. Even after the Exchange reopened, however, the situation in New York's financial district remained, as a lawyer character in the novel puts it, 'very unsettled' (p. 235). The stimulus to the manufacturing and banking sectors provided by the war eventually

allowed the American economy to rebound and enter into a boom phase, which was joined by other leading nations after the conclusion of hostilities. In 1920-21, however, the postwar boom gave way to the inevitable slump. The section of the novel set during this period features a newspaper report headed 'BLACKHEAD & DENSCH FAIL FOR \$10,000,000', which is studded with the ominous phrases 'smash', 'Economic Depression', and 'after the war slump' (p. 344). One of the eponymous owners of the collapsing company complains that 'the slump', has sent the market 'to hell. It's ruin I tell you' (p. 326), while his partner exclaims that 'there isn't a market in the goddam [*sic*] world that isn't shot to blazes' (pp. 295-96), and is left to reflect despairingly on 'twentyfive [*sic*], thirty years of work all gone to hell in ten minutes' (p. 351).

The world of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is also defined, as Ronald Berman suggests, by 'banking and credit and investment'<sup>36</sup> – and the promises and perils they present. Set in the summer of 1922, at the beginning of the speculative boom that followed the slump of 1920-21, the novel is narrated by a young Midwesterner, Nick Carraway, who relocates to New York to take up a post as a bond trader, since, in this rapidly financializing economy, 'everybody' he knows is in the bond business.<sup>37</sup> Nick hopes to penetrate the 'shining secrets' possessed by the legendary Wall Street financier J.P. Morgan, whose apparent omnipotence over the movements of the markets ranks him alongside those plutocratic icons of earlier ages, Midas and Maecenas (p. 10). While Nick dreams of fabulous wealth, however, the risks and instabilities integral to the financial system loom large over the narrative. The privileged background invented by Jay Gatsby, for example, includes the loss of an inherited fortune in the panic of 1914 (p. 87). The actual sources of Gatsby's wealth, it transpires, are bootlegging and dealing in stolen securities (p. 158). The latter aspect



of his career is inspired by the notorious Liberty Bond thefts of 1918-20, in which \$5 million of bonds were stolen, causing a sensation in the media and markets alike.<sup>38</sup> In much the same way that Conrad draws on scientific discourses linking solar energy to the rhythms of capital in *The Secret Agent*, Fitzgerald, as Michael Tratner shows, is indebted to economic theories in which ‘the economic system is compared to an automobile, a powerful engine ... that one keeps running via various throttles and breaks’.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the extravagant lifestyles of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are interrupted by four progressively more life-threatening car accidents (pp. 54, 59, 61, 75), before the climactic hit-and-run, in which a young woman is killed, leading to the murder of Gatsby by her vengeful husband. These scandalous deaths send shock waves through the East Coast high society over which Gatsby presided, and the criminal underworld where he amassed his fortune. At an allegorical level, moreover, the text mobilizes the multiple implications of the word ‘crash’ to suggest the acceleration of an entire economic way of life towards some devastating calamity.

The novels I have discussed all, in their different ways, register the instabilities inherent to the period’s growing state of socio-economic interdependence. Simply in so doing, they could be said to anticipate or forewarn of the potential future results of such interdependence. But their concern with a temporal manifold that extends beyond the time of their own inscription towards a future moment of crisis or upheaval is in fact self-consciously foregrounded, most notably through the adoption of the language of prophecy, premonition, and apocalypse. In *The Secret Agent*, the anarchist characters summon up grand visions of history as a progressive, linear unfolding. The anarchist’s chief theoretician, Michaelis, espouses a pseudo-dialectical materialist philosophy in which ‘the secret of fate’ is ‘discovered in the material side of life; the economic condition of the world responsible for the past and shaping the

future; the source of all history, of all ideas, guiding the mental development of mankind and the very impulses of their passion' (p. 36). For him, 'the future is as certain as the past – slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism'. 'This is the statement of a law', he insists, 'not an empty prophecy' (p. 40). Against such a position, however, the narrative envisages the future as open to sudden, ramifying shocks – 'unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space and time' (p. 68) – which rule out the possibility of understanding history in teleological terms. The fanatical bomb-maker known as the Professor derives an entire political philosophy from the potential for an instant of universally transfiguring cataclysm, which he opposes to the ruminations of Michaelis and the other anarchists. In contrast to the 'revolutionists' who 'plan the future', losing themselves 'in reveries of economical systems derived from what is', the Professor advocates 'a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life' (p. 59). He disdains 'prophecy' – 'what's the good of thinking what will be!', he exclaims – and advocates 'the destruction of what is' (p. 242). The narrative ends with the Professor striding relentlessly and irresistibly into a future that is at the same time foreclosed by the very earth-shattering disaster he envisages:

