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**HIDING AND SEEKING:
FORM, VISION, AND HISTORY
IN WILLIAM FAULKNER AND JOHN DOS PASSOS.**

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DPHIL IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

SEPTEMBER 2011

STATEMENT

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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DPHIL IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES

HIDING AND SEEKING: FORM, VISION, AND HISTORYIN WILLIAM FAULKNER AND JOHN DOS PASSOSSUMMARY

This thesis investigates how two distinctive and conflicting literary modernisms generate, and subsequently attempt to deal with the proliferation of difficult historical meaning.

Part one scrutinizes three novels from William Faulkner's middle period, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Sanctuary* (1931). Its arguments issue from three linked assumptions: first, that semantic meaning, in Faulkner, resides within the smallest of textual locations; second, that this meaning is insistently historical; and third, that the attempt to hide its release *as* historical meaning generates a formal opacity that, in turn, occasions acutely visual problems at the level of the text. Specific attention is drawn to what I consider to be the "compacted doctrines" (Empson) of Faulkner's prose: the pronoun. It is argued that, in these three novels, historically sedimented meaning congeals in three single words: "them", "I" and finally, "it".

If Faulkner's texts come into meaning at the level of the *word*, John Dos Passos' come into meaning at the level of the *concept*. What was "small", begrudging, and intractable in Faulkner becomes "big", abundant, and eminently retrievable in Dos Passos. The semantic "concept" to which I attend is *The Camera Eye*, a place of visual efficiency. Two parallel concerns drive these chapters. First, I claim that *The Camera Eye* is the preeminent site of the dialectic in *U.S.A.*; second, that these episodes provide the formal indices for Dos Passos' shift in political intensities. Sustaining an antagonistic tension between aesthetic modernity and historical memory, however, these mechanical integers problematize their own semantic productions. With reference to the generation of surplus and to Marx's concept of "hoarding" I route the (over)production of the textual product, and its subsequent channelling into distinct textual locations, into conversations regarding commodification, reification and the division of labour.

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INTRODUCTION

HIDING AND SEEKING: FORM, VISION, AND HISTORY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER AND JOHN DOS PASSOS

This thesis is centrally concerned with the proliferation and management of historically sedimented meaning in the prose work of William Faulkner and John Dos Passos. Taking as its primary materials two modernist trilogies, this thesis argues that Faulkner's prose of the 1929-1931 period and Dos Passos *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930; 1932; 1936; [1938];) offer two distinct and antagonistic ways of contending with difficult historical meaning. Faulkner, rooted in the loam of the South and snarled by the historical meshes of slavery and modernization, generates a "language" of secrecy, in which difficult meaning is buried, concealed, smuggled into discreet locations. Dos Passos, by contrast, seeks out prose efficiency by way of the implementation of a modern textual epistemology. This thesis attends, then, to what we might dub two antagonistic economies of scale.

My methodologies are reflective of the variance between these two contrasting formalisms. The first half of the thesis situates the pronoun as the "compacted doctrine" of Faulkner's middle period. The pronoun, I argue, provides a formal grammar by which Faulkner can miniaturize, and thus encrypt, the massive and unspoken traumas of the Southern past. Three words provide the focus for these first three chapters: first "them", then "I" and finally "it". Cramped, bruised and pained, these single words are restricted words, words that seek to condense into slim grammatical locations a vast web of abuses. Faulkner's words are sites of opacity; his texts sites of hiddenness. Copious work has been completed on the historical conditions of the American South. This thesis draws from a number of these materials, from Eugene

Genovese through Joel Williamson and from Grace Elizabeth Hale to Eric Lott.¹ The historiography has been used as justification for myriad historicist readings of Faulkner's prose and is familiar to us as readers and critics of Faulkner. Ted Atkinson and Kevin Railey have provided two recent and stimulating materialist readings of Faulkner, readings to which I refer in the coming arguments.² An entirely separate critical community has argued powerfully for the structural workings of literary language. From Wolfgang Iser to William Empson to the Russian linguist Valentin Volosinov, accounts abound as to the sociality of the word. These "literary" studies are also consulted in the pages that follow. While the "historical" and the "textual" scholarship exist in isolation, no critic attends to the relation between Faulkner's formal grammar and the historicity of his literary texts. This thesis bridges the "historicist" Faulkner and the "textual" one and, by so doing, connotes the first articulation of such an effort. By attending to the workings of the pronoun in the context of the American South, the first half of this thesis provides the only extended examination of the historicity of Faulkner's grammar.

The second half of the thesis mines an entirely different semantic economy. Whereas Faulknerian textuality generates its meaning at the level of the *word*, the prose practice of Dos Passos generates its meaning at the level of the *concept*. The "concept" to which I attend is *The Camera Eye*. Fifty one in number, these highly rationalized, mechanical interludes connote a single and singular narrative belt of what Dos Passos referred to as his "four-way conveyor system". Calibrated to meet the demands of a thoroughly modern

¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black White Relations in the American South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Random House, 1999); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Ted Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression: Aesthetics, Ideology and Cultural Politics* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2006); Kevin Railey, *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology and the Production of William Faulkner* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

epistemology, these prose “conveyors” render efficient the literary text. In distinction to the grinding formalism of Faulkner, which seeks to render opaque and thus *inefficient* its (historical) meanings, *The Camera Eye* streamlines literary language, rendering it fluid and maximizing its output. What was small and begrudging in Faulkner is big and seemingly limitless in Dos Passos. If Faulkner is minded to narrate a “postage stamp of native soil”, Dos Passos is driven, in Mike Gold’s phrasing, to “digest a continent”.³ Stylistically and semantically attuned to modern modes of industrial production, *The Camera Eye* occasions an aesthetics of overproduction. The proliferation of abundant semantic flows is the cardinal feature of Dos Passos’ literary formalism. Yet as the coming discussions seek to show, the textual apparatus generates a glut of meaning that Dos Passos struggles to manage.

Much has been written about Faulkner and, separately, about Dos Passos as modernist entities, yet no study has attempted to read them in dialogue. That the critical industry has fluctuated in the timing of its proliferations might explain why Faulkner and Dos Passos have not been subjected to joint evaluations. Simply stated, Faulkner and Dos Passos have both been prominent at different times in the critical imagination. During the inter-war period, Dos Passos’ star was clearly in the ascendancy. Famously hailed by Jean-Paul Sartre as “the greatest writer of our time”, Dos Passos stood at the summit of American literature.⁴ Faulkner, during the same period would, by contrast, suffer from a sort of critical palsy; at the outbreak of the second World War the majority of his novels were out of print. Malcolm Cowley’s editorship of a “portable Faulkner” in 1946 and the award of a Nobel prize three years later lifted Faulkner’s spirits, his rhetoric, and his ratings in the academe. No such accolades for Dos Passos, who, by the early fifties had disappeared almost

³ Mike Gold, “The Education of John Dos Passos”, *The English Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Feb., 1933), pp.87-97. p.95.

⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, “John Dos Passos and 1919”, *Situations I* (1947), trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider, 1955), pp.88-96, p.96.

entirely from the critical radar. Rarely considered as anything more than a period piece of leftist political activity, *U.S.A.* has been consigned to the critical scrap-heap.

Since the publication of *The 42nd Parallel* in 1930, *The Camera Eye* has been an occasion for critical floundering. Contemporary readers would despair at the formalism of *The Camera Eye*. Constitutive of “queer glimpses of almost anything”, many keen readers simply did not know what to do with Dos Passos modernist “conveyors”.⁵ James N. Westerhoven and Townsend Ludington groped toward exegesis in the seventies yet encountering similar difficulty, opted instead to draw out *The Camera Eyes* biographical details; other critics have, with reference to the other three narrative modes, charted Dos Passos’ shift in politics.⁶ Recently, the confusion regarding *The Camera Eye* has turned to silence. In his recent book, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernity and the Injuries of American Capitalism* Seth Moglen mounts a rare investigation into the formal exigencies of Dos Passos’ prose forms. Moglen proves eminently sensitive to the political alienations that subtend *U.S.A.* yet he remains silent on the formal exigencies of *The Camera Eye*.⁷ Barbara Foley’s recent work is similarly attuned to the alienations and deformations of Dos Passos’ aesthetic. Foley, however, like Moglen, pays scant attention to the political capacities of *The Camera Eye*. Conscious of the inadequacy of these readings and convinced that *The Camera Eye* is the key with which to unlock the “political unconscious”

⁵ Upton Sinclair, “Review”, *New Masses* (April, 1930), Vol. v, pp.18-19, p.19.

⁶ For cultural analysis of Dos Passos see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996); for a biographical report see Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (London: E.P. Dutton, 1980). Political commentary can be found in Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and Robert C. Rosen, *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

⁷ Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernity and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

of *U.S.A.*, this is the first study to attend uniquely to *The Camera Eye* and the only one to semanticize its operations.

Faulkner and Dos Passos offer two distinctive formal responses to the deleterious onset of modernity. As different ways of conceiving of historical contingency, these two writers demand an entirely different way of reading. By implication they require a different critical methodology. By attending to the *word* in Faulkner and to the *concept* in Dos Passos I strive to do more than flag up two neglected facets of two independent critical discourses. In reading the meagre semantic yield of Faulkner against the abundant proliferations of Dos Passos, I set out a methodology through which a rigorous semantic comparison between two key prose modernisms can gain discursive traction. The comparative aspect of this thesis thus seeks to provide a methodological frame through which we can draw out a number of key formal, political and epistemological differences between two of America's primary formalists and producers of modernist texts.

*

Chapter 1, "Them", or White on the Outside: The Semantics of Race in *The Sound and the Fury* considers the generative capabilities of the collective third person pronoun, "them", in relation to Faulkner's fourth - and arguably most notorious - prose production. Organized into four discreet portions, the chapter opens by providing an historical backdrop against which Faulkner's formal grammar can be contextualized. I suggest that the collective pronoun "them" tacitly invokes the recently freed blacks who, in migrating from the American South in the wake of Emancipation, bereaved the white sense of self, or "I-hood", in Heidegger's term. Borne out of an assumption that *The Sound and the Fury's* formal grammar is a textual outgrowth of a doggedly historical set of problems, I parse the social, economic and psychological consequences of black's breaking from white. By so doing I position the collective impersonal

pronoun as a compacted grammar for the fraught intersections of black “thems” and white “Is” in the context of the Great Migration. These prefatory discussions classify as historically sedimented the opacities that subtend Faulkner’s prose forms.

The remainder of chapter 1 investigates these opacities as they manifest at the level of Faulkner’s text. Across three linked readings I explore the ways in which Benjamin, Quentin and Jason Compson struggle to articulate and navigate the fault-lines of a difficult racial past. For each Compson brother the specter of the black “them” occasions a set of acutely visual problems. For Benjy, *idiot savant* and mute witness to the fall of the “Old South”, the black, as the custodian of a slave past, flashes up in a problematic moment of eye contact with his recently pregnant (and thus culturally “black”) sister, Caddy. This black look, I argue, is the central maneuver in a panicked, yet socially attuned attempt to reassert the “whiteness” of a sullied sibling, yet the eyemindedness of Benjy’s racial rescue annihilates the very notion - the “whiteness” - that it seeks to preserve. Passed through Benjy’s miscegenated “eye”/“I”, Caddy’s “whiteness” is dependent *upon* yet simultaneously dismissive *of* the magical sway of the (penetrating) black eye. The visual commerce between Benjy and Caddy connotes a modest textual event but it is not an ahistorical one. In fact, Benjy’s narrative (re)visions proffer tacit, if under-articulated evidence of a familiarity with what Richard Godden, following Paul Ricoeur, calls the “pre-plots of his time”.⁸ Despite the semantic densities that subtend his narrative, Benjy is sufficiently embedded in the sociality of the South to “know” what to do, and where to go, at specific moments of crisis and loss. Benjy’s “knowing” does not constitute a fully blown epistemology, yet it does infer an acculturation to the racial codes that underpinned Southern regimes of accumulation. This acculturation occasions what Raymond Williams dubs a

⁸ Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labour: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.18.

“structure of feeling”. Historical consciousness is a quality that Faulkner scholarship rarely assigns to Benjy Compson. A brief review of the critical literature prefaces my close reading and outlines the frequency with which Benjy is deemed an entirely passive narrator wholly lacking control over the vicissitudes of his textual praxis. My arguments seek to complicate these prevailing critical evaluations.

A third section suggests that the notion of a “them” terrorises the racial subjectivity of Quentin, the novel’s second narrator. For Quentin, the black emerges through a bruise that he receives in a bungled attempt to defend the notion of a sister’s sexual purity, or “whiteness”, from the “blackguards” (SF 948; 962; 963; 969; 971) that move in her orbit. This bruise, or “shiner” (SF 1003) activates a semantic insurgency in which submerged black presence rises up and pushes through the crust of Quentin’s newly miscegenated, thus historicised face. Inspected in the wobbling surface of a basin, this “black eye” (1011) gets Quentin to thinking about race. Drawing upon postcolonial and phenomenological critical frameworks, I claim that as Quentin peers into the basin, the full force of black slavery pushes to the forefront of his consciousness. Overwhelming his fragile racial identity, Quentin’s reflection takes him to the brink of the Other.

A final reading investigates the proliferation of racialised meaning in the narrative of Jason Compson. For Jason, the black gathers *behind* the eye and is an occasion for excruciating headaches. These aches, which intensify when Jason considers black labour, the cotton market and the sexual activity of his (now “black”) sister, are historically derived. Testimony to what Jean-Paul Sartre refers to as a “sinking in” of historical consciousness, these pains threaten to send Jason into “blackout”; by extension, they threaten to re-race his whiteness. In sum, my opening chapter investigates how Faulkner’s most famous, and famously sedimented historical fiction struggles to answer what

Edouard Glissant refers to as the “relentless question of race”.⁹

Chapter 2, ““I”, or, Splitting the Eye in *As I Lay Dying*” shifts its focus from the collective “them” to the first person pronoun “I”. The employment of the first person pronoun propels Faulkner toward his fullest dissection of existentialism. “I” is the novel’s “compacted doctrine” and the primary means by which Faulkner can interrogate questions of being.¹⁰ The chapter moves through three discrete phases. Its opening discussions map the phenomenological contours of the imperilled “I” with reference to the novel’s most prolific yet most precarious “Eye”/“I”, Darl Bundren. Drawing from the ontological investigations of Sartre and Heidegger, I parse a single episode in Darl’s narration in which he, situated on the edge of sleep and “thinking of home” (*AILD* 52) sets to philosophising on the existential dimensions of the “I”.

My middle section provides an aesthetic identity for the alienated textual “I”. From Stephen M. Ross to Owen Robinson, a constellation of valuable work has emphasized the the dialogism that inflects Faulkner’s fifth novel.¹¹ Attending, in turn, to what Volosinov refers to as the “clash of live social accents”, these critical efforts shed light on the narrative fragmentations to which the splitting of the “I” refers.¹² Counter to these recent trends in Faulkner studies, I read the “fundamental polysemanticity” of Faulkner’s fifth novel not through Bakhtin but through Sartre.¹³ Specifically, I discuss Faulkner’s textual divisions - the splitting of the narrative “I” - with reference to the notion of the “series”, as set out in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Given Sartre’s

⁹ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.3.

¹⁰ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p.39.

¹¹ Stephen M. Ross, ““Voice” in Narrative Texts: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*” in *PMLA*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (Mar., 1979), pp.300-10; Owen Robinson, *Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner’s Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹² V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.23.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.80.

appreciation of Faulkner's prose it strikes me as remiss that the existentialist deliberations of the novel, noted by writers as diverse as Michel Delville and Daniel Singal, have not extended to the concept of the series.¹⁴ John K. Simon's essay "Faulkner and Sartre: Metamorphosis and the Obscene" constitutes perhaps the closest that any critic has come to a serialized conception of Faulkner's formal grammar, yet here it is the notion of *le regard* rather than the series that comes to the fore.¹⁵ This chapter is the first articulation of the "serial situation" as it applies to the formal strategies of *As I Lay Dying*.¹⁶

As a second set of discussions seek to show, Faulkner's text is invested in the forms and syntax of French avant-gardes. In a section entitled "From Seriality to Surreality: Faulkner's Aesthetic Corpse", I pin the deathly procession of the Bundrens to the *cadavre exquis*, as formulated by Andre Breton in Paris in 1924. Attuned to the notion of the series as extrapolated by Sartre and to the shredded formalism of French Surrealism, *As I Lay Dying* is a collage prose work which comes into meaning by coming apart at the seams. This serialised and bizarre journey to the grave resounds as Faulkner's exquisite corpse.

A third and final section routes the fragmentation of the narrative "I" into an historical context. The phenomenological and textual alienations issue from the fragmentation attendant upon the disintegrative shift toward a modern South. Faulkner's narrative is an analogue for a painful journey to town and, an investment in commodity culture. Drawing upon a rich tradition of cultural historiography, the forty mile death drag to Jefferson doubles as an odyssey of consumption.

¹⁴ Michel Delville. "Alienating Language and Darl's Narrative Consciousness in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*", *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 27, Iss. 1 (Fall 1994), pp.61-72; Daniel J. Singal, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁵ John K. Simon, "Faulkner and Sartre: Metamorphosis and the Obscene", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Summer 1963), pp.216-225, p.220.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.249.

Chapter 3, ““It”, or *Sanctuary’s* Reversible Bodies”, closes the readings on Faulkner’s compacted pronominal trilogy. Occasioning the most sustained textual analysis of the thesis, the chapter attends to the materiality of the sign in its smallest workings. Here, a case is made for the centrality of the third person singular neuter pronoun “it” in Faulkner’s sixth and most infamous prose production, *Sanctuary* (1931). The work, an earlier version of which appears in *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha: Returns of the Text* (2011) consolidates the claims of my first two chapters that the pronoun resonates as a semantically generative textual element in Faulkner’s prose fiction of the middle period. Taking a problematically under-articulated rape as its focal subject, the chapter draws upon linguistic, formalist, and Freudian methodologies, and claims that the pronoun “it” is key to a series of textual, material and psychosexual inversions. As the novel’s “compacted doctrine”, the word “it” provides Temple Drake with a grammatical means of displacing and deflecting the pain of literal meaning. Paying close scrutiny to an act of “telling” that never really tells, the chapter situates Faulkner’s grammar as a place of violence. Temple’s incessant, habitual use of the impersonal pronoun sits at the centre of a bid to re-narrate her painful past, yet the desire to revise or to reconstruct transcends the limits of Temple’s body. The word “it”, as the final section of the chapter infers, situates Temple midway between the hideous past of American slavery and the unimaginable future of modernity.

Chapter 4 is entitled “Machining Meaning: U.S.A.” This chapter, the first of three on Dos Passos’ modernist trilogy, offers a theoretical framework through which Dos Passos’ abundant semantic proliferations can be conceptualized. The framing is explicitly Marxian and reads Dos Passos’ camera-texts as conduits for the stowing of semantic surpluses. A case is made here for *The Camera Eyes* as the hoards of the textual economy. The twenty-seven prose compartments function as linked semantic locations within which extruded textual matter - the textual surplus - is held and duly prevented from

clogging up the rest of the textual mechanism. These arguments consider Dos Passos' suggestive mention that his *Camera Eyes* were intended as "safety valves" employed to pump subjective liquidities away from the rest of the text, facilitating its objectivity. As "conveyors" and as "safety vales", *The Camera Eye* is awkwardly situated. These exchanges function both as the mode of (over) production and the means of controlling the excess. Having provided a theoretical frame in the first part of the chapter I seek, in the second, to probe the eminently dialectical relation between form, as a modernist imperative that rushes forward, and history, as a reach into the past. I classify *The Camera Eye* as the only place throughout the *U.S.A.* trilogy at which the tension between form and history manifests as a dialectical imperative and thus draw out a tension between text and context that supplements the tension between use and surplus.

Chapter 5, "Eyes Left: *Nineteen Nineteen*" (1932) solicits *The Camera Eye* as a lens through which significant shifts in Dos Passos' politics achieve focus. The chapter takes as its primary materials three of the novel's fifteen *Camera Eyes*, and argues that the formal nature of these episodes is a key to understanding coterminous fluctuations in Dos Passos' political stance. With reference to Sartre's concept of the petrification consequent upon capitalist modes and Walter Benjamin's notions of a *jetztzeit* or "now-time", I read the opening *Camera Eye* as a formal outgrowth of the intensification of Dos Passos' Marxian commitments. This is the materialist moment for Dos Passos, the point at which his formal praxis and his political leftism fuse. For the only time in *U.S.A.* Dos Passos' formal aesthetic proves sensitive to the workings of dialectical materialism. Close analyses of two late *Camera Eyes* seeks to show that by the publication of *Nineteen Nineteen* in 1932, however, Dos Passos' Marxism would start to slide. I pass the intensification and subsequent disavowal of Dos Passos' leftism through Freud, Marx and Bataille, and claim that by 1932, Dos Passos' former commitment to the American left had entered into "ebullition".

The final chapter of the thesis, “Eyes Right: *The Big Money*” considers the cultural, economic, and political ramifications of *The Camera Eye*’s withdrawal as structuring narratives for U.S.A. Having played a prominent part in *The 42nd Parallel* and less of a role in *Nineteen Nineteen*, the camera-text undergoes a final reduction in *The Big Money*. What was twenty-seven in the opening novel became fifteen in the second, which becomes nine in the third. The draining away of the visual surplus (and with it Dos Passos’ “subjectivity”) is a development that no critic warrants as worthy of serious attention. In 1976 Westerhoven mentioned the trend; the following year Ludington suggested that it had been “seldom noted”.¹⁷ More than thirty years have passed since these mentions and no study has attended to the shift. I want to argue in this final chapter that the attenuation of the *Camera Eye* is of threefold significance. First, the depletion is visually aggregated. Dos Passos reneges on his previously abundant visual commitments because Americans had, in his terms, “become eyeminded” by the time that *The Big Money* is published in 1936. Having achieved full proficiency in the eye-dialect of American modernity, the camera-texts, as the eye-prompts or ideological stabilizers of the prose “system” can come off. These figurations of surplus seem themselves, by 1936, to have become surplus to the demands of the textual economy. Drawing upon the theoretical approaches of Theodor Adorno, Alfred Sohn Rethel and Rachel Bowlby, I suggest that the phasing out of the camera-text implies the normalization of the signs and symbols of modern industrial capital and, by implication, connotes a begrudging acceptance of labour’s commodification. Through an extended close reading of *The Big Money*’s opening *Camera Eye*, I suggest that the “eye cramp” occasioned by the onset of commodification spreads to the throat and to the spine. The decision to shift from a tight “eye” to a tight “throat” and a stiff “spine” issues from a conviction that the contractions

¹⁷ James N. Westerhoven, “Autobiographical Elements in *The Camera Eye*” in *American Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Nov. 1976), pp.340-364.

of Dos Passos' text are informed *by* and responsive *to* contractions in the United States economy. By offering throat and spine as parallel sites of narrowness and constriction, I locate the "eyemindedness" of Americans within a more extensive social physiognomy.

The third and concluding section of chapter considers the political ramifications of Dos Passos' shift in formal praxis. With reference to a number of later *Camera Eyes* and to Dos Passos' literary correspondence of the mid thirties, it is argued that the final three *Camera Eyes* problematise Dos Passos' formal practice. Referring to a period of political radicalism yet composed during a shift toward the right, these final *Camera Eyes* provide Dos Passos with a means of revising a former political radicalism.

The thesis terminates via a coda: "The Truth About Visual Training", an unpublished research paper drafted by Dos Passos in collaboration with the eye doctor and behavioral optometrist Amiel Francke. Held in the special collections at the University of Virginia, these materials have yet to register on the radar of Dos Passos scholarship. That these grouped papers have received no mention in what is a notoriously vast critical pile is on its own a sufficient reason to draw attention to them here. Yet I do not rescue these papers from the margins for this reason alone. These texts enfranchise new ways of seeing the visual project to which Dos Passos was committed. More, they testify to a longer preoccupation with the implementation of visual efficiency than the current scholarship is willing to admit. In short, they provide a suggestive teleology thorough which Dos Passos' most famous fictions might be re-considered.

CHAPTER ONE

“THEM”,
OR,
WHITE ON THE OUTSIDE: THE SEMANTICS OF RACE IN
THE SOUND AND THE FURY.

*There was something terrible in me sometimes at night I could see it grinning at me I could see it through them grinning at me through their faces it's gone now and I'm sick.*¹⁸

Caddy Compson, *The Sound and The Fury*.

This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded [...] The "they", which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.¹⁹

It is early 1928. William Faulkner, in a funk with his publishers with regard to repeated rejections of his third novel, *Flags in the Dust*, begins work on a short story centring on the demise of the Compson family, an aristocratic clan that struggle, in the wake of Reconstruction, to come to terms with their social, psychological and material dissipation. Faulkner would call the story "Twilight". Within twelve months, by February 1929, the story had been emboldened and extended, and accepted for publication as a novel. For some reason uncomfortable with "Twilight" as its title, Faulkner had it changed. The

¹⁸ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), p.963. Throughout this chapter all primary citations are taken from Noel Polk (ed.), *Faulkner: Novels 1926 – 1929* (New York: Library of America, 2006), hereafter abbreviated SF and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.164.

novel he would call *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Faulkner's description of the process by which *Flags* became "Twilight" which subsequently became *The Sound and the Fury* has been etched in the stone of Faulkner criticism: "[o]ne day I seemed to shut a door, between me and all publishers' addresses and book lists. I said to myself, Now I can write."²⁰ Typically Faulknerian in its indirection and in its ambiguity, the pronouncement connotes the privation of a literary life. This thesis is less interested in Faulkner as a man than as a producer of texts, of texts that, in turn, problematise the kind of separation or disengagement to which Faulkner's famous statement refers. While Faulkner's solitude indeed resonates at the personal level, it also has repercussions at the level of form. By shutting the figurative "door" between himself, his publishers, and his reading public, Faulkner would secrete his novel behind the arras. As an exercise in hiddenness and opacity, this secretion, pertaining to the "secrets" of the South, is an apposite one. Faulkner, having withdrawn himself from "the social metabolism", blocks off the narrative sight-lines, vistas that realist prose sought to keep clear.²¹ *The Sound and the Fury*, then, not only "shut the door" on "publishers' addresses and book lists" but it "shut the door" on the aesthetic assumptions of a literary genre. "Transparency" and "precision" - watchwords of literary realism - would, in Faulkner's most durable fictions, collapse into obscurity and contradiction. In his study *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (1981) Ian F. A. Bell recalls an exchange between Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant that we might consider typical of the preeminent visuality from which Faulkner's novel would radically depart. Flaubert, Maupassant writes

²⁰ For commentary on Faulkner's 1946 Introduction see Philip Cohen and Doreen Fowler, "Faulkner's Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*", *American Literature*, Vol. 62, No.2 (June, 1990), pp.262-283, p.265.

²¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 2004), p.199.

compelled me to describe in a few phrases a being or an object in such a manner as to clearly particularize it, and distinguish it from all other objects of the same race, or the same species. 'When you pass', he would say, 'a grocer seated at his shop door, a janitor smoking his pipe, a stand of hackney coaches, show me that grocer and that janitor, their attitude, their whole physical appearance, including also by a skilful description their whole moral nature so that I cannot confound them with any other grocer or any other janitor: *make me see, in one word*, that a certain cab-horse does not resemble the fifty others that follow or precede it.'²²

With the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in October 1929 Faulkner provided a full repudiation of the terms of literary composition as set out in Flaubert's 1914 tutorial to Maupassant. Faulkner's novel seeks not to "particularize" but to ruin the particular. In this chapter I argue that Faulkner reverses Flaubert's insistent appeal to "make me see", thus, and in the terms of the visual theorist Martin Jay, "problematizing the notion of the transparency of visual experience".²³ *The Sound and the Fury* is an episode in opacity; it strives not toward what Flaubert dubbed "unequalled accuracy of perception", but toward obscurity. Despite its anti-visual tendencies, Faulkner's prose is far from meaningless. In fact, and in the idiom of Malcolm Bull, the Faulknerian text comes into meaning by "coming into hiding".²⁴ But what, we might ask, is being hidden? Why must it be hidden? What are the textual ramifications of its concealment? And how do we react to its unearthing? I address these questions in the following three chapters.

Most immediately, the attempt to block, hide or cover poses significant problems at the level of Faulkner's text. The formal condition of *The Sound and the Fury* is often governed by opacity; indeed, opacity forms a constitutive part of reading Faulkner's early novels, its presence threatening to frustrate attempts

²² Ian F. A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.86, italics added.

²³ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.246.

²⁴ Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision, and Totality* (London: Verso, 1999).

to extract “meaning” from the text. As Myra Jehlen writes in connection with Faulkner, “knowing has become increasingly problematical.”²⁵ Much of this thesis zeroes in on the smallest of Faulkner’s textual operations, how meaning accrues *in one word*, to flash back to Flaubert. Specifically, it attends to the workings of three pronouns, “them”, “I” and finally “it”. The pronoun, I argue, is the pre-eminent grammatical means by which Faulkner’s texts of the 1929-1931 period generate - yet simultaneously preclude the release of - semantic meaning. They, in effect, shut the door. We would commit an error, however, if we were to locate these figurations of opacity exclusively - or, for that matter, even primarily - at the textual level. The textual difficulty, substantial and notorious as it is, is the manifestation of a prior difficulty: a difficulty at the level of Southern history. The “dictatorship of the they”, then, in Heidegger’s terms, occasions not just a semantic problem but an historical one. Faulkner’s texts of the middle period generate their meaning by (dis)engaging with what Eric Sundquist calls “the single most agonizing experience of [Faulkner’s] region and his nation: the crisis and long aftermath of American slavery.”²⁶ A full investigation of this “agonizing experience” exceeds the jurisdiction of the present work. I restrict my early discussions to a more portable topic, namely, how black movement from the South in the wake of Emancipation contextualised (albeit belatedly, and in sporadic bursts) the shape and feel of American slavery; how, in other words, free blacks, by mobilising and migrating from the region, gave form to slavery’s “structure of feeling” to borrow an expression from Raymond Williams.²⁷

The 1920s bore witness to black migration on an unprecedented scale. According to the historian Cheryl Lester, two and a half million blacks left the

²⁵ Myra Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner’s South* (Secaucus; N.J.: Columbia University Press, 1978), p.1.

²⁶ Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p.6.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

South between 1915 and 1930.²⁸ Having begun in the “teens as an effort on [the] part of free blacks to take control of their lives”, black migration, in the words of economic historian Jay Mandle, “redoubled throughout the ‘20s.” Mandle notes that “the rapid pace of out-migration of blacks continued with nearly 700,000 blacks estimated as having vacated the six plantation states [Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and the Carolinas] in these years.”²⁹ All too quickly for the white landowning classes, the “thems” of the plantation South, those terrifying, indistinct “others” that strike fear into Caddy Compson, became history, became “gone now”. This “going” magnified and thus *made public* the flaws that, prior to black Emancipation, had remained a discrete, if constitutive feature of Southern modes of accumulation. The end of legal slavery articulated, in Michael Taussig’s terms, “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated”.³⁰ To be legally “free” was one thing; to move away from the South, asserting one’s “humanity” or “I-hood” was quite another.

Indeed, in the wake of Emancipation the benefits of life under wages - a form of economic control prevalent in the urban north - was difficult to differentiate from that which obtained under chattel slavery. As Mandle notes elsewhere, the coming of wages in fact rerouted many blacks back into the kind of subordination that was a feature of slavery.³¹ For many, the transition to a wage did little more than displace the power relations from master/slave to boss/worker. At a basic level, money wages legitimated the kinds of labour practices that were performed for free under slavery. The “freedom” that came

²⁸ Cheryl Lester, “*The Sound and the Fury* and the Great Migration” in Philip M. Weinstein (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.123-145, p.135.

²⁹ Jay Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978), p.74.

³⁰ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.5.

