

World War I and the Idea of Progress in Powers's Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance

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Abstract: In his article "World War I and the Idea of Progress in Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*" Karsten H. Piep reads Powers's 1985 debut novel as a critical reexamination of the dynamics and iconography of the early twentieth century that challenges the technological positivism espoused by many US neoconservatives during the 1980s, while insisting on the individual's interpretive powers to discern and release the ever present transformative potentials of history. Situating *Three Farmers* in the postmodernism debates of the 1980s, Piep argues that the novel succeeds in challenging the idea of history as linear progression, but ultimately fails to show how a critical engagement with the past might engender socially transformation action in the present

Karsten H. PIEP

World War I and the Idea of Progress in Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that the "dynamics and iconography of the Great War have proved crucial political, rhetorical, and artistic determinants on subsequent life" (*The Great War* 8). The experience of the Great War, Fussell maintains, "was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth ... It reversed the Idea of Progress" (*The Great War* 8). Written during the so-called "Reagan Revolution" Richard Powers's novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, harkens back to the memory of World War I with the aim of resuscitating the idea of progress. Not, to be sure, by participating in the revival of faith in *laissez-faire* capitalism and technological progress which had fueled the Reagan administration's conviction that "government is the problem" and beget Reaganomics, as well as the "Star Wars" initiative. Rather, before the backdrop of Reagan's pledge to restore "the great, confident roar" of US-American progress and growth, Powers embarks on an critical reexamination of the dynamics and iconography of the early twentieth century that challenged technological positivism espoused by many U.S. neo-conservatives during the 1980s while insisting on the individual's interpretive capacities to discern and release the ever present transformative potentials of history (see Reagan, "A Vital" <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/10.24.80.html>>). As much a "novel of interpretation" (O'Donnell 127) as a "revisionist novel" (Grassian 24), *Three Farmers* creates a self-consciously selective, impressionistic, and subjective history of events surrounding World War I that seeks to highlight how modern society's inherent contradictions reveal themselves in its imagery and thereby have the potential to call the beholder to action. Reflecting on the ways which the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, the US-American industrialist Henry Ford, and the German photographer August Sander were both products and shapers of their times, the novel not only challenges the idea of history as linear progression, but also summons its readers to engage the past so as to give "urgency" to the present and discern the possibilities of future actions (*Three Farmers* 304).

Three Farmers can thus be understood as a literary intervention in the postmodernism debates of the 1980s, which, according to contemporaneous observers, were, on the one hand marked by "a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the last two centuries in the idea of progress" (Lyotard 143) and on the other hand fueled by a resurgence of "the modern, technocratic worldview" that deems "science-based technologies ... a sufficient and reliable basis for progress" (Marx 38). Rejecting what Jürgen Habermas, writing in 1981, considered the neoconservative tendency to "welcome the development of modern science, as long as this only goes beyond its sphere to carry forward technical progress, capitalist growth and rational administration" (13), the novel turns to Walter Benjamin's "post-historici" writings of the 1930s in an effort to restore the "radical implications" of using art and relating aesthetic experiences to one's "own life problems." Drawing upon Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Powers's *Three Farmers* seeks to overcome mechanistic notions of historical progress by promoting an active engagement with the past that records when the present "epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one" and, "at a moment of danger," induces concrete action in the here and now (see Benjamin, "Theses" 255). Powers's *Three Farmers* summons up the faded memory of World War I at a time when President Reagan was building his Cold War rhetoric and contended that US-American technological advances were about to tip the balance in the nuclear standoff with the USSR. In a televised address on 22 November 1982, Reagan presented the nation with his high tech approach to "changing the course of human history: "What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack; that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies? I know this is a formidable technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of this century. Yet, current technology has attained a level of sophistication where it is reasonable for us to begin this effort" ("Address"

<<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/112282d.htm>>). Although met with some ridicule by pundits, Reagan's twenty-six billion dollar Ballistic Missile Defense Plan was "applauded by the trade press," and, as William E. Burrows recalls, "touched off a frenzy of activity within the industry and among a wide variety of defense-dependent research institutions" (843). Seven months later, on 25 October 1983, U.S. forces invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada in a preemptive strike against "Soviet-Cuban militarization" validating Burrows's observation that "the defense and the offense have forevermore become indistinguishable" (844).

