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An Interpretation of the Apostate from the Perspective of Schizoanalysis

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Abstract. In Jack London's short story The Apostate, Jack London portrays the protagonist Johnny's escape as both a critique of Western capitalist society and an expression of concern for the working class. Read through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the molar line, molecular line, and line of flight, Johnny's trajectory reveals his refusal to remain confined within the factory's rigid order, his oscillation between labor and desire, and his eventual break from the codes regulating individual life under early twentieth-century capitalism. In his reflection, he oscillates between continuing labor and seeking release, with the molecular line repeatedly surfacing in his consciousness. In an effort to resist the inhumane suffering imposed on laborers by economic deterritorialization, he ultimately disregards his mother's advice and starts a journey without destination. Through this line of flight, he breaks through the codes and constraints that early twentieth-century Western capitalist society imposes on the circulation of individual life, thereby revealing the possibility of new modes of existence within capitalism and suggesting the fluidity of desire.

Keywords: Jack London, The Apostate, deterritorialization, the molar line, the line of flight

1. Introduction

One of Jack London's best short stories surpassing "his novels and fantasies in literary power", *The Apostate* (1906) relates the day-to-day miserable life of a boy called Johnny [1]. At the age of seven, Johnny starts working round the clock in factories to feed his family. One day, he begins to engage in an inner struggle as to whether to continue the laborious drudgery or break free of the hopeless situation because he can no longer tolerate the dreadful ordeal that has lasted about ten years. Finally, he rescues himself from being oppressed as a lower-class worker and leaves home without a specific destination.

Although much ink has been spilled on Jack London's longer works, such as *The Call of the Wild* and *The Iron Heel*, previous research on *The Apostate* is relatively limited. Most critics tend to make a passing reference to it when commenting on the relations between Jack London and his viewpoints on social problems. For instance, James Tuttletown regards the story as one of "the works that purvey a Marxian view of existence" [2]. Kolson Schlosser takes a step further by pointing out that *The Apostate* reflects "London's Spencerian mechanism for bringing about the socialist revolution" [3]. Richard Etulain connects the story with London's life experience and believes that London "stressed the poverty and the adventures of his formative years" [4]. Regarding the economic sphere,

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Jonah Raskin states that *The Apostate* demonstrates "London's idea of a narrative about a slave who liberates himself" from capitalism, "an economic system that enslaved workers" [5]. In the context of parables, Donald Pizer reads the story as a hint that "when London wrote consciously in the parable form ... he sacrificed power for ideological obviousness" [6].

Nevertheless, there are still a handful of in-depth discussions on *The Apostate*. Jay Williams examines several favorable factors contributing to the creation of *The Apostate*, contending that it reveals the true meaning of the Machine Age and that "bohemianism is the solution" to child labor [7]. Revolving around the concept of efficiency, James Dorson declares that in *The Apostate*, London "proposes a solution that hints at his alternative organizing vision for industrial capitalism" [8]. However, Johnny's transformation from a meek worker to a rebellious runaway has not been studied in detail. This essay argues that the three distinct phases of Johnny's life, namely, his horrible experience as a child laborer, his inner struggles, and his ultimate runaway, can be better explained through the lens of molar lines, molecular lines, and lines of flight, which are three significant concepts explicated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Johnny's rich working experience in various factories reflects the impact of the deterritorialization in the economic sense on the twentieth-century American working class. His eventual escape may be interpreted as a valiant, if not successful, attempt to rebel against the economic deterritorialization.

2. Results

2.1. The molar line

Born and bred in factories, Johnny is so familiar with machines that "there had never been a time when he had not been in an intimate relationship with machines" [9]. He starts stepping into mills as a child laborer when he is seven, and during his career, he changes jobs several times. In jute mills, he undertakes the first job of winding bobbins. After only one year, he switches to another mill where he uses a stick to guide a stream of cloth. The glass factory is the third place that embraces him as a worker tying glass stoppers. After returning to the jute mills, he has his fourth and fifth jobs, which are starching and looming. Various as these jobs are, they all share one commonality, that is, the rigid segmentation. No matter in the mills or factories, Johnny is habituated to working in a fixed place. In his second job, he "sat always in the one place" [9]. In jute mills, "he took his place in one of many long rows of machines" [9]. Working on starchers and looms also requires him to stay in a particular place for a long time, not to mention that there is a separate room reserved only for the looms. On the other hand, the overseers and superintendents walk around the factories while keeping "a threatening eye" on workers "from a distance" [9]. One of the overseers catches "Johnny's neighbour at the trick" and even comes to hit him on side of head [9]. "For Deleuze and Guattari, 'segmentarity' is a basic feature of social life but exhibits far more complexity than we conventionally think: there are spatial segments—dwellings, territories, public and private domains" [10]. In factories, the rigid spatial segregation between the working class and the ruling class is not only shown by Johnny's forced workplaces but also demonstrated by the fact that the sound of abusive yells by Johnny's neighbour "did not carry half a dozen feet, the roaring of the room holding it in and containing it like a wall" [9]. As a political instrument of a specific type of power, space has been employed to convey the distance between classes. At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, "children from families at the lower end of the class spectrum were frequently employed, whereas the concern about idle youths did not appear to be one shared by the upper classes" [11]. Johnny and his neighbour child laborers are members of employed children, who are "daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, in the individual

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bourgeois manufacturer himself" [12]. The molar lines of rigid segmentation "stems from binary machines, which are necessarily very diverse" such as "the binary machines of social classes ... ages (child/adult)" [13]. Struggling under the binary machines of classes and ages that are relentlessly operating, Johnny has been eking out an existence composed of an endless flow of linear segments during his first phase of life, just as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, "not only are the great molar aggregates segmented (States, institutions, classes), but so are people as elements of an aggregate" [14].