He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (p. 246)

*The Secret Agent* ends, then, by opening out onto the global accident that simultaneously defines and obscures the horizon of the future. Though the one stands as a chilling forewarning of what the other actively seeks to instigate, the destiny of Conrad's novel mirrors the paradoxical fate of its character: to advance expectantly and unerringly towards an event whose onset and ultimate consequences are impossible to predetermine.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the idea that the world is immanent with the possibility of being, as the text puts it, 'entirely changed ... for ever' (p. 74) is also highly significant. It emerges primarily through the figure of Septimus Warren Smith, the young man whose suicide prompts Clarissa Dalloway's uncanny feeling of empathy at the end of the novel. Septimus is dismissed by his psychiatrist as one of a horde of 'prophetic Christs and Christesses, who [prophesy] the end of the world' (p. 109). Septimus' brand of 'prophecy' has something in common both with the lofty portentousness of Michaelis and the zealous catastrophism of the Professor. He exhibits particularly strong affinities, however, with another of Conrad's visionary characters, the innocent, doomed Stevie. In an argument that bears suggestively on these two characters, Fredric Jameson suggests that an adequate 'cognitive mapping' of the decentred world-space of capital in its imperialist or monopoly phase would demand a thoroughgoing reconfiguration and expansion of subjectivity, 'an enlargement of our sensorium'.<sup>40</sup> The depictions of Stevie and Septimus imply that the conditions that determine everyday life in this period so far exceed the data available to experience and perception that, in the absence of such an 'enlargement', only the products of an abnormal or even delusional consciousness may, albeit accidentally, approximate them.<sup>41</sup> Septimus repeatedly experiences overwhelming, hallucinatory impressions of the world in its totality. Passing people in the street, he

feels that he '[knows] all their thoughts ...; he [knows] everything. He [knows] the meaning of the world' (p. 73). Reclining in a chair, he has the sensation of laying 'very high, on the back of the world' while 'the earth [thrills] beneath him' (p. 74). He hears 'the whole world ... clamouring' and imagines himself to be a 'last relic straying on the edge of the world', an 'outcast', who gazes 'back at the inhabited regions', lying, 'like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world' (pp. 101-02). Like Stevie, Septimus is an obsessive scribbler of 'diagrams' and 'designs' (p. 161). Septimus senses that it is the supernal sphere, hung with its luminous and enigmatic bodies, which most effectively evokes a mode of being that embraces the globe, and so, again like Stevie, he draws 'circles' signifying 'suns and stars'; they contribute to a stylized and eccentric, but compelling, 'map of the world' (pp. 161-62).<sup>42</sup> As in *The Secret Agent*, the association of solar radiation with the enframing of the world recurs throughout *Mrs Dalloway*. Septimus imagines that his ability to witness 'the flesh [melting] off the world' and 'to see into the future' is attributable to 'the heat wave ... operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution' (p. 74). Again, the prospect of some profound transformation advancing over the face of a thoroughly globalized planet is figured through the image of a sudden alteration in the output of the sun. Early in the novel, Septimus feels 'the sun [become] extraordinarily hot', and sees the world 'waver' and 'quiver' and threaten 'to burst into flames' (p. 16). Shortly afterwards, he again feels 'the sun growing hotter' – a portent, he senses, that 'something tremendous [is] about to happen' (p. 75).

