THE TREATMENT OF TIME IN
THE BIG MONEY: AN EXAMINATION
OF IDEOLOGY AND LITERARY FORM

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IT HAS OFTEN BEEN OBSERVED THAT, AS A NOVELIST, Dos Passos is "historical" in an especially profound sense of the word. In his political biography of Dos Passos, for example, Melvin Landsberg stresses the encyclopedic portrayal of American institutions that emerges from U.S.A.: "No other well-known work of fiction studies so large a variety of Americans. None ranges so widely through the physical United States; events occur in every section of the country . . ., and everywhere in the narrative the national landscape is seen. U.S.A. presents tangible people in a real world during specific eras."¹ Alfred Kazin, specifying the literary-historical significance of Dos Passos' treatment of history, observes that "The old faith that 'history' exists objectively, that it is what the novelist most depends on and appeals to, that 'history' even supplies the structure of the novel—this is what distinguishes the extraordinary invention that is Dos Passos' U.S.A. from most novels published since 1940."² For the most part, however, critics of Dos Passos'...

¹Melvin Landsberg, Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography, 1912-36 (Boulder: The Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), p. 188.
best work—which is generally acknowledged to be U.S.A.—have failed to move beyond the insight that the trilogy contains a peculiarly rich admixture of historicity and mimesis, in which the montage of autobiographical, fictional, and historical elements functions to provide a kaleidoscopic and totalizing portrayal of historical process. While the various local effects of this admixture of the fictive and the real have been examined, the overall narrative structure of U.S.A.—as a trilogy or as three separate volumes—remains largely unexplored. The result of this emphasis upon exegesis is that most discussions of U.S.A., although they may furnish a variety of insights into the thematic unity and philosophical vision of the trilogy, do not succeed in establishing the generic identity of Dos Passos' enterprise with much specificity. The hermeneutical dimension of Dos Passos criticism has not been matched in sophistication by a vigorously theoretical component.

In this essay I propose to undertake an exploration of the narrative scheme of The Big Money that will contribute to our appreciation of the generic nature of Dos Passos' work. What I hope to demonstrate is that Dos Passos was a careful craftsman who undertook a masterful orchestration of the technical means at his disposal to produce his epic vision of a nation in decline. In particular, his treatment of temporal sequence in the final volume of U.S.A. reveals his awareness of the challenge involved in exploiting to the full the emotive potential inherent in fiction and the cognitive potential inherent in history. I shall argue that "history' supplies . . . the structure" of The Big Money in a formal as well as a thematic sense: Dos Passos creates a fleshed-out fictive domain, but keeps this subordinated to a plot that is ultimately historical, with the result that the truth which emerges from the novel is not merely the representative truth of conventional historical fiction, but the actual truth routinely associated with historically verifiable documents.

Explorations of technique move beyond the purely formal realm, however, and serve to refine textual exegesis. A corollary thesis that I shall argue is that Dos Passos' mode of combining historicity and mimesis should lead us to reassess his importance in the more general development of the novel: his anchoring of The Big Money in the sphere of factuality suggests that the novel may have more in common with nonfiction novels such as The Armies of the Night or In Cold Blood than with the naturalist tradition in which it is more commonly located. In addition, our interpretation of the "meaning" of U.S.A. is illuminated by this examination of structure, insofar as the formal strategy of The Big Money reveals certain fundamental beliefs about the relative merits and capacities of history and fiction that in turn suggest important shifts in Dos Passos' philosophical and political outlook at the time of writing this final volume of U.S.A. My exploration of Dos
Passos' technique in *The Big Money* thus has literary-historical and biographical as well as structural ramifications: the "place" of the text in the dramatic political odyssey of the author and in the broader evolution of literary tradition is defined not only by the novel's explicit philosophical orientation but also by those intricacies of form that signal deep-rooted ideological assumptions about the nature of social reality.

Throughout this discussion I shall employ a Marxist critical vocabulary and shall anchor my interpretation and assessment of Dos Passos in a Marxist philosophical framework. For, while Dos Passos was certainly not, as I shall argue, a Marxist in his overall outlook, he was a radical and a materialist in many of his analyses of—and judgments upon—separate facets of capitalist society: the use of a Marxist terminology illuminates, I believe, the conscious intention underlying many of Dos Passos' artistic choices in *The Big Money* and renders an accurate description of the social attitudes that are reflected in the text. Second, Marxist thought supplies the most sensitive critical instruments for assessing not only the contradictions in Dos Passos' own outlook but also the broader philosophical dilemma which he exemplifies as a progressive locked into a bourgeois system of thought. For, while Dos Passos' conception of historical process is animated by a vision of "two nations" engaged in a combat closely resembling the class struggle, the ideology emerging from the novel is stamped by the author's inability to reconcile his commitment to personal action with his conviction that such action is rendered useless by the inexorable grinding of the machine of history—certainly an undialectical view of the role of human agency in the historical process. And this pessimism is, I shall argue, profoundly linked to Dos Passos' dichotomous view of the objective and subjective realms. As Raymond Williams has argued in another context, such a polarization constitutes one of the "historical and theoretical keys to the bourgeois theory of literature,"3 because it extends to a series of corollary dualisms, such as the disjunction between the creative and the discursive, the private and the public, and even the fictive and the factual. In its formal strategy and ideological orientation, *The Big Money* invites a dialogue with Marxist theory, which illuminates more comprehensively than any traditional critical system the artistic and ideological questions confronted by the novel's author.