Influenced by his mother working in mills, Johnny is naturally prone to traveling the path of a worker. Indeed, divided by a crystal-clear break, his childhood ends as a segment, and the next segment is his new working career as a child laborer. In this stage of Johnny's life, "there is a line of rigid segmentarity on which everything seems calculable and foreseen, the beginning and end of a segment, the passage from one segment to another" [14]. Between his first day as a worker and his first day plagued by internal conflicts, his life is rife with frequent repetitions. Before entering the gate of factories, he always looks at the morning sky and then turns his back on it. When in factories, he invariably works like an accurate machine and an indefatigable beast, with his hands moving countless times in the same manner. The set pattern of getting on and off work and its ensuing monotony remain unbroken for ten years or so. As a consequence, in Johnny's view, "all days were alike. Yesterday or last year were the same as a thousand years — or a minute" [9]. Although he has "a way of accepting things", he still feels his life energy sapping from the bottom of his heart and seems to lose the battle against it [9]. Over time, he grows grumpier towards his family members, and his mind runs slower. He does not even realize that his mother cooks "floating island", a dish he has always dreamed of but never got to eat. "There was no joyousness in life for him ... his consciousness was machine consciousness. Outside this his mind was a blank" [9]. "The molar or rigid line of segmentarity; in no sense is it dead, for it occupies and pervades our life, and always seems to prevail in the end" [14]. The representations of molar lines are particularly salient in the first phase of Johnny's life, and they would continue presenting themselves if Johnny did not quit working. Being positioned at the bottom of the capitalist factory system, Johnny is forced to experience the rigid segmentation in a spatial form and falls victim to it at the cost of his health and teenagehood because being a laborer free of any master or lord means that he has no alternative but to sell himself "for wages in order to survive" [15]. Furthermore, he is living in a country where capitalism has already formed "when the flow of unqualified wealth encounters the flow of unqualified labor and conjugates with it" [14]. In this light, the suffering of Johnny is a miniature of that of the working class, who earn their living by working in different factories, or rather, places that constantly witness the deterritorializing forces interacting with capital and labor.

2.2. The molecular line

Although he has received preferential treatment for his high efficiency at work, Johnny can no longer bear the awful cruelties in factories. After eating the "floating island" wearily and mechanically on a late-spring evening, Johnny is suddenly knocked down by a severe attack of flu. What comes together with the sickness is his internal struggles arising from his subconscious contemplation on the meaning of work. On the first day of illness, "he was aware of a rising, swelling something inside his head that made his brain thick and fuzzy" [9]. At first glance, "a rising, swelling something his head" seems to be mere indications of the flu since a splitting headache is one of the common symptoms of the disease. However, Johnny's doings after his recovery suggest that what fills his head is his innermost pondering over the pros and cons of continuing to work. Away from the factory, which stands as testimony to the molar lines, Johnny

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starts a profound meditation at home on the first day of recovery. Different from the past, he adopts an aloof attitude towards his mother and the foreman of the loom room. In addition, he calculates the total number of physical movements he has made in mills and factories for the first time in his life. Beneath the molar line "lies another line, a supple line of molecular segmentarity, where imperceptible micro-transformations are constantly occurring, moving in all directions, some of which sometimes contribute to a major life-transformation" [15]. Johnny's perceptible changes are the results of the work-related poignancy that has been replaced by numbness long before the infection, just as the narrator observes, "deep down in the crypts of his mind, unknown to him, were being weighed and sifted every hour of his toil, every movement of his hands, every twitch of his muscles, and preparations were making for a future course of action that would amaze him and all his little world" [9].

