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The Politics of the Individual, the Power of the Machine: Dos Passos's U.S.A. Trilogy and Beyond

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THE POLITICS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, THE POWER OF THE MACHINE:
DOS PASSOS'S *U.S.A.* TRILOGY AND BEYOND

By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue that Dos Passos's politics, at least as they are manifested in his writing, do not follow any one party line, and that producing novels which suggested a strict adherence to any single political group would be anathema to the goal of his writing. Dos Passos's writing, I argue, is grounded in certain ideologies that remain constant—ideologies that were grounded in the rights of individuals who struggled against corrupt systems—and it is only his belief about which political philosophy best upholds these ideologies that changes.

I begin by reevaluating and defining Dos Passos's politics within the *U.S.A.* trilogy so that they can be compared to his stance following the trilogy, after his much-lamented shift in political loyalties. In my first chapter I show that Dos Passos's politics are driven more by a concern for the individual worker than they are by adherence to any particular doctrine. In fact, Dos Passos distrusted institutions, especially hierarchical institutions, since he felt that they all essentially exploit individuals and force them to live within an artificial, mechanical framework. In my second chapter, I explore Dos Passos's concern with the growing mechanization of society, both the literal mechanization which is the product of modernity and innovation and the political mechanization which seeks to optimize citizens for production by weakening their human response. I argue that Dos Passos's politics are driven by a desire to help the individual worker escape the political machine while taking control over his physical machinery. In my third chapter I analyze *Midcentury*, the final novel of Dos Passos's published during his lifetime, as a continuation of the themes and political motivations of the *U.S.A.* trilogy. My intention is to show that Dos Passos's detractors who have criticized his later work as right-wing propaganda have failed to read his final novel closely; in fact the critical preoccupation with Dos Passos's "swing," I argue, has focused almost exclusively on Dos Passos's personal life rather than his writing. Critics have read Dos Passos's novels through the lens of his political affiliations and in doing so have portrayed the author as a polarizing figure, when in fact the texts themselves are politically moderate.

INTRODUCTION

If one were to write a one-sentence biography of John Dos Passos that reflected the prevailing critical opinion of him, it would be this: John Dos Passos was a promising writer and a champion of leftist politics whose shift to the political right heralded the deterioration of his talent. *U.S.A.* still receives praise in some circles, but it is more often than not regarded mostly for its literary ingenuity—the blending of history, biography, fictional narrative, and autobiography through the use of the Joycean “Camera Eye”—than its actual quality. All of this amounts to a somewhat peculiar epitaph for an author who was once considered to be as talented, if not more than, the much-anthologized Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway and Dos Passos were, in fact, once great friends, but their friendship—much like the critical opinion of Dos Passos—soured over the issue of politics. It seems that even Hemingway, who was not primarily known for his political involvement, felt somehow betrayed by this perceived shift in Dos Passos’s political views. In 1932 Hemingway said of Dos Passos, “If the boys swing left in literature you may make a small bet the next swing will be to the right and some of the yellow bastards will swing both ways...Dos Passos doesn’t swing. He’s always been the same. To hell with your swingers” (qtd. in Ludington 304). By 1938 Hemingway would write, “Good old friends, you know. Knife you in the back for a quarter...Honest Jack Passos’ll knife you three times in the back for fifteen cents and sing Giovinezza for free” (qtd. in Koch 254). By imagining Dos Passos singing the “Giovinezza” (the anthem of Mussolini’s notoriously cruel black shirts), Hemingway even went so far as to associate him with fascist politics (254).

In 1938 Dos Passos found not only Hemingway but many of his old friends turning against him and by 1939, with the publication of *Adventures of a Young Man*, criticism of Dos Passos was widespread. Both Mike Gold and Granville Hicks, who had previously written positive reviews of *U.S.A.*, reevaluated the trilogy and found it to be much poorer than they had originally thought. Hicks said that Dos Passos’s work was marked by “irresponsibility, banality, naiveté, and sheer stupidity” and that Dos Passos was “capable of any kind of preposterous vagary.” An article in the *New Masses*, where Dos Passos had formerly served on the

publication's original editorial board, called Dos Passos's work "almost inconceivably rotten," and had declared "Dos Passos has gone sour" (Hicks, "Moods and Tenses" 165-166).

Dos Passos's critical reputation would never recover from the backlash that occurred in the late 1930's. Writing in 1996 critic Michael Denning wrote that *U.S.A.* "no longer lives for American readers...it is not the focus of critical debates, nor is it a founding text for contemporary cultural formations," adding that today, *U.S.A.* has only the ability to "provoke indifference" and "boredom" (167). Although critical opinion of him has softened a bit since the violent reactions of leftist critics in the late 1930's, Dos Passos's work is still too often evaluated—whether skillful or poor, "leftist" or "right"—as more or less propaganda.

In this thesis I argue that Dos Passos's politics, at least as they are manifested in his writing, do not follow any one party line, and that producing novels which suggested a strict adherence to any single political group would be anathema to the goal of his writing. Dos Passos's writing, I argue, is grounded in certain ideologies that remain constant—ideologies that were grounded in the rights of individuals who struggled against corrupt systems—and it is only his belief about which political philosophy best upholds these ideologies that changes.

I begin by reevaluating and defining Dos Passos's politics within the *U.S.A.* trilogy so that they can be compared to his stance following the trilogy, after his much-lamented shift in political loyalties. In my first chapter I show that Dos Passos's politics are driven more by a concern for the individual worker than they are by adherence to any particular doctrine. In fact, Dos Passos distrusted institutions, especially hierarchical institutions, since he felt that they all essentially exploit individuals and force them to live within an artificial, mechanical framework. In my second chapter, I explore Dos Passos's concern with the growing mechanization of society, both the literal mechanization which is the product of modernity and innovation and the political mechanization which seeks to optimize citizens for production by weakening their human response. I argue that Dos Passos's politics are driven by a desire to help the individual worker escape the political machine while taking control over his physical machinery. In my third chapter I analyze *Midcentury*, the final novel of Dos Passos's published during his lifetime, as a continuation of the themes and political motivations of the *U.S.A.* trilogy. My intention is to show that Dos Passos's detractors who have criticized his later work as right-wing propaganda have failed to read his final novel closely; in fact the critical preoccupation with Dos Passos's "swing," I argue, has focused almost exclusively on Dos Passos's personal life rather than his

writing. Critics have read Dos Passos's novels through the lens of his political affiliations and in doing so have portrayed the author as a polarizing figure, when in fact the texts themselves are politically moderate.

Although critics have used Dos Passos's political views to define his writing, they have done far less in the way of using his writing to define his political views. The evidence used to position Dos Passos within leftist politics in the 1920's and early 1930's rarely comes out of his fiction or essays but rather his affiliation with Communists (Max Eastman, Mike Gold, etc.), leftist literary groups (the *New Masses*, the New Playwrights Theater), and leftist causes (the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, the 1931 Harlan County, KY coal miners strike). Despite his many associations with the left these affiliations alone are not enough evidence to position Dos Passos within any orthodox political system, and by themselves they are not much more than evidence of radicalism by proxy.

In fact, as early as 1926 there is evidence that Dos Passos's lack of political orthodoxy may have caused tension between him and his more devoutly Communist friends. The *New Masses* first appeared in May of that year, and barely a month after its inception Dos Passos was already feuding with fellow member of the editorial board Mike Gold. Dos Passos and Gold were involved in a heated political debate, and Gold referred to Dos Passos as a "bourgeois intellectual" before storming off. Dos Passos defended himself in the essay "The *New Masses* I'd Like" (which appeared in the *New Masses* in June of that year) by giving his rationale for avoiding strict adherence to Communist doctrine:

As mechanical power grows in America general ideals tend to restrict themselves more and more to Karl Marx, the first chapter of Genesis and the hazy scientific mysticism of the Sunday supplements. I don't think it's any time for any group of spellbinders to lay down the law on any subject whatsoever. Particularly I don't think there should be any more phrases, badges, opinions, banners, imported from Russia or anywhere else. Ever since Columbus, imported systems have been the curse of this continent. Why not develop our own? (*MNP* 81)¹

Dos Passos does not go so far as to define what this new system of thought should be, but he makes it clear that Communism, Socialism, etc. will not suffice. Dos Passos felt the journal should set, "out on a prospecting trip, drilling in unexpected places" for new ideas (81). Again, he isn't clear as to how ambitious these ideas should be; whether they should seek to establish a

new economic system, a new method of governance, or simply a way to reconcile the interests of laborers and businessmen. Regardless of how broad his ambitions, Dos Passos's sentiment is not one that could exactly be called conservative but it does not precisely align him with many of the others on the journal's editorial board who believed in a relatively strict adherence to Communist party doctrine.

Dos Passos's growing opposition to the American Communist Party, however, did not stem from a philosophical opposition to Communism, but rather a desire that the party shrug off Russian influence and orthodoxy while developing ideas that would make their brand of Communism truly American. When Dos Passos visited Mexico late in 1926 he was impressed by the nationalist spirit the revolution had inspired, especially as it was manifested through the murals of Diego Rivera, Roberto Montenegro, and Clemente Orozco. What impressed Dos Passos the most, however, was the lack of Russian influence. In his article "Paint the Revolution," written for the *New Masses* in 1927, Dos Passos related the story of how Felipe Carillo, the former governor of Yucatan, had once made a speech outlining a plan for a Socialist commonwealth. After the speech, "someone went up to him and said the speech was worthy of Lenin. 'Fine,' he answered, 'who's he?'" (*MNP* 95). In 1926 Dos Passos saw the Mexican Revolution as an ideal movement, an entirely homegrown labor movement that empowered the common people, the story of which was expressed through beautiful murals painted by the nation's greatest artists. "The revolution, no more imported from Russia than the petate hats the soldiers wore, had to be explained to the people. The people couldn't read. So the only thing to do was to paint it up on the wall" (95). Even in this ideal system, however, Dos Passos's article betrays a note of skepticism about the Laborista government. As usual, his instincts were correct; then-president of Mexico and Laborista party leader Plutarco Elías Calles had recently signed into law a series of anti-clerical decrees that would be used as a rationale for widespread religious persecution and would eventually lead to the Cristero War (McLynn 397). Throughout his career Dos Passos supported the struggles of labor movements against oppressive governments, but he was often suspicious of the post-revolutionary governments they created, fearing that the ostensibly socialist nations would become de facto oligarchies or even autocracies.

In 1926, however, Dos Passos was focusing his energy on decrying the wrongs of his own government. In 1926 and 1927 he put a tremendous amount of energy into the aid of the

Sacco-Vanzetti defense committee. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants working as a fish peddler and shoemaker, respectively, who had been accused of an armed robbery and double homicide and had been in police custody since May of 1920. In July of 1923 the pair were found guilty and by 1926 the case was quickly becoming one of the biggest *cause celebres* of the decade. After having met with Aldino Felicani—the committee’s chief organizer—as well as Sacco and Vanzetti themselves, Dos Passos became one of the most active members of the defense committee, publishing an article in the *New Masses* and a letter in *The Nation* in their support, as well as writing the pamphlet *Facing the Chair: Story of the Americanization of Two Foreignborn Workmen* for the committee in 1927.

The Sacco-Vanzetti case was, for several reasons, an extremely attractive cause for Dos Passos. For one, Dos Passos was especially sensitive to the fact that they were treated unfairly because they were foreigners; as a child Dos Passos was often the target of taunts and insults in school because of his Madeiran-Portugese name and slightly European accent (Ludington 28). Dos Passos knew the role bigotry was playing in the case, and felt he could empathize with their dilemma. He later wrote, “In college and out I had...felt the frustrations that came from being considered a wop or a guinea or a greaser” (qtd. in Pizer 27). Dos Passos’s interest in the Sacco and Vanzetti cause was also sparked by his belief that the two were being persecuted for their political beliefs, and for good reason.

By the 1920’s tension between the United States government and those who adopted radical politics, especially anarchists, had been growing for quite some time. The Haymarket Square riots of 1886 convinced much of the public that anarchists were horribly violent, although the trials that followed the riots, in which four anarchists were imprisoned and four executed simply because of their political views, also helped the movement gain sympathy from some liberal thinkers and even a few new members, such as Emma Goldman. Tensions grew even greater in 1901, when President William McKinley was assassinated by anarchist Leon Czolgosz, and even though several anarchists publicly denounced Czolgosz many Americans still believed the assassination was a coordinated effort by the entire anarchist movement (Avrich 98).

One group who did view Czolgosz as a hero, however, were the Galleanists—the anarchist group Sacco and Vanzetti belonged to. They were followers of Luigi Galleani, the Italian anarchist who had only been recently deported when Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested.

Galleani and his followers were strongly opposed to the war and organized protests following the U.S. entry in April 1917. In retaliation, the government had their members beaten, their property destroyed, and their voices suppressed. Galleani himself was deported in 1919, and this inspired a particularly violent reaction from his followers. Galleanist leaflets from this period read, “You have shown no pity to us. We will do likewise. And deport us! *We will dynamite you!*” (Avrich 164). Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan, among others, became targets for Galleanist bombs. None of the intended targets were injured, although the bombs did maim a maid and kill a security guard. It was also widely believed that the Galleanists were responsible for a Wall Street bombing the following year, which killed 33 people (Avrich 164-165).

Although Dos Passos was interested in anarchism (he had taken several opportunities to hear Emma Goldman speak), he was not particularly a supporter of the anarchist cause and certainly rejected the idea of violence as a legitimate political tool. In his writing and in his own mind Dos Passos even distanced Sacco and Vanzetti from the anarchist movement. In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, a summary of the case as it stood in late 1926 that he wrote for the *New Masses*, Dos Passos said of Vanzetti:

His anarchism...is less a matter of labels than of feeling, of gentle philosophic brooding. He shares the hope that has grown up in Latin countries of the Mediterranean basin that somehow men's predatory instincts, incarnate in the capitalist system, can be canalized into other channels, leaving free communities of artisans and farmers and fishermen and cattlebreeders who would work for their livelihood with pleasure, because the work was itself enjoyable in the serene white light of a reasonable world. (qtd. in *MNP* 90-91).

Dos Passos's image of a pastoral anarchist commune may seem naïve, especially considering the violent acts they were associated with, but Sacco and Vanzetti had an unusual ability to evoke this kind of sentiment with eloquent phrases stammered out in broken English. For Dos Passos, Sacco and Vanzetti represented the struggle of the individual in the face of the “blind hatred of thousands of wellmeaning citizens” and “the superhuman involved stealthy soulless mechanism of the law” (91). In *Facing the Chair* Dos Passos writes, “Sacco and Vanzetti are not the only people who have been framed, but they have become symbols. All over the world people are hopefully, heartbrokenly watching the Sacco-Vanzetti Case as a focus in the unending fight for

human rights of oppressed individuals and masses against oppressing individuals and masses” (20).

The Sacco-Vanzetti case also gave Dos Passos a sense that he and other intellectuals could finally take some kind of positive political action. Dos Passos often criticized the impotency of intellectual organizations and publications with respect to the labor movement and other political aims. Dos Passos argued that writing pro-labor material for a pro-labor journal was tantamount to “sitting on the side lines...with a red rosette in your buttonhole and cheering for the home team” (*MNP* 82). Fred Moore, the attorney the Sacco-Vanzetti defense committee hired in 1920, brought his connections with organized labor, civil liberties unions both local and national, and the influence of many pro-labor intellectuals such as Dos Passos. The Sacco-Vanzetti case galvanized the intellectuals and their influence gave the labor movement an international stage to rally support for their cause. Likewise, the intellectuals were able to gain back, if only momentarily, the kind of national influence that they hadn’t enjoyed since the days of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. As David Felix put it, “It was the Sacco-Vanzetti case that permitted the intellectuals to crystallize their general protest around a hard, definable issue. Nevertheless, although the protest was an expression of defiance and alienation, it became an important stage in their progress back into American society. They had been absent a long time” (163).

Besides Dos Passos, Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Bertrand Russell, Katherine Anne Porter, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and others joined the fight to save Sacco and Vanzetti. Upton Sinclair is the author most closely associated with the trial; his novel *Boston* fictionalized the proceedings and did a great deal to promote public interest in the case, despite the fact that the novel was published a year after the trial had concluded. Despite the international support of the Italian anarchists, however, it was clear by late 1927 that the intellectuals were losing the fight. Dos Passos would recall, years later, how the intellectuals’ efforts had even been hampered by the American Communist Party. Years later, Dos Passos would lament, “The widespread protest that started as a spontaneous expression of anarchist ideals and hatreds ended pretty much under Communist Party control” (*Best Times* 169).

