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“No Magic in Being Lost”:
Conservative Sentiment in Ling Ma’s *Severance*

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Abstract

Ling Ma’s post-apocalyptic novel *Severance* (2018), like many examples of the genre, has generally been interpreted as a progressive work. This essay contends, however, that it expresses a conservative disposition as English philosopher Michael Oakeshott defined it, with clear preferences for the familiar over the unknown and a disdain for utopias. A close reading of *Severance* through the lens of Oakeshott’s philosophy reveals that change is shown as negative, since both the world after a deadly pandemic strikes and pre-2010 New York are portrayed as diminished by disruption – and as devoid of a sense of adventure that might otherwise turn disruption interesting. Furthermore, the novel warns of ideology and teleology: the apocalypse remains unexplained and is not used to communicate criticism or lessons, while the progressive and totalitarian characters that aim to impose a grand vision on the rest are ridiculed, and the personal and the private appear as tantamount. Finally, laissez-faire capitalism and the neo-liberal state are criticized not so much for their inherent exploitation, but for forcing a lifestyle onto people that is without alternative, that they did not choose, that (through the hegemony of work) leads to a profanation of life, and that causes an erosion of tradition.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic novel, conservatism, tradition, loss, rationalism, ideology, capitalism, Michael Oakeshott, Ling Ma, Chinese American literature

Post-apocalyptic novels are frequently seen as reflecting left-wing concerns, since the end of society they depict allows for the portrayal of subsequent post-capitalist utopias (Skult 367), as well as for a critique of

the role the patriarchy or neo-colonialism played in the corruption and fall of the system (Watkins 1). Maximilian Feldner describes the genre as predestined to both “offer warnings of potential outcomes if current courses are further pursued” and “demonstrate possible alternatives to the contemporary situation at a moment when change is still possible” (166). Some of the most celebrated examples of the genre are by progressive icons who managed to accomplish these goals in memorable ways: Kurt Vonnegut (*Cat’s Cradle*), Margaret Atwood (*Oryx and Crake*), Octavia Butler (*Parable of the Sower*). Ling Ma’s 2018 novel *Severance*, written before Covid but featuring a New York office worker navigating a devastating pandemic, has been interpreted as firmly being in this tradition. Reviews focused on the book’s treatment of capitalism, labeling it as a “wicked satire of consumerism and work culture” (Schaub) that offers “incredibly smart commentary on late capitalism” (Sarazen) and eviscerates the “soul-sucking nature of life” under it (Grady). Scholarly articles, some of them channeling Jacques Lacan (Galioto 135), argue that *Severance* exposes a learned contempt for women (Schaab 1), reveals the economic system’s reliance on biological and environmental risks (Yazell and Hsu 39), identifies American consumerism as triggering the apocalypse (Gullander-Drolet 94), and satirizes neoliberal individualism (Galioto 135). It appears that Ling Ma has written a novel that can be classified as progressive.

Yet, it can be argued that such a view is at best incomplete, and possibly even false, focusing too much on surface themes and too little on how they are presented. In fact, this article contends that *Severance* may be read as a conservative text – conservative not so much in terms of ideology or a political program (and certainly not in the sense the word conservatism is used in contemporary American public discourse), but rather as expressing conservative *sentiment* in the way the philosopher Michael Oakeshott defined it. Regarded during his lifetime as the most respected voice of British conservatism, Oakeshott captured the conservative spirit and temper of mind in much the same way as Lionel Trilling captured the “liberal imagination” (Himmelfarb 405-407). In his essay “On Being Conservative,” Oakeshott famously postulated that a conservative disposition means “to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to

prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss" (243). I will attempt to demonstrate that Ma's novel is conservative in this way, via a close reading of the text through the lens of Oakeshott's thoughts on change, loss, habits, tradition, ideology, and the economy. The world of *Severance* will emerge as one where change brings pain, habits and traditions are valuable, incremental improvements are preferable to revolution, radical swagger, and utopian promises; and capitalism, while undoubtedly negative, is not so much criticized for being exploitative as for being limiting and profane.

In the novel, Candace Chen, born in the Chinese city of Fuzhou to parents who emigrated to Utah shortly thereafter and died when Candace was an adolescent, experiences the 2011 outbreak of "Shen Fever" – an aggressive fungal infection that quickly spans the globe and turns sufferers into zombie-like figures who mindlessly repeat rote tasks from their former everyday lives –, while working for the "Bible department" of a firm paid by well-known publishers to coordinate cheap book production in developing nations. The plot begins with a pregnant Candace, who, having left the dying firm by this point, has been found, dehydrated, in a parked car by a band of survivors, and is now on the way with them to the mysterious "Facility" in Illinois which group leader Bob touts as their safe haven. In the end, Candace, who meanwhile has been incarcerated for insubordination by an increasingly unhinged and autocratic Bob, escapes with her unborn child from the "Facility" (a mall in Bob's hometown) and the group: "I get out and start walking," reads the final sentence (Ma 291). In between, first-person narrator Candace does not only provide more information about the voyage to Illinois but also – in flashbacks – recalls the time at Spectra (the production company) before and during the pandemic, as well as the relationship with her boyfriend Jonathan, her childhood, and her parents.