If, as Paul Fussell contends, the "heroic idiom must be accounted as one of the main 'casualties' of modern war" ("Introduction" 24), Reagan's assertion that we "have every right to dream heroic dreams" seemed to signal the resurrection of a heroic language that romanticizes military action ("Address" <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/112282d.htm>>). Although neither the Ballistic Missile Defense Plan nor the subsequent U.S. invasion of Grenada are mentioned explicitly in *Three Farmers*, readers in the 1980s would have likely made the connection between these events and P-'s reflections on "those material motives that underwrite wars," as well as the sense of "urgen-

cy" he feels upon first encountering August Sanders's photograph of three young men about to step into the carnage of World War I (255, 301). To make these historical connections even more explicit, P- quotes Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "the destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society ... Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of 'human material, the claims to which society has denied its natural material" (255-56). World War I, *Three Farmers* underscores, provided the first, unsettling recognition of the lasting consequences of the age of mass production: "the Battle of the Frontiers had shown that something irreversible had happened to the scale of human events ... The change was everywhere- - in warfare, industry, the arts, a sudden shift into numerical modernity, a new mass scale" (126). Amidst this "quantitative change" which "had become qualitative," *Three Farmers* seeks to uphold the revolutionary potential of the arts in the age of mechanical reproduction (126). Following Benjamin's argument that the "mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art," the novel attempts to illustrate how popular and public artworks such as Sander's photographs and Rivera's murals undercut the traditional "quality of the cult image" by making themselves available to the critical reception by general audiences ("The Work of Art" 234). Thus, the critical contemplation of Sanders's and Rivera's works by lay audiences in the here and now, *Three Farmers* suggests, not only discloses the historical fallacy of a blind faith in technological progress, but also brings to the fore "image[s] of redemption" that speak to the unfulfilled promises of the past (Benjamin, "Theses" 254). "If we constantly re-form the continuity of our past with each new experience," Powers's narrator asserts optimistically, "then the message posted out of an obscure or as yet unexperienced past represents a challenge to re-form the future" (209).

For all faith in the interpretative powers of "remembering forward" (Powers qtd. in Ickstadt 2), in the end *Three Farmers* appears unable to mobilize past images of socially transformative potential against the "technocapitalist dystopia America has become" (Harris 102). Foreshadowing Laura Bodey's endeavor to stage "a consumer boycott" in Powers's 1998 novel *Gain*, which serves to illustrate "the impossibility of beating the giant corporations" (298), Peter Mays, the protagonist of one of the three interwoven stories that comprise *Three Farmer*, devices various philanthropic schemes which quickly come to naught and land him back at his editing job at a computer magazine where he must "find that nothing had changed since his departure" (351). In a feeble attempt to act upon "the message" he retrieved from his personal past that connects him with one of the subjects in Sander's photograph shot on the eve of World War I, Mays sets out to draft a general call for peace, which he intends to mass distribute to "celebrities, clergy, business contacts, even names from the phone book" through "the miracle of electronics" (351), but by two o'clock, he has gotten no further in the letter than "a few of us would like to get together and try to keep the boys out of the trenches this Christmas" (351). As this scene indicates, "posting forward" the lessons of history "to all other future moments of corresponding circumstance" is easier to accomplish in theory than in practice (209). Tellingly, in reverting back to the language ("boys") and imagery of World War I ("trenches"), Mays's peace message fails to achieve contemporary correspondence and merely recalls the failed mission of Henry Ford's "Peace Ship." Despite its promising title, "Arrival at the Dance," the novel's closing chapter seems to confirm Fredric Jameson's conclusion in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" that "the Brecht-Benjamin position which hoped for the transformation of the nascent mass-cultural techniques and channels of communication of the 1930s into an openly political art ... [does not]...address the specific conditions of our own time" (140).

Before the backdrop of impending war, the three interrelated plots of *Three Farmers* revolve around Sander's photograph of three, well-dressed German country youths, who, the novel's title suggests, are on their way to a village dance. Like Benjamin's "Angel of History," the three young farmers glance backward over their shoulders into the eye of the photographer's camera. Taken on 1 May 1914 -- about three months prior to the outbreak of World War I -- Sander's photograph arrests its subjects at the moment of stepping out of an age of horse-drawn buggies, corrals, and sabers into a world of tanks, barbed wires, and machine guns. In a comment on *Three Farmers*, Powers described the photo as an image of the "birth of the twentieth century" (Powers qtd. in Burn and Powers 169). And sure enough, in the historical comedy of circumstance that constitutes the novel's second narrative thread, the young farmers are caught up in "the storm" called "progress," which lands them not in paradise, but straight in the mechanized mass carnage of World War I.