The defense’s final hope came in June of 1927, when Massachusetts governor Alvan T. Fuller appointed an advisory committee to review whether or not the case had been tried fairly or needed a retrial. Some of the Sacco-Vanzetti supporters were encouraged by the news, since the

trial had seen significant irregularities, an explicit bias on the part of Judge Webster P. Thayer towards the prosecution, and important evidence that was never admitted into court. Despite all this, the advisory committee ruled in favor of the court's decision, making Sacco and Vanzetti's execution all but inevitable. Dos Passos and other defense supporters were outraged. Dos Passos felt especially betrayed by advisory committee member Lawrence Lowell, then-president of Harvard, Dos Passos's alma mater. In "An Open Letter to President Lowell," which was published in *The Nation*, shortly after the committee made their decision, Dos Passos attacks President Lowell, referring to him as ignorant and accusing him of committing a "foul crime against humanity and civilization." In the letter, Dos Passos even goes so far as to suggest that Lowell's actions could incite a bloody revolution: "It is upon men of your class and position that will rest the inevitable decision as to whether the coming struggle for the reorganization of society shall be bloodless and fertile or inconceivably bloody and destructive" (*MNP* 98).

In actuality, Dos Passos's fear of bloody reprisals for Sacco and Vanzetti were already coming to fruition. In the year prior to the execution, anarchist bombs exploded in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, with another being diffused before it could reach the mayor of Boston. Roughly a week before the execution the anarchists bombed the home of Lewis McHardy, one of the jurors, while he, his wife, and their three children were all asleep. In 1928 the man who executed Sacco and Vanzetti had his house bombed and a few years later the anarchists came for Judge Thayer. Although Thayer was not killed in the bombing, his home was destroyed and, for fear of any further reprisals, he moved to his club in Boston where he died less than a year later (Avrich 167-168).

The intellectuals, however, were defeated more easily. They mounted one final strike on Boston Common in front of the state house that was broken up by police when several protestors were arrested—including Dos Passos and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on August 23, 1927 and by November of the same year Dos Passos was already bemoaning the fact that the "...names of Sacco and Vanzetti are fading fast into the cloudland of myth where they are in danger of becoming vague symbols like God, country and Americanism" (*MNP* 99). By the end of 1927 Dos Passos was still searching for a new political system that could be called truly American, was ruminating on his experiences in Mexico, planning a trip to Russia for the next year, and most of all still lamenting the death of Sacco and Vanzetti and the failure of the intellectuals to either save them or keep their memory fresh in the minds of

Americans. It was with these things in mind that Dos Passos sat down and began scribbling notes for a novel that was to be called *The 42nd Parallel*, which he soon realized would be the first novel of the *U.S.A.* trilogy.

CHAPTER ONE
AMERICANIZING MARX: DOS PASSOS AND THE POLITICS OF THE
INDIVIDUAL

Too often, it seems, the political views of John Dos Passos have been oversimplified through the use of words such as “liberal,” “right-wing,” “radical,” “conservative,” “reactionary,” and other terms that are both imprecise and semantically unstable. Lost in the critical appraisal of Dos Passos, both positive and negative, is an assessment of exactly what Dos Passos stood for and how his novels reveal his beliefs. If Dos Passos is to be defined by his politics and the *U.S.A.* trilogy is his most representative body of work, then the trilogy should be a good starting point to determine the character of his politics. This is complicated, however, by the fact that most critics cite *The Big Money* as the literal “turning point” in Dos Passos’s political sympathies—the point at which the writer who had formerly espoused radical politics embraced conservative ideologies, the point at which Dos Passos made his “swing.” This assertion, however, raises an important question: if Dos Passos is essentially a political novelist and he dramatically changed his political views during the writing of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, how can *U.S.A.* possibly retain the level of thematic and ideological cohesion necessary to be called a trilogy? Some critics have answered this question simply by denying that it does. Janet Casey has suggested that the trilogy contains “individualized internal dynamics that may strain against any teleological progression implied by the whole,” citing the “major ideological schism...in the transition from *Nineteen Nineteen* to *The Big Money*” (158-159). Casey, however, is vague about what this ideological shift entails, and so it is up to the reader to carefully examine the first two novels in the trilogy in order to determine what Dos Passos’s “pre-swing” politics actually were.

One of the most interesting narratives in *The 42nd Parallel*—and most useful in ascertaining Dos Passos’s earlier political views—is the Mac narrative. Dos Passos’s inspiration for Mac was a man he met in Mexico named Gladwin Bland, a former itinerant worker and I.W.W. member who was a used furniture salesman. Bland related stories of his I.W.W. days to Dos Passos which he told “with a satiric skepticism that appealed to Dos Passos’s own sense of irony” (Ludington 251). Certainly there was something about Bland’s stories that inspired Dos Passos; as Donald Pizer has noted, Mac’s uninterrupted string of seven narrative segments is

highly unusual (as most characters receive no more than two consecutive narrative segments) and Dos Passos's method of writing complete narratives and only later separating them means that the arrangement of Mac's narratives was not the misstep of a writer still grappling with the uncertainties of a new style (Pizer 116). Mac's narrative is important because he is the face of the average I.W.W. worker in the early 20th century; he is mostly uneducated but he has mastered a trade, he is passionate about the labor movement, his ambitions go no further than achieving a happy domestic life, and the nature of his politics and work has made him rootless.

Mac's first experience with the struggle between business and industry occurs early in his childhood when workers at his father's mill decide to strike. Mac's father opposes the strike but when it occurs strikebreakers move in and take his job anyway. Throughout the trilogy the defeat of organized labor by business interests is not only swift and thorough, it is inevitable. This could be partially blamed on a lack of solidarity between the workers (Mac's father blames the strike on the "Polaks" and the "lousy furreners" even though his Scotch-Irish heritage would exclude him from the dominant culture as well), but more often than not the workers are defeated by brute force or attrition—they are either arrested or denied work until they can no longer provide for their families. This problem is compounded by a generally defeatist attitude on the part of the workers. Upon losing his job Mac's father would "sit all day in the front room smoking and cursing" instead of looking for work while his wife and young children were forced to support the family (*42nd* 6). This additional strain proves too much for Mac's mother, and when his father is unable to pay for the funeral Mac's family is forced to move to Chicago with his Uncle Tim. Dos Passos repeatedly shows how the basic biological events of life—births, illnesses, deaths—enslave citizens within the capitalist system. Uncle Tim tells Mac that "an honest workin' man like John or myself we can work a hundred years and not leave enough to bury us decent with" (10). His words prove to be prophetic; Uncle Tim will also lose his job trying to uphold a strike and when he dies he has not left his family with enough money for the funeral. As much as Uncle Tim hates the capitalist system, and rails against the "goddam business men, agents, middlemen who never did a productive piece of work in their life," he is forced to admit that the reason the family must travel to Chicago is, "Supply and demand, they need workers in Chicago" (10). Uncle Tim's rant against capitalism juxtaposed with his use of capitalist terminology to explain the family's choice to move to Chicago underscores the

frustration and impotency experienced by the socialist characters; capitalism's control over their lives is so complete that it must be embraced on some level for the family to survive.

Uncle Tim becomes Mac's socialist mentor, and the printing shop is Mac's first experience working for the socialist cause. While distributing handbills for Uncle Tim, Mac exhibits what Donald Pizer has called the "paradigmatic act," which in Dos Passos's fiction is an event that "occurs early in a character's life and then reappears again and again in varied guises" (Pizer 71). Pizer identifies Mac's paradigmatic act as the moment he "is sent to distribute strike handbills and finds himself distracted by spring and the thought of girls" (71). Mac's paradigmatic act hints at the tension that will develop between politics and gender relations throughout the trilogy—some of the final advice Uncle Tim gives Mac is to beware of women, because "it's women'll make you sell out every time" (28)—but it also hints at the conflict between dedication to the socialist cause and the natural impulses of life. It is "early spring" and Mac's natural desire as a teenager is to "run out across the icecakes" on Lake Michigan and have "a swell-looking girl to walk with" but instead he distributes handbills and ends up being chased by a police officer (14).

It is not long after Mac's encounter with the police that there is a printer's strike in Chicago, Uncle Tim's print shop is forced into bankruptcy, and Mac is once again uprooted as he is forced to work for the traveling salesman Doc Bingham. Uncle Tim's reaction to the failure of the strike is similar to Mac's father's reaction to the loss of his job—he gets drunk for six days. Immediately following the loss of Uncle Tim's job Dos Passos further reinforces the impotency of the socialist struggle in "Newsreel II", where Michigan's retiring governor, Hazen S. Pingree, threatens, "I make the prediction that unless those in charge and in whose hands legislation is reposed do not change the present system of inequality, there will be a bloody revolution in less than a quarter of a century in this great country of ours"(17), while Andrew Carnegie displays his wealth by using a mock steel mill and railway system to deliver a sumptuous feast to his guests.

Instead of molten metal the blastfurnace poured hot punch into small cars on the railroad. Icecream was served in the shape of railroad ties and bread took the shape of locomotives...Mr. Carnegie, while extolling the advantages of higher education in every branch of learning, came at last to this conclusion: Manual labor has been found to be the best foundation for the greatest work of the brain (16).

Carnegie's feast acts as an ironic metaphor for the exploitation of the working class; Carnegie has literally transformed the tools of labor into an ostentatious display of wealth, all while attempting to endear himself to those he is exploiting with hollow and patronizing rhetoric. Carnegie's feast mocks Pingree's threats of a bloody revolution, and indeed a quarter of a century later Pingree would be almost forgotten while Carnegie would purchase a kind epitaph for himself.

In *Camera Eye 3* and the biography of Eugene Debs that follows it Dos Passos reiterates that racism and a lack of solidarity in the working class enables Carnegie and other monopoly capitalists to remain in a position of authority. *Camera Eye 3*, which seems to be a scene taken from a train ride the young Dos Passos experienced with his mother, shows how the working class were associated with immigrants and how, even within Dos Passos's own family, there was a conflation between racism and prejudice against itinerant workers: "Potteries dearie they work there all night Who works there all night? Workingmen and people like that laborers travailleurs greasers...one night Mother was so frightened on account of all the riflshots but it was allright turned out to be nothing but a little shooting they'd been only shooting a greaser that was all" (19).

Immediately following this train ride is the biography for Eugene Debs. Debs is one of the "heroes" of Dos Passos's biographies—he is given the epithet "Lover of Mankind"—but despite his efforts to improve conditions for the working class, he is eventually abandoned by those he spent his life helping. Dos Passos asks, "...where were Gene Debs' brothers in nineteen eighteen when Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta for speaking against the war...where were the locomotive firemen and engineers when they hustled him off to Atlanta Penitentiary" (20)? The Debs biography caps off a block of the *42nd Parallel* in which Dos Passos uses all four of his stylistic modes—narrative, biography, *Camera Eye*, and *Newsreel*—to portray socialist organizations such as the I.W.W. as disorganized and powerless in the face of capitalist interests. Dos Passos's response to organized labor is not condemnation, but it is not entirely sympathetic, either. He continually suggests that the I.W.W. has failed to realize its strength because of lackluster efforts on the part of its members. It is important to note, however, that despite the shortcomings of various labor institutions, Dos Passos is entirely uncritical of Eugene Debs and his work in founding the I.W.W., leading the Socialist Party of America, etc. Throughout the trilogy Dos Passos generally regards institutions as flawed and, at

best, morally ambiguous, while his biographies tend to paint their subjects in moral absolutes: individuals, unlike institutions, are capable of being either saints or villains. Because of this, individuals in Dos Passos's fiction always take primacy over institutions, which perpetually fail to meet individual needs.

At this stage in the novel Mac has been failed and uprooted twice by organized labor, and ironically it is Mac's dedication to the cause of labor (he refuses to take a job as a printer while there is an active printing strike in Chicago) that throws him blindly into the occupation of traveling salesman. Mac's introduction to capitalism is also fraught with disappointment. Under the apprenticeship of Doc Bingham, a duplicitous huckster who quotes Shakespeare but deals in bawdy literature, Mac once again finds himself avoiding the authorities (this time in the form of a train conductor) while distributing literature. His term of employment with Doc Bingham is not long, however, as a farmer catches Doc with his wife and forces the pair to run for their lives while he shoots wildly at them. Mac comes through the episode unscathed, but he is once again jobless, uprooted, and—because Doc never paid him—mostly broke. Mac's narrative has come full circle; both the capitalist and socialist systems have failed him and now Mac finds himself without a home and wandering in search of employment, which is the state Mac will continue to be in until the end of his narrative.

The spirit of rootlessness is an important aspect both of Dos Passos's fiction and his personal life. Even the circumstances of Dos Passos's birth required travel, because his father was married to another woman at the time Dos Passos was born in a Chicago hotel room halfway across the country from either of his parents' homes. Dos Passos spent much of his childhood traveling across the United States and to Europe and found himself caught between two cultures: he was a bit too American for his European peers and too vaguely European for his American classmates. Still, his childhood experiences instilled a love of travel in Dos Passos, who was perpetually on the move throughout his young adult life. Dos Passos felt that there was much to be learned from travel, both within the United States and abroad, and rootlessness within the *U.S.A.* trilogy is associated with the search for knowledge as well as the desire to connect. Dos Passos foregrounds the importance of this immediately in the trilogy, opening with the Whitmanesque vagabond who walks through the city with "eyes greedy for warm curve of faces" and "greedy ears taut to hear" the "speech of the people" (42nd xiii). The vagabond travels from New York to California to New Orleans experiencing as much life as possible. "One bed is not

enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough” (xiii). Yet this experience is bittersweet, because the rootlessness of the vagabond not only gives him the opportunity to live multiple lives, it demands it. In exchange for this multitude of experience the vagabond is denied the comfort of a domestic life; he has “no job, no woman, no house, no city” (xiv).

Mac, too, desires a domestic life, but he is denied this throughout most of the novel because of his status as an itinerant worker. He is willing to work hard but many of the jobs he acquires are temporary, and so he finds himself spending the money he has saved traveling and looking for work. As Linda Wagner has noted, Dos Passos originally titled Mac’s narrative “From the Ground Up” as a way of ridiculing the American dream of the self-made man (85). For Mac ambition and hard work are enough to survive, but hardly enough to prosper.

Mac finds himself in San Francisco long enough to meet a girl named Maisie who he wants to marry, but he does not have the money to do so. Mac finally hears about a strike in Goldfield, Nevada and, although he has promised Maisie he will not go, Mac makes a dangerous trip to Goldfield’s I.W.W. headquarters. Although Mac’s participation in the miner’s strike is his most significant contribution to organized labor, the strike itself seems to have only aroused the ire of the Goldfield locals, who seem to want nothing more than to lynch the I.W.W. members. Inside the I.W.W. headquarters Mac sees where “On the plaster wall of the office someone had drawn a cartoon of a workingstiff labeled “I.W.W.” giving a fat man in a stovepipe hat labeled “mineowner” a kick in the seat of the pants. Above it they had started to letter ‘solidarity’ but had only gotten as far as “SOLIDA” (79-80). Here Dos Passos parodies the socialist organization’s lack of motivation, cohesion, and strength. Instead of protests the workers are forced to vent their frustrations through caricature; instead of actual solidarity the workers use the word as an empty slogan that no one even bothers to finish writing. Bill Haywood comes to speak to the workers, but his rhetoric, like Pingree’s, is driven by the naïve assumption that a socialist revolution is both inevitable and imminent.

Big Bill was saying the day had come to start building a new society in the shell of the old and for the workers to get ready to assume control of the industries they’d created out of their sweat and blood...The exploiting class would be helpless against the solidarity of the whole working class. The militia and the yellow-legs were workingstiffs too. Once they realized the historic mission of solidarity the masterclass couldn’t use them to shoot down their brothers anymore (80-81).

Although his speech excites and energizes the workers, Haywood's speech offers no plan of action or even a logical rationale as to why the militias would suddenly turn against the men who paid them. The "historic mission of solidarity" is nothing more than a dream; the men of the I.W.W. have not even finished their mission to print the word. As Frederick Feied has noted, "[The I.W.W.] reassure themselves with militant, timeworn slogans, taking comfort in their belief in the inevitability of a spontaneous workers' uprising. Their pronouncements on the class struggle tend to be oversimplified. Their language is plain, forceful, partisan, but rarely analytical...They do not understand the power facing them..." (46).

It is during the Goldfield mining strike that Mac is faced with a moral dilemma: Maisie has written to tell him that she is pregnant and very distressed. Mac wants to continue assisting with the miners strike, but he also feels he has an obligation to Maisie. Here, and throughout the trilogy, socialists treat the idea of marriage as a betrayal and an acceptance of bourgeois ideals. Fred Hoff warns Mac that "A wobbly oughtn't to have any wife or children, not till after the revolution," but Ben Evans is more explicitly misogynistic in his advice to Mac: "...Mac, if a girl wasn't a goddam whore she wouldn't let you, would she?...Love 'em and leave 'em, that's the only way for stiffs like us" (82-83).