³¹ Mandle, *Not Slave, Not Free: The African American Experience since the Civil War* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

from emancipation often meant little more than the freedom to toil for the private profit of others. Trudier Harris has more recently made a similar point. "In the 1930s" Harris writes, "sharecropping was as much a system of slavery as that state that existed for Blacks in this country prior to 1860. Invisible chains of debt took the place of rope and shackles, but *the mental state which existed during slavery did not change much.*"³² Material incentives drove many white employers from Northern industries to lure blacks out of the South. Carole Marks writes that, "[i]n the Great Migration, the initial line of communication was established by agents of northern companies, acting as intermediaries between employers and potential labor migrants."³³ In scouting for degraded labor, these "intermediaries" differ only nominally from those sent, as per pre civil war custom, to buy slaves at auction. Yet blacks *did* move, in increasing numbers, figuratively shutting the door on the social and economic forms of the "old time" (SF 929) and, by so doing, moving away from the primal scene of American slavery.

Black out-migration would hamper Southern modes of production. As Jonathan M. Wiener writes, "[p]ostwar Southern society was evolving in the same direction as the rest of the nation, though at a slower pace because of the ideological and cultural heritage of slavery."³⁴ While rapid industrialisation and an abundance of labour in the North would see the national economy expand at a steady rate throughout the first third of the century, the Southern economy continued to fester. Bereft of black labour, the South, economically speaking, became "sick". Manumission, and the migration that (painstakingly) followed decimated the productive apparatus of the Southern economy. By 1927, the year

³² Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.34, italics added.

³³ Carole Marks, *Farewell - We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.21.

³⁴ Jonathan M. Wiener, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (Oct., 1979), pp.970-992, p.977.

before Faulkner began work on *The Sound and the Fury* - more than 41% of cotton spindles lay idle in the Southern states.³⁵ The turgid performance of the Southern economy reached its terminus in the crash of the cotton markets in October 1929. Articulating a singular break in the national experience, the crash was in no small part the culmination of an inability, on behalf of the owning classes, to deal with the twin shocks of modernisation and black migration. Michael Bernstein sums up the severity of the crisis:

[t]he crash created a massive disruption in the financial markets of the country, drastically devalued capital stocks, greatly depressed levels of disposable income, and, by virtue of the high unemployment [peaking at 25% in 1933]³⁶ and rapid deflation it generated, so biased the already unequal distribution of purchasing power as to virtually eliminate consumer and investor confidence.³⁷

The collapse of the cotton markets hit the South particularly hard. That in the wake of mass black migration the region proved unable to fend off the toxic effects of the marketplace might come as no real surprise. Indeed, notice had been served for some time that the cotton markets were unable to function as a profitable means of production in an increasingly modern - and increasingly global - system of exchange. As early as April 1928, Jason Compson, the third of the Compson children, would loudly speculate on the precarious condition of the "cotton market" (SF 1044), an economic system that was, in his idiomatic phrasing, "on the point of blowing its head off". (1065) Perhaps more difficult than the rupture itself was the discretion with which it threatened to become manifest: the "whole dam top could blow off and we'd not know it". (1051) The cumulative pressures of a decade of black movement had pulled the veil from

³⁵ Michael Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.76.

³⁶ Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor and Politics in America, 1920-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.160.

³⁷ Bernstein, *The Great Depression*, p.30.

the face of the old South. Consequently, and in the phrasing of W.E.B. Du Bois, “that dead weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem” came to the fore.³⁸

The economic hardship that issued from black migration was real and it was sharp. Yet perhaps the greatest shock to come out of this “moving” was psychological in kind. For generations, white and black had been tied by white dependency on black labour; with the loss of black labour, the social contract between white and black had to be redrawn. In effect, as rural blacks moved toward the financial independence offered - yet often never realised - by Northern capital, the fundamental principles that underpinned the logic of Southern means of production - first slavery, and then debt peonage at its centre - suddenly dissolved.³⁹ As blacks moved North the Southern white land owning class would come to realise, yet simultaneously attempt to repress, the implications of a difficult racial past.

The uncoupling of black from white - the cleaving of “them” from “us” - would cause massive damage to the white psyche, especially “among white Southerners who experienced black migration as loss and abandonment”.⁴⁰ Slavery, as a social configuration determined by economic incentives, demanded the psychological interpenetration of white and black. As Eugene Genovese affirms, “[t]he racial catastrophe that accompanied the whites’ moment of truth had its roots in a genuine intimacy, not merely in black pretense.”⁴¹ Ultimately this “catastrophe” was the result of what Eric Lott dubs

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Norton, 1999), p.14.

³⁹ For an account of the disparity between Northern and Southern wages see Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

⁴⁰ Lester, “Great Migration”, p.139.

⁴¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p.134.

a “conflicted intimacy”.⁴² To lose (sight of) the black body was not only to lose (sight of) the labour that it represented but it was also to lose (sight of) a part of oneself. Joel Williamson forcefully states the case: “[i]n order for an individual white person to let black people go, the white person, in a sense, had to die, had to cease to be in an important way what he or she had been.”⁴³ This inability to “let black people go” occupies the epistemological centre of *The Sound and the Fury*. It also occupies the corporeal centre of Caddy Compson, as my epigraph infers. Evidence enough of a “conflicted intimacy”, “Caddy’s” nervously italicised utterance is this:

[t]here was something terrible in me sometimes at night I could see it grinning at me I could see it through them grinning at me through their faces it's gone now and I'm sick. (SF 963)

“Caddy’s” terms, which are more properly “Quentin’s”, occasion a number of tensional displacements which, in turn, occasion what I wish to call a problem of throughness. In the present example the throughness is multi-layered. Not only does Caddy claim that there was “something terrible in” *her* (“she could see it grinning”) but this terrifying “something” can be seen “*through*” the submerged, pluralized “faces” of indistinct others.

In the first instance the plurality of “grinning [...] faces” refers to Caddy’s alleged promiscuity. Worryingly, for the Compson brothers, Caddy is unaware of (or perhaps more likely unwilling to disclose) the exact number of sexual partners that she has taken since she became, in Quentin’s awkward term “unvirgin” (SF 937), and thus “sick” in the summer of 1909. Quentin is especially interested in Caddy’s sexploits: “*Have there been very many Caddy / I dont know too many will you look after Benjy and Father / You dont know whose it is*

⁴² Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.75.

⁴³ Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, p.499.

then does he know" (SF 965, italics in original). Quentin pursues his sister, again with recourse to the term "them" and again through a fractured syntax that, constituting a sort of narrative ventriloquism, allows Quentin to furnish answers for his own questions: "*did you love them Caddy did you love them When they touched me I died*" (SF 991).⁴⁴ On one hand, then, the word "them" provides begrudging reference to Caddy's perceived sexual openness. In short, the word "them" nominates the multiplicity of lovers that may or may not have been "in" Caddy Compson. However, these myriad "faces" function as more than screens upon which the shame and recrimination of a deepening sexuality receive projection. Faulkner, I submit, uses the collective pronoun as a means by which Caddy's conception might be racialized.

The fluidity of Caddy's/Quentin's syntax renders opaque the nature of her/his "sightings". The "thing" which resides within Caddy, pushing through her stomach is indeterminate and menacing, dreadful yet amorphous and shifting in its threat. That this vaguely defined "something" becomes visible only "sometimes", materialising only "at night", and that it - whatever it is - disappears almost as soon as it is seen ("it's gone now") thickens the opacity of what is a barely perceivable material presence. The "something" is not just "in" Caddy but "in" that presence which is "in" *her*; this wretched, grinning cargo subsequently struggles to push "through" the submerged, collective faces of an unnamed and apparently unknowable "them". It is in this sense that a word - here the word "them", may, in Empson's meticulous phrasing "become a sort of solid entity, able to direct opinion, thought of as like a person".⁴⁵ By pushing the "grinning" through "Caddy", and in turn, through the faces of mysterious others, Faulkner semanticizes what Glissant refers to as "the opacity of the

⁴⁴ Because Faulkner doesn't let Caddy speak for herself, any evaluation of her sexual activity comes through her brothers, most abundantly, through Quentin. That Caddy is kept silent yet perceived of as sexually fluid chimes with the paternalist attitudes of the period, attitudes which fed into stereotypes about purity and whiteness.

⁴⁵ Empson, *Complex Words*, p.39.

other".⁴⁶ The word "grinning" racializes Caddy's nocturnal anxieties. Faulkner draws on racist stereotype as a means of generating metaphoric meaning. As Homi Bhabha explains, stereotype is itself a (by)product of a social sort of breeding. Gestating in the amnion of culture, stereotypes reproduce yet they reproduce only to infer a sort of epistemic stillbirth. Bhabha writes that

[a]s a form of splitting and multiple belief, the stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. The process by which the metaphoric 'masking' is inscribed on a lack which must then be concealed gives the stereotype both its fixity and its phantasmatic quality – the *same old* stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time.⁴⁷

Albeit partially and in an occluded manner, Faulkner tells "the same old stories", here centring on the "grinning", subhuman, rubber-lipped "nigger". In the context of the post-bellum South, "grinning" implies "blackness". Duly "tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy", these "faces" semanticize as black Caddy's "sickness".⁴⁸

Faulkner's terminology as well as his imagery draws, from the semantic well that is Caddy's stomach, implicit yet unutterable racial meaning. Caddy's penetration is most likely the result of sexual contact with the "blackguard" (*SF* 948; 962; 969; 971) Dalton Ames, although fittingly we never know for sure. What we do know is that her penetration results in pregnancy, a state that Caddy (again through Quentin) euphemistically tags a "sickness". Caddy never affirms her pregnancy directly yet her insistence that she has "got to marry somebody" (*SF* 963; 965) confirms the reader's suspicions of a conception. Caddy's penetration and subsequent "sickness" is a source of considerable

⁴⁶ Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, p.65.

⁴⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.42.

anxiety for her brothers, not least because they, with varying degrees of eloquence, equate Caddy's loss of virginity to a loss of "whiteness". Caddy's "blackness" issues from a sexual transgression, specifically the loss of virginity outside of the institutional parameters of marriage. Quentin poses the question frankly: "[w]hy must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden and furious in the dark woods" (SF 947). While initially functioning as a sex line, then, Caddy's hymen doubles as a colour line; its crossing marks her, culturally speaking, as "black".

Quentin would not have been alone in equating Caddy's alleged promiscuity with moral or cultural "blackness". The judgement was rife within the social context of the post-bellum American South. Lillian Smith vividly recalls the rhetorical thrusts that gave rhythm to turn of the century teachings on Southern sexual etiquette. Dispensed down the maternal line, these lessons conflated the language of sex and the language of race. Citing her mother, Smith recalls the tutorial: "parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from [...] Especially must you be careful about what enters your body [. . .] what enters and leaves the doors of your body is the essence of morality."⁴⁹ To be white one must "shut the door[s]". Agonisingly, for the Compson brothers, this is a lesson that Caddy has chosen to skip. (The portentous brown stain on Caddy's "nether garments" (SF 1081) - the image from which the novel grew - telescopes this later transgression.)⁵⁰

Caddy is not alone in her surrogacy of a hidden black. Each of the Compson brothers undergoes a substantive - and *historically meaningful* - "blackening" somewhere in the course of his narrative that chimes with the dismal miscegenation of "Caddy". Importantly, for present purposes, and thoroughly in keeping with our first reading, these raced moments generate

⁴⁹ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (London: Norton, 1961), p.14.

⁵⁰ Faulkner would mythologise his novelistic beginnings in an address to the English Club at the University of Virginia on March 7, 1957. For a transcript of the audio recording see http://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio02_2 (last accessed September 14th 2011).

specifically *visual* problems. For Quentin, the problematic intersection of race and vision manifests via the blacking up of his eye; for Jason it manifests in the form of a headache that risks his *blacking out*. I begin my analyses of the Compson brothers, however, by exploring the racial “visions” of Benjy Compson, visions that attempt to counter the sexual “blackening” of an absent sister.

BENJY COMPSON: BECOMING BLUE(GUM)

To claim a racial consciousness for Benjy Compson might strike many as a precocious - if not entirely disingenuous - assertion. The notion that Benjy might be “raced” and, as I seek to suggest, “raced” as other than “white”, cuts against the vast majority of interpretive positions on the novel’s opening session. Given the diversity of readings on *The Sound and the Fury* it is of note that critical responses to Benjamin Compson are so narrow. Scholars from disparate political, theoretical and national positions reach a near consensus in assuming that Benjy lacks, and lacks *in toto*, a sense of place, time and history. Benjy’s narrative, the critical tradition maintains, formalises the unbearable turmoil to which he is subjected, and over which he has no control. In 1948 Lawrence Bowling peddled what would become the standard line on Benjy Compson: “[t]o expect Benjy to explain the phenomena which his mind perceives is like expecting a phonograph to comment upon a recording. All his mind does is reproduce what it takes in through the physical senses.”⁵¹ In an influential essay of 1966, Michael Millgate claimed that Benjy’s “observations do not pass through an intelligence which is capable of ordering”. For Millgate, Benjy “reports the events of which he is *a spectator*, and even those in which he

⁵¹ Lawrence E. Bowling, “Faulkner: Technique of *The Sound and the Fury*”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 10, Iss. 4 (1948), pp.552-565, p.556.

is himself a participator, with a *camera-like fidelity*.”⁵² Four years later, James Mellard, with a camera-like fidelity of his own, would reproduce Millgate’s argument which, in turn, reproduced Bowling’s. Faulkner’s narrative, Mellard insists, “forces Benjy into the role of the passive, machine-like recorder that can convey sensations without intellectual mediation”.⁵³ Lacking intention, will and logic Benjy, Mellard exhorts, “cannot cause events to happen” but is instead done to, acted *upon*. “The world does not make sense only sensation”, he concludes.⁵⁴ I consider Mellard’s claim as odd on two fronts. First, it infers that the world makes “sense” to the text’s other narrators. Clearly, it doesn’t; be it Quentin’s failure to fathom the maturing sexuality of his sister or Jason’s inability to comprehend the machinations of the “cotton market” (1044), the fictional “world” of *The Sound and the Fury* is an habitual source of confusion. That Benjy might not be able to extract clear and consistent meaning from his experiences is not a problem that he alone faces. The signal difference between Benjy and his brothers is that Benjy lacks a language through which he can articulate the extent to which it confuses him.

Critical responses would continue to read Benjy as an essentially passive narrator whose primary function was to reproduce faithfully the words of others. The camera analogy has proved especially durable. For Noel Polk, Benjy’s narrative is constituted by no more than the “simple registering of sense impressions”.⁵⁵ For Eric Sundquist, the narration belies “the static image-making capacity of Benjy’s “mind””.⁵⁶ John T. Matthews gives the lie to Benjy’s

⁵² Michael Millgate, “*The Sound and the Fury*” in Robert Penn Warren (ed.), *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp.94-108, p.98, italics added.

⁵³ James M. Mellard, “Caliban as Prospero: Benjy and *The Sound and the Fury*”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring, 1970), pp.233-248, p.234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.243; 234.

⁵⁵ Noel Polk, *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p.133.

⁵⁶ Sundquist, *The House Divided*, p.14.

alleged passivity, claiming that he “*witnesses loss but cannot reply to it*”⁵⁷ as does Donald Kartiganer, who claims that “Benjy’s mind moves through the world and time wholly without a controlling perspective, voicing a prose of pure presentation.” In fact, Kartiganer claims that “[t]hings seem to reveal themselves of their own accord, unchosen, uncontrived, *as if to an innocent eye* unwilling or unable to impose any imaginative pressure on them, any prior models of ordering or cultural bias.”⁵⁸ I contest the notion of an “*innocent eye*” in the coming pages. Suffice it to say that predominant critical reactions, whether they cast Benjy as a primitive or as a machine, divest him of agency.⁵⁹ The following pages offer a riposte to this impacted critical tradition. With reference to a key moment of “revelation” I argue that Benjy *does* have some control over where he goes and, more, that he knows *why* he goes there. Roskus plainly testifies to the epistemological range of Benjy Compson: “He know lot more than folks thinks” (SF 901).

Benjy’s “knowing” is evident in an “eyeminded” exchange in which he attempts to negotiate the difficult realisation of his sister’s pregnancy. Benjy recalls it this way:

Caddy came to the door and stood there, looking at Father and Mother. Her eyes flew at me, and away. I began to cry. It went loud and I got up. Caddy came in and stood with her back to the wall, looking at me. I went

⁵⁷ John T. Matthews, *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1991), p.44, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Donald M. Kartiganer, ““Now I Can Write”: Faulkner’s Novel of Invention” in Noel Polk (ed.), *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 71-98, p.79, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ For further commentary on Benjy’s alleged narrative passivity, see L. Moffit Cecil, “A Rhetoric for Benjy”, *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 (Fall 1970), pp.32-46. For attempts to chart its scene shifts see George R. Stewart and Joseph M. Backus, “Each In Its Ordered Place: Structure and Narrative in “Benjy’s Section of *The Sound and the Fury*”, *American Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Jan., 1958); also significant are Edmond L. Volpe, *A Reader’s Guide to William Faulkner: The Novels* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp.353-65; and Noel Polk and Stephen M. Ross, *Reading Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p.5.

toward her, crying, and she shrank against the wall and I saw her eyes and I cried louder and pulled at her dress. She put her hands out but I pulled at her dress. Her eyes ran.

Versh said, your name Benjamin now. You know how come your name Benjamin now. They making a bluegum out of you. Mammy say in old time your grandpa changed nigger's name, and he turn preacher, and when they look at him, he bluegum too. Didn't use to be bluegum neither. And when family woman look him in the eye in the full of the moon chile born bluegum. And one evening, when they was about a dozen them bluegum chillen running around the place, he never come home. Possum hunters found him in the woods, et clean. And you know who et him. Them bluegum chillen did.

We were in the hall. Caddy was still looking at me. Her hand was against her mouth and I saw her eyes and I cried. We went up the stairs. She stopped again, against the wall, looking at me and I cried and she went on and I came on, crying, and she shrank against the wall, looking at me. She opened the door to her room, but I pulled at her dress and we went to the bathroom and she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed at her, crying. (SF 929-30)

In this exchange, two significant - and significantly troubling - moments from Benjy's past intersect. The first, designated by roman type, and consisting of the entirety of the first and third paragraphs, locates the reader in the "early summer" of 1909, and marks Benjy's realisation that his sister is no longer a virgin. The second, designated by italics, and subsuming the second paragraph, locates the reader in November 1900, and centres upon Benjy's change of name from "Maury" - a change consequent upon Caroline Compson's shame at the manifesting of her son's disability.⁶⁰ In the first instance, as Richard Godden has noted, these two moments of change evoke a parallel sense of loss: the first a loss of a maidenhead, the second the loss of a maiden (or first) *name*. "Caddy's sexual change", Godden suggests, "is associated with Benjy's name change, in an essentially cultural analogy involving two impurities."⁶¹ These "impurities" carry an implicit racial accent: Caddy is "blackened" by a sexual act in 1909;

⁶⁰ Stewart and Backus, "Ordered Place", p.444.

⁶¹ Godden, *Fictions of Labour*, p.17.

Benjy by his disability in 1900. Whilst Jason talks about it and Quentin reflects upon it, Benjy takes it upon himself to actually do something about his sister's pregnancy. By moving back to 1900, Benjy predates Caddy's act of intercourse, figuratively reinstating her hymen. For Benjy the reinstatement is a matter of the utmost urgency, as implied in the loss of Caddy's virginity is the loss of her "purity" and by extension the staining of her "whiteness".

Benjy's efforts at backdating his sister's virginity ultimately prove counterintuitive. In his attempt to expunge or negate an initial penetration - perpetrated (we think) by Dalton Ames in 1909 - Benjy enacts another. This "anecdotal rupture", in the phrasing of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, pushes 1900 through the tender roman middle of 1909.⁶² Connoting what Sartre calls a "double nihilation" this narrative flashback gives rise to a penetration that penetrates a penetration.⁶³ The regressive move solicits what Benjy understands as a practical measure of getting his sister back. Ironically, yet tragically for Benjy, the "moment" that he nominates as a means of affecting this racial rescue connotes the point of *his* blackening. In 1900, "Maury" - the name of a revered Uncle - would become "Benjamin"; drawn to Caddy's "loss" the name change infers a stigma that turns a "white" child "black". Recast through Versh's folkloric narrative, Benjy's attempt to retrieve his sister's racial "purity", or whiteness, elicits a second penetration in which a culturally black Benjy enters a "tarnished" - and thus "black" - Caddy. The narrative impregnation thus elicits an "innocent incest" between black siblings.⁶⁴ Part punitive measure, part attempt to claim Caddy's unborn child as his own, Benjy is attuned to what Godden, following Paul Ricoeur, calls the "pre-plots of his time". As Benjy judges it, he can only "penetrate" his sister - can only gain the

⁶² Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.67.

⁶³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2006), p.34.

⁶⁴ Godden, *Fictions of Labour*, p.18.

historical “stiffness” necessary to move properly “inside” her - by using the (fetishized) black body as a proxy. The point here is that Benjy opts to return to the early summer of 1909 because this is the vault, or “getting place” (SF 888), within which he can acquire the (historical) resources to affect a change to his sister’s unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.

The narrative transaction sequesters the body of the “bluegum”. *The Dictionary of American Slang* defines the “bluegum” as a pejorative designation for the “negro”, dating back to the Civil War - or “old time” (930), as Versh puts it. The “bluegum”, in Calvin S. Brown’s phrase, is “viewed with that mixture of reverence and fear which constitutes awe. He has many strange properties, such as a fatal bite, and he is a particularly adept and powerful conjurer”.⁶⁵ For many whites the “bluegum” represented a very real threat to racial purity. As Newbell Niles Puckett writes in *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926) “this idea of a bite from a blue-gummed Negro being fatal has considerable spread throughout the South.” Yet, for Puckett, as it is for Benjy, the potency of the bluegum’s *bite* is trumped by the penetrative magic of its *eye*. As Puckett counsels, “[c]onjuration on the part of a blue-gummed Negro or a Negro with one eye black and the other blue is unduly effective and death usually results”.⁶⁶ Here death is avoided yet the magic of the eye oversees a fate equally as terrible: the envisaged race change of Caddy’s unborn child. Versh, Benjy’s black ward, puts it this way: “when family woman look [the bluegum] in the eye”, the “chile” of said woman will be turned “bluegum”. The visual commerce is visually determined. Not only does Caddy’s shifty, evasive eye give the game away with regard to her pregnancy - disclosing her “black act” - but it provides a visual clue as to where Benjy might go to find the (dark) materials with which he might help his “sick” (SF 963) sister, now a “family woman.” (930) Intuiting Caddy’s sexual

⁶⁵ Calvin S. Brown, *A Glossary of Faulkner’s South* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p.33.

⁶⁶ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* [1926] (New York: Dover, 1969), p.204.

blackening in 1909, Benjy travels to 1900, picks up the memory of the bluegum, dragging it back into the “present”, 1909. Benjy “eyes” his sister; he remembers the “bluegum” story *into* her. Caddy is penetrated with Benjy’s racialised, eyeminded anecdote. The move from 1909 to 1900 is thus sanctioned by an eminently visual contract which takes as its coordinates three sets of eyes: Benjy’s, Caddy’s, and the eyes of the bluegum. The ontic traffic that darts between these three sets of (miscegenated) eyes is historically pertinent. For a black, or any person with any black blood, to look directly into the eye of a white woman represented a flagrant transgression of southern racial codes. Nicholas Mirzoeff provides a suggestive contextual frame for the historical breach of racial etiquette:

after the Haitian revolution and the dramas of abolition and Reconstruction, “reckless eyeballing,” a simple looking at a white person, especially a white woman or person in authority, was forbidden to those classified as “colored” under Jim Crow. Such looking was held to be both violent and sexualized in and of itself, a further intensification of the policing of visibility.⁶⁷

The “look” that Benjy fires into his sister is thus wired into the Hegelian mainframe, reverberating as one strand within the master slave dialectic.

It is not just Caddy that seems in the sway of Benjy’s powerful eye. Benjy’s aptitude for black magic clearly concerns Frony Gibson, Versh’s sister, who fears that Benjy might alter the (racial) characteristics of her son, Luster: ““You take Luster outen that bed, mammy.” Frony said. “That boy conjure him.”” (SF 901) Reacting to Frony’s call, Dilsey places a “long piece of wood and la[ys] it between” Luster and Benjy. This segregationist plank not only brings the infectious magical potential of Benjy into sharp relief but it acts as a metaphor for larger division along the “color-line”: ““[s]tay on your side now””,

⁶⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 473-496, p.482.

Dilsey warns Benjy. As Grace Elizabeth Hale might put it, Luster's bed figuratively encapsulates "the primal scene of the culture of segregation."⁶⁸

QUENTIN COMPSON: BECOMING BLACK(GUARD)

If the racial subtext of the "Benjy" narrative was difficult to dredge up from the recesses of Faulkner's text, the recovery of raced material in the narrative of his older brother Quentin seems a less laborious task.⁶⁹ In fact, artefacts of blackness regularly float up to - and indeed force their way *through* - the "white" surface of Quentin's consciousness. This section attends to these black (up)risings, and examines how Quentin mounts various attempts to block them or put them down. I begin by exploring a moment of violence through which vision and race are brought into immediate, and problematic congress: the blacking of Quentin Compson's eye.

In an attempt to defend the honour of his sister - and by extension her claims to "whiteness" - from the "blackguards" that move in her orbit, Quentin - imagining a previous fracas with Dalton Ames - fights with Gerald Bland, a Kentuckian of aristocratic blood, and receives a punch to the face that sets his racial alarm bells ringing. Quentin relates the immediate effects of the blow to the ever attendant Shreve: "it was like I was looking at him [Bland] through a piece of colored glass". (SF 1001) Not only does this blow recolour Quentin's vision, recolouring those around him (those "'blackguards" are re-blackened) but it affects a swelling that traumatises his conception of race and, by

⁶⁸ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Random House, 1999), p.96.

⁶⁹ For critical responses to Quentin Compson's racial attitudes see Thadious Davis, *Faulkner's Negro: Art and the Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983); Cynthia Dobbs, "'Ruin or Landmark?': Black Bodies as Lieux de Mémoire in *The Sound and the Fury*", *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 20, Iss. 1/2 (Fall 2004), p.35-51; Lester, "Great Migration"; Lott, *Love and Theft*; Philip M. Weinstein, *What Else But Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

extension, his notion of self. Describing the feeling in his face as the blood flows into his bruise, Quentin states that the blood

kept on running for a long time, but my face felt cold and sort of dead, and my eye, and the cut place on my finger was smarting again. I could hear Shreve working the pump, then he came back with the basin and a round blob of twilight wobbling in it, with a yellow edge like a fading balloon, then my reflection. *I tried to see my face in it.* (SF 1003, italics added)

The blow fails to cause total blindness yet the impairment that issues from Quentin's injury is substantial enough that he is unable to see - or more accurately, unable to *recognise* - his "face" in the basin delivered by Shreve. Quentin's search for a (white)face is problematised by the difficult external conditions under which the attempt to "see" proceeds; the "wobbling" surface of the water distorts the "reflection" and thereby destabilises Quentin's efforts to achieve a reliable visual representation. Worse, Shreve decants (or "pumps", a term to which we shall return) the water in the near dark of *twilight*. In addition to his looking through a bloody - soon to be "black" (1011) eye - Quentin attempts to fix his sight on a moving target in failing (twi)light. The punch, in P. Adams Sitney's phrasing, "make[s] the crucial moment of vision problematic."⁷⁰ Ultimately, however, this moment of opacity is problematic because it infers a slippage across "the color-line".⁷¹ A perceptual problem thus bleeds into a racial one.

The first thing that Quentin notices about the "basin" is its terrifying cargo: there was, he trembles, "a round blob of twilight wobbling in it, with a yellow edge like a fading balloon". The "round blob of twilight wobbling" - a

⁷⁰ P. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.19.

⁷¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p.33.

reference to the setting sun - carries implicit racial sediment.⁷² For Quentin, “twilight” (that which “wobbles”) registers as a moment of tonal ambiguity or “two-ness” in which the light of day mixes with the dark of night. As a transitional phase between day and night, “twilight” sets up an atmospheric miscegenation toward which Quentin’s remaining imagery (notably “fading balloon”) is drawn. “[T]wilight” intimates a problematic compound shade, an ominous “gray halfight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical”. (SF 1007) Quentin’s term “halfight”, which tacitly evokes “halfwhite”, creates the suitable gloominess within which the “stability” of racial absolutes undergoes dissolution, starts “wobbling”. Opening up an ambivalent zone - a “gray” area, perhaps - between “white” and “black”, “twilight” triggers a metaphoricity by which Faulkner, through Quentin, can racialise the setting of the sun. This quotidian event bears monumental significance for Quentin. Indeed, as he states, in an echo of his sister, it was as if “there was *something in the light itself*”. (1007, italics added.)

The racial accent of “twilight” becomes more pronounced when read in relation to Quentin’s sighting of the “balloon”. Often attended by grotesque rubbery lips and a smooth, distended head, the racist epithet of the “balloon faced nigger” is a familiar trope in Faulkner’s mature prose.⁷³ Through the rubber s(i)mile, Quentin likens the face and head of a black person to that of a balloon. Quentin’s metaphoric inflation pertains to anxieties consequent of racial mixing: whether he likes it or not, there is a black “wobbling” about in Shreve’s basin. Quentin’s response to the occupancy splits in two directions: grammatical and corporeal. First, Quentin attempts to displace the black balloon via the employment of a tricky adverb: “then”. “Then” is not quite “them”, yet the demonstrative cadences of Quentin’s adverb sit close enough to

⁷² In “That Evening Sun” (1931) an eleven year old Quentin Compson expresses a similar anxiety with regard to the “witching hour” of twilight.

⁷³ See *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), “That Evening Sun” and *Go Down Moses* (1942) for further surfacings of the “balloon face nigger”.

his tacitly racialised pronoun that “then” absorbs and offsets some of the iterative force of “them”. The significant part of Quentin’s phrase runs thus: “a fading balloon, *then* my reflection. I tried to see my face in it.” Ostensibly, Quentin’s adverb polices a simple grammatical handover in which one clause - “a fading balloon” - cedes ground so that another - “then my reflection” - may emerge. Quentin’s is no innocent intervention, however. The adverb “then” arbitrates a separation between two grammatical clauses that Quentin wants made clearly distinct. Quentin inserts “then” between these two proximate clauses in the hope that his grammar might effect a semantic clear-out, preventing “balloon” and his “reflection” from merging. A grammatical intervention thus renders the black “them” and the white “I” / “eye” as distinct. Conveniently, for Quentin, the word “then” acts as a lexical hinge by which Quentin can figuratively swing clear from black inference (“balloon”) and locate safely in white (“*my* reflection”). It is imperative for Quentin that “balloon” and “my reflection” (continue to) connote two distinct lexical phases. Soliciting a grammatical injunction that strains to prevent mixing across the “color-line”, Quentin’s adverb carries considerable semantic weighting. Its deployment denotes a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the interrelationships *between* black and white, a relation that was deeply entrenched in the psychology of the South yet at the same time strenuously denied. Quentin’s “then” provides a formal grammar that is both appropriate *to* and informed *by* the social and legal logic of Southern racial codes in the aftermath of black Emancipation. His, in effect, is a syntax of segregation; an adverb labours to reinscribe racial borders that are, Quentin fears, “fading”. Transitioning from black to white with all deliberate speed, and pertaining to a successive rather than simultaneous grammar, “then” suggests that black was black *until* it was white. The segregationist intent of Quentin’s language cannot hold, however. Indeed, his “then”, proves counterintuitive, providing a “bridge” across which black and white enter into congress. The imposition of (adverbial) distance

between “fading balloon” and “my face” unwittingly facilitates what the semiotician Michael Riffaterre dubs a “semantic transfer”, the activation of which brings black and white into a dialogic relation.⁷⁴

The problematic intersection of black with white is not limited to Quentin’s grammatical urges. Having failed to keep blackness at bay via a segregationist syntax, Quentin changes tack. Driven partly by a desire to inspect the extent to which he has been “blackened” and partly to displace the blobby figure of the “balloon”, Quentin moves his face over the reflective surface of the basin. Coming into alignment with the “round blob of twilight”, Quentin’s face mingles with the “fading balloon”. The latent miscegenation of “twilight” thus intensifies as “face” eclipses “moon” (“blob of twilight”); Quentin’s “reflection” is mired in blackness. In his attempt to displace the “balloon” Quentin becomes *part of* it. This racial mixing, in which first (“I”) and third (“them”) form a compound, represents a colossal blow to Quentin’s sense of self-hood. The connection equates to what Orlando Patterson calls “social death”.⁷⁵ Occasioned by an anxious glimpse into the basin, this “social death” preempts a material death which is realised, later that night, as Quentin plummets into the Charles River.