A similarly 'apocalyptic and prophetic tone'<sup>43</sup> informs *Manhattan Transfer*, where it is explicitly expressed in terms of financial and economic collapse. In a key scene set beside the Hudson River, two of the narrative's main characters encounter a

homeless man, who launches into a lurid sermon on the ‘wickedness’ of New York City and its imminent destruction:

It was only yesterday that Gabriel says to me ‘Well Jonah, shall we let her rip?’ an I says to him, ‘Gabriel ole scout think of the women and children an the little babies that dont know no better. If you shake it down with an earthquake an fire an brimstone from heaven they’ll all be killed same as the rich people an sinners’, and he says to me, ‘All right Jonah old horse, have it your way ... We wont foreclose on em for a week or two’ .... But it’s terrible to think of, folks, the fire an brimstone an the earthquake an the tidal wave an the tall buildings crashing together. (pp. 340-41)

‘Foreclosure’ – the repossession of a property by the lender after a default by the borrower – was a fate that befell thousands of households in the crises and recessions of the decades around 1900, and would inevitably do so again in any subsequent downturn. The speaker’s reference to this financial and legal process of retribution lends a genuine note of foreboding to his crazed vision of Biblical ruin.

A testament to the difficulty of representing globally circulating forces that wreak destruction on bodies, minds, environments, and communities whilst lacking any material instantiation can be found in the tendency of the authors I have discussed to take recourse, in the process of articulating these conditions, to the only means by which devastation of this scale and rapidity had, until very recently, been imaginable: namely, divinely ordained catastrophe (as in *Manhattan Transfer*) and natural disaster (as in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Secret Agent*, where, in addition to solar disturbances, Conrad envisions the landscape of the narrative being consumed by fire [p. 24], flood

[p. 80], and earthquake [p. 202]). In *The Great Gatsby*, meanwhile, it is a localized mechanical collision that is made to gesture towards the radically expanded and dematerialized form of manufactured or technological accident that was emerging in this period. Given the impossibility of a fictional narrative, with its inevitably partial perspective, directly depicting an event that occurs not somewhere but everywhere, it is logical that these authors should have devised means of limning this new historical situation that operate as much at the levels of form and expression as of content. I have discussed the dense web of connections traced by the roving narrative voice in *Mrs Dalloway*, and noted the presence of a similar strategy in *Manhattan Transfer*. For Conrad and Fitzgerald, it is the tendency of this economic climate to instil a fixation on events yet-to-come that most forcefully expresses itself in the formal arrangements of their texts, and, in particular, in the temporal structures of their narratives. The central violent incidents, with all their global resonances, around which the narratives of both *The Secret Agent* and *The Great Gatsby* are organized (Stevie's accidental detonation of the bomb; the fatal collision with the young woman and Gatsby's consequent murder) are never directly depicted. Instead, the narratives first cut to the immediate *aftermaths* of these disasters, before cycling back to trace the events that preceded them. The effect is of the future having somehow spun loose of its position in the temporal continuum and collapsed into the present. The historical and referential orientations of all the texts I have discussed in this essay are characterized by a similar dynamic. They issue an ominous appeal to the future that lies beyond the moment of their composition, projecting as their referent a crisis that will be accidental and contingent, but also, at a structural level, foreordained.

Interestingly, these texts have indeed struck commentators as eerily foretelling subsequent mass convulsions. Most obviously, it has become commonplace, since the

popular and critical ‘rediscovery’ of Fitzgerald in the 1950s, to hail the *The Great Gatsby* as predicting the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and the Great Depression it precipitated.<sup>44</sup> Very similar claims have also been made for *Manhattan Transfer*.<sup>45</sup> To a significant extent, however, the first age of globalization came to an end before the visions of pandemic upheaval projected in the texts I have discussed could be realized. In the wake of the crash of 1929 and the ensuing global depression, new restrictions and regulations were placed on the operations of the financial markets, formerly open economies withdrew into protectionism, and nations that had co-operated in building the infrastructure of the world economy turned towards preparations for impending global conflict. Even after the Second World War, the demands of maintaining functioning welfare states in the advanced capitalist nations, along with the presence of a significant non-capitalist power bloc, impeded the global circulation of market forces. It was only with economic and financial reforms beginning in the early 1970s (most significantly, the end of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates in 1973, which allowed for an explosion of currency speculation), and the exhaustion of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s, that the global economy began to return to the level of integration that had been established a century earlier. For Giovanni Arrighi, these developments augured the emergence of the final, financialized phase of the US cycle of global economic hegemony that had begun to succeed the British cycle at the end of the nineteenth century. Inevitably, this revival of a financially dominated globalization carried with it its ineradicable shadows: systemic risk and the global accident. This new climate has spawned events whose echoes of the work of the modernist authors I have discussed in this essay have been widely remarked upon. The ‘Black Monday’ global stock market crash in October 1987 and the abrupt bursting of the speculative bubble in ‘new economy’ or