Oddly enough, critics have mainly sided with the view of the socialists in this decision. Lisa Nanney sees this as the point at which "Mac deserts the movement and betrays his own ideals for the comforts of a middle-class life and marriage" (179) and Frederick Feied describes the choice as one between Mac's "obligation...to carry on for the revolution and his desire for comfort and companionship" (45). Donald Pizer even goes so far as to say, "Mac's narrative now becomes a version of a medieval morality play. Hayward and Maisie are the good and evil angels who seek to persuade Mac as Everyman to adopt a course of action that will determine the fate of his soul" (121). Such interpretations point to the danger of reading Dos Passos through the lens of political orthodoxy. To begin, the miner's strike is already failing by the time Mac makes his decision to leave. The Western Federation of Miners (WFM) has already turned against the workers; instead of showing solidarity with the I.W.W. they have already begun talks with a Washington delegate about how to break the strike. Secondly, it is difficult to read Maisie as an allegorical representation of evil, and although Pizer's argument that Maisie is "a caricature of the feminine aspiration to middle-class status through the acquisition of a husband, home, and family,"(121) might have some truth to it, at this point in the novel Maisie has revealed little of

her obsession with money and mass consumerism. Moreover, nowhere in *The 42nd Parallel*—or anywhere else in the *U.S.A.* trilogy— does Dos Passos demonize those who pursue a domestic life. Even within the biography of Eugene Debs, the novel’s socialist *par excellence*, Dos Passos praises the ideal of men who want, “a house with a porch to putter around and a fat wife to cook for them, a few drinks and cigars, a garden to dig in, cronies to chew the rag with and wanted to work for it” (20).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that Mac’s decision is between loyalty to an institution and loyalty to an individual to which he has some deal of responsibility, and Dos Passos always favors individuals over institutions. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos revisits this same moral choice with Ben Compton and Mary French, both of whom are working on a strike when Mary gets pregnant. In this episode, however, Ben argues that a baby “would distract him from his work and that...there’d be plenty of time for that sort of thing after the revolution. Now was the time to fight,” and that Mary “could have the baby if she wanted to but it would spoil her usefulness in the struggle for several months and he didn’t think this was the time for it” (359). Although Fred Hoff’s rhetoric in *The 42nd Parallel* is strikingly similar to Ben Compton’s in *The Big Money*, critics point to the former episode as an example of a weak-spirited socialist betraying his cause and the latter as an example of blatant sexual exploitation and an indicator that Dos Passos was vilifying members of the political left. Critics have arrived at these conclusions by artificially imposing a certain political agenda on each novel; they have constructed the myth of the “radical” and “conservative” portions of the trilogy and consciously choose to analyze them as such.

In fact, Ben Compton’s reaction to Mary’s pregnancy is not surprising; throughout the entire trilogy Dos Passos not only associates misogyny with socialist characters but establishes it as a fundamental socialist doctrine. Within the socialist ranks there are two schools of thought about women. The first school, of which Uncle Tim would be a representative member, feels that women are to be feared and avoided. Ben Compton’s socialist mentor, Nick Gigli, warned him that “a revolutionist ought to be careful about the girls he went around with, women took a classconscious working man’s mind off his aims, they were the main seduction of capitalist society” (*BM* 342)². This fear, however, only applies to women who seek domesticity, stability, and love. For women to be accepted within the socialist party, they must be emotionally detached from sexual relations and treat sex as socialists treat any other commodity—it must be

freely shared among the community of socialist workers. In *1919* the socialist Webb, who rejects love as “bourgeois nonsense” is enraged when Daughter refuses his sexual advances and attempts to force himself on her (218-219). In Mexico, Encarnacion is accepted into the socialist ranks because, as Mac’s friend Pablo explains, she is a “nice girl...Not goddam whore...not pay, she nice working girl...comrade” (42nd 101). G.H. Barrow, who is actually a capitalist giving lip service to the socialist cause, nevertheless uses socialist rhetoric to refer to monogamy as “bourgeois morality,” which pressures Mary French into saying that she doesn’t “believe in conventional marriage either” (103). Even when Maisie was first rejecting Mac’s sexual advances he muses that if she did not reject socialist politics then he could talk her into sleeping with him: “God he was sick of whoring round. If Maisie would only be a sport, if Maisie was only a rebel you could talk to like you could to a friend” (71). Considering the views on gender and sexuality that Mac has been conditioned to believe by his socialist peers, his decision to return to Maisie is even more laudable.

This being said, Mac’s actual marriage to Maisie does eventually become destructive due to her rampant materialism. Mac struggles just to pay the grocery and hospital bills while Maisie reads catalogs and talks about ordering new appliances for the house. Maisie compounds their financial problems when her brother Bill—who’s “talk about money ma[kes] her drunk”(94)—offers to let Mac in on a real estate offer and Maisie coerces him to accept. By this point Mac is virtually enslaved to the capitalist system; when he has a job he is working just to pay interest and when he doesn’t he finds himself buried even deeper in debt. Although Maisie’s materialism and Bill’s real estate investment scheme do hurt Mac financially, Dos Passos emphasizes the role the less avoidable expenses—Maisie’s pregnancies, the cost of food, Rose’s illness—play in accumulating Mac’s debt. Mac’s predicament is another reason for the inevitable failure of socialism within the trilogy; within a capitalist system the financial necessities of raising a family prove too great for the working class and thus socialist beliefs eventually create domestic tension, especially for someone as infatuated with consumerism as Maisie. As Colley has noted, “Dos Passos is not obliged to say whether he believes that men are alienated by the capitalist system of productive relations or by the nature of human life itself. Indeed, where capitalism rules, the two are effectively the same...” (82). It is, in fact, not Maisie’s spending that causes her and Mac’s relationship to dissolve but her preoccupation with having money and material possessions, which causes her to apply constant pressure on Mac to earn more money. It is not

surprising that an argument over money is what finally creates the impetus for their separation and Mac's subsequent journey to Mexico.

Mac's final narrative sequence finds him where he has been selling books and furniture and has settled down with a Mexican woman named Concha in Vera Cruz. Mac briefly considers returning to the United States without Concha, but after Alvaro Obregon's bid to overthrow the president is successful Mac sells his ticket and stays in Vera Cruz. Critics have variously said of this narrative segment, "Mac's defeat was utter and complete" (Feied 46), that he finally succumbed to the "ease of petit bourgeois involvement in the benefits of capitalism" (Nanney 180), that he experienced "the death of the self that is the self-betrayal of the best part of one's nature" (Pizer *U.S.A.* 121), or simply that "his fate, at the end of his personal history, is not evil or tragic but disappointing" (Colley 82). While there may be some level of disappointment at the end of Mac's narrative, it is more a general rather than a personal disappointment. Mac's domestic life with Concha is his ideal; she is infertile so Mac will not have to worry about the expenses of a large family, instead of looking to Mac as a source of income she works with Mac and acts as a financial manager for him, and she tolerates Mac's political views. Unlike the political orthodoxy of so many of the trilogy's other characters, Concha represents a sensible and pragmatic middle ground between the philosophies of socialism and capitalism. Concha ends all of Mac's political arguments with the truism: "Every poor man socialista... a como no? But when you get rich, quick you all very much capitalista" (243). Even Concha's cats Porfirio and Venustiano are named for Porfirio Diaz, Mexico's pre-revolution capitalist president, and Venustiano Carranza, Mexico's (moderately) socialist president who took office in 1914. After Mac's life of poverty and disappointment within the ranks of the socialist movement and his life of anxiety and debt within the capitalist system he has finally found a middle ground that will provide him with the domestic life he has been looking for. Mac has no need to return home because in the United States he never had a home; it is only in revolutionary Mexico that Mac finds what he has searched the United States for, and, if anything, this is the only note of disappointment in Mac's narrative. While Dos Passos uses Mac's narrative to present the idea that the old political ideologies have failed the working class of the United States, he is unable to offer the hope of a new system.

Granville Hicks, in a review of *The 42nd Parallel* he wrote for the *New Republic*, identifies the novel, as well as Dos Passos himself, with radical politics. Hicks writes, "Dos

Passos is a radical. This is important, not because his social views color his novels—though they do—but because his communistic theories give him a definite and advantageous attitude toward the material he works with...” Hicks went on to say of Dos Passos, “All his temperamental longing for a world of peace and beauty and security has been canalized in his determination to build such a world in fact and upon the ruins of the existing order” (“Dos Passos’ Gifts” 96-97). With his allusion to the Wobbly catchphrase, “building a new society in the shell of the old,” Hicks rhetorically aligns Dos Passos with the I.W.W., despite the fact that this organization had been on the decline for the better part of a decade when Hicks wrote his review. While *The 42nd Parallel* does attack capitalism, it is a far cry from socialist propaganda. At times the novel takes pity on the I.W.W., especially on certain of its individual members, but Dos Passos ultimately cannot accept an organization so fractured and ineffectual.

Critics such as Hicks mistook Dos Passos’s dissatisfaction with the capitalist system for loyalty to a socialist or communist one. It is true that Dos Passos did flirt with the idea of these political doctrines, but he was always evasive when asked about the nature of his politics. One of the most interesting statements Dos Passos ever made about his politics was his response to a questionnaire published in the *Modern Quarterly* in the summer of 1932, the same year that *1919* was published and the year that Dos Passos is considered, by many critics, to be as engrossed in radical politics as he will ever be. The first question the magazine asked was, “Do you believe that American capitalism is doomed to inevitable failure and collapse?” Dos Passos responded, “Sure, but the question is when. We’ve got the failure, at least from my point of view. What I don’t see is the collapse.” Another question asked about what the relationship between the writer and radical politics should be, specifically whether or not a writer should “write what he feels regardless of the party’s philosophy,” to which Dos Passos responded that, “It’s his own goddam business. Some people are natural party men and others are natural scavengers and campfollowers...I personally belong to the scavenger and campfollower section.” When asked how he felt about socialism, Dos Passos said, “I should think that becoming a socialist right now would have just about the same effect on anybody as drinking a bottle of near-beer.” Finally, in what was perhaps the most interesting question fielded by Dos Passos, the journal asked Dos Passos why he felt that the effort to create a proletarian literature in the United States had been largely unsuccessful, to which he replied: “It seems to me that Marxians who attempt to junk the American tradition...are just cutting themselves off from the continent. Somebody’s got to have

the size to Marxianize the American tradition before you can sell the American worker on the social revolution. Or else Americanize Marx” (*MNP* 149-150). Even at the supposed height of his involvement with radical politics, Dos Passos’s response to any established political system was lukewarm at best. This was the year that Dos Passos had signed his name—along with a number of other writers and artists—to the pamphlet *Culture and Crisis*, which was an endorsement of the communist presidential candidate William Z. Foster; Dos Passos’s endorsement of Foster, however, was not so much an endorsement of communism as it was a statement of dissatisfaction with mainstream politicians (Diggins 82). Dos Passos’s most interesting statement, however, is his idea that social revolution can only be achieved if one is to “Americanize Marx.” Again, Dos Passos is concerned about the radical movement’s lack of pragmatism, and he rejects the idea that an “imported system of thought” will be able to appeal to the masses, especially when the xenophobic anxieties of the middle (and poor white) class were one of the labor movement’s largest obstacles. Dos Passos did not feel it was impossible to cultivate the revolutionary spirit within the context of American thought. In the same questionnaire Dos Passos asserted, “Walt Whitman’s a hell of a lot more revolutionary than any Russian poet I’ve ever heard of” (*MNP* 150). The primary importance of Americanizing Marx, however, is the possibility of creating a revolutionary system of thought that could appeal to the middle class as well. Dos Passos said of the middle class, in an article for the *New Republic*, that middle-class liberals “are the only class to which neutrality is possible in any phase of the struggle,” also adding, “Even neutrality,” however, would “be difficult, and to many even the coolest neutrality is going to look like Red radicalism” (qtd. in Ludington 291). Dos Passos’s view was that the exploiting classes had been so successful in their slanted rhetoric and in cultivating a negative public image of the labor movement that even neutrality would be considered subversive; however, Dos Passos also feared that, given the opportunity, those involved in the labor movement could create an equivalent problem. Dos Passos feared that any interested party who was suddenly given control could possibly create a system just as corrupt as the one it had replaced.

These fears had developed during the writing of *The 42nd Parallel*, when Dos Passos traveled to Russia. Although he enjoyed his trip and found a great deal of inspiration in the country (Dos Passos’s montage technique for the Newsreel and to some degree Camera Eye sections were heavily influenced by Russian filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein), he had his

doubts about the success of the “Russian experiment.” After a trip to a local café, Dos Passos wondered to himself, “Was the poverty and the desolation the ground being cleared for future building, or was it just the results of oldfashioned ignorant centralized oppression?...Was this waiter with a dirty apron happier now than under the Czar” (qtd. in Ludington 272). Many had welcomed the new government as liberators, but were now trying to escape the country for fear of them. Dos Passos spoke with a Trotskyite couple who felt that escape from the country was their only hope for survival. “We are doomed,” the man confided to Dos Passos, “You know they always come at night. No arrests are ever seen. No one who sees them ever dares tell anyone. Nothing is ever known.” Dos Passos later wrote that, “It was terror I’d seen in the man’s eyes...” (qtd. in Ludington 274). Experiences like these would cause Dos Passos to wonder, “Are the Russians building socialism as they think they are” (268)? His experiences in Russia made Dos Passos distrust any political organization who looked solely to the Soviets for guidance and inspiration. More than ever he was convinced that only an American conception of Marxism which included both the middle and the working class had a chance of success.

Dos Passos drew his portrait of the middle class American in the character of Daughter in *1919*. Daughter’s narrative reveals Dos Passos’s feelings about the opportunity of radical movements to court middle-class liberals and the obstacles involved, both those that are inherent and those the radical left create for themselves. The most prominent characteristic of Daughter is the fact that her real name, Anne Elizabeth Trent, is almost never used, and even well into her adult life she goes by Daughter. This epithet suggests her naiveté; it is almost as if Daughter is trapped in a state of perpetual childhood. She is raised to hold traditional American values dear and to believe wholeheartedly in the infallibility of God and country. “The Trents lived in a house on Pleasant avenue that was the finest street in Dallas that was the biggest and fastest growing town in Texas that was the biggest state in the Union and had the blackest soil and the whitest people and America was the greatest country in the world and Daughter was Dad’s onlyest sweetest little girl” (*1919* 204).

Daughter’s mother died at an early age, and throughout her narrative Daughter is always defined by her relationships with other men: her father, her brother, and her several boyfriends. Daughter’s romantic relationships mirror her flirtation with differing social and political views. Joe Washburn is the all-American boy from Daughter’s hometown with whom she is perpetually infatuated. Joe becomes a lawyer, like her father, joins her father’s firm, and generally becomes

a replica of her father—a trait she clearly finds attractive about him. When Daughter moves to New York, however, she begins to encounter several men with radical political views who open her eyes to the social conditions of the lower class.

The first is Edwin Vinal, who quotes from Veblen and is more of a left-wing social activist than a member of any particular radical political party. Vinal attempts to erode Daughter's programmed racism; when Daughter makes the statement that, "We oughtn't to let all those foreigners come over and mess up our country," he makes his argument in religious terms to appeal to her conservative background: "You're a Christian, aren't you, well, have you ever thought that Christ was a Jew" (1919 211-212)? Edwin's argument clearly has an impact on Daughter, whose internal crisis is manifested in a nightmare in which she imagines herself simultaneously losing her connection with her father and trying to shoot a "big Jew with a beard" while Vinal's phrase, "You're a Christian aren't you," becomes an accusatory refrain (212-213). Vinal is perhaps one of the most attractive radical figures within the narratives as he has not put his faith in any particular party and he is attempting to take his commitment to his ideals outside the realm of theory; he does social work and teaches English to poor eastern European immigrants. Vinal's strong moral character is also shown in his relationship with Daughter; he is one of the few male characters in the trilogy not interested in sexual exploitation. Vinal's attitude towards his relationship with Daughter is an inversion of the socialist attitude towards sex in the trilogy. Although they have not had sexual relations, Vinal gets engaged to Daughter, and doesn't mind that "she didn't want to marry anybody for a couple of years yet," claiming that "he didn't care about carnal marriage but that the important thing was for them to plan a life of service together" (213). Vinal's downfall, however, is that his dedication to social causes has divorced him altogether from his sexuality and other natural aspects of life. Even when Vinal is engaged to Daughter he would only, "kiss her on the forehead when he said Goodnight" (213) and their relationship finally comes to an end because she chooses to study journalism instead of education or sociology. Vinal's prudishness and detachment from life strikes an ironic contrast with the man whose insights he has modeled his life after: Thorstein Veblen. Veblen's philandering was notorious; Nils Gilman relates how the dean of the University of Chicago once had to approach Veblen over stories that he had been having extramarital affairs with the wives of his colleagues. "The dean began by saying, 'We have a problem with the faculty wives.' 'Oh yes, I know,' Veblen allegedly rejoined, with a solemn shake of the head. 'They're terrible. I've

had them all””(689). Dos Passos was also an admirer of Veblen’s work, and although he might not have endorsed the kind of sexual promiscuity that marked Veblen’s personal life, he wouldn’t have approved of Vinal’s prudishness either. Vinal’s character shows that by reasoning to the middle class and appealing to their sense of community and basic morality a slow ideological shift may be possible. Vinal also shows, however, the ways that an overly zealous dedication to any cause can lead one to irrational behavior. Although Vinal only sees the benefits of direct work with the lower classes, Daughter’s decision to study journalism would give her the opportunity to make a larger impact than Vinal himself. Another criticism of those involved in radical politics that Dos Passos continually touches on is the focus on small, localized victories instead of on the struggle to change the views of the larger public. Although Vinal’s social work is noble, a career in journalism would give Daughter the ability to help shape a different public view of the lower classes.

