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Internationalism after Internationalism: Response to Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*

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Who remembers Peter Petroff? From his birth sometime around 1884, Petroff fomented socialist revolution across Europe and Eurasia, eventually rising to important positions with the diplomatic service of the young Soviet Union. But now Petroff is largely forgotten, his memoir unpublished, and the story of his life still needs to be cobbled together from a handful of print and online sources.[1] But in a moment when socialist parties may once again be on the rise, Petroff's life and work can teach us a thing or two about the value and limitations of modernist internationalism. It was Petroff who, in the midst of the Great War, affirmed that the business of socialism was the "gaining of liberties for the proletariat no matter to which nationality they may belong."[2] And it was Petroff who nevertheless found himself constantly at the sharp end of state power, repeatedly imprisoned by the governments he opposed and eventually exiled from every one of his political homes.

It's with the commitments and struggles of this obscure internationalist, then, that I'll begin my response to Aarthi Vadde's wonderful new book, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016.* My goal is to ask how Vadde's

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1 The biographical sketch that follows synthesizes information drawn from three sources: First, Ted Crawford's biography of Petroff at the *Marxists Internet Archive*. Accessed August 15, 2018. https://www.marxists.org/archive/petroff/biography.htm. Second, the entry on Petroff in William Knox, *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918–1939: A Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1984). And third, the "Biographical/Historical Note" included in the online finding aid to the Peter Petroff Papers, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam. Accessed August 15, 2018. https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/ARCH04330/ArchiveContentAndStructure. As Crawford notes, there exists no complete biography of Petroff's life and activities. The IISH archivists suggest that existing biographies depend on Petroff's self-representation in a climate he himself describes as marked by "systematic falsification and the manufacturing of faked revolutionary pedigrees."

2 Peter Petroff, "Rebuilding the International," *The Vanguard* 4 (1915). Accessed August 15, 2018. https://www.marxists.org/archive/petroff/1915/rebuild-international.htm.

broad cultural and historical conjectures look different when examined from Petroff's perspective. Although it makes space for international institutions such as the League of Nations, United Nations, and European Union, *Chimeras of Form* is silent about the left-wing Internationals—especially the Second International (1899–1914) and Comintern (1919–1943)—that embodied arguably the major institutional and ideological forums for cosmopolitical activity during the first half of the twentieth century.

There are some good reasons for this omission. Most particularly, as a study of anti-colonial internationalism "beyond Europe," *Chimeras of Form* quite properly weights its analysis toward the years after World War II, when decolonization became an established fact and a new spirit of internationalism began to inspire the struggle to create new political communities along lines other than those worked out in Westphalia. As she herself puts it, Vadde's subject is "a modernism of colonized and minoritized writers who found themselves unable to follow the party lines of liberal or socialists, nationalist or anti-nationalist internationalisms."[3] Moreover, even the pre–World War II chapters of *Chimeras* are focused on Indian and Irish struggles against British imperialism rather than on anti-capitalism writ large—and, of course, neither Rabindranath Tagore (the subject of a brilliant first chapter on self-translation) nor James Joyce (at the center of the second chapter) were revolutionary communists.

If I begin with Peter Petroff, then it's not to correct the historical record sketched by *Chimeras* so much as to augment it. More than that, it's to expand Vadde's account of modernist-era internationalism by engaging with one of her most compelling lines of inquiry: Are literary critics right to attribute political agency to modernist novels—and to novels in general? What kind of agency inheres within modernist formal practices that seem inimical to the idea of national traditions, national languages, or their imperial extension beyond national borders?

So who was Peter Petroff and what can we learn from him? Born into a Jewish family in Ostropol, Ukraine, the young Petroff trained as a carpenter but soon gravitated toward radical politics, becoming involved with the outlawed Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party by the time he was sixteen or seventeen. A party organizer during the revolution of 1905, he is said to have led an uprising among a socialist faction within the imperial army, as a result of which he was injured and imprisoned, perhaps in Siberia. By 1907, he had managed to escape the czar's prisons and make his way through Switzerland (and possibly Austria) to Britain. Arriving in London, he traveled to Scotland, then a hotbed of labor radicalism, where he became the sometime houseguest and longtime collaborator of the Glasgow agitator John Maclean—the man later appointed by Lenin as the first and only Soviet pro-consul to Scotland. Under Maclean's tutelage, Petroff learned English and began writing and speaking on behalf of the British Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Moving back to London, where he lived in the northwest London neighborhoods that are the subject of Vadde's chapter on Zadie Smith, he also began working for the Social Democratic Party of Germany—the home country of his lover, Irma Gellrich, whom he met in England and who would remain his lifelong partner and collaborator.