II

In order to appreciate the virtuosity of Dos Passos' technique, it is

necessary first to examine the interlock of thematic content and temporal sequence in each of the separate components of the novel’s braided narrative scheme. For, while at first glance the Newsreels, Camera Eye passages, biographies, and fictional stories appear to unfold according to a uniform strategy, each of these narrative components is actually divided into three distinct—and parallel—blocs that, taken together, define the basic structure of the novel.

The Newsreels of The Big Money comprise two general categories of subject matter. Those occurring in the opening and closing segments of the novel are primarily concerned with the “public” world of historical events. Newsreels XLIV to LIII fix the attention of the reader upon such concerns of the postwar years as the Red Scare, the Palmer Raids, the fixing of the 1919 World Series, the unemployment riots, and the scandal-ridden administration of Harding. Although every Newsreel here may not be precisely datable, a surprising number can be accurately placed in time, and what results is a diachronic depiction of the evolving class struggle in the years 1919-1926. Similarly, the Newsreels in approximately the final third of the novel portray the rush of events leading to the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Depression. Starting with Newsreel LXIII, which relates Charles Lindbergh’s landmark crossing of the Atlantic in 1927, these fragments of headlines, newsstories, advertisements, and popular songs chronicle the increasing hysteria accompanying the spiraling economy. The final Newsreel of the novel, indeed, suggests that the United States has reached a kind of secular apocalypse:

WALL STREET STUNNED

MARKET SURE TO RECOVER FROM SLUMP

Oh the right wing clothesmakers
And the Socialist fakers
They make by the workers . . .
Double cross

They preach Social-ism
But practice Fasc-ism
To keep capitalism
By the boss

He was goin' downgrade makin' ninety miles an' hour
When his whistle broke into a scream
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
An' was scalded to death with the steam

RADICALS FIGHT WITH CHAIRS AT UNITY MEETING
CARILLON PEALS IN SINGING TOWER

on a tiny island nestling like a green jewel in the lake that mirrors the singing tower, the President today participated in the dedication of a bird sanctuary and its pealing carillon, fulfilling the dream of an immigrant boy . . .

The suppressed reports of financial disaster, the songs reflecting a resurgence of class struggle, the symbolic suicide plunge of Casey Jones, the false tranquillity of the Bok carillon—these and other ironic elements reveal the varying attitudes of different social forces responding to the crisis. Indeed, one of these elements—the reference to a chair fight that occurred in 1934 between Communists and Socialists at a "unity rally" in Madison Square Garden—brings the narrative directly into the frame of the reader's own historical present. As Daniel Aaron has commented of such contemporary history, "Rigor mortis has not yet frozen [it]. The facts are not yet artifacts." The Newsreels framing the central portion of the novel thus furnish an insistent focus upon the domain of public history; their steady diachronism stresses the relentless-ness of the nation's movement toward ruin.

By contrast, the Newsreels occupying the midsection of the novel concentrate upon the cultural decadence of the Jazz Age and, for a span of two hundred pages, barely move forward in time. From Newsreel LIV, which records the death of Valentino in the fall of 1926, to Newsreel LXIII, which tells of the hurricane that devastated Southern Florida at the same time, virtually no chronological progression occurs. Instead, Dos Passos devotes himself to the task of describing and judging the more general "temper of the times." Such notorious 1920s figures as Rudolph Valentino, Peaches Browning, Peggy Joyce, and Queen Marie of Roumania dominate the historical cast of characters; clearly Dos Passos intends to lay stress upon the superstructure rather than upon the material base of 1920s society, insofar as these figures exemplify the mesmerized consciousness widely promoted by the mass media rather than the activities of conscious participants engaged in class struggle. The historical events that are repeatedly featured in these pages are such causes célèbres as the Hall-Mills murder trial and the Florida landboom. The former, revolving around the murder of a staid New Jersey minister and the chief soprano in his choir, aroused the

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4 According to Melvin Landsberg, this event exemplified for Dos Passos the problems of the Left and was central to his falling-off as a fellow-traveler of the CPUSA (pp. 180-182). It is prophetic that Dos Passos should have included this incident in the final Newsreel, in which many facets of historical doom are presented.


IDEA AND FORM

451
prurient imagination of the media and occasioned a full fifty photographers and two hundred reporters to be assigned to the subsequent trial of the minister's wife. The latter, a real estate fraud that gullled thousands of petty investors of their life savings, epitomizes the false consciousness of the decade and provides a prophetic context for the fictional account of Charley Anderson's seduction by the "big money." In this middle section, as we shall see, the fictional narrative takes on independent momentum, as Charley plummets to his death and Margo climbs to her cinematic apotheosis. The strictly "historical" component, however, essentially stands still, for diachronic progression is subordinated to a synchronic examination of the warped values dominating mass consciousness.

A similar tripartite arrangement characterizes the biographies of The Big Money. The sketches appearing in the opening section of the novel, those of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford, depict the villains of Dos Passos' epic—the industrialists and engineers who have reduced human labor to a precisely quantifiable commodity and produced the full-fledged alienation of the working class under monopoly capitalism. "The American Plan" and "Tin Lizzie" do not merely provide peripheral commentary; instead, they bear a directly causal relation to the fate of Charley, because both Taylor and Ford are architects of the rationalized mode of assembly-line production that makes "shaking husks" of the workers under Charley's supervision and gradually renders Charley himself an adjunct to the industrial machine. The sketches of the closing section, those dealing with William Randolph Hearst, Samuel Insull, and "Vag," signal the decadence and inhumanity of capitalist economy in its decline. Hearst and Insull reveal the peculiar adaptability of the American Dream to the propaganda of American fascists in the 1930s; "Vag" portrays the proletarian who has, by the machinations of the novel's villains and the crises of capital, been possessed of everything—even the opportunity to sell his labor power. These final sketches are especially noteworthy for their intrusion into the world of the reader. For, if we recall that The Big Money was published in 1936, at the height of the Depression, a particularly grim irony attaches to Hearst's admiration of "the blood and bludgeon rule of handsome Adolph" and to Insull's comfortable retirement on an annual pension of $21,000 after cheating tens of thousands of their livelihood.