One of the most remarkable ways in which Candace's story aligns with Oakeshott's conservatism is the depiction of change as threatening – Oakeshott speaks of the "hostile forces of change" ("On Being Conservative" 244) – and of the accompanying loss as truly devastating.

Oakeshott emphasizes that, for a conservative, “there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked” (246). In contrast to other postapocalyptic novels, in *Severance*, the end of the world as we know it does not bring with it a new hope for something better, nor does it engender giddy feelings of satisfaction over the destruction of hated structures or institutions. This is most obviously shown in the scenes with the Shen Fever zombies (whom Candace and her group typically encounter while “stalking” or systematically searching houses for supplies). There is nothing evil about the infected; meeting them is not an adventure or a challenge, but just sad. The pandemic is a tragedy, with its effects presented in a subdued, contemplative manner:

There was a father, a mother, a son. . . .
[T]hey clasped their hands together on the table and bowed their heads. The father opened and closed his mouth. . . .
Looks like they’re saying grace, Janelle observed.
When the father spoke, he uttered sounds but no words, at least none that I could decipher from our proximity. He could have been speaking in tongues. After a few moments, they opened their eyes and began to have dinner, as a family.
They ran their tongues over the cutlery. They clinked knives and forks to the [empty] plates, dashing off chicken cutlet or veal parmesan.
(61)

It is precisely the fact that the fevered still gather, sit down, pray, and eat (as they and millions of others used to), with their procedural memory the only thing left intact, that constitutes the horror here. Zombies staggering around are not very memorable, because they are simply devoid of humanity, but the Shen Fever families are living monuments to what exactly is *lost*: they gather without recognizing another, pray without understanding or believing, talk without communicating (Candace describes the utterances as “animal mumblings” [62]), and nibble at imaginary food without getting nourished. The passages appear to mourn a past where meaningful community was possible, via the replacement of such community with an obviously empty simulacrum of it. Thus, *Severance* can be said to link relatively traditional values to humanity’s essence, as it is not individualism or critical thinking that is highlighted as being tragically erased here, but togetherness. Candace refers to the

mindless creatures as "the family" (61) and takes pains to communicate that they are – or once were – real people: "The name on the mailbox indicated that they were the Gowers" (61). She cares and is moved by their fate. When she finds a young girl upstairs, "fevered, obviously" and "assuming the act of reading" (68), her unsuccessful attempt to hide this child from Bob, who shoots all zombies on principle to "put them out of their misery" (70), leads to a prolonged scene where Candace is forced to execute the girl:

The fifth shot hit her in the stomach, and the ensuing cries were weak little bays, attempts at protesting more than actual pleading.

At this point, everyone was beginning to get impatient.

Okay, look, Bob said. . . . You have to put some intent into this. If you do this without intent, it's not going to work. Locate your target. Focus on it.

I let my gaze rest on Paige Gower's face. The target was the forehead. . . . She raised her blue eyes and looked at me, as the sixth shot hit her in the cheek, and the seventh reached the forehead. The eighth shot hit her in the arm, the ninth in the stomach, the tenth in the eye, which spurted. . . . I just kept shooting, my hands welded to the humming carbine by someone else's sticky candy, every shot pulsing through me like a spark of electricity. . . . I kept going. . . .

I stopped. There was a strange rattling sound in the room, a shallow, irregular wheezing. It took me a moment to realize it was the sound of my phlegmy, panicked breath. (71-72)

It is abundantly clear that Candace is not in a good place, figuratively and literally. The scene, altogether more than a page long, is a lot more detailed than it has to be – the narrator forces the reader to witness every single gory part of the execution. Regardless of whether the killings are warranted or not, the impression is likely to be that the remaining 'healthy' humans have degenerated into violence and barbarism (when the aesthetic of splatter movies is the narrative choice that best reflects the things that the survivors do, yet at the same time, the narrator highlights the name of the victim, which Candace found in Paige's Bible, this is a conclusion the novel wants the reader to reach). Candace, describing the shooting matter-of-factly but then waking up from the violent trance and realizing that panic is the appropriate reaction, is half-'infected' by the normalization of inhumanity that characterizes post-Shen Fever America,

but is still self-aware enough to oppose it. The fact that Bob and the others are bored and unmoved by the slaughtering of the child, however, allows for the interpretation that the novel suggests that they have lost their humanity and become metaphorical zombies, just like the ones that they want to take out. When Oakeshott says that “every change is an emblem of extinction” (244), then *Severance*, with its erasure of community and empathy, appears to go in the same direction. In any case, Ma’s new world is not a good world, and there is indeed no magic in being lost or shipwrecked in it.

