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Scattered Narratives: A Critical and Creative Re-examining of Subjugated History

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Scattered Narratives: A Critical and Creative Re-examining of Subjugated History

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Abstract

Both scholarly and creative, my thesis looks at contemporary concepts of history. The first half of my thesis is a critical theoretical reflection on the lessoning of historical awareness in the contemporary world, while the second half is a creative writing project concerned with expanding historical awareness through narrative representations.

In the theoretical side of my thesis I explore the notion that the West is losing a sense of its past. My research suggests that this is linked to a complex intermixing of the ideologies of progress and capitalism, the proliferation of technology and mass media, simulacra, and the commodity. Moreover, I have found that the imperatives of economic “needs” under capitalist regimes create and reproduce within the cultural sphere a fragmentation of meaning which hinders the capacity to engage with and understand the true breadth and depth of working class narratives with a sense of coherency.

In the creative section of my project I respond to the problem of a dissipation of history through a type of reformulated social realism. Central to both stories are real historical events, which clearly situate the pieces within a certain temporal socio-political atmosphere. Additionally, in writing the stories I have underscored the effect that economic systems bear on the characters’ consciousness and identity. Thus, my stories achieve a sense of historical fullness and accuracy which, to a certain degree, counteracts the trend of historical dissipation through fragmentation that I identify in my theoretical section.
Key Words: Simulacra, Marxism, Fiction, Nostalgia, History, Postmodernism
Résumé

De manière à la fois érudite et créative, ma thèse pose un regard sur les concepts historiques contemporains. La première partie de la thèse est une réflexion théorique concernant le manque de conscience historique, tandis que la deuxième est un projet d’écriture créative concernant l’expansion de la conscience historique par des représentations narratives.

Dans la phase théorique de ma thèse, j’explore la notion, suggérée par les érudits d’orientation Marxistes, que l’occident est en train de perdre le sens de son passé. Ma recherche suggère que la décroissance du sens historique est liée à un ensemble complexe d’idéologies de progrès et capitalistes, à la prolifération des technologies et des médias, simulacres autant que dominants culturels et institutions, et à un besoin pour ces produits. De plus, j’ai trouvé que les impératifs économiques de ‘besoin’ sous les régimes capitalistes créent et reproduisent à l’intérieur d’une sphère culturelle une fragmentation de sens, qui, généralement, entrave la capacité de s’impliquer et de comprendre avec cohérence la véritable étendue ainsi que la profondeur des narratifs de la classe ouvrière.

Dans la section créative de mon projet, je réponds artistiquement au problème de la dissipation de l’histoire par un type de réalisme social reformulé. Central aux deux histoires sont des événements historiques réels, qui situent clairement les pièces à l’intérieur d’une certaine atmosphère sociopolitique temporelle. Ainsi, mes histoires créent un sens de plénitude et d’exactitude
historique, qui, jusqu'à un certain point, contrebalance la tendance à la
dissipation historique par la fragmentation identifiée dans la section théorique.

Mots Clés: simulacre, marxisme, fiction, nostalgie, histoire, postmodernisme
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Introduction
Originally used in reference to architecture as early as 1947, the term postmodernism began to be used by literary critics in the 1960s to “distinguish the post-world War II experimental fiction of Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and others from the classics of high modernism” (McGowan 768). It soon triggered skepticism as some wondered if writers like James Joyce and Franz Kafka and other avant garde writers hadn’t already performed “all the tricks now called postmodernism” (McGowan). Although there is a risk in generalizing too much about the thrusts and tendencies of the postmodern movement, I think that it is safe to assume that one of the major defining points of postmodernism is the recognition of the decline of master narratives, such as nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and Marxism. I have, in my critical reflections, been particularly interested in the latter. Several important interventions have transformed Marxist discourse, making it more open to difference. One is the intervention of feminist theorists, who argue that the division of the sexes is a more urgent problem than the division between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Heidi Hartmann points out that one of the key maxims of the feminist movement--the personal is political--means for radical feminists that “the original and basic class division is between the sexes, and that the motive force of history is the striving of men for power and domination over women, the dialectic of sex” (317). Moreover, due to the longstanding racial inequality within organized labour, orthodox Marxist ideology has been seen as problematic for the African American and African diasporic communities. Thus
prominent Black Marxists, such as C.L.R. James, have argued for a type of activism that is community-centered and focused on local needs and circumstances. This sea change in the politics of Marxist analysis and practice is also linked to developments within postmodernism, which by the 1960s began to “focus on the complex relations between the art work and its social contexts” (McGowan 768). Subsequently the formal analysis of the artwork in isolation gave way to an “exploration of the social determinants of the work and to the ideological or political impact the work had on its audience” (McGowan 768). During the key transition period from a modernist critical and artistic mode to a postmodern one (roughly from 1965-1985) there was a turn away from the modernist notion that the heroically alienated artist (usually a white male) could create art which would exist outside of the “sordid daily concerns of commercial culture” (McGowan 768). Instead postmodernists argued that the belief that intellectuals and artists can enjoy an autonomy from capitalism is both illusionary and sterile artistically and politically: illusionary because the very materials of their work (language, images) come from the culture; sterile because the purity of the alienated artist forecloses access to the energies and disputes that are lived in the culture while also severing any connection to an audience beyond the artistic elite (McGowan 769).

This shift in paradigm was accompanied by an emerging cultural politics which reacted against “the traditional Marxist emphasis on economic issues and the liberal concern with legally guaranteed equality” (McGowan 769). In place of
the old paradigm a New Left—groups oriented towards feminism, gay and lesbian activism, and post-civil rights racial politics—emerged and insisted that “cultural practices, such as common linguistic usage, media images, educational curricula and techniques, were crucial sites of oppression and of potentially transformative struggle” (McGowan 769). Thus traditional Marxism or the old left began to transform, opening itself to a more heterogeneous micropolitical social reality. As the artistic and scholarly realm dialogued with the larger culture it seemed to some observers that postmodern art was capitulating to the “dominant culture, which was itself now designated "postindustrial" or "postmodern" by various writers” (McGowan 768). Hence, discussions of postmodernism “began to debate not only changes in artistic style but also whether society itself had changed” (McGowan 768). The question of whether or not the logic of late capitalism has enacted a historical change in contemporary society is central to my project.

In order to understand how this proposed change may have come about I have engaged with various contemporary critical theorists who argue that as a result of being dominated by images, consumerism, and institutions, contemporary reality is losing its sense of the past. I would like to suggest that this troubling state of "cultural amnesia" has come to pass because of a general misrecognition of history which is related to the complex intermixing of ideologies of progress and capitalism, the proliferation of technology, institutions, mass media, simulacra as a cultural dominant, and the commodity fetish (as it has evolved from the 19th century to the present). Moreover, I
would suggest that the imperatives of economic "needs" under capitalist regimes create and reproduce within the cultural sphere a fragmentation of meaning which hinders, generally, the capacity to engage with and understand the true breadth and depth of working class narratives with a sense of coherency. Therefore, I suggest that the misrecognition of history also hinders political solidarity across the diverse range of identity groups which constitute much of contemporary society. Thus, although I begin the theoretical section with a critique of postmodern culture, my project is more concerned with an analysis of contemporary society in relation to how media, images, and institutions have shaped consciousness in relation to history, rather than with a critique of postmodernism per se.

My argument begins by examining the view that the logic of late capitalism reifies images and narratives of the past and therefore creates a situation wherein it is difficult to understand the cultural and socio-political circumstances of previous generations. This idea, that the contemporary world is losing its sense of the past is the impetus for the creative stories included in this project, which have a historical dimension. I then explore the work of two literary critics who discuss contemporary writing trends which embrace the past in their work, namely Rocio Davis's study of ethnic fiction and Michael Orlofsky's conception of historiografiction. Orlofsky defines historiografiction as writing which deals with history in unique and specific ways, that is, with short stories that deal with a specific historical figure or event, but do not try to create any larger systematic or schematic form of historical art. This essay has
influenced my creative writing and I have followed some of the conventions Orlofsky outlines. Ethnic writing, like historiografiction, is another type of writing that has emerged from the postmodern era which also looks to the past, particularly immigrant experiences, in order to come to terms with the realities of contemporary ethnic identity. After considering these historically informed writing trends I turn to an examination of the functioning of images and simulacra in contemporary society, taking note of Jean Baudrillard's work in this regard. In particular, I explore his assertion that the image has overtaken the real and connect this theory with the idea that we are losing our sense of history. Additionally, I explore recent work from the field of media studies which suggests that capitalist ideology may be propagated through media communications systems in the form of an anti-labour bias. From studying the institution of the mass media and its relation to labour coverage I turn to an analysis of the role institutions in general have played in the perpetuation of ideologies in relation to the notion of history, paying particular attention to the work of Michel Foucault. Following this I discuss the shift in economic systems, focusing on the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Here I argue that the shift to economic principles may have significant influence on the cultural realm. This would therefore reinforce the Marxist principle that the economic base shapes the superstructure.

From an analysis of twentieth century economic systems I then turn to an exploration of modern consciousness in regards to how nostalgia, the commodity aura, objects, and interiors relate to perceptions of history. First, I
examine how industrialization and the technological revolution effected human consciousness, creating new forms of nostalgia and romantic longing for the exotic-other. These phenomena seem to suggest that the economic system of Western capitalism (which drove industrialization) shaped modern consciousness, in part, by triggering a longing for experience which no longer fit within the horizons of the modern world. I then argue that modern consciousness may be shaped not only by nostalgic longing but also by the commodity aura. Marx’s concept of the commodity as a mysterious thing which causes alienation, as well as Walter Benjamin’s analysis of commodities, objects, and the interiors of homes and buildings suggest that ideology can be conveyed through objects and spatial configurations. Additionally, I contend that the commodity aura creates affective experiences which may connect people to places, temporal periods, and cultures that they may or may not have any actual experience with. Moreover, I suggest that the aura of the commodity can intermix with artistic movements in order to mediate technology, which suggests the commodity’s ability to mask social relations. Hence, as the reification of the contemporary world fragments the past, dissipating the capacity to engage with historical experience, the commodity aura and modern nostalgia function to mask social relations which tends to distort popular views of the past. Just as the commodity aura and mass media have the capacity to mask certain social relations I look at the example of post-Soviet Russia as a site were the friendliness towards free-market capitalism went hand in hand with the depoliticization of culture.
Part 1: Theory
Critique of Postmodernism's General Historicization Deficiencies
In his article “Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism,” Terry Eagleton argues that art no longer reflects life because there is now nothing in the world of substance to reflect upon, except “image, spectacle, simulacrum, [and] gratuitous fiction” (387). Eagleton attributes this lack of substance to the commodity fetish and the notion that contemporary western reality has evolved into a state of aesthetization, in other words that it is “textured, packaged, fetishized, [and] libidinalized” (387). This being the case, for postmodernism to reflect reality it simply needs to mirror itself, in what Eagleton calls a “cryptic self-referentiality” (387). This is an important point as it suggests that insofar as postmodern art is depthless, it is also interconnected and thus reliant on the depthlessness of a commodified, reified, aesthetized society to reproduce itself. As Eagleton demonstrates, the postmodern era has been characterized by this cyclical pattern, which has had the consequence of distancing artistic engagement from political praxis. In order to advance the idea of the commodification of postmodern art, Eagleton makes a comparison with modernism. Eagleton asserts that the modern work of art is “autonomous, self-regarding, [and] impenetrable”, which “in all its isolated splendour, is the commodity as fetish resisting the commodity as exchange” (392). He suggests that the modernists were aware of commodification processes and tried to resist them. Eagleton states that Modernist works were “discrete and bounded entities for all the free play within them” (392). Conversely, postmodernists (generally a wide range of culture producers), also aware of the commodification of the work of art, do not attempt to resist it, but, on the contrary embrace it. Eagleton
sums up the postmodernists' position on the assimilation of the commodity fetish: “if the work of art really is a commodity, then it might as well admit it, with all the sang froid it can muster” (392).

This point is reinforced by Eagleton’s assertion that the “manner of the revolutionary avant-garde” is no longer seen as “practice, strategy, performance, production” (397), but is instead, in the postmodern era, “grotesquely caricatured by late capitalism” (387). Therefore, because of the reduction of depth and meaning in postmodern art, the emphasis has shifted from patterns of meaning to surfaces, and consequently performativity dominates substance. On this matter Eagleton refers to Lyotard who points out “the performative principle is really all that counts” (387), and, although this may be considered a positive aspect to adherents of Judith Butler’s influential notion that identities are performative, in Eagleton’s view this tendency towards performance suggests “capitalism’s massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance” (Eagleton 387).

Regarding the relationship between performativity and cognitive statements, or more simply depth, Lyotard suggests that because of the spread of specialization each individual discipline tends to have its own language and hence the proliferation of language systems has caused a situation wherein no one individual can master all of the languages. This has made communicating with depth more difficult, and has also made it more difficult to acquire legitimation. Lyotard explains that “legitimation can only spring from” a particular discipline’s “own linguistic practice and communicational
interaction" (86), and since everyone is stuck within the positivism of his or her discipline, we are therefore left with a splintering of language without a meta-language. As a result, speculative or humanistic philosophy is "forced to relinquish its legitimation duties" (Lyotard 86). From this point an important question arises: if it is not possible for any one humanistic position to legitimately make universalizing statements, how then can any one person or group launch a credible critique of the processes of global late capitalism, which many believe to be causing or at least exacerbating the issues of poverty, land displacement, hunger, war, etc? It may be true, and is certainly commonly held in contemporary academia, that no one universal value system or master narrative can or should dominate ideologically, morally, or mentally. However, I think it is important to point out the drawbacks of accepting too categorically this ideology of the multiplicity of viewpoints. One danger, for example, is, as Lyotard points out, the singularity that specialization produces, which tends to keep discourse compartmentalized within a relatively "closed" system, ultimately hindering the ability to view social and historical processes holistically.

One of the most flawed areas of postmodernism is its inability to historicise. Eagleton's view on this matter is strong. Eagleton asserts that in the contemporary reified world, for postmodernism to reproduce itself it must "at all costs efface" history, or spatialize it "to a range of possible styles, if it is to persuade us to forget that we have ever known or could know any alternative to itself" (393). I think Eagleton is quite right to point out the serious problem
inherent in postmodernism’s proclivity to efface history, and how this avoidance of representing social reality within a meaningful historical context derides the possibility of worthwhile and much needed social commentaries. This need for historical contextualization resonates with Frederic Jameson as well, as he says in the opening lines of The Political Unconscious, “always historicize!” (9). It is noteworthy that Eagleton points to the narcissism inherent in postmodernism, the fact that it draws attention to itself and convinces us to “forget” alternatives (for example, to the now, the new, the spectacle, etc.). Within the narcissistic, self-referential context of the postmodern, Eagleton claims that “ethical and political discrimination would extinguish the contemporary simply by mediating it, sever its self-identity, put us prior or posterior to it” (393). In other words, historicising would break up postmodernism’s self-enclosure and could potentially lead to increased space within discourse for the marginalized. This might include group-orientations, collectivism, and interactivity, or the ability to better cognitively map our reality and understand how our past is dialectically related to our present.

In contrast to Eagleton’s view of postmodernism, Jean François Lyotard suggests that postmodernism, although not as stable or unified as Eagleton would like, is nevertheless still capable of manifesting political agency. Like Eagleton, Lyotard also makes a comparison between modernism and postmodernism, but unlike Eagleton Lyotard suggests a stronger continuity between the two movements. Lyotard claims that the modern aesthetic allowed the unpresentable to be put forward “only as the missing contents” (81), while
the form, "because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (81). The postmodern, on the other hand, would be that which puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (81).

Perhaps a telling example of this turn towards greater focus on the unpresentable can be seen in Flannery O'Connor's famous short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find". At the center of this story are the multiple murders of a family that, after a car accident, happens to encounter a murderer who has just escaped from prison, a fellow who calls himself the Misfit. Without any real justification or cause the Misfit and his cronies murder the family one by one. Although the family members are presented as being rather rude, bland, immoral, and somewhat racist, the murders nevertheless appear to be senseless and tragic crimes, and hence an understanding of the murders is unpresentable.

Other examples of this new form of art, which seeks to further enhance the unpresentable, would be the graphic violence manifested in such works as the novels of Kathy Acker, films like Natural Born Killers, or the manner in which past and present intermingle in the narratives of Tony Morrison and E. L. Doctorow. In the latter examples, pushing the "unpresentable" (ie. some manifestation of collective memory or collective consciousness) into the
foreground allows postmodern artists to explore political themes. For instance, the work of Toni Morrison shows the development of the African American community within a broad historical context which spans a good part of the twentieth century.

Frederic Jameson also discusses postmodernism at length, and he tends to agree with Eagleton that the postmodern aesthetic realm’s intimate interconnections with consumer capitalism render it less politically effective. In his essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson first proposes the idea that what he calls “postmodern hyperspace”—as an example of the this new hyperspace Jameson cites the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, which “aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city” (1968)—has “finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (1971). Jameson asserts that this “alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment . . . can itself stand as the symbol and analog of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (1971). It seems reasonable to state that this inability to map ourselves adequately has to do with the vast transformation Western society has undergone since the second world war, a transformation driven by a seemingly insatiable consumerism; what Jameson outlines as “new types of consumption” such as “planned
obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes” and, “the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society” (1974). This I believe is causally related to the reification of the aesthetic sphere that Eagleton points out, and part of what attenuates postmodern art’s political and didactic capacity. Jameson posits that the commodity production of multinational economic realities, such as “our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artifacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation” and therefore, Jameson suggests that “our advertising, for example, is fed by postmodernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it” (Postmodernism and Consumer Society 1972). This closeness of aesthetics and advertising, or the manner in which experimentation in the arts is now, by way of commodity production, reaching into many dimensions of life, for example our physical self-images through the clothing industry, our tastes in living environment through the furniture industry, how we experience urban and suburban environments through architectural planning and the construction industry, etc., this reification of our general perception of aesthetics has somehow changed human subjectivity, and, Jameson argues, in the process created a dissipation of our sense of history. Jameson claims that the “emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism,” and, additionally, that postmodernism’s “formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system” (Postmodernism and Consumer Society 1974).
Moreover, Jameson asserts that this coming together of postmodernism and consumer capitalism has created the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past. The informational function of the media would thus be to help us forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia (Postmodernism and Consumer Society 1974).

Concerning this dissipation of a sense of history, Jameson asserts that the “logic of simulacra, with its transformation of older realities into television images, does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it” (Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism 46). Hence the anatomizing of history, or older realities, into television images, debilitates our ability to properly contextualize social and historical processes, and thus also debilitates our ability to perceive the role that ideologies play in the creation of realities, for instance the causes of wars, the formation of social classes, and the construction of identities (national, racial, ethnic, gender, and
sexual). Regarding postmodernism's fragmentary approach to the past then, Jameson notes that "there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project" (Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism 46).