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1William Kunstler—the attorney who has gained fame at Chicago and Attica—has written an illuminating study of the Hall-Mills murder case, in which he vividly describes the media cult surrounding Mrs. Hall's trial and persuasively argues that the probable executioners of Rev. Hall and Mrs. Mills were members of the Ku Klux Klan engaged in a campaign of moral cleansing (The Minister and the Chair Singer: The Hall-Mills Murder Case [New York: William Morrow, 1964]). See also Charles Merz, "Bigger and Better Murders," in The Great American Bandwagon (New York: The John Day Co., 1928), pp. 71-87.

452 MODERN FICTION STUDIES
In short, like the Newsreels to which they are juxtaposed, the biographies framing the central portion of *The Big Money* function to focus our attention upon the causes and effects of the crisis in the capitalist system.

The biographies, occupying the middle portion of the novel, conversely, depict cultural heroes who, by their acceptance or rejection of prevailing attitudes toward art, philosophy, or technology, comment upon dominant values of the decade. As one critic has noted, these biographies are different in orientation from the majority of the sketches in *U.S.A.*, for they lay stress upon "the anti-human, anti-cultural wasteland of the Twenties." The portraits of Duncan and Valentino satirize the bastardization of artistic talent and the commodification of sexuality in the Jazz Age and thus illuminate the cultural forces molding the subjective awareness of a Margo, a Charley, or a Richard Ellsworth Savage. The sketches of the Wright Brothers and of Frank Lloyd Wright similarly examine the warping of invention and technology by the profit motive and thus explain—if they do not excuse—Charley's seduction away from the "industrial" to the "pecuniary" interests. Finally, Thorstein Veblen sets the tone for this critique of bourgeois ideology with his searing indictment of American capitalism. Looming over the rest of the novel—indeed, of the trilogy—as a Cassandra-like prophet who "establishes a new diagram of a society dominated by monopoly capital," he describes not only the web of false consciousness that ensnares a Margo and a Charley but also the vision of an alternative society that, however quixotically, motivates a Mary French. Veblen provides the most explicit moral and political touchstone to Dos Passos' own grim assessment of the U.S.A. of this era. Shifting Marx's description of the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat to an opposition between engineers and financiers, Veblen abandons the Marxist emphasis upon proletarians making their own history for a more determinist view of economic process and a more elitist designation of the source of revolutionary change. The biographical sketches appearing in the central portion of *The Big Money* thus play a crucial role not only in underlining the cultural critique articulated in the juxtaposed Newsreels but also in setting forth the ethical choices confronting the fictional characters. They add to our feeling that fiction has taken precedence over history, with the latter serving mainly to provide generalized moral commentary. Indeed, these biographies introduce a symbolic relation between the fictive and the real that has hitherto been largely unexplored in *U.S.A.* Charley's death from peritonitis, for example, parallels Valentino's graphically documented internal decay:

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When the doctors cut into his elegantly molded body, they found that peritonitis had begun; the abdominal cavity contained a large amount of fluid and food particles; the viscera were coated with a greenish-grey film; a round hole a centimeter in diameter was seen in the anterior wall of the stomach; the tissue of the stomach for one and onehalf centimeters immediately surrounding the perforation was necrotic. The appendix was inflamed and twisted against the small intestine.

Dos Passos sets up an echo between fiction and history to comment upon the rot eating away beneath the glossy veneer of material success; his introduction of this symbolic resonance suggests that, at this point, he is more intent upon examining the generalized manifestations of alienation in the superstructure than upon analyzing the specific causes of this epiphenomenon in the material base of capitalist relations of production.

The content and distribution of the Camera Eyes underline this tripartite pattern. Juxtaposed with the Newsreels reflecting the tensions of the early 1920s and the biographies depicting the framers of modern American industrialism, the opening series of Camera Eye meditations, from 43 to 48, depicts Dos Passos in a state of vacillating commitment. Determined to “hock the old raincoat of incertitude” and to cease “peeling the speculative onion of doubt,” the author wrestles with the pressures of his elitist background, his attraction by expatriation or Bohemia, and his distrust of the organized Left. Significantly, however, we are not exposed to the process whereby the author frees himself from this state of disquietude and emerges as a committed partisan of the oppressed. Instead, for a span of two hundred pages, the Camera Eye completely disappears from our view. This period of absence coincides with the Newsreels that render a generalized portrait of the “temper of the times” and with the biographies that explore the fates of the representative cultural heroes. Such an omission of autobiographical statement is timely, for it permits the reader to devote full attention to the intersecting tales of Margo and Charley without distraction; yet it also carries the implication that Dos Passos sees his own growth in political awareness as ultimately unrelated to the exploration of subjectivity which is central to the juxtaposed fictional and historical elements. Occurring in a sphere structurally as well as ideologically remote from the consciousness of a Margo or a Charley, the Camera Eye’s decision to enter the arena of history emphasizes the profound polarization of the novel’s “two nations.” It also suggests, however, that Dos Passos envisions politics as the realm of the external and the factual and “culture” as the realm of the internal and the fictive; authorial self and created

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world are perceived as statically divided rather than dialectically intertwined. The Camera Eye's eventual commitment to political activism, revealed in the final three passages centered on the Sacco and Vanzetti affair and the Harlan County miners' strike, thus returns the novel's focus to the public domain and charts the nation's rapid decline at the decade's end. Like the concluding biographies and Newsreels, the final Camera Eye passage takes us beyond the time frame of the fictional narratives and confronts us with the brutal reality of the Depression: clearly history—private as well as public—is privileged to make the final pronouncement in Dos Passos' pessimistic chronicle.