The sense of dread that flanks Quentin’s blackening is exacerbated by Shreve, who delivers a punch line immediately after Quentin’s attack. The line represents a knockout comic blow: “[d]amn it if you wont have a shiner tomorrow.” Shreve’s term “shiner” is racially astute. The O.E.D cites “shine” as “an abusive term for a black”, first used in 1908, two years before Quentin’s suicide. The term “shiner”, a reference to one who shines links Quentin’s eye to the professional “bootblack”. For Quentin, then, “shiner” carries an additional implication: that the “shine” or “lustre” of the well polished boot should be so

⁷⁴ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.5.

⁷⁵ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1985).

pronounced that one might be able to see one's face in it. This, however, is precisely the problem: Quentin *can* make out his "reflection" but he is curiously unable to see his "*face*". The re- or ef- facement harbours phenomenological inflections. In *Totality and Infinity* (1979) Emmanuel Levinas writes:

[t]he presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding [...] aroused by the epiphany of the face inasmuch as it attests the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me.⁷⁶

The "third party" to which Levinas refers connotes the collective "them" of the South, the absent yet "dictatorial" historical "other": "them niggers" (SF 879) that racialise the whiteness of the Compsons. It is in the damaged "eye"/"I" that the terrifying presence of the other is made manifest. Worryingly, for Quentin, the black face - the "shiner" - will, by "tomorrow", have fully "eclipsed" his own. As it proved for Benjy, the eye contact that brings Quentin face to face with his (rubbery) black other represents an "incendiary moment" of mimetic connection in which a flash of danger imperils his entire being.⁷⁷ Quentin begrudgingly acknowledges the "connection" with a further visual simile that points once more to the "dictatorship of the they" that comes in a flash and governs Quentin's racial consciousness: "[t]hey come into white people's lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope". (SF 1008)

The "sudden sharp" uprising of black blood, and by implication the mobilisation of black meaning, occasions what Theodor Adorno calls a "shudder of mimesis";⁷⁸ here Quentin's "whole being is seized with dread". His

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p.213.

⁷⁷ Taussig, *Defacement*, p.2.

⁷⁸ Theodor Adorno, cited in Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p.211.

"being", to use Hegel's terms, has "been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations."⁷⁹ "Gifted" to Quentin by an ever-willing Shreve, the basin is a crucible of race and it is a repository for the dialectic; it provides a meeting place for Quentin's white self and his (rubbery) black other.⁸⁰ The basin provides the means by which Quentin can quite literally *reflect upon* the blackness that provides ontological mooring for his precarious ("wobbling") racial positioning within the social hierarchy of the post-bellum owning classes. Quentin is thus no different from many white southerners, who, in Hegel's formulation, "derive their existence from, or have their essential being in, what is other than themselves".⁸¹ It is in this connexion that we concur with Genovese in his assertion that "[t]he men who emerge from the one can be recognized with little difficulty as those who emerge from the other."⁸²

That Bland administers the punch is not an insignificant detail, and shores up the contention that the bruise connotes a miscegenation of vision. The verb "to bland" means "to mix, intermingle or blend." (OED) Evidently, Quentin's "blanding" is a catalyst for the rising of something black through something white and a subsequent racialized "blending". By way of a violent act Quentin has been appointed the begrudging custodian of an implicit racial transfer. What Quentin nervously refers to as his "black eye" (SF 1011) activates a semantic insurgency in which a previously submerged blackness pushes *through* Quentin's "blanded" "eye"/"I". As Quentin peers into the bucket he reformulates the Hegelian dialectic: "a nigger", he blurts, "is not so much a person as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he

⁷⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [1807] trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.117.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of gift giving see Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.11-30.

⁸¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.274.

⁸² Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p.96.

lives among." (SF 942) As an "obverse" reflection, "a nigger" resonates, for Quentin, as the black "front" to a white "back". Quentin's "obverse" propagates a link between black and white, yet it simultaneously assumes their interdependence: only one side of the "coin", as it were, can be seen at one time. For Quentin at least, white culture and black "behavior" face in opposite directions; they do not "mix, intermingle or blend", nor do they look each other in the "eye"/"I". The basin thus explodes the racialised distinctions that Quentin seeks to affirm. The incendiary moment of mimetic connection brings Quentin face to face not with his black *surface* - here a blanded eye - but his black inner. Levinas' discussions on exteriority might help us discover how. "The surface", as a metaphorical place for an emergent black can, Levinas writes,

be transformed into an interior: one can melt the metal of things to make new objects of them, utilize the wood of a box to make a table out of it by chopping, sawing, planing: the hidden becomes open and the open becomes hidden [...] It would seem that between the different surfaces there exists a more profound difference: that of the obverse and the reverse. One surface is offered to the gaze, and one can turn over the garment, as one reminds a coin [...] The obverse would be the essence of the thing whose servitudes are supported by the reverse, where the threads are invisible.⁸³

Recast through Levinas, the metallic inferences of "obverse" monetize Quentin's metaphor, linking the "face" of the (absent, yet intimate[d]) black to the economic forms which linger as the ontological heritage of post-bellum modes of production. Suggestively, Levinas' judgements provide a conceptual ontology that render dialectical Quentin's notion of black as the "obverse reflection" of white. In this moment of "conflicted intimacy" Quentin's whiteness, drowning in its own opacity, mingles with the blob that is the colonial other. Like the "metal of things" that can be smelted down to be

⁸³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.192.

reformed - or reminted - Quentin's notion of self is made fluid, essentially amorphous. Nihilated by a basin, his "eye"/"I" is miscegenated, mixing with and overwhelmed by the "eye"/"I" of the black that forms the essence and centre of his whiteness. Brought face to face with the colonial other, Quentin's whiteness is overwhelmed by the appearance of the (absent, fading) black, a presence without which Quentin's whiteness could not obtain. White only on the outside, Quentin is a black in whiteface.

JASON COMPSON: BLACKING OUT

The intersection of vision and race represents a particularly potent brew in the narrative of Jason Compson. Whereas sight and blackness, for the first two narrators, collude in a "flashing moment of mimetic connection", the racing of vision, for Jason, is less abrupt, perhaps less spectacular, and part of an ongoing process of semantic accretion.⁸⁴ The miscegenation of vision does not proceed via a decisive "eye-minded" narrative flashback, as it did for Benjy, nor via the sharp shock of a "blanding" fist, as it did for Quentin, but issues instead from the steady building of racially invested pressure. For Jason, this pressure builds *behind* the eyes, and finds physical expression in the form of blinding (rather than "blanding") headaches.

The frequency with which Jason suffers neural pain is a source of anxiety for the hypochondriac Caroline Compson. Her son, she claims, is afflicted by "these headaches too often". (SF 1068) It is less the frequency of these attacks than their sheer velocity that stuns Jason, however. As he states at a moment of intensity: "I couldn't think about anything except my head". (1062) These headaches are a quotidian affair, shadowing Jason wherever he goes: "[i]t felt like somebody was inside with a hammer, beating on it" (1060). Jason's workmanlike metaphor is appropriate, establishing a connotative appeal to

⁸⁴ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.23.

black labour. The invidious labour of this “hammer[ing]” imperils the smooth running of Jason’s mental faculties. Most immediately, it is his vision that is endangered. Indeed, the pain is of such intensity that often Jason “could not see very well” (1114). Suggestively, these headaches threaten to take Jason into *blackout*.⁸⁵ The term “blackout” provides yet another instant within Faulkner’s novel in which race and vision clash and cross.

Like the word “blackguard” did in the preceding section, the word “blackout” carries a distinct, if implicitly drawn, racial accent. And, like “blackguard”, “blackout” unlocks a rush of black blood that rises through the head or face of a Compson. The pain in Jason’s head, like the pain in Quentin’s eye, is consequent of the building and subsequent release of (black) blood. The implied connection between a paroxysm in the head and a racially inflected (absent) signifier, is perilous. Even less than in Quentin’s section does racial meaning dominate the centre ground. Consequently, any attempt to locate a central importance for raced meaning in this section is problematised by the lack of a referent. Unlike the term “blackguard”, then, which appears numerous times in Quentin’s narrative, the term “blackout” never appears in Jason’s text. I will argue here that this missing signifier connotes an instructive absence rather than an unyielding textual problem. Indeed the non-appearance of the term is entirely in keeping with the novel’s tendency to obviate potentially difficult semantic meaning. As Sundquist has observed, “Faulkner’s obsession with the unnameable, the inexpressible, is his own greatest hazard, and *The Sound and the Fury* is its most intricate expression.”⁸⁶ Jason’s (black)guardedness with regard to enunciating this term is precisely to the point. Critics have noted that Jason uses words so that he *does not have to say*. As Polk observes, Jason’s words “don’t have to make sense as long as they make noise; what he cannot

⁸⁵ My reading of the term “blackout” extends Godden’s brief mention of the term in *Fictions of Labour*.

⁸⁶ Sundquist, *The House Divided*, p.19.

bear is the silence in which his real topic might articulate itself".⁸⁷ Handily, for Jason, the noisome nature of his words drown out peripheral voices, allowing him to avoid speaking of the black. The "intensely, loudly, desperately, gloriously oral" nature of Jason's narrative operates "so that he won't have to listen to the voices that threaten him."⁸⁸ Jason remains tight lipped with regard to "blackout" because to speak this term would be to prize open the floodgates, to carve out a semantically generative space through which psychologically damaging racial current might subsequently flow. Such an admission would necessarily lead to further pains in Jason's head. In Judith Butler's formulation, Jason's narration connotes "[t]he kind of speaking that takes place on the borders of the unsayable."⁸⁹ The term "blackout" is the "unsayable" term within Jason's lexicon. It is unsayable, I will now suggest, because it connotes the loss of the labour upon which Jason and, by extension the South, materially depend.

As was Quentin's, Jason's use of metaphor is racially aggregated. Jason reinvokes the rubbery visage of the balloon as a means of referring indirectly to the corporeality of his own head: "I kept thinking every time my head would *go on and burst*". (SF 1063, italics added) The expulsive nature of Jason's rubbery metaphor is instructive. By conflating *his* head with an excessively inflated "balloon", Jason sets in train his metaphorical race-change. As it was for Quentin, the "balloon" looms large as a signifier of an elastic and distended corporeality. Given Jason's inability to stop talking, it is richly ironic that he berates black labour for talking back: as he states with regard to his house servants, "them niggers" give "a little more lip and a little more lip" (1070) at the first opportunity. Jason's racist stereotype proves pliable. Indeed, the

⁸⁷ Polk, *Dark House*, p.118.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p.117.

⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.41.

inferred rubbery status of the “slick-headed jellybea[n]” (1018) stretches beyond an immediate physicality. Even black speech, for Jason, is a little balloony: “I never found a nigger yet that didn’t have an *airtight* alibi for whatever he did” (1044, emphasis added). Jason’s equating of “black” and “balloon” is wretched, yet the metaphor is informative. The “balloon”, that which threatens to “explode” provides a means by which Jason racialises *his own* head. Vis-a-vis the rubber metaphor, Jason is blackened; his head “flashes” or “flares up” as a proxy “balloon”.

Jason’s employment of the “balloon” metaphor not only creates a link between his head and the head of the black but it provides the means through which Jason racialises the cotton market itself. The cotton market, he spouts, is constantly “on the point of *blowing* its *head* off” (1065, emphasis added). Jason commits to localised variations upon this central rubbery metaphor - one that nominates a *bursting*: “bang” (1057); “blow” (1051); “blowing [...] blowing [...] blowing” (1063); “burst” (1063); “explode”, (1058; 1062); “pump” (1063); “pump [...] pump” (1064).⁹⁰ These inflations, or economic “balloonings”, terrify Jason. Yet what seems worse than the rupture is the silence with which the rupture might proceed: “[t]he whole dam top could blow off *and we’d not know it*” (1051, emphasis added). Excessively inflated, cotton stocks could conceivably “blow off”, occasioning a shock that, unknown, was no shock at all.

When it comes to finance, another “Head” dominates the foreground of Jason’s consciousness: Herbert Head, the chief - or “head” - of the local bank and erstwhile suitor to the ostracised Caddy Compson. Proficient enough at arithmetic to have calculated that Caddy’s child, Quentin, could not possibly be his own, Herbert Head has since disappeared (perhaps like a “fading balloon”), leaving Quentin in the tyrannical stewardship of her uncle, Jason. Prior to the revelation of Quentin’s illegitimacy, and by implication, Caddy’s “blackness”,

⁹⁰ References to Jason’s headaches are legion: see pps.1021, 1032-3, 1037, 1051, 1058, 1059, 1060, 1063, 1066, 1068, 1070, 1075.

Head had promised Jason a chance to work in his bank as a clerk; Jason, keen to point the finger of blame, holds Caddy culpable for ruining his chance of developing a remunerative career in finance. Jason holds Caddy's "whiteness" as the security for his fledgling career as a money man. Caddy's sexual doings, and her subsequent severance from the (white) community thus accrue economic significance for Jason. Unable to cash in on the promise to which Caddy's sexual capital referred, Jason takes his money via another route: by siphoning and embezzling money that is intended for his niece. For Jason the money markets conjure a doubled sense of "heads", then, not just through the racist epithet of the balloon-faced nigger but through the monetized symbol, Herbert Head.

The deflation of a rubber tire reinforces the relation between Jason's pressurised "head", the distended head of the black "balloon" and the tenuous state of the cotton "market" (1044). In hot pursuit of his sexually fluid niece, a "dam little slut" (1019) that, in her uncle's term is "going on like a nigger wench" (1022), Jason drives toward Jefferson. A shuddering headache forces Jason to stop the car and momentarily quit his tracking of Quentin. As Jason's attentions (re)turn to *his* head, Miss Quentin "slip[s] around" (1022) the back of Jason's motor, loosening the valve of a tire, thus relieving its pressure. Cannily, Quentin also removes the pump to prevent its re-inflation. The audacity of the act leaves Jason seething, although not, of course, speechless. Of the sabotage Jason blathers: "[t]hey never even had guts enough to puncture it, to jab a hole in it. They just let the air out." (1063) This letting out is enough to stall Jason; more, it is suggestive with regard to the metaphoricity that accrues around (black) heads.

Driven toward thoughts of rubber, Jason's attentions duly turn from a slack(ened) tire to the perceived laxity of his black house servants, who Jason blames for not equipping his car with a spare tire. Rubber and black labour converge. Standing idly to accuse others of physical inactivity, Jason puffs: "I

just stood there for a while, thinking about that kitchen full of niggers and *not one of them had time* to lift a tire onto the rack and screw up a couple of bolts. It was kind of funny because even she [Quentin] couldn't have seen far enough *ahead* to take the pump out on purpose, unless she thought about it whilst she was letting out the air maybe." (1063, italics added.) Jason's racist aspersions as to the "slackness" of black labour confirm this "letting out" as a sort of "letting in". As air passes through the valve of a deflating rubber tire, racial meaning passes into Jason's consciousness. Succumbing to what Sartre refers to as "a sinking in", the expulsion of air from Jason's tire is analogous to the pressure within his own head, a pressure which he cannot seem to release.⁹¹ Yet the expulsion of air commands a broader sociality. Rubber, in short, gets Jason to thinking about race. More exactly, the flat rubber tire connotes an analogous "letting out": one that entails a leaking of black labour from the American South.

Two linked words implicate Jason, and specifically his achingly raced head, into the broader sociality to which I refer. They are "migraine" and "migrate". These homophonically proximate terms are semantically twinned, inasmuch as they both infer a leaking and a leaving, a trickling out and a moving away. With a first dictionary entry dated to 1899, (Jason is six) the term "migraine" refers to a "paroxysmal pain in the eye or temple". By 1937, the term had come to stipulate "fierce migraine-like black-outs". The very next dictionary entry is "migrate", and is cited this way: "to pass from one place to another; to change one's place of abode to another country, etc; to change habitat according to the season; to move (as parasites, as phagocytes, etc) to another part of the body." If "head", in its various semantic manifestations, is the primary source of Jason's pain, and if his concern over this pain, articulated via a metaphor that is as "silent as rubber" (SF 980), links him to the stereotype of the black balloon face, then linkages between the circulation of blood (the

⁹¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.88.

migraine) and the circulation of blacks (the migration) gain semantic traction. Despite his intractable laziness, a “black trait” in the eyes of the “white South”, Jason’s thinking on the question of labor is decisive, and clear-cut: “[w]hat this country needs”, he spouts, “is white labor. Let these dam trifling niggers starve for a couple of years, then they’d see what a soft thing they have.” (SF 1023) Jason’s desire to see the expulsion of black labour meshes with his perennial thinking on “heads”; subsequently *he* is linked to black work: “[a]nd then a Yankee will talk your head off about niggers getting ahead. Get them ahead, what I say. Get them so far ahead you can’t find one south of Louisville with a blood hound.” (SF 1054-5) The irony of Jason’s compulsive, incessantly noisy critique of abolitionist chatter is clear. Less clear, perhaps, is how Jason’s contortions and variations on the term “head” semanticize his outburst. By riffing on the term “head”, Jason compounds (or “hammers” home) his ongoing difficulty with “heads”, and, more, what “heads” might mean. If “head”, takes us to “migraine” or “blackout”; “ahead” is drawn to “migrate”, that is “black: out”. The unspeakable word “migraine” gives rise to a means by which Jason can invest his own head with historical meaning. The pain connotes more than “[j]ust a headache” (1059), however. Like Quentin’s eye, Jason Compson’s head is a crucible of race, a corporeal location that is attuned to economic and social imperatives. If the unspeakable term “blackout” is a key by which the reader can unlock hidden racial meaning, *blacks, out!* works the limits of Jason Compson’s distinctive brand of white supremacy. Fittingly, “migraine” routes us back into the concerns with which this chapter began: black migration from the South in the wake of black Emancipation. By getting out of the South, blacks intensify not only the headache that traumatises Jason Compson but the headache that traumatises the white South.

CHAPTER TWO
 “I”,
 OR,
 SPLITTING THE EYE IN *AS I LAY DYING*.

In my first chapter I explored a number of moments at which *The Sound and the Fury* proved unable to bear the terrible historical freight of the pronominal marker “them”. In this chapter I shift my focus to a different text, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and to a different pronoun: “I”. My decision to move from the third to the first person is not arbitrary. The modification of pronominal emphasis advances the present study in two significant directions. Firstly, by interrogating the workings of the pronoun in the context of a second novel, we can begin to build a more comprehensive case for the pronoun as a semantically constitutive component within a broader textual economy. *The Sound and the Fury* is not, as this chapter will show, the only one of Faulkner’s novels to draw upon the pronoun as a source of textual capital. Secondly, the shift from “third” to “first” demonstrates the versatility of the pronoun or “shifter” as an agent of semantic value. That Faulkner exploits the workings of the pronoun across numerous texts is not to say that the specific class of pronoun remains the same from one novel to the next. As we shall see in this, and finally in a third chapter, the three novels that Faulkner produced between 1929 and 1931 are inclined or weighted toward a different pronominal reference. Faulkner provides each of these texts with a designated grammar, one that centres, in turn, on the proliferation of a dominant pronoun. In each case the selection of pronoun is wilful and it is imposed, I believe, so that Faulkner might meet specific, and specifically semantic ends. In short: Faulkner modifies his grammar because he seeks to modify his meaning.

The first person singular nominative pronoun “I” is the “compacted doctrine” of *As I Lay Dying*.⁹² This pronoun functions as the primary

⁹² Empson, *Complex Words*, p.39.

grammatical agent by which Faulkner's fifth novel generates or - to return to a previous term - "com[es] into meaning". Much valuable scholarship testifies to the opacities that subtend the Faulknerian "first person", yet these opacities have occasioned significant critical strife. From Vickery to Volpe, some of Faulkner's keenest readers have withered in the face of the complex epistemological economies that constitute the middle fictions.⁹³ Given the historical dependencies that undercut the broader sociality of the postbellum South, the notion of a "self" autonomous from an "other" is problematic. Indeed, Stephen M. Ross goes as far as to suggest that the "I" is the "most problematical of all shifters" in Faulkner's work.⁹⁴

As I Lay Dying constitutes Faulkner's pre-eminently existential text. To state as much is to state nothing new. Indeed, the existential case has been made before, yet it has been made gropingly and without close attention to Faulknerian grammar. Daniel J. Singal is one reader to have advanced the existential credentials of Faulkner's novel. *As I Lay Dying*, Singal submits,

can be viewed as an existential drama akin to the most advanced works of Gide, Malraux, or Beckett - its plot a minimalist quest to preserve identity under the most trying conditions conceivable. The Bundrens, unsophisticated though they may be, are caught up in the typical twentieth-century dilemma of defining themselves in the midst of an indifferent cosmos, of fashioning a basis of being in the midst of nothingness.⁹⁵

As a means of mapping the broad phenomenological contours of Faulkner's novel, Singal's account is intuitive. *As I Lay Dying* certainly invokes the tragi-

⁹³ For examples of the critical insufficiency see Olga Vickery's "Introduction" to Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (eds.), *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960); see also Volpe, *A Reader's Guide*. For a recent discussion on the difficulty of the Faulknerian "I" that counters the critical floundering see Robinson, *Creating Yoknapatawpha*.

⁹⁴ Ross, "'Voice'", p.308.

⁹⁵ Daniel J. Singal, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p.148.

comic inflections of Beckett, for example, dealing as it does with the cruel and bizarre category of the “I”, a fraught frame of reference which survives despite attempts to die. When it comes to specifying the “conditions” under which the “I” travails, however, Singal’s account proves insufficient, succumbing to a set of rather loose generalities (“typical”; “most trying conditions”) that add little to the critical pile. In lieu of the coming discussions, I seek to sharpen up one or two of Singal’s woolly terms. For “indifferent cosmos” I propose “industrial modernity”; for “trying conditions”, I would offer “reification and alienation”. To adjust Singal’s terminology is not to denude Faulkner’s text of its existential inflections; it is, as I seek to show, to intensify them. In *As I Lay Dying*, the “dilemma” of existence, while indeed tied to notions of the self, traverses *social* fault lines. The fragmentation and alienation of the “I” is an outgrowth of and response to what Matthews dubs the “lurch toward modernity”.⁹⁶ As a means toward this end, I engage, first, with how the problematic “I” manifests at the level of Faulkner’s text.

The “I” that Faulkner embeds in the title of his novel ostensibly refers to Addie Bundren. Wife to Anse (a likely truncation of “Anselm”) and mother to five children, Addie is the subject *of* and, latterly, the object *toward* which much of the discussion on being and existence gravitates.⁹⁷ It might reasonably be assumed that Addie Bundren, first, as a dying mother and wife and, later, as a cargo or “thing” transported to burial, functions as the ontological degree zero of Faulkner’s novel. Addie’s death (or more exactly, her *dying*) provides the standard against which the “being” of the living can be judged. There are two reasons, however, why we should cast Addie aside, at least presently, as the cardinal exponent for the problematic “I”. The first concerns chronology. Addie

⁹⁶ Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*, (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), p. 248.

⁹⁷ Cash, a son, is the oldest child; Darl (a phonetic rendering of “Darrel”) is Addie’s second child, also male; Jewel is her third child and third son; Dewey Dell is the fourth child, the only girl; Vardaman is the youngest of the five Bundren children and the last of the four boys.

spends relatively little time *as* an “I”; for the majority of the novel she is not an “I” at all but a *was*, a “not-I”. Addie “dies” - and thus relinquishes her “I-ness” on page 32 of Faulkner’s text. Addie’s early death thus bars her from discussions of “being”. Dying, to draw from a Sartrean lexicon, has “nihilated” Addie’s “for itself”. Evidently, it is not Addie but those who remain that have to deal with the crushing weight of the “I”. A second reason issues from the first and concerns the infrequency of Addie’s narration. Throughout the novel, Addie “speaks” but once, and does so after her death, in a post “I” incarnation: as a *was*. Only one of *As I Lay Dying*’s fifteen narrators satisfies both of the criteria to which Addie falls shy: Darl Burdren. Darl is not only the novel’s most vital narrator, inasmuch as he tackles the thorny notion of being with the most gusto, but he is its most frequent one, representing the most familiar textual “I” / “eye”. Narrating nineteen of the fifty nine “chapters” - almost a third - Darl’s allocation is almost double that of the second most prolific textual voice, Vardaman, who narrates on ten occasions.⁹⁸ It is to Darl, then, as the novel’s most astute and most practiced “I”, that our attentions duly turn.

DARL: BECOMING THIRD

The notion of an “I” poses significant problems for Darl Bundren. In distinction to many of his peers, who have neither the time nor the inclination for extended philosophising, Darl displays an acute sensitivity to questions of self and being. The ontological exercises to which Darl commits imperil what is an already shaky (self-)consciousness. Indeed, Darl holds the dubious distinction of having “the most precarious identity” of all the Bundrens.⁹⁹ What Singal dubs “precarious”, Sartre terms “fragile”. The word “fragile”, as understood by

⁹⁸ *As I Lay Dying* unveils its narrators in the following sequence (numbers in parentheses refer to the number of chapters that each narrator delivers): 1. Darl (19); 2. Cora (3); 3. Jewel (1); 4. Dewey Dell (4); 5. Tull (6); 6. Anse (3); 7. Peabody (2); 8. Vardaman (10); 9. Cash (5); 10. Samson (1); 11. Addie (1); 12. Whitfield (1); 13. Armstid (1); 14. Moseley (1); 15. Macgowan (1).

⁹⁹ Singal, *Making of a Modernist*, p.148.

Sartre, provides a key by which Darl's "I" might be unlocked. Sartre postulates that "[a] being is fragile if it carries in its being a definite possibility of non-being."¹⁰⁰ Aside from Addie, for whom "negations" are a constant fixture of being, Darl is the only "I" in *As I Lay Dying* that "carries", and is thus *haunted by*, this grave load of "non-being." Put differently, he is the only narrator who consciously debates the notion of his consciousness (as fragile, as a carrier of non-being). The following passage, taken from early in the novel, demarcates Darl's - and by association, the novel's - fullest engagement with the problematic "I". In it, Darl attempts to control, and subsequently understand, the vicissitudes of an especially slippery phenomenology:

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is*, because when the wagon is *was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*.

How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home.

(AILD 52, italics in original.)

In this dazzling, if beguiling eschatological set piece, the first person pronoun "I" acts as a sounding board for the amplification of intently existential reverberations. Situated on the edge of sleep and occasioned by the imminent

¹⁰⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.32.

death of his (m)other, Darl gets to thinking through the nature of *his* being: of what it is to be *is*. Despite the intensity of this “ontological inquiry” - or perhaps *because of it* - Darl struggles, in Heidegger’s phrasing, “to clarify the special problem of “I”-hood”.¹⁰¹ Passing through and subsequently passing *beyond* what Maurice Natanson dubs “[i]ntimately related stages of ontological metamorphosis”, Darl’s contorted syntax traces a circuitous route toward an evaluation of the self.¹⁰² Beginning and ending with a survey of his own “I-hood”, the passage elicits from Darl a commentary on *four* linked *ises*: first, Darl ponders *his* *is*; second, he considers the *is* of Vardaman; third, the *is* of the wagon; fourth, the *is* of his (now dead) mother; finally, Darl sets to theorise how these myriad *ises* reflect on his own “I”.

The first phase of Darl’s “inquiry” splits along two lines. First, Darl ponders the *what* of his “I”; he attempts, that is, to get to grips with the phenomenological substance that constitutes his being. Unsurprisingly, the “what-ness” of the “I” proves elusive. Like the “wall” that stands between him and the world, Darl’s sense of self is “unlamped”, murky, and thereby difficult to discern. Lacking the “luminous detail”¹⁰³ of an operative epistemology, Darl states, “I don’t know what I am.” Darl’s “I don’t know” is instructive; moreover, it is existentially derived. Sartre suggests that this kind of not knowing affirms one’s situatedness as a “non-thetic” subject. Upon Darl’s gloomy being Sartre sheds some light: the “non-thetic consciousness” he writes “is not to know”.¹⁰⁴ Yet Darl’s situatedness as a “non-thetic” subject is improbably *thetic*. That is to say that his “I don’t know” involves its own kind of knowing. As Sartre points

¹⁰¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.31; 370.

¹⁰² Maurice Natanson, “The Sleep of Bad Faith”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Autumn, 1980), pp.97-106, p.101.

¹⁰³ William Cookson (ed.), *Ezra Pound, Selected Prose, 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.21.

¹⁰⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.92.

out, “emptiness is emptiness *of something*”.¹⁰⁵ If Darl knows nothing else, he knows this much: that he does not know what he is. The effects of this “flagrant contradiction” will achieve sharper focus when we explore the “not knowing” that clings to Darl’s half brother, Jewel, in a moment.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, and perhaps more pressingly, Darl probes the *if* of his “I”; he queries, that is, his position *as* an “I” within the phenomenal world: “I don’t know if I am or not.” Darl, then, not only questions the *condition* - the *what* - of his being but he disputes his basic position as a viable empirical subject. As Darl questions the facticity of his “I” - its concrete detail - he contests the Cartesian metaphysics of the self; the relation, that is, between the notion of an “am” and its “I”. That Darl’s “I” is alienated from his “am” does not mean that he loses his I-ness. Following Hegel, Darl’s “I” should be read “not as Nothing, but as a determinate Nothing”.¹⁰⁷ As Hegel stresses, the “tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.”¹⁰⁸

Together, Darl’s “what” and his “if” raise what Robert Hemenway calls “insoluble epistemological questions” to which Darl seems unable to decisively respond.¹⁰⁹ The ambivalence with which Darl greets the facticity of his own “I” is less significant than the fact that he disputes it in the first place. Again, Sartre proves useful in this connexion: “[f]or man to be able to question” Sartre writes, “he must be capable of being his own nothingness; that is, he can be at the origin of non-being in being only if his being - in himself and by himself - is paralyzed with nothingness.”¹¹⁰ In spite of the chronic opacities that issue from

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.39, italics added.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p.321.

¹⁰⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.68.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.19.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Hemenway, “Enigmas of Being in *As I Lay Dying*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2 (Summer 1970), pp.133-146, p.138.

¹¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.69.

this ontological blackout, Darl proves able, by the end of his reverie to state “I am *is*” and by so doing, figure a more concrete sense of being. The transition from ambivalence (“I don’t know what I am”) through indeterminacy (“I don’t know if I am or not”) and into positive assertion (“I am *is*”) hauls the reader across some treacherous philosophical terrain, the negotiation of which involves careful explication.

Heidegger provides a fitting means of scrutinising in more detail the workings of Darl’s loquacious yet simultaneously absent “I”. “The word ‘I’”, Heidegger writes,

is to be understood only in the sense of a non-committal formal indicator, indicating something which may perhaps reveal itself as its ‘opposite’ in some particular phenomenal context of being. In that case, the ‘not-I’ is by no means tantamount to an entity which essentially lacks ‘I-hood’ [“Ichheit”], but is rather a definite kind of Being which the ‘I’ itself possesses, such as having lost itself.¹¹¹

For Heidegger, as it seems for Darl, the “not-I” (a position that Darl confirms with his phrasing “I don’t know if I am or not”) does not preclude the presence of “I-hood”. It does, however, *interfere with* it. Darl can “be” and simultaneously be “not-I”, yet the close proximity of “don’t know what” and “don’t know if” (the two constitutive phases that push Darl toward an unlikely “is”) provide this ontological inquiry with dialectical coloration. If the “*what* I am” works to unsettle the notion of being, the “*if* I am” stamps the imprimatur of “not-being” onto Darl’s elaborately and negatively charged “is”.

