Steamroller:
Reading the Cubist Portrait in \textit{Manhattan Transfer}

Charles Birkel
Haverford College
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Advisor: Tina Zwarg

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Dusk gently smooths crispangled streets. Dark presses tight
the steaming asphalt city, crushes the fretwork of windows and
lettered signs and chimneys and watertanks and ventilators and
fireescpaes and moldings and patterns and corrugations and
eyes and hands and neckties into blue chunks, into black enormous
blocks. Under the rolling heavier heavier pressure windows
blurt light. Night crushes bright milk out of arclights, squeezes
the sullen blocks until they drip red, yellow, green into streets
resounding with feet. All the asphalt oozes light. Light spurts
from lettering on roofs, mills dizzily among wheels, stains rolling
tons of sky.

~John Dos Passos, Manhattan Transfer
Section I, Chapter Five: “Steamroller”
John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) is widely heralded as a technical achievement in literature. Formally it contains many of the experimental techniques that would come to define Dos Passos’ writing and cement his place in the pantheon of great American modernists. Donald Pizer, in his book *Toward a Modernist Style: John Dos Passos*, describes the novel as the epitome of “fragmented, discontinuous, modernist fiction” (7). Rather than following a single narrative arc, the novel unfolds through a rapid succession of disconnected scenes featuring a panoply of characters. Dos Passos also deploys a continuous “mixing of modes and tones,” combining prose, poetry, drama, satire, pop culture, political treatise, newspaper clippings, and commercial signs (Pizer, 31). Perhaps the most widely recognized aspect of the book is Dos Passos’ revolutionary “application of visual forms to fictional method” (Pizer, 31). In particular, Pizer points to Dos Passos’ utilization of the Cubist painting techniques of “fragmentation, juxtaposition, and simultaneity” (30). However, Pizer, like most critics, ends his discussion of *Manhattan Transfer* at the level of form and structure, while the characters remain secondary concerns.

Linda W. Wagner, in her text devoted to the author, points out that “because his method was so different from the more familiar modernist approach of, say, Conrad or Faulkner…some readers thought him relatively disinterested in character, and it was commonplace that Dos Passos was more sociological than psychological in his emphasis” (xvi). Indeed a reliance on psychological modes of reading and interpretation has lead many critics to label Dos Passos’ characters as “flat” (Madsen, 37). The focus for these critics has remained Dos Passos’ representation of social circumstances, his radical experimentation with modern aesthetic techniques, and his complicated narrative
structuring. Often the city itself is considered a more complicated character than any of its residents. Certainly Dos Passos dedicates himself to capturing the financial, historical, and cultural forces that define his characters, but these characters remain integral to this project. In fact, their flatness is fundamental to Dos Passos’ social concerns, aesthetic experimentation, and wider structuring. His Cubist fragmentation, juxtaposition, and simultaneity creates an expansive, interwoven network which kaleidoscopically shatters the singular narrative as well as the singular character. His flattened characters, connected as they are to semiotic systems of finance and advertising, are capable of massive expansion and proliferation. Indeed Dos Passos’ utilization of social networks of meaning is a central aspect to his greater project, constantly giving his narrative and his characters both structural dynamism and greater social significance.

Using Paula Geyh’s reading of the Danderine Lady, we can progress the discourse on Dos Passos’ characters and gain a greater understanding of their relation to the city. Her notion of “textualized subjectivities” is a crucial step in recognizing how Dos Passos networks his subjects. However, to fully conceptualize these figures we must abandon the traditional hermeneutics that even Geyh relies on. Rather than searching the text for what is hidden and judging the characters for a lack of psychological depth, a surface reading must be employed. Such a reading, in conversation with Roland Barthes’ theory of Text, refocuses the critical lens and gives greater clarity to the play operating on the surface of the novel. Finally, returning to the formal methods for which Dos Passos is known, we can reclaim his Cubism as a mode of characterization which brings to the foreground the shifting contingencies of modern life through simultaneous perspectives on the individual. There exists a greater realism in Dos Passos’ flattened perspective—an
The steamroller of Cubism creates as it deconstructs, expands as it removes depth. Sinclair Lewis, after reading *Manhattan Transfer*, declared Dos Passos “the father of humanized and living fiction” (quoted by Wagner, 473). For Lewis, Dos Passos’ skill stemmed from his ability to fully depict modern society at every level, in every dimension. Dos Passos considered the delight of the writer’s craft to be, more than self-expression, the capturing of “the visible spectrum of life” (Wagner, xxiii). His unique techniques construct a single, simultaneous network—containing both individual and institution, real and imagined, empowered and ensnared—that is the spectrum of modern life.

**The Danderine Lady**

Ellen Thatcher is given enough space on the page, relative to other characters, to be considered one of the novel’s protagonists. Her life is followed in disconnected spurts from birth to adulthood. This lack of strict centrality and absence of continuous focus should be enough for a reader to label the character of Ellen as “flat.” However, her “flatness” goes beyond narrative organization. Her shallow identity is expressed within the narrative of the text itself, beginning with her birth. Born in a busy city hospital, Ellen’s first moments relay the struggle of identification in the massive metropolis. When the nurse brings the infant Ellen back to her parents, her father, Ed Thatcher, inquires, “How can you tell them apart nurse?” (18). The answer is blunt: “Sometimes we can’t.”

The doubt sparked in these comments causes Ellen’s mother, Susie Thatcher, to panic: “It’s not mine. It’s not mine. Take it away…That woman’s stolen my baby” (18). Susie’s hysterical doubt regarding Ellen’s identity manifests itself symbolically throughout her

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1 Dos Passos periodically neglects apostrophes in his novel—usually in the service of capturing an accent in all of its idiosyncrasies.
daughter’s life as she changes her name to Ellie, to Elaine, to Helena, and back to Ellen. Michael Clark argues that Dos Passos’ emphasis on proper names (especially those which change over the course of the novel) “shows that his characters are more interested in the shifting surface of life” (116). Indeed, the ephemeral, exterior aspects of life are definitive in modern life. This lack of static identity also gives her an original absence of individuality, a lingering transparency as a character. Even in moments of introspection, Ellen usually reflects on her flat, enacted personality. She lives a performative existence in the constrictive social world of New York City: “She kept winding up a hypothetical dollself and setting it in various positions” (334). There is little hidden or repressed in such a hollowed out figure. But as will become evident, this lack of unity and depth should not be equated with a lack of complexity. The reader is not invited to read into Ellen but to read with her.