I would like to turn back to Georg Lukacs and his debate regarding social realism and modernism, which suggests that due to its ability to represent lived experience in its totality, social realism has a greater potential for artistic political engagement than modernism. Just as Eagleton and Jameson criticize postmodernism for its fragmentation of the aesthetic and its attenuation of a sense of history, Lukacs, writing in the early to mid-twentieth century, criticized modernist literature for its fragmentariness, and claimed that social realism was a superior artistic approach. Lukacs distinguishes between modernism, which focuses on immediate and spontaneous experience, and social realism, which centers the individual within a totality of experience. In Lukacs' view modernism, with its fragmentariness, spontaneity, and intense focus on consciousness in all its variegated modes, does not help Marxist imperatives but in fact hinders them by pulling attention away from the deeper structures and processes of social formation. To understand how Lukacs connects the fragmentariness of modernist aesthetics with economics, it might be fitting to reiterate Lukacs' explanation of what he sees as the fragmenting nature of capitalist regimes:
Under capitalism... the different strands of the economy achieve a quite unprecedented autonomy, as we can see from the examples of trade and money – an autonomy so extensive that financial crises can arise directly from the circulation of money. As a result of the objective structure of this economic system, the surface of capitalism appears to ‘disintegrate’ into a series of elements all driven towards independence. Obviously this must be reflected in the consciousness of the men who live in this society, and hence too in the consciousness of poets and thinkers (1036).

So Lukacs points to the economic system as a major factor influencing modern alienation. Lukacs also ties economics to modern subjectivity and argues that by only reflecting these fragmented and autonomous states of consciousness, modernist writing remains emotionally and intellectually frozen in its own immediacy. As well, modernist literature, Lukacs claims, fails to pierce the surface and as such to discover the underlying essence, the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them (1040). This insufficiency of modernist writing is a major reason why Lukacs champions the social realist novels of Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, and Thomas Mann. Specifically, Lukacs views social realism as superior to modernism because it demonstrates the "importance of the overall objective social context" (1037), and because realism, in Lukacs’ estimation, represents how “thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality” (1039). Thus, in light of Lukacs’ views I suggest that the social realist mode of narrative, because it
shows the relationships of interiority and exteriority, how politics and ideology inform and shape society and subjectivity, can be useful for enhancing political consciousness.
Historiografiction
So far I have suggested that there is a problematic lack of historicization and political engagement in the postmodern era and suggested that social realism may be a helpful alternative to dealing with this state. Now I would like to examine a specific and exceptional postmodern trend of representing historical aspects, a methodology which I think fits in with my overall artistic project. In an essay entitled "Historiografiction: The Fictionalization of History in the Short Story," Michael Olofsky suggests that "Postmodernism is history's self-fulfilled prophecy," which would seem to coincide with what Eagleton says about postmodernism turning in on itself and being unable to historicize. Further, Olofsky claims that if "our culture has been unable to learn from its past, then the inevitability of our repeating it is the context of postmodernism - which is not necessarily a bad thing." (47). I think Olofsky's point here is debatable: one could take the point of view that by not learning from its mistakes the modern world has condemned millions to misery and death through wars, abject poverty and starvation. But on the other hand, I think Olofsky is attempting to be hopeful and accentuate the many positive aspects of modernity. In response to Fredric Jameson's statement that postmodern artists "will be forced to accept the death of art and aesthetic, and face the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past," Olofsky asserts, "that is not necessarily a bad thing. The past was a big place, a lot of people lived there. That is a lot of stories, as well as a lot of perspectives on the floodtide of history" (49). I tend to agree with this sentiment and feel that it is worth further exploration.
Orlofsky's definition of historiografiction suggests that narratives based on actual historical figures or events qualify as a form of postmodern art that can be used to elaborate historiography and challenge the notion of a singular history. Orlofsky asserts that the term historiografiction is "a postmodern construction" (47), which he uses to denote "the literary treatment of persons or events from the past" (47). Some examples of Orlofsky's concept of historiografiction include: Donald Barthelme's "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning," Raymond Carver's "Errand," Bharati Mukherjee's "Management of Grief," and Robert Olen Butler's "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain".

Historiografiction is not exactly the same sort of realism that Lukacs would have applauded, the type of Balzacian fiction that attempts to express a broad panoramic view of reality. Nor is it "activated by plot, setting, details, or lifestyle," but rather, is more concerned with "character, perhaps secondarily with theme" (47). Additionally, the type of historiografiction that Orlofsky defines in his essay is to be found in isolated short stories by authors who aren't necessarily concerned with a large project of historicization akin to the one I have been sketching out thus far in this essay. Nevertheless, the phenomenon that Orlofsky points out suggests at least the relevancy of embracing history in the contemporary artistic realm. It might also suggest that, in light of the theories purported by critics like Eagleton and Jameson, there is a growing awareness amongst artists of this attenuation of a sense of history and that they are beginning to think of ways to respond. The writers Orlofsky discusses are doing this is in various ways, for example Orlofsky claims that each of the
stories “presents the historic in unique ways” (47), while expanding “the possibilities of history without diminishing its veracity” (48). Moreover, Orlofsky claims that unlike the tendency for contemporary writing to restrict “characters to the author’s world” (50), which we might say bears a resemblance to Lukacs’ critique of modernism’s self-containment and Eagleton’s critique of postmodernism’s self-referentiality, the historiografiction writers “have developed the literary and esthetic confidence to take risks to see where their characters want to go” (50). Furthermore, Orlofsky points to a trend within postmodernism which suggests that contrary to postmodernism’s general political inefficacy, there are still particular moments within the larger epoch that show signs of developing a critical discourse. Orlofsky asserts that many contemporary “artists, journalists, government officials, and authors alike” (51), share a perspective that is dubious about the authority of traditional historical narratives, or the “master narrative” approach to history. From this skeptical perspective arises a question that is central to postmodernism, namely: “whose history constitutes History – whose history survives, and whose does not” (51)? Orlofsky asserts that the writers engaged with the historiografiction style have begun to work towards exploring this important question. In other words, they have developed an “epistemological imperative based on the question: whose history is it anyway?” (61). Overall we can see that although postmodernism has been enmeshed within the system of capitalistic consumerism that has ushered in the age of depthlessness and cultural amnesia, there are nevertheless still particular viewpoints within the broad movement of postmodernism that are
working to counteract these more ahistorical tendencies. In the specific example of Orlofsky's articulation of historiografiction, we can see that artists are dealing in various ways with not only the issue of the attenuation of a sense of history, but developing ways of challenging the dominant form of History.
The Ethnic Short Story Cycle as Re-Historicizing Narrative
Ethnic writing, which often has used the short story cycle and expresses a pluralistic vision of North American culture, much like historiografiction, also challenges dominant historical narratives, and as such can be seen to be politically engaged. For instance, Rocio Davis in Transcultural Reinventions: Asian American and Asian Canadian Short-Story Cycles, asserts that “short-story cycles in both Canada and the United States demand consideration as a formal manifestation of the pluralistic cultures in which they are produced and developed” (7). Just as historiografiction writing, through its transcendence of time can express narratives that are “strongly revisionist” (61), Davis suggests that ethnic Asian writers challenge the hegemonic view of a single historical perspective by demonstrating “how a traditional literary form converted into a transnational literary phenomenon can cross geographic, cultural, ethnic, and even linguistic boundaries” (Davis 7). For instance, Davis asserts that one of the ways ethnic writers interrogate contemporary North American reality is through their imaginative inscriptions of the historical events that shaped their communities, and their rejection of the historiographic ideology that advocates the ideal of a single narrative truth, as represented by the official versions of history (102).

Moreover, by integrating the events from the past into their present writing, these cultural artists “weave the workings of memory into the idea of the constructedness of history, and its ability to become personal and communal story” (102). Hence we can see that this form of writing, particular to ethnic
diasporic writers in the North American context, manifests the notion I am so concerned about, that is, developing a sense of the dialectical relationship between the past and the present. Additionally, it seems that the form of the short story cycle is an integral component for thematizing this dialectical process by linking "the manner of narrating in the present with that of the past, fundamentally by enacting oral story traditions through the written word." (12). Moreover, Davis asserts that ethnic short-story cycles are “built from a complex mixture of oral and literate thought and offer a way of reading the former through the latter” (13). Hence, the short-story cycle in its modern form, can effectively bring together a diverse array of forms and voices, including “oral narrative, the articulation of the fragmented perspective, and the presentation of a dynamic process of re-representation” (9). Through the interaction of these various forms and voices the writer can express “evolving identity and self-representation, constructions of community” (15), and particular ethnic identities which, Davis posits, are most often articulated as “a matter of becoming as well as of being” belonging “to the future as much as to the past” (22). Therefore we can see how there are contemporary artistic discourses, that, contrary to the main trends of the postmodern era, have found inventive ways of expressing identities of difference, and importantly, of conveying a meaningful sense of the dialectical relationship between past and present.
Simulacra, Mass Media, and Historical Consciousness
Returning to the subject of the postmodern image and the logic of simulacra, I would like to investigate some of Jean Baudrillard’s notions concerning consumption and the mass media which suggest compelling reasons why contemporary society is losing its sense of its own history. Like Jameson, Baudrillard believes that the “managed possession of consumer goods” in modern society, has an “individualizing and anatomizing effect” (The Consumer Society 4-5) which leads to distinction and differentiation, and, as such, not to social cohesion or social solidarity. To begin with, one of Baudrillard’s central premises is that in postmodern society, the sign has come to have precedence over the real, or the natural. “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance” (1732), Baudrillard argues, but rather, simulation is the generation of “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreality” (1732). To further reinforce the point, Baudrillard uses a cartographical metaphor, stating: “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory” (1732-33). Thus, Baudrillard argues, the manufactured image or simulacra is not built from a coextensivity of the map and the territory, or the image and the real, but rather of a “genetic miniaturization” of units from “matrices, memory banks, and command models”, which can be produced an indefinite number of times (1733). Moreover, the image “no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational.” (1733). Given the fact that the image is not derived from the real, is not necessarily rational, and is devoid of content-meaning or in other words
its meaning stems mainly from its operationality, Baudrillard claims that the spectre of simulation is that “truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist” (1734). Furthermore, Baudrillard claims that because signs precede anything real they have a secret “murderous capacity” (1735). In order to substantiate this claim Baudrillard references the Iconoclasts, who, he suggests, wanted to destroy images “precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of effacing God from the consciousness of men, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God, that only the simulacrum exists” (1735). Given that simulacra are overpowering in their presence, almost purely operational in function, and as such alarmingly devoid of meaning or objective truth, it is perhaps not surprising that the vast domination of consumerist-related simulacra in the post-war Western world has had the general effect of decreasing an understanding of the complex dialectical relationship between the past and the present.

If the image has taken precedence over the real then commodities, and the manner in which they are continually and everywhere on display in modern affluent societies, duplicates a sort of “new-found nature of prodigious fecundity” (33). As such, Baudrillard claims that because simulacra have infiltrated society to such a degree that the general spatial and temporal fragmentation of labor processes - transportation, distribution channels, etc. - the everyday blessings of consumption are not experienced as resulting from work or from a production process, but rather, they are experienced as a miracle
Moreover, the mass communication systems of late capitalism, the generators and projectors of simulacra, have grown to such vast and complex proportions that they have taken on a sense of universality (33). Within this structure of communications, Baudrillard asserts that a significant amount of political, historical and cultural information is received by mass audiences in the same "at once anodyne and miraculous form of the news item" (33). Moreover, the news item has evolved to become "not one category among others, but the cardinal category of our magical thinking" (34). Given that the vast array of news items disseminated through the media have come to be perceived by consumers in a more or less equal fashion, which is to say one news item is given as much attention and thought as another, suggests a troubling lack of contextualization. That is, if all news items - from the coverage of a tsunami to a weather report - are received in the same anodyne and miraculous way, full and appropriate understandings of the events being covered could likely be hindered. We can perhaps then say that a good amount of the time political, historical, and cultural events and subjects are not fully grasped in all their consequence by the majority of consumers of news items. That is to say, the typical news viewer would not come to a full appreciation of the anguish and anxiety of living through a bombing campaign, or empathize with a parent whose children live and play near an abandoned mine field, let alone understand, in any substantial way, the many intricate economic, political, or historical reasons for war, structural violence, and so on. Instead the viewer would live, as Baudrillard posits, "sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real"
(34). Given this proclivity for misrecognition of the realities framed within the various news item formats of mainstream news coverage, we may suggest that the chances for comprehensive understandings of historical continuities that historical materialists like Jameson call for is, to a significant degree, reduced.

In recent history control of the mass media industry has been consolidated into the hands of approximately a dozen or so conglomerations, which control “just about every media sector, including television, cable, newspapers, radio, film, music, magazines, books, and the internet” (Martin 44). Given that the media is controlled overwhelmingly by corporate interests it is appropriate to scrutinize the information it disseminates in relation to the interests of the corporate conglomerates that have so much control over it. Perhaps it is a pessimistic assumption to make, but I suggest that it should not be surprising that the mainstream media, given its ownership, would attempt to weaken the working classes’ sense of identity as well as general support for trade unions. Recent studies of the media have shown this to be the case. In his book length study, Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor, William Puette studied the portrayal of labour in a variety of media formats, such as films, television news, television dramas, newspapers, political cartoons, and comic strips, and based on this study reached the conclusion that with few exceptions the portrayal of unions in the media “has been both unrepresentative and virulently negative” (Puette 31). This sentiment been echoed in many quarters. For example sociologist Warren Breed recognized in 1958 “that the mainstream news media held certain values, such as capitalism,
as unassailable, while they were disinclined to report anything that might question the public's faith in such institutions" (Martin 45). Christopher R. Martin in his book Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media, suggests that the nature of this institutional bias may be rooted in education and the established practices of journalism. Moreover, Martin claims that one of the main ways that the mass media has been able to de-emphasize labor concerns is by reframing the notion of society from one that is made up of various classes, to one made up of consumers only. By addressing the news audience as consumers, the news media “establish a consumption-based social relationship between themselves and their audience and create an ideological frame for understanding the news story” (Martin 51). Martin also suggests that the styles and rituals of reporting learned in the newsroom “ultimately serve to disguise the commercial interests of the news and operate within and reify a sphere of consumer culture” (70). He claims this is done through objectivity, which is both a strategy and an ideology. Moreover, Martin asserts that objectivity is meant to separate facts from emotions, to build a story into a narrative with two sides and to use quotes as “data” without any reporter interpretation (Martin 70). Although it may be commonly believed that objectivity in journalism is the fulfillment of fair-mindedness, Martin suggests that objectivity is in fact an attempt to “transcend the contradictory relations of class in order to maximize market shares of the news as commodity” (70). Moreover, Schudson also claims that although objectivity seemingly strives for fairness and accuracy it actually contains a built-in bias towards
statements of fact which are observable and unambiguous; toward broad
categorical vocabulary – 'say,' rather than 'shout' or 'insist'; toward
personal narrative style and 'inverted pyramid' organization which force a
presentation of facts with 'as little evocation of their real-world context' as
possible; towards conflicts rather than less dramatic happenings; toward
'events' rather than processes (Martin 70-71).

The crucial point I take away from Martin and Schudson's insights is that
media biases, concealed by objectivity, and most notably the tendency to avoid
or downplay real world contexts and political, social, and historical processes
contribute to the lessening of the ability of mass audiences to come to terms
with and comprehend the complex interconnections between past events and
present realities.
From Simulacrum to Panopticism
As we have seen thus far, the postmodern subject has become ensconced in a system of signs that are distanced from the real, and, therefore also become more prone to misconstrue historical and political situations. I suggest that this cultural phenomenon is related to the increasing influence of institutions and technologization in the post-war era, which has created an increased sense of conformism to group-thinking and to an increased tendency to adopt a general ahistorical attitude. In the following section I would like to examine some salient reasons why this has come to pass.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary techniques illustrates that the tendency to individualize is central to the development of modern society, which, ironically enough, also creates an atmosphere of conformity to group structures. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault discusses the phenomenon of panopticism. He traces the roots of panopticism to the manner in which group behaviour changed to cope with the plague. Because of the deadly contagiousness of the plague, a unique system of organizing space developed, one that entailed the sectioning off, regulating, and quarantining of bodies. Within this system almost everyone would exist within an enclosed structure, with only intendants, syndics and guards allowed to walk the streets and monitor the towns, thus making for an environment which Foucault describes as "a segmented, immobile, frozen space" (195), in which each individual is "fixed in his place" unable to move for "risk of his life, contagion or punishment" (195). This troubling phenomenon led to a regime of "permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the
intendants to the magistrates or mayors" (196). Moreover, this led to the creation of environments that were characterized by segmented space observed at every point,

in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an interrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchal figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism (197)

So from this basic system of organizing bodies in space, and in using various agents as monitors, Foucault suggests that a new machine or apparatus came to exercise power by segmenting “bodies” and at times circulating them amongst other bodies.

Although Foucault begins his genealogy of panopticism with the particular historical event of the plague, he also indicates that the panoptical style of social organization emerged gradually and organically, which is to say that it developed in multiple locations and in a multitude of discontinuous series. A pivotal moment in the development of this sort of machinery of power came with the architectural planning of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon in the early nineteenth century, a design intended primarily for prisons, but also to be used for houses of industry, work houses, poor houses, lazarettos, manufactories, hospitals, madhouses and schools (Bentham). The uniquely
powerful aspect of the Panopticon is that it was built in such a way that from a central location all of the cells or rooms can be viewed and monitored, while the occupants of the cells do not necessarily know when they are being viewed. In this way, there need only be one supervisor (in theory) watching over a whole multitude of people who exist in "so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone" (200). The crucial element, I believe, is that the bodies contained within the Panopticon become "perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (200). Another important element is the fact that the cells have two windows, one from which it can be viewed from the central tower, and one which lets in sunlight. This is important as the body, cannot seek refuge in a crowd, because it is always individualized, and cannot seek refuge in the dark, because it is always lighted (in theory). In this way the bodies configured within the panopticonal structure - individualized, prone to constant monitoring, confined, and separated from their companions - cannot connect to or form a crowd, or in other words "a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect" (201). The capacity for the energy, creativity and potentiality that a crowd may afford is thus abolished, and although the bodies are still gathered together in a singular time and place, it is not with the freedom to connect and interact of an un-disciplined crowd. Rather this mass of people becomes a "collection of separated individualites" (201). The Panopticon then functions to reverse the principle of the dungeon, rather than enclosing, depriving of light, and hiding, the Panopticon "preserves only the first and eliminates the other two", so that "full lighting and the eye of a
supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected”, and hence Foucault concludes that, within the Panopticon, “visibility is a trap” (200).

Moreover, because each individual is securely confined within his cell, seen only from the front by the supervisor, but prevented by the side walls from contact with others, the individual “is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (200). Thus the major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The Panopticon structure arranges things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its actions; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (201).