In effect, Darl’s “am not I” opens up a weird space within which epistemological, ontological and corporeal uncertainties clash and cross. Under Darl’s jurisdiction, the “I” is an imperilled category of reference, a marker of a “fragile” phenomenology. Despite these difficulties, one thing is certain: Faulkner’s use of the “I”, in the curious case of Darl Bundren, is far from stable.

¹¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.151-2.

Darl's aloof, volatile, and capricious signifier connotes a shifting personhood, an "I-hood" subject to negation and modification. Expressed simply, Darl's "I" holds to no firm position as regards either to his *dasein* (his "essential inner") or to his *ichheit* or "I-hood" (that which brings the *dasein* into focus). The fluctuations that attend Darl's "I" thus render his personhood "non-committal" in the sense demarcated by Heidegger.

Darl might not know the *what* - or even the *if* - of his "I" but he appears, somehow, to know the ontological constitution of his half (br)other Jewel. To this he can commit. For Darl, Jewel *is*. More, Jewel "knows that he is". Paradoxically - and thus entirely in keeping with the "dialectical flip-flops" of the passage - Jewel's "knowing" emerges from an abundance of *not knowing*.¹¹² Jewel must *be*, Darl figures, because he "knows that he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not." This extended - and immensely frustrating - chain of negative clauses constitutes more than syntagmatic horseplay. Its value lies in its status as a site of contradiction. Compacted though it is, some elements of Darl's conceivably Rumsfeldian syntax are discernible.¹¹³ First, the seemingly absurd claim that "knowledge" can function outside of or perhaps even *in spite of* itself offers a toe-hold if not a leg-up to semantic meaning. Jewel can know that he doesn't know that he knows (that he is). Carole Haynes-Curtis points out that "[t]here is for Sartre a sense in which I can know without knowing that I know".¹¹⁴ To wit: "knowing" can issue from, or better yet can survive as a constituent (yet submerged and conceivably unconscious) part of not knowing that one knows. To know something, then,

¹¹² Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p.31.

¹¹³ Donald Rumsfeld, then United States' Secretary of Defense would make a similar point in 2002 and was accused by many of tortured language: "there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know."

¹¹⁴ Carole Haynes-Curtis, "The 'Faith' of Bad Faith", *Philosophy*, Vol. 63, No. 244 (April 1988), pp. 269-275, p.271.

for Sartre at least, does not demand that one must know that one knows. We might or might not agree with Sartre's proposition: we are free to choose either way, yet we must remind ourselves that while Darl's utterance extracts "knowing" from "not knowing", it does not assume that Jewel knows by not knowing that *he knows* but by not knowing that he *does not* know (whether he is or not). While this point might seem, to some, to constitute no more than semantic nit-picking, the difference is crucial to current concerns. Jewel's "knowing" emanates not from his ignorance of his *knowing*, as the Sartrean mode sets out, but from an ignorance of *an ignorance* (of that knowing). Jewel therefore comes into knowledge because of an ignorance of an ignorance. Again, though, we run aground: to be ignorant of one's ignorance is clearly not the same as to know. A tribesman in the Putumayo may be ignorant of his ignorance of I.T. networks in industrial societies but this does not amount to his knowledge of I.T. networks in industrial societies. Unlike grammatical "double negatives", through, which positive meaning emerges, these two embattled epistemological clauses do not cancel other out. In fact, they add to each other's intensity. How, then, might we solve the impasse, if it is at all solvable? Darl's final clause, "whether he is or not," resolves - by scrambling one more time - the epistemological framing within which he can locate Jewel's knowable, yet implacable "I". To the very end of this pronouncement Darl is constantly revising the terms by which he communicates what should otherwise be a rather simple fact: that Jewel knows that he is. Darl's "whether he is or not" propounds the not knowing, turning a double revision into a triple one. Darl not only effaces Jewel's not knowing once *but twice*. Having casually affirmed Jewel's "being-in-itself" (which, more properly speaking, is a "*being for Darl*"), as an "original nihilation", Darl gloriously proceeds toward what Sartre calls "the intuitive apprehension of a double nihilation".¹¹⁵ In summation, Jewel's "knowing", issues from *three* linked moments of opacity. Thus impacted, Darl's

¹¹⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.33-34; p.34.

semantic densities prove insoluble. Inconceivably, the “inner contradiction” (that knowing is not knowing) contradicts its own contradiction.

According to Sartre, there are three dimensions - or *ekstases* - to “nihilation”: first, not to be what one is; second, to be what one is not; and third, to be what one is not and simultaneously not be what one is.¹¹⁶ Jewel, under Darl’s auspices, fits neatly into this third branch of *ekstasis*: he “is not what he is and he is what he is not”, Darl reports. Negations such as these are not entirely unfamiliar to Jewel. Addie, we note, sought “to negative Jewel” (*AILD* 119), the product of an adulterous yet liberating relation with Reverend Whitfield. The attempted negation of Jewel manifests in an act of reproduction, specifically, in Addie’s giving birth to Dewey Dell who, in turn, is motivated by her desire to abort - or “nihilate” - her own illegitimate conception. Given Addie’s act of “negation”, in which Jewel’s “isness” is affirmed and at the same time destroyed by the “is-ness” of his sister, it is fitting that Darl evaluates Jewel’s consciousness along similar lines. Jewel is the negated or “nihilated” subject both at the filial *and* at the epistemological level. Nevertheless, and however it is formulated, Jewel’s *ichheit* is that which brings Darl’s own “I” into being. Darl *is* because Jewel *is*. In Elza Adamowicz’s terms, Darl’s “search for the self - who am I? - is constantly displaced by the search for the other - whom do I haunt?”¹¹⁷ Part of a commentary on “masking” as it informs Surrealist praxis, a mode to which we shall turn below, Adamowicz’s supposition pertains in suggestive ways to the ontological somersaults to which Darl commits: “the self as a stable and coherent unity is replaced”, she writes, “by the notion of a fluctuating identity, where the personal (‘qui suis-je’) is traversed and constructed by transpersonal factors (‘qui je “haute”)’.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.651.

¹¹⁷ Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.130.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.129.

The above discussions attempt to tease out some of the ontological threads that run through, thus problematising the “I” of Darl Bundren, *As I Lay Dying*’s most prominent textual presence. These threads often tangle, frustrating the reader’s attempts to draw meaning from the text. In this connexion Hemenway is right to assert that “Darl Bundren’s reverie is one of the most difficult passages in all the Faulkner canon, and is probably the most difficult single paragraph in *As I Lay Dying*.”¹¹⁹ The knotty problem of an “I” is not limited to philosophical inquiry, however. Indeed, such epistemological peristalses problematise the structural aspect of Faulkner’s text.

The existential uncertainty that attends Darl’s sense of self is aggravated by the frequency with which he is required to offer narration. Given the excessive demands that Faulkner places on Darl as a textual “I”/“eye” it is perhaps unsurprising that his sense of self deteriorates as the novel develops. In fact, by the end of the novel Darl’s sense of selfhood has entirely corroded. Referring to himself in the third person, Darl displays his total alienation from the “I”. He narrates: “Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed.” (AILD 172) Darl has become “third”. What better way than this to expunge the traces of a problematic “I”? Darl’s transition from “first” to “third” is symptomatic of a text that can only expect to come to grief as it attempts to deal with its own narrative “I”.

THE AESTHETICS OF “I-HOOD”: SERIALITY AND SURREALITY

Whereas *The Sound and the Fury* splits the narrative “I” into four discreet (sub) sections, *As I Lay Dying* apportions the narrative labours fifteen different ways. This “radical segmentation of perceptions,” in the idiom of Arthur Kinney, is

¹¹⁹ Hemenway, “Enigmas of Being”, p.133.

the novel's most striking textual feature.¹²⁰ Faulkner's insistent displacement of the narrative "I"/"eye" generates an abundant narrative community that dwarfs *The Sound and the Fury's* relatively compact narrative constituency. This eminently "dialogic" text is, following Bakhtin, "populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others".¹²¹ That *As I Lay Dying* sustains an eminently "polyphonic" load has become a standard judgement within Faulkner scholarship.¹²² Ross's work on narrative voice in Faulkner, for instance, copiously exemplifies the "paralinguistic context" within which *As I Lay Dying* is located. This "context", Ross maintains, allows one textual voice to become saturated with the inflections of another.¹²³ The point is germane to the present inquiry, yet what concerns me here is less the density of *As I Lay Dying's* narrative community - its numerical supremacy *per se* - than the organisational principles by which these narratives are arranged.

In *The Sound and the Fury* each narrative section follows consecutively: Benjy, the novel's first narrator (its first "first person", or "I") passes the figurative baton to Quentin (its second "first person"), who hands over to Jason (its third) who, begrudgingly - and as such, entirely in character - yields to a fourth (the novel's first "third person"). The novel's first three "chapters" begin, mature, and reach their respective termini before the next "chapter" commences. Having completed his narrative in its entirety, each brother recedes, exhausted, into the textual background, where he resides for the remainder of the novel. *As I Lay Dying* maintains an entirely different textual etiquette. Its narrators refuse, or prove otherwise unable, to wait for one

¹²⁰ Arthur F. Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), p.30.

¹²¹ Michael Holquist (ed.). Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p.294.

¹²² See Delville, "Alienating Language"; and Robinson, *Creating Yoknapatawpha*, especially pp. 185-198; also, Stephen M. Ross, "'Voice'".

¹²³ Ross, "'Voice'", p.306.

narrative phase - say the story of Darl - to reach "completion" before embarking upon the next. In contrast to the four consecutive, protracted textual sessions of *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* provides fifty-nine episodic narrations that intersect, drop off and - in the majority of cases - rejoin the narrative "queue" at a later stage. Seven of the fifteen narrators report only once and therefore do not rejoin the "queue", yet even these most marginal narrators, shoved off to the text's periphery, constitute a formative part of what Jameson refers to as the "serial situation".¹²⁴ The concept of the "queue" is existentially weighted; more, its treatment allows us to consolidate our claims that Faulkner's text problematises, via the first person pronoun, the conception of the self.

The broad organisational logic of *As I Lay Dying* accords to the Sartrean notion of the series. In the first volume of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre proposes that the serial situation arises when a collective population are passively drawn together by an event, a phenomena or experience within the social life of a given community.¹²⁵ Sartre's most famous "everyday example"¹²⁶ comes as he describes those that wait for a bus.¹²⁷ Each member of the queue has a "common interest" - here, catching the bus - yet this commonality is an *anti-social* one: each waits in sequence without integrating *with* - or even viewing themselves as part *of* - the collective gathering. In short, "[t]he bus they wait for unites them" but it does not allow for their integration.¹²⁸ Sartre's conception of the "queue" proves instructive as a means by which we might

¹²⁴ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p.249.

¹²⁵ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004).

¹²⁶ Ibid. p.256.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p.265.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p.259.

begin to theorise the fractured, contested and competing impulses that constitute Faulkner's serially alienated novel.

The "formula of the series", Sartre writes, "is a dynamic scheme which determines each through all and all through each".¹²⁹ For Sartre, those that constitute the queue are bound by a single event, be it waiting for a bus or one's parole, listening to the shipping forecast, waiting to bury one's mother. At the same time, however, those who constitute the queue maintain a relational interdependence. On the queue Sartre notes: "we are concerned here with a plurality of isolations: these people do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist *side by side* alongside a bus stop."¹³⁰ Sartre's "a plurality of isolations" provides astute commentary on the formal syntax of *As I Lay Dying*. With the possible exception of Vardaman and Darl, who share an intimate narrative relationship, Faulkner permits scant interaction between members of the textual queue; figuratively speaking, these queueing "Is" turn their backs on the "Is" that surround them. Rarely in *As I Lay Dying* does one textual "I" provoke a response in the next.¹³¹ Autonomy-within-the-series is the novel's *idée fixe*. On arriving at the front of the textual queue, each narrator, eschewing both the diversity and the sociality of those with whom he queues, articulates (a portion of) what needs to be articulated and then rejoins the back of the queue. This perpetually shifting narrative positioning gives *As I Lay Dying* its central, agitated rhythm. Faulkner's novel constantly evolves, or better yet *revolves*, creating new and surprising formal juxtapositions. As Jameson notes, the "Sartrean system" is "not a form fixed once and for all, but a process of rotating or revolving thirds,

¹²⁹ Ibid. p.266.

¹³⁰ Ibid. p.256, italics added.

¹³¹ An exception proves the rule: from page 139 to page 156 the text brokers a "face to face" (rather than "side by side") interaction between Darl and Vardaman. Across seven narrative chapters, Faulkner alternates between the two brothers to the exclusion of all others. The pattern is unique in the context of the novel.

in which everyone *in turn* serves as the unifier of the other members.”¹³² It is in the “serial situation” that the reciprocal relation between “first” and “third” comes into relief.¹³³ Ironically, however, the pronouncedness of the first person (here a first person to the power of fifteen) dislocates, thus undermining, the autonomy of the “I”. The novel is thus democratic at the same time as it is private, a means of unification yet simultaneously the cause for separation. In the queue “everyone is equally a member, or a third” yet the overabundance of individuals means that the individual loses his or her sense of self.¹³⁴ Interchangeability, agitation, and substitution are the watchwords of the serial situation.

FROM SERIALITY TO SURREALITY: FAULKNER’S EXQUISITE CORPSE

The organisational principles of *As I Lay Dying* are not only serialistically but surrealistically inflected. Specifically, the compositional principles that underpin Faulkner’s novel, principles that serialise the alienation of the “I”, find a structural analogue in the Bretonian practice known as the *cadaver exquis*, or exquisite corpse (fig. 1). I shall explore the problematic materiality of the corpse itself in the next section. First, I want to attend to how the *cadaver exquis* informs the aesthetics of Faulkner’s text. Initiated in Paris by Andre Breton in 1924 - the year before Faulkner’s first French sojourn - the *cadaver exquis*, in its first incarnation, connoted a language game that issued from the juxtaposition of

¹³² Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p.264; p.253. The etiquette of the queue is not always neatly observed. On more than one occasion a narrator pushes their way back into the textual foreground before the “present” narrator finishes narrating. On page 35, for example, Darl is “interrupted” by an impatient (“running” [36]) Vardaman and prevented from committing to the period (“.”) that would complete his syntax; Cash is “interrupted” twice in the novel, first by Darl and, later, by Cora Tull (see p.62; p.111).

¹³³ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p.249.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p.253.

seemingly incongruous lexical clauses.¹³⁵ The conjunction of incompatibles allows for chance encounters (meeting on the bus, sharing a cell, tuning into a radio broadcast) to reconfigure the text, to play with readerly positions and, ultimately, to challenge the notion of the “I”. Breton described the genesis of this corpsing in the following terms:

When the conversation—on the day's events or proposals of amusing or scandalous intervention in the life of the times—began to pall, we would turn to games; written games at first, contrived so that *elements of language attacked each other in the most paradoxical manner possible*, and so that human communication, misled from the start, was thrown into the mood most amenable to adventure. From then on no unfavorable prejudice (in fact, quite the contrary) was shown against childhood games, for which we were rediscovering the old enthusiasm, although considerably amplified. Thus, when later we came to give an account of what had sometimes seemed upsetting to us about our encounters in this domain, we had no difficulty in agreeing that the Exquisite Corpse method did not visibly differ from that of 'consequences'. Surely nothing was easier than to transpose this method to drawing, by using the same system of folding and concealing.¹³⁶

Only later would the *cadavre exquis* become a visual game in which dismembered body parts would come into congress, attacking each other. It was in this later variant that the head of a woman might, for example, find itself atop of the body of a duck. Breton's “system of folding and concealing” finds a structural analogue in *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that embraces the repeated narrative folding that was central to the forms and syntax of French avant-gardes. In *As I Lay Dying* one narrator “folds” under (or folds to) the narrative

¹³⁵ For a recent discussion of Faulkner's French activity see my recent essay, “The Regional Modernisms of William Faulkner and John Dos Passos”, *U.S. Studies Online*, Issue 18 (Spring 2011), unpaginated.

¹³⁶ http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/definition/Bretons_Remembrances.html (last accessed September 16th 2011), italics added.

authority of the next narrator.¹³⁷ Essentially episodic in character, Faulkner's text implements "[r]adical editing as a means of subverting established narratives".¹³⁸ Faulkner's narrative system is thus analogous to the "written games" forwarded by Breton in 1924.

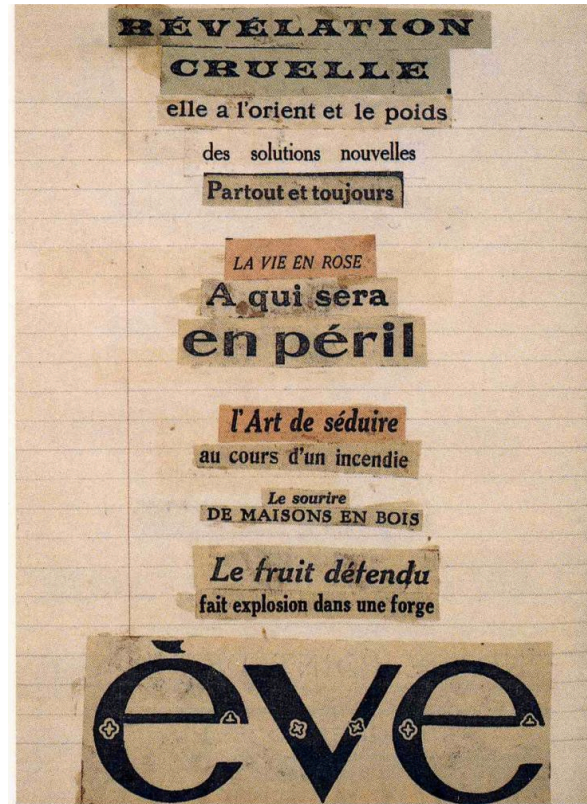


Figure 1, "Revelation Cruelle" (circa 1924).

Breton's juxtapositions connote a "semantic overturn" which reinvigorates the literary text: old meanings are cut away from their original contexts and reorganised so that new meanings may emerge. Faulkner's formalism is not dissimilar to the cutting and splicing that is a central tenet of the aestheticism of the *cadavre exquis*. As Faulkner's collage novel, *As I Lay Dying* is the work in which the "I" is broken up most fully. Indeed, "[t]he systematic estrangement

¹³⁷ The verb "to fold" is suggestive in a third sense, meaning "to file for bankruptcy". That so many businesses were folding at the time might have given extra incentive to Faulkner in making a novel by committing to so many "folds".

¹³⁸ Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage*, p.99.

and coupling of disparate elements in collage” is perhaps the key mode of alienation by which Faulkner’s novel plays with readerly positions. At the level of the work as a whole, Faulkner enacts the logic of the corpse, yet the corpse is not just structurally mediated. In fact, the forms and syntax of the *cadavre exquis* wriggle into the individual component-parts of Faulkner’s aesthetic design. In the coming section I seek to explore a number of these designs and trace how the processes of modernist making informs the notion of an “I”.

The most prominent example of the vexed alignment of aesthetic and material forms emerges as a surrealistically inflected list supplied by Cash, denoting the structural principles of coffin construction. Evoking in concentrated form the narrative segmentation that governs the novel as a whole, Cash’s list looks like this:

Cash

-
- I** MADE it on the bevel.
1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
 2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
 3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
 4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
 5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
 6. Except.
 7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
 8. Animal magnetism.
 9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
 10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
 11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
 12. So I made it on the bevel.
 13. It makes a neater job.

(AILD 53)

Determined to keep the textual “seams and joints” square and true, Faulkner affixes a pre-numerical “cramp” to its top left hand corner:

I MADE it on the bevel.

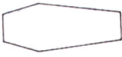
Staunchly vertical, Cash’s oversized pronominal marker intersects with a pronouncedly horizontal assertion of making. This (con)junction secures - bracing like a “crosstie” - the numerical portion of his text, preventing it from slipping, or becoming slant: it “makes a neater job.” Duly cramped or “gripp [ed]” by a prominent marker of selfhood, the (aesthetic) construction can begin. Fittingly, Cash’s thirteen point list, in turn, “cramps up” as a result of a tension between aesthetic and material imperatives. The episode reaches forward, evoking the manifestoes of aesthetic modernity, yet it simultaneously reaches backwards, toward a past of use value and unified labour practices that are fundamentally incompatible with the ideological underpinnings of industrial modernity. The tension between going forward and going back is a generative one throughout Faulkner. As Matthews writes “it’s precisely in the friction between a backward social order and a progressive aesthetics that Faulkner gets imaginative traction on the world that has produced him”.¹³⁹ Clearly, the dynamism of form and the recalcitrance of a bevel also “grips” Cash, who seems trapped between tradition and modernity. The time-consuming addition of a bevelled edge to his mother’s coffin exemplifies a form of making that is entirely incommensurate with the acceleration, standardisation and massification that would rip through production in the teens and twenties.¹⁴⁰ A bespoke edge is therefore politically resonant, providing the “gripping surface” upon which an act of resistance to the encroachment of technological modernity

¹³⁹ Matthews, *Seeing Through the South*, p.107.



¹⁴⁰ On the massification of culture see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997).

can gain traction. Given the holistic approach that Cash brings to his carpentry, the rationalised formalism of the exchange is jarring. Caught between modern and premodern impulses, this surrealistically formatted, artisano-futurist tract invokes, in Susan Sontag's term, "an aesthetics which yearns to be a politics."¹⁴¹

Only three pages later Cash's coffin is shorn of its tactility. In place of labour comes an icon:


They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clock-shape, like this  with every joint and seam bevelled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket, and they had laid her in it head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was her wedding dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could spread out, and they had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the auger holes in her face wouldn't show.


(*AILD* 56)

Cruelly, given Cash's painstaking creation of "joint and seam" (*AILD* 53), his addition of a "bevelled" edge and the integration of side slats with end pieces, Vardaman's representational practice reduces Addie's coffin to a flat, two-dimensional state. The "iconicity" of "" dematerialises, figuratively burying Cash's labour, rendering opaque that which is produced from the (preindustrial) processes of its production. Stripped of its self consciously "worked" dimensions, Cash's labour has been reduced to an entirely symmetrical, geometric design. "", is the *shape* of Cash's labour.


Tull's iconic abstraction not only drains Cash's coffin of its labour but it strips it of its use values. The depthlessness of this icon, now a prism rather than a box, precludes the job for which it was initially conceived. The depthlessness of Tull's icon multiplies the deathly connotations that "coffin" initialises. Within this iconic space one can only stifle. The dematerialisation reaches a third stage as the coffin icon, a stifling repository for Addie's I-ness,

¹⁴¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), p.54.

dematerialises further. Morphing into a blank textual space that Addie equates to the dimensions of her vagina, "" loses *all* of its dimensionality:

I would think: The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a  and I couldn't think *Anse*, couldn't remember *Anse*. It was not that I could think of myself as no longer unvirgin, because I was three now. And when I would think *Cash* and *Darl* that way until their names would die and solidify into a shape and then fade away, I would say, All right. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what they call them.

(AILED 117)

The vacant space that Faulkner uses to refer to Addie's (now ruinous) virginity - demands that we attend to what Wolfgang Iser dubs "the aesthetic relevance of the blank".¹⁴² In literary discourse, blanks, Iser suggests, "are nothing in themselves, and yet as a "nothing" they are a vital propellant for initiating communication."¹⁴³ Addie's, "", like Darl's "I", is a "determinate nothing", a blank which tacitly admits Addie's inability to come to terms with her not-I. Wrecked by the phallic intrusions of *Anse*, Addie's vagina - referred *to* and thus aestheticised *by* a blank space in a text - is a negatively semanticized, yet copiously referential region within which the impossibility of Addie's "I" comes into relief. Like her son, Darl, Addie is a "nihilated" subject, nihilated in this extract by a textual space which refers to what she later dubs "the process of becoming unalone". Exploiting what Hugh Kenner refers to as the "principle of omission"¹⁴⁴ Addie's blank "work[s] against our normal expectations of dialogue in so far as the focal point is not what is said, but what is unsaid."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.186.

¹⁴³ Ibid. p.195

¹⁴⁴ Hugh Kenner, "Faulkner and the Avant-Garde" in Richard H. Brodhead (ed.), *Faulkner: New Perspectives* (Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1983), pp.62-73, p.67.

¹⁴⁵ Iser, *Act of Reading*, p.193.

Faulkner's gapping thus enacts a process of "semantic indirection" in which "textual space serves as a principal of organization for making signs out of linguistic items that may not be meaningful otherwise".¹⁴⁶

As a negatively charged absence Addie's "lack" accrues metaphoricity in the sense set out by Ricoeur.¹⁴⁷ The blank is a "work in miniature", a significant dematerialisation that is suggestive of wider erosions. The coming pages seek to map out a set of "lacks" or empty locations inside of the Bundrens that remain.

AS I DIE BUYING: FAULKNER'S COMMODITY AESTHETICS

The first two sections of this chapter examine the existential and the aesthetic credentials of the Faulknerian first person as it manifests in *As I Lay Dying*. In the coming pages I place the fractured "I" within a concrete social context. The existential and aesthetic opacities that subtend *As I Lay Dying* are historically derived. The alienations that subtend the "I" - be it the problematic "I" of Darl, the impossible "I" of Addie, or the fragmented "I" of the text itself - are consequences of a wider set of social alienations that are particular to Faulkner's South.

In the Introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Sanctuary*, published in 1932, Faulkner would make telling reference not to his most recent, and most notorious novel, but to one that had appeared in the Autumn of the previous year: *As I Lay Dying*.¹⁴⁸ The introduction provided a fictitious framing within which Faulkner could situate the genesis of his fifth prose production. Faulkner remembers it this way:

¹⁴⁶ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.2.

¹⁴⁷ Paul Ricoeur "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No.1 (1998), pp.143-159.

¹⁴⁸ *As I Lay Dying* was published on October 6th 1930; *Sanctuary* appeared on Feb 9th 1931.

That was the summer of 1929. I got a job in the power plant, on the night shift, from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M., as a coal passer. I shovelled coal from the bunker into a wheelbarrow and wheeled it in and dumped it where the fireman could put it into the boiler. About 11 o'clock the people would be going to bed, and so it did not take so much steam. Then we could rest, the fireman and I. He would sit in a chair and doze. I had invented a table out of a wheelbarrow in the coal bunker, just beyond a wall where the dynamo ran. It made a deep, constant humming noise. There was no more work to do until about 4 A.M., when we would have to clean the fires and get up steam again. On these nights, between 12 and 4, I wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks, without changing a word. I sent it to Smith and wrote him that by it I would stand or fall.¹⁴⁹

The place of novelistic construction: "just beyond a wall where the dynamo ran". The time of its construction: "between 12 and 4", during a lull in energy consumption. A fitting context for what many critics consider Faulkner's most avant-garde prose text.¹⁵⁰ Sitting in a "coal bunker" at an upturned wheelbarrow and flanked - perhaps even encouraged by - the steady throb of the dynamo, Faulkner would forge his fifth novel.¹⁵¹ This, at least, is how Faulkner places the generative moments of the work. For those familiar with Faulkner's tendency toward self mythologizing, however, it will come as no surprise to learn that the scene-setting is somewhat misleading. Like all good conceits, this one issues from a seed of truth. Faulkner indeed worked nights in Oxford's power plant for a brief period during the summer months of 1929.¹⁵² Yet a number of Faulkner's subsequent claims are patent fabrications. As

¹⁴⁹ James B. Meriwether (ed.), *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches & Public Letters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p.177-8.

¹⁵⁰ For two examples see Kinney, *Narrative Poetics*, p.19; 162; and Matthews, *Seeing Through the South*, pp.61-62.

¹⁵¹ In a letter to Lawrence Stallings Faulkner insisted that his literary production was propelled by the machine: "I think the hum of the dynamo helped me. If ever I get rich I'm going to have a little dynamo built to hum away in my room." New York *Sun* (September 3, 1932), reprinted in M. Thomas Inge (ed.), *Conversations with William Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p.28.

¹⁵² On Faulkner's employment at Oxford's power plant see Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.384

Atkinson notes, “[r]iddled with inaccuracies and trademark embellishments, the introduction is yet another illustration of Faulkner’s disregard for facts when constructing the events of his life and work.”¹⁵³ Polk’s researches on Faulkner’s manuscripts prove invaluable in this connection and demystify *As I Lay Dying*’s compositional chronology. First, Polk’s studies show that despite writing at “white heat” during the late twenties and early thirties Faulkner’s “six week” boast is disingenuous.¹⁵⁴ Notwithstanding Faulkner’s astonishing literary productivity during this period - a level that he would sustain until the completion of *Light in August* in February, 1932 - the novel would take its time to emerge. Faulkner worked for a period of nine weeks, from October 25 and December 29 1929, on holograph version of the novel; he would spend another three weeks preparing the carbon typescript, finishing on January 12, 1930. The lack of a proof copy means that we may never be able to assert with finality the duration of *As I Lay Dying*’s composition, yet from the dates on Faulkner’s holograph and his carbon it is clear that the compositional framework within which *As I Lay Dying* emerged constitutes a lengthier period than Faulkner was willing to admit.

Faulkner’s claim that he wrote *As I Lay Dying* “without changing a word” is also a fabrication. That many of the manuscript pages bear multiple page numbers demonstrates that Faulkner reworked and revised his novel between its drafting and its publication. Harrison Smith might well have made “very few” changes to Faulkner’s text, yet the compositional history of the novel was far from seamless. The journey from “blank sheet” to published novel was, like the torturous, protracted journey that provides its thematic centre, peppered with ruptures, changes of direction, and breaks in continuity.

Faulkner’s claim that he began writing *As I Lay Dying* “in the summer of 1929” fails to tally with evidence from biographical sources. According to

¹⁵³ Atkinson, *Great Depression*, p.119.

¹⁵⁴ Polk, “Afterword” to *Sanctuary: The Original Text* (New York: Random House, 1981), p.294.