Ellen often serves as a witness, a consumer, of the city’s sights and social networks rather than simply as a nucleus around which the plot is organized. Hers is a critical and highly self-reflective lens, which constantly surveys the daily detritus of the cityscape. On one such occasion, while walking downtown past Central Park, Ellen notices something unusual interrupting the dizzying carousel of “streets, stores, people in Sunday clothes, strawhats, sunshades, surfacecars, taxis” (129):

At Lincoln Square a girl rode slowly through the traffic on a white horse; chestnut hair hung down in even faky waves over the horse’s chalky rump and over the gilt edged saddlecloth where in green letters pointed with crimson, read DANDERINE. She had on a green Dolly Varden hat with a crimson plume; one hand in a white gauntlet nonchalantly jiggled at the reins, in the other wabbled a goldknobbed riding crop. (129)

The mounted figure is distinct when viewed against the backdrop the midday traffic. She appears as an anachronism—a powerful woman dressed in the style of a romanticized
medieval past. Further complicating this surreal, almost dreamlike vision is the product she is advertising. The reference to Danderine, a poplar dandruff shampoo, would have been more obvious to a contemporary reader. The product is barely mentioned in the text, but its bold advertisement becomes a generative symbolic vehicle.

Dos Passos’ New York is a city of advertising. Product names and slogans drift through the novel intermittently, constructing a city and an era through text and marketing. The result is, as Dos Passos describes it later in the novel, a “city of scrambled alphabets[…][a] city of gilt letter signs” (315). Urban advertising was a product of the industrial boom of the 19th century, during which the unprecedented mass-production of consumer goods catalyzed a consumer revolution (Geyh, 414). But they were also, as early as the 1920’s, signals of an immanent post-industrial capitalism—what Paula Geyh refers to as “a capitalism of signs” in her essay “From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs” (414). These scrambled alphabets facilitated, Geyh argues, the transformation of consumption: “the consumption of commodities, while never without some semiotic function, became primarily the consumption of signs” (Geyh, 414). Geyh points to the example of Ellen and the Danderine Lady as a moment in which just such consumption can be identified.

Ellen watches the Danderine Lady pass and continues into the park where she falls under the “seagreedy eyes” of a pair of sailors (129). Dos Passos creates a darkly accurate descriptor through his unique vocabulary. The sailors are sexually starved, consumed with rapacious desire; their eyes “cling stickily to her neck, her thighs, her ankles” (129). Ellen is made painfully aware of her sexuality, forced to “keep her hips

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2 All ellipses without brackets will, from this point forward, be the author’s own. Any ellipses in brackets will be my additions. This applies to quotations from Manhattan Transfer only.
from swaying so much as she walked” (129). Further along in her walk a young man beckons her into his car. The oppressive, male-dominated atmosphere of sexuality in the city directs a steady progression of gazing, clinging eyes at the beautiful, young woman. In this moment—as the general cultural ethos attempts to subjugate Ellen through her sexuality—Dos Passos opens a window into Ellen’s stream of consciousness and the image of the lady on the white horse returns: “All in green on a white stallion rode the Lady of the Lost Battalion…Green, green, danderine…Godiva in the haughty mantle of her hair…” (130). The figure, now configured as “the Lady of the Lost Battalion,” becomes a warrior, a poetic symbol of female empowerment. In these references, Ellen constructs a vision of herself. She, as Lady Godiva or “the Lady of the Lost Battalion,” is a romantic hero, a legendary, independent, and militant figure. This imagined self appears in active resistance to the “seagreedy eyes” which surround her. The process is not smooth, however. The reader is not given the pure product of Ellen’s imagination, but rather is shown the process by which it operates, building an imagined self through the empowered symbol of the Danderine Lady. She pauses over her words—“Green, green, danderine”—considering the elements with which she can work.

Paula Geyh argues that the capitalism of signs offers the postindustrial consumer specific “narrative[s] of potential subjectivity” (415). Geyh describes this process, stemming from the advertising itself, as “the interpellation by the forces of capital,” which produces a “textualized subjectivity” (432). The surreal, anachronistic figure demands consideration as an advertisement—a force of capital selling a narrative of individuality rather than a product. In the postindustrial economy, semiotics rule over consumption as “signs are largely detached from things” (Geyh, 430). The Danderine
Lady, in its interaction with the urban subject, offers a floating economy of signs through which the individual can create a new, textualized subjectivity.

With her theory of the capitalism of signs, Geyh is able to focus on one of Dos Passos’ characters in a productive way. In articulating the creation of textualized subjectivities she also connects them to larger networks of meaning in the urban environment. However, Geyh, in her conclusions, is still more focused on the force of capitalism over the individual subject rather than on the subject in question. She brings new insight to the complexity of Dos Passos’ characters but concludes that, ultimately, they are allowed only the “simulacra of identity” (434). In her view, Dos Passos’ reproduction of the capitalist spectacle overshadows what he might be generating through his textualized subjects. Even as Geyh reveals Ellen’s imagined heroic identity, she maintains the common notion that the modern, urban subject is merely assaulted and smothered by the interpellation of capitalism. In fact, Ellen’s interaction with the Danderine Lady stretches her subjectivity far beyond the confines of a capitalist narrative of beauty or purchasable cleanliness.