It is worth noticing that Johnny takes the calculation seriously and does it more than once. He first does mental arithmetic with his lips moving. The next day, he calculates numbers in dead earnest with pencil and paper. To ensure the precision of his calculations, he even asks his brother Will, against whom he harbors intense resentment, about the method of counting numbers bigger than a million. The amount of energy he channels into calculating reveals that he is undecided about whether or not to quit his job. "There is no question that the two lines are constantly interfering, reacting upon each other, introducing into each other either a current of suppleness or a point of rigidity" [14]. Torn between the two options, which respectively lean towards the molar line and the molecular line, "throughout the week he seemed lost in a great communion with himself" [9]. It is not until the following Monday that he announces to his mother his decision to work. His hesitation generates the time interval between the first day of recuperation and the announcement, which may be interpreted as the consequence of the interference and entwinement between the two lines. What's more, when Johnny contracts the flu, "in his head began the shrieking, pounding, crashing, roaring of a million looms. All space was filled with flying shuttles. They darted in and out, intricately, amongst the stars ... his brain unwound, faster and faster, and became the thread that fed the thousand flying shuttles" [9]. On the surface, what Johnny is experiencing authentically manifests the severity of his condition. However, a closer examination may expose that the "thread" in his hallucination carries an allusive tone as it denotes a long thin line of something. Considering his extensive experience in factories, the "thread" may be interpreted as an incarnation of the molar line of rigid segmentation. Accordingly, the process by which the brain deforms into a thread is allusive to the destructive effect of economic deterritorialization on the working class's mental health. Also, it may serve as an insinuative prelude to the following bitter inner conflicts. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the molecular line is "made of silences, allusions, and hasty innuendos inviting interpretation" [14]. During the second phase of Johnny's life, the molecular line is manifested not only by the silences of Johnny's brooding but also by the "thread" in his hallucination.

2.3. The line of flight

Johnny's third stage of life starts when he concludes his two-week-long inner struggles with his conversation with his mother. In the early morning of the day when he is supposed to return to work, he refuses his mother's usual routine to wake him up. Instead, he only responds that he will not get up in a strange and passionless voice. After sleeping for another few hours, he notifies his mother that he is going away from home. "The molecular line is likely to generate the lines of flight. It may also retreat to the level of molar lines at any time" [16]. At this moment of notification, it can be clearly seen that the molecular line, which is conspicuous in the second phase of Johnny's life, begins to fade and a line of flight is touched upon by him without reserve. Johnny's deviant answers

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to his mother's questions create an explosive situation during their conversation. Just as Deleuze and Guattari state, the line of flight "no longer tolerates segments; rather, it is like an exploding of the two segmentary series" [14]. When asked about the destination of his runaway, Johnny answers that he does not know where he will go and that it can be anywhere. Still dominated by "the religion of wage labor", which is an exhibition of molar lines, Johnny's mother fails to comprehend the implication of this answer [3]. Therefore, she further asks how he intends to deal with his present job. To her utter surprise, he replies with absolute certainty that he is "never goin' to work again" [9]. If his answer to the first "where" question is barely regarded as a casual response, then the following answer to the "how" question displays that he has taken a firm stand on breaking away from working. In fact, he has emphasized that he will not get up before the conversation starts. Deterritorialization "is the operation of the line of flight" [14]. Johnny's determination to forever sever from his past life as a child laborer shows his burning wish to free himself from the miseries caused by the economic deterritorialization. Just like the line of flight that "crosses specific boundaries to arrive at a previously unknown destination", Johnny plans to embark on a journey without a specific destination [17]. He randomly sneaks on a freight train stopping at a railway station that he accidentally passes by when wandering around the countryside. By refusing to be hired as a worker anymore, he eliminates, as much as possible, the possibility of being embroiled in the economic reterritorialization again.

When hearing Johnny's decision to quit his job, Johnny's mother cries and stops him from talking further. The reason is that "what he had said was blasphemy to her. As a mother who hears her child deny God, was Johnny's mother shocked by his words" [9]. "It is most frequently the case that a single group or individual functions as a line of flight; that group or individual creates the line rather than following it, is itself the living weapon it forges rather than stealing one" [14]. As an individual who has the courage to challenge the established social norms of wage labor, Johnny himself rebels as a living weapon through his words and actions, which is probably a rarity at his time since his mother quavers and weeps with shock. The fear of Johnny's mother comes from not only his abnormality in her view but also the possible danger arising from the line of flight, which is "very dangerous for societies, although they can get by without them, and sometimes manage to keep them to a minimum" [14]. After all, most people do not constitute a threat to society as they are meekly exploited by factories all their life because of ignorance, cowardice, or helplessness. Nevertheless, Johnny stands out from them and transforms himself into an apostate. Although he has been reduced to an abject state, Johnny still strives for a brighter future and even smiles to himself in the darkness of the train. For him, running away means that he gives himself a new lease of life, which stands opposite to giving up life. Deleuze and Guattari once argued that "the great and only error lines in thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life ... on the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon" [18]. By bringing himself to nature, where birds, trees, and grass soothe his "hopelessness and spiritual enervation", he feels alive again and looks forward to a work-free life [19]. No matter whether his dream can be truly realized, it should be noted that his attempt is indeed a fearless practice to create an oppression-free life eagerly awaited by countless working-class people.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Johnny's transformation from a compliant child laborer to a defiant runaway is more than a powerful story of workers running away. Its profound meaning can be further explored by the molar line, the molecular line, and the line of flight, all of which delineate the different shapes of Johnny's life in various stages. Not willing to be hemmed in by the rigid segmentation of the molar

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line demonstrated in factories, Johnny goes through fierce internal struggles, where the molecular line is traced and accentuated by the rumination. Escaping from the economic deterritorialization, he starts the third stage of his life, and his aimless journey echoes the line of flight. Johnny's revolutionary change reflects the inhuman sufferings of the working class due to the economic deterritorialization. Examining Johnny's changing process through the three concepts may help deepen the understanding of the devastating effects on the working class in a capitalist society.

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