‘dot-com’ shares in the spring of 2000, for example, have been presented in certain quarters as if they too had been adumbrated by *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>46</sup> All of the texts I have analysed, moreover, have been identified as resonating prophetically with the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11 2001,<sup>47</sup> events whose reverberations through the mass media and global markets led Paul Virilio to identify ‘9/11’ as a prime example of the global accident.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, there are already signs that the qualities displayed by these texts appeal to analysts seeking to identify foreshadowings of the ongoing financial and economic crisis stemming from the global credit crunch.<sup>49</sup> Unsurprisingly, these commentaries have privileged the immediately arresting resonances between these narratives and what we might heuristically term the ‘substance’ or ‘content’ of recent events: that is, their principal actors, geographical locations of origin, and particular ideological or socio-economic investments. Such critical and journalistic discussions also, though, implicitly register the more assuredly foresighted attunement of these novels to the ‘form’ of contemporary crises: the state of simultaneity and spatial dispersal in and through which they unfold. While the advanced information and communication technologies involved in the diffusion of these shocks may have been beyond the ken of Conrad, Woolf, Dos Passos, and Fitzgerald, the shared emphasis of their texts on the dangers inherent to the sheer fact of global interconnectedness speaks to our present with extraordinary force.

Though the claims of the more hysterical commentators would sometimes suggest differently, then, this recent trend in the reception of these texts is not (it hardly needs emphasizing), attributable to any quasi-mystical powers of prescience possessed by their authors. Equally, however, it is not simply a matter of pure coincidence, onto which meaningful correspondence has been retroactively projected.



Rather, such commentary needs to be understood as responding to the sensitivity of these narratives not towards any singular, locatable accident, but towards ‘the accident’ more broadly, as the inevitable, yet – in its specific coordinates – unforeseeable, product of globalization and systemic risk.<sup>50</sup> That events would transpire to throw this sensitivity into sharp relief is, moreover, an expectation embedded in these texts themselves. Assertions of the ‘prescient’ qualities of such novels merely, then, confirm a foreboding of their being read in the shadow of disaster that attended their production; and their meaning, too, is not so much altered as *realized* once, albeit decades later, their field of reception enters into the ambit of the accident that they will then always have anticipated. Such is their openness to the future, however, that the convergence of these texts with recent moments of crisis by no means precludes their subsequent assimilation to the accident that, even now, is taking form in the matrix of our globalized world.

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## Notes

I am grateful to Melanie Waters, Laurent Milesi, Alissa G. Karl, *Textual Practice*’s anonymous reviewers, and audiences at the Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research at Cardiff University and the ‘Novel and its Borders’ conference at the University of Aberdeen for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this argument.

<sup>1</sup> As part of a revivifying interdisciplinary and historicist turn often referred to as the ‘new modernist studies’, recent scholarship has demonstrated the modernist canon’s constitutive relation to such important late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomena as exploration, imperial expansion, cartography, mass migration, the fluid circulation of capital and commodities, and the development of faster and more extensive networks of transportation, media, and communications. In a complementary project, critics have expanded the scope of modernist studies to encompass a diverse array of modernisms, ranging from Brazil to Kenya to China to New Zealand. Significant contributions to these

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various research areas have been made by David Adams, *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby, eds., *Modernism and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds., *Geographies of Modernism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Modernism, Geopolitics, Globalization', *Modernism/Modernity*, 10.3 (2003), pp. 539-58; Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Andreas Huyssen, 'Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World', *New German Critique*, 100 (2007), pp. 189-207; John Marx, *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); 'Modernism and Transnationalisms', special issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, 13.3 (2006); Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, I follow the lead of James Annesley, who argues that criticism should not merely channel 'the analysis of globalization towards the understanding of literature and literary theory', but should also 'interpret literature and literary theory in terms that might aid the understanding of globalization' (*Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market, and the Contemporary American Novel* [London: Continuum, 2006], p. 163).