Finally, the fictional narratives of The Big Money are blocked into three distinct phases that correspond to this tripartite structure. In the opening portion of the novel, Margo, Charley, and Mary are all portrayed as being in some way affected by the class struggle that so insistently hammers at them from the surrounding historical elements. Charley is victimized by the same spectre of unemployment that dogs the Camera Eye and the anonymous millions shadowed forth in the Newsreels; Mary French is aroused from her liberalism by the violence of capital's repression of labor in the aftermath of 1919; even the supremely apolitical Margo is oppressed in her early years by the grinding poverty and familial instability induced by capitalist social relations. As the Newsreels and biographies increasingly stress the cultural ambience of the decade, however, so do these fictional narratives depart from the focus upon class struggle and instead highlight the stories of Charley and Margo, which illustrate the deceptively classless magnetism of the American Dream. The middle section of The Big Money thus reveals Dos Passos at his most conventionally novelistic, with the fates of Margo and Charley crisscrossing in a manner reminiscent of such a classic naturalistic fiction as Sister Carrie and involving us in a heightened vicarious participation in the fictive realm. With Charley's demise and Margo's skyrocketing to fame as a movie star, however, the fictional narratives return us to the sphere of public history, and our attention is focused upon Mary, who fights to save Sacco and Vanzetti and, later, the starving children of the striking miners. In The Big Money, then, Dos Passos experiments with two emphases in his admixture of history and fiction. The opening and closing segments stress the dominance of objective forces over subjective awareness, while the central portion projects a microcosmic fictional world that relegates "facts" to subordinate status.

Dos Passos' experimentation with different modes of relating fact and fiction does not stop here, however. A still closer scrutiny of the treatment of time in the three principal fictional narratives reveals that the author carefully orchestrates their interlock to maximize the emotive
effect of the Margo-Charley tale and the cognitive illumination of the Mary French narrative. For Dos Passos was faced with a tricky formal problem in *The Big Money*. He had to create the illusion that the life of Charley Anderson is fully dissipated by the corruption of the "big money," that the career of Margo is built upon Charley's shoulders, and that the fate of Mary encompasses and comments upon the veiled political import of these lives—all this within the span of less than a decade. To accomplish this end, Dos Passos undertook a series of chronological distortions that effectively telescope and extend the three principal fictional lives.

Let us first examine Dos Passos' treatment of time in Charley Anderson's tale. In *The 42nd Parallel*, we learn that Charley joins the ambulance service in 1916 after he has been out of high school approximately one year. Assuming that he would be about nineteen years old at this time, we can estimate his year of birth to be 1897. When Charley returns from the war in an alcoholic stupor in 1919—the opening scene of *The Big Money*—we can calculate that he is twenty-two. He returns briefly to the Midwest early in 1920, attends the funeral of his mother, and experiences pressure from his brother to invest in the Ford dealership. (This chronology is corroborated by the juxtaposed biography of Henry Ford, in which we learn that "in February, 1920, [Ford] needed cash to pay off some . . . notes that were coming due . . . he shipped every car and part he had in his plant to his dealers and demanded immediate cash payment . . . Many dealers were ruined . . . but when he reopened his plant, he owned it absolutely.") Returning to New York, Charley undergoes a lengthy period of unemployment, has an affair with Eveline Hutchins Johnson, and finally goes to work with Joe Askew. We learn that Charley spends a year virtually without taking off his overalls, after which he emerges to get involved with Doris Humphries. Charley is subsequently jilted by Doris, cheated of his stock, and catapulted to Detroit—in what must be 1922 at the very earliest, but possibly considerably later. Charley spends several years in Detroit: he passes some time as an eligible young bachelor, marries Gladys, gradually abandons his engineering vocation for the attractions of the stock market, and has a couple of children. By the time he leaves Detroit for recuperation in Florida, a good five years must have passed. This dating would place his meeting with Margo in Jacksonville in 1927 at the earliest. The affair between Charley and Margo continues in Florida, New York, and then back in Florida over a period of a couple of years. Thus his death—symbolically occurring when the starter of his car fails at a railroad crossing—must occur not sooner than 1929, which would make him about thirty-two years old at the time of his demise. This estimate, based upon the minimum number of years Charley must have
spent in each location, surprises the average reader, for Charley strikes us as considerably older. His hearty businessman's manner seems typically middle-aged, and when he first meets Margo she describes him (in Peaches Browning style) as an "elderly sugardaddy." As we shall see, however, even this estimate that he dies in 1929 at the age of thirty-two is too generous; according to the chronology contained in the narratives of the two women whose stories follow his, Charley must be even younger at his death.