It is no accident that the only person who enthusiastically welcomes the new world is Bob, a character that is portrayed as both villainous and pathetic. The narrator reports that the pandemic is “short, stout” Bob’s “higher calling;” he prepared for the apocalypse by playing “Warcraft with a near-religious fervor” (4-5). He regards the past with contempt, as something to be wiped out, with the new tomorrow being the only thing that matters. Pompously gifting Candace’s phone back to her after having broken it, Bob declares the gesture a symbol of the past’s uselessness and the promises of the future: “accessing all your old data is not helpful to you in moving forward. . . . [W]e all live too much in the past. But . . . there is a bright side. This loss of the internet presents an opportunity. We are more free to live in the present, and more free to envision our future” (113-115).

While Bob’s general critique of the internet is something that the rest of the book does validate, his “proselytizing” about new beginnings is secretly met with eye rolls (114), and thereby narratively undermined. The language of the magic of change is also countered through metaphorical passages, like the one where Candace, just before the group’s stalking of a house of one of their own, recalls a lesson: “Once, in sixth-grade history, we watched a documentary on King Tut. When the archaeologists first opened his tomb, they heard a loud tearing sound, like a knife gashing through cloth. It was the sound of all the textiles inside the tomb, the imperial fabrics, ripping at the sudden exposure to fresh air” (122). Not only does this constitute a clear reminder that a breath of ‘fresh air’ is not automatically good, but also that actions which appear perfectly

reasonable can have unexpected consequences when the complexities of historical contexts are ignored, when the past is dismissed as irrelevant.

The scene that follows appears, at first sight, to refute this interpretation by depicting a look back into the past as fatal. During the stalk, Ashley, the woman whose family home the group is in, turns into a zombie after trying on her old clothes, a turn of events that, as with the other zombies, is presented as deeply unsettling without being exciting: "It took me a second to understand that there was a sound coming out of Ashley's mouth. It was a sound of pain, but resigned; flattened into monotony. . . . The closest approximation is a hum, but stronger and fresher; sticky and electric and rhythmic like a pestilence of parched cicadas on the deepest summer night" (128). What has happened suggests it is remembrance and nostalgia that trigger the erratic behavior Shen Fever sufferers display, and one might thus argue that metaphorically, the novel warns against delving into the past, especially since Candace seems to explicitly issue such a warning: "It is too depressing, too soul-crushingly sad, to reminisce. The past is a black hole, cut into the present day like a wound, and if you come too close, you can get sucked in. You have to keep moving" (120). In fact, Erica D. Galioto does claim that Ma writes about the necessity of "abandoning . . . the nostalgic past to the . . . unknown future" (135). Yet, the exact content and the context of Candace's comment reveal that she is far from advocating looking forward and forgetting the past. A black hole, while not technically 'empty' for a physicist, has the distinct characteristic that it and its contents cannot be observed – for all intents and purposes, it is like a void. Hence, the narrator, when mentioning black-hole-like past, can only be talking about the specific kind of reminiscing where someone yearns for something in the past, but cannot find it when going back in their mind. Candace emphasizes that her trips down memory lane would come up empty in this way; searching for "home," for example, yields no results: "if I myself returned home, . . . I wouldn't know where to go. The house my parents owned had been sold," she says, and "Maybe I would go to the church that my parents fastidiously attended. But I'd always disliked the place" (Ma 120). The past is a black hole because there is nothing there where something would be needed – far from critiquing an obsession with

the past or an inability to move forward, the passages problematize a wish to move forward born solely from the soul-crushing belief that one's life has not provided the necessary sense of safety, identity, or community. Ashley, too, has been estranged from her family for years when she tries on the dresses, so perhaps it is not the reminiscing per se that makes her sick, but the fact that she comes up empty when trying to find happy memories. *Severance* can be said to allude to a lack of meaning in the lives of twentysomethings in 2011 (partly due to a lack of true connections and groundedness, which is arguably a conservative notion again), rather than to a general need to leave the past behind.

In other words, there is a second level to the novel's discussion of change and loss. The period of the pandemic-ravished US is not the only time when something fundamental was lost due to massive change. The narrator's account of pre-pandemic America in the early 2000s also gives off the vibe of a diminished world, a place that has changed for the worse – thus strengthening the impression that *Severance* portrays disruption as an Oakeshottian threat. Jobs are lost and journalism is dying, exemplified by the magazine that Candace's boyfriend Jonathan worked for: "The budget for freelance writers was severely slashed. . . . The quality of the publication diminished" (137). Gentrification is crippling New York; "all the tenants in our East Village building . . . received notice that our leases would not be renewed; our apartments were being converted into single-family condos" (131). When juxtaposing the contemporary city with the New York of the past (which she only knows from movies from the 1970s and 90s), Candace makes the former come across as sadly inferior:

In Jonathan's apartment, we used to watch single-woman-in-Manhattan movies, a subgenre of New York movies. . . . The city was empowering. Even if a woman doesn't have anything, the movies seemed to say, at least there is the city. The city was posited as the ultimate consolation.