The fantasy of self returns within a couple pages as Ellen continues to compose her poetic vision:

> When thou and I my love shall come to part, Then shall I press an ineffable last kiss Upon your lips and go...heart, start, who art...Bliss, this, miss...When thou...When you and I my love... (131)

It is clear in this passage that the fantasy is highly personal as Ellen articulates her romantic self in the first-person. This sort of adjustment is typical of Dos Passos’ writing. No authorial voice announces the shift into Ellen’s consciousness or into this poetic frame of reference; it simply interrupts the novel, continuing the project begun a few
pages ago. Here the reader is given not just poetry but the process of constructing poetry. The lines flow freely until Ellen is forced to find a rhyme for “part.” She runs through her first thoughts—“heart, start, who art”—options which break with the set-up of the line at hand but open up a variety of avenues to follow. With each word the poem can shift and aim itself at a new meaning. The verse—as well as the self conveyed through it—is dynamic and fluid rather than a static composition. The narrative of potential subjectivity offered in the Danderine Lady’s advertisement is, in the hands of Ellen Thatcher, capable of infinite and expanding potential. In this way Ellen mirrors Mrs. Brown from Virginia Woolf’s paper, “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924). Instead of claiming to know the character, Woolf argues that the modern writer should “insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety” (336). For Woolf and Dos Passos, the modern subject contains an uncertain, unstable, protean quality even as she is configured constantly by social forces.

We are witnesses to a narrative construction, an identification of self, that takes the form of writing, of lyrical composition. The language becomes an associative chain, searching for an ultimate vision of love and self. This identity is something entirely different than her mechanized “dollself.” Standing in stark contrast to the “seagreedy eyes,” this vision of self attempts to both liberate the subjugated woman and resolve the frustrations that have plagued her interactions with men. Instead of Ellen becoming the Danderine Lady, a new vision of Ellen grows out of and beyond the elegant and surreal figure on the horse. That is not to say that the capitalist aspect of this hypertextual proliferation has been left behind, but it has produced further planes of subjectivity that don’t belong to its interpolating force. The radioactive force of finance with its
manipulation of signs is a crucial engine in Dos Passos’ text—metastasizing in its desire for signification and meaning in a crowded marketplace—but the reader should look closely at the subjects produced. Ellen demonstrates a literal textualized subjectivity in her lyrical experimentation—organizing a self through the forces of capitalism that ultimately extends beyond them.

Paula Geyh fails to see how Ellen, in the guise of Lady Godiva or the martial heroine, creates a means to overcome her oppressive environment through hypertextual proliferation. Ellen uses the semiotic economy to confront issues of sexual identity. What is evident here is not psychological depth in the traditional sense, but a generative play across the surface of Dos Passos’ text. The reader has been given new, multiplying perspectives of an ostensibly flat character. E. D. Lowry, in his influential essay “The Lively Art of Manhattan Transfer,” describes how the novel’s characters are “‘steamrolled’ by the materialistic pressures of the metropolis” (1636). After considering the complexity of the Danderine Lady episode, it is not enough to simply declare that Ellen is steamrolled by capitalism. At least, our analysis cannot end at this statement. The flattening of the steamroller leaves much to consider. Indeed, when Dos Passos describes the “steamroller” of night in a poetic epigraph, a more complicated picture of the machine’s action emerges:

Under the rolling heavier pressure windows blurt light. Night crushes bright milk out of arclights, squeezes the sullen blocks until they drip red, yellow, green into streets resounding with feet. All the asphalt oozes light. Light spurts from lettering on roofs, mills dizzily among wheels, stains rolling tons of sky. (108)

There is beauty and complexity in the flattened surface expanding and fracturing, producing its own light. Any aspect of closure is abandoned as the streetlights,
illuminated signs, and even the asphalt bleed and spread under the weight of the steamroller. It is important to find new ways of reading the flattened character. In fact, just such a new critical frame is available.

**Surface Reading**

In their introduction to a 2009 issue of *Representations* entitled “The Way We Read Now,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus seek to articulate an emergent method of literary criticism. They begin by outlining the established method of reading popularized by New Criticism after the acceptance of psychoanalysis and Marxism into the discipline of literary criticism. Best and Marcus refer to this method as “symptomatic reading”—a broad term which takes “meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (3, 1). A symptomatic reading assumes that significant truths lie beneath a text, are veiled or silent within a narrative or a character. This method has, obviously, been utilized to great effect in considerations of race, gender, sexuality, Marxism, ideology, etc. in literature. However, Best and Marcus, in their introduction, gesture toward a method of reading that rejects the necessity of depth-seeking hermeneutics. They term this method “surface reading” (9):

…we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breath but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through. (9)

The method of surface reading can be executed through a variety of different forms with distinct focuses: from the surface as materiality to the surface as the location of critical patterns. It has emerged, in part, because of a lingering debate over the freedom of the critic in reading and interpreting a text. This is a valuable consideration, but I do not
intend to argue that every text should be considered at its surface level, rather I contend that *Manhattan Transfer* must be. Dos Passos’ characters are indeed flat, especially when considered next to those of Faulkner or Conrad on the criteria of psychological depth. However, to read them critically with this lens is misguided. Best and Marcus gesture toward what might be abstract, complex, and self-critical on the surface of the text rather than in its silent depths. In reading Dos Passos characters, it is critical that “we replace the symptom, which depends on the contrast between surface and depth, with a constellation of multiple surfaces understood as concealing nothing” (9). With this critical frame in mind, Ellen—in all her flatness—becomes a complex collage of potential subjectivities. Returning to her succession of names, we can reread the “shifting surface of life” which Clark critiqued as the epitome of an image-focused existence. Indeed, Ellen can be affirmatively read as the collection of multiple, shifting planes of reality on the surface of the text. The shifting surface of life is a dynamic and productive space. Even if she is not rounded with hidden depth, Ellen is more than an unattended prop in a larger historical construction. She forms an integral part of the text’s surface art.

Surface reading—this restoration of art’s “original, compositional complexity”—is especially useful when considering modernist authors, who commonly viewed “art as the locus of critical autonomy” (14). Texts like *Manhattan Transfer* do not provide gaps into which the critic can insert themselves and extrapolate latent meaning. Instead they challenge us to keep pace with their constantly moving work and expanding criticism. Roland Barthes articulates a theory akin to the method of surface reading in his essay “From Work to Text.” His concept of “work” is the prototypical object of a symptomatic reading: “the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation (Marxist,
psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.); in short, the work itself functions as a general sign” (59).