Margo is, we learn, sixteen when she marries Tony; the year is approximately 1919, since the war is still in the very recent past. Margo spends a couple of years in Cuba, where she lives with Tony's family for some time, then becomes pregnant and has a child, and suffers a severe and lengthy postpartum illness because of her syphilitic infection. It is thus about 1921 when she returns from Cuba. Taking a job with the Ziegfield Follies, Margo plays her cards carefully, having a strategic affair with her manager, Jerry Herndon, and then gradually leading on Tad Whittlesea in the hopes of snaring him into marriage. Their break-up occurs in Florida no sooner than 1922 or 1923—and then she meets up with Charley! (By the chronology of his life, we recall, this meeting takes place in 1927.) Since the lives of Margo and Charley are intertwined from this point on, no further discrepancy can occur. Calculating then that Charley's death occurs about two years later, we conclude that this event must take place no later than 1925. (This date is corroborated by an "objective" historical fact. After Charley's death, Margo sees William Jennings Bryan hawking real estate under a striped awning in Coral Gables—a vocation satirized by Dos Passos in his portrait of Bryan in The Forty-Second Parallel—and Bryan died in 1925!) Margo goes on to make her fortune on the silver screen—a process which takes at least a good five years, since we learn that, after finishing up her business in Florida, she spends four years in a motor court outside Los Angeles before crossing paths with Margolies and Cathcart and subsequently sleeping her way to fame and glory. According to Margo's chronology, then, it is about 1930 when she is seen by Mary French at the closing cocktail party at Eveline's house: Margo is twenty-seven at the time, and Charley, having died in 1925, must have been no more than twenty-eight at the time. But even these estimates, it appears, will not do.

Mary's narrative pushes the events in the lives of Margo and Charley still further back in time: and because Mary's tale is molded predominantly around public historical events, it would seem that her narrative is the final arbiter of chronological sequence. Clearly Dos Passos prefers to distort the time it takes for a fictional character to marry, have children, and achieve or ruin a career than to tamper with
the dates of strikes and executions. As Mary moves leftward from her Hull House liberalism, she participates in support activities for the steel strike of 1919-20. Then, after a brief and unsatisfying affair with the "labor-faker," G. H. Barrow, Mary travels to New York to have an abortion, live with Ada Cohn, and work with the Communist Party. She arrives in New York in the winter of 1921, around the time of Harding's inauguration. There then occurs the long gap in her fictional narrative when our attention is given over to the lives of Margo and Charley. At the point where Mary comes into view again, though, we take up her story right where it was left off, since we learn that "the first job Mary French got in New York she got through one of Ada's friends." Soon thereafter, Mary experiences her happy but short-lived affair with Ben Compton, who grows apart from her because of his deep involvement in the Passaic strike—which occurred in 1926. While Dos Passos has not given any indication that unrecorded time has elapsed, he has obliter-ated a good five years from Mary's life. After her break-up with Ben, Mary goes to Boston to participate in the Sacco and Vanzetti support activities in the summer of 1927. When we see her at the end of the novel, she is active in the campaign to aid the miners on strike in Western Pennsylvania in 1928—a disastrous event which William Z. Foster described as one of the longest and most bitter in the history of American labor, ending in a disastrous defeat for the miners and the shattering of the union for years to come.⁹ According to the dating of Mary's narrative, then, the final cocktail party occurs in 1928—a date actually more appropriate than the 1930 suggested by Margo's story, because there has been no mention of the stock market crash, and the "talkies"—which will apparently be the doom of Margo, since she has a voice like an old crow—became current around that time. If we retrospectively apply the chronology of Mary's narrative to the life of Charley, then, Charley's death is pushed back to as early as 1922, which would make him twenty-five at the time—and give him only three years to cover all the events of his life which are recorded in the novel.

Clearly Dos Passos is playing intricate tricks with the temporal sequence in the fictional narratives of The Big Money. What it is important to realize about these chronological machinations is that the author is doing more than simply disguising the seams in the uneven fabric of his narrative. By enclosing the stories of Charley and Margo within the more public historical framework of Mary's narrative, he is securing for

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⁹William Z. Foster, American Trade Unionism: Principles and Organisation, Strategy and Tactics (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 174. It is interesting that Dos Passos chose the 1928 miners' strike for his fictional finale, rather than the 1931 Harlan Country strike that provides the context for the concluding Camera Eye passage: clearly he intends to enclose the entire fictional narrative in the period before the stock market crash.
his novel the emotive benefits of fictional creation while still ensuring that these qualities will ultimately be subordinated to a cognitive scheme which is primarily historical. Margo and Charley interest us in their own right as imagined exemplars of the warped values of the age; but their significance ultimately points not toward a universalized moral judgment but toward the real destiny of the actual U.S.A.

This primacy of the realm of fact is borne out by Dos Passos' treatment of the Sacco and Vanzetti episode, which furnishes the climactic moment of the novel and thus firmly anchors the prophetic drift of the narrative in the sphere of actual historical events. For, at the moment of the Camera Eye's stark insight that "we are two nations," Mary's narrative is drawn into the very maelstrom of historical reality. Arrested for demonstrating against the executions, Mary enters a paddy wagon and joins in singing the Internationale: "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation" are the closing words of her narrative. The subsequent words of the Internationale are then carried over in the following Newsreel, which focuses almost exclusively upon the Sacco and Vanzetti affair:

HOLMES DENIES STAY
A better world's in birth

CHICAGO BARS MEETINGS
For justice thunders condemnation

WASHINGTON KEEPS EYE ON RADICALS
Arise rejected of the earth

SACCO AND VANZETTI MUST DIE

Shall be the human race

Much I thought of you when I was lying in the death house. . . . I wish I could see you every moment, but I feel better that you will not come to the death house. . . .