Tonight, Times Square seemed dim. (158)

Although Candace is aware that the movies might have exaggerated New York's glory, the feeling of loss is palpable, and it is telling that it is a loss of light, intimacy, and inspiration. The personal lives of the characters just before the pandemic are equally dim, lonely, and uninspired – just like in

Shen Fever times, there is no magic in being lost. The tone Candace uses to narrate what happens, such as a hookup with a writer, is generally either disaffected ("He did that thing where he laid me down on my back and worked his way south, kissing my breasts, my ribcage, my belly. . . . The only guy I had ever let go down on me was the college boyfriend, and that was under the pretense of love" [36]) or fashionably snarky ("I didn't want to be part of the meaningful postdivorce narrative he was constructing. Like, Obligatory Sexual Interlude with Inappropriate Twentysomething. If he was looking for newfound meaning, I would be the first to tell him this was nothing" [37]). That this indicates a loss is borne out by the fact that in flashbacks to childhood ("In sleep it came to me" [15]), the tone invariably changes towards warmth and tenderness. Proving that not all of the past is of the inaccessible black-hole-like kind discussed above, memories of "long, unfurling Utah freeways on aimless, drifting afternoons" evoke descriptions of classic Americana whose unironic, innocent joy is in complete opposition to jaded 2011 Candace: "I was still dazed at the variety and surplus of the supermarkets, miles of boxes and bottles lit with fluorescent lighting. Supermarkets were my favorite American thing. Driving was my mother's favorite American thing" (15). Proustian objects trigger these memories, the madeleine being replaced with a Michael Jackson song Candace's mother used to play in the car (15), with the "jittery caffeinated high" of a Pepsi (103), or with the "neon blur" of night market stalls in Hong Kong, bringing the protagonist back to Fuzhou, where she lived until she was 6: "the nostalgia of it hit me all at once. I couldn't think straight" (103). In contrast to Proust's, the triggers here, whose power is underscored by the fact that even zombies are susceptible – "Unchained Melody," according to Candace, "the most beautiful song I have ever heard," has tears stream down the cheeks of the fevered, so that Bob's people recognize "their residual humanity" and shoot them "in the heads but not the faces" (28-29) – are not engendering long narratives: soon, Candace is back in the less magical world just before the pandemic. But the memories are strong enough to make her realize that she lost something, that at some point something changed for the worse, and that she has to come to terms with this. Having seen a Hong Kong stall that sells products for mourning and

ancestral worship, the feeling that she did not do enough for her parents drives her to frantically burn a massive amount of spirit money: “I thought of my mother and my father, unhoused and hungry. . . . The flimsy paper burned pretty fast. . . . It didn’t feel like an adequate-enough offering, for all the time that had passed that I hadn’t burned tribute. I wanted to give them more” (104). Pre-pandemic Candace is lost, and resorts to family, the past and its already-discarded cultural practices, to become grounded again. She adds offerings consisting of pages from magazines: “For my father, I burned a Jos. A. Bank suit, and Salvatore Ferragamo wing tips to match. . . . For my mother, I burned a Louis Vuitton suitcase and a Fendi handbag” (105). The urgency of her improvised efforts, combined with the incongruity of providing sacred objects that are in reality luxury consumer products and were hastily ripped from *Vogues* and *Elle Decors* her roommate hadn’t thrown away, highlights both how serious it is for her to make amends with the past and how ill-equipped her era is to facilitate this.

All in all, the various time levels in *Severance*, the fevered world after 2011 and New York in the early 2000s, equally evoke the sentiment of deprivation brought on by changes. It is legitimate to conclude that Ma explicitly wants to communicate an Oakeshottian skepticism of disruption, as she clearly links the zombie experience to the state of pre-pandemic Candace, weaving both together into one powerful statement of loss (here, specifically of no longer belonging). The “sound of pain” zombie Ashley emits gradually becomes the protagonist’s own sound of pain, back in the time of her work at Spectra:

It is a sound that you can feel, that enters your body like bass pumping from an SUV on the street below. . . . The track is Rihanna, and it was the only thing I’d heard that weekend. . . . Summer nights in my Bushwick studio, when it was so hot with no air-conditioning, and I’d put cold water on dishrags and stick them leechlike all across my body. . . . All the lights were off, and I just lay there, trying to pass the hours before I had to get up and go to work, which was impossible when the night was so loud. My neighbor’s electric air conditioner, the bass pumping from other people’s cars. They were all converging together to say one thing: You are alone. You are alone. You are truly and really alone. (128-129)