<sup>3</sup> Seán Burke, *The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy in Plato and Nietzsche* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 25, 23, 22, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 17-21.

<sup>5</sup> Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860-1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> H.J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History' (1904), *The Geographical Journal*, 170.4 (2004), pp. 298-321, at p. 299. Mackinder's work has been of particular interest to scholars of Joseph Conrad: see Con Coroneos, *Space, Conrad, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 15, 25-26; Christopher Gogwilt, *The Fiction of Geopolitics: Afterimages of Culture, from Wilkie Collins to Alfred Hitchcock* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 34; Janice Ho, 'The Spatial

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Imagination and Literary Form of Conrad's Colonial Fictions', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30.4 (2007), pp. 1-19, at pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

<sup>9</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 260, 261.

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Winseck and Pike, *Communication*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>13</sup> Harold James, *The End of Globalization: Lessons from the Great Depression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, 4th edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 118, 228-30.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Virilio, 'The Silence of the Lambs', interview with Carlos Oliveira, trans. Patrice Riemens *CTheory* (1996) <[http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=38](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=38)> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 2.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 4; Borislav Knezevic, *Figures of Finance Capitalism: Writing, Class, and Capital in the Age of Dickens* (London: Routledge, 2003); Francis O'Gorman, ed., *Victorian Literature and Finance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt, eds., *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Paul A. Jarvie, *Ready to Trample on All Human Law: Financial Capitalism in the Fiction of Charles Dickens* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Mary Templin, 'Panic Fiction: Women's Responses to Antebellum Economic Crisis', *Legacy*, 21.1 (2004), pp. 1-16; Gail Turley Houston, *From Dickens to Dracula: Gothic, Economics, and Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Tamara Wagner, 'Speculators at Home in the Victorian Novel: Making Stock-Market Villains and New "Paper Fictions"', *Victorian Literature and*

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*Culture*, 36 (2008), pp. 43-62; David A. Zimmerman, *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 136-61, at pp. 143, 151, 160.

<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 43-66, and 'Cognitive Mapping', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347-60; Harvey, *Condition*, ch. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Harvey, *Condition*, pp. 261, 265.

<sup>20</sup> Christina Britzolakis, 'Pathologies of the Imperial Metropolis: Impressionism as Traumatic Afterimage in Conrad and Ford', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29.1 (2005), pp. 1-20, at p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> See Britzolakis, 'Pathologies', p. 7; Coroneos, *Space*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907; London: Penguin, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Eyeington, "'Going for the First Meridian': *The Secret Agent's* Subversiveness", *Conradian*, 29.1 (2004), pp. 119-26, at pp. 120-21.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Conrad, 'Travel', *Tales of Hearsay and Last Essays* (1923; London: J.M. Dent, 1955), pp. 84-92, at p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Houen, *Terrorism*, p. 42; Michael Whitworth, 'Inspector Heat Inspected: *The Secret Agent* and the Meanings of Entropy', *Review of English Studies*, 193 (1998), pp. 40-59, at pp. 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Terry Eagleton, who claims that Stevie's circles exemplify the tendency of the modernist novel to 'give us ... a kind of empty signifier of a totality which is no longer possible' (*The English Novel: An Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], p. 19).

<sup>28</sup> Ann Banfield, 'Remembrance and Tense Past', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 48-64, at p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (1927; London: Hogarth Press, 1966), vol. 2, pp. 218-29, at p. 222.

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Wicke, 'Mrs Dalloway Goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets', *Novel*, 28.1 (1994), pp. 5-23, at p. 13.

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<sup>31</sup> Jameson, 'Modernism', pp. 58, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Wicke, 'Mrs Dalloway', p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; London, Penguin, 1992), p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925; London: Penguin, 1987), p. 247.