Although Bentham’s actual design of the Panopticon has only been implemented a few times, as Foucault points out, the concept behind the Panopticon has had a great influence on not only the manner in which modern institutions have been developed, but also on the increased regimentation of society in general. And, it is in light of this understanding that Foucault poses the question: “is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (228)

I would suggest that the effects of panopticism are reflected in the manner in which social groups have been organized, that is, as individuated yet
collected together in regimes of disciplinarization, especially since the Second World War. David Riesman claims that because the increased growth of the economy has been achieved, in the latter half of the twentieth century, through “institutionalizing technological and organizational advance” (104), individuals have thus become less inclined to take initiatives than they were in the pre-World War II era which rewarded the “ability to envisage new possibilities for production” and the “zeal to realize those possibilities” (104). In the post-war era however Riesman asserts that individuals, especially in the context of the business environment, have become less assertive. With the growth of monopolistic competition, Riesman claims, “the way to get ahead is not so much to build a better mousetrap but rather to package an old mousetrap in a new way, and then to sell it by selling oneself” (104). In other words people feel that they have to be able to “adapt themselves to other people, both to manipulate them and to be manipulated by them” (104). Thus the working world has become a network of relations that must be constantly monitored (110), and the chief concern of the majority of individuals becomes the approval of others (105).

A similar analysis of post war culture is put forward by William Hollingsworth Whyte in his book *The Organization Man*. Much like Riesman’s assessment of mid-century American culture, Whyte also notes that the post-war American has, to the detriment of his full potentialities, tended to become dependent on the approval and acceptance of the group. Whyte uses the term “Social Ethic” to describe how people have come to be dependent on the group
not only for career advancement but also as a source of creativity and for a feeling of belongingness (Whyte 7). Whyte also points out that those who adhere to the social ethic tend to “worry very little over long range problems of society” (Whyte 8).

To summarize, it seems that in the modern world the influence of panopticism, institutions, and technology have made the social realm more individuated, while at the same time the constitution of work-life, in relation to the complexity of the economy and labour processes, has paradoxically made the individual less confident and less assertive, and therefore more dependent on the approval and acceptance of others. This dependence on the approval of the group has also caused an increase in a sort of trivial attitude towards politics and the integrity of the larger social world.
How Economic Imperatives Influence Culture
At this point I would like to return to the question of the relationship between art and economics, and will argue that economic imperatives influence the artistic realm. Beginning at the end of World War II and lasting until the early 1970s, western industrial capitalism was most influenced by the Fordist model of production, that is, technocratic and rationalistic large-scale assembly line models. Following the Second World War the United States used the Fordist paradigm to escape from the deep economic crisis of the 1930s, and to speed up the modernization of its productive system (Amin 12). By way of U.S. policy this paradigm was spread to key geopolitical locations--Europe under the Marshal Plan and Japan under the Treaty of San Francisco. As a result of their implementation of the Fordist model, both Europe and Japan underwent “speedy development” (Amin 12). Throughout the two decades following the Second World War the Fordist model worked exceedingly well for the West and Japan, however during the period from 1965 to 1973 the principles of Fordism and Keynesianism were becoming increasingly unable to “contain the inherent contradictions of capitalism” (Harvey 142). Thus the economic systems in the West and Japan shifted to what David Harvey calls the flexible accumulation model. A full explanation of the transformation from a Fordist economic model to a flexible accumulation one is too broad for the scope of this essay. However, I will highlight a few of the key features responsible for the change in order to suggest that economic imperatives often drive innovations and trends in the artistic and cultural realm.

One of the main problems with the Fordist model was its “rigidity of
long term and large-scale fixed capital investments in mass-production systems,” which tended to preclude “flexibility of design and presumed stable growth in invariant consumer markets” (Harvey 142). As we shall see, this presumption turned out to be unfeasible. Moreover, any attempts to overcome the rigidities in labour markets, labour allocation, and in labour contracts, were met with staunch resistance by “deeply entrenched working-class power” (Harvey 142). As well, the rigidities of state commitments “also became more serious as entitlement programmes (social security, pension rights, etc.) grew under pressure to keep legitimacy at a time when rigidities in production restricted any expansion in the fiscal basis for state expenditures” (142). While governments were hampered with rigid commitments to keep social programs in place, many corporations found themselves with a lot of usable excess capacity, mainly in the form of plant and equipment, in a period of intensifying competition. (Harvey 145). As a result corporations went into a “period of rationalization, restructuring, and intensification of labour control,” which had, as part of its objective to “overcome or bypass union power” (Harvey 145). Within this context “technological change, automation, the search for new product lines and market niches, geographical dispersal to zones of easier labour control, mergers, and steps to accelerate the turnover time of their capital surged to the fore of corporate strategies for survival under general conditions of deflation” (145). Thus the economy evolved into flexible accumulation, which, in contrast to Fordism, rests on “flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (147), and is
characterized by the emergence of entirely new “ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation” (147). Important for my argument is the increase in attention and energy given to the service sector, and what Harvey calls the “time – space compression” (147), a phenomenon which is caused by the shrinking of the “time horizons of both private and public decision-making” (147). This has led to the new postmodern economic era’s dependence on “accurate and up to date information,” speed with regards to the transmission of information, and a strong capacity for instant analysis (Harvey 159). The deployment of new technologies also meant the very real possibility of reducing turnover times in production, “always one of the keys to capitalist profitability” (Harvey 156). Furthermore, the economic imperative to shorten turnover time and life-cycles thus caused a shift in emphasis from “production of goods (most of which, like knives and forks, have a substantial lifetime) to the production of events, such as spectacles that have an almost instantaneous turnover time” (157). However well technologies may have served to increase the efficiency of production, this acceleration of production would nevertheless not have been useful unless the turnover time in consumption was also reduced (Harvey 156). Hence, flexible accumulation “has been accompanied on the consumption side . . . by a much greater attention to quick changing fashions and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation this implies” (156). Thus, Harvey argues that the relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has “given way to the ferment, instability,
and fleeting qualities of a postmodern aesthetic that celebrates difference, 
ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms”
(156). In other words, we can say that the economic imperative to shorten life 
cycles has to some degree influenced the forms that economic exchange has 
taken, that is, the shift in emphasis to various service sectors, including 
television, film, radio, video gaming, spectacles, concerts, popular music, music 
videos, festivals of all kinds, etc., not to mention web-based businesses and as 
such we may suggest that economic imperatives have not only significantly 
influenced cultural forms, but that the economic imperatives of flexible 
accumulation have influenced art to become more commodified. Looking at the 
relationship between art and economics in this light suggests that the traditional 
Marxist concept that the material economic conditions create the ideological 
and cultural realm may still be valid. Moreover, this link between flexible 
accumulation and postmodern art may also suggest, given postmodernism’s 
thrust towards the ephemeral, the polymorphous, and anti-form fragmentation, 
that these tendencies may have contributed to the general sense that the 
contemporary social realm is losing its capacity to retain its own past.
Nostalgia, Modernity, and the Flows of Memory
In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym asserts that due to the dominance of the ideology of Progress nostalgia, this strange condition which involves longing for traces of the past and sometimes for things that never actually existed, has emerged as a symptom of modernity. Regarding the general standpoint towards time prior to the age of progress and industrial capitalism, Boym suggests that “people could exist in an attitude of temporal ease,” and moreover that “neither time nor change appeared to be critical and hence there was no great worry about controlling the future” (9). However, by the time of the French and American revolutions the conception of time had shifted. The idea of “progress through revolution or industrial development became central to the nineteenth century culture” (9). The symbolic representations of time changed as well, moving away from “allegorical human figures” such as “an old man, a blind youth holding an hourglass, a woman with bared breasts representing fate,” which predominated from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, to the “impersonal language of numbers: railroad schedules . . . the bottom line of industrial progress” (9). Although time was no longer lax or free floating, but rather inextricably connected to money, production, profitability, etc., it still “allowed for multiple conceptions of time and made the experience of time more individual and creative” (9). Nevertheless, when the notion of progress became tied to the ideology of industrial capitalism a new theology of “objective” time emerged. Hence, Boym claims that progress is the “first genuinely historical concept which reduced the temporal difference between experience and expectation to a single
concept” (10). That is, what mattered in the idea of progress “was improvement in the future, not reflection on the past” (10). This created a sense of the “unrepeatability” of time that was akin to Christian teleology, for example the accumulation of good deeds and sins that follows one throughout life. As Boym says, progress became a “new global narrative as a secular counterpart to the universal aspirations of the Christian eschatology” (10). Nostalgia then, became a “historical emotion” in the form of a longing for a “space of experience that no longer fit the new horizon of expectations” of the newly emerging industrialized world, and as such nostalgia can be interpreted as a side effect of “the teleology of progress” (10).

In a similar way Chris Bongie has pointed out a phenomenon, which he terms the exoticist project. Bongie defines the exoticist project as a nineteenth century literary and existential practice that posited another space, the space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a civilization that “by virtue of its modernity, was perceived by many writers as being incompatible with certain essential values” (4-5). Like Boym’s thoughts about nostalgia, this sense of the exotic also is linked with the onset of industrialization, and, it should be noted, has long been recognized as an element of the romantic period in the arts. Basically, as the technological and political revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fed industrialization more and more people felt disconnected from earlier more natural patterns of life, causing what Walter Benjamin has identified as the atrophy of experience (Bongie 9). With the emergence of mechanical, industrial society, “real” experience, Bongie
suggests, became impossible. Thus from the crisis of industrialization the modern romantic figure emerged as a sort of after-image, desiring experience and seeking it in regions other than his own newly mechanized world (Bongie 10). In so far as the ideology of progress needed to transform the radically heterogeneous pre-modern world into a relatively homogenous modern one, by and large for the purposes of industrialization and colonization, it also sparked the development of exoticism, which, according to Bongie, was an attempt to “defuse the supposed threat of homogenization that mass society poses” (11).

All in all, the onset of the technical and industrial revolution driven as it was by the ideology of progress, spawned not only the modern form of nostalgia but also the exoticizing tendency in the artistic and philosophical realm. Moreover, the vast enterprise we associate with Progress—industrialization, technological revolution and modern institutions—also seems to have triggered an affective and metaphysical rebellion against modern environments, or in other words, a longing for ways of being that are less hampered by regulations, time constraints, and all of the mechanisms of disciplinary society, and more in touch with natural paces and environments, whether they be actual remembered experience or fantasy.
The Commodity
Boym has argued nostalgic longing is often a symptom of, and dialectically connected to, modernity and more specifically the ideology of progress. In order to connect nostalgia to the larger theme of the misrecognition of history, I will now compare the concept of nostalgia with theories on the commodity, history, time and space. Earlier, I introduced Baudrillard’s contention that, because the processes involved in the distribution of mass media are so complex most people receive postmodern simulacra as a sort of miraculous event. Karl Marx, writing in the nineteenth century, conveyed a similar message about commodities in general. He claimed that although on the surface the commodity seems a simple thing, if one thinks analytically about its nature she will see that in reality the commodity is “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (776). To specify, Marx claims that a commodity is a mysterious thing because in it (the commodity), the social character of men’s labour appears to have an objective character, which is stamped upon the product of the labour they produce. In addition, the relation of the wage-labourers to the sum total of their labour appears as a social relation existing not between the human labourers, but between the products of labour (Marx 776-778). Hence, the products of labour (commodities) end up in social relations with other products while the men/labourers become alienated from their labour, and as a consequence, from other men as well. In order to clarify his somewhat obscure notion of commodities Marx posits that attached to the commodity is a religious-like fetish, whereby “the productions of the human brain appear as independent
beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (777). Marx asserts that this fetish masks the relations involved in the production of the commodity, causing an aura of mystery and the sense that commodities, as social things, have qualities that are “at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (777).

Walter Benjamin, an adherent of Marxism, shares a similar view concerning the character of commodities. In his introduction to Walter Benjamin’s Reflections, Peter Demetz asserts that, Benjamin in his essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, utilizes a Marxist analysis of institutional structures [which] relies productively on his earlier habits of ‘reading’ things as if they were texts, in which he seizes upon an architectural development, an industrial event, or a fashion in the arts of mid nineteenth century Paris, treats the locus of his attention as a “fact” and proceeds to search for its sociological and technological causes and/or correspondences, as well as suggesting links to economic trends and political tendencies of the time (xxxviii-xxxix).

In so doing, Benjamin pressures the fact to “deliver to his and to our minds what it hides and preserves of the wishful thinking of the ruling classes” (xxxix). In his analysis of commodities, Benjamin asserts that the World Exhibitions of the nineteenth century (in France, for example) “are the sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish” (151), and furthermore, Benjamin claims that the phantasmagoric character of these large scale events creates a framework in which the intrinsic value of commodities is eclipsed (152). The alienation Marx
identified (from having the product of one's labour extracted and deposited into a larger system of exchange) is assuaged as the individual, through the manipulations of the entertainment industry, is elevated to the level of commodity. Thus the working class spectators, taking pleasure from their position in the crowd, from the plethora of objects and entertainment, enjoy “their alienation from themselves and others” (Benjamin 152). This transmogrification of social relations suggests that the spatial organization of the exhibitions, which glorifies “the exchange value of commodities”, instills in the working class viewers a sense of emancipation (152). Therefore the commodity provides something like a social adhesive which, at least partially, allows for the exhibition to take place, and for working class people to feel as though they are not only enjoying themselves, but are in fact emancipated. This suggests that the commodity fetish has the power to mask the relations of alienation between individuals. That is, the commodity mystifies social relations through the glamour of entertainment, the phantasmagoric quality of crowd-experience, and with a bedazzling placement of objects, which also validates a system that has as its main purpose the continual reproduction of commodities and as such the reinforcement of the ruling class’s ideology.

In an analysis of early detective fiction Benjamin insightfully comments on the interiors of homes. He observes how the objects inhabiting bourgeois homes, like the objects at world exhibitions, manifest ideological values. In describing Victorian bourgeois homes, Benjamin demonstrates that they are, generally, suffused with signs of the Orient, such as Persian carpets, ottomans,
hanging lamps, and genuine Caucasian daggers (65), which suggests that the Victorian bourgeoisie tended to cherish these objects/commodities whose value for them seems to be, at least on one level, a connection to colonized cultures, or, in other words to the “Other.” Furthermore, Benjamin states that behind “the heavy, gathered Khilim tapestries the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feels himself the Eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanserai of otiose enchantment” (65). This suggests how the commodities, redolent of the topos of Eastern cultures, can instill in one the glories of travel, colonial settlement and adventurism. In other words, “Orientalist” commodities, if you will allow me to attach a Saidian significance to the commodities in this instance, manifest an aura which induces a nostalgia-like affective experience, connecting the Western bourgeois individual to another time and space.

Just as interiors of the bourgeois homes of the nineteenth century were inhabited with ideology-freighted and nostalgia-invoking “Orientalist” commodities, a similar ideology-carrying style emerged in the interior of dwellings around the turn of the century – art nouveau. Benjamin asserts that the ideology of art nouveau seems to be “the consummation of the interior” and that “the transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal” (154). Benjamin claims that art nouveau is in fact art’s “last attempt to escape from its ivory tower, which is besieged by technology” (154). Perhaps the idea of art nouveau being art’s last attempt to escape its ivory tower is debatable, especially in light of much contemporary artwork which is participatory and interactive.
However, for the purposes of my essay I would like to focus on the notion of art’s attempt to mediate the encroachment of technology. Benjamin asserts that art nouveau mobilizes all the reserves of inwardness, and moreover that these energies become expressed in “mediumistic line-language” (155). As well, by using “iron building” and “girder forms” (155), which at the time of art nouveau’s ascendance were new methods and materials of construction, the practitioners of art nouveau attempted to win these elements back for art’s sake. On the level of the individual subject, Benjamin claims that, at the time of art nouveau’s popularity, when modern business practices had just become widespread and normalized, “the real center of gravity of living space” was “transferred to the office,” and thus “the de-realized individual” created “a place for himself in the private home” (155). It is here then, in the home that the individual, as Benjamin claims, engages in a “battle with technology,” and this struggle is manifested in “the flower as the symbol of naked, vegetal nature confronting a technically armed environment” (155). Thus, bringing flowers into the home, on the surface a simple and pleasant enough phenomenon, also suggests, on a deeper level, a striving by modern individuals to hold at bay the continual encroachment of technology, and moreover suggests a yearning for connections with the natural world which, due to the rationalistic ideology of progress, I would argue, is always turning away from the modern individual. On a broader level, this economy within the modern home, consisting of real natural elements, art nouveau and its attempt to win over modern utilitarian building techniques for the purposes of art and human psychological well-being,
suggests an alienation from the real which cannot be mediated by commodified forms. As Benjamin says, “the attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall” (155). To summarize, the commodity can act as a social adhesive whilst simultaneously masking the relations of alienation that result from the process of commodification. As well the commodity can create nostalgia which may connect people to places, times, and cultures, that they may or may not of had any actual experience with. Additionally, the aura of the commodity can intermix with artistic movements in order to mediate technology, while masking the relations of alienation and, perhaps infusing artistic movements with ideological values that by concealing the relations of alienation, promote the continuation and dominance of capitalist ideologies. This obfuscation of social relations then also bears a resemblance to the negation of historical contingencies perpetuated by the mass media and also suggests a fundamental link between the commodity aura and the prevalent ideology driving mass media, both of which mask social relations in such a way as to promote, protect, and indeed to construe as unassailable the exigencies of capital.
The De-Politicization of Contemporary Russian Culture
In this section I would like to return to Boym and her ideas regarding the de-politicization of art in Russian culture during the post-Soviet era. She suggests that the new relationship between Russians and commodity culture tends to de-ideologize and thus de-politicize their collective experience of the past. In Russia, Boym posits, the trauma of Stalinism was not really tackled head on, but rather, a sort of collective nostalgia wherein a “new longing for an ahistorical past, the age of stability and normalcy” (58) set in. Moreover, Boym describes this mass nostalgia as a “kind of nationwide midlife crisis” which had many people “longing for the time of their childhood and youth, projecting personal affective memories onto the larger historical picture and partaking collectively in selective forgetting” (58). As a result of this mass nostalgia and collective forgetting, a new sort of de-ideologized attitude has become fashionable. For example, Boym refers to contemporary Russia’s tendency to poke fun at its own history, that is, using images of Stalin and Lenin in comic films and more recently “resurrecting some of their monuments in cities” (57). Boym suggests that this new de-ideologized form of cultural self-deprecation has “become a new style, almost a new official discourse (57), which suggests the power that the manufactured image has to infiltrate the collective consciousness, and to promote certain ideologies.

Contemporary Russia’s new “de-ideologized” style seems to be in contrast to the sense of time that was cultivated during the period when communism was in power, which tended to privilege a futurist orientation while being skeptical of nostalgia. Boym asserts that at the time of the October
Revolution the communist leadership performed a sort of “nationalization of time” (5) which was presented as “the culmination of world history to be completed with the final victory of communism and the ‘end of history’” (59). On account of the communists’ redefinition of time “most instances of grassroots revolutionary action in 1917 and 1918, from the February demonstrations to the Kronstadt uprising, entered public conscience in a restored form, only in so far as they contributed to the official teleology of October” (59). Therefore, nostalgia after the revolution was considered a “counterrevolutionary provocation” (59), and as such was not a part of the revolutionary vocabulary (59). Nostalgia, Boym claims, would have been perceived as a “dangerous ‘atavism’ of bourgeois decadence” that had no place in the new revolutionary order, whose ideology was “future-oriented, utopian, and teleological” (59). Boym suggests that the past was “rewritten scientifically” as a forerunner and legitimizer of the revolution” (59). Since the break-up of the Soviet Union communist teleology, which had been “extremely powerful and intoxicating” (Boym 59), has disappeared from the ideological conscience, and its loss has been acutely felt, leaving many Russians looking for “another convincing plot of Russian development that will help make sense of the chaotic present” (59).