The “general sign” of an author’s work has consummate semiotics—a general level of signifiers (the first part of meaning) and a hidden layer of signifieds (meaning’s second part). Barthes’ *Text*, rejects this vertical binary and the form of traditional hermeneutics that would penetrate it:

The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite postponement of the signified, the Text is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier; the signifier must not be imagined as “the first part of meaning,” its material vestibule, but rather, on the contrary, as its *aftermath*; similarly, the signifier’s *infinitude* does not refer to some notion of the ineffable (of an unnamable signified) but to a notion of *play*… (59)

Barthes has articulated a form of literature that necessitates a surface reading because it is created through a “surface” writing—a play of signifiers on a horizontal field of meaning. The discovery of meaning is not, in the case of the Text, the discovery of the ineffable and obscured, but the tracing and traversing of the text’s own explosive work. The surface of the text forms a rich territory that, more often than not, refuses any singularity. As Barthes explains, “The Text is plural. This does not mean only that it has several meanings but that it fulfills the very plurality of meaning: an irreducible (and not just acceptable) plurality” (59). *Manhattan Transfer* doesn’t simply leave itself open to several different interpretations, it actively pursues several, simultaneous meanings. It depends “on an explosion, on dissemination” to escape a singular state and to produce meaning at the surface level of the *Text* (Barthes, 59). Put another way, the destruction created by the steamroller is also productive. Dissemination of meaning is enabled, in Dos Passos’ *Text*, through the variety of modes and tones that the author deploys. In assembling his depiction of the modern city, as we have already seen, Dos Passos integrates contemporary signifiers of culture and finance. Barthes affirms that this
collaboration of disparate codes is central to the work of the Text, woven as they are “in a vast stereophony” (60).

For Dos Passos the surface level extends across the entire structure of society. Marco, an anarchist waiter featured in a single vignette, expresses the sentiment that all of society is as shallow as the modern individual: “Police, government, armies, presidents, kings…all that is force. Force is not real; it is illusion. The working man makes all that himself because he believes it. The day that we stop believing in money and property it will be like a dream when we wake up” (Dos Passo, 45). His philosophy is essentially structuralist (as well as anarchist) and considers the institutional certainty of society to be merely an illusion reproduced in the minds of average citizens. However, Marco gives no sense of the authentic reality that is being deluded by this widespread illusion. His poor English ironically betrays him when he declares that “it will be like a dream when we wake up.” Institutional force is a dream, but so too is the “reality” to which society will wake. The dream and the individual are co-extant and co-creating. The textualized subject, connected as it is to the networks of the modern city, is both entrenched and invested in this surface and its constant, dynamic play.

**Millionaire Thatcher**

Ed Thatcher, Ellen’s father, is a hard working accountant in the city. He is featured in only a handful of vignettes that usually center around his daughter Ellen. Despite his job, Thatcher represents a different species of individual than that which thrives in the financial structure of New York City. In one episode, he reviews the balance sheet of an “Import and Export Company” which claims to have branches across the globe. Their profits are in the hundreds of thousands: “‘A bunch of goddam crooks,’
growled Thatcher out loud. ‘Not an item on the whole thing that aint faked. I don’t believe they’ve got any branches in hongkong or anywhere…’” (107). The system of high finance is, as Geyh gestured towards earlier, an economy of signs, the manipulation of signifiers to potentially fictional ends. These sorts of operations are so common, so intrinsic to the system, that they have real weight in society. The calculations do not require Ed Thatcher’s faith because they have the faith of board members, banks, and investors.

It is not a surprise that such fictions are taken for truths in the economic climate of the first few decades of the 20th century. Especially during the economic boom that followed the First World War, this expanding virtual market of the stock exchange had the faith and trust of a global population. Its unseen and intangible mechanisms, fueled by this trust, generated wealth and grew in power. Franco Berardi describes the mechanism of the post-industrial financial economy as a post-structuralist exchange of signifiers: “signs produce signs without any longer passing through flesh” (17). The effects of these shifts should not be underestimated. The exchange of the traditional, tangible guarantees of wealth (knowable monetary referents) for monetized signifiers even had echoes in modern literature and art. As the linguist Jean-Joseph Goux points out, “the crisis of realism in the novel and in painting coincided with the end of gold money” (3). But in this crisis, this gradual departure from tangible forms of wealth (and possibly reliable modes of realism), is the potential for incredible (though dangerous) growth which both

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3 This intersection forms a potent theoretical frame for considering modernist literature. As one 19th century economic critique argued, the bills “mere fiction of speech and bad use of language” (David Wells quoted by Michaels, 146). The ability of the modern author to trust language is a critical issue in the novel (as it was for Dos Passos and his contemporaries).
Dos Passos and his characters recognize. Finance represents a distinct and empowered code or network of signification. While the Danderine Lady’s commercial system of meaning (itself empowered by economic interests) called out for slippage, the modern financial system requires it for its operation. Ultimately, both networks often act as vehicles for the text’s explosive proliferation in Dos Passos’ sociological writing.

Ed Thatcher’s doubt regarding the company’s ledgers arises in the midst of his receiving a stock tip. His friend, Viler, has come to him with inside information: “It’s a sure thing, I’m telling yer,” he assures Ed (105). The “sure thing” is, in fact, a scheme to prompt a buying frenzy on a stock, pushing up the value. Viler continues to assure the skeptical Thatcher that it is a trustworthy tip: “Man I’ve hocked the misses’s silver teaset and my diamond ring an the baby’s mug…It’s a sure sure thing” (106). He uses further terms of certainty to characterize the safety of the bet: “you’re as safe as…as the Rock of Gibraltar” (106). The pause is a crucial piece included by Dos Passos. It confirms the guarantee’s status as words only, as pure speculation. Indeed the scheme depends on speculation—the central engine for the entire process of growth in the market. Virtual wealth—rather than the traditional, tangible objects of wealth—can swell and inflate on the rising current of popular opinion or general speculation. Ed Thatcher cannot accept the proposition offered to him by Viler, explaining that he’s “examined the books of too many bankrupts” (106). He knows too well that, when the positive speculation ends, total collapse follows. However, after his friend has left, Thatcher returns to the idea and