Closing with a quotation from the letters of Bartolomeo Vanzetti to his wife, the Newsreel is followed by the climactic Camera Eye (50), in which Dos Passos makes his impassioned statement, "all right we are two nations." This Camera Eye meditation is then interrupted by a further quotation from the Vanzetti letter—an intrusion of the public into the private heretofore unheard of in the exclusively subjective meditations of the Camera Eye:

the men in the deathhouse made the old words new before they died

If it had not been for these things, I might have lived out my life talking at streetcorners to scolding men. I might have died unknown, unmarked, a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man as now we do by an accident

now their work is over.
At the climax of *U.S.A.*, fictional lives are drawn wholly into the vortex of factuality. History is no mere collection of facts and dates; it possesses a teleology and shape actually superseding the patterning of fiction, which ultimately serves to "document" the arc of inexorable doom in the reader's world. Indeed, insofar as history provides the final framework for the narrative, it could be argued that the term "novel" needs in some ways to be qualified when applied to Dos Passos' trilogy. Despite the fact that the largest number of pages in *U.S.A.* is devoted to the creation of imagined persons and events, the "truth" toward which the narrative points is the "truth" of "facts" and not merely of a typical or representative fictional microcosm.

III

A careful examination of the treatment of temporal sequence in *The Big Money* thus illuminates the technical basis for the common critical insight that *U.S.A.* projects a fuller sense of history than most works of historical fiction. There is an important literary-historical corollary to this argument. For *U.S.A.* is most often seen as a final monument in the "great tradition" of literary naturalism—a massive indictment of the bankruptcy of bourgeois values in the manner of Zola, Dreiser, and Farrell. While the lives of Margo and Charley certainly provide judgments analogous to those attaching to a Nana, a Clyde, or a Studs, the relation of these lives to the historical background is, in Dos Passos, reversed. For, in the traditional social novel, history provides the backdrop, but the reader's attention is fixed upon fictional characters who in their very typicality, as George Lukács puts it, "always represent social trends and historical forces." Indeed, the historian Herbert Butterfield argues, in such works "sometimes a wrench has to be given history in order to subdue it to the demands of the novel." The *Big Money* is a work of a very different kind, for history here occupies the foreground of the reader's attention, and fictional lives, however moving in themselves, ultimately serve the interests of historical commentary. If necessary, as we have seen, a wrench is given to fiction to subdue it to the demands of history. While *The Big Money* clearly consists primarily of fictional narrative, then, it could be argued that it is essentially, in its generic nature, a historical document rather than a fictional one, since its structure is molded by the shape of

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historical events and its goal is to illuminate the truth of the reader's world.

The subordination of fictional elements to a factual frame in *The Big Money* suggests that the *U.S.A.* trilogy may, in fact, have more in common with the contemporary “nonfiction novel” than with the traditional historical or naturalistic novel. In documentaries such as *The Executioner's Song* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Test*, the structuring principle is contingent upon the notion that the events depicted “did,” as Carlyle put it, “in very deed occur.” To the extent that the author's imagination enters the narrative, it serves to embellish and enliven a historical world rather than to create a world that is in any sense autotelic. Yet while *The Big Money* anticipates this important trend in contemporary prose narrative, it also hearkens back to the great social and historical novels of the nineteenth century in the sense that it aspires to construct a representative fictional microcosm that, as Mary McCarthy puts it, contains all of society, “from the front page to the financial section.” Nonfiction novelists like Mailer and Wolfe restrict themselves to a more limited segment of historical reality; they hesitate to grapple with the grand historical themes that animated the imagination of a Dickens, a Tolstoy, or a Zola. As David Lodge has observed, this reluctance to formulate comprehensive fictional portraits of social reality allies the nonfiction novelist with the metafictional, insofar as the assumption behind such experiments is that our “reality” is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate. . . .

Art can no longer compete with life on equal terms, showing the universal in the particular. The alternatives are either to cleave to the particular—to “tell it like it is”—or to abandon history altogether and construct pure fictions which reflect in an emotional or metaphorical way the discords of contemporary experience.14

In *The Big Money*, by contrast, we find blended together the microcosmic fictional world of the classic historical novel and the documentary immediacy of the contemporary nonfiction novel. What the complex strategy of *The Big Money* reveals, then, is that the common literary-historical estimate of the importance of Dos Passos' best work may need revision: he may be less significant as a figure closing out the naturalist tradition in American literature than as a crucial watershed figure in the development of the historical novel, synthesizing the comprehensive overview of the nineteenth-century tradition with the documentary concreteness of historical consciousness in the present day.

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IV

Dos Passos may have synthesized two important strains of historical fiction in *The Big Money*, but this unity of mimesis and historicity was hardly an untroubled one. Indeed, if the peculiar method of blending fiction and history in *The Big Money* points to the transitional position of the novel in the development of historical fiction, it also points to the transitional nature of Dos Passos' own political and philosophical outlook at the time of writing the final volume of *U.S.A.* For, after finishing the trilogy, Dos Passos turned to narrative forms that stressed either fiction or history, and—with the possible exception of *Midcentury*—his subsequent works reflected an abandonment of that hybrid generic strategy that had energized his earlier work. By no coincidence, these later writings also articulated an increasingly right-wing viewpoint—an apparent shift in outlook so dramatic that many of Dos Passos' critics have been unable fully to account for it. I shall conclude this essay with some biographical and ideological observations about the assumptions underlying Dos Passos' complex treatment of the interlock of history and fiction in *The Big Money*.