The collapse of the Soviet system ushered in this new sense of chaos for Russians, as the social order underwent rapid and dramatic changes. Boym explains:
Instead of labour intensive development of democratic institutions and improvement of social conditions for the population, both Western governments and Russian radical reformers to a large degree embraced economic determinism, viewing it as a sole panacea for the country and the movement of progress itself. It was as if that lost revolutionary teleology that provided purpose and meaning to the surrounding chaos of transition was found again, only this time it was not Marxist-Leninist but capitalist (64).

This has led to a sort of counter-memory in the form of nostalgia. Thus, as the rhythms of Russian life changed dramatically with the fall of communism nostalgia became a “defense mechanism against the accelerated pace of change and economic shock therapy” (64). Moreover, recollections of the past in the post-communist era became commercializable. As Boym says, “the word old became popular and commercially viable...old here refers to an ahistorical image of the good old days, when everyone was young, some time before the big change” (65). Therefore, the vast social and economic change that occurred in post-Soviet Russia created renewed nostalgia not for the egalitarian ideals of communism, but rather for an apolitical, de-ideologized and rather sentimental past. Hence, the example of post-Soviet Russia illustrates another instance of Western capitalist values influencing cultural consciousness by insidiously masking historical realities while promoting values that work in favor of capital.
Part Two: Creative
Introduction: Connecting Theory to the Creative Process
As a creative response to my critical theorizations concerning repressed histories, I have sought to build narratives that represent particular historical moments and which are concerned with class consciousness. I thought that by incorporating real historical events and figures into my stories I could infuse them with a sense of authenticity and concreteness that would illuminate some of the key social issues of specific times. Moreover, by reflecting on my characters' subjectivity in relation to their work-life, I could explore the relationship between economic systems and human consciousness.

In order to fulfill my creative objectives I have found Orlofsky’s article on historiografiction to be useful, in particular the idea of creating short stories that delve into the consciousness of specific historical figures. For my first story I decided to focus on James Jamerson, the legendary bassist for the Motown studio band the Funk Brothers. I choose Jamerson as a subject for fictional treatment because I myself have been an afficiando of the bass guitar—I began lessons at the age of thirteen and over the years have been involved in various musical projects as a bassist—and have long been an admirer of the Motown sound, especially Jamerson’s contribution. As a creative writer I have often written pieces that have a musical element, either through experimentation with the sounds and rhythms and words, or else featuring characters who are musicians. In my own musical experience, I have been touched by the experience of playing with other musicians and I am particularly interested in improvisation, which I find creates a feeling of expansive and joyful interconnectedness. As such I thought that exploring music, in particular
Jamerson’s forays into Detroit’s jazz scene, would allow me to engage creatively with the symbiotic feelings and thoughts of improvisational musical production, which may also describe a type of labour capable of transcending the alienation that Marxists argue result from wage labour.

Jamerson’s life also seemed to me to be caught up in some of the paradoxes of living under the logic of late capitalism. Jamerson seemed to live within the tension between the desire to realize his artistic potential, which would have meant getting involved in the jazz world or having more artistic control over the projects he was involved with, and the desire to have a financially and emotionally stable life which would best allow him to fulfill his roles as husband and father. Although in some cases Jamerson had the freedom able to play extremely inventive and intricate bass lines, for the most part he was relegated to a supportive role on musical tracks meant to be palatable to a wide commercial audience. My story attempts to figure the tension between these two motivating forces within Jamerson.

I was also interested in the socio-political situation of Jamerson’s time and place. Although Detroit has a history of racial tension, throughout most of the 1950s and 1960s it was, at least on the surface, much milder than in other American cities. In fact Detroit was considered by many to be a model city in terms of racial harmony. Perhaps this was due to the large auto industry in Detroit which hired African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s when many other companies would not. Beyond the surface of the apparent racial harmony though there were problems. Although the auto industry was generally open to
hiring African Americans, inequality still persisted, and most of the blacks worked in the lower waged positions. Hence, when in the early 1960s the auto industry began to automate many of its processes, a disproportionate amount of African Americans lost their jobs. In addition, as the auto companies automated they also moved facilities out to the suburbs, causing further problems for African Americans who mainly lived in the city (Smith 37). This shift of the auto industry from the urban core to the suburbs went hand in hand with larger urban planning schemes which saw the razing of several important black neighbourhoods. One such incident was the razing of Hastings street in 1960, the hub of the black cultural community, to make way for the Chrysler freeway, which was one of several highways that connected “the city’s primarily white suburbs to the downtown area” (Smith 47). In response to these unfavourable economic and social conditions “designed to destroy community” (Smith 38) local African American activism increased. Through “radio airwaves, newspaper columns, and independent recordings” (38) community ties were created and maintained. Freedom songs, poetry, plays, and photography were used to educate the public about racial injustice and boost morale in the midst of the movements’ difficult struggles (Smith 93). In Detroit, which had a strong musical heritage, the spirit of the civil rights movement manifested itself in a vital musical culture. Young singers took to hallways of public spaces and institutional buildings, like high schools and the Brewster center, and transformed these spaces into “performance sanctuaries” (Smith 157). Through music, these creative young people “personalized and transformed institutional
environments and produced a distinctly urban culture in the process” (Smith 157). Given that the impetus for my project was to create a sort of reformulated social realism, I thought Jamerson’s story, which is set in socially and politically charged atmosphere of urban America in the 1960s, would be a good canvas for fictional exploration. Moreover, I think that with this piece I was able to achieve a depiction of both a specific character dealing with a commercialized musical milieu, as well as an image of the socio-political anxiety of the time.

Like “James Dreams of Jazz,” “The Strike” is also influenced by Orlofsky’s notion of historiografiction. In this case I decided to place the historical figures – Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti – in the background, while populating the main narrative with fictional characters. With “James Dreams of Jazz” I had found that the necessity of maintaining historical accuracy, especially regarding Jamerson himself, created certain constraints, which had both benefits and drawbacks. The benefit was that it helped me to stay focused on certain character traits, the setting of Detroit and its music scene, and the relationships that Jamerson was known to be a part of, namely his business-musical association with Motown, and his family relations. The drawback was that these limitations also, at times, infringed on creative directions I would have liked to have taken with the story. Thus with “The Strike” I decided to make the main characters fictional with the historical “factual” characters looming in the background.
In order to have a feel for the times and culture I read several documents. I was particularly inspired by a journal kept by my Italian-Canadian grandmother Madelaine D’Abramo. Her portrayals imparted a sense of the day to day life of Italian Canadians in the early 20th century, such as their living conditions, their sense of humour, and how they coped with unemployment in the 1930s. Additionally, I engaged with recent research in the field of Italian studies. The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism, edited by Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, which explores the radical nature of Italian American life in the early 20th century, was particularly helpful. In their introduction Cannistraro and Meyer suggest that about a quarter of Italian Americans were radicalized and active in various forms of socialism, communism and especially anarchism. As well, about one third of Italian language newspapers in New York City held a radical leftist viewpoint (Cannistraro 13). Leftist newspapers, leaflets, and pamphlets conveyed a whole world of culture and politics to the Italian community, who were largely poor urban dwellers. Through the radical presses the community was able to stay connected and grow. This radical movement also spawned a rich literary and artistic culture within the Italian community. Some of the prominent literary artists to emerge from the Italian radical community were Arturo Giovannitti, Belalma Forzata Spezia, Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, Virgilia D’Andrea, and Pietro Di Donato. Prior to conducting research I was not very aware of the extent to which Italians were active in political and artistic activity. I was anxious to
integrate some of my new findings into the narrative I had been planning about
Italian immigrants involved in radical leftist politics.
James Dreams of Jazz
A shaft of sunlight slanted in the Chit Chat club, lighting James’ whiskey, like a traffic light. As he tipped his glass back, the warm woody scotch swished down his throat, and an ice cube kissed his lip. James eyed the bartender momentarily, wondering if he should have another. Annie would not approve, but then, it would be hours before he would see her. He’d sober up in time. When the bartender, a moment later, glanced his way James raised his glass,

“Another,” he said.

Thin wisps of smoke drifted up from the people at the tables. A few musicians milled by the stage, adjusting instruments. One of the musicians, a tall fellow in dark glasses with a goatee beard which angled down from his chin triangularly, went from table to table handing out pamphlets. Soon he was moving along the bar, and then he placed one down beside James. After handing James a pamphlet, the tall man moved on, then stopped, and, as a sort of afterthought, wandered back.

“Excuse me, but, aren’t you James Jamerson?” He looked at James and then looked away, scanning the room; there seemed to be a calculating non-chalance in his manner. His eyes returned to James’ face.

“Listen man,” he continued, “we’re taking names down for a petition. I encourage you to check it out. We’re demanding fifty more black foremen.” He pointed out a table at the front of the bar with sheets of paper and pencils on top.

“Alright, I will,” James went over to the table, signed the petition and came back to his stool, propped his elbows on the bar, and leaning forward,
scanned the pamphlet. The headline read: ELRUM Charges of Discrimination and Unsafe Working Conditions. The pamphlet also announced various upcoming lectures and rallies concerning the activities of D.R.U.M., the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

James decided he just felt like sitting and after a while fell into a reverie. He thought about Larry, his brother-in-law, who lost his job at the Ford plant a few months back, on account of automation, he had said. Since then his visits to the house were more frequent. He would come by in the evenings mainly; chase the kids around the living room, tickling and playing with them, seemingly in good spirits. But after the kids were in bed, Annie, James, and Larry would sit on the couch and chat, and Larry's mood would alter. At first his words were understandably bitter, but lately, he seemed more withdrawn, he would vacantly discuss sports, or else just get quiet, brooding over a bottle of beer. Annie was worried about him. She didn't like hearing that her kid brother was spending more and more time in pool halls and bars, and, consequently, a sorrowful aura seemed to have come over her of late.

"So James, are you going to jam or what?" said the bartender, "Sure put a smile on those people's faces." He nodded at the folks sitting at the tables. James' blinked and then pulled himself up. He fixed the bartender with a stare.

"Does a bear shit in the woods?"

James traipsed over to the stage, walked up four steps, then went over to an old stand-up bass, picked it up off the ground and looked it up and down, like a hunter appraising his prey. He plucked the E string, and a deep vibration
emanated from the bass. It sounded a little flat. Twisting the tuning peg, his tea-brown forehead wrinkled into twig-like lines as he listened to the pitch bending. He fiddled with the bass until he was satisfied, and then played a few runs. Some onlookers emitted enthusiastic hoots. One or two pairs of hands applauded.

James smiled hello to the other musicians gathered on the stage, and noticed that the fellow in dark glasses was playing sax. The drummer suggested Basin Street Blues.

"B flat," the piano player cried, the drummer clicked his sticks together four times, and they charged into the familiar blues tune. After eight bars of the intro the drummer glanced at the others and, like trucks merging onto the highway, they stormed into the solo section.

The saxophonist stepped up to the front of the stage, and straight away launched into an impressive solo. As notes streamed out of his horn, fragments of familiar melodies emerged. James thought he heard the shape of "My Girl" but played at a pathologically rapid pace, then it was distorted with a tortuous wail, a stuttering sequence of squawks, and then the passage transitioned into flurries of abstract notes. Finally, the saxophonist seemed to be nearing the end of his solo, his runs became shorter, and then the solo tapered off into twittering arabesque riffs that sent chills up James’ spine. After everyone else soloed, shouts volleyed from the audience encouraging James to play a solo too. James waited for the top of the chorus to come around again and then switched from a walking pulse into an intricate passage that mixed booming low notes with
slinky syncopated runs. This was a treat that James relished. Working for Motown full-time he rarely had the chance to solo, although as a youngster James had studied jazz, and had voraciously listened to and learned from the great jazz bassists like Ray Brown, Milt Hinton, and especially his hero, Paul Chambers. Halfway through James’ solo the front door opened, squeaking and ringing a bell. Earl, James’ co-worker and the keyboardist of the Motown studio band, walked into the bar. He was tallish, with the sturdy build of an all-star linebacker. Earl sallied up near the stage, one hand resting on the back of a chair. James closed his eyes and continued to flow through his solo. As the de facto leader of the Motown band Earl had a big brotherly way of shepherding James and some of the others back onto the straight and narrow. Deep down James appreciated Earl’s friendship, but he also felt the need to keep him at arm’s length. When James opened his eyes Earl was even closer, glowering and pointing to his watch. James unleashed a swift run, his hand scampering down the bass’s neck like a frightened spider. Earl stood by the stage, crossing his arms on his chest until the tune ended, then moved closer to the stage.

“The session is back on,” Earl said, “everyone’s waiting.”

James considered this news then turned back to the stage, his eyes scanning the floor for a safe place to lay down the bass.

“Why you always running off like this?” Earl continued, “We’re not even supposed to be doing any gigs outside the snake pit.”

“Rules, rules, rules,” James muttered as he slowly lowered the bass down. “Let them wait” James said standing back up. “I’m doing my thing here.
You know, I need to get out and mingle with other musicians. Sitting in that rank old basement studio everyday makes me feel all stale.” James picks up a cord and coils it around his forearm. “It's like we're turning into a bunch of machines.” He shakes his head, trying to get his thoughts straight. “An artist needs space... some room to grow.”

“An artist needs to eat,” Earl rejoined, and chuckled in spite of himself. James looked down at Earl, fixing him with a funny stare. There was a lull, Earl seemed confused for a moment. His mirth subsided. Then James said,

“Listen, have you ever seen a flower grow down in a snake pit?” Earl’s head bobbed back. He pondered for a second or two, looking askance at James, then waved his hand, as if to dismiss the strange comment.

“Come on, let's get going,” Earl said. James, half paying attention to Earl, bent onto his knee and adjusted the knobs on the amplifier. The saxophonist sauntered up and introduced himself as Major. James and Major began chatting, as if they were old friends, and, laughing, they clinked their glasses together.

Earl put one large hand on James’ shoulder.

“Well us funk brothers have our duties to go back to, don't we?” Earl said, tugging on James’ shoulder. James shrugged off Earl's hand.

“In a minute,” he said and then directed Major towards the bar.

As they walked away from Earl, James said, “that song you quoted in your solo, was it My Girl?”
James and Major chatted at the bar while Earl waited by the door. After a few minutes James shook hands with Major and headed towards the door.

As James and Earl skipped out of the Chit Chat club, dense humidity washed over them. They headed up the avenue without speaking. Only shadowy faces of passersby could be seen in the soft yellow light cast from the street lamps. They came upon an awning-covered fruit stand; the smell of apples, oranges, and melons wafted up to James, and his stomach churned.

"Hold on," James said. He darted into the grocery store. A few minutes later he slipped out the door and back onto the street with a sack of peaches and a jar containing something meaty and bloody.

"What the hell is in that jar?" Earl asked. James just fixed him with a stare, a grin coming over his face. He pinched a chunk with his fingers, and popped it in his mouth.

"Oh man," Earl waved his hand under his nose, "what...is that pigs feet?!" Earl cried. Then he shook his head. "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy."

They continued along the street, Earl striding ahead of James who was lagging behind, chewing on his pig's feet. After finishing one, he tossed the bone at a couple of nearby pigeons. Striding and flapping their wings, the birds surrounded the meaty bone. James stopped and looked amusedly at the pigeons, noticing the way their bodies rocked and their heads bobbed. It looked musical, like a dance. Watching the little grayish white bodies bounding, and the thin
talonued feet slap the cement, a musical idea unfurled in James' mind, a slinky, stuttering type of rhythm.

"James!" Earl shouted. James looked over, snapping out of his reverie.

"Oh, yeah," he said, James tossed another chunk of bone at the pigeons, "Be right there, boss."

As they walked on James hummed this new tune under his breath, while raucous guitars and horns reverberated from night clubs, the humid air carrying the sounds into the street.

They came upon Slick Sam’s record shop. In the display window were some Motown records. James slowed his pace and tapped on the window above the jacket of a record by the Four Tops, a single called "Bernadette," which had been a number one hit. Both James and Earl had played on the recording.

"I knew it would be a hit," James said.

"Yeah, you really tore it up on that one," Earl said, a paternal pride coating his voice. James stared at the photograph of the Tops, they smiled broadly, their hair was slicked back, and they wore finely tailored glittering suits. Not long after the record hit number one the Tops had headlined at the Apollo, and then they sang on the Ed Sullivan Show. Mulling this over James felt a twinge of resentment. He thought of the millions they had earned, and some of the stories he heard of the lavish houses they had bought. The Tops, the other star acts, and the songwriters earned royalties from each record sold, whereas James and the other studio musicians were paid by the hour. Thinking back on the recording process James knew that it was his bass-line that stood
out and made the song so compelling. After a few takes were down, the producers, arrangers, and some of the musicians stood around in the mixing room listening to James’ performance. A masterpiece they had called it.

Earl looked down at his watch

"C'mon," Earl said, "let's get going."

Up ahead singing voices ascended above the din of street noise. James and Earl crossed the boulevard and approached a crowd of people milling about the front steps of the Brewster center, a three story, brown brick building. A woman in a green dress leaned on a placard. They had just returned from a civil rights demonstration, she told James and Earl, and now they were just relaxing, having a bit of fun. In the center of the crowd a singing group harmonized. One voice rang out above the rest, clear as a church bell and yet, kind of doleful, like some down-at-the-heels traveling blues-man. Other voices intermittently merged with him, thickening the sound and lifting the music seemingly high up in the night air.

"They're not bad," James glanced at Earl, an enthusiastic smile brightening his face. James could imagine piano chords fused into their melodies, minor sevenths perhaps, and a syncopated bass line bubbling underneath. "Maybe we should get their names?" James offered. Motown management was always on the look out for fresh talent. The three scotches and two beers still resonated within James and he was feeling rather altruistic. Earl looked impatient.
A police car turned a corner up ahead. Its headlights glared like stars as they cruised towards James and the crowd. A spotlight on its roof flashed on. James squinted as an intense shaft of light streaked across his face, and then hovered for a moment or two on the crowd of revelers.

"Whatta they want?" Someone sneered. The Police car pulled over to the curb, car doors thudded. A few of the revelers dispersed while others stood and watched. For a minute or two the police stayed by their car, exchanging glances. The singers at the center of the crowd continued, the lead singer's eyes were closed. A few of the onlookers seemed concerned while others snapped their fingers along with the beat. Then one of the cops walked over.

"Alright folks," he said in a booming voice, "Move along now."

"We aren't doing nothing wrong," someone asserted.

"No loitering here!" the cop cried, his voice bounding through the air like a bowling ball. The other three cops fell in behind him, and, as a phalanx, they marched forward. The singers continued, their voices ascending.