After a series of improbable misadventures, two of the youths, Hubert and Adolphe, die before seeing combat. The third one, Peter -- depicted at the center of Sander's photo -- escapes to neutral Holland and under an assumed identity becomes a correspondent for a Dutch newspaper in Paris from whence he dispatches semi-literate war stories. Toward the end of the imaginary tale, Peter, going by the name of Theo, achieves a brief moment of fame when he is photographed alongside Henry Ford, who had just emerged from a botched peace conference in Oslo. As James Hurt observes, the story of the three farmers bears traces of Jaroslav Hasěk's 1923 novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, depicting the tragic comedy of little people and in *Three Farmers* described as "caught up in the juggernaut of World War I" (26).

The third narrative, set in 1984, features Mays, a jaded journalist in his early thirties who writes for a computer trade magazine based in Boston. The romantic plot unfolds when Mays catches a glimpse of a Sarah Bernhardt look-alike in Boston's Veteran's Day Parade and sets out to pursue this "brilliant strawberry red" (35). Instead of Bernhardt, Mays finds the sharp-witted Alison Stark, who majored in history only to find herself stuck in a dead-end job as a waitress. Alison becomes not just Mays' love interest, but also kindles his budding interest in history, which eventually leads him to the discovery of a family secret in his mother's attic. Stumbling upon the Sander photo, a newspaper clipping about Henry Ford's peace mission to Oslo, and a promissory note by the automobile czar that turns out be worthless, Mays reconstructs that he is the great-grandson of the adventurous Peter in the novel's parallel narrative. Although Mays bears a striking resemblance to the Peter in Sander's photo, his genealogical conclusion turns out to be incorrect, or, better, incongruent with the parallel unfolding plot of the second narrative. For according to this second version of the past, Mays' Dutch great-grandmother had merely flirted with the Peter in the Sander photo while being involved more seriously with other men. Finding herself pregnant and poor, Mays' great-grandmother concocted Peter's fatherhood, leaving behind photographic clues which would forever deceive her descendants who by 1960 emigrated to the United States.

The first narrative centers on the self-reflective musings of a first-person narrator who is known only as P-. Thinly plotted, it relates P-'s chance encounter with the Sander photo at the Detroit Art Institute and his ensuing quest to find a deeper meaning in the image that speaks to him with "an urgency" from the past. P- manages to uncover the "photographer's name and correct nationality, dates, location of the image -- all the facts I needed to put my obsession to rest" (301). Yet, "the facts behind the photos were not enough" and so, after some hesitation, P- visits Mrs. Schreck, an old, immigrant cleaning lady from the Netherlands, who claims to have been engaged to the young man depicted on the left of Sander's photo (301). To P-'s surprise, however, the old woman confesses that she "did not know the actual boys pictured there, but invented out of her own need a whole story likening them to herself by means of the pliable image" (305-06). As Joseph Dewey notes, "Powers refuses to validate entirely any one story" and thereby shifts the burden of interpretation squarely onto to the shoulders of his readers (21). This first narrative provides the stereoscopic view through which the novel's three interwoven narratives achieve depths. Carefully scrutinizing the Sander photo once more at Mrs. Schreck's house, P- notices that "with two slightly different views of the photo -- the essayistic and the imagined -- side-by-side, I need only the stereopticon itself to bring the image into fleshy three-dimensionality" (334). And upon leaving Mrs. Schreck's house, P- begins to see the thin film of the image spreading out in two directions, back through the past, through catastrophe, to that idyllic day that had brought the taker and subjects together, forward, far forward in time until the product of that crossed the path of one who, like me, took on the obligation of seeing" (334). This "obligation of seeing," P- underscores, rests with the viewer, who, in contemplating the photo, might either gain some insights into his "personal history of work, family and love," or attempt to "put to rest, after seventy years, the destructive residue of the Great War" (334). But, P- is quick to add, any attempt at forgetting the past and denying one's own historicity is futile, for "there is no escaping the destruction of this war" (334). Deeply imbedded in the collective unconscious, the memory of World War I, like those of other traumas, cannot be circumvented: there is only going through it, the first-person narrator insists.