After her relationship with Vinal dissolves, Daughter has a series of small affairs in her life. She meets Ben Compton, the socialist, who Daughter is interested in, but she does not pursue him because of her racism. “Daughter sized up that he was attractive, even though he was probably a Jew” (215-216).

The next relationship Daughter has is with Webb Cruthers, the anarcho-syndicalist. Not only does Webb attempt to sexually exploit Daughter using the kind of “free love” rhetoric that is common throughout the radical characters, but he also flees the scene of a textile mill strike when his friend Ben Compton is arrested. Daughter despises Webb’s cowardice so much that she becomes confused as to where her sympathies lie.

This changes, however, when Daughter returns to the picket line again several days later and the police break this gathering up as well. As the crowd disperses, a retreating young woman falls in front of Daughter. “Daughter caught the scared look in her eyes that were round and black. Daughter stepped forward to help her up but two policemen were ahead of her swinging their nightsticks. Daughter thought they were going to help the girl up. She stood still for a second, frozen in her tracks when she saw one of the policeman’s feet shoot out. He’d kicked the girl full in the face” (220). This scene of police brutality shocks Daughter, who has been raised to believe in the basic goodwill of the police. Daughter’s reaction to this shock is to flail wildly at the police officer, punching him in the face and chest until she is bludgeoned with a nightstick and thrown into the back of a police wagon. Daughter’s reaction to the police shows

that she still has faith in the basic goodness of middle-class liberals. Although they may have been programmed to hold certain views about the lower class, other ethnicities, and radical politics in general, when exposed to the truth of the workers' plight and the injustices of the exploiting class they respond accordingly. Unfortunately, the middle class is rarely exposed to the unadulterated truth, as it is filtered through news reports that distort the truth. After the attack on Daughter and the nameless protestor the headlines read, "TEXAS BELLE ASSAULTS COP," (220) and Daughter's family becomes ashamed of what they assume is her inappropriate behavior.

This epistemological crisis experienced by the middle class is exhibited in Daughter's final relationship, which is with public relations expert Dick Savage. Savage, along with J. Ward Moorehouse, acts as the mouthpiece for the exploiting classes. Dick quickly and easily seduces her, impregnates her, and finally abandons her.

Daughter's episode portrays the middle class as naïve, racist, and easily charmed by the rhetoric of the exploiting class; at the same time, however, the middle class possesses a strong moral center that can be appealed to and they are shown to be fellow victims of capitalist exploitation. Although the middle class has its faults, Dos Passos suggests that it is the lack of a strong, cohesive radical movement that is partially to blame.

Of course, it is perhaps unfair to speak of the politics of *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919* and not emphasize the relentless attacks Dos Passos makes on the capitalist system and what he refers to as the "exploiting class." His attack on the ruling class—which is consistent throughout all four modes and three novels—makes it clear that Dos Passos is dissatisfied with the state of politics in the early twentieth century. Certainly Dos Passos involved himself with radical groups, publications, and individuals and even the occasional radical politician. Still, this does not amount to an endorsement of any particular political system.

The most damning evidence for Dos Passos's political swing in *The Big Money* is his treatment of the socialists in regard to the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. Mary French and Don Stevens are both Sacco and Vanzetti supporters, but as the execution date nears, they take very different stances on how to proceed. Mary wants to apply political pressure to the governor, who may very well commute the sentence, while Don organizes a violent demonstration that will rally different socialist groups but will effectively destroy any hopes of getting the sentence

commuted. “After all,” reasons Don, “they are brave men. It doesn’t matter whether they are saved or not any more, it’s the power of the workingclass that’s got to be saved” (*BM* 367).

While critics have pointed to this moment—the moment at which the socialist movement sees the opportunity to grow stronger at the cost of Sacco and Vanzetti’s lives and cashes in on it—as Dos Passos’s final break with the left, the socialist betrayal of Sacco and Vanzetti had been planned from the beginning; its origins were back in 1926 when the Communist party interfered with the efforts of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee.

It is clear that the Sacco-Vanzetti execution had a dramatic impact on Dos Passos. In *Camera Eye* 50 Dos Passos draws a line in the sand, writing, “...all right we are two nations.” Still, one should not interpret this statement as Irving Howe has, as the moment when, “the class struggle...came to be the flesh and pain of daily life” (15). As Barbard Foley has observed, Dos Passos “declares, ‘all right we are two nations’—not ‘all right we are two classes’” (426) and although class may play some role in drawing the battle lines it must be remembered that there were members of the upper class who fought for Sacco and Vanzetti’s release. Dos Passos’s two nations are comprised, instead, of those who value political power over individual rights and those who refuse to support the political establishment. Yes, most of the members of Dos Passos’s sinister nation are wealthy, that is how they “hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the college presidents...” (371) etc., but the people they hire are complicit in their crimes as well.

Worst of all, this sinister nation has “taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul” (*BM* 371). As Dos Passos asserts in his introduction to the *U.S.A.* trilogy, “mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people” (42nd xiv). Dos Passos looks to the nation’s founding fathers as a body of leaders who shared in this speech and codified it in the unalienable rights they granted to the nation’s citizens. While men like Thayer may be the biological heirs of the founding fathers, Dos Passos rhetorically disinherits them for perverting the ideological systems of their ancestors; he refers to Thayer’s sinister nation as “strangers” while aligning the founding fathers and the “old American speech of the haters of oppression” with the “old words of the immigrants,” making men like Sacco and Vanzetti the heirs to the country. And while the sinister nation has defeated America and still inhabits the seats of power, “the men of the conquering nation are not to be seen on the streets...the streets belong to the beaten nation” (*BM* 370-371). Again, Dos Passos’s vision of the authentic America is exceptionally Whitmanesque;

the true American thrives on the streets, commingling with the crowd, listening to the true, authentic speech of the common man.

In the end, it would be difficult to pigeonhole *U.S.A.* as a statement of either radicalism or conservatism. Dos Passos believes that it is the people who are commonly called conservatives who have made liberal changes to American democracy, therefore his call at the end of *The Big Money* to return to the “old words” of the founding fathers is difficult to position as a statement of radicalism or conservatism. Is Dos Passos radical for wanting to buck the established order or conservative for looking to the past for a political model? Dos Passos’s views on labor complicate matters further. If Dos Passos is a radical for wanting to hand more power over to the labor unions then why doesn’t he regularly support the Communist and Socialist Parties? It is not surprising then that the politics of *U.S.A.* are the source of some confusion and debate. If Dos Passos would not fit into any particular ideology critics would simply accuse him of being fanatical about one. In the tense political climate of the 1920’s and early 1930’s, few critics could accept a writer who would not commit to a political party, who, like Fighting Bob La Follette, was a “willful man expressing no opinion but his own” (42nd 288).

CHAPTER TWO

“IN THE WHIRRING HEARTS OF MACHINES”: TECHNOLOGY AND THE MECHANICAL STATE IN THE *U.S.A.* TRILOGY

While the classification of Dos Passos as a political novelist is complicated by the fact that he does not endorse any particular political system, there is no doubt that his novels are politicized, but to what end? One answer would be that his novels are an attack on the capitalist system, but if Dos Passos is not willing to adhere to any other system of thought, what is the inherent drawback of capitalism that he is railing against? What is Dos Passos saying? What is his theme? What is the common thread that allows *U.S.A.* to act as a trilogy?

To begin, one must return to Sacco and Vanzetti and Dos Passos's impetus for writing the trilogy. Going back to the summary of the case that Dos Passos wrote for the *New Masses* in 1926, it is worth noting that he imagined that Sacco and Vanzetti came over to the United States in hopes of living in “free communities of artisans and farmers and fishermen and cattlebreeders who would work for their livelihood with pleasure, because the work was itself enjoyable in the serene white light of a reasonable world” (*MNP* 90-91). The pastoral nature of Dos Passos's utopian vision is somewhat curious, especially considering that Sacco and Vanzetti lived in a reasonably urban environment and Vanzetti even worked in a factory. It is not clear if Dos Passos was suggesting that the Italian immigrants imagined the United States as a place where such communities were possible or if the development of such communities was the goal of their particular brand of anarchism, but either way it seems to be more Dos Passos's vision than it is theirs. Sacco and Vanzetti certainly wanted a better life for the working class and sought to abolish the capitalist government, but at no time do they suggest that urban life is problematic.

It is a suggestion, however, that Dos Passos makes time and again. His play *Airways, Inc.*, written for the New Playwrights Theater shortly before he started work on the *U.S.A.* trilogy, was less about socialism (despite the political motives of the New Playwrights) and more about the dangers of modern life in an industrial world. The play follows the lives of the Turner family as they try to find their place—both socially and economically—within a small, nameless American town that acts as a microcosm of the entire country. Dos Passos said that the play was an attempt at developing “socially creative ideas...the new myth that's got to be created to replace the imperialist prosperity myth if the machinery of American life is ever to be gotten

under social control” (qtd. in Aaron 348-349). Dos Passos’s play seemed so critical of modern technology that critic Edmund Wilson said the play made him want “to rush to the defense of even the American bathroom, even the Ford car—which, after all, one begins to reflect, have perhaps done as much to save the people from the helplessness, ignorance, and squalor as all the prophets of revolution have done” (34). *Airways, Inc.*, as Wilson suggests, aligned machines and the desire to create with moral deficiency and a willingness to exploit other human beings. In Dos Passos’s view, the danger of modern technology was not just physical, but mental, emotional, and spiritual as well. After the Ohio prison fire of 1930 (which left 320 inmates dead after guards refused to unlock the cells), for example, Dos Passos was shocked at the lack of protest and blamed modern technology for eroding the ability of Americans to feel empathy. He wrote that since the beginning of the 20th century and especially the years following the First World War, “the rapid mechanization of life had entirely dulled the imaginative response (putting yourself in the other man’s place) that’s biologically at the bottom of feelings of mercy and compassion” (*MNP* 131).

Even as far back as his days at Harvard, Dos Passos was warning anyone who would listen about the dangers of science, the “steel-girded goddess, with her halo of factory smoke and her buzzing chariot wheels of industry...leading the procession of human thought which follows so tamely in her trail” (qtd. in Pizer 31). Science, Dos Passos posited, has built “a silly claptrap of unnecessary luxuries, a clutter of inessentials which has been the great force to smother the arts of life and the arts of creation” (33). There was something about the machine that bothered Dos Passos both on a literal and symbolic level. At times he even imagines machines in the same way that many modern filmmakers have, as conscious beings themselves that seek to wipe out humanity. He was interested in Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, specifically a chapter called “The Book of the Machines,” which “tells fantastically how all complicated machinery was abolished in this country of Erewhon because the inhabitants feared lest it should eventually find itself conscious and enslave the race of men.” Dos Passos notes: “There is a profound thought in this idea” (33-34). He continues this idea in *Airways, Inc.*, when the Professor muses that, “In the hearts of a million men the thought grows, in the whirring hearts of the machines there is a will” (73).

It is no wonder that the machines seem dangerous within the context of Dos Passos’s worldview: they ran the factories that enabled monopoly capitalism, they were the products

sought after by a public bent on conspicuous consumption, they fueled the Great War in Europe, and they rendered the jobs of many working-class Americans obsolete. Even if it is not conscious, the machine, as it is a single unit composed of many parts operating with a cold logic, also functioned as a perfect symbol of the oppressing class for Dos Passos, who often imagined the upper class as a sinister cabal plotting the enslavement of the rest of the country. Early in his career Dos Passos felt that the working class would have to operate with this kind of singular purpose if it had any chance in the face of the strength of the oppressing class. The Professor in *Airways, Inc.* therefore says that “we must turn our hearts into dynamos, our blood into electric current” (141). Later, however, Dos Passos would consider the machine too vulgar a symbol for his desire for working class solidarity. The machine, therefore, is always signified as a collective force that stands in direct opposition to the powerlessness of the individual.

Oddly enough, Dos Passos does not criticize those who have invented the machines, reserving his criticism solely for the companies who, in Dos Passos’s opinion, corrupt their intended use. His biography of Thomas Edison in *The 42nd Parallel*, for example, depicts Edison as a hard-working, innovative “tinkerer,” a word that removes from Edison the negative connotations Dos Passos would associate with the products he invented. Dos Passos wrote of Edison that he “never for a moment allowed himself to envisage the importance of the changes in the organization of human life that his inventions were to bring about,” and that he “would have resented it if anyone had suggested to him that his work would destroy homes, wreck morals, and help end the individual toiler’s world he was brought up in” (qtd. in Ludington 281). Dos Passos criticizes the incandescent light bulb and electric stock ticker with the kind of rhetoric most in that day reserved for hard liquor and prostitution, yet he imagines Edison as a naïve and unwitting Pandora, transmitting the evils of modernity through a carbon filament.

Dos Passos is similarly kind to the Wright brothers in their biography in *The Big Money*. Although the biography has an ominous tone at times—they almost kill a coastguardsman, test their take-offs from Kill Devil Hill, and play “Diabolo in the Tuileries gardens”—Dos Passos ultimately praises their dedication to their craft, writing, “The Wrights don’t seem to have been very much impressed by the upholstery and the braid and the gold medals and the parades of plush horses, / they remained practical mechanics” (*BM* 225). For Dos Passos, the inventor who stays focused on his work without being distracted by fame, recognition, and, above all, the possibility of wealth is the ideal craftsman. If one’s motivations are in the proper place then the

accomplishment of their innovation can remain untainted by whatever future uses it has. This seems to be especially true of the Wright brothers, whose machine Dos Passos holds in particularly ill regard and yet whose accomplishment he praises. Dos Passos writes:

...in the snorting impact of bombs and the whine and rattle of shrapnel and the sudden stutter of machineguns after the motor's been shut off overhead...the Wright brothers passed out of the headlines / but not even headlines or the bitter smear of newsprint or the choke of smokescreen and gas or chatter of brokers on the stockmarket...can blur the memory / of the chilly December day / two shivering bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, / first felt their homemade contraption / whittled out of hickory sticks, / gummed together with Arnstein's bicycle cement / stretched with muslin they'd sewn...in their own backyard...soar into the air / above the dunes and the wide beach / at Kitty Hawk. (226).

Although the airplane has military (“bombs...shrapnel...machineguns”), industrial (“choke of smokescreen and gas”), and commercial (“chatter of brokers on the stockmarket”) associations for Dos Passos, he divorces the Wright brothers’ invention from all of these things by associating it with nature (“chilly December day...hickory sticks...soar into the air / above the dunes and the wide beach”) and by establishing the Wright brothers—like Edison—as essentially tinkers (“homemade contraption...gummed together with Arnstein’s bicycle cement...in their own backyard”). It is the “rush of new names: Farman, Blériot, Curtiss, Ferber, Esnault-Peltrie, Delagrange...” (226) that profit from and ultimately corrupt the airplane. Again, Dos Passos is hesitant to blame the original inventor or innovator for producing a corrupt invention; it is generally those that expropriate that invention who receive the true blame. The expropriation and subsequent misuse of airplanes turns up several times in Dos Passos’s writing, in *U.S.A.* with the Tern Company’s acquisition of Charley Anderson’s Askew-Merritt company and in *Airways, Inc.* with the Chamber of Commerce’s manipulation of Elmer and his airplane.

For Dos Passos the airplane held a special significance as a particularly loathsome machine. It is a modern Icarus myth, a metaphor for the hubris of the mechanized age. In *Airways Inc.* the airplane serves as a symbol of the greedy and foolishly optimistic bourgeoisie who lack the prescience to see that the inventions they feel will bring them convenience and wealth will actually bring about their own destruction. Several of the characters get into the airline business, marveling at the machine’s power to get from “New York to Chi in eight hours,

rain or shine” (87), and hungry to get in on the ground floor of a swiftly developing industry. When the Chamber of Commerce decides to drop propaganda down on striking workers, Elmer, with the promise of “a hundred bucks an hour” and the desire to “put on a show for ‘em” (104) doesn’t hesitate to side against the workers, although he has no real interest in breaking up the strike. As is generally the case in Dos Passos, the “villain” here is not the individual (Elmer) but the faceless organization that actually wields the power (the Chamber of Commerce). The dangerous aerial maneuvers Elmer (who has also been drinking heavily) performs for the crowd corresponds with his reckless decision to accept a government bribe. The police shoot down Elmer’s plane just so they can frame one of the principal agitators and Elmer realizes too late that, like the workers, he is considered an expendable resource by those who hold power. As critic Robert Rosen has noted, *Airways, Inc.*, rather than focusing solely on the exploitation of the lower classes, also points out the ways in which the middle-class, white collar worker is just as much a slave to corporations (58).