3 Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 231.

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With the collapse of the SDF in 1911, Petroff joined Maclean as a founding member of the new British Socialist Party (BSP). During World War I, however, he became a prominent critic of the BSP's leadership, which he felt to be compromised by nationalist sympathies. Eventually, Petroff and Gellrich's antiwar militancy led them to be interned by the British government as undesirable aliens until, with the victory of the Bolshevik forces in October 1917, they were deported to Russia at the request of Leon Trotsky. There, Petroff was soon in the thick of post-revolutionary politics. He took part in the Soviet-German peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, served in the Red Army during the Russian civil war, and was eventually appointed vice commissar of foreign affairs.

Having so far bounced back and forth between Russia and Britain, Petroff's next stop was Gellrich's native Germany. In 1921, he was posted to the Soviet embassy in Berlin, with responsibility for building links between the USSR and left political parties in the Weimar Republic. While he was in Germany, he received warning that he was in danger of denunciation and prosecution as a supporter of Trotsky. Eventually, with Stalin's rise to power, Petroff renounced Bolshevism, left the diplomatic service, and went into exile in Germany. There, Petroff and Gellrich remained active participants in left politics until 1933, when, with the assistance of Sylvia Pankhurst, they fled persecution by the Nazis and returned, for a final time, to London. In exile once again, Petroff and Gellrich coauthored an analysis of Hitler's political triumph, *The Causes of the Breakdown of the German Republic*, which was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in 1934. For the rest of his life, Petroff taught for the National Council of Labor Colleges and wrote about Russia and Germany for Labour Party and trades union papers in the United Kingdom. By the time of his death in 1947, his descent into obscurity had already begun, with his passing noticed by a mere one-line obituary in the 1948 Labour Party conference program.

Petroff's political life is too complicated to reduce to any one lesson or principle. Still, for the reader of *Chimeras of Form*, the standout quality of his life must be his commitment to internationalism. Born to a diasporic people in a multi-ethnic empire, Petroff married a citizen of yet another nation and had deep personal experience with working peoples' lives in five national cultures and three different imperial states. Above all, he consistently advocated for a political worldview in which these diverse peoples were bound together by their common structural relation to the capitalist mode of production. In this context, perhaps the key tragedy of his long career was the collapse of the Second International in 1914, when most of the socialist parties of the belligerent European powers abandoned the principles outlined in the 1912 manifesto of the International Socialist Congress and voted to support military action and war budgets.[4] For Petroff, this represented more than a great betrayal of Marxist theory; it had immediate and far-reaching practical consequences. On the western and eastern fronts, he wrote in an essay titled "The Breakdown of the International," "millions of

4 In France, the assassination of the antiwar socialist leader Jean Jaurès led to broad left support for a patriotic antistrike policy; in Belgium, Britain, and Germany, the main socialist and social democratic parties voted in favor of war credits to fund military action; in Austro-Hungary, the socialists agitated in favor of war. Only the British Independent Labour Party, the Serbian Social Democrats, and the Russian Bolshevik and Menshevik parties maintained their commitments to the Second International. For a fuller history, see James Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (London: Routledge, 1974).

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proletarians [were] murdering each other in the battlefield," egged on by erstwhile radical leaders now "preaching the gospel of hatred."[5] The anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist energies of the last decades had been squandered, their momentum redirected outward to a spurious foreign enemy. Rather than serving as a bulwark against imperialism and militarism, the Second International broke apart like a fissiparous atom.

For Petroff, writing in December 1915, the only thing deader than the Second International was the utopian dream that internationalist values or modes of organization might be imposed from above: "How," he asked readers of *The Vanguard*, "can the foreign policy, say, of [Britain], be transformed either by confessions of Socialist faith or the establishment of a Central Committee independent of national frontiers, when the power of government and all the institutions are controlled by the reactionary Liberal and Tory organisations?"[6] What the world needed instead was political action that was internationally coordinated but nationally focused:

> The working class with a common programme must fight in their respective countries for the termination of the war and the sweeping out of power of those responsible for it. That means also the restoration of the political liberties possessed by the workers before the war, and their extension in such a way as to assist the working class in its struggle for emancipation.[7]

But, alas, Peter Petroff had not long to contribute toward that struggle in Britain. Only weeks after these words appeared in *The Vanguard*, he and Irma Gellrich were interned and subsequently deported.