What P- calls "the obligation of seeing," then, appears to be grounded in Walter Benjamin's claim that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history" so that it becomes the responsibility of present generations to redeem the unfulfilled hopes of the untold millions who were sacrificed on the altar of history in the name of a spurious concept of progress (254). Tellingly, having encountered a "mechanical reproduction" of the Sander image at the Detroit Art Institute, P- is periodically overcome by "the shame of neglect that I always feel in those dreams in which my father, who gave in to cancer when I was twenty-one, comes and sits on the end of my bed, saying, 'You've forgotten me? What do you think I am, dead?' The farmers, looking out over their right shoulders, accused me of the same crime" (78-79). Suppressed but never erased from US-America's collective memory, the World War I suddenly assumes a personal urgency for P- that compels him to interrogate the long dominant view of historical progress as a chain of causalities leading somehow naturally from one event to the next. What he discovers is that "the old model of sequential cultural progress" no longer holds, for just prior to World War I it had started to collapse onto itself (83). In the twentieth-century environment of "hyperprogress," P- identifies certain "trigger points" such as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle that "come about when the progress of a system becomes so accelerated, its tools become so adept at self-replicating and self-modifying, that it thrusts an awareness of itself onto itself and reaches the terminal of velocity self-reflection" (81). "Art that was once a product of psychological mechanism," P- notes, "is now about those mechanisms and--the ultimate trigger point--about being about them. The Industrial Revolution culminated in the computer, a machine capable of designing its own replacement" (83). He concludes that "the century has become about itself, history about history" (83). Although aware of the potential destructiveness of ever more powerful technologies, it is this parallel emerging self-reflexivity that instills P- with the conviction that old ways of

thinking can be overcome so that new ways of social action may be found in the willfully disremembered past.

Several scholars and critics commented on the novel's postmodern focus on constructivism. For example, Marco Portales reads *Three Farmers* as an expression of "postmodern, fragmented 1980's consciousness" (14) and John Clute considers the novel's "ruminativeness" as "typical ... of the postmodern era" (276). Greg Dawes, on the other hand, argues that "Powers is not jumping on the post-constructivist bandwagon of 'world as text'" for *Three Farmers* remains grounded in "objective reality" (47). In a 1998 interview with Jim Nielson, Powers himself has dismissed both "naive materialism" and "naive social constructivism" as "incomplete models of knowing" (Powers qtd. in Nielson and Powers 16). Interestingly enough, for all of P-'s postmodern reflections of the ways in which texts, authors, and readers co-construct a past that at the same time constructs them, *Three Farmers* never relinquishes its insistence on the significance of historical facts. Similar to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, *Three Farmers* relates a host of historical data, details, and events which supplement and contextualize its three narrative strands. Consequently, the novel seems to reassert the importance of historical facts while stressing that their interpretation is necessarily subjective and thus sketches out what Powers describes as "a new consensus of thought" which "reconstitutes meaning as a two-way product ... that involves both data and its narrative collaborator" (Powers qtd. Nielson and Powers 16). Adapting an approach that resembles Benjamin's materialist historiography "based on a constructive principle" (256), Powers's novel locates the possibility of progress in history, which, "brushed against its grain," reveals images and events of unrealized potential in Rivera's depictions of exploited factory workers, Sander's portrayals of marginalized groups, and Ford's ill-fated peace mission to Europe. And akin to the materialist historian in Benjamin's treatise, Powers' novel seeks to arrest these potentially liberating images and events, thereby making them available to critical reflection in the here and now.

Before P- chances upon Sander's photo while killing time at the Detroit Art Institute, he is captured by Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle. Intended as an homage to the benevolent progressivism of the Ford Motor Company and commissioned in 1932, Rivera's murals caused an instant uproar when they were unveiled: "even those who had yet visited the museum," P- relates, "found a garden variety of blasphemies in the work ... An organized outcry of radio broadcasts and written petition culminated in the *Detroit News* saying that 'the best thing to do would be to whitewash the entire work completely'" (15). "Diego," P-reflects, "had committed the principal subversive act": "he painted the spirit of Detroit in all its unretouched particulars. Strings of interchangeable human forms stroked the assembly line -- a sinuous, almost functional machine, stamping, welding, and finally producing the finished product -- an auto engine. Men in asbestos suits and goggled gas masks metamorphosed into green insects. Languorous allegorical nudes mimicked the conveyor ... Diego had painted a chapel to the ultimate social accomplishment, the assembly line" (14). Accustomed to a view from above that blots out the dehumanizing particulars of mechanical production, the good citizens of Detroit demanded that Diego's work be whitewashed lest it might compel them to self-critically reflect on the ambivalent and contradictory nature of technological progress. Of course, this was precisely what Rivera sought to achieve. Technology's impact on humanity was to be submitted to a critical eye. P-, beholding the same murals 51 years later in 1984, grasps this intuitively "viewed from inside the factory, the self-reproducing machine demanded allegiance or resentment, but denied the possibility of indifference. Technology could feed dreams of progress or kill dreams of nostalgia ... The machine was our child, defective, but with remarkable survival power" (15). Diego, P- muses later, "came, saw, and acted" (260) and through his action he altered our perception of reality "to look at a thing is already to change it. Conversely, acting must begin with the most reverent looking" (260).