"Shut up, boy!" one of the cops yelled, pointed his club at the main singer. James stepped in front of the phalanx.

"You can't say that." He shouted, "you can't talk like that!" The cop tried to shove James, but James brushed his hands aside, and turned his head to address the commanding officer.

"He has no right to be so damn rude!" James looked the commanding officer squarely in the eye. "Do you know who I am?" The cops stopped their aggression for a moment. They glanced at one another, slightly confused. "I'm
James Jamerson, I work for Motown. You know Motown? You must hear our songs on the radio...” James peered at each of their name plates, “... officer McLendon, officer O’Malley, officer Johnson. What you see here is an audition.” Earl’s jaw dropped. One of the cops sputtered.

“That’s right!” James said “an informal audition. These youngsters...” James gestured towards the singers, “... have shown a lot of talent, and we’re here to check them out. And I don’t think you have the right to be breaking up our business. Now, you know Motown, aside from the auto industry, is one of the most successful businesses in town, right. Well we have our own lawyers, and they’re damn good lawyers... am I right Earl?” When James peeked over at Earl who was behind him a little, Earl was silently dumfounded. After a moment he uttered.

“Ah... sure, sure.” James turned back to the police, swayed on his heels a little, then puffed out his chest.

“So if you don’t want to be facing no law suits, you better just back off!” James then poked the officer’s chest. The commanding officer leaned back, startled for a moment, then his face grimaced savagely and he flexed forward. James felt a club whack his shoulder. He ducked and grabbed at the body in front of him. They shoved and tussled. First the other cops swarmed onto James, and then Earl and other onlookers clamped on to the scrum. Clubs swung down hard. James felt a blow at the base of his neck. One cop tripped and fell to the ground. Several angry people kicked him. The scrum revolved and twisted. There were grunts and curses. The clubs came down again and
again, sounding at times like fly swatters, at times like baseball bats hitting line drives. Head down, grasping and punching, James saw a blur of twisted clothing, leather boots, the cement sidewalk with drops of blood. Suddenly James felt himself being pulled back, back, back, like a calf being lassoed. He saw contorted faces, then a tree, branches, the circular moon glowing bright.

"C'mon, man, let's get outta here!" Earl clutched the back of James' shirt. He lumbered quickly down the street, with James in tow half running, half wobbling. James looked back, for a second, and saw the dimly lit blue figures of the police, surrounding a downed person, swinging their clubs. Earl darted down a dim side street and James sprinted after him. After running down an alley for five blocks James stopped. Covered in sweat and with his lungs heaving, he looked up at the moon.

"They were just singing!" His voice fluttered up in the night like a curse.

When they arrived at the Motown studio, James and Earl quickly went to the bathroom. James splashed water on his face, and looked at himself in the mirror - had he gone too far? Earl put his hand on his shoulder.

"You alright?" James heard the question but only gazed at the taps. In a few seconds his gaze turned into a hard stare. He slammed his hand down on the counter.

"God damn crackers!" His bear claw hands gripped the edge of the counter. "God damn Ofay crackers!" He strode across the room, to the
window, and looked out at the darkness. After a long moment, he turned to Earl, his face had softened. "Yeah," he sighed, "I'll be fine, just give me a minute, will you?" James turned all the way around to face Earl, who stood there attentively. A moment passed in silence. Then Earl headed for the door.

"Hey," James said. Earl slowed and half turned.

"Thanks."

Ten minutes later James shuffled downstairs to the recording studio. Musicians milled about, setting up their instruments, joking and laughing in the process. James took his bass out of its case and tuned up. As the sounds of the musicians’ happy voices bantered back and forth the image of the policemen’s aggressive faces began to fade from James’ mind, but he was still unnerved, and sat quietly in his usual spot between two baffles. The smell of coffee wafted from a table at the corner. Frank, one of the new producers, handed out written sheet music to everyone. James perused the sheet, and then his eyebrows lowered and his face grimaced. Looking around the room at no one in particular James emitted a disapproving grunt. The new producer looked over at James.

"Is there a problem?"

"Problem? The *problem* seems to be that you don't know how things work around here." A hush came over the room. James picked up another sheet of music from his stand and held it up for everyone to see. "You see this," he pointed to the sheet, the staff was empty, but it had chord symbols written on top: Emin, A7, Dmin7. "*This* is how things are done around here. Y’see that, ain’t noth’n there.” James gripped the paper tightly with one hand and brushed
his finger along the empty staff with the other. "I improvise." James said emphatically. Some of the musicians snickered. Frank stood still, momentarily surprised by the outburst, and then a frown drew his cheeks down. James blew a huffy breath.

"Haven't you heard my playing on Bernadette, Reach Out, and all those top ten hits? Do you think somebody wrote those bass-lines?" Frank sighed copiously.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" James stood up. "The hell you don't!" Earl stood up from behind the piano.

"Calm down James." James' eyes moved from Frank to Earl for a second, he calmed down slightly, and then fixed his eyes back on Frank.

"You know I wouldn't mind playing written parts. I have played written parts before, you know, but this here," James pointed to Frank's song sheet, "these lines you have down, they're mine! They come straight from stuff I've already recorded." James' glance swept the room, the others were silent. "How d'you like that, this man here's serving me back my own bass-lines to play on his would-be hit record... and who collects the royalties at the end of the day?"

"That's enough!" Frank took a step closer to James. "We'll talk about this some other time, in private." Frank sniffed James' breath, "sometime when you're sober."

"Motherfu..." James lurched forward; then realized his bass was still strapped around his torso. He whipped the bass off and put it on its stand.
“Had enough of this shit!” James snarled, rumbling across the room and out the door.

Furious, agitated, and in need of another drink, James headed back to the chit chat club. Major was still there, leaning on the bar, a glass of beer in his hand, a small ring of friends around him, chatting. Major noticed James and beckoned to him. James chatted with Major and his friends and, after a few more drinks James began to feel good again. Major and his band were going to play another show a little later and he asked James if wanted to join them.

“I'll introduce you to the guys,” Major said, “Follow me.” Major disappeared behind a swinging door. James followed him through the door and down a dark and musty corridor. James’ face felt hot, he had a little trouble going down a short set of stairs. Then James began to feel fresh air. They stopped at an open doorway, where a few others stood chatting. Major introduced James to the others: Cindy the pianist and Vince the drummer, a few others who weren’t in the band were also hanging around. James said hello but couldn’t fully make out their faces in the muted street light that shone through the doorway. A joint was passed around. The talk was light, they laughed easily. James leaned against the wall and listened for a while. They seemed a close bunch. They would laugh at jokes before the punch line, or finish each others’ sentences.

At one point, Major turned to James, a fox-like grin came across his face and his eyes glowed.

“Yeah, we dig what you do,” Cindy said, “but the rest of it . . . .” she swiped her hand through the air derisively, “what’re y’all really saying with all them sugary clichéd lyrics?”

“damn!” a voice said.

“Ain’t saying shit.” Someone else added. Cindy hopped into the center of the group, extended her arm, and in a sassy voice sang “Stop! In the name of love, before you break my heart.”

“And those four on the floor drum beats,” Vince said in a pained voice. He mimicked a Motown beat, his forearms threshing up and down robotically. James’ mirth began to fade, he felt a little confused.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Vince continued, “Benny Benjamin is a great drummer. I’ve seen him play once or twice in clubs, with some jazz cats, and man, could he ever play. But the stuff he records at Motown, well, frankly, it’s boring man…” Vince again threshed his arms robotically, to another round of guffaws. Then he stopped hamming, and a thoughtful look came across his face. “It’s like having a thorough bred horse . . . out . . . plowing the fields.” He shook his head. Major moaned his agreement. James inhaled from the half burned joint, felt the smoke heat his lungs and then blew a triangular column of grey smoke towards the ceiling. He looked at the shadowy faces, and felt compelled to say something.
"Motown may not be perfect, but they treat us musicians well more or less. Y'know I have a wife and children to support, and Motown provides a regular pay check." He looked around at their faces; which seem to have turned stony. James passed the joint over to Major; a wistfulness came over him.

"Sometimes though, I feel . . . frustrated . . . and man, I get into some arguments . . . yeah I do feel, a little . . . yoked. It is simple stuff . . ." he laughs,

". . . like you say, four on the floor beats, straight ahead like that. But that's the way Berry wants it, you know, not too rough, nice and easy." Major clears his throat.

"Berry wants to take the blues and put a nice white bow on it."

"Yeah, so whitey'll buy his records." Someone said. James starts to feel uncomfortable again, he never really thought much about who buys what.

"I think Berry learned a thing or two when he worked at the Ford plant," Major continued. "Seems he's got all you musicians, singers, composers, and arrangers all lined up . . . just like an ol' assembly line!"

"Berry thinks he's Henry Ford himself?" someone adds.

"Almost as rich as Henri Ford," James blurts, and then immediately regretted it. Major stared at James for a moment.

"How do you like that," Major finally said, "Berry's gone and modeled himself after a white man, and a racist at that! What, is Berry going to up and move Motown out to the suburbs too?" Major scowled, then looked at the
ground. A minute later a woman’s head appeared out of the dark corridor, “you’re on in five minutes.”

Major looked up. He put his hand on James’ shoulder.

“Listen,” he said, “Don’t take us too seriously, you know . . . . and tonight, you can forget all about Motown and Mr. Berry Gordy, ‘cause with this band, we play it open and free.” As he said this Major spread his arms like an eagle expanding its wings.

From the stage faces in the crowd looked ambiguous in the flickering candle glow. James caught a smile here, a glinting eye there, but he didn’t recognize anyone. They were like the public that buy Motown records.

The drums started playing and James quickly realized this was not Motown. Vince played a nine-eight beat on shushing cymbals, swinging freely and cracking off-time accents on the snare. James plucked a walking bass-line. Cindy played a set of chords, some of which slid into the tune harmoniously, some of which sprang jaggedly from the piano. Major’s saxophone spun twisting melodies. Locked into the groove James closed his eyes, he felt like a surfer catching a massive wave. When he asserted a melodic idea, the others responded with a snare shot here, a chiming chord there, and together they roved through the tune like a soaring flock of geese. Feeling light and joyful, James’ fingers moved along the strings of the bass, nosing forward in an ebb-and–flow of elegant notes. When he opened his eyes James saw the people, the tables, and the flickering candles shrinking. He turned to the wall and realized that he was wafting upwards, as if he was underwater and floating towards the
Major and the other musicians were also drifting up. They floated up to the ceiling, through a skylight and into the blue-black night. Ensconced in the harmony, James kept plucking his bass, Vince kept drumming, Cindy kept chording, Major kept blowing his sax, and together they kept rising and rising. Below them Detroit shrank into a glittering map. The jam continued as they poked into wisps of mistiness. James looked to the west, to Beaconhill, found his street and located his very house. He smiled. The saxophone dropped out of the music, and there was a lull, an undeniable absence. Sliding his left hand down the bass, James picked patterns of higher and higher notes, and feeding off the cascading groove, he soared into a solo.

Suddenly billows of black smoke arose from the streets below. A building was ablaze, and a mob gyrated down 12th street. Just below the music, James heard the chaotic furor of an angry mob. A window shattered. A siren wailed. Then he saw a blue and red flashing light appear about twenty blocks to the west. It dashed towards 12th street. A minute later more blue and red lights appeared, and also dashed towards the riot. James and the musicians continued to play, however the tempo had slowed, and the timbre had turned dirge-like. As the blaze grew and blended into other buildings, more police cars raced towards the riot.

Down below, by a congregation of police cars and activity, a spot light flashed on, casting a shaft of white light into the night sky. It swung this way and that, like a sword, and finally caught James and the musicians in its bright illumination. James squinted. The musical groove wavered; they looked at one
another like sailors on a capsizing ship. Shots fired, and James heard bullets wiz past. Looking down at the spotlight, James could see tiny policemen with shiny objects in their hands. More shots fired. One smashed a cymbal. The groove broke. They felt themselves dropping, and their instruments screeched out of tune. They kept falling until they landed, their feet smacking the pavement and their instruments crashing all around them. In the street clusters of people strode and ran towards the blazing riot. Some were angry and shouting, waving fists in the air. James, Major, and the others stood on the sidewalk thunderstruck, yet, in the recesses of their minds each of them knew that this was bound to happen. Suddenly, James thought about his work, the Motown studio was only a few blocks away. He worried that something might happen, someone might get hurt.

In the distance, they heard a rifle shot, and two more shots called out in response. Major, who was still tightly gripping his saxophone, stared at the passing throngs, as if transfixed.

“God-damn right,” he said to himself. Then suddenly he took off down the street, about fifty paces, stopped at his car, opened the trunk and placed his saxophone inside. James and the others wandered up to Major’s car, instinctively feeling they were better off if they stuck together. Major slammed the trunk.

“I’m goin!” he cried. “Bout time we fight back!” A wild eyed look had come over his face. His eyes flitted from face to face.

“Who’s with me?” The drummer and pianist expressed their interest.
“Well alright then,” They all looked at James. There was a rage within James that wanted to flame down the street with the rest of them. But then, he thought about Motown only a few blocks away, he thought about Annie, the children, and their home in Beaconhill.

“Naw, man, I better not…I gotta go.”

“Suit yourself,” Major said, then turned abruptly on his heel. “Let’s go!”

“You be careful!” James called, and standing on the sidewalk he watched their backs blur into the angry crowd.
The Strike
The air was warm but a nice breeze blew through the tenements on St Denis Street so that the smells of raw sewage and rotting food scraps didn’t linger too long. On the upper level of a townhouse Nick, Amelia, and their daughter Ruby were seated around the dinner table. Amelia forked salad onto all the plates. Ruby slapped her hand on the table several times and then pointed with stubby writhing fingers at Nick, cooing and smiling as her gleaming eyes explored the features of his face. An outpouring of affection swelled within Nick. It was all worth it, he thought, all of the struggle he had been going through to organize workers and to stick up for his countrymen Sacco and Vanzetti, it would be all worth it if he could in some way help create a better and more just future for his Ruby, for all children. Nick stroked Ruby’s hair with one hand, and with the other brought a glass of home-made wine to his lips. The wine was given to him as congratulations for an essay he had recently published in the Social Question. Momentarily, and with a dreamy look on his face, he stared at the dregs at the bottom of the glass.

“Don’t you like the wine?” Amelia said, sipping from her glass; she had been eyeing Nick for a while, curious as to why he was so quiet.

“Sure,” Nick said, after a pause. “The wine is fine. I am grateful for brother Masserelli’s kind gesture.”

“So what’s wrong, why are you so quiet tonight?” Amelia asked in a carefree tone. Nick reached across the table and kissed her lips.

“Nothing,” Nick said, “not a thing.”
But Nick was quieter than usual, and this was because he had been
contemplating how comparatively good things were now. Brother Masserelli
had come by yesterday with the wine and well wishes, and last week he got his
pay raise. He had worked at the train yards now for the past eight months and
although the pay was not very much, at least they could afford rent, the
groceries, and even put a little money on the side. Ruby had made some friends
in the neighbourhood and Nick and Amelia heard her speaking both English and
French. Yes things definitely were improving.

Nick had immigrated to Canada five years earlier. At first he explored
the working class districts of Montreal and worked at whatever job he could
obtain. He worked as a pick and shovel man on a road gang, on the docks as a
stevedore, he cleaned floors and bathrooms in a factory, and cracked coconuts
in a fruit refinery. None of these jobs were permanent though, and thus Nick
was always worried about paying his rent and filling his stomach, which
increasingly demanded more and more. He eventually made his way out to Port
Arthur, as he had heard that there was demand for stable and strong workers on
the docks. When Nick first arrived he could still barely speak English, and so
he relied on a padroni to procure him work. A part of everything he earned was
siphoned away by the padroni, Nick never knew how much but considering the
paltry amount he ended up with he figured it was more than he could afford, or
more than the padroni deserved, at any rate. Therefore he set his mind to
freeing himself from the padroni as soon as possible. He would keep a sharp
eye out to see which other Italians were able to speak English or French, and he would befriend them and ask them about the meanings of words. He collected newspapers - if they were two days old and sitting in a trash basket it didn’t matter. At night in his room or in a café he would go over them and jot down notes, tired as he was, he would try to dedicate at least an hour to his studies. He enjoyed reading anyway, a habit that was nurtured by his aunt Concetta, whom he used to love to visit on Saturdays. She was a school teacher and always had newspapers and books around. She would lend him novels and books about politics and philosophy, and encouraged him to read them and report back to her with his impressions. Since her husband was shot down by a soldier during a protest, she was known to carry a pistol; she could be heard taking target practice in her back field. On her kitchen wall beside the picture of her husband was a picture of Gaetano Bresci. When Nick’s mother discovered a book by Galleani in Nick’s room, she forbid Nick to visit his aunt. Before he left for Canada Nick snuck round to Concetta’s farm house to say goodbye. She hugged him and gave him a tattered copy of the communist manifesto.

"Read it carefully and review it often," she said, "in it lies the key to the future."

When Nick finally made it out to Port Arthur his English was much improved.
“Hi! How are you!” he would proudly proclaim, raising his cap, to any passerby who looked remotely friendly. The first morning Nick was in Port Arthur he headed down to the waterfront. He arrived at six and there was already a lineup. Some of the men clutched brown bag lunches. Some were chatting jovially, while others stood quiet and pensive. At another table, ensconced in a cloud of cigarette and cigar smoke, a dozen or so men gathered around playing cards.

“So has there been a lot of work, lately?” Nick eagerly asked the man next to him, who was short and chewing sunflower seeds. The man shrugged.

“Depends,” he said brusquely.

Nick’s glance wandered over to the card table again. It seemed strange to Nick to be playing cards so early in the morning, but then, he reasoned, since they had time to kill why not.

After a while the card game broke up and the men drifted over to the front table. One guy, wearing a shiny black visor, a white shirt and tie, took up a clipboard and began calling out names. The men he called out formed a group to the side of the table. Nick noticed that some of the men who were playing cards ended up beside the superintendents. When the superintendent finished calling out the names, there still remained about two or three dozen men not chosen. There were a few discontented groans as the remaining men closed in around the table. Nick edged his way in to hear.

“I’m Ernesto!” one man shouted, “remember me?” The superintendent looked down at his clipboard, then at the man.
“No,” he said firmly. Nick looked at Ernesto, he was the short and slight man he had spoken to earlier. Ernesto sidled, grumbling and kicking at stones. The superintendent scanned the remaining men, raised on to his toes and waved over three tall men at the back. After they moved into rank with the other chosen ones, the superintendent said,

“That’s it for today fellows, thanks for coming down.” He gathered his clipboard at his side, and turned abruptly. The gang of chosen men and superintendents then marched towards the freighter sitting next to the dock.