Joseph Blotner, a man to whom Faulkner would yield much, Faulkner did not start work on *As I Lay Dying* until the end of October. Conflicting with Faulkner's account, Blotner's runs as follows: "[o]n October 25, 1929, the day after panic broke out on Wall Street, [Faulkner] took one of these [onion] sheets, unscrewed the cap from his fountain pen, and wrote at the top in blue ink, 'As I Lay Dying.' Then he underlined it twice and wrote the date in the upper right-hand corner".¹⁵⁵ In and of itself, the discrepancy between Faulkner's and Blotner's account - a discrepancy that, in essence, pits "summer" against "October" - might seem slight. Given the historical specificity of "October 25, 1929," however, the few months' slippage is instructive. If Faulkner is right, and *As I Lay Dying* materialized in "six weeks", without need for revision, the novel would have been completed before Blotner dates Faulkner's inaugural efforts at composition. If Blotner is correct, however, and Faulkner did not begin writing until "the day after" the collapse of the stock market, then the text takes on an altogether different aspect. In light of Faulkner's previous with regard to self-mythologizing and given his later efforts to warp the compositional history of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *A Fable* (1950), his self declared "magnum o", the archival evidence of Polk and Blotner seems more reliable than the anecdotal, retrospective testimony of the "public" Faulkner. But why, we might ask, would Faulkner lie and, more, continue to lie - he would die lying - about the compositional history of his fifth novel? Willful in its orientation, Faulkner's misremembering is, I suggest, driven by a desire to wrench his text free from any inferred social, historical, or political moorings. Put differently, Faulkner's fudging was spurred by an attempt to drive a wedge between two linked realities: that of his text and that of his nation. As I seek now to show, these two realities prove ultimately unwedgeable. Faulkner's attempt to estrange his novel from the generative historical context within which it was composed is

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography, Volume 1* (New York: Chatto and Windus, 1974), p.633, qtd. in Atkinson, *Great Depression*, p.176-7.

undermined by the close proximity between the (inadmissible) “beginnings” of Faulkner’s text and the (inadmissible) “beginnings” of a new phase of American capitalism. Composed in the immediate wake of this national egg laying, *As I Lay Dying* manifests as Faulkner’s signal response to the crisis of modernity and the onset of the Great Depression. It is, in Matthews’ phrasing, “Faulkner’s most probing exploration of the effects of modernization on the rural poor”.¹⁵⁶

As I Lay Dying charts the movements of the Bundren family, poor white tenant farmers, on a forty-mile death drag to burial grounds in Jefferson. Punctured by broken bones, acts of arson, date rape, and mental breakdown, the stated objective of “this funereal steeplechase” is to inter the body of the recently deceased mother, Addie, alongside kindred corpses.¹⁵⁷ I shall unearth a coextensive motivation for the journey in a few pages, one that locates the deathly procession of the Bundrens as a means to explicitly mercantile ends. Suffice it to say here that at the literal level, “burial” is the novel’s driving force; “to bury” is its active verb. The burial of Addie’s body - as a permanent, enduring act of hiding - is, however, a metaphor for a larger interment. As Jessica Baldanzi and Kyle Schlabach note, the “stench of the decaying body serves as a metaphor for the family’s unspoken histories that have been pushed aside but stubbornly refuse burial.”¹⁵⁸ One in a number of “other buried narratives of family, regional, and national significance”, Addie’s body appropriates a “text” inasmuch as it provides a surface upon which specific social traumas might figuratively be inscribed.¹⁵⁹ More exactly, the

¹⁵⁶ Matthews, *Seeing Through the South*, p.146.

¹⁵⁷ Andre Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.161.

¹⁵⁸ Jessica Baldanzi and Kyle Schlabach, “What Remains?: (De)Composing and (Re)Covering American Identity in *As I Lay Dying* and the Georgia Crematory Scandal”, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp.38-55, p.38.

¹⁵⁹ Baldanzi and Schlabach, “What Remains?”, p.41.

Bundrens' movement from farm to town is an extended metaphor for the historically determined shift from agrarian to capitalist modes of production. In Lester's words, Faulkner's novel

allegorizes this collective upheaval of traditional rural life by setting the hapless Bundren family on a journey to town. As the family moves toward the unfamiliar landscape and community of Jefferson and toward new social identities, they are compelled to respond to pressures and limits that emerge in the context of new settings and social relations.¹⁶⁰

The metaphorical road from farm to town infers a rough ride for the grieving poor. Indeed, Atkinson is right to locate "*As I Lay Dying*, [as] the story of a harrowing journey toward an uncertain and ominous horizon."¹⁶¹ The pages that follow trace this "journey".

RURAL I-HOOD: RELOCATIONS

In the early 1930s, the identity of rural America - its I-hood, perhaps - was in a state of flux. What people did, and where they did it was changing. Ted Ownby points out that "[t]he percentage of the Mississippi population defined by the U.S. census as rural decreased from 97 in 1880 to 86.6 in 1920 and 83.1 in 1930."¹⁶² As Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying*, Mississippi remained predominantly rural, yet recent and significant interstate migration would see many Mississippians swap the farm for the town. By 1930, the Southern economy had entered an important new phase. Paralysed by the recent collapse of the cotton markets, Mississippi was becoming what Jack Temple Kirby might

¹⁶⁰ Lester, "As They Lay Dying: Rural Depopulation and Social Dislocation as a Structure of Feeling", *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 21, Iss. 1/2 (Fall/Spring 2005), pp.28-50, p.28.

¹⁶¹ Atkinson, *Great Depression*, p.16.

¹⁶² Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty and Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p.83.

call “town oriented”.¹⁶³ Ownby provides a useful, two-pronged back history to Mississippi’s rural depopulation: “For the first time in the state’s history”, he writes, “the number of people living and working on farms decreased in the period from 1910 to 1920 and it increased only slightly in the 1920s.”¹⁶⁴ Mississippi’s rural communities would continue to constitute a greater part of the state demographic, yet by 1930 the first phase of urbanisation had been set in train.¹⁶⁵ Discomfited by the prospect of continual back breaking labour and curious to taste the fruits of consumer culture, Mississippians like the Bundrens, were being drawn from rural settings and relocating in urban ones. The transplantation of farming families into nascent urban centres swelled the ranks of Southern towns, signifying the first phase in a shift from premodern to capitalist modes of production. On its own, of course, “being there” was not enough to constitute a significant challenge to the forms and customs of the Old South. A deeper commitment than mere present-ness was necessary if capitalism was to be cemented as the dominant ideology of the emergent South. It was imperative that those who came had the means to consume. As Wolfgang Haug has asserted “[t]he working class exist in relation to capital not only as those who are exploited in the production process, as the creator of all values, even of those which are the sources of all forms of profit and social surplus: to the sectors of social capital which provide the necessities of life, they are also a mass market of buyers.”¹⁶⁶ Only by turning producers into consumers could the circuits of exchange upon which Southern capitalism had come to depend perpetuate.

¹⁶³ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p.154.

¹⁶⁴ Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.83.

¹⁶⁵ According to figures drawn from the 2000 census, Mississippi’s urban population was 48.8%. West Virginia was the only other state to register a rural majority (46.1 % urban) in 2000.

¹⁶⁶ Wolfgang Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p.101.

The implementation of money wages provided the requisite conditions under which the South could embrace the shift from use value to exchange value and, by extension, acquiesce to the shift from premodern to capitalist modes of accumulation. Again, Ownby helps us to map the change: “the number of [Mississippi] people earning wages increased from 5,827 in 1880 to 57,560 by 1920, and total wages in that period went from slightly over \$1 million to \$51 million.”¹⁶⁷ For a growing section of the rural South, the staggering, fifty-fold increase in money wages represented an alluring alternative to the hardly pulse-raising subsistence modes of pre- or proto-modern Souths. Not only were Mississippians becoming urban but they were, by way of money wages, being opted into an entirely new system of exchange. Rural populations were thus unified, in Jackson Lears’ term, by “the centrifugal forces unleashed by the market.”¹⁶⁸

As a precis for the coming discussion of the Bundrens’ post bereavement expenditures, I seek briefly to situate the growth of commodity culture in the rural South in a national context. With reference to national economic trends, William Leach notes that “the rapid shift of American capitalism from its agrarian base in the early nineteenth century to industrial manufacturing [...] generated a great abundance of commodities for the domestic market and created unprecedented distributive requirements. In the short space of just thirty years, from 1890 to 1920, “American society had established the institutional basis for a consumer society.”¹⁶⁹ The situation in the rural South was altogether different. Notwithstanding America’s “rapid shift” from agri- to commodity- culture, modernisation would come slowly to many parts of the

¹⁶⁷ Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.83.

¹⁶⁸ Jackson Lears, “Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America” in Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), pp.73-97, p.84.

¹⁶⁹ William Leach, “Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire” in Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions*, pp.99-132, p.100.

American South. Thomas Schlereth is right to assert that “the level and scope of rural consumption was rising by the turn of the twentieth century”, yet these trends did not apply to vast swathes of the postbellum South.¹⁷⁰

As late as 1950, in fact, significant portions of the rural population were yet to experience the sweep of commodification, yet to herald the arrival of modern communications, goods and services, and yet to experience the division of labour, an event without which industrial modernity would cease to function. As economically marginal figures, the hill-farming Bundrens provide a pertinent example of a population at a distance, physically and figuratively, from the logic of market relations.¹⁷¹ Kirby notes that in 1930 “[t]he remote highland South was the most “backward” part of rural America, dramatically lacking - even in comparison within the South - the infrastructures and amenities of farm and business life.”¹⁷² Whether one considers these premodern regions as pockets of resistance within which extant social formations could brace themselves against the scarring winds of market capitalism, or as zones of primitivism defined by a cultural blindness to the liberating potential of modern living, the point remains: many rurally situated Americans escaped (in the first case) or missed out on (in the second), modernity’s consumer driven entitlements. Hindered no doubt by what Wiener dubs “the ideological and cultural heritage of slavery”, Mississippi proved sluggish in the transition from “old” to “new” South.¹⁷³ Providing perhaps the pre-eminent example of the molasses quick advance toward modernisation and modernity, Mississippi

¹⁷⁰ Thomas J. Schlereth “Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America” in Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions*, pp.339-375, p.341.

¹⁷¹ Susan Willis, “Learning from the Banana”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp.586-600, p.587.

¹⁷² Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, p.119.

¹⁷³ Wiener, “Class Structure”, p.977.

ranked last in the country in the percentage of its people with radios and telephones in their homes, last in the proportion of people with motor vehicle registrations and homes wired for electricity. In 1937, less than one percent of the farms in the state had electricity. The state ranked last in the country in per capita wealth, with less than half the national average. Even more dramatically, Mississippi was last in the country in per capita retail sales, with a figure 34 percent of the national average.¹⁷⁴

Given the material lag that separated rural Mississippians from many differently situated Southerners, it is perhaps no wonder that the Bundrens - the embodiment, perhaps, of a South within a South - seem determined to get to "town". (*AILD* 13; 28; 92) Anse is perhaps more concerned than his children that the trip reaches its (commodified) end: "'Just going to town. Bent on it'", he manfully declares. (*AILD* 92) Anse's desire to fulfil his potential as a consumer of manufactured goods is no doubt heightened by the fact that it has, as the more geographically fluid Peabody disbelievingly states, been "twelve years" since Anse last visited "town". If we trust in Peabody's chronology - and Faulkner gives us no reason not to do so - Anse has been an absentee from town cultures since about the mid teens.¹⁷⁵

Stuart Ewen's work on interwar commercialism in the United States provides a useful framework within which we can historicise Anse's extended period of exile. "In the 1920s", Ewen writes, "the consumer ethic was projected to sectors of the population whose fidelity was seen to be necessary, but in the process much of the American populace was ignored. Ads of the twenties, like the mass consumer market itself, were not generally directed toward the poorest sectors of the population."¹⁷⁶ Given the exclusionary tactics of the marketplace in the twenties, we might fairly speculate that Anse's last visit to

¹⁷⁴ Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.95.

¹⁷⁵ That Peabody can get to town despite his morbid obesity brings Anse's sedentary countenance into relief.

¹⁷⁶ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), p.19.

town, circa 1915, constituted an unpleasant lesson in the discriminatory etiquette of consumerism. Notwithstanding the slim chance that Anse would have had much of a wage to spend on this previous sojourn, working class identity would likely have disqualified him from partaking in “the fun and potential romance of consumer spending”.¹⁷⁷ As of the teens, at least, Anse Bundren was not a target upon which the crosshairs of Southern commercialism chose to affix. Fast-forward “twelve years”, however, and what Ewen calls the “logic of consumption” had shifted.¹⁷⁸ First time as tragedy and second time as farce, Anse squares up to the “town” under more favourable conditions in the dying moments of the twenties. Fun times and not a little romance beckon for Anse Bundren. Willis is right to assert that the Bundrens “participate only partially” in the logic of consumption, yet the fact that they do so at all is historically pertinent.¹⁷⁹ Certainly, this was no gaudy spree, yet as the thirties approached, the tentacles of commodity culture would start to wrap themselves around the very poorest members of society. Even hill-peasants like the Bundrens would have access to a growing array of mass-produced goods: the bananas that Dewey Dell munches on the buckboard, the false teeth that instil a manic desire in Anse, and the record player that Cash enjoys on returning to the farm. In short, as Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying*, the fruits of commodity culture were beginning to stretch beyond the middle classes.¹⁸⁰ For Anse, the timing of Addie’s death could not have been better. Coinciding with the opening up of the market to the urban poor, Addie’s death represents the perfect subterfuge for a trip to the shops.

¹⁷⁷ Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.70.

¹⁷⁸ Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, p.19.

¹⁷⁹ Willis, “Banana”, p.588.

¹⁸⁰ Railey argues that the Bundrens’ post bereavement expenditures announces a willingness to ingratiate themselves to middle class cultures and liberal ideologies. See *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology and the Production of William Faulkner* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999), especially pp.87-108.

Having hinted that the Bundrens' journey to town is the outward expression of a inner (that is, "buried") desire to consume, I seek to probe how a number of individual acts of expenditure accrue symbolic value at the level of Faulkner's text. The booty differs for each of the Bundrens. For Anse, "town" means a new pair of false teeth (*AILD* 12; 25; 35; 71) and, as we discover at the novel's end, a new wife. For Vardaman, town means a shiny red train (170). For Cash, it yields "one of them little graphophones" (177) that plays pre-recorded music that the Bundrens subsequently purchase via "mail order" (178). Dewey Dell goes to town to buy an abortifacient with which to terminate (or "negative") an unwanted pregnancy (164-169). Aside from Addie, then, who is too dead to consume, and Darl, who is too "mad" to, Jewel Bundren appears the only child not dazzled by the "new enchantment" of commodity culture.¹⁸¹ Despite the variety of forms in which it manifests, the desire to buy unifies the Bundrens, barring Jewel, under the shared logic of capitalism. Ownby is quick to find an airy spot within the seemingly strangulated space of commodity culture. The Bundrens, he claims, enjoy "a sense of freedom in shopping" that they do not experience in their life on the farm.¹⁸² Consumption, in effect, refreshes the parts that other (social) acts cannot reach. As Ownby puts it in another text, "Anse and Cash Bundren find common, and actually sympathetic ground in the appeal of consumer pleasures."¹⁸³ I would like to complicate Ownby's responses to the Bundrens' consumptive urges. For Faulkner the "freedom" of consumption doubles up as a kind of death. Problematised by the spectres of production, each act of consumption is more complicated than Ownby gives credit. Whatever commodity it is that Faulkner evokes - be it "train", "teeth", "phonograph" or "banana" - these goods are "shape[s] to fill a

¹⁸¹ Leach, "Strategists of Display", p.100.

¹⁸² Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.71.

¹⁸³ Ownby, "Snopes Trilogy and Consumer Culture" in Kartiganer and Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and Ideology: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1992 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), p. 110.

lack". More, they are objects that seek to obfuscate the buried reality of capitalist modes of production. Of all the Bundren family, Vardaman is the one who falls most spectacularly through the trapdoor of capital. He thus provides a pertinent point of departure for our final set of discussions.

VARDAMAN: THE EROTICS OF CONSUMPTION

Vardaman's longing for situatedness in the world of things manifests as a burning desire for a red toy train, that "shines" behind the plate glass window of a store in Jefferson. (*AILD* 43) Vardaman first hears of the train, thus its "being-in-the-world" of commodities from Dewey Dell who, unlike her farm-bound father, has recently witnessed the "wonder" of mass-produced goods. Vardaman's desire to consume is aroused not by modern advertizing, then, but by a more traditional means, by word of mouth: "it is red on the track behind the glass. The track goes shining round and round. Dewey Dell says so." (*AILD* 142) Vardaman's desire for "train" pulls him toward Jefferson; his excitement is palpable yet it is coupled with a reassurance that this commodity will "reserve" itself for him: "[w]e are going to town. Dewey Dell says it wont be sold because it belongs to Santa Claus and he taken it back with him until next Christmas. Then it will be behind the glass again, shining with waiting." (*AILD* 65) The ruse is apparent enough to us but it eludes young Vardaman: having been bought by some other (richer) boy, the processes of labour are set in train to replenish the store windows in time for Christmas.¹⁸⁴ As if by magic, the commodity, produced *en masse* but masquerading as unique, returns from the grotto of labor to cast "loving glances" at Vardaman.¹⁸⁵ As the family get closer "to town" Vardaman's desire intensifies. Indeed, the potency of "train" as an

¹⁸⁴ For a probing analysis of the function of window displays and their relation to use values see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), p.25.

¹⁸⁵ Haug, *Commodity Aesthetics*, p.23.

object to be possessed is almost too much for Vardaman to bear. "It was behind the window, red on the track, the track shining round and round. It made my heart hurt." (AILD 145) *It made my heart hurt*: perhaps the single most freighted line in Faulkner's novel. Certainly, it reveals much with regard to the libidinal economies of the text. The "unleashed commodity" demonstrates how Vardaman's "human sensuality is moulded by commodity aesthetics".¹⁸⁶

The notion of "sensuality" returns us to the surrealist notion of the self. In Franklin Rosemont's words, Vardaman's desire testifies to an "[e]roticism, which touches the very heart of the surrealist message."¹⁸⁷ As a desiring "I" or "eye" Vardaman glimpses in "train" a new world, a world opened to the possibility of desire. He does not know it yet but this is desire that must be left unfulfilled. Ownership is so near but yet so far for Vardaman. In effect, Vardaman is the one "shining with waiting"; "waiting" that is, for the "train" that never arrives. What does "arrive", in place of consumption (and the social mobility it encapsulates) is the fetish. Willis maps this particular terrain:

If the commodity is by definition a fetishized object, containing the hidden social relationships of its producers, we have only to extrapolate from its production to its use to understand how the commodity conveniently fills the gaps in broken and alienated social relationships. Under twentieth-century capitalism, consumption becomes a means for replacing relationships between people and deflecting emotional responses which might otherwise be painful and hard to manage.¹⁸⁸

Under capitalism, then, labour acquires what Georg Lukács refers to as a "phantom objectivity"; that is, a relation between people transforms itself into a

¹⁸⁶ Haug, *Commodity Aesthetics*, p.49; p.45.

¹⁸⁷ Franklin Rosemont, *Andre Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.65.

¹⁸⁸ Willis, "Banana", p.590.

relation between things.¹⁸⁹ The commodity, as the object of capitalist modes becomes, in a familiar idiom, “a shape to fill a lack” (*AILD* 116). We might want to resist being so hard on Vardaman; his “I” is not the only one filled with commodities. Indeed, his pulmonary reaction to “train” provides a cogent metaphor for the growing sense of wonder at the plethora of products that represented a bold, often colourful, and patently surrealistic new world that sought to compensate for, if not fully to displace, the degraded, knackered and jaded lives of the rural poor. “And yet with all this”, Du Bois lamented at the turn of the century, “there was something sordid, something forced, - a certain feverish unrest and recklessness; for was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?”¹⁹⁰ Kirby follows the Du Boisian line, noting that “[t]he [reified] products and the cash required to buy them must have struck important if unmeasurable blows against local cultures and premodern economies.”¹⁹¹

The appeal of “shining” (*AILD* 145) new products not only represents an alternative to the mundane life on the farm but it also, in the self-referential sense typical of capitalist production, represents an alternative to the more familiar commodities with which Vardaman has previous experience. For Vardaman the conundra of consumption infers a toss up between a train and a banana. Again, Dewey Dell is the conduit between the desire to consume and its realisation. The alternative to train seems, for Vardaman, less than satisfying:

Dewey Dell said that we will get some bananas. The train is behind the glass, red on the track. When it runs the truck shines on and off. Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour and sugar and coffee cost so much when he is a country boy. “Wouldn’t you rather have some

¹⁸⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* [1920] trans. R. Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1967), p.83.

¹⁹⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, p.82.

¹⁹¹ Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, p.118.

bananas instead?" Bananas are gone, eaten. Gone. When it runs on the track shines again. "Why ain't I a town boy, pa?" (*AILD* 43)

The cross cuttings and derailments of Vardaman's syntax issue from an ideological struggle between two antagonistic commodities: "train" and "banana". These two products are in dynamic tension, "incessant interaction or conflict" to use Volosinov's term.¹⁹² Yet for Vardaman, the choice is clear. Despite its relative exoticism, "banana" cannot displace "train" as the pre-eminent object of his desire. The hidden and attenuated processes of production re-situates "train" to the store window; Vardaman's syntax reaffirms "train" at the forefront of his desiring "eye" / "I".

GETTING A GRIP: ANSE BUNDREN AND "THEM TEETH"

For Anse Bundren, the journey from farm to town is an unmitigated success. Despite the humiliations that subtend his low-budget funeral arrangements, despite the fetid odour that issues from his rotting other half, and despite the serial alienations that threaten to break apart the tenuous connections that link Anse to his family, the two main objectives of the journey find successful realisation. For the full, ten-day, duration of the Bundrens' journey, Anse has been lustily looking forward to burying his stinking wife and getting himself a pair of false teeth (*AILD* 12; 25; 35; 71; 177). These artificial dentures prove key to a proper understanding of the commodity aesthetics that bereave the Bundrens and, by association, bereave Faulkner's text. Given the changing demographic of consumer markets during the latter part of the 1920s it is not entirely surprising that Anse is able to consummate this particular transaction. Desire, mediated by an exchange of capital (or perhaps, an agreement "on installment" [*AILD* 176]), secures "them teeth" (*AILD* 71) which subsequently plug (into) a hole (or, lack) within the paternal face. Less predictable than the

¹⁹² V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986).

acquisition itself is the pulling power of such monstrous dentures. Anse's "mouth bling" in Matthews' street term, wows a woman whose only function, it seems, is to replace the defunct model of womanhood - the "old" Mrs Bundren - with a more modern version.¹⁹³ This grim parody of part exchange (the second of its sort) sees Anse trade a corpse for a woman shaped like a "duck", who comes (and perhaps as a makeweight for her duck-ness) with a "graphophone" as a dowry.¹⁹⁴ The down payment needed to secure Addie's replacement may have been no more than a flashing-white-smile from the newly dentured Anse (and the promise of the safe return of the tools that he borrowed to bury the first "Mrs Bundren"), yet despite his "badly splayed feet, his toes cramped and bent and warped" (*AILD* 8), despite his hunched back, despite his laziness and despite a lack of his own teeth, Anse has wended his way to a full set of disposable goods: teeth, duck, and portable home entertainment system, replete with "grip".¹⁹⁵ Along with his new teeth, then, Anse acquires a new, "duck shaped" (*AILD* 177) wife, a woman who subsequently takes to the task of domestic life effortlessly, shall we say. These acquisitions render Anse practically unrecognizable to his sons, as a final, and properly surrealistic passage demonstrates:

"Who's that?"

Then we see it wasn't the grip that made him look different; it was his face, and Jewel says, "He got them teeth."

It was a fact. It made him look a foot taller, kind of holding his head up, hangdog and proud too, and then we see her behind him, carrying the other grip - a kind of duck shaped woman all dressed up, with them kind of hard looking eyes like she was daring ere a man to say nothing. And there we set watching him, with Dewey Dell's and Vardaman's mouth half open and half-et bananas in their hands and her

¹⁹³ Matthews, *Seeing Through the South*, p.283.

¹⁹⁴ The first "part-exchange" occurs when Anse seizes Jewel's newly acquired horse as part payment for a matched team which do the job of the animals that are drowned in the river.

¹⁹⁵ The French word for "grip" is "anse".

coming around from behind pa, looking at us like she dared ere a man
[....]

“It’s Cash and Jewel and Vardaman and Dewey Dell,” pa says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if he wouldn’t look at us. “Meet Mrs Bundren,” he says. (*AILD* 177)

Functioning as little more than a grotesque display cabinet for a set of strangely animated teeth, Anse’s face is transformed into a “monstrous burlesque of all bereavement” (*AILD* 50). The reified symbol of Anse’s dead wife is thus kept in the mouth of Anse for future smilings at Addie’s replacement body, the new, hideously resurrected “Mrs Bundren”. Entombed within the mouth, Anse’s new gnashers function as a pristine plastic memorial to the death and dispatch of the old Mrs Bundren. With a mouth like a graveyard and a duck-for-a-wife, death and slapstick merge. Bakhtin proposes that “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.”¹⁹⁶ “Domination” is a key term on two levels. First, the teeth loom over the Bundrens as a physical object that alters the face of a (previously) well-known member of the family. Making Anse “look a foot taller”, these false teeth are agents of the uncanny. Anse, as an “I” that the Bundrens thought they knew, is somehow altered. His teeth invoke a Poe-like charge. In “Berenice” (1835), Poe’s narrator provides a scene that compliments the one committed to by Faulkner:

The teeth! - the teeth! - they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development. Then came the full fury of my monomania and I struggled in vain against [their] strange and irresistible influence. In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thought but for

¹⁹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.317.

the teeth. For these I longed with a frenzied desire. All other matters and all different interests became absorbed in their single contemplation. They - they alone were present to the mental eye, and they, in their sole individuality, became the essence of my mental life.¹⁹⁷

Poe's narration offers a fitting epitaph for Anse's trip to town. We would miss a trick, though, if we remained tethered to Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque. While Anse's teeth are verifiably "strange and irresistible" in their "influence", they are more than a location for the gothic. The real horror of Anse's transformation is rooted in the horrors of commodification, horrors which alienate the very notion of an "I". Indeed, we note the power of the teeth to perpetuate the consumption for which they stand as a synecdoche. By enabling further consumption, Anse's teeth resonate as the commodity *par excellence*, metaphorically evoking the journey toward a fully-fledged consumer culture. Anse does his best to mask the exchange value that teeth imply under a flimsy veil of use. The consumption that teeth allow is, Anse weakly argues, a right that he should not be denied: "me without a tooth in my head, hoping to get ahead enough so I could get my mouth fixed where I could eat God's own victuals as a man should". (AILD 25) Despite Anse's effort to "make natural" the role of consumer goods, to claim for their always-there-ness, his part in the logic of the marketplace "comes to the surface". As the "redness" of the train obfuscates the congealed labour that worms its way into in commodities, Anse's teeth contain, and subsequently seek to expunge, a whole history of buried productive labor.

As "train" shapes Vardaman's "I-hood", then, (or the shortcomings of it) false teeth shape the I-hood of Anse. He, like the narrator of *Berenice*, has "no thought but for the teeth". Testifying to Anse's powerlessness in an artificial world, "teeth" are the location of Anse's "freedom". His *raison d'être* and a reminder of his uselessness, "teeth" are as was "train": a "shape to fill a lack".

¹⁹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice" (1835), in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp.642-646, p.646.

The frequency of their mention evinces Anse's desperation with regard to consummating the transaction. Yet something weird happens to Anse as this consummation is realised: as he plugs into commodity culture, he becomes "indentured", that is "beholden" to his dentures. They, with the magnetic power of commodities, have lured Anse away from his farm. It is *they* that plug *him* into the cash nexus, into the gawping face of capital, into what Taussig dubs the "maw of the modern".¹⁹⁸ Driving a wedge between farm and town cultures, "them teeth" speak of an ill-fitting and alienating transition from production to consumption. By implication these artefacts of consumptive desire bring into relief the artifice, the concealments and the defacements that occupy and semanticize the commodified centre of Faulkner's novel.

¹⁹⁸ Taussig, *Shamanism*, p.94.

CHAPTER THREE
 “IT”
 OR,
 SANCTUARY’S REVERSIBLE BODIES.

The opening chapter of this thesis argued that *The Sound and the Fury* semanticizes around the collective pronoun “them”. The word, it was suggested, functions as the “compacted doctrine” that terrorises the racial subjectivity of the Compson brothers.¹⁹⁹ A second chapter built upon the assumptions of the first, attending to Faulkner’s treatment of the first person singular pronoun, the “I”, as it manifests in *As I Lay Dying*. Passed through numerous narrative consciousnesses, Faulkner’s application of this pronominal marker leads to a textual fragmentation that, in turn, imperils the coherence of the self. The present chapter narrows its focus for a final time, scrutinising how Faulkner extracts meaning from the smallest of textual markers. More exactly, the arguments that follow seek to give a precise textual location to *Sanctuary*’s problematic materiality by exploring the workings of the third person singular neuter pronoun - “it.”²⁰⁰ Through an extended close reading, I argue that the pronoun “it” is the pre-eminent place of semantic conflict in the novel, and more, that the novel’s employment of this specific type of pronoun characterises Faulkner’s grammar as a place of violence. The *grammatical* violence that I investigate in this chapter stems, of course, from a *material* violation. As Diane Roberts asserts, “*Sanctuary* is about rape. Stated baldly, the point seems as obvious as daylight.”²⁰¹ Specifically, the novel is about the rape of Temple Drake, a seventeen year-old virgin, with a corn-cob, in a disused

¹⁹⁹ Empson, *Complex Words*, p.39.

²⁰⁰ All primary citations are taken from Polk (ed.), *Faulkner: Novels, 1930-1935* (New York: Library of America, 1985), hereafter abbreviated *S*, and inserted parenthetically by page number.

²⁰¹ Diane Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), p.123.

barn. Temple's penetration provides the kernel or *ur-scene* out of which the novel grew.²⁰² As Faulkner famously commented in 1957, "I thought of the most horrific idea I could think of and wrote it."²⁰³ While rape is the novel's central preoccupation, it also constitutes its central silence. As T. H. Adamowski notes, the reader is prevented from gaining access to "that cob rape which we might, at first, suspect to be the privileged space of obscenity in the novel".²⁰⁴ Instead, the process of recognition proceeds by inference; its realisations are arrived at in instalments: "[t]hat famous episode is never shown to us. Popeye [Vitelli] materializes in the corncrib; we learn of Temple's anxiety, and then we see her bleeding in the car."²⁰⁵ Providing the novel with its *ur-scene* and with its dirty secret, rape is the elephant in the room, both the event from which the novel grew and the one which it refuses to sufficiently address. As Matthews notes, "vague diction, vacancies in syntax, breakages in thought and utterance, and violations of place, time and character conspire to blur the presentation of the novel's crucial event."²⁰⁶ Despite these ruptures and displacements, however, the threat that the novel poses is never far from exposing itself. It is, in Faulkner's terms, "hidden and secret yet nearby". (S 181) That Temple's rape

²⁰² Kathleen M. Scheel floats the arresting possibility that the novel's *ur-scene* was not, in fact, Temple's rape by Popeye but her rape and incarceration at home by her father and four brothers. Domestic violence, Scheel claims, is the generative abuse upon which the novel is grounded. See Scheel, "Incest, Repression, and Repetition-Compulsion: The Case of Faulkner's Temple Drake", *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, Vol. 30, Iss. 4 (1997), pp.39-55. Scheel's study is part of a strong tradition of feminist scholarship that enriches our understanding of *Sanctuary*. For further valuable feminist readings of *Sanctuary* see Minrose Gwin and Deborah Clarke in addition to Roberts.

²⁰³ Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner. (ed.), *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp.90-91.

²⁰⁴ T.H. Adamowski, "Faulkner's Popeye: The Other As Self" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sanctuary: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp.32-48, p.46.

²⁰⁵ As Dawn Trouard and Edwin T. Arnold note, "[i]n *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) Faulkner would give Popeye the last name of Vitelli, but he is known only as Popeye in *Sanctuary*." See *Reading Faulkner: Sanctuary* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p.6.

²⁰⁶ Matthews, "The Elliptical Nature of *Sanctuary*", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Spring, 1984), pp.246-265, p.246.

remains un- (or, better, “under”-) articulated is significant and will provide a point of departure for the coming arguments.

Temple’s rape occurs at the end of chapter XIII, yet passes with the barest of mention. The reader *is* notified that “[s]omething is happening” to Temple, although the nature of this “something” is ultimately withheld, rendered mute. As Temple remarks, “it was as though sound and silence had become inverted”. (S 250)²⁰⁷ The violence of this “[s]omething” stuns the next five chapters into a “bright silence” (*idem*). In fact, between chapters XIV and XVIII, Temple, whom one presumes is attempting to recover from the brutality of her attack, remains silent. This period of remission reaches a terminus in chapter XVIII. Here, Faulkner’s narrative rejoins Temple, providing the first material traces of her violation. Slumped in Popeye’s Ford awaiting imprisonment in a Memphis whorehouse,

Temple gazed dully forward as the road she had traversed yesterday began to flee backward under the wheels as onto a spool, feeling her blood seeping slowly inside her loins. She sat limp in the corner of the seat, watching the steady backward rush of the land - pines in opening vistas splashed with fading dogwood; sedge; fields green with new cotton and empty of any movement, peaceful, as though Sunday were a quality of atmosphere, of light and shade - sitting with her legs close together, listening to the hot minute seeping of her blood, saying dully to herself, I’m still bleeding. I’m still bleeding. (S 273-4)

The “minute seeping” of Temple’s blood is a metonym for with the novel’s wider tendency to muffle or offset the brutality of its central act. Despite the modest scale of this bleeding, however, its significance is far from slight. Not only does this passage provide the first material evidence of Temple’s penetration but it also sets up an antagonistic correspondence between going

²⁰⁷ For an interesting take on the sonic reverberations that semanticize *Sanctuary*, see Rebecca Keane-Temple, “The Sounds of *Sanctuary*: Horace Benbow’s Consciousness”, *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 50, Iss. 3 (Summer 1997), pp.445-50.

forward with going back. This antagonism inflects the formal strategies of the novel.