In *U.S.A.*, like *Airways Inc.*, there is something dangerous, even reckless about air travel. The trilogy contains three flight-related deaths, none of which are the result of air combat and all of which feature a circumstance which heightens the danger of the flight; Buddy Trent’s airplane was not properly maintained, Bill Cermack and Charley Anderson crash on a test flight, and Daughter finds her flight spinning out of control after climbing in the cockpit with a drunk pilot.

The novel’s most memorable image of the airplane comes in the final biography, that of the vagrant. While the vagrant walks and hitchhikes, attempting to get a “hundred miles down the road,” the narrative suddenly cuts to the business traveler flying by overhead. The vast amount of territory covered by the transcontinental passenger reminds the reader of the vagrant’s narrative that opens the novel, except that while the vagrant experiences the richness of the country the business traveler merely covers territory. While the vagrant has felt the “cold razorwind” (42nd xiv) off Lake Michigan, the traveler can see only a “string of lights” (BM 447) along Lake Erie; while the vagrant has slept “among frozen beartracks in the Yellowstone” (42nd xiv), the traveler catches only the faint hint of sweetgrass above Cheyenne. The business traveler experiences life only in large, impressionistic brushstrokes, “a glimpse of the dipper,” “puddles of mist,” “steel glint from a river,” and the “sunny dazzle of Salt Lake” (BM 447). The airplane passenger doesn’t stop to consider even these small glimpses, however; his mind is on “contracts, profits, vacationtrips...power, wires humming dollars...”(448). Again, the airplane

and its passengers are affiliated with the business world. The plane is a privileged form of travel; it is exclusively (at least in the early 20th century) for the upper class and unlike the railroad there is no opportunity for a free ride. The airplane is also moving at a frenzied pace; it is the next evolutionary step in “history the billiondollar speedup,” and while its pace causes the business traveler to vomit “into the carton container the steak and mushrooms he ate in New York,” it is “no matter...plenty restaurants in L.A.” (448). For the air traveler meals are no longer things to be enjoyed but simply to be consumed; his meal is not an experience or a pleasure but a simple commodity—it came from a carton container and to a carton container it is returned. While the business traveler regurgitates his food overhead, the vagrant, whose “needs know the belly,” starves below.

The connection between airplanes and business is made explicit in the narrative of Charley Anderson. Anderson’s narrative, although primarily occurring in *The Big Money*, begins at the tail end of *The 42nd Parallel*. Charley learns to be a mechanic at a young age, working long hours at a car garage, tinkering with motors, and reading magazines like *Scientific American*. At the same time, Charley also develops a reckless nature; he borrows his boss’ truck without permission, drives it without a license, almost hits a cart full of young girls, and finally crashes it into a telephone pole. Still, the young Charley is not an altogether unattractive character. He works hard, he is sympathetic to socialist movements (although, like Dos Passos, he refuses to commit to one), and he is skilled at his craft.

At the end of *The 42nd Parallel* Charley goes to the war; by the time he has returned home in *The Big Money* he has made a name for himself as a pilot and is a local hero. Almost immediately upon returning home Charley’s brother Joe attempts to convince him to use his hero status to cash in on the popularity of the war. “They eat up this returnedhero stuff... With your connections in the Legion and aviation and all that kinder stuff, we’ll be jake,” Joe tells him, “Every other Ford dealer in the district’s got a German name” (27-28). Whether Charlie’s refusal of Joe’s offer is more about his aversion to exploiting patriotism for profit or whether it is simply self-interest is not entirely clear, but regardless Charlie has still resisted the temptation of the “Big Money.”

This begins to slowly change when Charley and his friend Joe start their own company to begin manufacture of an airplane motor Charley helped design. Charley also enlists the help of his friend Bill Cermack, who is a skilled mechanic and in charge of production at Charley’s

company. Bill represents Charley's life before his business involvement; Bill is hard-working, knows his craft, and respects his workers. Charley seems to respect Bill, telling him that "the pilot's nothin' without his mechanic, the promotor's (sic) nothin' without production...in five years now we'll be in the money and I'll see you're in the big money too" (*BM* 172). However, this elicits no response from Bill, who isn't seduced by the promise of the "Big Money."

Charley, however, is obsessed by the quest for the "Big Money," and his pursuit causes him to sell his stock in his own company in order to get in with Tern, a larger company based out of Detroit. Now Charley has not only transformed from technician to businessman, but he has completely sold out his invention in search of bigger profits. Newsreel LIX, which directly precedes Charley's arrival in Detroit, reads almost entirely like a brochure encouraging Americans to move to the motor city. The Newsreel lauds Detroit as the city that "LEADS THE WORLD IN THE / MANUFACTURE OF AUTOMOBILES" and claims that "DETROIT IS FIRST" in all manner of industrial products, including "Adding Machines...Marine Motors...Twist Drills...Gasoline Torches...In Foundry and Machine Shop Products," etc. The final slogan praises: "DETROIT THE CITY WHERE LIFE IS WORTH LIVING" (*BM* 227-228). The advertisement ironically associates quality of life with the drudgery of mechanical production. Regardless, the Newsreel does not point out the incompetence of the brochure writers so much as it highlights the growing importance of production and the associations between production and success in the American subconscious. The slogans use production as an easily quantifiable measure of Detroit's worth; Detroit "LEADS THE WORLD," "IS FIRST," and "RANKS HIGH" in production. The subtext is that where production is high there are jobs to be had and money to be made, both of which, for people such as Charley Anderson, equates to a higher quality of life.

After his move to Detroit, Charley's treatment of the working class becomes increasingly insensitive. When Bill complains to Charley about Staunch, the efficiency expert he's hired, Charley responds, "Staunch? Staunch's a genius at production." "Maybe," Bill responds, "but he don't give the boys any chance for reproduction...Honestly, no kiddin'. That damn squarehead make the boys work so hard they can't get a hard on when they go to bed, an' their wives raise hell with 'em." Charley, however, is unfazed. "We got to have efficient production or they'll wipe us out of business...We're goin' to fire the whole outfit...Hell, if they don't like it workin' for us let 'em try to like it workin' for somebody else" (246-247). However, when Bill pleads

with Charley on behalf of the workers again, Charley's response is a mixture of nostalgia and defeat: "The oldtime shop was a great thing, everybody kidded and smoked and told smutty stories, but the pressure's too great now. If every department don't click like a machine we're rooked" (249). Charley's rejection of Bill and his previous life as a worker and technician is complete. Immediately after their conversation Charley and Bill take off on an ill-fated test flight that leaves Charley hospitalized and kills Bill. Bill's death coincides with the symbolic death of everything Bill represented—the dedication to craft and hard work—to Charley.

While the plane crash that kills Bill is accidental, it is yet another event in the trilogy that portrays aviation as a dangerous venture. Not only are airplanes themselves considered dangerous, but it is also the aviation business itself, as a machine in its own right, that acts as a life-negating force. It is important here, however, to again make the distinction between the industry and the business of aviation. As a mechanic and worker Bill Cermack is untainted by his association with aviation, just as Charley was a positive character until his decision to leave behind the role of technician and become a businessman. As Diggins has observed:

If there is a scheme of social conflict in *U.S.A.* it is not labor against capital but the Veblenian cleavage of industry against business... Dos Passos's attitude toward various forms of human labor derived from a moral rather than a class distinction. Whether proletariat or professional, his fictional heroes were more interested in productivity than profit, guided by what Veblen called the "instinct of workmanship." Opposed to the worthy doers and makers stood the businessman, the antagonist who haunts the pages of Veblen's sociological treatises. With pecuniary gain as his sole objective, the businessman manipulates the economic levers of power and conspires against the productive instruments of the industrial system (109-110).

Business, in its goal to mechanize the elements of production (including the human elements), suffocates the "instinct of workmanship," which is tied to the enjoyment of labor. The "oldtime shop" that Charley speaks of was less profitable but it offered camaraderie and did not rely on the exploitation of any of its workers. As Charley's company merges with Tern and places a greater focus on profits, the hierarchy that separated the workers from the management became more defined, the workers were forced to work longer and harder, Charley began to work less, and even Charley's old friend, Bill Cermack, began to refer to him as "Boss." Charley's transformation, both of himself and his company, destroyed his quality of life, the quality of life

of his workers, and the kind of environment that allowed him to create an innovative new motor design. As Arnold Goldman has pointed out, the auto accident that ultimately proves fatal for Charley was caused by the failure of an engine starter—one of the very products Charley produced while he was still a technician (481). Even Charley's physical death, therefore, points back to the death of his innovative spirit which occurred when he left his old shop and entered into the more highly disciplined world of mass production.

Dos Passos places the blame for this new system of production—a system which treats individuals as complex pieces of machinery—at least partially on management consultant Fred Taylor. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos writes a biography of Taylor that paints him as somewhat cruel, somewhat inhuman, but ultimately just another individual who has been exploited by the system of monopoly capitalism. Taylor is characterized as ascetic, rigid, and obsessed with production. Like Charley, Taylor began his career as a worker: “he was a machinist with the other machinists in the shop, cussed and joked and worked with the rest of them, soldiered on the job when they did” (*BM* 16). When Taylor became a foreman, however, he sided with the management and created the “Taylor System of Scientific Management,” which not only further mechanized the factory itself, but mechanized the very process of labor. “He devised an improvised steamhammer; he standardized tools and equipment, he filled the shop with college students with stopwatches and diagrams, tabulating, standardizing...He broke up the foreman's job into separate functions, speedbosses, gangbosses, timestudy men, orderofwork men” (17). Taylor's scientific method of labor stands in direct contrast to Dos Passos's romanticized view of what manual labor should be like, which is perhaps best expressed by the Professor in *Airways Inc.*, who recalls the physical labor he performed as a youth: “Every time I moved it was a pleasure, the twist and untwist of my arms, my fingers tightening...All down the river, all over the world, work and fatigue flowed in a rhythm like a song” (66). Dos Passos sees physical labor as a positive activity that puts one in harmony with nature and other human beings, so long as the worker receives a fair wage and, above all, so long as the workload is fair. Taylor's scientific method of production not only intensifies the amount of labor performed, but perhaps more importantly removes the social element of labor, the importance of which Dos Passos continually highlights.

Despite single-handedly creating this oppressive system of production, the villainous aspects of Taylor's biography are mitigated by the perpetual signs that he, too, is a victim of the

machine he helps support. Many companies dispose of Taylor after they have incorporated his system of production and his penchant for paying higher wages to hard-working employees also gets him in trouble with management. Taylor's downfall, it would seem, is his belief in the "Big Money," a belief that "production would make every firstclass American rich who was willing to work at piecework and not drink or raise Cain or think or stand mooning at his lathe" (BM 19). It is the idea of the "Big Money" that fuels Dos Passos's mechanical civilization, not just for Taylor, but for all of his characters. Dos Passos titles the individual volumes of his trilogy to express what went into creating the socioeconomic environment of *U.S.A.* (both the novel and the physical location). The title *The 42nd Parallel* shows the importance of the nation and the journey across it while the title *1919* shows the importance of the historical moment with specific regard to the First World War, but perhaps the most important factor in shaping the nation in the early twentieth century is *The Big Money*, which is not actual wealth but an ideology, the false hope of the "American Dream." The "Big Money" mechanizes civilization through a two-fold process: it encourages the conspicuous consumption of mechanical goods, the "silly claptrap of unnecessary luxuries" Dos Passos bemoaned, and it provides a rationale for allowing oneself to be used as a machine by the capitalist system. Dos Passos's biography of Fred Taylor retains some degree of sympathy for him because ultimately he was not of those who were actually exploiting the workers; Taylor himself was consumed and assimilated—by the end of his life he had been abandoned by the companies he worked so hard for, and was found "dead with his watch in his hand" (BM 19)—by the capitalist machine.

One of the marks of Dos Passos's mechanical civilization is that human beings are both consumed by and assimilated into machines. It seems that the literal consumption of human beings is the greatest within the working class, who are broken down and consumed by businesses hungry for profit. An example of this could be found in Minor C. Keith's biography in *The 42nd Parallel*, "Emperor of the Caribbean." Keith takes seven hundred men to Limon to build his railroad for them, pays them only with free meals and a dollar a day, and "Of that bunch about twentyfive came out alive. / The rest left their whiskyscalded carcass[es] to rot in the swamps" (191). Keith responds by hiring another fifteen hundred workers, none of which survive. Dos Passos describes how Keith found himself with twenty miles of railroad, apparently costing him over one hundred workers per mile. Keith's biography is a continuous cycle of consumption in search of profits; he raises cattle and catches fish, but when that is not

profitable enough he chops up the cattle and fish and feeds them to hogs, when that is not profitable enough he goes to Limon and essentially kills workers in order to build a railroad, and when the railroad itself is not profitable he clears the jungle in order to plant banana trees so the railroads would have something to ship. Keith treats his workers as any other commodity, and accepts that they may need to be consumed if he is to turn a profit. Of course, the irony is that when Minor Keith dies his picture is in the papers, and he is lauded as the “pioneer of the fruit trade, the railroad builder” (42nd 192) despite the cost of these enterprises. The ideology of the “Big Money” holds wealth in esteem, despite what Machiavellian schemes have been perpetrated in order to achieve that wealth. Ironically, it also supports a near-sighted, naïve vision of how one can obtain wealth; just as Taylor felt that “the pigiron handler [working within the American System of Production] can invest his money and get to be an owner like Schab and the rest of the greedy small-eyed Dutchmen” (BM 19), the workers feel that if they allow themselves to be exploited, they might one day become a member of the exploiting class.

This is not to suggest, however, that the working class are the only characters in Dos Passos’s fiction who become mechanized. On the contrary, the upper middle class is at just as great, if not greater risk of falling victim to mechanization. If Dos Passos imagined the bodies of laborers being crushed by the capitalist machine, it is the souls of the upper classes he saw as being consumed by a mechanical society. A prime example of this is the narrative of J. Ward Moorehouse, who, like Charley Anderson, realizes Horatio Alger’s promise of a rags-to-riches transformation only to have his financial success correspond with moral failure. While Charley represents the technician who sacrifices his craft in search of profits, Moorehouse represents the intellectual who, in lieu of any particular innovation, commodifies himself by allowing finances to mould and reshape his very identity.

This is evidenced almost immediately in Moorehouse’s narrative through the evolution of his name. As a young adult he goes by the name Johnny Moorehouse, but when he is sent to Ocean City, Maryland on a business trip he begins to refer to himself as John Moorehouse, which soon becomes John W. Moorehouse and later, at the urging of his fiancé Annabelle, he begins to go by J. Ward Moorehouse, or simply “Ward” because she decides it is “more distinguished than John W.” (42nd 153). Moorehouse allows Annabelle to make these decisions for him because her father, Dr. Strang, has the capital and connections to further his career in real estate. Even when Moorehouse discovers that Annabelle has been promiscuous prior to and

during their relationship, even getting pregnant with another man's child, he decides that the opportunity for wealth that Annabelle represents still makes their marriage worthwhile. Moorehouse mused that "there was a chance if the [real estate] boom did come he might get in on the ground floor, and this connection with money and the Strangs; opportunity knocks but once at a young man's door" (42nd 152).

Moorehouse's use of a tired aphorism to rationalize his decision seems strange at this point in the narrative, but it is an early sign of his growing reliance upon the language and logic of business to simplify complex personal choices. By his honeymoon Moorehouse has compromised his decision to abstain from alcohol—not because he wanted a drink, but because his code of behavior has become based less on personal principles and more on social normalcy ("when in Rome do as the Romans do," he reasons (154)). Moorehouse is no longer able to distinguish between decisions that are good for his life and decisions that are good for business. While he and his wife harbor deep feelings of resentment for one another, on their honeymoon "Annabelle and Ward found that they made a good team," charming some of the wealthy and influential passengers on their ocean liner. Although Moorehouse spent the better part of their time on the ship seasick and Annabelle sick from her pregnancy, making contacts on the night of the captain's dinner made them feel "that all the seasick days had been thoroughly worth while" (154). Just as the travel guide for Detroit in Newsreel LIX associated production with quality of life, happiness for Moorehouse is dictated by finance; the significance of his honeymoon is that it allows him to consummate his (business) relationship with Annabelle. When the couple inevitably divorce, their communication is just as businesslike, with Annabelle trying to avoid publicity so that her father's practice won't suffer and Moorehouse asking for "compensation for the loss of time, etc., and the injury to my career" (161).

The next woman Moorehouse pursues, Gertrude Staple, comes from even wealthier stock; "she was the only daughter of old Horace Staple who was director of several corporations, and was reputed to own a big slice of Standard Oil stock" (198). When Gertrude's father prohibits her from marrying a poorer man, Moorehouse immediately abandons her. Later, however, when Moorehouse reads that her father has died, he immediately sends Gertrude a letter attempting to reconcile. Even Moorehouse's attempts at offering Gertrude his condolences take the same form as his advertisements; he begins to remind her, "In the valley of the shadow of death we must realize that the Great Giver to whom we owe all love and wealth and all

affection around the jocund fireside is also the Grim Reaper,” before deciding that “it was a bit thick” and removing the sentence altogether (201). By this point in his narrative, Moorehouse is only capable of the kind of stilted, ostentatious prose that he uses in advertising—genuine human emotion eludes him.