Nick followed some of the other men into town. They told him about a Salvation Army where he could get a meal for free. First, Nick found a café. The coffee suppressed his hunger for a few hours, and this allowed him to read a day old newspaper. By the late afternoon his hunger pangs were getting bad. He found the Salvation Army and, sitting at a long wooden table slurped a bowl of vegetable soup and munched a piece of bread. He slept in a rooming house and the next morning went back down to the waterfront. There was a similar scene, men milling about, and a couple of card games at various tables. After all the names were called, the superintendents chose a few men out of the crowd and turned the rest away. Nick again wandered in the town and frittered the hours in a café. With the 15 dollars he had brought with him to Port Arthur, he figured he could last two weeks without work, but he would practically have to starve himself to ration it out that long. Nick woke on the third morning feeling hunger stinging his insides. He didn’t feel very strong, but he thought he better go down and give the docks another chance. If they saw that he has shown up
three days in a row they might see that he's a serious and reliable sort of fellow and give him a break. When Nick arrived at the line up he noticed that there was a seat available at one of the card games. He eyed it once, then looked away. The men at the table were rather loud, several of them puffing on cigars and cigarettes. A little nervous, Nick nevertheless wandered up to the table. No one seemed to notice him. He slipped into the seat. He adjusted his cap, his glance moved from one face to another. There were six working men and one fedora wearing superintendent sitting around the table. Most of the men had folded, two were left in the game; a gaunt man with a long neck, and the superintendent.

“Come on, Pete,” someone said, “You in or out? we ain’t got all day.” Pete stared at his cards, furrowed his brow, then laid the cards down. The superintendent gathered up the pile of bills at the center of the table.

“Luck’s really with you today, hey Jack?” a man said in a sardonic tone. He sprang up and the chair screeched on the floor, then he strode off in a huff.

Jack seemed unfazed and dealt the next hand without comment. The first few rounds Nick had nothing better than a pair and folded early each time. Eventually, Nick received three kings. He tried to relax. He hoped his face hadn’t shown the rush of excitement. He lasted through five rounds of betting. The ante was upped a dollar each time. One by one the rest of the men folded, one man gruffly slamming his cards down. Nick looked at the pile of money, there seemed to be about fifteen or twenty dollars, enough to last another two weeks, Nick figured. He looked around at the other men, most of whom had
been losing almost every game. He looked at the pile of folded and crushed bills at Jack’s elbow. So this is how it goes, Nick thought. There are scoundrels everywhere, Canada, Italy it didn’t matter; wherever in the world men were in positions of power over other men and women there would be scoundrels exploiting for gain. He gazed down the pier at the massive grain elevators, like giant barns, their cylindrical columns reminded him vaguely of the pillars of Roman architecture, and he could see the front of a freighter, like the face of a whale. He could barely fathom how much grain and coal and whatever other goods passed through this port, in these monstrous looming machines that worked so efficiently. He could not fathom how he fit into all this except as another machine to lift, dig, carry, broom, scrub, until his hands were sore and his back ached.

“Well?” Jack said, “It’s another dollar…you in or out?” Nick looked at his three kings. His stomach grumbled. His eyes darted down to the money loosely gathered in the center.

“What’ll it be?” Jack demanded leaning forward putting his elbows on the table. Nick looked at Jack’s face, it was calm and smooth shaven, and seemed to manifest a kind of strength Nick hadn’t reckoned with before. Nick paused as long as he could. He knew this irritated Jack and he held the pause as long as he could before he could feel anger and power rise up out of Jack and of the spectators.

“I’m out,” Nick said gruffly, slamming his cards on the table. After the role call Nick was still left standing amongst the un-chosen, and he felt the
blood heating in his temples. Nick positioned himself near the front and tried to catch Jack’s eye. Jack finally looked at Nick, and recognition flashed in his face. Jack looked at the other superintendent and then gestured in Nick’s direction. They glanced at their clipboards and exchanged a few words.

“Why not?” the other superintendent said, “and ya know...these dagos work like the devil.” They both chuckled and Jack waved Nick over. Nick was introduced to Jeffrey a gang master, and he Nick and eleven other men headed down the dock, which creaked and swayed under their shoes. Along the dock was a long warehouse.

“Gentlemen!” Jeffrey hollered, “take yourself one of those!” he pointed to several rows of trollies, carts, and wheel barrels lined up in the shadow of an eave.

“We have 4000 barrels and casks to move today. It’s going to be a busy day so step to it!” Nick grabbed the thick cast iron handles of a trolley, spun it around and headed towards the ship. He had to thrust the trolley several times to get it over the lip, and then bounded up the steep gangplank. There were countless rows of barrels, stacked three high. Nick and two other men loaded them onto his trolley. Once the trolley had two large barrels loaded on it Nick tried to turn it around but it wouldn’t budge. He felt eyes looking at him. Nick stuck his left foot on the axle, and yanked back as hard as he could, and the trolley tipped towards him, the weight almost knocking him over.

“Whoa, whoa! Steady!” the gang master shouted from across the hold. Nick could hear his boot steps approaching. Nick jostled with it, and tugged it
hard to the right so that the trolley was pointed towards the entrance. He bent his knees and leaned all his weight into the trolley to get it moving. Once he approached the gangplank the trolley bounced over a ledge, and as it descended he felt the weight of it shift out of his control, his wrists twisted, his hands clutched the handles so that he managed to guide it straight down the gangplank, his feet slapping and skidding to keep his balance, and the last five feet or so running to keep up with the rumbling barrels, finally the trolley hit the dock, the barrels hopped then landed back on the trolley, tottered, and then Nick, flexing his arms as much as he could, slowed the trolley until it halted. He flung his arm over the top to ensure it wouldn’t fly off. Nick stood like this panting for a moment or two, then drew his sleeve across his forehead. He looked up at the sky tasting saltiness around his lips. The sun was halfway to its apex. Spotty puffs of cloud hung low, buffering an even darker sleeve of cloud further to the west. Nick couldn’t tell whether or not the day would turn out OK.

The air wasn’t as bad as some of the other factory jobs he had worked, but the work was tough and he was beginning to have a perpetually sore back. At first Nick didn’t complain to anyone, he thought this was just a part of life, the natural order of things in the new world, one had to work one’s way up the ranks. But after a few months he was getting frustrated with the work conditions and the low wages. He found that old tattered copy of the Communist Manifesto that his aunt had given him and began to read. From time to time he would gaze at the cover and the short declarative title, Workers
Unite! filled him with a new and powerful sort of inspiration. So he started asking around at the docks to see if there was any interest in a union. One day, while Nick was speaking with a group of men a large man in overalls with a derbie pulled tight over his eyes spoke up in a loud voice.

“We’re not interested in any unions round here!” he said. Nick looked at the man, he had a bull-like torso and a set jaw. A few other men fell in behind him. The big man pressed his right fist into his left palm.

“If you don’t want trouble, just forget about this union!” the large man bellowed, looking around at the other men surrounding Nick, some of whom were beginning to disperse. The man came closer and closer, glaring at anyone near him. Finally he approached Nick and a menacing grin appeared on his face. Suddenly, in one quick motion a man stepped forward, there was a shimmering arc and a blade appeared, just short of the large man’s chin. The man with the blade’s arm stretched out straight and steady. He stared down the broad side of the blade like a sniper lining up a shot. The large man put his hands in the air slowly, his eyes so focused on the blade before him he looked cross-eyed.

“Anyone recognize this guy?” the man with the blade asked. A few men answered in the negative.

“No, of course you don’t. He’s not a dock worker. He’s not one of us. He works for them. Don’t you?” Just then the big man made a grab for the blade, but the other man pulled his hand back and as the big man was lunging forward the other man slashed him across the shoulder, slicing his shirt open
and drawing blood. The big man drew back and clamped his hand on his bleeding shoulder. His face winced, but he still stared menacingly at the man with the blade.

"Get the fuck outta here," said the man with the blade, in an intense whisper. The large man looked stunned and for a moment didn’t move. Then he slowly backed away.

"Go on!" the man with the blade yelled. "You can tell your bosses that we’re organizing, and they can expect a strike in return for their bloody poverty wages!"

All the men went back to work. At lunch break Nick went looking for the man who saved him from trouble earlier. He found him sitting on a bench overlooking the pier, eating a sandwich. Nick approached and held out his hand.

"Thanks," Nick said, looking down at the man, who sat and didn’t respond or move right away. He continued to chew, and when he was done and swallowed, he looked up, squinting in the sun. His longish hair dangled down his forehead. He stood up, looked Nick in the face appraisingly for a moment, then shook his hand. Nick noticed his shake seemed hollow.

"Name’s Victor," he said. Nick thanked him and introduced himself. From the corner of his eye he noticed Victor was missing a finger on his right hand. All that day they worked together. Victor told Nick he had been in Canada since he was seven. He had a few years of school and could speak English well. There were many Italians in Canada now, but many of them still
struggled and mostly did hard labour jobs, building roads, in construction, masonry, as stevedores, or else did a variety of factory work.

After work Victor and Nick went to the cafe Italia.

"Tonight's a special night," Victor said. "The Anarcho-syndicalists are holding a meeting." Nick glanced around the room and saw others like him, working men. Although their clothes weren't fancy or expensive they were scrubbed and groomed and radiated with the joy of being out for the evening with friends and with a looking forwardness to a stimulating night of discussion. A mandolin and accordion whined pleasantly. The strains took Nick back to his childhood, hearing music in his village. After a few numbers, the guitarist leaned his guitar against the wall, took out some notes from a leather satchel and began a lecture.

"I would like to talk to you this evening about how the anarchist movement is doing in Italy..." He went on telling about the strength of the movement, how working as independent communities they are building a better society for the future, one freed from the dangers of institutions, etc.

After the lecture Nick stayed around for more drinks. The musicians began to play again, this time the mandolin plucked out a lively tarantella, while the accordion pumped out jaunty chords. Victor went to the bar and returned with two glasses of sambuca. He clinked Nick's glass, took a long lusty swig and then danced into a fray of revelers, who greeted him with smiles and ahhhs.

"Giovan fesht!" A woman called out playfully and touched his cheek, then turned to her friends with a sly smile. The musicians feet stomped on the
wood planks of the floor. The women held their skirts and kicked their feet as
the men danced and hopped about them. Nick’s cheeks felt hot, he gulped the
sambuca, and got up to dance. They danced energetically for an hour or so.
The air was filled with the smell of strong liquor and cigars and the room
seemed to be wheeling around Nick like a merry-go-round. From the corner of
his eye Nick noticed the café owner peering out the window with a worried
expression. He turned quickly, made a hand gesture to the musicians, and then
scuttled behind the bar.

“Hey!” Nick called out, “what’s the worry?” The café owner’s eyes
flitted to Nick’s face and didn’t answer right away but rather began scrubbing
dishes and cutlery. Nick traipsed over to the bar.

“Hey…it’s Luigi right?” Nick said. The café owner nodded his head,
slightly annoyed.

“Listen,” Nick said “would you sell me a bottle of your wine?” Luigi
looked into Nick’s face for a second or two, then went into the pantry and came
back with a bottle held loosely in his hand.

“Now friend,” Luigi said in a fawning tone, “all sell you this a-here
bottle of vino…but,” he raised his finger, as if to make a point, “you-a be
careful…don’t get me into a’no trouble!”

Nick took the bottle and went back to the table. The musicians had
stopped playing. They were consulting sheets of music and debating whether or
not to go on. With wild gestures and loud voices the crowd harangued for more.
Luigi looked worried. Suddenly there was a sharp rapping on the window. A
few police officers, tough-looking and aloof, sauntered into the café. Nick placed the bottle under the table. Most of the patrons half-turned their backs to the police, exchanged annoyed looks, and kept sipping their drinks. Victor leaned towards Nick and whispered an obscenity. The police chief scanned the room.

“Just wanted to remind you all about the curfew,” he said, and pointed to the clock with his night stick, “you all have to clear out of here by eleven o’clock.” The police officer took one last glance around the room and then he and his men left.

“OK,” Luigi said, raising his voice for everyone to hear, “finish your drinks, and then….that’s it…closing time.”

Victor came over to the table Nick was sitting at. Sweat glistened on his brow. The two girls he was dancing with also came over. Nick recognized them from the silk factory he passed everyday on his walk home. Without being asked, the girls dropped into the chairs.

“AAAh, my feet!” One girl cried, “…so good to sit down.” She laughed and then looked at everything around her with vivacious glimmering eyes.

“You’re a good dancer,” Nick said, then immediately hated himself for uttering something so banal. She smiled a quick insincere smile and then her glance roamed the room, lingering on the different parties finishing up their drinks and saying goodbyes. Nick picked up the bottle of wine and mindlessly gazed at the claret liquid. His eyes strayed to her face; the supple tan skin that
seemed to radiate a mellow self-possession. She could feel his eyes on her face. She waited then slowly met his glance, sizing him up.

“Well,” she said, “It’s late, I think I’ll call it night.” As she stood up Nick made a disapproving clucking sound and shook his head. She looked at him with a slightly annoyed look.

“What?” She said. He kept looking at the bottle for a moment, grinning.

“Curfews are for children,” he said. Her face tightened for a second, she looked shocked, then she proudly rolled her eyes, turned to her friend and said goodbye, then wheeled and strode across the floor.

“Don’t forget to have your mother tuck you in and read you a story,” Nick said. She whipped around with a mock-shocked look on her face. She walked back to the table, stood there with her hands on her hips, then she grabbed the bottle.

“C’mon,” she said to her friend, “let’s get drunk!” She grabbed her friend’s hand, yanked her away from Victor and they rushed across the room, skidded past a few people, and elbowed their way out the door. Nick and Victor grabbed their hats and took off after them. As they passed the bar, Luigi gave them an imploring look (arms outstretched). Nick checked himself and slowed down.

“Uh, sorry, Luig,” Nick placed his finger over his lips, then walked more calmly towards the door.

“Bona sera Luig” they called out as they left the café. Nick and Victor walked as quickly as they could without making a spectacle until they caught up
with the girls two blocks down. They split up and went abreast of the girls on either side. Nick glanced casually at the girl with the bottle.

“That’s mine,” Nick said, with his eyes indicating the bottle.

“Yours?” she said in a saucy tone, pretending to be affronted. She considered for moment. “I don’t believe in property rights,” she said and continued striding down the road.

“Ok,” Nick said catching up with her, “…then…care to redistribute resources?”

They walked along the streets in the peachy glow of the street lamps laughing and talking, the drinks in their bellies warmed their hearts and they talked and laughed and Victor was really feeling outrageous dancing and singing. They passed a group of older people having tea on an outdoor balcony, and Victor looked at them and sang out a Tarantella in loud and chiming notes and waved his arm in mock dramatic gesture. They looked on a little stunned and uncomfortable. Nick took him by the shoulder and guided him away, trying to hide his laughter. They continued along, bounding along the sidewalk, happy to be out in the flaring street, to be able to move. Victor slid into the shadows of an alley and then they heard a few retches and a splashing sound. He came back into the light a minute later, his eyes reddish and distant, his body wobbled and he stopped and leaned his hand on the wall. Nick put Victor’s arm around his shoulder, Amelia put his other arm around her shoulder and they walked Victor to his door.
Nick and Amelia strolled down the street, more calmly, their arms swinging, at times in unison. They discussed the speeches that they heard earlier in the evening. Then a lull fell over them and neither one seemed to think of anything to say. The sounds of the street - the clip clop of horses’ hooves, the din of the conversations from benches and from restaurant windows heard fleetingly, the rustling of car wheels and the occasional horn blast - conversed with their minds and hearts. They walked on, acting interested in the passersby and the items in the shop windows. Nick realized that they would soon be coming upon his street. He cleared his throat then began speaking; his voice sounded loud in his ears, the words had edges. They came to the intersection of Nick’s street. He paused. He glanced at the building in front of him.

“Well, my place is down this way,” he said pointing with his thumb down a dimly lit street. A smile slowly appeared on his face. He reached for the bottle. She pulled it away from him and spun around, grinning.

“That’s mine!” he said, laughing a little and struggling to get a grip. They play wrestled. Nick tickled her a under the ribs. She laughed out loud but wouldn’t loosen her grip on the bottle. After a minute or two of tussling they backed into the wall, laughing and panting from the effort.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said holding the bottle snuggly in her arms, “I’ll share it with you.”

They went back to the building where Nick rented a room.
“Wait here,” Nick said as they reached the door to his room. He went inside and got a glass from his bathroom, the one he used for rinsing his mouth, and a candle. He cleaned the glass in the sink and met Amelia in the hall.

“Let’s go up onto the roof,” he suggested. Holding the candle steadily Nick went to the end of the hall, opened a door that lead to a staircase. As they entered the little used stairwell they heard the sound of tiny scurrying feet. Nick felt a little embarrassed, but continued up the creaking stairs. Up on the roof the air was cool, and a slight breeze played over the roof tops and ruffled their hair. They talked some more about the meeting, the books they had read recently, and how they thought workers should be organized. Nick told her that he was trying to organize a strike at the docks.

“Oh yeah,” she said, perking up. “Get after them early, talk to as many of your co-workers as possible, and, most importantly, appeal to their sense of logic. You have to show them that it makes sense to take the power back from the bourgeoisie, that all this industry and wealth would be nothing, wouldn’t even exist if it wasn’t for their labour. You have to make them see that when workers put their tools down the whole economy melts into air. You have to read to them, you have to distribute pamphlets... ideas... that’s what’ll hook’em in for the long term. Otherwise, what happens is some join in at the last minute, others bail out at the last minute, and this leaves a pool of potential scabs.” She said with disgust in her voice. She looked off into the distance with a bitter look on her face for a moment, and then shook her head, laughed and a more cheerfully ironic look came over her face.
“Yeah scabs, they really piss me off,” she said, shaking her head. “Some of us made these signs; they weren’t very nice . . . . and someone got their hands on these fish horns, from where I don’t know, they were bright red and they made an awful noise . . . . loud and screechy. Anyway, last time we had a strike we would blow these crazy fish horns as the scabs were going through the picket line. Everyday, whenever you heard the horn you would know the scabs had arrived and everyone would give ‘em hell as they walked by . . . . ah guilt,” she said, then laughed a charmingly evil laugh. She sipped from the glass, and then looked at it quizzically and pondered for a moment.

“You don’t have another glass?” she asked. Nick chuckled awkwardly.

“Actually no,” he said. She looked at him as if by studying his features some thoughts and impressions she had been forming about him all night were beginning to crystallize.

“Real Spartan, huh?” she said, with an approving undertone in her voice.

The next week the weather turned bad. Rains swept across the open hull, lashing down on the men as they worked, making the floors slippery and muddy. Nick’s fingers would often slip off the edges of the canisters and they would drop and clang on the floor. At times he would try and catch the canisters as they slipped which would cause a miserable twist of the back, and an angry sensation would flare up. But then he was also consoled by the thoughts of Amelia which flocked his mind as he worked. Her mellowness,
lightness, and charm would take form and appear in his mind like a series of impressionistic paintings.

At the breaks the men huddled under the eaves of the office and tried to warm themselves with steaming cups of coffee. They would grumble about the weather and allude resentfully to the fact that during the rainy storms the bosses were nowhere to be found. Where did Jeffrey go? Nick wondered. Was he working, as they all were working, vigorously hoisting, lifting, wheeling, or was he sitting in some office drinking coffee and chatting? Who cares, Nick thought, and tried to banish such thoughts from his mind. But then, if he was going to help organize the workers he needed to know more about how businesses were managed, he needed to know how much money was coming in, how much went to the workers, how much went to reinvestments. He wanted to know more about the farmers that grew all this wheat, corn, and apples, and the manufacturing plants that released every object imaginable into the world. His mind yearned to know where it all came from, and where it was going; but these questions echoed in his soul like unanswered prayers.