Dos Passos' own comments about the function of the novelist uncover some important changes in his attitude around the time of the composition of *The Big Money*. While at work on *The Forty-Second Parallel*, Dos Passos had argued that "the only excuse for a novelist . . . is as a sort of second-class historian of the age he lives in" and that he preferred history to the novel because "fiction is the day dream of a single man, while history is a mass-invention, the day dream of a race."18 Around the time 1919 appeared—when he was closer to the Left than he ever would be again—he had declared, "as a producer and worker, any writer who's not a paid propagandist for the exploiting group (and most of them will be) will naturally find his lot with the producers."19 By the time of writing *The Big Money*, however, he was experiencing a subtle alteration in his outlook. On the one hand, he placed a new emphasis upon the importance of creating fictional characters who take on a life of their own:

The business of a novelist is, in my opinion, to create characters first and foremost, and then to set them in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate permanent record of a phase of history . . . . If a novelist really creates characters that are alive, the rest follows by implication. . . . It's the invention of characters, which is work of an entirely different order from the jotting-down of true-to-life silhouettes and sketches of people, that sets apart the novelist from the storyteller or commentator.17

This focus upon rounded characters clearly bore fruit in the depiction of Charley Anderson, certainly the most successful fictional creation in all of U.S.A. But the deterministic vision of history as a "snarl of . . . human currents" and the repudiation of his own role as a mere "storyteller" or "commentator" reflect a lessened confidence in his earlier, more progressive view of history and in the value of the interpretive mission of the "second-class historian." Similar doubts about the writer's role in the process of historical change underlay Dos Passos' remarks before the American Writers' Congress in 1935, when he was immersed in the composition of The Big Money.

The professional writer discovers some aspect of the world and invents out of the speech of his time some particularly apt and original way of putting it down on paper. If the product is compelling and important enough, it molds and influences the ways of thinking to the point of changing and rebuilding the language, which is the mind of the group. The process is not very different from that of scientific discovery and invention. The importance of a writer, as of a scientist, depends on his ability to influence subsequent thought. In his relation to society a professional writer is a technician just as much as an engineer is.  

Where previously Dos Passos had described his mission as functioning as a kind of "second-class historian" or as siding with the producers against the exploiters, here he somehow recedes from the historical background. Suggesting a more limited view of his own role in effecting actual historical change, he looks upon the historical world from the outside and focuses more upon the manipulation of language than upon the social reality to which that language refers. Indeed, his description of the writer as a "technician" reveals the extent to which Veblen's veneration of the "engineer" had come to influence not only his conception of class struggle but also his interpretation of his own mission as a writer. Dos Passos not only was foreshadowing his subsequent separation of novel from history but also was backing off from his task as an unabashed political partisan; in the future, his goal would be not so much to interpret history in order to change it as to carp at a process beyond the conscious reach of humanity.

At the time when he was writing The Big Money, then, Dos Passos was at a crucial watershed in his artistic and political development—and this transitional perspective is intimately related to the form as well as the philosophical outlook of the final volume of U.S.A. On the one hand, Dos Passos' skill in alternately subordinating history to fiction and fiction to history reveals the perfection of a hybrid narrative technique toward which he had been developing since Manhattan Transfer. On

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the other hand, his increased reliance upon fiction to project, in the tales of Margo and Charley, a relatively autonomous sphere of apolitical subjectivity reveals an uncertainty in his mind about the relationship between individual consciousness and the broader historical context. In The Forty-Second Parallel, however far-flung the careers of Eleanor Stoddard and Mac, these characters were united by the word-mongering empire of J. Ward Moorehouse, which drew them into a representative fictional microcosm that commented by analogy upon the real historical world. In 1919, the close connection between the experiences of the Camera Eye and various fictional characters—especially Dick Savage—provided a vehicle for Dos Passos’ passionate critique of the war. In both earlier volumes, fiction and history are in temporal alignment by the end of each novel, for the imagined and real worlds are not merely parallel, but convergent. In The Big Money, by contrast, Charley and Margo’s pursuit of the American Dream is held apart from the realm of “history” as such; the true story of the author’s own experiences is removed from our view, and even the factual elements which frame these fictional tales feature the bizarre atmosphere of the decade—the novelistic aspect of the times, as it were—rather than key public events. Dos Passos’ enclosures of these narratives within the compass of Mary’s story, as well as the intricate temporal machinations which he performs in order to perfect this enclosure, reveal his intuition of the importance of directing these fictional portraits to the ends of historical truth. Indeed, his decision to carry the factual elements into the time-frame of the Depression and to restrict the fictional narratives to the period before the collapse of Wall Street underlines his conviction that the nation’s tragedy is in its essence historical. But, as a consequence of the very ingenuity of Dos Passos’ chronological maneuvers, the spheres of the private and the public remain more remote in The Big Money than in either of the earlier volumes of U.S.A.

In this context Dos Passos’ treatment of the Camera Eye takes on added significance. For, as Townsend Ludington has noted, the Camera Eye himself moves away from the realm of subjectivity as he grasps his role in the collective historical process: “What Dos Passos attempted to show through the entire group of Camera Eyes was his gradual assimilation into a world beyond the shelter of his self-conscious imagination. The more he could find his place in that world, the less of a separate, subjective life was there to portray.”