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4 Much has been written regarding Dos Passos’ political leanings and his views on the capitalist system. Over the course of his career these views changed gradually—from an early consideration of the values of socialism to a later fear of the communist system. I bring this up to address the critique of capitalism in Manhattan Transfer. It is at times clear and at others oblique. Dos Passos breaks ground by accurately portraying characters from all levels of society. He is, at his core, a writer who captures the reality of the system—its evils and its productive powers.
contemplates it in more depth: “Suppose I’d taken a plunge on Viler’s red hot tip” (107). Thatcher imagines himself on the precipice, capable of complete and sudden success or total ruin and failure. One choice is all that separates him from the precipice, from floating or falling: “Take a plunge, take a plunge…they’re all crooks and gamblers anyway…take a plunge and come up with your hands full, pockets full, bankaccount full, vaults full of money. If only I dared take the risk” (107). It is at this point that the narrative boundaries begin to rupture and break apart: “Ellen, how do you like these American Beauty roses? They have stems eight feet long, and I want you to look over the itinerary of the trip abroad I’ve mapped out to finish your education” (107). A new narrative of Thatcher’s life opens before him—its reality dependent on the speculation of the market, on one choice. It stretches hyperbolically along with the incredible dimensions of the stock exchange. The true power of the market has been released. Roses grow eight feet long. A simple accountant is able to purchase the grand tour. Finally the narrative frame breaks apart completely as an alternate plotline springs from his mind, opens up, and proliferates:

Dollars swarming up like steam, twisting scattering against the stars. Millionaire Thatcher leaned out of the window of the bright patchouli-scented room to look at the darkjutting city steaming with laughter, voices, tinkling and lights; behind him orchestras played among the azaleas, private wires click click click clicked dollars from Singapore, Valparaiso, Mukden, Hongkong, Chicago. Susie leaned over him in a dress made of orchids, breathed in his ear. (107)

A new image of Ed Thatcher has been born out of this speculation. “Millionaire Thatcher”—the potent and ironic conjunction—is connected to the unseen network of money signs, the constant “click click” of wired dollars. A dizzying vision of the city from this new perspective unfolds with an overwhelming bricolage of light, sound, and
constantly multiplying virtual dollars. He is now connected globally—a textualized subjectivity that circumnavigates the earth through the telegraph wire, the central artery of global capitalism. It is only the last image of his deceased wife that ends the imagined sequence and closes the window to this new reality: “You poor fool what’s the use now she’s gone” (107). In one regard, we see how the fiction of the market has made the fiction of the novel unstable. The characters are capable of almost complete change based on one relatively small decision. We have, in a sense, a literary fiction based on an economic fiction. The manipulation of the stock markets signs has dismantled the centrality of the text and the singularity of one of its characters. But this line of thinking can only get us so far. The presence of Millionaire Thatcher is both a collapse of narrative and an expansion of it, providing the crucial explosion and dissemination which Barthes describes.

Across the surface of the Text, the play of the financial network is immensely generative even as it is potentially destructive. The narrative is pluralized most noticeably around these objects of advertising or finance as characters are connected to vast, floating networks of signification. The swarming, scattering dollars explode the singular character, fracture his flattened, simple identity. His portrait is bifurcated rather than deepened as the Text finds an entirely new perspective of the character. Put simply, Millionaire Thatcher breaks the frame of the novel, transforming Ed Thatcher into a “constellation of multiple surfaces.” A surface reading recognizes how this flat character can proliferate, how the surface of the narrative can pluralize. It is important, at this point, to return to one of the formal elements that Dos Passos has been recognized for and reconsider its operation in his text.
Simultaneous Perspectives

Probably the most definitive aspect of the Cubist movement was the creation of a “new flat perspective” (Sypher, 267). This flattening “broke open the volumes of things by spreading objects upon shifting interrelated planes” (Sypher, 267). Rejecting the illusions of three-dimensional space, Cubism created a means by which multiple perspectives on one object or one human figure could be combined on a single canvas and represented simultaneously. As Robin Walz describes it, “multiple views on the figure had been combined and flattened out upon the two-dimensional canvas surface” (66-67). The resultant fractured, kaleidoscopic representations were, therefore, not chaotic explosions or meaningless deconstructions but strictly scientific combinations of many angles, perspectives, views in one flat reproduction. The explosion, the fracturing and bifurcating was generative and significant for Cubist painters.

The influence of Cubism has already been traced through some aspects of Dos Passos’ work. He himself admitted the influence of the Futurists and Cubists on Manhattan Transfer: “Though I was never in Paris more than three months at a time I went home with my interest in experimentation…enormously stimulated…Why not write a simultaneous chronicle? A novel, full of popular songs, political aspirations and prejudices, ideals, hopes, delusions, crackpot notions, clippings out of the daily newspapers…Manhattan Transfer was an attempt to chronicle the life of a city. It was about a lot of different kinds of people” (quoted by Wagner, 49). This aspect of Dos Passos’ modernist aesthetic has already been analyzed. Indeed it is obvious not only in his collage technique—with its multiple characters, it multiple mediums, its multiple

5Dos Passos, who experimented with painting during his life, even designed the original dust jacket for Manhattan Transfer (Lowry, 1628). It betrays subtle Futurist and Cubist influences in a borderless arrangement of symbols from the text including the Danderine Lady.
perspectives on the world—but also in his landscape descriptions of the city: “Everything was a confusion of bright intersecting planes of color, faces, legs, shop windows, trolleycars, automobiles” (300). To see the city in full at any moment requires a nearly chaotic, simultaneous conjunction of multiple perspectives. But such simultaneity is also found, as has already been demonstrated with Ellen and Ed Thatcher, within Dos Passos’ construction of his “flat” characters. Ellen, in response to the constriction of her gendered existence, uses the empowered play of signifiers in advertising to imagine a different aspect to her subjectivity. With Ed Thatcher the narrative breaks apart, shifting to a new perspective and a new reality when Millionaire Thatcher emerges. Though speculative, this new identity fractures the portrait of Ed into multiple planes, combining several views of the individual on the flat surface of the text. Perhaps a starker example is found in the figure of the once successful stock market trader, Joe Harland.