The crisis of the Second International has much to teach us about how hard it is to act upon internationalist values in a world in which popular sovereignty is still identified with national states, and in which political parties must appeal for support and legitimacy to restricted and unevenly enfranchised citizen bodies. The question of modernist internationalism is not only—or ever—a matter of how we think or express ourselves. The socialist internationalism espoused by Petroff failed to carry the day in 1914–1918 for many reasons, but mostly because there existed no sufficiently powerful or legitimate institutional force—no European party or union, multitude or mob—sufficient to overcome the entrenched power of national states. There's plenty of class-related hypocrisy at work in this: as Petroff himself points out, countries such as Britain and Germany have long been in the business of exporting capital across national borders, often to the disadvantage of their own working classes.[8] Yet, as an internationalist with no illusions, Petroff knows that cosmopolitical struggle takes place in a material context dominated by national institutions of an unevenly developed character.

The fact that internationalists like Petroff had to play on the terrain of national states gives their cosmopolitan commitments an inherently oppositional character.

5 Peter Petroff, "The Breakdown of the International," *The Vanguard* 3 (1915). Accessed August 15, 2018. https://www.marxists.org/archive/petroff/1915/breakdown-international.htm.
6 Petroff, "Rebuilding the International."
7 Ibid.
8 Peter Petroff, "The Breakdown of the International."

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This is important in Vadde's book, too, in which all the key literary figures pit themselves against national insularity, as well as against forms of globalization that would supplant national difference with a homogenizing empire of the same. The keynote here, as in many parts of the book, is provided by Tagore, whose 1930 debate with H. G. Wells reveals his commitment to the—great phrase, this—"ambiguous universal" of a " 'common language' that 'would probably not exclude national languages.'"[9] Petroff's example teaches us about the necessity of fighting for internationalist values from within the national state. Similarly, Tagore's practices of self-translation and anthologization show how a "stringent antinationalism" may be consistent with the defense, in the name of Indian anticolonial struggle, of political sovereignty and "national community."[10] Throughout her book, Vadde insists on the dialectical—or, as she would put it, *chimeric*—qualities of modernist internationalism. Thus, Tagore's support for Indian self-determination depends on the belief that "assuming the mantle of the nation-state without an understanding of international interdependence would never amount to more than a capitulation to the most destructive forces of modernity."[11] Joyce, meanwhile, gives us the ability to think of internationalism as far more than a perennially unachievable commitment to love strangers as much as ourselves but as "an internally combative and competitive discourse" in which tensions between self and other, near and far, "rarely resolve themselves."[12]

In short, there's common ground between Peter Petroff's militancy and the kinds of modernist poetics encountered by a reader of Joyce or Tagore. But as her title clearly suggests, Vadde's focus in *Chimeras of Form* is not on politics as such but on the way political possibilities and impossibilities emerge as a kind of literariness. The key idea here is the notion of the *chimera*, which evokes different sorts of fantastic object: a monstrous hybrid out of Greek mythology, an illusory dream, an organic product of distinct genotypes. As a formal concept, the chimera names "a site where the line between possibility and impossibility is under dispute."[13] Translated into the formal idiom of literary criticism, this definition maps nicely on to the central aesthetic terms of Vadde's body chapters, each of which considers the productively monstrous relation between two or more discrepant kinds of writing and thinking. For Tagore, as we have seen, the relevant chimeric entanglement concerns values of translatability and illegibility; for Joyce, it's the oxymoronic method of disproportionate comparison; for George Lamming and Claude McKay, chimeric form is embodied in the idea of plotless stories; for Michael Ondaatje, it's the tension between archive and memory; and in Zadie Smith's fictions of multiethnic London life, it's the possibility that there exist narrative "parts that at times need to be understood as wholes" (187).[14] Chimeric forms are non-unitary. They tend toward fragmentation

9 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 38.
10 Ibid., 43.
11 Ibid., 57.
12 Ibid., 75.
13 Ibid., 3.
14 Ibid., 187.