It is not until chapter XXIII - ten chapters after its occurring - that Temple commits to a narration of her ordeal. In her narration, the tension between backward and forward motion again proves a prominent feature. Sitting in a Memphis brothel with local lawyer Horace Benbow, Temple gradually begins to find the words through which she can recount the moments leading up to her violation. In anticipation of a close reading, I number my pronouns for the sake of clarity.

I thought if he'd just go on and get it [1] over with, I could go to sleep. So I'd say You're a coward if you dont! and I could feel my mouth getting fixed to scream, and that little hot ball inside you that screams. Then it [2] touched me, that nasty little cold hand, fiddling around inside the coat where I was naked. It [3] was like alive ice and my skin started jumping away from it [4] like those little flying fish in front of a boat. It [5] was like my skin knew which way it [6] was going to go before it [7] started moving, and my skin would keep on jerking just ahead of it [8] like there wouldn't be anything there when the hand got there.

Then it [9] got down to where my insides began, and I hadn't eaten since yesterday at dinner and my insides started bubbling and going on and the shucks began to make so much noise it [10] was like laughing. I'd think they were laughing at me because all the time his hand was going inside the top of my knickers and I hadn't changed into a boy yet. (S 330-1)

In this relatively short extract "it" is the dominant term, featuring ten times.²⁰⁸ The density with which Temple applies the pronoun is noteworthy. Nowhere else in the novel do so many third person pronouns mean so many different things within such a short space of time. Yet it is less the frequency of the pronoun than the rhythms of its movement that concerns me here. By listing the referents of Temple's pronoun in quick succession, one can begin to decipher the logic behind such rhythms. Temple's chain of pronouns run as follows:

²⁰⁸ *Sanctuary* is saturated with the impersonal pronoun "it", featuring 1,129 times in 217 pages.

“it” [1] refers to a sex act, (which, as I will discuss below, culminates in Temple’s rape); “it” [2], [3], and [4] refer - in different stages of realisation - to Popeye’s offending hand; “it” [5] appears, at least on first impressions, to be an inert or “dummy” signifier (in other words, the reader is not really sure what this one might mean); “it” [6] and “it” [7] are seemingly interchangeable, both of them referring either to Temple’s skin or to Popeye’s hand; “it” [8] and “it” [9] return to the hand; “it” [10] refers to the noise of “the shucks”, which Temple likens to a kind of “laughing”. A series of ten “its”, then, move to the following pattern: rape (or, more exactly, the threat of rape), hand, hand, hand, blank, skin or hand, skin or hand, hand, hand, laughter.

Having isolated Temple’s pronouns and located them in this chain of signification, it is clear that the term “it” functions as an indeterminate and highly volatile lexical unit. Neither stable nor singular in its meaning, Temple’s pronoun constantly threatens to vacate one meaning and take up occupancy in another. Of course, “it” remains the same word all the way through, but as the above compression demonstrates “it” - whilst under Temple’s jurisdiction at least - provides a forum for semantic ambiguity. Temple’s linguistic varieties and contortions of the pronoun “it”, beginning as the threat of rape and finishing as “laughter”, cover considerable semantic ground. The Marxist linguist Volosinov - a contemporary of Faulkner - might have cited this tendency to move as evidence of the “multivocal” essence of language. That language is essentially “multivocal” (and in the present context the assertion surely holds) does not mean that its various semantic possibilities are arrived at arbitrarily. Nor does it mean that the pronoun operates solely as a textual event; on the contrary, Temple’s “it” has a specific material imperative. In an attempt to classify the nature of this imperative, I will pull apart the chain of pronouns and ponder each one in greater detail.

“It” [1] refers to the novel’s generative event: Temple’s rape by Popeye in the Old Frenchman barn. The meaning of this first pronoun is communicated by

inference rather than direct address. Temple does not say “my rape”, yet the context within which Temple speaks the pronoun confirms such meaning as irrefutable. (The prospect of Temple suffering a rape has been one of the text’s only constant features; in fact, Temple’s penetration has seemed likely ever since she made her first foray into the Old Frenchman barn, at Chapter VI.) Temple’s inaugural “it” constitutes what linguists refer to as a “deictic” pronoun. The term “deixis”, as John Lyons suggests, “comes from a Greek word meaning “pointing” or “indicating” [and] is now used in linguistics to refer to the function of personal and demonstrative pronouns, of tense and of a variety of other grammatical and lexical features which relate utterances to the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the act of utterance.”²⁰⁹ Put simply, the deictic pronoun indicates the meaning of a thing or an object that the text fails to directly name. As a condition of its working, the deictic pronoun requires contextual support if its meaning is to be fully understood. Such context is provided by a glut of surrounding terms: a “he” is doing something that Temple hopes might pass quickly (Temple implores Popeye to “go on and get it over with”);²¹⁰ more, the ‘it’ involves a “fiddling”, “it” happens late at night (“I could go to sleep”), and Temple is “naked” whilst “it” is taking place. Providing context, these terms inform the reader that the “it” is sexual in kind and that Temple has not invited, nor is enjoying, such attention.

Temple’s deictic first pronoun is employed to absorb the shock of literal meaning. Through the rape a corporeal barrier has been breached. Through the telling, another rupture threatens. This rupture must come (or we have no novel) yet Temple fears a direct retelling and so defers it - with “it” [1]. Simply, the pronoun provides Temple with a means of referring to her rape without reprising it. “Rape” is locked into the crypt of Temple’s pronoun; what emerges,

²⁰⁹ John Lyons, *Semantics*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.636.

²¹⁰ Temple’s rape is prolonged, beginning with a “fiddling” on Saturday night, and ending with her penetration on Sunday morning.

as a semantic byproduct of the encryption, generates what Abraham and Torok call “a poetics of hiding”.²¹¹ As an “it” rather than a concrete event, “my rape” effectively becomes “that thing”; as such, the rape is easier to cope with. This verbal strategy, Temple hopes, will impose a fictitious distance between her “insides” and Popeye’s “cob”. Figuratively speaking, the deictic “it” [1] reverses Temple’s body back into virginity. However, Temple’s effort to dematerialise her body into text - her attempt to become “a printed object” perhaps - proves impossible.²¹²

As the chain of pronouns progresses, the restorative ambition of “it” [1] is ruined by the sheer physicality of “it” [2]. Grammatically speaking, Temple’s second pronoun shifts out of the deictic form and into the “anaphoric”, our second means of pronominal reference. Unlike the deictic pronoun, which cannot be understood without recourse to contextual information, the anaphoric pronoun *stands in for* that object or thing that has already appeared (or in some cases is about to appear) in the text. Problematically, Temple’s second pronoun undermines “it” [1]’s attempt to eke out a neutral zone between her body and its traumatic history. That this second pronoun, a forward-looking anaphoric pronoun, seems to acquire an impossible physical agency (“it touched me”, Temple claims) only compounds the sense of dread with which “it” [2] nominates a part of Popeye’s body: specifically, his “nasty little cold hand”. If “it” [1] is the reinstatement of the hymen, then, “it” [2] is the “hand” that ultimately breaks it (one recalls: due to Popeye’s impotence he uses his *hand* to rape Temple).

The semantic value of this second pronoun (its value as “hand”) is not immediately available to the reader, however, but is subject to a deferral. This

²¹¹ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Vol. 1: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

²¹² In his 1932 Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *Sanctuary*, and on the back of his recent literary successes, Faulkner proposed a similar transformation from body into text: “I began to think of myself again as a printed object.” See Meriwether (ed.), *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, p.177.

deferral complicates the rhythms of the first two pronouns. At the precise moment of “it” [2]’s reading, the pronoun is lacking concrete semantic affiliation. Gazing “dully forward” (S 273) in vague expectation of finding an attribution, this second pronoun is, as Lear’s fool might contend, “an o without a figure”.²¹³ Soon, however, the “empty” second pronoun is drawn to a meaning. Feeding into a qualifying clause (“that nasty little cold hand”) the epistemological impasse appears resolved. On discovering meaning further down the line, the reader feels subsequently obliged to revisit (or move backward), and inscribe this retrospectively acquired meaning - “hand” - onto what was a temporarily empty signifier. Having passed through and then reversed back into “it” [2] we now know that “it” [2] nominates a physical part of Popeye’s body: “hand”. With this new knowledge of “hand” (a knowledge that was prohibited when we first encountered “it” [2]) we are associatively taken - or slapped - backwards again, back to “it” [1]. At the mercy of Temple’s erratic pronoun, the reader has been bounced back and forward between a rape and a hand. This semantic backtracking (which, if we are to continue reading, necessarily infers a returning move forward) implicates the rhythms of reading with the rhythms of rape.²¹⁴ These rhythms are duly complicated by the remaining pronouns.

From “it” [3] through “it” [10], Temple’s pronouns appear to follow a more sedate course. Certainly, the coming “its” repeat neither the semantic nor the material gyrations that were enacted by “its” [1] and [2]. In fact, “it” [3] reverses (out of) the unusual “forward-looking” anaphoric tendency of “it” [2] and by so doing sets in motion a more traditional means of lexical reference. “It” [3] is a “backward-looking” anaphoric pronoun, in that it follows rather than anticipates the object to which it is semantically anchored. Not only does

²¹³ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I, Scene IV, ll. 188-9 (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), p. 84.

²¹⁴ See Homer B. Pettet, “Reading and Raping in Sanctuary”, *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 (1987), pp.71-84.

“it” [3] follow its referent - and by doing satisfy the rules of a traditional grammar - but it also recycles the meaning of the previous pronoun. In short, “it” [3] uses “it” [2] as a pre-established reference and by so doing endorses “it” [2]’s meaning. “It” [3], then, means what “it” [2] (eventually) meant: “that nasty little cold hand”.

“It” [4] continues the pattern established by “it” [3], and recalls Popeye’s “hand”. That the fourth pronoun grows out of the third (which grew, in turn, out of the second) is significant. By reaffirming, rather than redirecting meaning, “its” [3] and [4] bring a greater fluidity to Temple’s syntax. These two pronouns do not need contextual support (as did “it” [1]), nor do they need to reach forward for meaning (as did “it” [2]). Moving incrementally rather than in staccato fashion, “its” [3] and [4] seem to fulfil the demands of a useable (and for Temple, liveable) grammar. More, the rhythms of rape that materialise as a result of the semantic back and fore appear to have abated. Temple seems to have wrested some kind of control of her language. Certainly, the third and fourth pronouns suggest a more instantaneous - and perhaps more effective - semantic transmission. This is not to say that their rhythms pose no threat to Temple. In fact, “it” [3] and “it” [4], by repeating the mention of Popeye’s “hand”, bracket off a period of intense trauma. Temple’s use of the pronoun may have afforded her syntax a greater fluidity, yet it simultaneously reinscribes the presence of the “hand” that raped her. As if chanting “his hand, his hand” in a concussive series, Temple’s third and fourth pronouns demonstrate her inability to remove herself from the terrifying memory of Popeye’s “hand”.

As Temple’s fourth pronoun slides into a fifth, however, the impetus of Popeye’s “hand” is suddenly halted. “It” [5] is what linguists refer to as a “dummy” or “neuter” pronoun. The “dummy” pronoun, linguists maintain, does not have a referential duty but is transparent and essentially passive in its workings; its only function is to make the sentence “grammatical”. On one level, this claim holds. Temple’s fifth “it” works like the “it” in the declarative

phrase *it's raining*; one understands this utterance without needing to ask *what* is raining. In addition to satisfying the demands of a generative grammar, this particular pronoun possesses a more radical intent. Specifically - and uniquely, given the semantic inclinations of the pronoun so far - "it" [5] generates meaning through its *resistance* toward meaning. Given the problematic inflections of the previous pronouns, the fact that this pronoun *doesn't* mean - specifically it doesn't mean "hand" or "rape" - is a pertinent detail. Up to this point in the pronominal sequence, the term "it" has carried terrifying implications for Temple, referring each time to a moment of violence. This particular pronoun, however, is different, and suggests a kind of semantic clear-out. "It" [5] contests, in a bid to invert, the usefulness of words as functional semantic entities. This pronoun doesn't, as is the case with the previous four, enact a process of "*avoiding*" but of "*voiding*". Specifically, "it" [5] begins Temple's campaign of "voiding the words like hot silent bubbles" (S 250) or, in our terms, of emptying them of traumatic literal meaning. "It" [5] is important, then, not as a presence but *as a silence*, an empty space. "It" [5] may be immune to linguistic affiliation, but it is not free from semantic meaning. Rather "it" [5] means by *not* meaning, which is not the same as being "meaningless". The "hot silen[ce]" of "it" [5] thus offers Temple brief respite from the trauma that attended previous "its". Given the pronouns' previous with regard to the absorption of literal meaning "it" [5] is unique. Temple's fifth pronoun parries the semantic advances to which the four previous pronouns succumbed. Mercifully, for Temple, "it" [5] connotes a (syntagmatic) hole that cannot be filled. Would that her body offer the same resilience, the same impenetrability. Tragically, Temple's body - like her text - is essentially porous. Until "it" [5] at least, both Temple's "body" and her "text" prove eminently pluggable: the former is filled with a "cob", the latter with a pronoun. As a moment of pure opacity, however, "it" [5] has nothing to do with Temple's rape. Given the velocity with which the other nine pronouns drive the memory of "rape" back

into Temple, this lack of attribution is welcome. Properly speaking, then, “it” [5] is not free from meaning, but means by *not* meaning. This “it” resonates as what Bhabha might refer to as the “ineradicable sign of negative difference.”²¹⁵

Countering “it” [5]’s resilience to the absorption of the literal, “it” [6] symbolises a return to “positive” meaning. That is to say, the pronouns, from “it” [6] through to “it” [10], resume their role as the shock absorbers of Temple’s text. In fact, “it” [6] and “it” [7] accommodate not one but two meanings - and thus two kinds of shock. Semantically ambivalent, Temple’s sixth and seventh pronoun prevent the reader from ascertaining, with any degree of certainty, whether “it” means “skin” or “hand”. These two pronouns are open to the possibility of both assignations. We can do better than “ambivalence”, however. “It” [6] is what I want to term a semantically *ambidextrous* pronoun.²¹⁶ Inasmuch as it is “[m]ore than usually dextrous or clever” (OED) Temple’s sixth pronoun pushes in two different directions at the same time. “It” [6] accommodates “hand” - that which reaches *toward* Temple’s vagina - *and* it denotes Temple’s exposed “skin”, that which “*jump[s] away*” from Popeye’s insistent hand. For the first time, then, the pronoun refers to two things at once. Strikingly, it connotes two things that are in direct conflict. Demonstrating what Bakhtin calls the “internal dialogism of the word”, “it” [6] is the first of two polyvalent or “double voiced” pronouns that provide suitable housing for a brace of antagonistic semantic inflections.²¹⁷ That Temple’s sixth pronoun runs together, and thus makes a compound of, these two competing referents is intentional: “hand” and skin” are the body parts that *Sanctuary* brings into distressing congress. Here, two meanings reside within a single word and operate in macabre tension. If we couldn’t state it already we surely can’t fail to now: the

²¹⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p.75.

²¹⁶ *Ambidextrous* is a better term than *ambivalent* because it also evokes “bisexual” as a slang term.

²¹⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.282.

pronoun is a place of violence - a place, that is, in which *semantic* clash translates into *material* clash. No new “information” comes between “it” [6] and [7] to alter, reverse or deflect the direction in which Temple’s meaning travels. Indeed, “it” [7] reiterates the poly-valences of “it” [6], attaching to the same *two* referents. Given the anaphoric returns of Temple’s text and given the associative logic that figuratively grafts “skin” to “hand”, one can reasonably suspect that “it” [7], like “it” [6], indicates *both*, bringing the relation *between* hand and skin into focus.

“It” [8] and “it” [9] ditch the double meaning and by so doing provide grim syncopation for the countdown to (the narrative recollection of) Temple’s fantasy penetration. Like [6] and [7], which replicated each other’s (dual) meanings, [8] and [9] are semantically twinned. Notably, however, a singular source - “hand” - dictates the reference point for these two pronouns. That Temple’s mind is stuck on this particular body part is hardly surprising. As Popeye’s “nasty little cold hand” descends down the length of her torso, a penetration threatens; it is thus logical that Popeye’s “hand” is the only thing about which Temple can think. In an attempt to maintain the distance between Popeye’s “hand” and her “insides”, Temple redoubles her efforts to dematerialise that which threatens her. Temple thus deploys an eighth pronoun to neuter the advances of Popeye’s “hand”.

This linguistic depletion, the eighth in a series of ten, not only delays the arrival of Popeye’s “hand” but it also marks the disappearance of the body part to which Popeye is drawn. As a last-ditch attempt to avoid the telling of the rape, “it” [8] oversees an amazing vanishing trick: Temple’s “skin would keep on jerking just ahead of it [8] like there wouldn’t be anything there when the hand got there.” Here, then, an absent hand attempts to grope at an amount of “skin” that no longer exists. The withdrawal of “hand”, through an intentionally obstructive grammar, and “skin”, by catachresis, annuls the likelihood of a rape. Temple’s “insides” seem, at “it” [8], at least, just out of

Popeye's reach. In the portion of text so far explored, Temple refers, indirectly, and by way of a pronoun, to Popeye's "hand" six times. Only once, however, does she refer to it by name. The protracted imprecision of Temple's syntax means that by [8], "hand" has become a distant signifier.

"It" [9] affirms the meaning of "it" [8], referring, for a final time, to Popeye's "hand". If "it" [8] labours to remain one step ahead of Popeye's descending hand, "it" [9] suggests that the borders of Temple's body are essentially indefensible. The attempted dematerialisation of Temple's cringing body ("there wasn't anything there") is short-lived. Realising full contact with Temple's "insides" - a euphemism for "vagina" - "it" [9] ruins the defensive work of previous pronouns, which attempted alternatively to freeze (see "alive alicie") or cramp (see "jerking") the movement of Popeye's "hand". Instead of arresting the motion of Popeye's "hand" Temple appears, by "it" [9], to be enjoying the touch that it provides.²¹⁸ The "bubbling" is a reference to Popeye's agitated masturbating of Temple. Keen to denude this particular noise of its sexual connotations, Temple maintains that the "bubbling" emanates not from a stimulated clitoris but from a hungry stomach. The displacement tenders yet another example of the subterfuge - the "semantic indirection", in Riffaterre's terms - that typifies Temple's counter-narrative.²¹⁹

"It" [10] acts as a coda or summation for this extended period of abuse, drawing to a close Temple's intensive pronominal dependency. This final pronoun denotes the noise of the "shucks" that fill the mattress upon which Temple's molestation takes place. Disturbed by the "jerking" of Popeye's "hand", these bits of loose matter provide a homophonic counterpart for the

²¹⁸ For Horace, the story of Temple Drake carries a significant erotic charge. Evidently, the narrative transaction that takes place between Temple and Horace constitutes an act of solicitation. Having "told her what he wanted" (S 326) prior to their meeting, Horace is determined to get what he came for. Temple acts under instruction of brothel owner Miss Reba, who is clearly keen to facilitate the liaison to Horace's satisfaction: "[w]ill you do what he wants you to?" (S 327) she inquires.

²¹⁹ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p.2.

“bubbling” to which “it” [9] referred. Temple believes that the corn shucks are “laughing at” her because, in her terms, she “hadn’t changed into a boy yet”. Mocked by her mattress, Temple is impelled to accelerate her transformation.

*

Moving beyond this passage to one that follows only a page later, Temple’s attempt to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding her rape enters a second narrative phase. Here, Temple’s employment of the pronoun undergoes a substantial revision. Instead of using the pronoun “it” as a means of indirectly referring to an act that she finds unspeakable, Temple now uses the term as lexical material out of which she will form a material defence to her rape. Temple’s “it” now aims not only to repel or defend from Popeye’s advances but to directly punish him:

I’d lie there with the shucks laughing at me and me jerking away in front of his hand and I’d think what I’d say to him. I’d talk to him like the teacher in school, and then I was a teacher in school and it was a little black thing like a nigger boy, kind of, and I was the teacher [...] I was telling it what I’d do, and it kind of drawing up and drawing up like it could already see the switch.

Then I said That wont do. I ought to be a man. So I was an old man, with a long white beard, and then the little black man got littler and littler and I was saying Now. You see now. I’m a man now. Then I thought about being a man, and as soon as I thought it, *it happened. It made a kind of plopping sound, like blowing a little rubber tube wrong-side outward.* It felt cold, like the inside of your mouth when you hold it open. I could feel it, and I lay right still to keep from laughing about how surprised he was going to be. I could feel the jerking going on inside my knickers ahead of his hand and me lying there trying not to laugh about how surprised he was going to be in about a minute.

(S 330-1, italics added.)

Temple’s “it” no longer works to deaden or blunt the memory of her recently traumatic past but to match Popeye’s violence with one of her own. This

“intersecting of making and telling”, as Hale states it, allows Temple to re-appropriate the pronoun as a weapon to attack Popeye.²²⁰ Newly configured, the term “it” refers not to Popeye’s but to *Temple’s* penis: specifically, this “it” connotes “a little rubber tube”.²²¹ On the literal level, of course, Temple’s account is a fantasy, a charade of otherness. At no point in the passage (and at no other point in the novel) does Temple anthropomorphise into a “nigger boy”. She never becomes “a teacher in school”, a dead “bride” (as she claims in the next paragraph), nor does she get “to be a man”. Despite the technical implausibility of her becoming “other”, Temple’s “cryptofantasy” in Abraham and Torok’s, term - carries a very real incentive: the “switch”, as Temple calls it, allows her to displace and thus evade the terrifying implications of literal meaning.²²² Appropriating what Freud termed “incorporation”, Temple figuratively ingests the bodies of others, taking them inside, so that they - rather than she - might absorb the trauma of a rape.²²³ Temple’s summoning of the Other - her “psychosymbolic shape shiftings”, in Charmaine Eddy’s phrasing - thus offers Temple a means of sampling the benefits of inhabiting *other* - indeed “Othered” - bodies.²²⁴ Only by sampling such bodies can Temple make an informed judgement upon which one is most likely to deter Popeye’s “cob”. The information will prove essential to the shoring up of Temple’s “insides”, a region that Popeye’s cobbled “hand” seeks to reduce to ruins. The “switch”,

²²⁰ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p.11.

²²¹ I use the term “penis” advisedly, in the knowledge that both Temple’s and Popeye’s penises are fabricated.

²²² Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok and Nicholas Rand “A Poetics of Psychoanalysis: “The Lost Object: Me””, *SubStance*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1984), p.5.

²²³ Freud first posited the concept of incorporation in 1915 as part of his revisions of an earlier work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). For Freud, incorporation, works so that the outside world might be brought inside or made into a “body” that, once internalized, might be destroyed or reworked. Temple may not *intend* to destroy or cannibalize these alternate bodies (teacher, dead bride, old man, black boy), but she does use them - at best as decoys and at worse as surrogates - to carry the terrifying burden of her rape.

²²⁴ Charmaine Eddy, “The Policing and Proliferation of Desire: Gender and the Homosocial in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*”, *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 14, Iss. 2 (Spring 1999), pp.21-39, p.22.

then, not only allows Temple a means of opting out of her own problematic body but it provides her with the equipment (specifically a “little rubber tube”) with which she is able to mount a counter attack: she can fabricate a proxy body and rape Popeye back.

Temple, of course, does not have a “cob” of her own with which she might enforce this punitive reversal; subsequently she must “borrow” one from elsewhere. In an attempt to recruit the most effective repellent, Temple moves into - and subsequently reverses out the other side of - a weighty folio of “undesirable” (that is, sexually untenable) bodies: a dead bride, a spinsterish teacher, a rural black child, and finally a hirsute old man. None of these borrowings fully satisfy Temple’s present needs. After rejecting the pedagogical austerity of the female “teacher in school” (presumably on the grounds of practicality) Temple appoints the “little black thing” of the “nigger boy”. Temple refuses this “black thing”, interestingly, for its lack of size. On one level, Temple’s phrase “little black thing” mobilises a phallic reduction which, by implication, disables a prevailing racist stereotype: that a black man has a larger penis than a white man. Yet the preliminary diminishment of black sexual prominence offered by “*little black thing*” is immediately problematised by the paternalistic inflection within Temple’s term ‘boy’. Born out of a heritage of paternalism and white-black racism, this “demeaning designation”, in John N. Duvall’s terms, initialises a return to stereotype and thus cancels the good work of the diminutive “*little black thing*”.²²⁵ Temple’s phrase is a site of contradiction, liberating the body of the black from a racist stereotype only as it shrinks, or *belittles* black presence at the level of the text.

Practically speaking, the “little black thing” proves insufficient in fending off the advances of the “black man” who threatens rape. Blackness, Temple asserts, “wont do”. “I ought to be a man”, an “old man, with a long

²²⁵ John N. Duvall, “A Strange Nigger’: Faulkner and the Minstrel Performance of Whiteness”, *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 22, Iss. 1 / 2 (Fall 2006 / Spring 2007), pp.106-119, p.209.

white beard". It is this (white) incarnation, Temple hopes, that will really "surpris[e]" Popeye, will really "Pop" his "eyes". Yet, the "old white "man" maintains only a brief supremacy over the recently dismissed black "boy". The inferred whiteness of "man" (which counters the tacit blackness of "boy") is shortly contested by the sudden expulsive (re)appearance of the black via Temple's psychosexual inflation of the "little rubber tube". For Temple, the "switch" (in which corn is exchanged for rubber) is immediate: "as soon as I thought it, it happened. It made a kind of plopping sound like blowing a little rubber tube wrong-side outward."²²⁶ The "plopping sound" is thus suggestive of an outward move, inasmuch as it nominates the "emergence" of a combative "rubber tube" by which Temple aims to land a pre-emptive penetration and thus thwart Popeye's attempt at rape. Temple's declarative clause occasions the emergence of a rubbery (and thus black) penis; the protuberance materialises as Temple inflates her clitoris, or, as she euphemistically terms it, that "little hot ball that screams". This is an emergence which aims to land a pre-emptive penetration of Popeye, thwarting his planned rape of Temple. The move *out*, however, muffles an additional move *in*. Given the dialogic resonances of Temple's earlier "its", grammatical forms which denote both the act of rape and the "hand" that commits it, one might reasonably claim that the phrase "[t]hen it happened" also describes the moment of Temple's rape. Immediately following the "happen[ing]" comes the sound of Temple's penetration: "It made a kind of plopping sound". Semantically ambivalent, this "plopping", like the "little black thing of the nigger boy" moves in *two* directions. The case can be stated simply: whether Temple means to or not she emits a black rubber tube

²²⁶ Due in part to the growing production of illicit bootleg whisky during prohibition, corn was a principle export crop from the American South during the 1920s. The corncob, then, on top of its structural resemblance to a penis, acquires additional currency as a metonymic figure of the violence implicit within southern labour regimes, specifically as it related to the cultivation of corn crops. Seen in this light, a case might be made that the rape of Temple by way of corn bleeds into a larger raping, one which saw the exploitation of the sharecropper or tenant who worked the land.

from her vagina as a means of confronting Popeye's "cob".²²⁷ Countering Popeye's "cob" (that which goes *in*) to Temple's "knob"²²⁸ (that which comes *out*), rubber materialises as a black rubber phallus that Temple, in suitably sexual slang, "blow[s]" "wrong-side out" to greet Popeye's invading "cob".²²⁹ By doing, rubber makes possible what Dawn Trouard and Edwin T. Arnold refer to as the "reverse rape of Popeye".²³⁰

The imagined inflation of the "little rubber tube" not only reverses Temple out of her gender but it reverses her out of her race. Specifically, black rubber returns Temple to the fantasy of miscegenation that was interrupted by her move out of the body of the "nigger boy" and into the "old white man". By way of the rubber image Temple moves back to black. The racial inflections of the rubber tube are worth pondering here. In the first instance the reference to a "little rubber tube" is analogous to a condom. During the teens and twenties the condom would have been fashioned from dark brown or grey latex.²³¹ This

²²⁷ I do not have sufficient space here to fully address the intentionality of what Duvall refers to as Temple's "becoming black". (Duvall, *Race and White Identity*, p.38.) I would suggest, however, that Temple's sudden (and *problematic*) expression of "blackness" is rooted in the learned racism of paternalism rather than in the psychological desire to live vicariously through the (eroticised) black body. That the (rubbery) black penis is the first thing that comes into Temple's mind at the point of her penetration owes more to contemporary attitudes toward rape and blackness - attitudes which frequently committed to the hypersexualising of blacks - than to any desire to *become* black. Social pressures, then, trump psychological ones in the priming of Temple's erection. This is not to say that Temple's act of blackface is without erotic inflection, yet the point remains: these inflections are semantic by-products of social interaction.

²²⁸ Although the term "knob" as a sexualised referent - a slang term for "penis" - would probably not have signified in the late part of the 1920's, it would not take long to evolve into this kind of meaning. The O.E.D. cites "knob" as a "hill" or a "mound", "a small rounded lump or mass." Another meaning allows for "a rounded protuberance or swelling on the skin or on a bodily organ, a bump, hump, wart, pimple, pustule, etc." By locating "knob" as a "protuberance" on or "swelling" of the body, the latter definition takes us close enough to the kind of meaning that I insist upon above without detracting from the term's intended suggestiveness.

²²⁹ The slang term "to blow" was the most widely employed popular term for the act of fellatio during the 1930s.

²³⁰ Trouard and Arnold, *Reading Faulkner: Sanctuary*, p.177.

²³¹ James S. Murphy, *The Condom Industry in the United States* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1990).

coloration invokes a visual link between sex and blackness and, by extension, reinforces traditional stereotypes about black sexuality.²³² Complicating the resemblance between the “little rubber tube” and the darkly coloured condom is a racist epithet that we discussed in chapter 1, the “balloon face of the nigger”. Temple does not pump up a balloon *face* but a balloon *penis*, yet the affinity between the (imagined) “rubber tube” and the (imagined) black penis surely holds. Racialised by Temple’s narrative, rubber “flashes up at a moment of danger”²³³, thus signalling the difficult emergence of black through white. Like a hideous hour-glass turned on its head, Temple is an inverted Bovary. Indeed, “that black stuff that ran out of Bovary’s mouth” (S 184) as Benbow describes it, is here reversed as black discharge that emerges from Temple’s vagina. In short, rubber acts as a proxy for an emergent blackness that, under strict instruction and activated on demand, “rises” to counter Popeye’s “nasty little cold hand”. Providing echoes of Quentin Compson’s “blanding” in *The Sound and the Fury*, the rubber image initiates a semantic insurgency through which the social dependency of black white-relations in the American South achieves metaphoric figuration.