When Joe Harland is introduced in Manhattan Transfer his luck has already run out. The stories of his former wealth and influence are all that remains. Joe’s nickname, the “Wizard of Wall Street,” arose from his ability to manipulate the arcane and unpredictable stock market and produce incredible profits (138). People still recognize the name, the legendary epithet. However, even he admits, “I never had as much as they said I did” (192). The wealth and reputation he traded on was, in part, pure speculation—speculation which constituted his identity. In fact, he recalls, an author “even wrote a detective story about me called the Secret of Success, which you can find in the New York Public Library” (138). Joe Harland, the Wizard of Wall Street, is a living fiction, a legend constructed out of floating signifiers. The market creates a virtual reality as it invests individuals with enormous amounts of intangible wealth. The power of this
speculative reality is further demonstrated when Joe encounters a vision of his past self while working the night shift as a security guard:

   Suddenly he saw himself in a dress-suit wearing a top hat with an orchid in his buttonhole. The Wizard of Wall Street looked at the lined red face and the gray hair under the mangy cap and the big hands with their grimy swollen knuckles and faded with a snicker. (175-176)

In this moment the novel allows for a near schizophrenic cohabitation of two versions of Joe Harland. He is split between the speculative, memorial Wizard of Wall Street—which has suddenly re-emerged and been given room within the narrative constraints of the novel—and the deflated security guard (in some ways an equally surreal incarnation considering his past). In this instance, even more so than with the example of Millionaire Thatcher, the singular character fractures, with multiple planes of reality appearing simultaneously. The flat Cubist perspective allows these two versions to come face to face.

   However, this moment, in following with Cubist theory, is not devoid of realism. Indeed, Wylie Sypher explains, “the Cubist found his reality among the shifting appearance of things” (268). Cubism was in this way an “ingenious examination of reality in its many contingencies” (270). In short, the Cubists sought to capture a greater realism. The shifting, dynamic quality of the individual, which Woolf echoed, is mimetically reproduced. The shifting aspects of modern life and the modern individual cannot be cleaning separated, distinguished, and closed off. They multiply and disseminate across the flat plane of existence. As William Brevda explains, “The problem for the modernists was a problem of representation, how to represent the flux and flow of dynamism” (97). The same problems persist in representing the modern individual. Through his flattened characters, Dos Passos is able to demonstrate the effects of modern
life’s shifting contingencies, the vast array of networks which the solitary individual is connected to, and the explosive capabilities of a text’s surface level. Dos Passos replicates—in the most powerful aspect of his sociological architecture—a more philosophical principle of Cubist art: “that there is no isolated or independent existence, that the whole is constitutive of each part and each part constitutive of the whole” (296).

Even in the isolating city, even under the steamrolling pressure of modern life, the individual is massively interconnected with the systems of the city. Indeed such systems operate through and because of the individual subject. We cannot therefore declare, as others have, that character is of secondary or negligible importance in *Manhattan Transfer*. Each is indispensible to the whole project. Dos Passos operates with a single expanding and dividing plane of existence, and the textualized subject—in its connection to the city—becomes a means of reflecting on the “whole” through the “part.” His characters act not only as examples of the effect of modern life’s many contingencies but as vehicles in their own right through which the totality of modern life can be critically re-examined.

**The Trial of Jimmy Herf**

Jimmy Herf, like Ellen Thatcher, is given enough space in the novel to be considered another one of its protagonists. Their eventual marriage (despite its ultimate failure) strengthens the argument that they form a partial core within the narrative. However, Jimmy, like every figure in the novel, only appears in brief vignettes, beginning with his entrance into the city at a young age. His father never makes an appearance, a fact which, along with his mother’s untimely death, leaves Jimmy isolated at a very young age. The rest of his life can be characterized as somewhat directionless as
Jimmy finds it difficult to conform to the city’s exigencies. He rejects his Uncle Jeff Merivale’s offer for Jimmy to “follow James’s [Jimmy’s cousin’s] example and work [his] way up through the firm” (144). Uncle Jeff promises the young man, “if a man’s a success in New York, he’s a success!,” but Jimmy can only envision “the revolving doors grinding out his years like sausage meat” (114, 115). In response to these perceived dehumanizing effects Jimmy decides to begin a career in journalism, far beyond the reach of his family connections.

In the newspaper business Jimmy finds only well-insured fictions and gossip. He feels like “a parasite on the drama of life,” looking at “everything through a peephole” (288). Indeed, his attempts at significant writing are incomplete. At one point, he accompanies a friend to get an inside scoop on the bootlegging taking place during prohibition for a magazine article (290). However, Jimmy is trapped inside of a building while the deal goes dramatically wrong outside. Later, Jimmy relates the story to his friends, heightening his involvement in the retelling: “I hopped around keeping out of harm’s way […] I finally did drag my bootlegger friend out of the fray when he got his leg broken…his wooden leg” (292). The detail about his friend’s broken wooden leg is indeed true and incredibly sensational, but Jimmy’s position within the fight is a complete fabrication. His friends accept it at face value: “‘Oh Jimmy,’ cooed Alice, ‘you lead the most thrilling life’” (292). Jimmy recognizes the falseness of his “thrilling” life. Even this attempt at seeing the true, inner workings of the city ends up a project of fiction.

Jimmy’s general dissatisfaction with his career eventually forces him to quit his job. In many ways, it is a moment of liberation from the status quo expectations that have
confined him throughout his life: “he had nothing to do today, tomorrow, next day, day after” (315). However, without any steady work to define him, Jimmy is left with nothing to do but wander through “the city of shiny windows, through the city of scrambled alphabets, through the city of gilt letter signs” (315). He is immediately bombarded by a barrage of products and advertising claims: “Spring rich in gluten…Chockful of golden richness, delight in every bite, THE DADDY OF THEM ALL, spring rich in gluten. Nobody can buy better bread than PRINCE ALBERT. Wrought steel, monel, copper, nickel, wrought iron. All the world loves natural beauty” (315). The phrases are dislocated and recombined in ironic conjunctions. The title of a recent movie, “The Daddy of Them All,” is displaced within an ad for bread, as is the canned tobacco, Prince Albert. 6 The promise of a line of beauty products testifies for the production of alloyed metals. This consumption of the city’s semiotic economy suddenly transforms into a larger speculative matrix in which advertisement and individual are considered together:

Express service meets the demands of spring. O God to meet the demands of spring. No tins, no sir, but there’s rich quality in every mellow pipeful…SOCONY. One taste tells more than a million words. The yellow pencil with the red band. Than a million words, than a million words. ‘All right hand over that million…Keep him covered Ben.’ The Yonkers gang left him for dead on a bench in the park. They stuck him up but all they got was a million words….‘But Jimps I’m so tired of booktalk and the proletariat, cant you understand?’