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rather than unification. The aesthetic forces they unleash are centrifugal, not centripetal. They are, in short, modernist.[15]

But when Vadde talks about "the line between possibility and impossibility," she invokes something more than aesthetics—or, rather, something to which literature gives us access but which, she trusts, exceeds the literary in any narrow sense. Chimeric forms, Vadde argues, allow artists to question how aesthetic principles such as "originality, wholeness, cohesion, and autonomy" might function "as measures of the identity and health of communities, particularly national ones."[16] They do this because they activate the sense of utopian possibility (in the 1980s, they'd have said "[im]possibility") implicit within the idea of communion across cultures and borders. In a brief but important section of her introductory chapter, Vadde explains how scholars such as Bruce Robbins have attempted to rehabilitate internationalist thought as something more than "an infinitely deferred ideal of ultimate justice for all."[17] Against this, Vadde argues that modernist fiction goes beyond "the opposition between the idealism of the [internationalist] concept and the reality of the lived situations in which it functions."[18] Chimeric forms reveal to us that the fracture between nations is also the point at which those communities join. In this way, they possess a liberatory energy that resists translation into the language of political realism.

The danger of this position is that it exaggerates the ability of literary acts to conjoin or cross over the borders between nations—borders at which migrants are turned back and children taken from their parents. Acutely aware of this danger, Vadde explains early on that she is "not claiming that poetic inventiveness can directly change the circumstances of political reality."[19] And she concludes *Chimeras of Form* by arguing that modernist art wrestles with, rather than aggrandizes, its capacity to work on and in the world.[20] Chimeric artworks "cannot solve problems of policy," she writes; they "exert agency by being propaedeutic," which is to say that they offer readers "preliminary instruction in discerning the power dynamics, social struggles, and intellectual impasses of modernity as a globalizing force."[21] In this way, the chimeric monstrosity of modernist internationalism owns a pedagogical, rather than revolutionary, character. A novel such as Lamming's *The Emigrants* or Smith's *NW* doesn't just confuse or delight—but nor does it transform or redeem lived experience.

15 Vadde's account of modernism continues the decolonization of that literary field while remaining traditional in its emphasis on formal innovation and incongruity. A book that begins with Tagore and ends with Smith does indeed "stretch the usual parameters of canonical modernism" (7). And yet readers of Hugh Kenner or Richard Ellmann would recognize Vadde's assertion that those authors "are accurately called modernist because they do not look of literature to overcome the real illegibilities, distortions, and affective conflicts that pervade attempts to think through collectivity … [but] allow those irregularities room to flourish" (7). Lest the reader think I'm being critical in saying this, I'll note here that much work on literary modernism shares this same aspect. There's no properly literary account of modernism that doesn't foreground the (admittedly relative and subjective) dimension of formal innovation and generic non-identity.

16 Ibid., 8.

17 Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 7. Quoted in Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 3.

18 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 4.

19 Ibid., 3.

20 Ibid., 222.

21 Ibid., 230.

By refusing the lie of national autonomy or autochthony, such literature provides us with new "standards of judgment" through which to understand the meanings of the lives we live between and beyond national cultures.[22]

A Petrovian question still tugs at me, though: Although Vadde's theory of internationalism claims to merely maintain the tension between border-crossing dream and bordered reality, it really tends to subsume the latter within the former. A fighter like Petroff experienced the contradiction between socialism's national realities and internationalist aspirations as an intolerable affront. Internationalism didn't emerge out of the clash between working-class solidarity and national sovereignty; it had to be fought for via revolutionary political combat with the ruling classes of whichever national state one found oneself imprisoned within. By contrast, in Vadde's supple and compelling aesthetic theory, the conflict between internationalist aspiration and national circumstance itself produces a kind of sublime negativity, in which "the internal conflicts" between peoples and states lead authors "away from organized politics" and toward "social scenes of impracticality, failed aspiration, and ambiguous agency."[23]

The shift, in that last sentence, from the language of party politics to the ambiguous grounds of the social is an important aspect of *Chimeras of Form*, which—though Vadde doesn't describe it this way—shows how minoritized and postcolonial authors, suspicious of "authoritative ways of knowing" like Petroff's own Marxism, find ways of acting politically by other means.[24] Chimeric forms graft art and politics together, but the nature of that graft can be described in more than one way. For a capital-I internationalist such as Petroff, maintaining the tension between nation and cosmopolis would count as an historic defeat; for postcolonial writers struggling with Western imperialism on the one hand, and insular nationalisms on the other, that tension represents the only way of moving, however ambivalently, from where we are to where we might want to be. In that partial but very real sense, *Chimeras of Form* describes internationalism after Internationalism.

22 Ibid., 4.
23 Ibid., 231.
24 Ibid.

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