That Temple, a white southern “belle” becomes “black” in order to prevent her penetration at the hand of a “black man” (S 207; 212; 255) is rooted in a wider historical frame. Temple’s recourse to the (perceived) sexual prowess of the black male body should not be read as an ahistorical mutation. Rather, this “explicit moment of racechange”, in Duvall’s terms, codifies a (problematic)

²³² For accounts that discuss white assumptions of black bestiality see Davis, *Faulkner’s Negro*; Duvall, *Race and White Identity*; Genovese, *Roll*, (especially pp.295-308 and 413-430); Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*; Lott, *Love and Theft*; Sharon Desmond Paradiso, “Terrorizing Whiteness in Yoknapatawpha County”, *Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 23, Iss. 2 (Spring 2008), pp.23-42; also of significance is Craig Werner, “Minstrel Nightmares: Black Dreams of Faulkner’s Dreams of Blacks” in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and Race: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), pp.35-57; and Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

²³³ See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp.245-55, p.247.

system of racial dependency that delivered the shattering psychological realisation that white and black were two parts of a conjoined social body.²³⁴ Temple's problematic blackness whispers toward wider, insistently historical problems. In the wake of Reconstruction, as Williamson has written, the splitting of black from white traumatised the psychological character of the South. Temple, for sure, has ceased to be what she had been, yet it is at the historical level that her ordeal achieves resonance. The reversibility of Temple's body, an act that places at its centre a (reversible) black penis, demonstrates the problematic, and often silently erotic, intersections of black and white that permeated the fabric of the American South. If *Sanctuary* is about rape, then, it is also about race. Much historiography cogently argues that rape is inextricably tied in with racist assumptions of black bestiality. Susan Estrich attests to the link: "Between 1930 and 1967", she notes, "89% of the men executed for rape in [the United States] were black."²³⁵ To consider the rape of a white woman, in the 1920s, in the south, without considering the black body (if only as a racist, "balloon-face" stereotype), is inconceivable.

So far in this chapter I have considered how the movement of the pronoun informs the movement of Temple Drake's body. Broadly speaking, I have argued that Temple's use of the pronoun offers her a means through which she can distort and reconfigure the violence of her terrifying past. More specifically, I have suggested that Temple's pronoun attempts to swerve and evade the potency of literal meaning. Evidently, the word "it", as *Sanctuary's* "compacted doctrine", proves the sounding board by which "discreet whispers of flesh" (S 279) become audible.²³⁶ In a second passage, I examined how a modification at the level of Temple's pronoun provides a means of enacting a

²³⁴ Duvall, *Race and White Identity*, p.34.

²³⁵ Susan Estrich, "Rape", *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 95, no.6 (May, 1986), pp.1087-1184, p.1089 (n. 2).

²³⁶ Empson, *Complex Words*, p.39.

modification at the level of her physical body. I have argued that Temple's retaliative act is made possible by a co-opting of the black body. In the space that remains I propose to shore up these grammatical urges with a look to a final passage, in which we see a similar kind of mobility, a similar predilection for the pronoun, and, I will suggest, a similar trauma at the level of (black) history.

Chapter XXIII is not, then, the only point in the novel at which the pronoun and the body enter into congress. Providing an early indication of the extraordinary plasticity of Temple Drake's body comes an extract from chapter VIII. As if it were a signpost for the grim contortions of chapter XXIII,

Temple's head began to move. It turned slowly, as if she were following the passage of someone beyond the wall. It turned on to an excruciating degree, though no other muscle moved, like one of those papier-mâché Easter toys filled with candy, and became motionless in that reverted position. Then it turned back, slowly, as though pacing invisible feet beyond the wall, back to the chair against the door and became motionless there for a moment. Then she faced forward and Tommy watched her take a tiny watch from the top of her stocking and look at it. With the watch in her hand she lifted her head and looked directly at him, her eyes calm and empty as two holes. After a while she looked down at the watch again and returned it to her stocking.

(S 226)

Moving one way, pausing, and then reversing in the direction from which it came, Temple's head performs "an excruciating" regime of move and countermove, of turn and re-turn. Inspired by the terrifying "masculine sounds" (S 216) from "beyond the wall" (226) this appalling - almost superhuman - show of dexterity sees Temple's head, (or more accurately her "it") rotate; her body, however, remains "rigid" (223; 288), even "erect" (226). The regressive turn of Temple's "head" / "it" embodies that most Faulknerian of tensions, situating Temple in an unliveable place between rigidity and mobilisation. As William Rossky has written, "Temple seems almost constantly

in motion [but] yet remains terrifyingly fixed".²³⁷ Her body, to cite a term from *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), is a place of "fierce dynamic rigidity".²³⁸ The (con) torsion - and the contradiction that subsequently issues - is contextually appropriate: Temple is quite literally *scared stiff* (pun intended) yet she is similarly determined to get a better view of the threats that surround her, even though they remain hidden, "beyond the wall". At the local (literal) level, the striking turn of Temple's head indicates an immediate fear of rape. Metaphorically, however, this torturous head-turn does more than highlight a personal threat. I would like to conclude with the suggestion that this "turn" and "re-turn" speaks silently of wider historical anxieties, concerns with looking back. Contorted thus, Temple's head acts as a symbolic repository - a "hive of subtlety" - within which Faulkner can encrypt broader social anxieties.²³⁹ Throughout this chapter I have traced some of these efforts to return or to revise, yet a final example should solidify my point. The threat of rape forces Temple's head to turn, forces her *to look back*. Induced to "move" in this regressive fashion, Temple's head pauses, becoming "motionless in that reverted position"; on its return forward, Temple's appearance seems somewhat altered. Her eyes, "calm and empty as two holes" have witnessed a trauma outside of the "walls" of her room. The trauma that Temple perceives "beyond the walls" testifies to the South's problematic relationship to its (black) history. Temple's turn is a synecdoche for what Sundquist calls the "gratuitous contortions" of the Old South.²⁴⁰ Temple carries this traumatic historical sediment with her throughout the novel, so much so that the anxiety of

²³⁷ William Rossky, "The Pattern of Nightmare in *Sanctuary*; or, Miss Reba's Dogs" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sanctuary: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall), pp. 70-78 [71].

²³⁸ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936] in Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (eds.), *Faulkner: Novels, 1936-1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990), p.131.

²³⁹ Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" [1855] in *Herman Melville: The Complete Shorter Fiction* (London: Everyman's Library, 1997), pp.52-126, p.126.

²⁴⁰ Sundquist, *The House Divided*, p.28.

backwardness provided by Faulkner subsequently (dis)colours her attempt to move forward, to forget her history, to split from blackness. Yet these operations ultimately prove futile. However reversible the novel's bodies might be, they remain unable to fully expunge the traces of a violence that permeates the grammar of Temple Drake and the grammar of the South.

PART TWO:
FORM, VISION, AND HISTORY IN JOHN DOS PASSOS' *U.S.A.*

Tending toward the opaque, Faulkner's fictions of the 1929-1931 period are symptomatic of sustained and repeated attempts to occlude, block, or violate the efficacy of the eye. Each novel differs in how it formalises, or gives shape to, this preoccupation. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the eye is transfigured, beaten, or on the point of collapse; in all instances it is *blackened*. In *As I Lay Dying*, the eye is ripped from its representational sockets, detached, and thus alienated from its phenomenological context. In *Sanctuary*, the eye is jaundiced, impotent, and roams obliquely from one dark room to the next. Semantically inefficient and begrudging with regard to the release of historically freighted meaning, the Faulknerian "eye"/"I" occasions what I dub a problem of throughness. Put differently, I have suggested that Faulkner's texts, petrified by their own historicity, seek to retain meaning within cramped grammatical locations, thus preventing semantic leakage. They are exercises in hiddenness. The problem of throughness causes significant problems at the textual level. These textual "problems", however, issue from a staunchly historical source. Faulkner's textual (de)formations are, in short, responses to prior historical (de)formations. Wilfully opaque, Faulkner's textual practice is part of a dedicated campaign of obfuscation through which historical meaning is suppressed, buried, hidden from view. As it has been argued, the challenges that issue from Faulkner's formal practice are numerous. Despite these difficulties, one thing is clear: each novel brokers a problematic, because historically sedimented, relationship between narrative and "seeing". The above discussions anchor Faulkner's textual opacity to three grammatical locations: the pronouns "them", "I" and finally "it". Faulkner's three novels exploit their respective pronouns as a means by which they might enact what Jay calls "the dethronement of the

eye.”²⁴¹

If Faulkner’s “trilogy” generates its meaning by contesting - and ultimately by repealing - the primacy of (historical) vision, as I have insisted that it does, Dos Passos’ trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930; 1932; 1936 [1938]) generates *its* meaning by reinstating the eye to a position of authority.²⁴² The second half of this thesis investigates the conditions under which this kind of “authority” becomes manifest. In *U.S.A.*, the eye is neither deficient nor faulty - as it was in Faulkner - but is instead a viable, reliable and ultimately *efficient* organ. That the Dos Passosian “eye” is more efficient than the Faulknerian one is hardly surprising. As we shall see over the course of the coming pages, this visual efficiency is the product of the implementation of mechanical modes. I refer, of course, to the textual operations of the *Camera Eye*, the pre-eminent place of visual efficiency in Dos Passos’ prose fiction. It is to the efficient and abundant semantic proliferations of *The Camera Eye* that I shall now turn.

²⁴¹ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.216.

²⁴² The first three dates refer to the year in which each volume of *U.S.A.* was published; the last refers to the year in which the trilogy was published as a set.

CHAPTER FOUR

MACHINING MEANING: *U.S.A.*

It is February 1930. Stamped, bound, and uniformly cut to size, first editions of Dos Passos' fifth novel, *The 42nd Parallel* roll off the production line at Harpers and Brothers, New York. This work, the first instalment of what, eight years later, becomes the *U.S.A.* trilogy, attests to Dos Passos' implementation of an entirely new textual apparatus.²⁴³ Hyper-efficient in its operations, the new textual "system" is geared to outstrip the semantic capabilities of Dos Passos' previous aesthetic machinery. In *U.S.A.* words work harder, move at greater speed and with the minimum of effort. Meaning is machined; energy is saved; waste, strain, and fatigue are things of the past.

In a bid to maximise the productive output of literary language *U.S.A.* invokes what Siegfried Giedion calls "new methods of organization".²⁴⁴ Significantly, Dos Passos refers to *U.S.A.* as "my four-way conveyor system".²⁴⁵ Dos Passos' "conveyor system" metaphor approximates to what Ricoeur, in his discussion of Aristotelian *poesis*, terms a "good metaphor". For Aristotle, Ricoeur argues, "the gift of making good metaphors relies on the capacity to contemplate similarities. Moreover, the vividness of "good" [perhaps "efficient"] metaphors consists in their ability to "set before the eyes" the sense that they display. What is suggested here is a kind of pictorial dimension, which can be called the picturing function of metaphorical meaning."²⁴⁶ The eidetic intuition of Dos Passos' metaphor - its "picturing function" - sets in motion a

²⁴³ John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) in Daniel Aaron and Townsend Ludington (eds.), *Dos Passos: U.S.A.* (New York: Library of America, 1996), hereafter abbreviated *42P*, and cited parenthetically by page number.

²⁴⁴ Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p.345.

²⁴⁵ Dos Passos, cited in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.170.

²⁴⁶ Ricoeur, "Metaphorical Process", p.144.

“system” of semantic (over)productivity in which “similarities” between “textual” and “industrial” forms of conveyance achieve realisation. Meaning is a product of the assembly line. Dos Passos’ conception of U.S.A. as a “four-way conveyor system” mobilises what Ricoeur calls “an inquiry into the capacity of metaphor to provide untranslatable information, and, accordingly, into metaphor’s claim to yield some true insight about reality”.²⁴⁷ The “reality” that emerges from Dos Passos’ metaphor is historically anchored and, more specifically, is predicated on seismic shifts in American modes of industrial production.

As Martha Banta notes, the first third of the twentieth century was “an era during which management methods for efficient production were inspiring, and complicating, every phase of diurnal experience.”²⁴⁸ The “management method” to which Dos Passos’ metaphor refers is the assembly-line. Inaugurated by Henry Ford in 1914 and implemented in his (state-funded) river Rouge plant from 1917, assembly-line technologies would revolutionise production in the United States, at least above the Mason-Dixon line.²⁴⁹ As David Harvey points out, “by flowing the work to a stationary worker [Ford] achieved dramatic gains in productivity”. Consequently, “labour productivity could be radically increased by breaking down each labour process into component motions and organizing fragmented work tasks according to rigorous standards of time and motions study”.²⁵⁰ Regulated by little except what Marx calls “the boundless thirst for surplus labour” the assembly-line would enshrine overproduction as the *sine qua non* of American

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p.143.

²⁴⁸ Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives, Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.9.

²⁴⁹ Gordon, *New Deals*, p.41.

²⁵⁰ David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity : An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.125.

industrialism.²⁵¹ Given the rapid rise of Fordism as urban America's dominant mode of production it seems fitting that Dos Passos uses a machine-based metaphor as a means of describing his textual practice.

Through metaphorical association, then, Dos Passos pins his most successful writing to the workings of the assembly-line and by so doing provides a specific location within which his "writerly technologies", in Caren Irr's phrasing - might be situated.²⁵² As Banta suggests, "[m]odern industrial life requires the creation of appropriate narrative structures, expressive forms as 'scientific' as the conditions they set out to represent. The scientific account, neither melodrama nor the realist novel, is the proper genre for the times."²⁵³ Thus the assembly-line proved, in Evelyn Cobley's terms, "the appropriate metaphor for an unassailable objective reality".²⁵⁴ The machine, and by extension, the ideological apparatus of late capital thus provided a semantic reference by which Dos Passos' *literary* mode of production, his "modern word conveyors" in the idiom of the journalist and inventor Bob Brown, could semanticise the emergence, first via Taylor, and later Ford, of a regulated, rationalised, and standardised mode of (prose) production. Part "self-mockery" part double-bluff, Dos Passos' machine-based metaphor pulls on the verb "to convey" and by so doing subjects literary language to the operations of the Fordist economy.

Given the intensification of Dos Passos' leftism, however, his metaphoric comparisons are problematic. More, they cut against his frequent attacks on modern modes of production. In a biography from *The Big Money* entitled "Tin Lizzie", Dos Passos satirises the ills of standardisation and the concomitant

²⁵¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.151.

²⁵² Caren Irr, *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada During the 1930s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p.45.

²⁵³ Banta, *Taylorized Lives*, p.143.

²⁵⁴ Evelyn Cobley, *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency: Ideology and Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p.44.

drive to extract surplus from the (newly sedentary) body of labour:

At Ford's production was improving all the time; less waste, more spotters, strawbosses, stoolpigeons (fifteen minutes for lunch, three minutes to go to the toilet, the Taylorized speedup everywhere, reach under, adjust washer, screw down bolt, shove in cotterpin, reach under adjust washer, screw down bolt, reach under adjust screw-down reach under adjust until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home grey shaking husks). (TBM 812-3)

Such an exchange is awkwardly situated, providing a denunciation of the Fordized processes to which U.S.A., as a "four-way conveyor system", is formally committed. We will examine the effects of this tension in the coming arguments. Suffice it to say here that by appropriating Fordism as a formal reference, Dos Passos prose renders as obsolete his previous prose productions. With recourse to an explicitly optical analogy, Dos Passos expresses the distinction this way: "*Three Soldiers* and *Manhattan Transfer* had been single panels; now, somewhat as the Mexican painters felt compelled to paint their walls, I felt compelled to start on a narrative panorama to which I saw no end."²⁵⁵ The figurative journey from "panel" to "panorama" provides a visual lexicon by which we can start to theorise U.S.A.'s abundant semantic projections.

Dos Passos' term "panorama" taps into the visual prehistory of emergent modernity. Patented by Robert Barker in 1787, the "panorama," or *La Nature à coup d' Oeil* ("nature at a glance"), as it was originally marketed, refers to a "picture of a landscape or other scene, either arranged on the inside of a cylindrical surface round the spectator as a centre (a cyclorama), or unrolled and unfolded and made to pass before him, so as to show the various parts in

²⁵⁵ Dos Passos, *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (New York: The New American Library, 1966), pp.171-2.

succession" (OED). The "narrative panorama" to which Dos Passos saw "no end" is "arranged" in a similar fashion to the contraption devised by Barker; it also, of course, evokes the movements of the assembly line. The "various parts" of the text - *The Camera Eye*, Newsreel, biographies and prose narratives - are "made to pass before" the reader; they are "rolled out" in succession.

It is no small concern that as "panel" became "panorama", Dos Passos' political identity moved from the singular to the collective. The deepening of Dos Passos' historical consciousness would place under considerable strain his metaphoric comparisons, the first of which mechanises his prose practise, the second which sees it stretching into the infinite. By satirising industrial modes, Dos Passos comes perilously close to condoning them. Indeed, the flip tenor of Dos Passos' "conveyor system" analogy jars with a number of more sanguine judgements as to the dehumanising effects of capitalist modes of production. In a review of Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) Dos Passos provides chronologically pertinent evidence of a vehement, if embattled opposition to the division of labour, an ideological "event" to which his "conveyor system" metaphor explicitly refers. Published in the *New Masses* in December 1929, Dos Passos' laudatory review cuts across - and thus problematises - his account of U.S.A. as a textual mechanism driven by four Fordized "conveyor[s]". Commending Hemingway on the grounds of his perceived intolerance of modern modes of production, Dos Passos states that the novel represents "a first-rate piece of craftsmanship by a man who knows his job. It gives you the sort of pleasure line by line that you get handling a piece of wellfinished carpenter's work".²⁵⁶ Strikingly, given his predilection for technological analogies, Dos Passos engages only briefly with Hemingway's text before he segues into an extended critique on the ornery perquisites of modern industrialism. "After all," Dos Passos insists,

²⁵⁶ Dos Passos, "A Farewell to Arms", *New Masses*, No. 5 (Dec. 1929), p.16.

craftsmanship is a damn fine thing, one of the few human functions a man can unstintedly admire. The drift of the Fordized world seems all against it. Rationalization and subdivision of labor in industry tend more and more to wipe it out. It's getting to be almost unthinkable that you should take pleasure in your work, that a man should enjoy doing a piece of work for the sake of doing it as well as he damn well can. What we still have is the mechanic's or the motorman's pleasure in a smoothrunning machine. As the operator gets more mechanized even that disappears; what you get is a division of life into drudgery and leisure instead of into work and play. As industrial society evolves and the workers get control of the machines a new type of craftsmanship may work out. For the present you only get opportunity for craftsmanship, which ought to be the privilege of any workman, in novelwriting and the painting of easelpictures and in a few of the machinebuilding trades that are hangovers from the period of individual manufacture that is just closing.

Notwithstanding the soft-pedalled "may" that qualifies - and thus weakens - Dos Passos' belief in socialism as a viable alternative to American capital, these rhetorical investments bring Dos Passos into line with an orthodox Marxism, of which Lukács, in his twenties "phase" at least, stood as the pre-eminent example. Dos Passos' idiomatic phrase "the drift of the Fordized world" sits flush with the Lukácsian complaint as regards the commodification and reification of labour. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) Lukács complains that "the mechanical disintegration of the process of production into its components destroys those bonds that had bound individuals to a community in the days when production was still organic."²⁵⁷ The Dos Passos of the *New Masses* article would surely have lamented, in concert with Lukács, that "the division of labour", an imperative fixture of capitalist systems of accumulation, "disrupts every organically unified process of work and life and breaks it down into its components."²⁵⁸ That Dos Passos decries "rationalization and subdivision in industry" three months before he institutes "rationalization and

²⁵⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.90.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p.103.

subdivision" as a structural imperative of his fiction (and, moreover, an imperative "to which [he] saw no end") flags up the signal contradiction of the mature aesthetic. Engaging with - and simultaneously distancing himself from - the operational conceits of modern American industrialism, Dos Passos' "literary" product is locked into an impossible epistemology. The contradiction, which sees Dos Passos' formalism wedged between critique and appropriation, does not derogate from the trilogy's value as a literary text, however, but points to its signal virtue. It points, that is, to its dialectic. The interaction of antagonistic intuitions generates the driving force by which Dos Passos' text establishes new and potentially revolutionary meaning. As we shall see over the course of the coming chapters, this meaning would fluctuate both in its amount and in its quality, yet *The Camera Eye* is the only place in U.S.A. in which a tension between modern(ist) textual practice and historical memory becomes manifest as a dialectical imperative. This chapter focuses on two interlinked strands of this "imperative". In a few pages I will draw out, with reference to Dos Passos' text, an antagonism between form, as a lurch forward, and history, as a reference to the past. First, however, and as a means of theorising how Dos Passos deals with the proliferation of abundant historical meaning, I seek to draw out an antagonism between use and surplus.

FIGURATIONS OF SURPLUS

Routed into a Fordized aesthetic, *The Camera Eye* facilitates an abundance of prose product. Crucially, it is also the means by which these proliferations might be controlled. In an interview of July 1962 Dos Passos would provide a succinct prehistory for *The Camera Eyes*. "I was trying," he writes,

to develop what I had started, possibly somewhat unconsciously, in *Manhattan Transfer*. By that time I was really taken with the idea of montage. I had tried it out in *Manhattan Transfer* – using pieces of popular songs. By the time it evolved into such compartments as the

camera eye of the *U.S.A* trilogy it served a useful function – which in that case was to distil my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described. My hope was to achieve the objective approach of a Fielding, or a Flaubert, particularly as one sees it in Flaubert's letters, which are remarkable. In the biographies, in the *Newreeels* and even the narrative, I aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting views – using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier.²⁵⁹

These fifty-one “compartments” - more than half of which are crammed into *The 42nd Parallel* - free up the textual space within which Dos Passos can pug away his “subjective feelings” and, by doing, alleviate the semantic pressure that might affect the trilogy's other textual parts, or “components”, in the Lukácsian register. In Dos Passos' terms, *The Camera Eye* functions as a “safety valve” through which he can “distil” or “convey” subjective meaning away from the rest of the text. In this sense, *The Camera Eyes* do not generate semantic meaning so much as they facilitate *the efficient management of its flows*. They are not the source of production but the means by which production might be governed and, by implication, its values appropriated. They do not produce but they control. Yet, and almost impossibly, *The Camera Eyes*, by siphoning off superfluous (read: “subjective”) literary matter, yield “use values”. That is to say, they serve, as Dos Passos' claims, a “useful function”. These prose compartments constitute semantic gutters through which *U.S.A.*'s unwanted (subjective) meaning can be channelled. As designated “control systems” *The Camera Eyes* regulate the textual “flows” and, by so doing, guarantee the solvency of the prose “system”.²⁶⁰ In short, “objectivity” is the condition to which the (literary) text strives; the (camera) text is the agent in that striving. To employ a Derridean formulation, objectivity is the “gift” which, bestowed on

²⁵⁹ David Sanders, “John Dos Passos” in George Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: The “Paris Review” Interviews*, 4th ser. (New York: Viking, 1976), pp.68-89. Cited in Pizer, *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.247.

²⁶⁰ Banta, *Taylorred Lives*, p.5.

the rest of the “system”, appears to seek nothing in return. This act of giving, rooted as it is in systems of exchange, does, as we shall see, indeed demand reciprocity. The abstractedness of this particular act of giving - in which one piece of text gives itself to another - does not indign Derrida’s notion of the gift as a pertinent frame of reference. As Derrida writes, “[t]his “something” [the gift] may not be a thing in the common sense of the word but rather a symbolic object; and, like the donor, the donee may be a collective subject; but in any case A gives B to C.”²⁶¹ Following Derrida we might locate *The Camera Eye* as the “donor” (A) that gives “objectivity”, a “symbolic object” (B), to the other three narrative “belts”, or “collective subject” (C). Dos Passos’ own observations lend support to such a bid. In an interview of 1968 Dos Passos insisted that “objectivity” not only conditioned *U.S.A.* but sat at the centre of his entire oeuvre. He reports, somewhat defensively, that

[m]y system has always been to try to do it objectively. That’s why I put the Camera Eye things in *U.S.A.*; it was a way of draining off the subjective by directly getting in little bits of my own experience.²⁶²

Inasmuch as they jointly assume the beneficence of “objectively” rendered prose, our two most recently indented citations are linked by a common function: to drain off subjective liquidity. So far, the “gift” seems unproblematic and centred upon “use”; Dos Passos’ textual “compartments” are the authorised outlets within which his “subjective feelings” can safely accumulate. The primary duty of *The Camera Eye* is thus to hold - that is, to *hoard* - rejected or superfluous subjective meaning, making the text safe for objectivity. As they make it safe, however, *The Camera Eyes* foster the conditions under which tacitly dialectical reverberations receive amplification. The dialectic centres on the

²⁶¹ Derrida, *Given Time*, p.11.

²⁶² “An Interview with John Dos Passos”, *Idol*, 45 (Fall, 1969), pp.5-25. Reprinted in Frank Gado (ed.), *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1973), p.289.

valences of two linked terms: “distil” and “draining off”. These terms are crucial in an attempt to unpack and subsequently theorise *The Camera Eye*’s conceptual ontology.

According to the O.E.D. the verb “distil” carries a number of connotative and denotative inflections. In the first instance it can connote “[t]o trickle down or fall in minute drops” or “[to] extract the quintessence of; to concentrate [or] purify”. The proximate verb “to drain” follows similar semantic coordinates, meaning “to draw off or away (a liquid) gradually, or in small quantities, by means of a conduit or carry off or away by means of a drain.” Routed into a common vernacular, “distil” and “drain” infer the “extraction” and subsequent appropriation, in increments, and for some useful purpose, of specifically desired liquidities. They infer a sort of essence. By “draining off the subjective” *The Camera Eye* thus affirms its status as a “use-value”. That is to say, it fulfils a job deemed essential to the “health” of the textual “system”. Paradoxically, though, the “use-value” of *The Camera Eye* is predicated on its status as a figuration of “surplus”. Inasmuch as *The Camera Eyes* are not, as Sinclair attested, essential to the “story”, they connote a reserve or fund of semantic value from which one might later draw. The flows that are channelled into these textual locations represent a textual product that is over and above the immediate demands of the textual “economy.” In effect, *The Camera Eyes* hold the flows that have been “withdrawn from the stream of circulation”, in Marx’s terms.²⁶³ As the means by which Dos Passos redirects extruded textual matter away from the metabolism, *The Camera Eyes* are essential to the workings of the system yet at the same time they are superfluous to it. Thus *The Camera Eye* becomes, in Sohn-Rethel’s idiomatic phrase, “an object of use-value estranged from its use”.²⁶⁴ *The Camera Eyes* are the drainage and they are the drained.

²⁶³ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.128.

²⁶⁴ Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, p.64.

Throughout the trilogy, *The Camera Eye* remains unable to reconcile this implicitly dialectical tension between use and surplus.

Closer attention to the notion of surplus sheds further light on Dos Passos' prose proliferations. In the Marxian economy "surplus" functions as the lifeblood of capitalist accumulation; its extraction and subsequent embodiment as exchange value - value which congeals in commodities - constitutes what Lukács calls the "central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects".²⁶⁵ In *Social Justice and the City* (1973) Harvey, following Marx, offers a useful and concise way of approaching the theoretically freighted notion of "surplus" as it informs Marx's theory of political economy. "Surplus value", he states, "is that part of the total value of production which is left over after constant capital (which includes the means of production, raw materials and instruments of labour) and variable capital (labour power) have been accounted for."²⁶⁶ Surplus, Harvey counsels, can take two forms. The first he dubs "social surplus", which is described as "an amount of material product (over and above that which is necessary to reproduce society in its existing state) that is *set aside* to promote improvements in human welfare."²⁶⁷ Alternatively, surplus "may be regarded as an estranged or alienated version of the first: it appears as a quantity of material resources that is appropriated *for the benefit of one segment of society at the expense of another*."²⁶⁸ The textual "surpluses" that issue from the camera's eye connote a variant strain of the two forms of social surplus alluded to by Harvey. While these stockpiles of textual capital are not "set aside to promote improvements in *human* welfare" they do "promote" what we might call the "textual welfare". As per Dos Passos' claim, *The Camera Eye* exists not for its own sake but for the benefit of the other parts of the "system". Its

²⁶⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.83.

²⁶⁶ David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1973), p.250.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p.238; p.219-20, italics added.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p.220, italics added.

liquidities are duly “appropriated”, not for “the benefit of *one* segment of society”, but for three. Despite its alienation from the other “segments” of the (textual) community, then, *The Camera Eye* gifts itself widely, affirming a broader sociality.

As locations within which Dos Passos holds and stores the “visual capital” that is generated by the subdivision and rationalisation of the “literary” text, these compartments constitute the hoards of the textual economy.²⁶⁹ In the second volume of *Capital* Marx writes that “the form of the hoard is simply the form of money not in circulation, money that is interrupted in its circulation and is therefore preserved in its money form.”²⁷⁰ “Money”, or, more exactly, the exchange-value that is embodied by useable gold is, while in circulation, fluid; hoarded, it comes to a halt.²⁷¹ Hoarded money, for Marx, is money *at a standstill*, money that is “immobilised”.²⁷² Dos Passos’ textual economy responds in significant measure to the Marxian schema; “circulation”, “interrupted” and “preserved” are the key terms by which Dos Passos’ textual practice underscores its Marxian commitments. First, the notion of “circulation” links the monetary hoard to the “textual” one. The fluidities of the literary text approximate the sloughed off values from the monetary economy. To be *in The Camera Eye* is to be *outside of* circulation. If “circulation” provides a first key term, “interruption”, its anachronism, provides a second. Indeed, *The Camera Eyes* are agents of interruption inasmuch as they situate themselves between other bits of text. Positioned thus, these episodes interrupt the textual flux and thus denote breaks in its circulation. Connected *to* but separate *from* the rest of the textual metabolism, the textual flows that gather in *The Camera Eye* connote

²⁶⁹ Douglas Tallack, *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.9.

²⁷⁰ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Vol. II* (London: Penguin, 1978), p.163.

²⁷¹ For a useful summation of the workings of the hoard see Suzanne de Brunhoff, *Marx on Money* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

²⁷² Marx, *Contribution*, p.20.

liquidities that are effectively withdrawn from the textual economy. Integral to the operations of the “system” yet removed *from* it, these sclerotic deposits of subjective value are awkwardly positioned between “use” and “surplus”.

As stockpiles of reserve meaning that can be drawn upon at moments of need, *The Camera Eyes* are deployed as a means of meeting the specific - and often fluctuating - demands of the textual “economy”. The hoard achieves capitalisation by drawing on (or “draining” from) what Marx, in the *Critique*, calls the “social metabolism”.²⁷³ Stripped of their sociality, Dos Passos’ hoarded narratives constitute stockpiles of visual capital that have been “smuggled away from society”.²⁷⁴ Removed from the social life that inf(lects) the rest of the trilogy, these private - or better yet *privatised* - memories register as moments of “holding and storing up”, in Marx’s term.²⁷⁵ “Holding” in that they operate to maintain the balance in the textual “system”; “storing”, in that they can be utilised whenever the text needs controlling, easing, or adjustment. As the “safety valves” that channel overproduced textual meaning, *The Camera Eyes* thus resonate as the hoards of the textual economy and thus play a central role in what Marx, in his discussion of surplus value, calls “[t]he vascular system of production”.²⁷⁶ Structurally analogous to hoards, then, *The Camera Eyes* constitute reserves of surplus value upon which the remainder of the text can conceivably draw. The money hoard, as employed in the capitalistic economy and *The Camera Eye* as employed in U.S.A. are linked mechanisms; both seek to stabilise or “balance” respectively fragile - and inherently imbalanced - systems of accumulation.

The above discussions provide, in condensed form, a general theory, based on the principles of a scientific Marxism, under which the rationalised

²⁷³ Ibid. p.130.

²⁷⁴ Idem.

²⁷⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol II, p.85.

²⁷⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p.116.

affinities of the *Camera Eye* can be grouped.