Chockful of golden richness, spring. (316)

The fecund bounty of spring is reconfigured as a textual collage with dislocated signs further overlapping and recombining. Another ad for tobacco blurs into a sign for the oil company, Socony. The claim that “one taste tells more than a million words” runs up against the ultimate reality that these signs are nothing but words. They are confirmed as

6 The movie title, “The Daddy of Them All,” is a somewhat obscure silent comedy from 1914 according to the International Movie Database.
monetized signifiers when the “Yonkers gang” emerges to mug the wandering writer. Jimmy has nothing to offer but words—endlessly streaming from him and from the city. The voice of Ellen, his wife, chimes in to remind him that this is not enough for her. Jimmy is, at this moment, the epitome of the modern textualized subject. The distinction between him and the expansive networks of meaning around him is lost: “With every deep breath Herf breathed in rumble and grind and painted phrases until he began to swell, felt himself stumbling big and vague, staggering like a pillar of smoke above the April streets” (316). His lack of employment, of significant work, has left him utterly hollow—the ideal vessel for the city to fill. Clear in this description is the way in which the whole is constitutive of the part, the way in which Jimmy’s subjectivity emerges directly from the narratives provided by the city. Inflated with text, consumed with the “demands of spring,” we can read Jimmy through this collection of inter-textual claims and slogans. And yet, simultaneously in these passages, Jimmy’s personal narrative infiltrates the city’s larger narrative. Jimmy like Ellen with the Danderine Lady, is able to work with his proliferating and unstable identity within the urban matrix of signifying systems. The result is—as opposed to Ellen’s Romantic lyrics—self-critical, an ironic consideration of his writing’s real worth. Indeed, this collage of advertisement and popular culture gives way to an expansive consideration of Jimmy’s life thus far, which expands to even wider considerations.

7 In many ways, Dos Passos is giving voice to the modern writer’s plight in Jimmy’s struggle to find something real in his words. The crisis of meaning which has already been mentioned certainly forces a reconsideration of the representative value of a writer’s words. Journalism in particular is an object of Dos Passos’ critique. As Craig Carver notes in his study of newspaper references in the novel, “The newspaper for Dos Passos was one of the hallmarks of corrupt language and inevitably he identified it with the culture that generated that language” (171). Jimmy is accused of becoming “a paid prostitute of the public press” and acquiescing to the abuse of language in the popular forum (Dos Passos, 180).
Jimmy thinks back to another spring—when his mother passed away and was buried in Yonkers: “In Yonkers I buried my boyhood, in Marseilles with the wind in my face I dumped my calf years into the harbor. Where in New York shall I bury my twenties?” (317). This analogy for time, in which a life’s progression is configured as death, breaks Jimmy’s life and identity into distinct sections. His concept of self only incorporates his most immediate past; the rest is divided into other, extinct existences. He concludes that his twenties were not, however, buried: “Maybe they were deported and went out to sea on the Ellis Island ferry singing the international” (317). This formulation of Jimmy’s recent past takes over the reality of the narrative, suddenly displacing his walk through the city with an article clipping:

DEPORTED
James Herf young newspaper man of 190 West 12th Street recently lost his twenties. Appearing before Judge Merivale they were remanded to Ellis Island for deportation as undesirable aliens. The younger four Sasha Michael Nicholas and Vladimir had been held for some time on a charge of criminal anarchy. The fifth and sixth were held on a technical charge of vagrancy. The later ones Bill Tony and Joe were held under various indictments including wifebeating, arson, assault, and prostitution. All were convicted on counts of misfeasance, malfeasance, and nonfeasance. (317)

The individual’s background is further pulled out and separated, his past coming to the foreground in personified figures. In the process, Jimmy’s present character is judiciously dissected into distinct influences. His first four years are given Russian names and accused of being communist spies, general undesirables. The next two years appear nondescript, apprehended as anonymous vagrants. His later years, including the one’s in which he was married to Ellen, are given American names and suspected of domestic crimes. Gradually “James Herf young newspaper man” is thinned out—turned into a shallow present as the last decade of his life is lined up and held for deportation. Through
this dreamlike encrypting, Dos Passos has summarized Jimmy’s political leanings, his struggle for domestic harmony and professional satisfaction, and the general malaise which has plagued much of his life. The final three offenses—misfeasance (lawful action executed in an illegal or improper manner), malfeasance (illegal or dishonest activity by a public official), and nonfeasance (failure to act)—convey a total impotency (OED). None of his actions have followed the path set for him by propriety. In some instances it seems as if he has been frozen in inactivity. As with Ellen, Dos Passos takes time to confirm the flatness of his character. Jimmy is nothing but a present plane in a constellation of past selves—a single figure in a police line-up. However, the conclusion of the article makes way for the trial itself, as the frame of the narrative is further disrupted.

The judge, Jimmy’s cousin, declares: “Oyez oyez oyez prisoner of the bar…I find the evidence dubious” (317). To be judged by his cousin—who followed every path laid out for him since birth—is to be considered against the “ideal” version of his self. However, what follows is an apparent decent into chaos as the trial itself breaks apart.