Apart from this, there are numerous passages associating new behaviors of people in the 2000s with zombies, for instance, when Candace looks at the eyes of an infected: "They were open but unfocused. They didn't register me. . . . The closest approximation for this gaze is when someone is looking at their computer screen, or checking their phone" (128). Living in times of change is not painted as thrilling or offering opportunities; Ma's text reflects Oakeshott's dictum that change "appears always . . . as deprivation" (234). What should remove the last doubts that Galioto is wrong when she suggests that *Severance* is about the promises of the future and the irrelevance of the past is the fact that Candace is literally saved by the past in the end. Her dead mother speaks to her "in a visitation that is too lucid to be a dream" (242). Shaking her head at Candace's "incompetence," she employs her life experience and maternal instincts to successfully persuade her daughter to run away from Bob: "As long as you carry this baby, he's interested in making sure nothing happens to you. But what comes after that? . . . You should escape now" (243-244).

One other central element of Oakeshottian conservative philosophy that *Severance* shares is a dislike of ideology and teleology. In line with his above-mentioned distrust of the idea of perfection and his preference of the tried over the untried, Oakeshott criticizes "the nuisance of those who spend their energy . . . in the service of some pet indignation, endeavoring to impose it on everybody" ("On Being Conservative" 250). The scenario of some group "imposing . . . a dream" on anyone is undesirable to him (250). Ma, similarly, not only stays clear of ideological messages in her novel, but also demonstrates the trouble with self-proclaimed saviors and those who are so convinced to be on the right side that they can infringe on other people's rights.

In *Severance*, the pandemic, the most important plot element, is not used to communicate any moral or political lesson, as apocalyptic events often are in literature. Although Candace, and thus the reader, gets access to a brief Shen Fever factsheet (148-149), how the fungal infection originated and why it spread remains unclear – and does not seem to be of much interest. There is no hint that human failures were responsible for the outbreak, or that a different society, a different politics, a different mindset could have prevented it or minimized its impact. Nor are there any indications that the state of the public health system in the novel

parallels ours. Hence, the book does not offer obvious ideological criticisms or panaceas.

Various minor characters that are progressive intellectuals with agendas come across as slightly ridiculous and ineffectual; they are narratively sidelined, with their implied claim to be heard being mocked. When Candace registers that Jonathan is lecturing about how the “future is more Urban Outfitters, more Sephoras, more Chipotles. . . . The future is more overpriced Pabsts at dive-bar simulacrum. Something something Rousseau something” (13), she tunes out. Her offhand account of a previous boyfriend in college manages to make him look both forgettably generic and distinctly shallow: “When he wasn’t digging wells or developing crop rotation systems in outlying South American villages, he was reading postcolonial theory in chambray shirts . . . He broke up with me via email after the calling card minutes ran out” (34). Occupy Wall Street, in the novel appearing briefly in the context of the parallel emergence of Shen Fever, is “deemed decadent and out of touch” by the people (214). The writer Candace has an affair with speaks “with authority” about unemployment rates among youth but cannot tie his own tie (35). None of the characters is shown to be wrong, exactly, but it is clear that the novel does not suggest giving them control over world affairs would be beneficial.

A far more dangerous ideologue is Bob. He epitomizes the ‘us vs. them’ mentality and feeling of superiority that people with a cause, or people who want to “impose a dream” on the world, may display. “We are *selected*,” he proclaims, based on the (mistaken) belief that he and his gang are immune to the fungal infection, “I’m talking about divine selection” (31). Even if he does so very clumsily, he basically creates a cult, with a sacred place (the Facility), rituals – such as a pre-stalk recitation, with a “chant, a long mantra,” and a sermon by Bob, “part prayer and part affirmation” (59) – and the language of mystery and utopia, where words like “blessing” and “miraculous” figure prominently (167). Ma is careful to have the cult feature many of the problematic characteristics of groups of people on a mission. Dissent is seen as betrayal, and, for those who are convinced they are on the right side, it becomes second nature to reframe unjust actions as benevolent; when Candace voices her disbelief that Bob is imprisoning her, he replies:

"You're safe. You're healthy. You're going to be a mother. As soon as this baby comes, we're going to celebrate it" (168).