<sup>35</sup> See William L. Silber, *When Washington Shut Down Wall Street: The Great Financial Crisis of 1914 and the Origins of America's Monetary Supremacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Berman, *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; London: Penguin, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Allen Boyer, 'The Great Gatsby, the Black Sox, High Finance, and American Law', *Michigan Law Review*, 88.2 (1989), pp. 328-42, at p. 330.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Tratner, 'A Man in His Bonds: *The Great Gatsby* and Deficit Spending', *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, ed. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 365-77, at p. 369. On the significance of the automobile in *The Great Gatsby*, see also Alberto Lena, 'The Seducer's Stratagems: *The Great Gatsby* and the Early Twenties', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 34.4 (1998), pp. 303-13, esp. pp. 307-09.

<sup>40</sup> Jameson, 'Modernism', p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Jameson writes elsewhere that in the period of modernism 'the truth of ... experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place .... We can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true ('Cognitive', p. 349). Figures such as Stevie and Septimus offer an intriguing alternate perspective on Jameson's dictum, in that, although the visions they summon up of the life-world in its global totality are experientially inauthentic (the impression, whether received by themselves or by others observing them, that they possess a privileged awareness of this totality is a mere effect of their automatism or psychosis), they nonetheless offer a glimpse of what such an experience *might* be like, were it authentically possible.

<sup>42</sup> David Adams also notes this commonality between Stevie and Septimus in *Colonial Odyseys*, arguing that their drawings suggest 'questions about the meaning of human experience in its totality' (p. 220).

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<sup>43</sup> David L. Vanderwerken, 'Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos' Babel Story', *American Literature*, 49.2 (1977), pp. 253-67, at p. 253.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the following remarks: 'Gatsby, which was published in 1925, is a historical novel that was written in its own time. Fitzgerald knew exactly what he was creating: an elegy for a present that was already past' (Vicent Canby, 'They've Turned *Gatsby* to Goo', review of *The Great Gatsby* [dir. Francis Ford Coppola], *New York Times*, 31 March 1974

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby74.html>> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 10); 'It is eerie how well *The Great Gatsby* predicted the end of the Twenties .... The Liberty Bond boom of the early 1920s touched off the stock-market speculation which characterized the rest of the decade. This helped cause the Great Depression, and led, in turn, to the securities legislation of 1933 and 1934 .... In the middle of the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald had seen that the music was bound to stop' (Boyer, 'The Great Gatsby', p. 340). Fitzgerald himself would speak of his fiction of the 1920s in these same terms: 'All the stories that came into my head had a touch of disaster in them – the lovely young creatures in my novels went to ruin, the diamond mountains of my short stories blew up, my millionaires were as beautiful and damned as Thomas Hardy's peasants. In life these things hadn't happened yet, but I was pretty sure that living wasn't the reckless, careless business these people thought – this generation just younger than me' ('Early Success' [1937], *The Jazz Age* [New York: New Directions, 1996], pp. 77-83, at p. 80).

<sup>45</sup> Jay McInerney, for example, writes, 'published in 1925, the same year as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, *Manhattan Transfer* gives us a very different view of the era ... though in retrospect both novels seem to have anticipated the Great Depression' (Introduction to Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, p. 7). According to James Fountain, 'in *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos anticipates the Wall Street Crash of 1929 through his portrayal of a network of characters all connected to a vampiric, capitalist machine' ('The Majesty of American Citizenship: *Manhattan Transfer* and Dos Passos' Anticipation of the Wall Street Crash', *Material Worlds: Proceedings of the Conference held at Glasgow University, 2005*, ed. Rachel Moffat and Eugene de Klerk [Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007], pp. 2-14, at p. 13)

<sup>46</sup> Writing in the wake of the crash of 1987, John Gross suggests that, besides Tom Wolfe's recently published *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), no novel offers a better 'panorama of New York life' within which to understand the crisis on Wall Street than *Manhattan Transfer* ('The New Greed Takes

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Centre Stage', *New York Times*, 3 January 1988

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DE1DE143DF930A35752C0A96E948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 26). Landon Thomas, Jr. praises Fitzgerald's ability in *The Great Gatsby* to 'see it all' – that is, to see the impending crash and resulting depression – well before 'the game was up', and suggests that the lesson of the novel is that the 'game' that was the 'dot.com bubble' of the late 1990s may also now be 'up' ('The Giddy Age of Ambivalence', *New York Observer*, 25 March 2001 <<http://www.observer.com/node/44165>> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 40.