As Moorehouse’s career takes him from real estate to advertising and finally to public relations he finds increasing opportunities to put to use his talent for manipulating public opinion with hollow rhetoric. Just as Moorehouse eventually becomes the persona he created for himself, he also reaches a point in his career when he can no longer differentiate between his own beliefs and those he prepares for public consumption. While Moorehouse is not the victim of a mechanized system of production, he is nevertheless assimilated into the capitalist machine; he has lost his humanity—what Dos Passos might call the “imaginative response”—through a total immersion in the world of business and public relations. This is not intended to be a unique problem of Moorehouse’s, but simply a natural response to a career that is based on creating lies. By the end of the trilogy Moorehouse’s protégé, Dick Savage, is beginning to lose his own ability to produce genuine emotion; he catches an “oily note” in his voice when lamenting Moorehouse’s failing health and when he speaks to Eveline, his ex-lover, “it sound[s] phony in his ears, like something he’d say to a client” (*BM* 387-388). Despite the fact that Dick Savage is initially a somewhat more sympathetic character than Moorehouse he becomes mechanized by the capitalist system all the same.

While Dos Passos focuses on the ways in which society is mechanized through the influences of the industrial and commercial spheres, it should be noted that the political sphere plays an important role in solidifying this state of mechanization, primarily through involvement in the War. For Dos Passos, the War is the state’s purest example of the mechanization of its citizens, not only in the sense that it was the first example of widespread, highly mechanized warfare, but also in the sense that it deadened the “imaginative response” of those who weren’t consumed by it. Even before writing the *U.S.A.* trilogy, Dos Passos wrote about the mechanizing effects of war in *Three Soldiers*, which contains chapters such as “The Metal Cools,” “Machines,” and “Under the Wheels” (4). By the end of *The 42nd Parallel*, the faint hope that the workers might gain control over the machines of government and industry that enslave them is clearly endangered by the ominous rumblings of war. By the beginning of *1919* the specter of Randolph Bourne, “a tiny twisted unscared ghost in a black cloak / hopping along the grimy old

brick and brownstone streets still left in downtown New York” is “crying out in a shrill giggle: / *War is the health of the state*” (81). The mechanized state, which is a combination of political and financial interests, perhaps best summed up in what Dos Passos refers to as “Power Superpower,” uses the war to solidify power and crush dissent.

At the heart of the war is Woodrow Wilson, who is perhaps the greatest “villain” in Dos Passos’s trilogy. Throughout Dos Passos’s biography of him, Wilson promotes himself through empty rhetoric. He becomes president of Princeton and then governor of New Jersey on platforms of reform, but he leaves each post before his reforms are complete. As President he tells the people, “*I wish to take this occasion to say that the United States will never again seek one additional foot of territory by conquest;*” Dos Passos subsequently notes: “and [then] he landed the marines at Vera Cruz” (194). Wilson’s reelection campaign is just as fraught with empty promise: “Five months after his reelection on the slogan *He kept us out of war*, Wilson pushed the Armed Ship Bill through congress and declared that a state of war existed between the United States and the Central Powers; / *Force without stint or limit, force to the utmost.*” With this decision, the force of the entire commercial/industrial/political system is rallied under Wilson, “Wilson became the state (war is the health of the state), Washington his Versailles...” (194). Wilson, whose campaign earlier in the biography promises to lead the “common man” to “the sun of God, / the sun meant to regenerate men” (193) leads himself to become America’s Sun King.

In the final biography of *1919*, “The Body of an American,” a fictional biography of the Unknown Soldier, Dos Passos ends the novel with one final image of Wilson. The Unknown Soldier, who grows up simultaneously in Chicago, Virginia, and Portland, who simultaneously grows up to a wealthy family and to a poor one, who held all jobs and was all men, becomes simply John Doe. It is a fitting image for Dos Passos, who shows how the military takes the bountiful differences of America and standardizes them, mechanizes them, consumes them and produces “scraps of dried viscera and skin bundled in khaki” (379). But it is Wilson who provides the final insult, after all of the medals pinned “where his chest ought to have been,” “Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies” (379-380). In the Wilsonian democracy, war, it would seem, has replaced religion as the opiate of the people.

It is not enough to simply say that Dos Passos saw capitalist society as mechanical; he felt that all hierarchical systems of industry had a tendency to exploit the individual worker in

any way that would benefit the system as a whole. At the bottom of the hierarchy laborers sacrifice their bodily health while workers who are higher up in the chain make moral and spiritual sacrifices. Factories operating under the Taylor Plan created the perfect image of how this mechanical system operated: a mechanical corporation hires workers to operate machines, places them into a mechanical system of production (the Taylor Plan), transforms them into extensions of the machines they operate, and ultimately produces machines (and other goods) for consumption. The technologies these systems produce only serve to exacerbate the problem. Dos Passos, an avid reader of Veblen, saw the public's obsession with developing technologies as being driven more by conspicuous consumption than a real need for the products they were purchasing. Although these machines themselves pose no inherent threat they do expand the range of products the average American household is expected to have and thus create an increasing need for capital, placing the worker deeper in servitude to his or her job.

There are other machines, such as the airplane, that Dos Passos seems to fear directly. While his fears are expressed in vague terms that at times make him seem irrational and even paranoid, Dos Passos was extremely concerned about any technology that increases the devastation caused by war. He feared that the government would soon develop technologies they did not fully understand, capable of possibly even annihilating human life. Although there were most likely those who scoffed at these fears, Dos Passos did not take much pleasure in being vindicated, nine years after the publication of *The Big Money*, in the desert hills of New Mexico.

CHAPTER THREE

“IN THE CENTURY’S DECLINE”: TRACING THE *U.S.A.* TRILOGY IN MIDCENTURY

It has been said that *The Big Money* represents the final worthwhile volume in Dos Passos’s career as a writer of fiction. While it is impossible to attack an argument that is based solely on aesthetic sensibilities, critics have associated Dos Passos’s decline with an increase in political orthodoxy; they have positioned him as less an author so much as a writer of propaganda for the political right, much as critic James Smith once dismissed Dos Passos as a pamphleteer of the political left. The irony, of course, is that the critics who at one time mistook the first two volumes of the *U.S.A.* trilogy as leftist polemics—and gave Dos Passos their highest praise because of this belief—would be the ones attacking his later work for being more political than artistic. But what are the politics of Dos Passos’s late novels, and how do they differ from the message of his earlier novels? Do his later novels have significant thematic differences that reflect this new political motivation? The easiest method of determining these answers might be to turn to *Midcentury*, the final Dos Passos novel published during his lifetime. *Midcentury* was written in the late 1950’s to early 1960’s, at the peak of Dos Passos’s support for the new Republican right. In 1962, just a year after the publication of *Midcentury*, Dos Passos stood on stage with conservatives such as Strom Thurmond and John Wayne as he accepted an award from the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom, Inc. (Ludington 487).

Midcentury is a useful novel for comparison to the *U.S.A.* trilogy not only because of the shift in Dos Passos’s political sympathies, but also because it is stylistically similar to Dos Passos’s magnum opus. *Midcentury* is composed of narratives, biographies, and “Documentary” sections, which is simply a modern renaming of Dos Passos’s “Newsreel” technique. Only the “Camera Eye” sections are absent; in their place is a series of “Investigator’s Notes” which are not written in the stream-of-consciousness style of the “Camera Eye” but which do place the reader within the perspective of a silent observer.

Reviews of Dos Passos’s final novel were, at best, mixed. Milton Rugoff, writing for the *New York Herald*, called *Midcentury* “thinly disguised propaganda” that is “moved... by rancor and prejudice;” Melvin J. Friedman, writing for *The Progressive*, called Dos Passos’s new “preaching novel” a “thinly-veiled defense for his own conservatism;” and John Gross, writing for the *New Statesman*, said Dos Passos’s final effort at fiction was “only the growl of any

bilious reactionary down at the country-club...All one can do for the sake of the man who once wrote *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Big Money* is look the other way” (qtd. in Maine 267-275).

One notable dissent to the opinion that Dos Passos’s later work paled in comparison to his earlier novels came from Gore Vidal, who said that “unlike most of Dos Passos’ more liberal critics, I never cared much for his early work even at its best” (269). To be fair, Vidal never cared much for Dos Passos’s blend of politics—regardless of their leaning—and fiction. In a review of *Midcentury* for *Esquire* magazine, Vidal borrowed a phrase of Stendhal’s to express his feelings about Dos Passos’s work: “Politics, amidst the interests of the imagination, are a pistol shot in the middle of a concert. This noise is ear-rending, without being forceful. It clashes with every instrument” (269). Although Vidal does write that Dos Passos is capable of creating “word-music,” he claims that his political sympathies have spoiled his literary symphonies.

What place, then, do politics have in *Midcentury*? As in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, politics are central to the novel and yet political orthodoxy is absent. Nearly thirty years after the publication of *The Big Money*, the primary concern of Dos Passos in *Midcentury* is still the plight of the individual—specifically the working-class individual—as he struggles against powerful institutions that seek to exploit him. In *Midcentury*, however, Dos Passos’s criticism of government institutions is ancillary to his concern with an institution much closer to the worker—the labor unions. In *U.S.A.* Dos Passos had already lamented the weak and ineffectual nature of the unions, especially in the face of “POWER/SUPERPOWER,” the powerful, well-organized political machine that represented the combined interests of government and big business. To make matters worse, the First World War allowed politicians to exploit the populace’s sense of nationalist pride by enforcing the idea that labor’s opposition to government was unpatriotic. As if this were not enough, the largely immigrant labor unions were doubly injured by the heightened sense of xenophobia created by the war. Ironically, it is the Second World War (or rather the peace following it) that rejuvenates the labor unions. While the Depression increased union membership, it was the prosperity following the war that solidified the unions’ strength. As a lecturer explains early in *Midcentury*, following World War Two, “There was need for housing. People hadn’t been able to buy new cars or refrigerators or washing machines or electric irons during the war and now they had the money saved up...” (35). This increase in national wealth, coupled with a demand for new products, caused an

increase in employment—and union dues. Later in the novel, one worker explains the impact the war had on the carpentry industry: “Before Pearl Harbor there were only eight hundred carpenters employed in the area. A few months later there were twentyfive or thirty thousand. Dues came in so fast they had to stuff the money in mail bags” (211).

Dos Passos highlights this change in labor’s fortunes with his biography of John L. Lewis, titled “Organizer.” Lewis was a miner and then labor leader who quickly rose to power within the ranks of miners’ unions and by 1919, when there was a major coal miners strike shortly following the war, Lewis was acting president of the United Mine Workers of America. When Woodrow Wilson declared the strike unlawful, Lewis came back with a speech declaring, “May the power of my government never be used to throttle or crush the efforts of the toilers to improve their material welfare and elevate the standards of their citizenship.” And, as Dos Passos notes, “The power of the government was used to do just that.” Lewis’s UMW of A was defeated again a year later when, in West Virginia, a miners strike turned into a “fullfledged war with skirmishes and ambushings” between the miners and gunmen hired by the strikebreakers until the army arrived and finally broke up the strike (112).

While Lewis found the post-World War environment treacherous, Dos Passos notes how Lewis continued to ruthlessly consolidate power within his own union. When Franklin Roosevelt’s National Recovery Act bolstered membership in the UMW of A he used the increase in funds to create the Committee for Industrial Organization and extend the power of organized labor until Lewis found himself with enough political capital to spar with Roosevelt himself. By the time he retired, John Lewis had made the miners’ union—and himself—extremely rich. It did cost jobs; “He reduced the size of the labor force engaged in mining by tens of thousands” because he “priced his product out of many a market,” but when he retired “his miners, / from being serfs of the mineowners forever in hock to the company store, / had become the top aristocracy / of the best paid working class in history” (116). Unlike Eugene Debs, who Dos Passos continually lionized in *U.S.A.*, John Lewis wanted himself and his workers to rise from the ranks, not with them.

Dos Passos views Lewis’s rise to power as the transition between the ineffectual and politically impotent I.W.W. to a new era in labor unions that would be marked by Machiavellian leaders and large, autocratic labor organizations. As Dos Passos observes, “What the Wobblies had dreamed, John L’s heavyhanded management began to put into effect. He knew what was

good for the working people better than they knew it themselves” (113). While Lewis did achieve higher wages for his workers (at a price) he transformed organized labor into yet another powerful institution that the individual worker had little control over. It also brought the labor unions into the world of high finance; labor leaders now controlled a significant amount of money and amassed considerable personal fortunes. As the new institutions of labor increasingly grew politically and financially powerful they further alienated the individual worker.

The real villains of *Midcentury*, however, are the Teamsters’ bosses—Dan Tobin, Dave Beck, and Jimmy Hoffa. Dos Passos paints a picture of the Teamsters union as an organized criminal syndicate. During the depression, Dos Passos writes, “If you didn’t join you were likely to get you head bashed in. At the very least you were punished by the denial of employment” (218). Organized labor, in the hands of the Teamsters’ bosses, looked increasingly like another form of big business. When Tobin retired as president of the union (making way for Dave Beck), he was given “a Cadillac, all expenses paid including the chauffeur’s wages, the services of a fulltime maid, maintenance on his two homes, and fifty thousand dollars a year for life,” (218) a generous pension even by today’s standards. Dos Passos’s biography of Dave Beck reveals an interesting change in the development of new labor leaders—Beck, like many others in *Midcentury*, enters into labor leadership not out of a sense of duty to the working class but because of the increasingly tempting financial prospects labor leadership offered; Beck was already doing well financially in the laundry industry when he went into labor leadership. As Dos Passos writes, “Laundries were chicken feed. The big money was in Labor” (219). With this passage, Dos Passos recalls the “Big Money” of the *U.S.A.* trilogy—and along with it figures such as Carnegie, Keith, and Morgan who ruthlessly fought to achieve it. Dos Passos’s message is clear: the leaders of this new institution of organized labor are no different than the past (and contemporary) leaders of business; they are interested in power, wealth, and influence and will exploit the individual worker in order to achieve them. Dos Passos writes,

Dave knew what was best. Local autonomy was all right so long as the locals did what they were told. Dave didn’t like back talk. ‘Unions are Big Business,’ he was quoted as saying. ‘Why should truckdrivers and bottlewashers be allowed to make big decisions affecting union policy? Would any corporation allow it?’ (219)

Under Beck’s leadership, the Teamsters union (like Big Business) physically intimidated other unions and non-union workers—tactics Dos Passos compares to those of William

Randolph Hearst's media empire (220). When Beck is finally attacked by the McClellan Committee and flees to Europe, Dos Passos compares his tactics to "Insull in the old days," (225) drawing a clear parallel between the POWER/SUPERPOWER of the *U.S.A.* trilogy and the labor unions of *Midcentury*.

If Dos Passos's outlook in *Midcentury* is bleaker than that of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, then the failure of organized labor to offer hope for the individual worker is at the center of this disappointment. For Dos Passos, who distrusted political systems, organized labor was the final hope for the individual against "the strangling institutions he himself creates," and yet organized labor became one of the most strangling institutions of all. Even in the old days, when groups such as the I.W.W. had failed to provide higher wages, they at least gave workers hope. In *Midcentury*, the unions are comprised of criminals, crooks, and thugs who bully the rank and file members into joining. Solidarity, in *Midcentury*, is not a slogan but a law.

In "Investigator's Notes," Dos Passos continually foregrounds the fear and helplessness of the working class as they struggle with their respective unions. In these sections a nameless investigator travels to the homes of workers and takes statements from them, most of which are anonymous. The diversity of occupations the investigator covers is a testament to the broad reach of organized labor; they come from an aerodynamics plant, a food processing plant, and a cigarette factory; they are plumbing installers, motion picture machine operators, carpenters, and wine salesmen. The investigator is uninterested when at first he interrogates an elderly man who has spent his life savings trying to fight the unions in court and has seen one of his good friends and fellow dissenters killed. The investigator feels the old man has been exaggerating, is perhaps senile, and has a "persecution complex...probably paranoid," until he turns up dead the morning after the investigation and the police refuse to pursue the case (108-109). The Investigator continues, and hears six more stories of union theft, unfair firings, intimidation, racketeering, and murder. Those workers giving statements have been driven to poverty from unemployment and legal fees; some have not been able to pay medical bills while others can not afford to send their children to school—several simply want enough money to flee the country. The union officials, meanwhile, pad their own wallets with union funds and so successfully intimidate the rank and file members that the few who are willing to give statements against the unions are only willing to do so anonymously. By the end of *Midcentury* the investigation is left unfinished, but the reader is given the impression that the results are inconsequential. The

investigator has already heard the testimony of numerous witnesses, but the ones that are even left alive are paralyzed by their fear of the unions. The investigator has few witnesses willing to appear in court, even less physical evidence, and even if he did it is unclear whether the Investigator would be willing to imperil his own life by pursuing a case against such a power structure.