Bob and his worldview are thoroughly dismantled in the text; the "special" one, who claims to be "immune to something that took out most of the population" (31), unceremoniously and anticlimactically turns into a zombie one day (coincidentally, it is the day of Candace's escape). She shoves him, and he ends up "on his back, a crumpled beetle, his hands clutching the air" (282). Another group member, Adam, tries to stop her, "enunciating every word as if speaking to a child," but Candace just laughs: "I have never had a personal conversation with Adam all this time and he is telling me what to do. That's pretty funny" (282-283). Here, Ma obviously skewers the tendency of groups with a sense of mission to disregard relationships and the actual needs of particular individuals in favor of their "dreams of new and better worlds," as Oakeshott puts it ("On Being Conservative" 247). For the philosopher, in a functioning society, people "enter in relationships of interest and emotion, of competition, partnership, guardianship, love, friendship, jealousy and hatred" (247); a variety of beliefs is guaranteed, compromises are made, by and large, one gets along, and, importantly, can make one's own choices without interference from groups with ideas of "substantive uniformity" (247-250). *Severance* posits Candace – a generally positive character, and the protagonist – as the exact opposite of Bob's men on a mission. In the spirit of Oakeshott, she focuses on the private and the personal rather than the universal; first and foremost on her mind is not the world, or Shen Fever, or big ideas, but her unborn child: "I don't want Luna to be in this environment. I don't want her to grow up here, in a group controlled by someone like him" (Ma 228). To free Luna, she proceeds step by step, eschewing grand schemes in order to pragmatically focus on what is right in front of her – in other words, she prefers the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant. It is her mother's voice again that brings this Oakeshottian strategy to her, which once again emphasizes the centrality of relationships and family. The imagined mother breaks the situation down to the very basics: "You barely eat. You don't sleep enough . . . Change your clothes. Brush your teeth. Wash your face . . . Exercise. Get yourself together" (223). In contrast to Bob, Candace

succeeds, and the last sentence of the novel, the simple “I get out and start walking” (291), can be read as testament to the superiority of individual choice, the ‘actual,’ and small steps over visions and ideology.

It is true that the above suggests a change in Candace, and thus goes against the earlier pronouncement that *Severance*, like Oakeshott, portrays change as bad. However, Oakeshott is enough of a realist to know that change is often inevitable – and then, the nature of the change becomes important, with the conservative preferring “small and limited innovations to large and indefinite” (“On Being Conservative” 246). Candace’s step-by-step progress matches this model. The sentiment about life that the book expresses on the whole is summarized by Candace’s father, in another flashback to childhood, giving a synopsis of a novel he has been reading:

What’s the book about? I asked.
It’s about a man from a poor background who wants to better his life.
Does he make it?
My father smiled. He does, but it comes at a cost. There’s no happy ending. (188-189)

The context suggests that this describes the father’s life too – and perhaps Candace’s life, and even life in general, for most, if one allows for a broad interpretation of “poor background.” The statement is as simple as it gets (we want a better life; we get it, sort of), yet profound: it shows striving as a personal, unideological endeavor, gains as incremental, loss as real, and final goals as illusory. It is the ultimate anti-teleological and anti-utopian statement, and it encapsulates the mood of the novel. Candace’s mother captures the same mood on her deathbed, in another flashback. Asked by her daughter, “But what do you want me to do?,” the reply is: “I just want you to do what your father wanted: to make use of yourself, she finally said. No matter what, we just want you to be of use” (190). Again, there is the language of pragmatism, of small steps, and the complete absence of any higher meaning, any design, or any cause to throw one’s weight behind, voiced in a way (“just”) that makes limitations sound alright. It can be argued that the whole plot is a description of Candace, as a narrator, ‘learning to make use of herself’ in this Oakeshottian way: even though the story is not told chronologically, in terms of themes, tones, and moods,

the narrator moves, bit by bit, toward family, toward calm, towards details and particulars. In the end, the earlier narrative snark – the hallmark of the overconfident generalizations of a self-proclaimed in-group – is replaced by precise observation that, by actually looking at individual human beings, is also gentle. Her thoughts about Jonathan at the end of the book, for example ("I know you too well. You live your life idealistically. You think it's possible to opt out of the system. . . . I used to admire this about you, how fervently you clung to your beliefs – I called it integrity – but five years of watching you live like this has changed me" [205-206]), this time written as if addressed to him, are considerably more nuanced, understanding and tender than the earlier sarcastic take-downs of what at that point was simply described as Jonathan's 'woke' droning.

Another topic that *Severance* addresses (and the one that scholarly articles appear to focus on most) is capitalism and the nature of work. It may seem surprising that a novel that regards individual choice as tantamount and treats well-meaning interference, including progressive efforts, with suspicion, should also criticize the free market. However, the conservative tradition, even in America, has always had significant strands that were opposed to laissez-faire capitalism (Kolozi 1). Interestingly, Oakeshott's critique of the modern economy is practically a variation of his anti-ideology and anti-teleology argument (rather than being in conflict with it), and arguably Ma's goes in a similar direction. The problem the philosopher has with capitalism is its all-encompassing nature; in modern society, once a state has chosen neo-liberalism, there is nothing but the market (Plotica 83). The individual is not asked if they want to participate in the neo-liberal capitalist economy. There is no alternative, and, consequently, the capitalist state forces activities, beliefs, and lifestyles on people that they have not chosen for themselves. In the Oakeshottian interpretation, the capitalist state, like a group of ideologues with a sense of mission, but much more pervasively (as it is literally in power), imposes "a single overriding purpose upon their citizens" (O'Sullivan e39).