The photographic work of Sander affords P- another opportunity to reflect on the self-modifying nature of observation. Haunted by the image of the three country boys, glancing backward over their right shoulders, P- immerses himself in the study of the life and work of Sander and reports his finding back to the reader: "one night in 1910, August Sander ... hit upon the idea of an epic photographic collection to be called *Man of the Twentieth Century*, a massive, comprehensive catalog of people written in the universal language -- photography" and before Sander "photographers used their machines solely to isolate beauty: upper-class portraits, vases of flowers" (39). The working class, as well as those groups that were deemed ill, insane, and disabled had thus been edited out of view. Sander, himself of humble working class origins, started to correct this picture by taking "impromptu portraits of the local population," which made him "one of the first to spread photography outside the privileged and middle classes" (40). Like Rivera, Sander sought to capture the whole of society juxtaposing photos of poor peasant children with those of upper-class schoolboys and schoolgirls. His social realism was a clear break with tradition that revealed uncomfortable truths about persistent and potentially explosive class differences in pre- and post-World War I Germany. Powers' first-person narrator notes that Sander's photographic attempt is intended "to speak the truth in all honesty about our age and the people of our age ... The nineteenth century had held to a doctrine of perfectibility. Aside from a few holdouts, most of the thinkers of the last century believed in the upward spiral of rationality,

which would at last triumph over the imperfections. Sander forsook such meliorism in favor of dispassionate observation" (44).

Sanders encyclopedic work is therefore noteworthy on two accounts, P- maintains. On the one hand, it revealed truths that mainstream society refused to see and acknowledge. And on the other, it revealed that obtaining a standpoint of objectivity and detachment is impossible. For dispassionate observation becomes instantly recognizable by the absence of the observer. Thus, Sander "blundered against and inadvertently helped uncover the principal truth of this century: viewer and viewed are fused into an indivisible whole. To see an object from a distance is already to act on it, to change is to be changed" (45-46). Power's narrator is straddling the line between fact and fiction, between materialism and social construction, between human agency and cultural determinism. Against a wave of poststructuralist thought, he maintains the scientific view that the process of knowledge-making rests on a trial by error approximation of reality "because there can be no interpretation without participation, the biographer has to be accountable to some third party that is neither commentator nor subject, independent of the system under investigation. If no such independent accountability existed, each judgment would stall in an infinite regress of self-judging. Although we cannot hope to pin down a view of our subject undisturbed by our observation, we can test if we have reached an optimal fit between the two" (207). P- locates the capacity for critical thinking and reflection in "our unusual ability to make one level of our terraced awareness double back and appraise another" (208). Conceived as an ongoing reconciliation of experience and self-awareness, critical reflection becomes the means by which we may chart out a course of action that is neither stifled by an overestimation of inherited circumstances (which results in fatalism) nor led astray by an overstatement of our own consequences (which results in hubris).

Three Farmers provides an account of Ford's peace mission to illustrate the dangers of both fatalism and hubris. One year into World War I, the automobile magnate who had achieved global fame decided to intervene and bring peace to Europe. He chartered an ocean liner, packed it full with celebrities active in the then still strong Peace Movement, and sailed to Oslo where he hoped the neutral countries would work out a peace agreement. From the start, however, the idealistic mission was met with "irony, ridicule, satire ... *The New York Herald* called the Peace Ship 'one of the cruelest jokes of the century'" P- reports (121). Under the mounting pressure of public ridicule, luminaries such as Helen Keller and Jane Addams reneged. Little was achieved in Oslo and Ford's grandiose promise to "get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas" came to naught. The ship was sunk in the court of public opinion, where fatalism won out. The Great War was seen as irreversible, unstoppable beyond the reach of counter action. Thus, the public ridicule heaped upon Ford's idealistic peace mission became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet, having "acted as a nineteenth-century leading citizen voting his conscious" (*Three Farmers* 118), the industrialist with a knack for self-aggrandizement "embodies the unsolvable paradox at the heart of modern man" (*Three Farmers* 127). A "pragmatist and idealist, inventor and reactionary, peace monger and war profiteer" (126), Ford unites within himself both the promise and the pitfalls of twentieth-century progress. Returning from Europe humiliated, Ford blamed the failure of his mission on the Jews and subsequently "waged war against the 'Hebrew network'" (126). And following the U.S.'s entry in the war, Ford became "one of the country's most committed armorers" and P- detects "frustrated narcissism" behind Ford's reversal (126). As Flora Valadié argues, P-'s account of the failure of the Peace Ship defies a "conception of history, in which great men hold sway over the masses and shape the course of history thanks to their individual genius and charisma" (<<https://transatlantica.revues.org/4642>>). But it also underscores how a general lack of public imagination forestalled the possibility of taking collective action to change the course of history by peaceful means. On 2 April 1917 President Woodrow Wilson, whose reelection campaign had been built around slogans to avoid war, asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany.