Then again, the fifth section of “Investigator’s Notes” is juxtaposed with the biography of John Little McClellan, entitled “Backcountry Lawyer,” perhaps suggesting that the Investigator is assisting the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, which does manage to mitigate the power of organized labor. McClellan is to *Midcentury* what Debs was to *U.S.A.*—a hardworking, if mostly ineffectual, champion of the working class. For Dos Passos he is, as a letter from a worker describes him, “somebody going to bat for the forgotten man” (273). Much of McClellan’s biography is made up of letters (mostly anonymous) from workers who were frightened of the unions and wanted to support the CLPW in any way they could; many of the letters read like the narratives found in the “Investigator’s Notes” sections. While investigating the unions McClellan uncovers “sluggings, shootings, embezzlement, thievery, gangups between employers and business agents, the shakedown, the syndicate, oppression, sabotage, terror;” Dos Passos even compares McClellan’s and Robert Kennedy’s work on the labor committee to Virgil and Dante navigating the circles of hell. Alluding to the “Inferno” may have been a bit dramatic, but Dos Passos uses the allusion to point out the almost surreal nature of the proceedings that cause McClellan’s face to freeze into a “mask of patient incredulity,” and to question how an institution charged with aiding the working class, operating within a nation founded on democratic freedom, could form what McClellan referred to as a “national dictatorship.” Throughout the biography, McClellan’s mantra is “Can this be America?”(272); indeed, the state of organized labor in 1955 was not simply lost in a dark wood—it had gone to hell.

McClellan and the CLPW do manage to pass the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (otherwise known as the Landrum-Griffin Labor Act), but Dos Passos is not convinced that legislation will have much of an effect, since “its enforcement / remained in the hands of officeholders and aspirants to high office whose ears perpetually cocked toward the lobbyists, / and who never heard / the testimony, / nor read the letters / that outraged the senior senator from Arkansas” (277). While McClellan was successful in getting legislation passed and going on the offensive against Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa, two men—no matter how

powerful—did not represent the entire face of organized labor, which by that time was a powerful and corrupt institution. Although Dos Passos may somewhat unfairly discount the importance of McClellan's legislation, he does well to point out that deep-rooted corruption in such a powerful institution cannot be removed in one fell blow.

To remind readers of the continual struggle of laborers, Dos Passos juxtaposes McClellan's biography with the final narrative of Blackie Bowman, the familiar character of the disillusioned Wobbly. Blackie is to *Midcentury* roughly what Mac was to *The 42nd Parallel*. Mac's disillusionment and escape, however, are the point of his narrative, whereas the reader picks up Blackie's narrative towards the end of his life, after his disillusionment, while he lays bedridden in a Veterans' Hospital. From the very beginning Blackie restates the problems that Mac has previously dealt with. "From organizing the whole cockeyed industrial system," Blackie muses, "we'd fallen to organizing a bunch of dead beats. We had the psychology of mission stiff" (77). In flashbacks told from his hospital bed, Blackie recounts his days in the I.W.W. with a kind of wistful cynicism. He attributes the failure of the organization to political pressure coming from both the capitalist right and the communist left, but also to the defeatist attitude of the members themselves—a position one could easily imagine Mac taking. Unlike Mac, however, Blackie remains in the United States, flirts with ragtag I.W.W. movements that occasionally pop up across the country, and eventually more or less abandons the movement. Like Mac, there are moments in Blackie's narrative where it seems he will commit himself absolutely to the I.W.W., which doesn't always seem destined to fail. Blackie is a wobbly during the I.W.W.'s peak, and he works alongside Earl Gates, a charismatic agitator that "the fellow workers looked up to...like a god" and that "in spite of his class war notions...worked like ten men" (264-265). However, just as Mac was forced to leave a strike because of Maisie's pregnancy, Blackie leaves Earl at a mine strike to fulfill his promise to marry his girlfriend Eileen. While on his honeymoon, Blackie discovers that Earl was arrested during the strike and subsequently killed in prison (266). The event, far from urging Blackie on to revolutionary action, seems only to dampen his taste for radical politics.

The reader finally sees Blackie, directly after McClellan's biography, dying in the veteran's hospital after years of wasting away in bed, "hanging...between heaven and hell" (148). Blackie's final observation concerns the wobbly belief in the brotherhood of man, "All men are brothers when they're asleep, ever thought of that nurse? Asleep or dead. I seen plenty

dead men. They have a family resemblance” (280). In the end, Blackie’s slow death in his hospital bed counts no more or less than Earl’s violent death fighting for the cause of organized labor. The sequence of the “Investigator’s Notes,” the biography of McClellan, and the death of Blackie Bowman reinforces the futility of the workers’ cause. Bowman’s narrative reminds readers that the working class fought and died for organized labor, while McClellan’s biography reminds readers that they find themselves, just a few decades later, fighting and dying in the struggle against it. This fact, coupled with Blackie’s observations about death, is not merely discouraging; it practically creates an existential crisis for the rank and file worker.

Although the failure of early labor movements such as the I.W.W. and the corruption of later organizations such as the AFL-CIO is mostly to blame for this state, the reader cannot ignore *Midcentury*’s attack on Communism as a failed and even dangerous ideology.

Midcentury marks a stepping up of Dos Passos’s attack on Communism; as critics such as Gordon Milne have noted, in previous novels, such as *Adventures of a Young Man*, Dos Passos, “rather than indulging in an out-and-out denunciation [of communism], puts before the reader the strengths and weakness of the dogma” and allows them to draw their own conclusions (137). In *Midcentury*, Dos Passos first posits this idea within, oddly enough, a biography section on Sigmund Freud (or perhaps, more accurately, a biography on the whole of psychoanalysis). Dos Passos’s problem with Freud seems to be twofold: first that he interprets humans as essentially adversarial creatures who revolt against community, even the basic community of the family, and secondly that he removes the “thou shalt not” which, ironically, prevents society from going insane. Dos Passos writes that within Freudian theory, “God / is a father image to be talked out of the system” (30). Not that Dos Passos was ever particularly religious, but he does have a strong belief in conventional morality, which he feels Freud erodes by encouraging people to act on instinct and blame their problems on the womb. Conversely, the problem he sees with Marxism is similar: it also views society as essentially adversarial, but it fails to allow for individualism; one is either a member of the thesis (bourgeois) or the antithesis (proletariat). Marxism’s fault is that it is too rigid; it is only “by scrupulous adherence to the Party Line” that “a man may be assured of salvation” (30). In the scientific revolution, religion has not been dissolved but simply reinterpreted. The “twin myths of Marx and Freud, opposed yet interlocking,” have eliminated the best elements of religion and preserved the worst, creating, in Dos Passos’s view, “the disintegration of the Western will” by submission to either desire or

authority (30). When Dos Passos later establishes John McClellan as the novel's hero, he places him in direct opposition to both Freud and Marx; McClellan fights the unions which Dos Passos feels are at least partially controlled by the Communist Party and Dos Passos is also sure to mention that McClellan has "a certain reverence for the Ten Commandments" (272) which contrasts with the Freudian desire to "dispose of thou shalt not" (30).

Dos Passos also makes an implicit comparison between Communism and the myth of the American Dream in his biographies of Samuel Goldwyn and Harry Bridges, respectively titled "The Promised Land (old style)" and "The Promised Land (new style)." Goldwyn's biography reads (almost) like a motion picture about the American Dream. Goldwyn spends his early years in an Eastern European slum, comes to America as a penniless young teenager, and by his mid-thirties is a millionaire. For Goldwyn, the United States is a promised land because it gave him the opportunity to pursue and achieve the big money: "He'd reached America and he'd made his fortune. It was what they called freedom" (70). In the old vision of the Promised Land, freedom has been perverted by the American Dream so that it is boiled down to life, liberty, and the pursuit of profits. Even Goldwyn seems to discount the plight of other, less fortunate, immigrants. "America has been a heaven to all these people coming over from Europe.' / His voice is suddenly bitter. His face goes glum: 'And in the last fifteen years there come people who want to make a hell of it'" (72). Although it isn't stated explicitly, one could easily assume Goldwyn is referring to the influx of immigrants just prior to and after the Second World War—many of them Eastern Europeans like himself.

Like Sam Goldwyn, Harry Bridges was also an immigrant who looked to America as a Promised Land. Bridges worked his way up through the rank and file of the longshoreman's union fighting with racketeers, employers, and finally the police, until he controlled one of the most powerful labor unions in the United States. Dos Passos portrays Bridges as a devout Marxist who sticks to the party line; as head of the longshoreman's union Bridges sided with the U.S. Government when they were allied with Russia or when it was profitable and fought the system when the United States and Russia were in conflict. When Nikita Khrushchev visits California, Bridges arranges a staged ovation for him and, Dos Passos notes, "K. came away wearing a longshoreman's cap / and an unusually satisfied smile" (55). Dos Passos also writes that Bridges has many admirers in Russia, the country Dos Passos sarcastically refers to as "the proletariat's Promised Land / where every man owns everything / except his own life" (55).

Ironically, the Promised Land for Bridges is not the country where he chose to emigrate, but the nation that provided him with the philosophical tools to achieve his goals. “Marxism offered a program for strategy and tactics...Dogma furnished every answer” (53-54). Just as Goldwyn was less interested in America than he was the big money, Bridges cares more about Communism than he does Russia. Also, just as Goldwyn’s conception of the American Dream did not actually provide a “heaven to all these people coming over from Europe,” Communism offered much more to the Party elect than it did to the masses.

Although Dos Passos’s comparison of the American Dream and Communism seems curious, he does well to consider each one as an ideology that is designed to appeal to the masses but will become a reality to only the few. Just as Dos Passos warned of the allure of the “Big Money” in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, in *Midcentury* he warns idealists about Communism’s charm.

One such idealist who bought into Communist doctrine was Robert Oppenheimer, whose biography is titled, “The Uncertainty Principle.” Oppenheimer, much like Steinmetz in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, is exploited and eventually discarded, this time not by a company but by the government. Dos Passos praises Oppenheimer for his (pre-Communist) sense of individuality, but, like Mrs. Roosevelt, is portrayed as a bit naïve. He joins numerous Communist organizations (“I probably belonged to every Communist front organization on the west coast,” Oppenheimer once said [331]) because he does not understand the relationship of men to political systems and the Communist organizations provide “an air of fashion and right thinking” (331). Oppenheimer thrives in the Manhattan Project because he is able to work together with colleagues in the fields of science and engineering.

Ironically, the Manhattan Project resembles, in one sense, Dos Passos’s ideal civilization. A small community of men, isolated, surrounded by nature, working together for a common goal. Their accomplishment is a testament to the effectiveness of this vision, to the idea that innovation and production can be achieved without a hierarchical structure. Then again, if Dos Passos was concerned by what impact the inventions of Edison and the Wright brothers would make, he must have been terrified by Oppenheimer’s creation. Dos Passos looked at the dropping of the atomic bomb as “A big bang, the biggest bang ever;” not simply a leap in weapons technology but the creation of a new epoch, a violent herald of “the hazardous glory / of the age of fusion and fission” (332). Still, like Edison and the Wright brothers, Dos Passos treats Oppenheimer with a relatively soft touch. His greatest flaw seems to have been his desire to

mingle with common Americans, to join the Communist Party simply because they offered him the chance to become part of a movement. Ironically, Oppenheimer joined the American Communist Party because he wanted, as he said, to “be part of the life of my time and my country”(330). The man who was responsible for altering the zeitgeist of not only his own time and country but for dramatically affecting the future of the entire world felt his best chance to become a part of history was membership in an organization that would shortly become culturally and politically irrelevant.

Although Dos Passos is vehemently opposed to Communism in *Midcentury*, he does not take the opportunity to demonize Oppenheimer. Instead, Dos Passos portrays him as a man who struggled with the morality of his project. “The difficulty,” Dos Passos writes, “of discovering where the cleavage lies (not outside but inside civilization) / between the powers that would destroy and the powers that would save / the spirit of man...How can you be sure?” (334). Instead of attacking Oppenheimer, Dos Passos attacks the Personnel Security Board of the Atomic Energy Commission that called Oppenheimer’s loyalty into question seven years after he had created the bomb that won the war. Dos Passos does not attempt to make a judgment as to whether achieving a swift victory in Japan was worth the creation of the atomic bomb, but he seems to sympathize with Oppenheimer for being the one chosen to personally deal this issue. Dos Passos seems to be saying that Oppenheimer has performed his duty and deserves better than to have his loyalty questioned; in the words of Dr. Oppenheimer’s friend and colleague Dr. Isadore Rabi, “We have an A bomb, a whole series of it...and what more do you want, mermaids?” (335).

Dos Passos’s failure to criticize Oppenheimer, or at least his decision to recognize him, would seem out of place in a novel that is driven by conservative politics. Dos Passos may not approve of Oppenheimer’s political beliefs, but far from lambasting him Dos Passos treats Oppenheimer’s (purported) membership in the Communist Party like a quaint joke. Again, this is because Dos Passos’s affiliation with the right (much like his affiliation with the left) is marked more by an appreciation for the individual than a strict belief in the party line. In fact, Dos Passos makes John McClellan the hero of *Midcentury*, despite the fact that he’s a “dyedinthewool Democrat” (271), because he comes to the aid of the common worker. In one of his “Documentary” sections, Dos Passos features a truck driver, desperately trying to recover some of the money Dave Beck extorted from him, who asks the question, “Is there any provision

in the law in favor of the individual?" (236). This question sums up Dos Passos's political stance in both the *U.S.A.* trilogy and *Midcentury*.

Midcentury also reemphasizes *U.S.A.*'s distrust of institutions. In his vignette "A Creature That Builds," Dos Passos writes that "Man is a creature that builds institutions" which "fashion his destiny." Unfortunately "Institutional man, / like the termites and social insects...sacrifice individual diversity for diversity of caste" (119-120). With this statement Dos Passos again blames the "strangling institutions" for attacking the individual—an assertion he has made before—but in this vignette it seems that it is class difference (a product of the institutions) that truly wipes out individuality. This is hardly a declaration one would expect in a novel described as "thinly disguised propaganda" for the political right; if anything, this vignette would seem to support socialist doctrine.

Yet Dos Passos steers his vignette away from any message on class differences and again focuses on his attack on institutions by comparing the human impulse to create institutions to the same impulse in the ant, which "in spite of the predestined perfection of their institutions, / suffered..."perversions of appetite." These perversions cause the ants to allow lethal creatures into their colonies, including a "plumed little bug / which secretes in its hairs an elixir so / delectable to antkind / that the ants lose all sense of self or / species preservation / and seek death in its embrace" (121). Dos Passos never states what the social counterpart to this deadly elixir is, whether it be the "Big Money," monopoly capitalism, consumerism, systems of government, or even labor unions (this vignette directly follows the biography of John L. Lewis), but the message is that our institutions cannot be trusted to protect us—indeed they may even prove to be our downfall. The next vignette in *Midcentury*, "Systems of Enterprise," seems to support this idea. The piece again focuses on animals, but instead of ants, termites, and other institution-building insects, it marvels at the most unique of animals: aardvarks, the "odd ambiguous body" (283) of the duckbilled platypus, and the spiny anteater. The wonder of their variation "cracks the dogmatic mold which man the classifier laboriously constructs to ease the pain of sorting out diversities" (283). The narrative then goes on to explain that the diversity among human beings is greater than anything else in the animal kingdom, eventually leading up to the question, "Can it be...that variety instead of uniformity is nature's law?" (284). The implication of this vignette, when considered along with "A Creature That Builds," is that these "strangling institutions" which force unique beings into uniformity act in defiance of natural law.

Throughout *Midcentury* there is a concern with the perversion of nature, especially in regards to the relationship between nature and science. Dr. Oppenheimer's atomic bomb is a primary example of Dos Passos's growing concern over the ability of science to harness, transform, and imitate nature; Dr. Rabi's mermaid comment may have been tongue-in-cheek, but Dos Passos seems to be saying, "If science can use an atom to level a city, why not?" In the "Documentary" sections, Dos Passos highlights the ways in which science can create a simulacra of nature—one company creates an artificial human being, complete with "the chambers of the heart, the interior of the kidneys, the viscera, the brain and optic nerves inside the skull" (24), another creates an artificial earth, "called a geoscope," intended to "help architects plan their work in a larger perspective" (103), while Queen Soraya of Iran drinks "synthetic orange juice from a bottle" (363). Dos Passos also points out science's role in creating new products that contribute to uniformity. In "Systems of Enterprise" Dos Passos notes, "We none of us smell alike. (That's how the bloodhound earns his kennel ration; the bloodhound can tell)" (284), and yet a "Documentary" section includes an advertisement for a product that, "Keeps A Man So Odorfree A Bloodhound Couldn't Find Him" (267). The "Documentary" sections also feature the erosion of the natural world while science further develops unnatural materials. Documentary 14, for example, features the headline, "Atlantic Oyster Blight Baffles Scientists" next to a blurb about synthetic innovations that are referred to as "Chemagination" (215).