This sense that capitalism and the attendant ways of life and work are an inescapable force, limiting freedom and eliminating alternative conceptions and philosophies of life by making them appear nonexistent, figures prominently in *Severance*. When Candace has a crisis at work and

is told to find and phone a supplier in Asia that is willing to have its workers breathe in deadly dust from gemstone granules, she briefly reacts as one would expect a human being to react – she loses it, yanks the phone out of the wall, shoves it in the wastebasket and jams her foot on it until it cracks – but immediately stops herself:

I took my foot out, assessed the damage. I took the phone back out of the basket, swabbed it with some antibacterial wipes, reassembled it, and plugged it back in.

I picked up the phone and called Hong Kong. It was six in the morning there, but I knew there would be someone who'd come in early to work. There was always someone. (26)

The modern office and the modern sweatshop are immutable facts. Candace knows that neither she, nor her supplier in the Hong Kong office, nor the workers getting lung disease in rooms without ventilation systems, will even entertain the question whether they should continue to participate in capitalism. The protagonist's workmanlike and almost automatic cleaning and rearranging of the phone, described not as a tragedy or a necessary evil but as a no-brainer that hardly needs mentioning, shows that continuing with work is a matter of course.

Money is not the (main) issue here; even if inequality and the power differential between the US and poorer Asian nations are thematized, *Severance* is not particularly focused on exploitation. Candace, for one thing, does not need to work, since she would be able to live on her sizable inheritance. In the world that Ma writes about, she works because there seemingly is nothing else. Even when the pandemic strikes, Spectra's business collapses, and there is no practical reason to come to the abandoned office, Candace shows up unfailingly: "I was there to work, I reasoned, so I would just work. And yet, there was no work" (233). Work, repeated three times here as if to stress its centrality, remains the only possible choice that seems available, even when literally anything else would make more sense – and even though the only proper reason one can find to work is that one is expected to do so. The problem, the novel suggests in an Oakeshottian vein, is ideological: the neoliberal state has really imposed an overriding purpose upon its citizens, so strong that it defies logic. Candace reaffirms her alignment with this purpose

periodically ("I have a contract that stipulates I have to work in the office until a certain date," I expressed stiffly, defensively" [251]), and as the culmination of Ma's portrait of the hegemony of work, she finally moves into the Spectra offices (262).

One important consequence of said hegemony – a profanation of life – is highlighted via the author's choice to give Candace the position of "Senior Product Coordinator of the Bibles division" (22) in a firm that coordinates book production. Her job involves overseeing the production of new editions of the Bible in line with market needs and the latest trends: her current project is the "Gemstone Bible, marketed toward preteen girls, . . . to be packaged with a keepsake semiprecious gemstone on a sterling alloy chain" (23); she also produced the "Daily Grace Bible," an "everyday Bible for casual use" made from fake leather (66), and considers ideas like the "Outdoors Bible" for adventurous types, the "Bible Handbag," or the "Alternative Bible, featuring a blank cover and packaged with Sharpie markers, for the alt-Christian teens to decorate however they want" (139).

The Bible can be said to represent anything that is sacred, constitutes the cornerstone of a cultural tradition, and cannot be understood in terms of utility. Here, it is stripped of its aura. The book is fully integrated into the corporate realm, and, in fact, subordinate to it (as Candace's job title and the name of her division, the "Bible department," already suggest). At Spectra, the Bible is one of many products, and the language of the market has completely subsumed and made forgotten anything that it might have once meant: "There's nothing like the Gemstone Bible on the market, and we think a title like this is going to do very well" (24). Candace does expound that no one "can work in Bibles that long without a certain respect for the object itself" (22), but this turns out to be highly ironic, since the respect is for the material features only: "It is a temperamental, difficult animal, its fragile pages prone to ripping, its book block prone to warping" (23). In fact, Bibles are at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy; Candace wants to move to the Art department and tells of a colleague who "used to work in Bibles, but since her transfer to Art Books, she sometimes pretended I didn't exist" (18).