<sup>47</sup> As Peter Lancelot Mallios notes, *The Secret Agent* has been invoked more frequently than any other novel in media discussions of September 11, featuring in hundreds of articles and reports (see Peter Lancelot Mallios, 'The Deserts of Conrad', Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* [1907; New York: Modern Library, 2004], pp. 261-90, at pp. 262-63, and 'Reading *The Secret Agent* Now: The Press, the Police, and the Premonition of Simulation', *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Lancelot Mallios, and Andrea White [Abingdon: Routledge, 2005], pp. 155-72, at p. 155). James Wood's comments are typical: 'Joseph Conrad, in *The Secret Agent*, portrayed the first suicide bomber .... It is impossible not to recall Conrad's prophetic powers whenever the mercenaries of no mercy are at work today. Conrad has been unwittingly quoted time and again in the last few years; the al-Qaida crowd are now quite fond of the Professor's life/death opposition' ('Warning Notes from Underground', *Guardian*, 26 February 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/feb/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview33>> [accessed 25 November 2008], pars 2, 3. Unsurprisingly, the other three novels I have discussed have been less frequently cited, but various examples nonetheless present themselves. In her work of criticism-cum-memoir, *Letters to Virginia Woolf*, for example, Lisa Williams writes, 'I cannot bear to look at what is no longer there. Those brash towers, symbolizing the centre of a city, of a people's psyche, unafraid to build higher and higher, feeling always the rush of invulnerability. All that is certainly gone. As Septimus sits on a park bench in London "the world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames". Were you, Virginia, some prophet, peering into the terrors of the next century?' (*Letters to Virginia Woolf* [Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2005], p. 77). For Mike Davis, *Manhattan Transfer*, with its palpable evocation of 'urban anxiety' and the 'sheer out-of-control velocity of the metropolis' is one of 'the visions hurled back at us since the World Trade Centre became the womb of all terror' ('The

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Flames of New York', *New Left Review*, 12 (2001), pp. 34-50, at pp. 42, 43, 35). Adam Cohen remarks of *The Great Gatsby* that, 'in today's increasingly disturbing world, home to Al Qaeda cells and suicide bombers, ... the grim backdrop against which Gatsby's life plays out feels depressingly right' ('Jay Gatsby, Dreamer, Criminal, Jazz Age Rogue, Is a Man for Our Times', *New York Times*, 7 April 2002 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE0D9143DF934A35757C0A9649C8B63&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=all>> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 6).

<sup>48</sup> See Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Crepuscular Dawn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, trans. Julie Rose (2005; Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Elaine Byrne, for example, observes that as the boom years peter out, 'we can see our reflection in F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, set in America's roaring twenties' ('Extravagant Gatsby Era Leaves Trail of Indebtedness', *Irish Times*, 15 October 2008 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2008/1015/1224020737554.html>> [accessed 25 November 2008], par. 18), while William Keegan claims that amid 'deepening gloom about the US and world economy', *The Great Gatsby* – 'an evocation of the Jazz Age that preceded the Great Depression' – is a book 'to re-read' ('A New President Will Inherit Bush's Shattered Piggy-Bank', *Observer*, 2 November 2008 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/nov/02/us-economy-bush-recession>> [accessed 25 November 2008], pars 1, 4. For a commenter on an article that draws similar parallels between the credit crunch and the crash of 1929, the only thing to do is 'go back, dig in, and read *Manhattan Transfer*' (anonymous comment on Steve Fraser, 'The Specter of Wall Street', *CommonDreams.org*, 3 October 2008 <<http://www.commondreams.org/view/2008/10/02-0>> [accessed 25 November 2008]).

<sup>50</sup> Advancing a similar argument in relation to *The Secret Agent*, Peter Lancelot Mallios suggests that rather than imagine that 'Conrad, through a kind of divine inspiration ... transcended his own time ... to speak with absolute clarity to and of ours', we should recognize that it is 'rather *history* that has spoken, with Conrad's text absorbing and probing the very historical developments of his own time – for instance, new developments in terrorist practice, new practices and technologies of media – that still structure our own time' ('Deserts', p. 263; emphasis in original).