Of course, even with his growing concern over the relationship between science and nature, Dos Passos has not forgotten the old specter of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, the machine. The novel's opening "Documentary" section features "the case of 'Joey,' [a] nine-year-old who is so convinced he is a machine that he is unable to eat unless he first plugs himself in." The article goes on to describe how the boy has used random materials from his room to construct an imaginary machine that he hooks himself into. When he is not plugged in, the boy slips into a "mute motionless nonexistence." The psychiatrists that observe him conclude that "Joey's story...has relevance to the understanding of emotional development in the machine age" (7). Other "Documentary" sections advertise for the "most efficient propulsion system ever devised by man" (56), tell of mechanical failures ("TRAPPED BY AN ELEVATOR" (267)), praise computers for "rivaling the human brain in action" (354), and predict a future where a "two-way TV" cooks, cleans, "and then scurries back to its own wall cupboard" (285). Dos Passos, who was so highly suspicious of the airplane, also includes copious references to the space race in his

“Documentary” segments, even though he was writing *Midcentury* just prior to the first instances of manned space flight. Although Dos Passos does not take the same paranoid tone with space flight as he did with the development of airplanes, it is undoubtedly a concern for him.

Space, and the contemplation of it, is the focus of *Midcentury*'s opening vignette, “Your Place In The World.” The vignette features a man going on a midnight walk with his dog, contemplating the universe. The man (in a scene that is somewhat reminiscent of Whitman's “When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer”) seems unable to appreciate his walk; he begins to ponder “photoelectric calculators” that “giddy the mind with numbers mechanically multiplying immensities by billions of lightyears” and is reminded by the night sky that “rockets successfully soar and satellites trundle on their punctual trails above the stratosphere.” In *Midcentury*, the continued exploration of both the macrocosm and microcosm causes mankind to ponder the immensity of the universe, and as the universe expands the individual begins to shrink. Suddenly the mechanized world seems to threaten what little place the individual has left; Dos Passos writes that Norbert Wiener (the founder of cybernetics) “says his calculators are hep; watch out if they get a will of their own” (4). Numbers swirl in the man's head, and he thinks back to the space-traveling Rhesus whose “little face [is] as inscrutable as when he went up.” The monkey who travels to space summarizes Dos Passos's feeling about space travel; although a great deal of effort is expended trying to explore space, conditions on Earth remain the same. In Dos Passos's view, we have learned nothing more than the monkey has. Suddenly, pondering the universe, the man is brought back into reality by the mortal battle between his dog and a raccoon. “In the silence my dog panting drags a thick carcass through the brambles out on the road...a beautiful raccoon that was alive...is dead. / This much is true” (3-5). There is more reality in the blood and fur and combat that occurs at the man's feet than there is in the pondering of space exploration or the mechanical world around him.

Yet, Dos Passos suggests, people are not encouraged to focus on the reality around them. Instead, they are distracted by the “cans, bottles, jars, and packaged goods wearing provocative labels” with “bright shiny surfaces...designed for printability and scuff resistance” (136) and the “instore...posters, display cards...pennants, package stickers, streamers,” etc. (182). Dos Passos also highlights the growing importance of television in the lives of Americans when he includes a long section about the Charles Van Doren scandal to show how even secondary representations of reality (i.e. “Twenty-One”) are less real than they seem. Instead of giving readers headlines

about Van Doren's run on "Twenty-One," Dos Passos includes excerpts from the Harris Commission investigation of Van Doren, which asks him if he "did not realize at that time the bad effect this would have on the children of the country?" (365). Congressman Derounian's deep concern over a quiz show scandal seems out of place in a "Documentary" section that also tells readers of blacklisting and intimidation by labor union officials, but the fact that the nation's outrage is mostly reserved for the quiz show scandal reveals how the general public is increasingly becoming more concerned with popular culture than with serious political issues.

Dos Passos's concerns regarding the manipulation of nature by science, the growing mechanization of society, and the increasing distraction of consumer and popular culture is encapsulated in an image of a laboratory test he includes in "Documentary 20." The test goes as follows: "In a standard behavioral test...the animal is placed in the unfamiliar but otherwise neutral surroundings of a transparent plastic box. The nonmanipulated animals crouch in the corner of the box. Animals that have been handled and subjected to stress in early infancy freely explore the space" (354). The "transparent plastic box" is not a real environment in the sense that the animals within it can not touch, taste, hear, or smell anything real, but it gives the appearance of reality. Dos Passos anticipates the work of Jean Baudrillard in that he views the modern world growing increasingly like the plastic box; it is not reality, but an approximation of it—what Baudrillard would refer to as the "hyperreal." *Midcentury*, in fact, was published just a few short years after the opening of Disneyland, which Baudrillard said is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real" (175). Dos Passos's greatest fear is the development of such a world, but he is perhaps even more concerned by the younger generation who he sees as growing up to be conditioned to such an environment.

Dos Passos's prime example of this new generation is James Dean, whose biography he titles "The Sinister Adolescents" to encompass not only Dean himself but his entire generation. Dean's biography is bookended by "Documentary" sections which involve mobs of youth who attack police officers and vandalize property because they were prevented from racing cars (a nod to Dean's penchant for racing on the track and on the streets) or were done some imaginary harm by the police. Dos Passos views every member of this youth culture as a "Rebel Without a Cause;" they are portrayed as wild, violent, and parasitic teens who live off the hard-earned cash of their working class families (who, ironically, may have a legitimate reason to rebel against the system). It is fitting that the hero of this youth culture should be a film star, as Dean is only real

to his fans when he is playing a fictional character. Dos Passos writes, “The teenagers found it hard to believe that James Dean was dead. There he was right on the screen when they saw his old pictures.” After Dean’s death there are interviews conducted with him by clairvoyants, requests for photographs of him increase to 7,000 a month, and “pulp merchants sold oneshot lives of him in hundreds of thousands of copies. Bronze heads and plaster masks were marketed in bulk. One popular item was made of a plastic supposed to feel like human skin when you stroked it.” “James Dean was dead sure enough” (486), Dos Passos notes, but in an era where the real is becoming increasingly irrelevant it is the simulacra of Dean that gains even more popularity than the man himself.

Midcentury, both stylistically and thematically, bears a strong resemblance to the *U.S.A.* trilogy. It would be hard to deny that Dos Passos’s political sympathies did not shift in three decades following the publication of *The Big Money*, but reading *Midcentury* gives the impression that his political ideals, strangely enough, never did. Dos Passos is still championing the individual worker, he still distrusts systems of control, and he is still terrified by the wave of technology that he feels is a threat to individuality. The irony of Dos Passos’s career is that he was an author who never could fully identify with a particular political party, who never found any particular system of political thought suited to his beliefs, and yet who, throughout his entire life, had his fiction judged by what his perceived political affiliations were. The reader of *Midcentury*, contemplating Dos Passos’s career, is reminded of the image of Blackie Bowman undergoing an existential crisis on his deathbed and may recall that Dos Passos shares several key traits with Blackie—their mutual disillusionment with labor movements, Blackie’s past living in Greenwich Village and knowing Fred Davis, Jack Reed, Eugene O’Neill, and other key figures in radical politics, and the fact that both Blackie and Dos Passos are both missing an eye. One cannot help but sense that Dos Passos must also feel Blackie’s struggle with the futility of life, like the helplessness of a writer who spends his career championing the working class only to come to the end of his career, mostly unappreciated, and still finding that his themes of freedom, self-government, and fair treatment for the common man are falling on deaf ears.

CONCLUSION

Despite accusations that *The Big Money* had marked Dos Passos's political shift to the right, in 1936 (the year of the novel's publication) the author of the *U.S.A.* trilogy was desperately trying to find ways to throw his support behind a leftist cause—the aid of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. Although his critics claimed that he was turning to the political right, Dos Passos wanted to become a key figure in the leftist cause of the day, just as he did with the Harlan County coal miner's strike in 1931 and the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee almost a decade prior. After the American policy of non-intervention blocked several of Dos Passos's early attempts at involvement, he finally lighted on the idea of producing “a documentary film which would depict something of the life of the common people and their misery during the Civil War” (Ludington 363). True to form, Dos Passos was more interested in the plight of the Spanish civilians than in the conflict between political ideologies, but he did feel that the people of Spain would fare better under their legitimate government than they would under the rule of Franco.

Dos Passos was soon able to enlist the support of several key members of the anti-Franco cause, including fellow writer Ernest Hemingway, who Dos Passos brought on as a primary collaborator despite his differences in opinion over the direction of the film. Hemingway, like Dos Passos, was more anti-Fascist than he was pro-Communist (“I like the communists when they're soldiers,” he remarked to a friend in 1938. “When they're priests, I hate them” (Beever 246).). Hemingway, however, was less interested in the plight of the common people; he wanted the documentary to focus on the war itself. It was an argument Dos Passos was particularly ill-suited to engage in; by 1936 Hemingway had much more sway than Dos Passos with the Popular Front and Dos Passos—who seemed to be perpetually in arrears—needed funding for the film that only Hemingway's involvement could produce. Dos Passos was short on capital, both political and actual, and would have to struggle to maintain creative control over his own film (Ludington 363).

Dos Passos was soon to find out, however, that the biggest threat to his control would not come from Hemingway, but the Communist Party itself. Days before embarking for Spain, Dos Passos sat down to dinner with his old anarchist friend Carlo Tresca, who warned him that the Communists would hijack the film from Hemingway and himself. “John, they goin' make a

monkey outa you...a beeg monkey” Tresca warned, adding, “If the communists don’t like a man in Spain right away they shoot him” (Ludington 364). At that time, however, neither Dos Passos nor even Tresca could have predicted how strong the Communist Party’s hold would become not only over the film but over the entire Republican war effort.

Upon arriving in Spain, Dos Passos began to inquire about an old friend of his, the author José Robles, whom he met when they were both students at the Centro de Estudios Históricos in Madrid. After their time in Spain Dos Passos often saw Robles in Baltimore, where he had a teaching position at Johns Hopkins University. Robles happened to be in Spain with his family when the war broke out and instead of returning to the States he had decided to stay on in Spain and assist the Republic (Carr 106, 366). Dos Passos thought that Robles’s political connections in Spain might be useful, but above all he was eager to meet up with his old friend. Eventually Dos Passos caught up with Alvarez del Vayo, a friend of Robles who was also Spain’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, and inquired as to the whereabouts of their mutual friend. “We’ll have to get in touch with him a little later,” del Vayo responded, adding, “You can take my word for it, your friend is quite all right” (Koch 110). Del Vayo’s cryptic dismissal of the question distressed Dos Passos, who immediately set out to locate Robles’s family. Robles’s wife, Mária, was the one who informed Dos Passos that her husband had been arrested and that she had not yet learned what the charge was to be. Dos Passos, both angry and distraught, set out to find someone who could give him some answers (113-114).

Over the next few weeks Dos Passos received conflicting reports concerning Robles. Pepe Quintinilla, a member of the Republic’s secret police, informed Dos Passos that Robles was only being detained over a minor matter that would surely be cleared up soon; Coco Robles, José’s son, had been informed by a member of Alvarez del Vayo’s office that his father was dead. Dos Passos, who was unable to tell who was lying, continued asking questions about Robles. This raised the ire of Hemingway, who feared that Dos Passos’s indiscreet questions could jeopardize the film and possibly insult Quintinilla, whose report Hemingway had a great deal of faith in. Hemingway even suggested that Robles had possibly been caught secretly working against the Republican government, and warned his friend to “keep his damn mouth out of this Robles business” (120-126). Dos Passos, however, could not forget his old friend so easily, and his relationship with Hemingway became increasingly strained.

Hemingway, frustrated by Dos Passos's refusal to cease his inquiry concerning Robles, finally consulted with fellow traveling partner and Republican sympathizer Josie Herbst. Hemingway wanted Herbst's assistance in convincing Dos Passos that his friend was well. Instead, Herbst confided to Hemingway that she had reliable information that Robles had been executed as a fascist spy shortly after his arrest. Herbst didn't want to be the one to tell Dos Passos himself, and so that honor fell to Hemingway. Hemingway, seeking to inflict as much pain and embarrassment on Dos Passos as possible, chose a very public event to relay the news. At a fiesta, surrounded by many of Spain's most important political and military figures, Hemingway sat at a table with Dos Passos and casually told him that his friend José Robles had been executed as a fascist traitor and spy. He had, in fact, been killed shortly before Dos Passos arrived in the country. Dos Passos, who knew Robles's dedication to the Republic, was both confused and distraught, but was forced to maintain his composure in front of the other guests. Later that night, as Dos Passos was "slumped into a mood of desperate anxiety," his friend Juan Posada approached him and confirmed the truth of Robles's execution. Dos Passos asked Posada the question he had been asking himself all afternoon: "Why?" Posada cryptically responded, "Dos, we are living in terrible times. To overcome them we have to be terrible ourselves" (142-160).

For Dos Passos, the news that his good friend José Robles had been falsely accused and executed must have brought back memories of the Sacco-Vanzetti executions over a decade prior. Once again a corrupt institution had wrongfully taken the life of someone he cared about; it was Dos Passos's great theme of the individual against the "soulless mechanism" of the institution brought once again to a bloody reality. This time, however, there was no trial—not even a mockery of one—which Dos Passos could rally his friends around. In the communist-controlled Spanish Republic he most likely would have found few friends anyway, or at least friends willing to publicly air their dissent. Certainly none of Dos Passos's companions in Madrid wanted him questioning the authority of Robles's executioners, and even Dos Passos himself knew better. Shortly after learning the truth about Robles Dos Passos left Spain. The communists had killed his friend, taken control of his film, and would soon be exercising almost total control over the Republican war effort and demanding Party membership to the point that some non-communist wounded were even denied treatment (Beever 307).

The death of José Robles pushed Dos Passos's political affiliations further right. He had already been suspicious of the Communist Party prior to entering Spain. At the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, the Harland County coal miners' strike, and at several socialist demonstrations Dos Passos noted communist interference and strongarm tactics. Although they were all left-wing causes, the communists were less interested in freeing prisoners or securing better working conditions than they were in furthering the strength of the Party. While Dos Passos spent a great deal of his career searching for a political movement that would empower the individual, after the death of Robles he began to feel that at the heart of communism was the same kind of hierarchical power structure he had spent so long fighting against. Speaking of such power structures in 1950 Dos Passos wrote,

In the United States we call it capitalism. If you go over to England you'll find people behaving in much the same way but calling it socialism. In the Soviet Union and its satellite states you'll find a remarkably similar social structure going under the name of dictatorship of the proletariat...the government of the Soviet Union...resembles more than anything else the government of a great American corporation (*Theme is Freedom* 251).

Economic systems, Dos Passos is saying, are all more or less designed to manipulate, exploit, and, if necessary, sacrifice the individual worker so that the larger political machine can grow stronger.

Dos Passos's shift to the political right, it would seem, is less motivated by his faith in capitalism as it is by his growing pessimism in regards to other economic systems. His increasing pessimism is apparent in *Midcentury*, where the working man is bullied by thugs, the government is still corrupt, the power of machines to replace and kill is growing beyond human control, and the younger generations are growing up to become savages. Still, one may choose to read Dos Passos's pessimistic message as a plea for change, which, after all, is what his literary career was about. (Sartre himself once said of Dos Passos, "He arouses indignation in people who never get indignant, he frightens people who fear nothing" [89]). It is a testament to Dos Passos's optimism that he is able to find a note of hope after his experiences with the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee and the execution of Robles. Even Granville Hicks, who was not hesitant to criticize Dos Passos following his shift in political loyalties, admitted that Dos Passos's traumatic experiences were "not merely metaphorical" and that he was, perhaps, "a

victim of the successive shocks he has undergone.” “If there are some things he has lost,” Hicks continues, “courage, honesty, and a fundamental generosity of spirit remain” (Hicks 30).

In 1956 a group of German students wrote Dos Passos to ask him why they should admire the United States. “‘Young people in Germany,’ they wrote, ‘as in other places in the world are disillusioned, weary of pronouncements on the slogan level. They are not satisfied with negations, they have been told over and over again what to hate and what to fight...They want to know what to be and what to do’” (*Theme is Freedom* 261). Dos Passos, who wrote a great deal about what to hate and fight, was perhaps an interesting choice for this inquiry. Still, the students knew that Dos Passos certainly did not believe in slogans or empty rhetoric, and that he would answer as honestly as he could. “This is what I told them:” Dos Passos writes, “I told them they should admire the United States not for what we were but for what we might become. Selfgoverning democracy was not an established creed, but a program for growth...Faith in selfgovernment, when all is said and done, is faith in the eventual goodness of man” (262). Even late into his career, it seems, Dos Passos still believed in the power of the individual to reclaim democracy.

NOTES

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- ¹ All citations of *Major Nonfictional Prose* will be parenthetically abbreviated as *MNP*.
- ² All citations of *The Big Money* will be parenthetically abbreviated as *BM*.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Doug Hattaway was born and raised in Ocala, Florida. In 2002 he received his Bachelor's degree in English from the University of South Florida, where he focused on 20th century American Modernism. After completing his Master's degree at Florida State, Doug plans on entering into the Moritz college of law at The Ohio State University.