To P- Rivera's colorful murals and Sander's black-and-white photo constitute "a call to action," yet it remains unclear what kind of action he is ultimately willing and prepared to take (209). Despite his insights about the structure and workings of his consciousness, P- does not appear to change much. In the end, he seems to be the same self-reflective introvert, who at the beginning of the book, seeks to avoid social gatherings, does not care about economics, and accepts pay cuts without protest. Interestingly enough, it is not the philosopher P-, but the decidedly un-self-reflective journalist Mays who undergoes the most noticeable change in *Three Farmers*. Through his relationship with the headstrong Alison Stark, Mays not only develops a keen interest in his personal history, but also becomes enthralled by a one-woman play with the suggestive title, taken from an Emily Dickenson poem "I Dwell in Possibilities" that reenacts the history of US-American feminism through historical figures ranging from Elizabeth Cathy Stanton to Sylvia Plath. When Mays comes across an image of Ford's Peace Ship during his genealogical research, he suddenly "remembered and that memory imitated his plans for philanthropy" (325). In his mind, Mays devises a scheme for a subscription-based "No Overheads Restaurant" and although doubtful about the feasibility of his plan: "the more he looked at the photo of the industrialist on the dock in front of his ludicrous Peace Ship, and the more he thought of those lost farmers walking along a muddy road toward disaster producing someone as ludicrous as he,

the more his chest and throat informed him of how much more ludicrous, desirable, and necessary hope was than the press made out" (325).

Here, then, in the figure of Mays who has been transformed from a jaded, borderline misogynistic trade magazine writer into an idealistic would-be philanthropist with budding feminist leanings, Powers comes closest to offering his readers an illustration of how memory "is not only a backward retrieval of a vanished, but also a posting forward, at the remembered instant, to all other future moments of corresponding circumstance" (209). Ultimately, however, what Dawes describes as "Powers's objective ... to question dominant ideas about socio-economic progress and to suggest radical alternatives to these developmental patterns" (43) appears to collapse under the weight of its own ambitions. For while the novel describes Sander's photographic reproductions as "supreme acts of subversion" (42) it seems unable to translate this subversiveness into the present. Similar to Habermas's "Modernity versus Postmodernity" which provides the example of "a group of politically motivated, knowledge-hungry workers in 1937 in Berlin" to illustrate how a critical engagement with art can "illuminate a life-historical situation [that] is related to life problems" (12), Powers's *Three Farmers* evokes the radicalism of the 1930s for which it can find no clear correspondences in the present.

Through P-'s ruminations, *Three Farmers* alludes to Benjamin's "state of emergency" which impresses upon the proletariat the need to act collectively, but then fails to detect a "trigger point" that might affect such a revolution in the here and now. In the two framing narratives set in the 1980s, the class struggles invoked by Benjamin and made transparent by Rivera's murals are muted, if not altogether absent. In the novel's opening chapter, P- demurely accepts a pay-cut and Mays's attempt "to find the urgent memory that the past posted forward to him," lands him back at his old job at *Micro Monthly News*, where his boss admonishes him "to report [his] vacation days before taking them next time" (351). Having played with a variety of a potentially libidinal "ways of receiving and relating to art," the novel adopts an apolitical postmodern stance that "the century has become about itself, history about history" and engages in circular self-reflections whose transformative potentials peter out until readers are left with Mays's mildly subversive narrative that culminates in a reader-directed reiteration of the obligation to lend a hand to "that most elusive, universal, persistent quantity ... the Other Fellow" (352). While *Three Farmers* refuses to give up "modernity and its project as a lost cause" (Habermas 13), it falls short of "a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages" (Habermas 13).

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