The Outdoor Bible, the Bible Handbag and the like are certainly funny – as they are only slightly more outlandish than what one would

expect marketing in real life to come up with; they function as a parody of the book business –, but *Severance* also clearly problematizes the profanation. Balthasar, operations director of the Hong Kong printer that Candace works with, and a genuinely positive character (later, having lost his daughter to the fever, he will write to Candace and movingly urge her to spend time with her family [240]), makes the snide remark, “of course, your precious Bibles.” The protagonist interprets this as pointing out the incongruency between having “the emblematic text” and negotiating “aggressively over pennies per unit cost” when dealing with it (83-84). Given that Balthasar’s comment could mean many things, her thought proves that she does feel something is wrong with turning everything into a mere product. Furthermore, there are hints everywhere that there may be a need for the sacred in one’s personal life. When Candace cannot take her eyes off the praying zombie Gowers, deeply moved, she might not be mourning the people, but the fact that she has not been saying grace at the table with her family for as long as she can think. When she spots the zombie daughter’s name in her Daily Grace Bible, “in frilly teenage script . . . *Property of Paige Marie Gower*” (68), and opens the text to a random page, the verse she reads exudes more profundity than anything anybody has ever said at Spectra, if one keeps in mind that Mary Paige’s head is going to be blown off her shoulders by human beings in a minute: “I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man” (68). Just before she escapes, after having heard her mother’s voice for the last time, Candace utters her own version of the verse: “I begin to pray” (270). This, the last sentence of chapter 23, and her call to action, is so close in style and function to the closing sentences of chapter 25 (“I pull out of the parking lot and get the fuck out” [283]) and 26 (the aforementioned “I get out and start walking” [291]), that Candace’s success appears explicitly linked to the sacred.

This need for the sacred is not necessarily for God (and certainly not for a uniform belief system everyone should submit to, as this would contradict the anti-ideology stance), but for something of value that goes beyond meeting a sales goal, which could also be traditions, rituals, something that links oneself to others and a shared history meaningfully. Without this, one might become what Oakeshott calls a “Rationalist.”

Rationalists live like they have found a "timeless, pure form of thought uncontaminated by habit, tradition or prejudice" – an illusion, according to Oakeshott (Jacobs and Tregenza 7). In a scathing essay, he mocks the Rationalist as follows:

Intellectually, his ambition is not so much to share the experience of the race as to be demonstrably a self-made man. And this gives to his intellectual and practical activities an almost preternatural deliberateness and self-consciousness, depriving them of any element of passivity, removing from them all sense of rhythm and continuity . . . His mind has no atmosphere, no changes of season and temperature. . . . With an almost poetic fancy, he strives to live each day as if it were his first, and he believes that to form a habit is to fail. ("Rationalism in Politics" 7)

The corporate types that constitute Bob's group, whose description forms the opening of the book, are like this: "We were brand strategists and property lawyers and human resources specialists and personal finance consultants. We didn't know how to do anything so we Googled everything. We Googled *how to survive in the wild* . . ." (Ma 3). They have no access to shared practices, and never acquired useful habits, so they are helpless. Their mind is truly devoid of 'atmosphere,' as they even need to google their *needs* (4). Of course, the internet will be gone a few days later, so the band is completely hapless. This can be one of the reasons why it is so easy for Bob to control them. But in some respect, Bob himself is also a rationalist in the above sense, even with all the spiritual talk: his eyes firmly directed at the future, he does live each day as if there were no yesterday. Every day there is a new project (his mantra is "*We need more inventory*" [227]), but never does he consider the wisdom or experiences of those who came before him or analyze what happened to the group in order to learn lessons. When Ashley turned into a zombie, he should have started to doubt his theory that his group is immune to Shen Fever and examine Ashley's case to hypothesize how one could protect oneself. His indifference towards what was – his behaving like an Oakeshottian rationalist – leads him directly to his infection and demise.

This is reminiscent of how, in the analysis of the hostile forces of change in the novel, Candace was saved by caring about what was; thus,

the discussion has come full circle. All in all, the various elements of *Severance*, some of them seemingly at odds with each other – an anti-capitalist stance combined with a plea for individual choice, a rejection of teleology combined with a warning to not let go of the sacred too easily – make good sense if interpreted, through the lens of Oakeshott's philosophy, as expressing a certain conservative sentiment together. Massive change is shown as bad, as both the world after the pandemic and Candace Chen's New York in the early 2000s are presented as damaged by disruption and devoid of anything that would make the disruption exciting. Ideology and teleology also appear negative, since utopian thoughts and characters that impose grand ideas on others fail and are mocked, while incremental changes and a focus on the personal emerge as positive alternatives. Finally, the neo-liberal state and laissez-faire capitalism are criticized for forcing a limiting lifestyle onto people, turning the world profane, and creating a populace that knows nothing of tradition. Ma has written a rich and complex novel, and the claim that Oakeshott's ideas offer a more useful and suitable interpretive framework for it than the more progressive theories that have been applied to the novel before is also an argument for openness in terms of approaches. There is a wealth of thought available, including a wide range of conservative ideas, and each literary work deserves a lens that truly does it justice and manages to illuminate its essence best.

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