The rain hadn't let up for five days. By the end of the week some of the men got sick and a few of the regulars didn't show up. It was a Friday afternoon when it happened. It was the opening Nick knew they would need, and although he hated to see Ernesto slip down the gangplank and the wince of pain on his face as a large barrel dropped on his leg, Nick knew that this would be their chance. And so he rushed down to Ernesto's side,
"You alright?" Nick cried. Ernesto writhed and moaned and didn’t answer. Nick and another man lifted the canister up and someone went for the foreman. Nick heaved Ernesto up and onto his feet, and together they hobbled to the office. Standing on the landing Jeffrey counted out half a day’s pay and handed it to Ernesto. Jeffrey’s usual gruffness softened somewhat as he looked into Ernesto’s downtrodden face. Jeffrey shuffled awkwardly then took off his fedora.

"Get well soon," Jeffrey said, and tapped Ernesto on the shoulder in a way that seemed to say let’s get this over with and move on. But a profound silence emanated from the stevedores who now had stopped their work and stood staring at the scene. It was an eerie stillness in which everyone could hear the subtle creaking as the boat rocked against the dock. Jeffrey paced the landing then quickly turned to face the men standing motionless on the dock, the gangplank and the boat, with what he thought was the brute stupidity and stubbornness of pack animals. A scowl came over his face.

"Get back to work the rest of you!" He shouted down at the men, but they remained defiantly motionless.

"Go on!" Jeffrey yelled, his voice verging on savage anger. "What do you think this is, a fairy tale?" There was a patronizing smugness in his tone. He laughed, but then his face changed and he took on a more businesslike tone. "Those of you who want to continue to work with this company better get back to work immediately." He said. His uncertainty about the outcome of this confrontation showed in his shifting eyes. The stevedores stood immobile for a
moment longer then slowly, like stubborn children, their bodies shifted into motion and once again the wheelbarrows were pushed, the canisters slung into the air, and the whole dock was bustling again. Some time later Ernesto’s shawl-draped wife came by with a man in a horse-drawn cart. They loaded Ernesto into the back and pulled him away. Ernesto’s face was drawn down sullenly, and his mangled leg bounced and flopped with horrible flexibility as the cart rolled up the road towards the city.

At lunch time Nick and Victor eyed each other knowingly over their sandwiches. They both knew that this was the chance they needed.

“Now’s the time,” Nick said later that evening at the Café Italia, he was a little drunk, he felt light and swayed a little. He was standing at the bar amidst a ring of fellow workers.

“It’s been two weeks since Ernesto’s accident. He hasn’t been back to work and all the men hear about how his children have been living on a pittance, one slice of bread a day, stretching out his last pay check, and the little Mary takes in for washing. The men are in sympathy with Ernesto and at the same time fearful that they may end up the same way...one slip...down you go with a twisted ankle or wrist and then what? You can’t work, can’t buy no food...nothing.” Nick’s voice was heated and edgy. His eyes swept across the faces of the onlookers, he knew he was getting through to them and it thrilled him.

“Now would be a good time for a strike, we must strike while the iron is hot!” Nick pounded a fist into his hand, then smirking in spite of himself he said
"no pun intended." He paused to drink and the crowd laughed a hearty, triumphant laugh. "The men are angry," Nick continued, "they realize now they're precarious situation, how insidiously their fates are tied to the greedy and uncaring bourgeoisie who own the shipping companies and the factories."

He raised his glass "spread the word, the more brother and sister workers that join us, the more powerful we’ll be." They all raised their glasses and drank to solidarity, to justice, and to the imminent strike.

Nick arrived at the docks the following Wednesday at eight o’clock. The sky was bright and clear, and a crowd had already gathered. People were in good spirits, someone handed round coffee. A pile of placards with slogans written on them leaned against a building. Suddenly Nick became acutely aware of the bank in front of him and the police house just down the street. Momentarily, a feeling of trepidation zipped through his body. He looked at the faces in the crowd, they were determined and serious and yet also resplendent with some new kind of joy and liberation. They emboldened him. He picked up a bull horn and put it to his mouth and raised his hand in the air.

"Good morning!" Nick said cheerfully, his voice booming and echoing along the buildings that lined the street.

"Good morning!" the crowd shouted back.

"Thank you all for coming out this morning." He outlined the route they planned to take and implored them to take up a sign. A hat was passed around for Ernesto’s family.
The crowd began marching along the docks. Some of the strikers called out to the few workers who remained in the warehouses and offices. One man stared out the window of an office, peered suspiciously at the throng, then waved his hand dismissively and closed the shutters.

“Coward!” Victor yelled. A chorus of jeers and boos echoed the sentiment. As the crowd ambled onto the last section of the dock, they noticed some stevedores still at work on a mid-sized ship. The strikers called out to them, waving and encouraging them to come and join the protest. The stevedores stopped their work, their faces full of morning sobriety, glazed with the concentration of work-life. They glanced at one another un-assuredly. Then one man threw down his work gloves, spat, tugged on his cap and jogged over to the throng. Several others followed. The strikers cheered and clapped as the men joined the throng.

The crowd moved off the docks. Nick looked at the faces all around him, some he recognized and knew well, some he knew only from passing in the streets or in the markets on weekends, and others he didn’t know at all. As they made their way along the streets of the industrial section they raised their voices in song. With proud and rousing voices they sang the Internationale and the music bloomed into the street. People peered from apartment buildings, children stopped their play and watched from the sidewalk; a few of them wandered into the fray. Yes Nick thought, watching a young boy with a baseball mitt entering the throng. They need to absorb this, they need to continue this. As the throng rounded the corner, it slowed down. A hush
roamed over the crowd. Two dozen mounted police filled the far side of the town square, the horses shuffled and the men looked serious and solemn in the dusty morning sun-haze. The throng almost came to a halt altogether and the people at the back flowed into the people standing still on the pavement.

The horses shuffled, their hooves clip-clopping on the pavement. Amelia’s eyes swallowed the scene before her.

“Well,” she said, hands on her hips, “we can’t turn back now can we?” She nodded in a way that indicated the matter was not open to debate. She walked on ahead of everyone, her hair streaming across her shoulders. The crowd fell in behind her, flowed across the street and onto the grassy park. Here, the sun-bathed and unsoiled air felt fresh and good to breath. Pigeons flew up, wheeled and landed on the far side of the park.

Where was Victor, Nick thought; his eyes casting around at faces. Finally, Nick spotted Victor sitting on the low branch of an elm tree, his face still, hawk-like and dappled in leaf-shadow. Jesus, what’s he up to?

The throng thickened as more people came out from the stores and apartments. A rumor seemed to crackle through the crowd. Then someone said loudly that another factory had shut down for the day and the workers were on their way. The throng cheered and applauded. Someone tossed a ratty derby cap in the air.

Nick’s gaze returned to Victor, perched in the elm, gripping the trunk and glowering at the scene below. The horses shuffled restlessly. The police were strapping on gas masks. Suddenly men poured out from a side alley, into the
street, and towards the park. They moved swiftly and stealthily. Nick recognized the large barrel-chested strikebreaker, his square jaw jutted forward and his thin eyes smoldered. About two dozen men followed behind, at their sides holding pipes, knives, chains, and pistols. They moved onto the grass and Nick felt an up-rush of anger and fear. He wanted to fight but his only weapons were his bare fists. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. He looked at the huge crowd that surrounded him and fleshed out the entire space of Mulberry Street. He looked around at all the good hearted people who followed him and his revolutionary words from the waterfront down the cobble stoned streets shambling to this grassy tree-filled park, grooving to this moment of solidarity, absenting themselves from the sewing machines, the sweatshops, the ship’s holds, the workshops, the tanneries, and he stood there like Moses without a parted sea. The streak breakers were spread before them, now openly brandishing their weapons, laughing and smirking superiorly with the mounted police. Nick felt like he was slipping in quicksand. He glanced at the crowd. He saw faces that were confused, angry, and defiant. It isn’t worth it Nick thought as the words came out slowly at first then accelerating to a roar:

“Baaaaack! Get baaaack!”

Amelia rushed over, a questioning look in her eyes. She turned quickly to see the menacing strikebreakers, the gas mask wearing police and she quickly moved into action waving and calling for people to retreat, to turn around and head back the way they had come. Confusion fluttered across the crowd.
People hopped up from the grass, grabbed bags and bottles - there was a mad commotion of turning, twisting, waving, and shuffling.

Suddenly from the elm tree a cat-whistle screeched, and from a back alley men poured out. With grubby caps pulled down over their eyes and kerchiefs wrapped around their faces they moved swiftly, fanning out into the park, hustling to find cover behind parked cars and tree trunks. Nick looked at one guy who wasn’t wearing a mask, he recognized his face, it was Mario from his work gang.

Just then the leader of the strikebreakers gave a nod to the leader of the mounted police. Then something flew overhead emitting a stream of smoke. It hit the ground and skidded in between shuffling feet. Smoke rushed from the canister in ball-like clouds, enveloping the crowd. Victor’s voice bellowed from up in the elm. Another smoking canister skipped along the ground. The police moved into the crowd in a tight phalanx, whereas the plain-clothes streak-breakers moved to the sidewalks on the fringe of the park, swinging their weapons and taunting the protestors, some of whom yelled back.

In the middle of the crowd, Nick was still exhorting the protestors to retreat. As he waved his arms frantically, his arm entangled with Amelia’s. Then his hand slid down her forearm and his fingers snagged on her fingers, and, for a second or two, their fingers enmeshed. He couldn’t see her for the smoke but he gripped her hand tightly. They marched forward, flushing the protestors before them back towards the entrance of Mulberry street. Suddenly, Nick’s foot kicked something lumpy and soft. He stopped and looked down to
see a fallen boy, curled up and coughing into his baseball mitt. Nick hauled him up by his arm and looked at his squinting puckered face. Nick gripped one arm and Amelia clutched the other and together they carried the boy over the grass, hollering at the others to keep moving. The boy kept coughing, in a young high toned pitch. Behind, somewhere in the billows of smoke, they heard the stevedores skirmishing with the police; a cacophony of yelling, cursing, and thumping. Most of the crowd now had retreated and had reached the safety of Mulberry street. Some of the protesters where using the placards to fan away the tear the gas. Nick and Amelia reached the sidewalk and put the boy down. He tottered and sat down on the curb.

Scarves of smoke still wisped through the park, around the trees and benches, and what could be seen of the line of police who had advanced to the edge of the park now.

Suddenly a shot fired. Then a horse whinnied; an excited high pitched squeal, and trotted quickly away from the tight line of police. Victor was on top of the horse. A few shots fired in his direction. Victor ducked. The horse danced. Gripping the reigns in one hand and holding his pistol in the other, Victor steadied the horse, lowered the gun and fired in to the line of police a few times before kicking the horse and galloping away, with a thunder of hooves, down the street. Two mounted policemen galloped after him.

Nick and Amelia stared in astonishment. They were speechless. The crowd milled around Mulberry street, slowly dwindling away as the afternoon wore on. Some of the dockers were rounded up and locked in the jail for the
night. Nick and Amelia hid in the crowd, circulating, discreetly thanking people for their support and courage, and checking to see if everyone was alright.

There was no word from Victor.

The next day most of the workers returned to their jobs. After holding out for a day Nick decided it would be best to return to the docks. The walk down to the waterfront felt painfully familiar. The seagulls screeched. As he treaded the downgraded road to the dock a mood of somberness came over him. He had no idea how the supervisors would react to his presence and he didn’t really care. With his cap pulled down low, shading his eyes, he ambled to the back of the crowd of men, nodding subtly to his fellow workers. He was greeted with a few looks of subdued astonishment. A few of the men shook his hand, or clapped him on the shoulder. When Jeffrey came out of the office and began the call-on he didn’t notice Nick and he didn’t even acknowledge the strike, he must have lived through so many by now, he simply ran through his usual procedure scrutinizing the men’s faces and bodies in the flash of an instant. Finally, after twenty or so men were picked Jeffrey noticed Nick in the back, held his gaze for a second and then waved him on.

Nick worked his usual job for the rest of the week. Initially he was disappointed and felt the urge to send the barrels toppling overboard into the river. Back to the shit, he thought bitterly. Working silently, he brooded over his recent failure; endlessly reviewing his miscalculations and misjudgments. Although acidity clung to his thoughts of the present circumstance, somewhere deeper down, faith in a different and better existence still glowed.
That Friday afternoon Jeffrey assigned Nick to place barrels in the warehouse storeroom. There were two or three dozen and Nick figured it would take all afternoon. He was glad of it as the August humidity was thick and stifling in the open ship's hold. The warehouse was dark and cool and musty smelling. The wheels of the trolley grinded as Nick pushed the barrels down the corridor. He loaded the barrels gingerly, he had developed a fine technique, using his body weight to shift the barrels and then roll them into place. Suddenly the sound of footsteps came rushing closer and closer. Before Nick had a chance to do anything he was shoved from behind and his shoulder slammed into the wall. As he turned around a metal pipe ripped into his hamstring and he fell to his knees. In total shock he looked up to see his assailants, and there was the leader of the strikebreakers, his face strangely calm and his square jaw set in determination as he whipped the back of his hand against Nick's cheek. Nick fell to the ground and was kicked repeatedly by several men. They pummeled his sides and smacked his head into the ground. He felt his skin burn against the ground and become porous, leaking. When they were done one of them grabbed Nick's hair and held up his head.

"That'll learn'ya" he growled, "No more strikes you fucking commie wop." He gave Nick's hair a yank. "You understand!?"

The next morning as Nick tried to rise out of bed, a stab of pain radiated from his torso, and he slumped back onto the bed. He called for the women who ran the house and asked if she would mind picking him up a bottle of
whiskey when she went out. He gave her a few dollars. She returned in the afternoon and placed the bottle on his dresser, gazed at him for a moment, wiping her hand on her apron. She didn’t say anything but looked at him with the expression of one who looks at a dying bird whose belly has been sprayed with buckshot—a mix of pity and hard-wonder at the inscrutableness of life. She uncorked the bottle, working efficiently and silently, placed the cork down beside the bottle and left the room.

Nick got out of bed, hobbled painstakingly to the dresser and held the bottle in his hand. The odor of whisky in his face felt odd at this time of day, but he tipped back the bottle anyway. He drank half the bottle and felt better, slouched back on the bed and dozed. Some time later a knocking sound oozed into his stupefied state of mind. Huh, he shuffled in the bed, the springs squeaking like mice under him. Foot steps approached sliding on the floor lightly.

“Oh Nick,” a voice said, pitifully. He rolled onto his side, towards the door, and, looking through blurry vision, saw Amelia. Her hand lightly touched his bruised face. She looked intently into his eyes. She didn’t have to ask what happened. She sat on the bed and stroked his hair, and began to tell him about the last few days.

“Although shaken, the workers’ morale doesn’t seem to be totally sunk. Some even seemed eager for renewed job actions,” she said. “Many are commenting on your friend, Victor. It’s said that his bullets have wounded several police officers and that a large search party was sent after him.” As she
spoke Nick seemed to be staring at the wall but there was a faraway look in his eyes. Amelia could tell this wasn’t the right time for such talk. She left and then came back a while later with a plate of spaghetti, a crust of bread, and a bottle of water. Nick ate without speaking. The warm pasta seemed to revive him. Thoughts re-emerged in his mind and suddenly he felt like talking, he felt like getting out of bed and going for a walk. He thanked Amelia for the dinner. She touched his bruised cheek, and a look of worry flashed over her face.

“We have to get out of here,” she said.

A week later Amelia quit her job and with a little saved money they bought train tickets to Montreal. They settled into a small but clean apartment and found jobs. Amelia worked in a silk factory and Nick found steady work at the rail yards as a brakeman. Although riding on top of the cars was a little dangerous, he nevertheless liked being outside and found the work convivial enough. He joined the local union and found that the workers had a reasonably good rapport with management.

A few years went by and Nick and Amelia had a baby girl, Ruby. Although they occasionally heard rumours that Victor had passed through Montreal, they never heard from him directly.

One time Nick was taking his coffee break as usual, in the staff room. The time clock and all the punch cards were lined up next to the door. Nick sat down on a wooden chair which creaked under him, placed his coffee down and for a moment, in a fatigue-induced stupor, half meditated and half stared at all of the punch cards. There must have been over a hundred, each one with a
name and an employee number, five to a rectangular slot. Some of the names on the cards had been working at the railway for twenty or thirty years. He wondered if this could be his career, if he could be happy working on the rails or in the shop for so many years, for the rest of his working life. He blinked and sort of re-awoke, leaned over and picked up his coffee cup and took a sip. His eyes roamed around the room, taking in the pictures on the walls of the locomotives roaring across rugged Canadian landscapes. Then he riffled through a stack of newspapers and magazines and noticed near the bottom a leaflet with some Italian and Spanish text. The leaflet was published by a group called the Sacco and Vanzetti defense committee. There was a meeting planned for next Wednesday. Right there and then Nick decided to attend the meeting.

Nick found the address, on a busy part of east St-Catherine’s Street. He treaded down a narrow stair case, which smelled of old cigar smoke. The meeting had already begun when Nick entered the crowded basement. A woman at the podium spoke to a lively audience that responded to her words with comments and moans and cheers. The faces and voices in the audience were not only those of Italians, but also of Greeks, Jews, Poles, Blacks, French and Anglo Canadians. The smell of coffee and fruits and chocolate wafted in the air. The bespectacled speaker gave an update on Sacco and Vanzetti. When the speaker mentioned that a man named Medeiros had come forward and actually confessed to the crime a hush of amazement swept through the crowd. It was rumoured that Judge Thayer’s courtroom had been outfitted with cast-
iron bomb shutters, painted to match the wooden ones fitted elsewhere in the building and with heavy sliding steel doors.

It was standing room only and Nick was at the very back. Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder. He jerked around and there was Victor, smiling behind that curly lock of hair hanging down. A sudden joy swelled up in Nick. He laughed out loud for gladness and embraced Victor. Victor smiled and they exchanged whispered pleasantries but as Victor walked away the smile vanished from his face and something dark came into his eyes.

Victor was the next presenter.

"Chair, ladies and gentlemen, it's so good to see such a well attended meeting here in Montreal." He paused for a drink of water, then continued "But we must continue our efforts to build the movement." Victor reported about his activities over the past years. Making his escape from Northern Ontario he made his way South, stopping in small mill towns, factory towns, lumber camps, distributing socialist literature and fomenting worker militancy.

"...although some meetings were sparsely attended, and in some cases I was chased out by guards, it was plain to me that there is generally a hunger for change, an openness to our movement." Victor gripped the edges of the podium as he spoke. There was an edge in his voice.