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1I discuss the formal and ideological ramifications of Dos Passos’ use of converging narratives in 1919 in my “History, Fiction, and Satirical Form: The Example of Dos Passos’ 1919,” Genre, 12 (Fall 1979), 357-378.

development of the Camera Eye in the novel, then, Dos Passos had at his disposal narrative materials possessing tremendous potential for depicting the intimate connections between individual consciousness and collective historical reality—for drawing together the daydream of the individual and the daydream of the race. Yet Dos Passos chose to pass over in silence his own growth from a peeler of the onion of doubt to an outspoken partisan—to portray his own alteration in awareness as a fait accompli rather than as the result of a concrete process. It is small wonder, then, that his final realization that “we are two nations” smacks of a religious conversion; for all the skillful blending of fact, fiction, and autobiography at this climactic moment in the narrative, the insight is a yoking together of subjective epiphany and objective historical analysis rather than a genuine interpenetration of the two.

What a close examination of the narrative structure of The Big Money suggests, then, is that central to Dos Passos’ subsequent movement to the right was a fundamental inability to grasp the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process. As Marx pointed out in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, the root cause of capitalist alienation is the separation of workers from the products of their labor—and hence from their very species being, since what elevates humans above the animal realm is their ability to create the world around them and thus to see themselves, as conscious subjects, reflected in the “external” reality which is their historical object.61 On the level of explicit social analysis, Dos Passos’ perceptive depiction of the fetishization of possessions, sexuality, and even language in the lives of Charley, Margo, and Savage reveals his awareness of the degrading instrumentality occasioned by capitalist social relations, which lead the fictive subjects to lose all sense of real connection with their environment and to come to objectify not only others but even themselves. But, on the structural level, The Big Money reflects a kind of alienated consciousness in the author himself: history and fiction follow parallel but separate paths and reach parallel but separate conclusions, with the result that the subjective awareness that fiction is especially privileged to explore remains largely isolated from the public historical domain—

61This concept is elaborated in several of the essays, perhaps most explicitly in “Stranged Labor”:
“It is just in his work upon the objective world . . . . that man first really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his projection, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, edited, with an Introduction by Dirk J. Struik, trans. Martin Milligan [New York: International Publishers, 1964], p. 114).
which is, in essence if not in appearance, the created object of a multitude of such subjectivities. In short, self and world remain hypostatized elements in *The Big Money*. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that, in this account which faithfully documents so many facets of class struggle, the Camera Eye’s final words should be an echo of despair: “We have only words against POWER SUPERPOWER.” The mechanical materialism—learned from Veblen—which conceives of history as an impersonal force beyond individual human agency is the obverse side of the idealism which conceives of consciousness as being “only words” and not itself a material force: both reveal a failure to understand that, as Plekhanov put it, “men make history, and, therefore, the activities of individuals cannot help being important in history.”22

It is, I think, useful to analyze the historical consciousness implicit in this pivotal novel because such an ideological examination takes us more deeply into the causes of Dos Passos’ change in outlook than do primarily psychoanalytical or sociological explanations. No doubt it is true that the right-wing politics of Dos Passos’ authoritarian father were more deeply ingrained in the author than he initially cared to admit; no doubt it is also true that Dos Passos’ elitist class background presented a formidable obstacle to his becoming a full-fledged Marxist.23 But, unless we are resigned to seeing all beliefs as wholly determined by unconscious or external forces beyond the individual’s control, we must acknowledge that our thought-processes are free—at least to some extent—and, therefore, subject to conscious alteration. Dos Passos never became a Marxist not because his Oedipal conflict went unresolved or because his Harvard background caught up with him, but because he failed to abandon the categories of bourgeois thought—to become, in essence, a revolutionary who overturned the old ways of seeing and doing rather than an impassioned reformist who worked within the dominant political and ideological framework of the liberal bourgeoisie. Because his old habits of mind were never fundamentally shaken, it was hardly surprising that these other factors should eventually combine to push him to conservatism—and, indeed, beyond. To argue that Dos Passos was never a Marxist is, of course, hardly a novel discovery. Among others, John P. Diggins and Frederick Feied have demonstrated the reactionary aspects of Veblen’s influence upon Dos Passos, while Granville Hicks and David Sanders have argued that a marked streak of anarchistic individualism characterized all the novelist’s protests against various American institu-

23The psychoanalytic argument is ably presented by Martin Kallich in “John Dos Passos: Liberty and the Father Image,” in *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer’s Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 146-155. The sociological argument is endorsed to different degrees by a variety of Dos Passos’ critics.
tions, from the capitalist war machine to the Communist Party to organized labor.\textsuperscript{24} What I hope to have added to these discussions is evidence that this cast of mind is discernible not only in the propositional content of Dos Passos' work but also in its form and in the assumptions about human consciousness that undergird that form.

My examination of The Big Money yields a number of conclusions that may provide a fruitful basis for further critical investigation. First, it is clear that Dos Passos was a masterful craftsman in his splicing together of history and fiction. Perhaps other works by Dos Passos, written at different phases of his career, will reveal a similar ingenuity when subjected to close scrutiny. Second, by providing some insight into the complex historicity of Dos Passos' work, I have suggested its seminal relation to the nonfiction novel and have demonstrated some analytical tools which may prove useful in the study of a range of contemporary narratives. Finally, I hope to have developed a model for utilizing formal analysis to penetrate to the ideology submerged in a text—a model that will prove applicable to authors besides Dos Passos. Of the three this last goal has the broadest critical relevance, because I have attempted to demonstrate a method whereby Marxist criticism can buttress its investigation of a text's more explicit philosophical content with an examination of the implicit assumptions about social reality that are projected in the form of the text, thereby extending the legitimate domain of ideological analysis.