The “clerk of the court” becomes “overgrown with vineleaves.” This “Shining Bootlegger took the bulls by the horns” and a bacchanalian parade begins with the clerk turned bootlegger as its grand marshal. The court has been compromised by the widespread resistance to prohibition: “‘Court is adjourned by hicky,’ shouted the judge when he found gin in his waterbottle” (317). The corruption of Jimmy’s cousin dismantles the assumed superiority of the court and Jimmy’s extended family. The disruption spreads to the rest of the city’s institutions: “The reporters discovered the mayor dressed in a leopard skin posing as Civic Virtue with his foot on the back of Princess Fifi the oriental dancer” (317). The statue of “Civic Virtue,” erected in City Hall
Park in 1922, was widely criticized as a representation of male dominance over “sinful” women (Nir). The mayor is implicated in an illicit recreation of the statue while the trial falls apart. A comical revolution begins as an orchestra of waiters materializes, utilizing “the potbellies of the Gausenheimers for snaredrums” and “the resonant bald heads of the seven directors of the Well Watered Gasoline Company of Delaware as a xylophone” (318). The cheating, corrupt oligarchs are employed in a rendition of “My Old Kentucky Home” (318). The apparent chaos is, in fact, intricately coded. Elements of Jimmy’s life and the recent history of the city collide and proliferate across the surface of the text. The “shining bootlegger” continues his parade up broadway and leads the bulls to “the Spuyten Duyvil, [where] they were incontinently drowned, rank after rank, in an attempt to swim to Yonkers” (318). The bulls—both figures of masculinity and of financial confidence—have reached the end of the island of Manhattan and plunge blindly to their deaths. Yonkers—that locus of death and disillusionment for Jimmy—becomes a magnetic pole pulling at the island and its residents.

This feverous proliferation of narrative and explosion of symbolism represents a caustic commentary. Jimmy as a character, as the textualized subject connected to the network of the city, is a part which constitutes the whole. His self-reflection prompts a total reconsideration of American law, class, and recent history. Jimmy’s speculation has reverberated across the surface of the novel, bringing the city to its knees, shattering its façade, creating multiple planes of reality. Just as the modern individual is dynamic, Dos Passos proposes that the social context surrounding him is as well. E. D. Lowry suggests something akin to this dynamism when he discusses Dos Passos’ technique of replacing emotional descriptors with a montage of symbolism: “Reality is seen as a single, organic
continuum in which the private world of feeling ‘overlaps’ and interacts with the public world of objective fact” (1634). The single, though fractured, continuum of the text’s surface brings both the individual and the communal or industrial to the foreground. The constellation of shifting planes that emerges from Jimmy’s dream-like speculation therefore contains, in the spirit of Cubism, a greater reality, a more accurate sense of life’s simultaneity, fracturings, multiplicities. All of these are contained within the solitary, modern individual. Indeed the contingencies of urban life have emerged from Jimmy, materialized out of his individual subjectivity. Though Jimmy stands as a flat individual—thinned out by a city which has continually rejected him—his image now contains a multiplicity of simultaneous perspectives (his lived plurality) unified into a single, two-dimensional portrait.

In the end, Jimmy is left with no choice but to leave New York City. He simply crosses the river and begins walking into the fog. Dos Passos does not allow the reader any sights beyond the urban landscape. When Jimmy gets picked up by a passing truck the driver asks, “How fur ye goin’” (360). Jimmy’s answer is certain in one regard: “I dunno…Pretty far” (360). With Jimmy headed beyond the city, beyond even the expansive surface of its networks of signification, the novel ends. There is no vision (or perhaps version) of Jimmy outside of New York City and, as far as the reader is concerned, there is no city without this figure in it.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” argues that “men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has thus imposed itself upon them” (319). For John Dos Passos, this character was no single
person but rather New York City and, by extension, America. Dos Passos looked back later in his life and recalled, “New York was the first thing that struck me. It was marvelous. It was hideous. It had to be described” (63). Such a description is no simple task. Traditional literary techniques were not equipped to capture the modern metropolis. The fabric that Dos Passos weaves across the surface of his text—a discontinuous, fragmented, limitless bricolage—pulls all aspects of the city and its subjects to the foreground. The flattened perspective allows for a simultaneous perspective of the individual and the landscape, of the subject and the speculative subject, of the stability and the instability of life. Ultimately there is no way to conceive of the city without its inhabitants and no way to conceive of its inhabitants without the city. With his dynamic, fractured, and ultimately flat subjects, Dos Passos conveys a greater realism which unpacks the many, shifting contingencies of modern life without hiding them behind a veil. With Ellen Thatcher, Dos Passos works through the effects of a societal tyranny of sexual subjugation, utilizing the random but powerful economic signifier of the Danderine Lady to empower Ellen’s self-narrativizing. With Ed Thatcher, Dos Passos opens multiple realities within one narrative frame, further demonstrating the power and instability of the financial structure underlying modern economics. The modern subject, like the market he plays in, is capable of boom and bust. Through Jimmy Herf Dos Passos examines the effects of class, privilege, and disillusionment. The textualized subject who is also a writer finds ways to further manipulate the system of floating signifiers around him, collapsing the narrative and the city’s realities. Further issues of race, religion, addiction, etc. work through this same expansive network. In the sprawling subjectivities of Dos Passos’ characters, these critical issues are reproduced in explosive
proliferation rather than hidden machinations. This constant foregrounding, unearthing, is the core aspect of Dos Passos’ sociological mode.

Ultimately it is the characters’ uniform flatness that enables the greater realism of Dos Passos’ Cubist method. Dos Passos, the authorial steamroller, brings all of these aspects of life—real and imagined, beautiful and painful, immense and miniscule—into the same dimensional field. These characters can’t be read in a psychoanalytic or symptomatic mode. Only when a surface reading is engaged does the full effect of Dos Passos’ method reveal itself: His Cubist technique must be reclaimed for his method of characterization instead of simply his narrative form. Through it his characters are profoundly interconnected, proliferating to infinite possibilities. Certainly there are aspects of pessimism or even nihilism when the flatness takes the form of the city’s homogenizing pressure. Those are possibilities. But the literary process of steamrolling, in Dos Passos hands, releases bursts of light, new forms, new visions, new planes. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes that Modern Art tries “to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which neither can be seen nor made visible” (78). Dos Passos’ surface captures the inflation of value, the floating signifier, the hypertextual, allowing him to display the booming, shrinking, interweaving hopes, dreams, imaginations, visions, speculations that constitute society in reality. Rather than remain hidden at depths that only the penetrating hermeneutics of a critic can access, all of the intangible, invisible influences of life are brought to the foreground through the node of the individual. The networked character he creates thus captures, through multiple simultaneous perspectives, the impossible reality of modern life.
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