"...Lastly, I would like to implore you all to go out and recruit more members and spread the word, the world must know the truth about Sacco and Vanzetti! They must see them for the heroes, the noble and brave men that they are! We mustn't let them rot in jail any longer!" Victor's fist hammered the
podium. "...and hopefully, with fortune and moral fortitude on our side, when Sacco and Vanzetti are liberated from the contemptuous and fearful machine that has ensnared them and now threatens their very breath, the world will recognize that this same tyranny also imprisons all the good-spirited working men and women, imprisons them within the burdensome toil of wage labour!"

After the meeting Nick and Victor went out for a drink. Victor had a new fervor in his eyes, a tense glassiness. After slurping down a coffee Victor skidded the cup into the saucer, pulled the napkin from his lap and vigorously wiped his mouth. His mouth fidgeted with a few crumbs, or perhaps it was just a twitch. Nick eyed Victor with some concern. He didn’t like the look of the new streaks of grey on his temples or the dark haggard skin that hung under his eyes like tea bags.

"Vic," Nick said in a confidential tone, "how are you really doing?"

Victor sighed.

"I don’t know," He tossed the napkin on the table. There was a hurt look in his eyes. His glance crept slowly around the table. "It’s not easy. For the past three years I haven’t stayed in one place for more than a couple of months. And sometimes just when you think you’re making progress, getting workers to join up with unions and petitions, some damn cops crack down on you," Victor shook his head, "it’s not easy. Always ducking and running."

Nick thought he detected a note of self-pity in Victor’s tone, something he never felt from Victor before. Nick tried to conceal his concern. He picked up the menu,
“Let’s get some cake, OK?” Nick said. There was a lull in the conversation. Nick sipped his coffee and swirled the remnants around in the bottom of the cup, and then, staring at the coffee a thought came to him.

“I can talk to the supervisor where I work,” Nick said, “there might be something. Nobody knows you down there.”

So Nick got Victor a job at the rail yard. The supervisor assigned him to work with Nick to be an apprentice brakeman. They trained in the short runs within the train yards and the trains that rain through the industrial sectors of Ville-Marie, watching the cityscape pass by them from up on high. They would pass the factories, the buildings, etc. Nick showed Victor how to couple the cars together and all of the hand signs used to communicate with the engineers and conductors. Victor would pay attention some times, but when the boss wasn’t around he might wander off and slack. Occasionally Victor would become mad and smash the hitches together, or he would make a bitter comment. One time when they were making a short run across town, Nick said.

“Listen,” as the engine blew a distinctive whistle, a short melody composed of three notes. “That’s Mac’s unique whistle” Nick said, “When he comes riding home from a long journey he blows that whistle, his wife can hear it from her flat on Wellington street and she gets dinner going,” Nick said. Victor didn’t respond right away but stared out at the trees that passed.

“Who says the worker is alienated?” Victor said finally with a wry smile.
In the coming weeks Victor and Nick continued to attend the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee meetings. When Celestino Medeiros, a member of the infamous Morelli gang, stepped forward and confessed that he had been involved in the Braintree hold-up, instant jubilation ran through the crowd, followed quickly by guarded optimism. It was as though it took a few moments for the realities to sink in, the image of Judge Thayer and the jurors saying things like: they should hang anyway! Let the anarchist bastards fry!

Eventually Judge Thayer turned down the Medeiros motion. The case was then taken to the superior court, which also turned it down. In those months the defense committee meetings took on a somber, gloomy, and even fatalistic atmosphere. A few of the members dropped out, while others called for more job actions and petitions, and in secret backroom conversations acts of violence were discussed. Late that summer it was announced that, in spite of Sacco’s letter to the governor insisting on his innocence and pleading for a retrial in light of the Medeiros confession, Governor Fuller declared that he would not intervene in the case. The next few weeks saw mass demonstrations in cities around the world. From all corners of the globe there was a great outpouring of sympathy and a plea echoed again and again – Free Sacco and Vanzetti!

Twenty days after Governor Fuller’s refusal to intervene in the case, Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted.

A little while later Nick went to visit Victor. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon and Nick was going to the bakery. He decided to stop and say hello.
He walked in the front door, went down the hall and knocked on Victor’s door. From behind the door came a bang and scrambling sounds, then all was silent.

“Who is it?” Victor said, his voice tense.

“It’s me,” Nick said. A moment later the door swung open curtly. Victor took a good look at Nick and then relief swept over his face.

“Nick, why didn’t you say so? Come in,” he let Nick pass him and then peeked down the hallway in both directions before shutting the door.

“We have to start being more careful,” Victor said walking back into the room. Nick glanced around. The room was clean and tidy. Then Nick’s eyes suddenly fixed on a book sitting on the dresser. It was Salute in Voil Galleani’s famous bomb making manual, the same book that had gotten him banned from his aunt’s house as a child. Nick was taken aback yet somehow he was not that surprised.

“That’s right,” Victor said, noticing Nick’s preoccupation with the book. “It’s time we step up the fight” Victor said. Then Victor went into another room and came back with a box in his hands. In the box were a few sticks of dynamite, coiled wires and a couple of vials. Nick stared hard at Victor, he didn’t know what to think of this new development. Victor looked recalcitrant.

“How many more comrades will be murdered and deported?” Victor asked. “We have to do something. A week from now we will be traveling to New York, this will be our chance to attack the ruling class, right in the heart of their system.”
So that week Nick’s mind was heavy, should he go through with it? He discussed the matter with Amelia. She seemed unsurprised, and listened to the plot in a blasé manner.

“Try not to hurt any innocents,” she commented.

The freighter to New York was scheduled to leave Montreal at eight AM on Monday. Nick arrived at seven to inspect the cars. Victor ambled nonchalantly into the shop at a quarter to eight. As they were hitching up the last car to the caboose the boss came by.

“Everything in order?” he inquired sternly.

“Yes,” Nick said. The boss furrowed his brow and then said, “...we’re supposed to be in for some bad weather,” he looked down at a clipboard. There seemed to be some trouble in his mind momentarily. Then he sighed, “well nothing we can do about it. You boys behave yourselves and keep safe, you here,” he said, then marched back to his office.

The engineer hopped down from the cab. He strode towards them in a purposeful bowlegged stride, and shook their hands.

“Good ta meet ya, b’ys,” he said through a bristling silver beard.

Nick told Victor to stay on the fire car and watch for any signals from the engineer. Nick walked towards the back of the train checking the couplings of each car one last time. When he got to the last car, he made a signal to the engineer. A blast of steam shot out horizontally from the lower front part of the engine and whole train lurched into motion ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump. The train chugged through the city, along a route that passed the backs of apartment
buildings, chain link fences, and clothes flapping from clotheslines. As they reached the end of a block Nick saw a little boy and girl playing in a sandbox. The little boy gazed at the train, while the little girl pulled on his sleeve, but as the roaring engine approached them she too turned and stared. The rhythm of the pistons and driving rods seemed to transfix them, and when the whistle blew their eyes bulged with surprise and smiles lit their faces. They watched all the cars passing and when they saw Nick on the caboose they waved frantically. Nick waved back the way one waves to children in such situations, as if they were your own dear nephew or granddaughter. He thought about the bomb sitting in Victor’s satchel, and he worried. We’ll have to do this right, he thought; we’ll have to get this right.

It was an unusually warm and sunny morning for early November. The sun gleamed on passing cars. Nick decided to climb up on top of the cars. He carefully walked along the catwalks and got to the middle of the train. The sun fell gloriously on his face. He squatted down. Evergreens lightly dusted with snow sat still and calm as the train roared by. He sat like this for a while, brooding over his current situation. Victor’s head poked up from the front of the train, a big grin on his face. He climbed up and headed towards Nick. His hair and clothes flapped in the wind. The wind was so loud and strong that they didn’t bother talking. Victor took out a flask and offered it to Nick. They drank, and happily watched the landscape dash past; some of the trees here still blazed with autumnal oranges and reds while others had lost their leaves and stood barren with skeletal branches pointing to the sky.
“It’s funny,” Nick said after some time, “I’ve been in Canada eight years now and I’ve never really taken the time to explore Canada’s wilderness.” He mused, squinting, and looking out at the landscape.

“Someday,” Victor said, “everyone will be able to enjoy the wonders and beauty of nature, not just the rich.” Then he looked Nick in the eyes, “and what we’re about to do in New York will help pave the way.”

They took a few more sips and with the alcohol stirring their hearts, they sang the Internationale.

Arise ye starvlings from your slumbers
Arise ye criminals of want.
for reason in revolt now thunders…

By the time they reached the chorus they were really belting it out. When they finished the song they didn’t say anything but looked at each other. They felt proud and yet solemn. The wind began to beat harder and harder. Nick tightened his scarf and pulled his collar close around his neck.

“We better get down,” Nick said, and took one final swig, “health” he said. He got up and grabbing a handrail began to walk back to the caboose. As he climbed down the ladder he caught a glimpse of a dark cloud forming farther to the west. Soon rain drops began to sprinkle and then quickly streamed against Nick’s face as he looked out from the back of the caboose. He looked up. The dark clouds had grown and the train was heading straight into the storm. Nick went back inside, took off his jacket, pulled on a wool sweater, put
his jacket back on and slid a pair of gloves on his hands. He took a sip of coffee from a canteen and brooded. Did Victor think to bring extra clothes and gloves?

Nick stuck his head out the door and to his dismay the rain had turned to a combination of snow and ice pellets. They pricked his face like needles. A while latter the distress whistle blew.

“Shit!” Nick hissed; it was the brake signal. As soon as he started climbing the ladder the wind beat against him and seemed to try and suck him off the train, but he gripped the rail tightly and climbed up, carefully setting each foot down solidly before ascending to the next rung. He shut down the brake on the caboose and then hopped the two foot gap between the caboose and the boxcar, landed hard on the steel roof and crouched down, splaying his hands on the roof for balance. Once he regained his balance he spun the brake wheel. It screeched and squealed. When it was tight he began to advance. The wind knocked him and he tottered dangerously. He stopped immediately to regain his balance, and crouched as low as he could. Once he felt secure and steady he slowly began to advance. The engineer blew the distress signal again, the long note beginning like a moan and rising to a terrible scream. Then the two short screams. The wind and rain beat fiercely against him. Nick continued, in a crab-like crawl, along the roof towards the next car. Where was Victor? The train rattled loudly chuga-ch chuga-ch chuga-ch chuga-ch. Nick had shut down the brakes on the first two cars. Finally he saw Victor’s head and shoulders arise from the front of the train. Wisps of mist streamed through the air. All was grey for a moment. Then he saw Victor’s figure, unbalanced,
tottering, then he disappeared in a wisp of mist. Nick heard a thunk. The mist cleared and he saw Victor on his hands and knees, his jacket flapping wildly in the wind.

Again the whistle blew and Nick wondered what the hell the problem was. Some idiot’s car stalled on the tracks, or some god-damned cows passing through? Anger, fear, and adrenalin converged within Nick and he continued to crawl to the next car. Once he reached the edge, again he hopped the two foot gap between the cars and then he spun the brake wheel around and around, and as the brakes screeched he could feel the train slow slightly underneath him, but it still chugged and swayed speedily down the tracks. The mist cleared for a few seconds and Nick could see a bridge ahead, veering to the left and crossing over a gorge. Nick’s feet sloshed on the slippery floor as he scrambled towards the next car. More gusts of mist swept along the top of the train. Nick crouched low and planted his splayed hands on the roof. The ice pellets and wind lashed his cheek. As a wispy scarf of mist blew past, there was a clearing and Nick could see Victor tottering on the rattling boxcar, his arms wind-milled as he toppled over the edge of the train.

“Victor!” Nick screamed. He scurried to the edge of the car and peered down below. Through the mist Nick could see a gorge, maybe forty yards below. He couldn’t hear anything above the wind and the clanking of the train. He glared intensely down below but the fog clouded a clear view. Here and there he caught glimpses of foamy water rushing over rocks. Shocked and numb with horror, Nick lay frozen for a moment. He would have to finish
braking the rest of the train, there was no time to think, he had to move. He
crawled along moving as fast as he could, he almost didn't care if the wind
ripped him off the train and sent him spiraling into the gorge.

Nick went precariously over the wet and now icy surface of the roofs
and shut off the brakes on all the rest of the cars. As the train gradually slowed
down, heaving and chuffing, and blowing steam, Nick wondered what he should
do about the bomb in Victor's bag. God damned Victor! If he hadn't slacked
off and shirked learning the ropes...and, Jesus...the booze didn't help. Why did
he always have to be so stubborn? But then guilt welled up inside Nick and he
couldn't help feeling a harrowing sense of responsibility for what just happened.

Thoughts and strange visions swirled in his mind. He saw himself as Vanzetti
giving a speech before a huge crowd on the steps of a courthouse; he saw
himself as Karl Marx writing at a desk with sad-eyed and hungry children
underfoot; he saw himself at a foot path leading to a cottage surrounded by
flowers, a garden, and acres of woodlands, sunshine beaming from a blue sky,
and the voices of Amelia and Ruby in the garden, singing a lullaby. But then a
shadow crossed his mind; the shadow of a huge ship's mast creeping over a
dock. Bitterness flowed into his soul as he stared into the distance along the
railroad to the horizon line fringed with blue and grey sky. I have one soul to
avenge, he thought, at least one! Yes he had vengeance to exact and a point to
make, but was violence the answer? He stared hard at the horizon line. The
golden sun mesmerized him, his whole being relaxed and then crumbled. Tears
welled in his eyes as he lay prostrate on the roof.
Conclusion
All in all, we have seen simulacra as a cultural dominant, the panopticonal nature of institutionalization, the commodity aura (and its connection to otherness), and the logic of late capitalism has created, in the contemporary world, a fragmented and reified cultural atmosphere which hinders a sense of the relationship between the past and present. Moreover, this lessening of a sense of history is all too susceptible to being co-opted by forces that would favor the ruling class free market ethos.

Eagleton suggests that postmodernism has delved too deeply into the arena of late capitalist ideology, mimicking too closely the gestures and performances of pop culture and advertising driven mass media. He laments the supposed disappearance of the notion of a universal subject and suggests that postmodern culture and the broader culture of late capitalism exist in a sort of incestuous and dependent relationship. Given the deep integration between postmodernism and the broader culture, it is difficult for the former to formulate critical themes regarding society. Because advertising and the economic system are so intimately tied to the cultural-artistic realm - even though there may be many professional or amateur artists who work independently of a capitalist or mainstream ethos - the immense power of the corporate sector nevertheless coopts masses of creative workers, such as graphic designers, writers, musicians, and photographers etc., and directs their energies towards ever more fragmented and commercialized images which are disseminated and circulated within modern living environments. This has sparked a fundamental change in
subjectivity, which among other consequences, has created an attenuation of a sense of history.

Baudrillard’s analysis of images and simulacra reinforce the idea that mass media has, in the contemporary era, increasingly reified the world. Moreover, Baudrillard’s claim that the manufactured image originates from matrice memory banks and command models and as such are purely operational and often devoid of content-meaning, suggests that although the fragmented images of the postmodern cultural realm may draw upon historical traces, the overall system of simulacra is not conducive to understanding historical continuities. Additionally, Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary techniques illustrates that central to the development of modern society is the tendency both to individualize, and, paradoxically, also to create a climate of conformity to group thinking. The latter, it has been suggested, seems to have come to pass due to the increase in technologization and specialization in the work-force, which has led to increased insecurity and anxiety which have contributed to an attenuation of a sense of historical awareness.

As a means to increase profitability, a central component of post-Fordism is the imperative to speed up product life cycles. This has in turn sparked new forms of business, most notably the service sector and an array of popular cultural forms, which suggests that the reification of postmodern culture has its roots in economic imperatives, namely the profit principle.

Industrialization and the technological revolution have, according to Boym and Bongie, created new forms of nostalgia and romantic longing for the
exotic other. This phenomenon seems to suggest that the economic system of Western capitalism (which drove industrialization) shaped modern consciousness, in part, by evoking longing for a space of experience which no longer fit within the horizons of the complexities of the modern world. Thus the ideology of progress created an affective rebellion against the exigencies of the industrial revolution's spatial and temporal reorganization of the world, in the form of nostalgic longing and the romanticizing of the other. Because what mattered in the ideology of progress was "improvement in the future, not reflection on the past," (Boym 10), a feeling that one's time was unrepeatable emerged. Therefore, in the historical change of subjectivity that the ideology of progress brought about, I suggest, may be the beginnings of what today Jameson and others identify as the lessening of a sense of history.

The concept of the commodity fetish, expounded by Marx, suggests that by objectifying the labour that produces commodities, the process of commodification alienates the worker from his labour by alienating him from and his fellow workers and from the product of his labour. In like fashion, Benjamin examines the commodity aura, and expands on Marx's view of the commodity as a mysterious thing which contains the power of a religious fetish. Benjamin suggests that the mystifying and dazzling effect of the commodity can serve to mask social relations, both the relation of one individual to another, and the relation of the individual with objects. For example, the manner in which the objects in Victorian bourgeois homes connect them to the experience of orientalism and colonialism. Thus, as both Marx and Benjamin illustrate, on a
fundamental level the commodity in the modern world has had the effect of masking social relations. Furthermore, this obscuring of social relations is similar to the manner in which reified postmodern mass media negate historical continuities and as such suggests a link between the commodity aura and the prevalent ideology driving mass media, both of which mask social relations in such a way as to promote and protect the interests of capital.

In the turmoil that ensued after the break up of the Soviet economic and social system we can see another example of how the commodity aura and the code of simulacra mask social relations. In the context of post-Soviet Russia the rapid integration of a free-market ethos seemed to spark nostalgia as a sort of coping mechanism for the “economic shock therapy” (Boym 640) which ensued. Thus a form of de-ideologized and apolitical nostalgia emerged in Russia to mediate the rapid social changes brought about by the transformation of economic policy in Russia. Perhaps, due to the atrocities enacted under Stalin’s regime it is understandable that many Russians would resist revisiting aspects of their history, however it is important to note that this de-ideologized nostalgia emerged when Russia was actively moving towards a free market ethos, and within the context of a postmodern cultural realm. It is also important to note that the vast social and economic changes that happened in post-Soviet Russia inspired nostalgia not for the ideals of communism, or even a vivid portrayal of the communist past, but rather for a de-ideologized and apolitical past. Thus, we see here again another example of the combination of
postmodern culture, media, and capitalist ideology dissipating a coherent sense of working class narratives.

One potential artistic response to the problem of a dissipation of history is a type of reformulated social realism. Thus, I have written two long fictional stories, in a more or less naturalistic mode, which engage with particular moments in history. Important to both stories are real historical events, which situate the pieces within certain temporal socio-political atmospheres. Additionally, in writing the stories I have underscored the effect that the economic system bears on the characters' consciousness and identity. Thus, with my stories I have hoped to achieve a sense of historical fullness and accuracy in order to, in some small symbolic way, counteract the trend of historical dissipation through fragmentation that I identify in my theoretical section. Ultimately, my intention has been to illuminate class consciousness and to explore the effect that economic systems have on identity.


For my creative stories the following sources were consulted:


“Sacco and Vanzetti.” *Wikipedia*. 