Drawn to the tension between use and surplus, described above, comes a second strand of the dialectic, and concerns an antagonism between modernist form, as a lurch forward, and history, as a retreat into the past. As stridently historical narratives, that is to say, as episodes that interrupt to historical flow of the other three “conveyors”, *The Camera Eyes* connote interlinked exercises in looking back. Spanning a period from 1902 to 1931, these fifty one prose belts thus occasion what Jameson, in his most recent work, has dubbed an “unremitting confrontation” between form and history.²⁷⁷ In short, as form proposes a move forward, history parries, proposing one back. Neither of these forces cancels out the other yet the antagonism is a generative one. These episodes constitute what Taussig, following Benjamin, refers to as “dialectic at a standstill.”²⁷⁸ The tensile relation between movement and historicity is not arbitrary. In fact, and in the idiom of Gallagher and Greenblatt, seeks “to show the relation between a culture’s obviously dynamic elements and its seemingly static ones.”²⁷⁹ In Michael North’s wording, “an intended meaning of speed and progress [clashes] with the confession of repetition and regress.”²⁸⁰ I seek now to show how this branch of the dialectic, predisposed toward antagonism and “semantic clash” manifests at the level of Dos Passos’ prose form.

The suspension of punctuation is *The Camera Eye*’s most durable - and most visible - formal characteristic. The measure is enforced almost without exception across the trilogy; the period halts none of U.S.A.’s fifty-one *Camera Eyes*; the comma restrains the text on only five occasions; the semi-colon appears once. [See APPENDIX, D] Aside from these anomalous moments, the

²⁷⁷ Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p.18.

²⁷⁸ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (London: Chicago University Press, 1987), p.199.

²⁷⁹ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p.59.

²⁸⁰ Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.139.

text does not, grammatically speaking, come to a “standstill” anywhere in the trilogy.²⁸¹ Neither, importantly, does the reader’s eye. By opting out of a governing grammar *The Camera Eye* bypasses the formal traffic that would hinder a more traditionally “grammatical” prose form. In stark contrast to the clotted semantic articles of Faulkner, then, language has been subjected to the assembly line and rendered fluid and fast. An “emphatic rapid-transit structure” that bypasses traditional formal grammars, *The Camera Eye* engineers what Cecilia Tichi calls “a poetics of efficiency”.²⁸² The streamlining of literary language comes as standard in each of *The Camera Eyes*. One opens the text at any *Camera Eye* and the result will be the same. *The Camera Eye* (17) offers a pertinent example of the rebellious, freedom-loving, yet problematically unregulated formal syntax of the prose conveyor. It is May 18th, 1910; Dos Passos (then John Madison) is in his final term at Choate school, Connecticut, and awaits the arrival of Halley’s comet.²⁸³ The reader passes her eye across the following standardised, streamlined prose material:

and not in church and Skinny said if you’d never been
baptized you couldn’t be confirmed and you went and told
Mr. Greenleaf and he looked very chilly and said you’d
better not go to confirmation class any more and after that
you had to go to church Sundays but you could go to ei-
ther one you liked so sometimes you went to the Congre-
gational and sometimes to the Episcopalian and the Sunday
the bishop came you couldn’t see Halley’s Comet any

²⁸¹ *The Camera Eye* does employ apostrophes, both possessive and plurals, and it makes use of periods after formal titles (‘Dr.’; ‘Mr.’ etc.). The capitalisation of proper nouns is constant, and adheres to traditional grammatical convention.

²⁸² Cecilia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modern America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.198; 257.

²⁸³ Dos Passos was born John Roderigo Madison and did not begin using the name “Dos Passos” until 1911.

more and you saw the others being confirmed and it lasted for hours because there were a lot of little girls being confirmed too and all you could hear was mumble mumble this thy child mumble mumble this thy child and you wondered if you'd be alive next time Halley's Comet came round (42P 183)

Favouring the fluid, continuous ebb of connectives - "and", "but", and "so" - over the ponderous (and potentially terminal) deliberations of a period, Dos Passos' streamlined syntax invokes an aesthetics of the production-line. The suspension of punctuation propels the text forward, setting in motion the drive toward a fully efficient textual epistemology. By stripping the text of its punctuation Dos Passos clears his syntax of grammatical clutter and expedites the speed of its reading. The expediency is central to the proliferation of the apparatus to which Dos Passos' prose form tacitly refers. As Hart Crane writes in an essay on the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, "[s]peed is at the bottom of it all [...] the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture indefinitely: the moment made eternal."²⁸⁴ Only by stripping the text of its grammatical impediments can Dos Passos' text become fast, fluid, and consequently *modern*. *The Camera Eye* privileges "the essential freedom of modernity - movement" above all other functions.²⁸⁵ Punctuation, as a time to "pause", "breath", or "rest" is a stylistic anachronism in this intensive new textual economy. Even the comma, as an occasion for the briefest pause, is incompatible *with*, and thus sacrificed *to* the progressive ambitions of a text that simply cannot wait, cannot delay. The comma implies an extraneous motion - an unnecessary twist of the syntactical wrench - to which the modern text

²⁸⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.65.

²⁸⁵ David Gartman, *From Autos to Architecture: Fordism and Architectural Aesthetics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), p.11.

simply need not commit.

It is the omniscient eye of the camera that is the organ for these compulsory - and indeed *compulsive* - grammatical redundancies. Eschewing the ponderous deliberations of a traditional grammar, the camera-text implements what Sontag refers to as a "fast seeing".²⁸⁶ By accelerating the prose text, Dos Passos "streamlines the eye".²⁸⁷ Demanding fewer movements of the eye and thus demanding less effort in its consumption, *The Camera Eye* eradicates waste from the process of reading. Thus streamlined, the text can yield the maximum "value" with the minimum expenditure on behalf of the reader. The tag-line might read: "Text labours so you don't have to". An abundance of surplus is duly generated and siphoned off into Dos Passos' prose compartments.

Dos Passos' camera-text exploits what Jean-Louis Baudry calls "the inherent mobility of the cinematic mechanism"²⁸⁸ and, by so doing, approximates the "Eye-Lingo" valorised by Brown in 1929.²⁸⁹ Brown's reading machine works "microscopically by the new photographic process", printing words "on a transparent tough tissue roll...no bigger than a typewriter ribbon". Approximations of strips of celluloid, these words would unroll, in a panoramic sort of way, and subsequently pass "beneath a narrow strip of strong magnifying glass."²⁹⁰ Brown's conception of the Readies (pronounced "read-ease") is instructive with regard to the "literary" text that Dos Passos feeds

²⁸⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.124.

²⁸⁷ Susan Currell, "Streamlining the Eye: Speed Reading and The Revolution of Words, 1870-1940", in Charles Acland (ed.), *Residual Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp.344-360.

²⁸⁸ Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975), pp.39-47, p.43.

²⁸⁹ Bob Brown, *The Readies*, (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009), pp.41-47. See <http://my.qoop.com/store/Rice-University-Press-3111075350609104/Bob-Brown-s-The-Readies-by-Craig-Saper-1942967424287/> (last accessed 18th September 2011).

²⁹⁰ Brown, *The Readies*, p.28.

under the “magnifying eye” of his camera. Dos Passos’ conveyor-belt-cum-kino-eye passes text under its magnifying “eye” / “I”, and does so as a means of making “language purely optical for the first time in history.”²⁹¹ The influence of cinematic technique on Brownian textual practice, and by extension, on Dos Passos’s is unmistakable. The cinematic apparatus solicited by Brown and broader advances in cinematic technique provided the impetus for a new, eminently modern, and conceivably *democratic* mode of prose production. The linkages between Dos Passos’ prose forms and cinema have been well established.²⁹² As Dziga Vertov would diarize in 1934, “Dos Passos’ work involves a translation from film-vision into literary language. The terminology and construction are those of the kino-eye.”²⁹³ Hence cinema’s appeal to Dos Passos who was, as he wrote *The 42nd Parallel*, was not only in the thrall of experimental avant-gardes but increasingly committed to the causes of the working classes. Dos Passos, like Brown, felt that “by mimicking the movement of cinema”, one might “somehow short-circuit the conventional meanings of words and letters, allowing other, more genuine meanings immediate access to the eye.”²⁹⁴

Calling for new forms of attention and released from traditional syntactic obligations, the “eye” of the “camera” is free to move; its “rhythms” are fluid and forward moving; its “sentences”, if we can call them this, rush across the page with apparent impunity. The filmic syntax of Dos Passos cinematic text manifests from the very first *Camera Eye*. Here, the speed-up at the level of the text coincides with the rush of physical bodies. Rapid material transit is

²⁹¹ North, “Words in Motion”, p.216.

²⁹² For a survey of the filmic influences on Dos Passos see Justin Edwards, “The Man with a Camera Eye: Cinematic Form and Hollywood Malediction” in John Dos Passos’s *The Big Money*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Iss. 4 (1999), pp.245-254, electronic access, unpaginated.

²⁹³ Vertov’s diary entry is cited in Lavrentiev (ed.), *Experiments for the Future*, p.lxiii.

²⁹⁴ North, “Words in Motion”, p.216.

easier if you hold Mother's hand and
 hang on it that way you can kick up your toes but walking
 fast you have to tread on too many grassblades the poor
 hurt green tongues shrink under your feet maybe thats
 why those people are so angry and follow us shaking their
 fists they're throwing stones grownup people throwing
 stones She's walking fast and we're running (42P 13)

This "running" is both textually and materially determined. The flat speed that Dos Passos generates from the suspension of punctuation - his "running on" of words - is analogous to the expeditious pace with which the narrator is pulled off of his feet by his dashing mother. The syntactical fluidity of the *Camera Eye* (1) is complicit in aiding a pair of bodies in desperate need of efficient, streamlined propulsion. Yet there is an excess here that compromises the drive toward a streamlined textuality. These two bodies are made to expend significant energies in an attempt to keep up with a rapid prose form.

The accelerated movement of the Madisons is historically determined. Mistaken for English subjects, these bodies dart and weave across the "cobblestones" of this Belgian or maybe "Dutch" city so that they might escape unscathed from violent reaction to British imperialism in South Africa, namely, the Battle of Bloemfontaine in March 1900, impossibly referred to by the infant Dos Passos as "war on the veldt". Corresponding with the opening of the century, this *Eye* is colonially inflected; its formal syntax seeks to usher Dos Passos and his mother away from a decidedly political disturbance, away from the "grownup people throwing stones" and into the guardianship of the "nice Dutch lady who loves Americans". In this opening episode, then, political asylum is dispensed in a clandestine manner, "under the counter", so to speak. The "need for speed" dominates - although it is not limited to - the opening *Eye*. Indeed, the

breathlessness of *Camera Eye* (1) spills into a second; here, the “stones” of colonial resistance mutate into the nationalistic baubles of the world’s fair:

we hurry wallowing like in a boat in the musty stably-
smelling herdic cab [...]
hurrying to catch the cars to New York
and She was saying Oh dolly I hope we wont be late
and Scott was waiting with the ickets and we had to run
up the platform of the Seventh Street Depot and all the
little cannons kept falling out of the Olympia and every-
body stooped to pick them up and the conductor Alla-
board lady quick lady (42P 19)

In these two early episodes an accelerated formal syntax, tethered to what Rosalind Krauss refers to as the “formal premises of modernist opticality” contrives to provide swift and apparently safe passage for “hurrying” (read: inefficient) bodies across linked (both are bombarded), concourses.²⁹⁵ Form and content seem, in both of these early exchanges, to pull in the same direction. Yet again, the expenditure of energy (“we hurry”; “we had to run”) undermines the efficient movement to which Dos Passos’ formal practice refers.

The Camera Eye (10) provides perhaps the clearest evidence of an antagonistic relation between form and history in *The 42nd Parallel* and is thus worth pondering in some detail. Like it did in *The Camera Eye* (1), the language of *The Camera Eye* (10) retains its syntactical fluidity; unlike it, however, the memory that this syntax transmits is beginning to congeal. In stark contrast to the brisk tempo of earlier *Camera Eyes*, this camera-text exemplifies a material heaviness. [APPENDIX: A] The “eye speed” that Dos Passos generates by the

²⁹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “The Im/pulse to See”, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (New York: The New Press, 1988), p.52.

withdrawal of punctuation stalls in the face of a turgid - and potentially nauseous - historical memory. Documenting a day trip to Washington D.C. circa 1907, this remembrance of things past is dominated by a sense of stasis and fatigue. The youthful quickstep of the opening pair of *Eyes* is replaced by the laboured plodding of Dos Passos (here probably aged about eight or nine) and the weary "old major". For the first time in *The 42nd Parallel*, the camera-text exemplifies what Anson Rabinbach calls "a poetics of fatigue".²⁹⁶ Having traipsed through "long corridors full of the dead air" the young Dos Passos and "the old major" "walk very slowly through the flat sunlight" that provides weak illumination within the strangely lifeless "Botanical Gardens". Dos Passos' "legs would get very tired", exhausted even at the thought of the "Corcoran art gallery full of columns and steps". The suffocating atmosphere that attends this historical memory evokes an almost unbearable sense of depthlessness. From the "flat sunlight" of the "Botanical Gardens", to the incongruously "flat air of the rotunda"; from the "flat red" of the Senate chamber to the statue of "Caesar in purple fallen flat," *The Camera Eye* (10) is - apart from the inconceivably "fat" robins on the lawn, totally void of buoyancy. All of the life appears to have escaped from the scene; its narrator gasps for breath as he labours along the stifling, "long corridors full of the dead air". In the first instance, the "flatness" that pervades this memory is historically endowed, a consequence of the oppressive world of political power. Of this episode Westerhoven writes that "the narrator is for the first time exposed to the workings of the government, and they make a far from vital impression."²⁹⁷ For the nine year old Dos Passos, the contours (or "corridors") of power and privilege remain imprecisely defined. Notwithstanding the irredeemable opacities of American jurisprudence, this *Camera Eye* denotes a key moment for

²⁹⁶ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p.40-42.

²⁹⁷ Westerhoven, "Autobiographical Elements", p. 345.

the young Dos Passos. Marking the point at which his distrust of power and political affiliation would start to “set”, this camera-text denotes the coalescence of an historical consciousness in its first articulation.

The flatness of *The Camera Eye* (10) does more than express an early discomfiture toward American political forms. In fact, the flatness is aesthetically resonant. This exchange represents the pre-eminent example, in the context of *The 42nd Parallel*, of a “photographic” formal prose. By “[e]voking the flat, stamped out quality of a print or photograph”²⁹⁸ *The Camera Eye* (10) moves further away from typically “literary” forms of representation and exacerbates what Stuart Culver calls the “unbridgeable gap between linguistic and photographic truths”.²⁹⁹ Compounding the suspension of punctuation, an anti-literary act, an imagistic flatness, which appeals to the logic of photography, places further strain on the “ambivalent cohabitancy” between the “literary” text and the visualization of history.³⁰⁰ *The Camera Eye* (10) is, in William Dow’s idiomatic term, “a verbal photograph”.³⁰¹ This particular photograph however, is poorly “developed”, both with regard to the crispness of its impressions and with regard to the nascency of Dos Passos’ understanding of the adult world of American political life.

If *The Camera Eye* (10) yields no more than a motley, barely permeable first impression of political power, the next ten *Camera Eyes* provide few sharp insights as to the radical life that Dos Passos would come to embrace. Occasional references to a latent radicalism pierce the nostalgic fug but they are, at best, confused affirmations. It is not until *The Camera Eye* (20) that Dos Passos political orientation begins to acquire significant definition. Having provided no

²⁹⁸ North, *Camera Works*, p.14.

²⁹⁹ Stuart Culver, “How Photographs Mean: Literature and the Camera in American Studies”, *American Literary History*, Vol.1, No.1 (Spring 1989), p.194.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. p.203.

³⁰¹ William Dow, “John Dos Passos, Blaise Cendrars, and the “Other” Modernism”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), pp.396-415, p.405.

more than “queer glimpses” of radical activity between 1907 and 1912, Dos Passos is privy, for the first time, to an explicit moment of industrial action, namely the strike of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in early 1912. In fact, the industrial dispute was, as Westerhoven argues, “probably Dos Passos’ first confrontation with labour violence” and would “indicat[e] an increasing awareness of the nature of life outside the privileged group of Harvard students.”³⁰²

The final eyes of *The 42nd Parallel* evoke what Rosen has dubbed Dos Passos’ “halting development into a radical”.³⁰³ *The Camera Eye* (25), the first of the *Harvard Eyes*, situates Dos Passos on the (conceivably Sartrean) precipice of political maturity. Important decisions await Dos Passos, yet these decisions pose something of a dilemma for a young man trapped between two distinctive “spheres”, between bourgeois privilege on the one hand and the diurnal struggles of the working class on the other. As Virginia Spencer Carr notes, Dos Passos “knew he was on the cusp of something momentous and had to decide where he stood in relation to his personal ideology.”³⁰⁴ Nineteen years old and preparing to graduate cum laude from Harvard, Dos Passos is unable - or perhaps just unprepared - to remedy this twoness; he hasn’t, as he puts it, “got the nerve to break out of the bellglass” (42P 262) and launch into political activity. He can choose either to “grow cold with culture like a cup of tea forgotten between an incenseburner and a copy of Oscar Wilde” (262) or he can join the “millworkers marching with a red brass band through the streets of Lawrence Massachusetts”. (263) Despite his Prufrockian indecisiveness, his lack of “nerve” regarding active engagement in a messy world, Dos Passos recognises that his estrangement issues from an insistently dialectical relation, that is to say between the “sphere” of Harvard and the “sphere” of working

³⁰² Westerhoven, “Autobiographical Elements”, p.351.

³⁰³ Rosen, *Politics and the Writer*, p.86.

³⁰⁴ Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p.236.

class struggle: "it was" he laments, "like the Magdeburg spheres the pressure outside sustained the vacuum within". The relation between inside and outside - literally an example of class tension - brings Dos Passos, by 1930, to the Marxian conception of history. It is to this conception to which I shall now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE

EYES, LEFT:
NINETEEN NINETEEN

The publication of *Nineteen Nineteen*,³⁰⁵ U.S.A.'s middle novel, announces an intensification of Dos Passos' historical consciousness. Deploying a marked shift in tone from *The 42nd Parallel* and, significantly, deploying only fifteen *Camera Eyes* - a diminution of nearly a half - *Nineteen Nineteen Nineteen* ushers Dos Passos from "muted optimism" to "anger and militance" in Rosen's phrasing.³⁰⁶ For a number of commentators this stylistic shift was politically resonant. In a laudatory review of *Nineteen Nineteen*, published in February 1933, Mike Gold ululated: "[w]e can now say that the Harvard aesthete in Dos Passos is almost dead. The spiritual malady of tourism no longer drains his powers. He has entered the real world. He has definitely broken with capitalism, and knows it is but a walking corpse. He wars upon it, and records its degeneration."³⁰⁷ Notwithstanding his penchant for hyperbole and despite his inclination toward lush, vampish syntax, Gold proved too acute a reader to mistake Dos Passos, as of 1932, for the finished (socialist) article. Aware that Dos Passos had some way to go before satisfying the epistemic mandates of a properly materialist aesthetic, Gold qualifies his eulogy with a sober addendum:

he has not yet found the faith of Walt Whitman in the American masses. He cannot believe that they have within them the creative forces for a new world. This is still his dilemma; a hangover of his aristocratic past; yet this man grows like corn in the Iowa sun; his education proceeds; the future will find his vast talents, his gift of epic

³⁰⁵ All primary citations to *Nineteen Nineteen* are taken from Daniel Aaron and Townsend Ludington (eds.), *U.S.A.*, hereafter abbreviated *NN*, and cited parenthetically by page number.

³⁰⁶ Rosen, *Politics and the Writer*, p.79.

³⁰⁷ Gold, cited in Barry Maine (ed.), *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.116.

poetry, his observation, his daring experimentalism, and personal courage enlisted completely in the service of the co-operative society. He does not retreat; he goes forward. Dos Passos belongs to the marvellous future.³⁰⁸

Gold's corny simile was symptomatic of a hope, shared by many writers, critics and intellectuals,³⁰⁹ that Dos Passos would function as the heliotropic messiah of the literary left, that he would turn, like a Benjaminian flower, toward the warm glow of international socialism.³¹⁰ Matthew Josephson was another prominent leftist who, like Gold, had high hopes for the political Dos Passos. In his essay "A Marxist Epic", published in *The Saturday Review* in March 1932, Josephson heralded *Nineteen Nineteen* as an urgently and insistently historical prose text. "The whole work", Josephson writes, is "unified by the author's consistent view of the history he deals with: this, it is perhaps embarrassing to relate, is nothing less than Marx's materialist conception of history as determined by the means of production."³¹¹ In contradistinction to Gold, then, who considered Dos Passos' socialism as a source of potential energy awaiting conversion, Josephson went so far as to suggest that Dos Passos had already, by 1932, arrived at the Marxist position. Despite the "experimental interruptions" - a veiled reference to the novel's fifteen *Camera Eyes* - *Nineteen Nineteen* proved, in the eyes of Josephson, a durable enough "transmitter" through which a dialectical charge might pass. Numerous commentators have subsequently - and not a little smugly - pointed out that Dos Passos' political "future" followed

³⁰⁸ Gold, in Maine (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, pp.116-7.

³⁰⁹ See Matthew Josephson, "A Marxist Epic", *Saturday Review* (March 19, 1932), p.600.

³¹⁰ In part IV of his essay "On the Conception of History" (1940) Benjamin evokes the figure of the heliotrope as a metaphor for the inexorable pull of history: "[j]ust as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so too does that which has been turned, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, *towards* the sun which is dawning in the sky of history. To this most inconspicuous of all transformations the historical materialist must pay heed."

³¹¹ Josephson, in Maine (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p.107.

a rather different path than the one enumerated by Gold and Josephson.³¹² Indeed, Dos Passos was, in 1932, on the verge of turning, like a flower, toward the warm glow of the political right. The conservative turn, which receives detailed treatment in my final chapter, exemplified Dos Passos' bitter misgivings about Marxism, first, as an appropriate lexicon through which a history of the class struggle might be articulated and, second, as a practical - and ultimately *efficient* - solution to what Barnaby Haran dubs the "inequalities of machine age America."³¹³

Dos Passos' suspicion with regard to the epistemological and ontological probity of international socialism would gather momentum during the middle years of the thirties. By the time of *U.S.A.*'s publication as a single volume in January 1938, this suspicion had crystallized into outright hostility toward those who remained under the influence of what Dos Passos would come to call, with appropriately mechanistic inflections, "the intricate and bloody machinery of the Kremlin".³¹⁴ The conservative turn lay in wait for Dos Passos. As work commenced on *Nineteen Nineteen* the disillusionment *with* and alienation *from* leftist praxis that proved characteristic of the post-war Dos Passos remained latent, "yet to bloom", to return to Gold's analogy. Indeed, at the decade's inception, the ideological ground upon which Dos Passos stood appeared fertile for the cultivation of his Marxian commitments. Whether it manifested in his writings on industrial "terrorism" at Harlan County, Kentucky,³¹⁵ in his vote for the Communist presidential ticket or in the composition of an insistently

³¹² Ludington, *Twentieth Century Odyssey*; Iain Colley *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978).

³¹³ Barnaby Haran, "The Amerika Machine: Art and Technology between the USA and the USSR, 1926-1933", PhD diss., University College London, 2008, p.141.

³¹⁴ Letter from Dos Passos to John Howard Lawson, postmarked August 24, Hollywood. Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections, University of Virginia, Inventory #5950, box no.5.

³¹⁵ Dos Passos' findings from the Harlan dispute were first published in the National Student League's Communist inflected *Student Review* in 1932 under the title "The Free Speech Speakin's"; the account would reappear in the *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), pp.277-297.

dialectical *Camera Eye*, Dos Passos' political engagements during the 1929-1932 period furnish compelling - if fleeting - evidence of the augmentation rather than the attenuation of his ties to the left. Dos Passos, in Foley's summation, "was a historical creature to the core and composed all his work in—and about—the crucible of historical change."³¹⁶ This was a period in which Dos Passos would come, in Granville Hicks' summation, "closer to communism than he had ever been - and as close as he was going to get. In his parabolic orbit, though he did not know it, he had reached perihelion."³¹⁷ Despite his subsequent lurch toward the margins of conservatism Dos Passos' commitment to the ideological assumptions of the political left was, as work began on *Nineteen Nineteen*, substantial enough to confer credibility on Gold's suggestion that full affiliation was a very real possibility.

This was also a period in which the United States encountered - and survived - its most significant economic adjustment since black emancipation: the collapse of the cash nexus.³¹⁸ As a slew of critics have noted, the consolidation of Dos Passos' leftism was accelerated by the crash of October 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression.³¹⁹ Having generated surpluses with abandon throughout the glitzy sump of the twenties, the machinery of capitalist production would grind to a halt by the decade's end. By March 1932, with

³¹⁶ Barbara Foley, review of Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, *The International Fiction Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1981), p.144.

³¹⁷ Granville Hicks, "The Politics of John Dos Passos", *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1950), pp.85-98, p.93.

³¹⁸ See Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathaniel West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Charles Cunningham, "'To Watch the Faces of the Poor': *Life* Magazine and the Mythology of Rural Poverty in the Great Depression", *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 29, No.3 (Fall 1999), pp. 278-302; Melvyn Dubofsky and Stephen Burwood (eds.), *The American Economy During the Great Depression* (New York: Garland, 1990).

³¹⁹ See Rosen; Ludington; Pizer; Moglen; Denning; and Foley for a selection of writings that emphasize the centrality of the Depression to the deepening of Dos Passos' leftism.

United States' productive output having fallen by a staggering 46.2%,³²⁰ it had become almost impossible to ignore the vast and deepening material chasm that separated those who had control over the productive machinery - a group within which Dos Passos, as a landlord and member of the propertied class, could count himself - and those who didn't.³²¹ A biography of the Progressive journalist Paxton Hibben mirrors Dos Passos' outraged yet curiously detached attitude toward the raft of social and economic inequities that, having gained traction at the turn of the century, would push the United States toward and subsequently over the precipice of fiscal solvency:

something was wrong
with the American Republic, was it the Gold Standard, Priv-
ilege, The Interests, Wall Street?

The rich were getting richer, the poor were getting poorer, small farmers were being squeezed out, workingmen were working twelve hours a day for a bare living; profits were for the rich, the law was for the rich, the cops were for the rich (NN 511)

By the outset of the "long thirties", economic and social disparity had become an embedded fact of American life. Indeed, by 1933 more than a quarter of the nation were out of work.³²² Kazin states that "the great United States, with thousands of people wandering the roads looking for jobs, food, shelter, and with a desperately pragmatic FDR trying any stratagem to keep America together, was a country of punctured illusions and was virtually bankrupt."³²³ As a period of stagnation and stasis the Depression brought little in the way of material edibles. It did, however, provide much to feed the appetites of writers

³²⁰ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1956), p.136.

³²¹ To supplement the family income the Dos Passoses would rent out their five and a half thousand square foot property, located at 571 Commercial Street, Provincetown, Virginia.

³²² Gordon, *New Deals*.

³²³ Alfred Kazin, "John Dos Passos and His Invention of America", *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp.154-166, p.155.

on the left who, like Dos Passos, considered it their job to catalogue, or, in Gold's term "record" the plight of the working poor. Dos Passos was quick to take up the mantle as the (bourgeois) spokesperson of the dispossessed. The role was self appointed and it was fraught with difficulty. Despite extending his condolences to America's poor, Dos Passos would simultaneously flounder to square the social origins of the economic slavery under which they toiled with his privileged position as a member of the bourgeoisie. As the material gulf between the classes deepened, then, so too did Dos Passos' sense of complicity in its deepening. In "Back to Red Hysteria", an article published in *The New Republic* on July 2, 1930, Dos Passos admits as much: "I speak as a writer, and therefore as a middle-class liberal, whether I like it or not."³²⁴ This double helix of self-promotion and belligerent absolution would generate a contradiction in his political thought that he would prove unable to reconcile. Dos Passos was blithely aware that his class positioning inferred his exemption from the financial hardship that rendered destitute vast numbers of the producing classes. "The Great Depression" he confessed, "didn't affect me that much personally. I used to tell people I had been just as broke before the stockmarket crash as after it. It was what I saw of other people's lives that brought home the failure of New Era Capitalism." This is a rather awkward dedication. Constitutive of an ostensible attack on the pyrrhic realisations (the "failure") of modern industrial capitalism, Dos Passos' rhetorical adumbration is less a statement of class solidarity than a tacit admission of difference.³²⁵ Fixing a paternalistic "eye" ("[i]t was what I *saw*") on the plight of the (silently) working poor, Dos Passos' iteration is shot through with a muted suspicion that the American underclass might not be best placed to offer narration as regard their own relation to "New Era Capitalism". However well intentioned Dos Passos

³²⁴ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.127.

³²⁵ The admission cuts across Dos Passos' assertion that "[a]s 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." Dos Passos, "Whither", p.150.

may be, he, to propound an Adornian concept, stands in for a subject that cannot speak for itself.³²⁶ The notion of “speaking for” (and thus *instead of*) would haunt Dos Passos’ thinking on politics, even at the height of his “attachment” to the left. As he would write in a lead article in the *New Masses* in August 1930, “[i]ts [sic] the job of people of all the professions in the *radical fringe of the middle-class* to try to influence this middle class We can’t affect the class war much, but we might possibly make it *more humane*.”³²⁷

Notwithstanding the paternalist inflections that subtend these dubious recommendations, the ruinous state of the United States’ economy hardened Dos Passos’ belief that the time was ripe for a radical overhaul of the productive machinery: “[s]ome way must be found”, he would write, “by which the mass of citizens can keep control of the man at the switchboard.”³²⁸ As this chapter seeks to show, the “way” would fluctuate. The “need”, however, remained constant. In the first years of the thirties, at least, it was Marx that offered the most effective, and most timely antidote to the toxic effects of emergent Fordism. Blanche H. Gelfant asserts that “[t]he Marxian dynamic view of history and the actual signs of evolution, revolution, and counter-revolution gave [Dos Passos] the view that these were critical times.”³²⁹ Dos Passos’ 1932 “Introduction” to the Modern Library reissue of *Three Soldiers* (1921) copiously exemplifies this urgency. In it, and with recourse to unambiguously Marxian terminology, Dos Passos writes: “[t]hose of us who have lived through have seen these years strip the bunting off the great illusions of our time, we must deal with the raw structure of history now, we must deal with it quick, before it

³²⁶ See Adorno’s essay “Parataxis” in Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Theodor Adorno, *Notes To Literature II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp.109-152.

³²⁷ Carr, *A Life*, p.278, italics added.

³²⁸ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.206.

³²⁹ Blanche H. Gelfant, “John Dos Passos: The Synoptic Novel” in Andrew Hook (ed.), *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), pp.36-52, p.39.

stamps us out.”³³⁰

Nineteen Nineteen constitutes Dos Passos’ attempt to “deal with the raw structure of history”. In this novel Dos Passos elicits, through the technological filter of *The Camera Eye*, a composite grammar by which the forms and syntax of late modernity might be understood. The first half of this chapter seeks to build a case for the dialectical identity of *The Camera Eye* (28), the first camera-text of *Nineteen Nineteen*. It will be claimed that this inaugural *Camera Eye* is a textual manifestation of Dos Passos’ relation to the Marxian position as it stood at the outset of the thirties and that it connotes the point at which Dos Passos’ formal practice, despite maintaining a structural complicity with Fordist technologies, absorbs what Marx in “The German Ideology” (1845-6) dubs a “practical consciousness”.³³¹ The relation between “textual” and “historical” formations in *Nineteen Nineteen* is far from consistent. Despite the intensification of Dos Passos’ commitment to leftist politics his attempt to formalise the historiography of American modernity was fraught. Indeed, and in keeping with the political ambivalences that subtend much of the mature prose, Dos Passos’ acceptance of the historical “need” was partial and it was subject to qualification. “It seems to me”, Dos Passos would counsel in response to a political questionnaire of 1932

that Marxians who attempt to junk the American tradition, that I admit is full of dryrot as well as sap, like any tradition, are just cutting themselves off from the continent. Somebody’s got to have the size to Marxianize the American tradition before you can sell the American worker on the social revolution. Or else Americanize Marx.³³²

³³⁰ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.148.

³³¹ Marx, *The German Ideology, Parts I and II*, ed. R. Pascal (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938), p.19.

³³² “Whither the American Writer”, *Modern Quarterly*, VI (Summer, 1932), pp.11-19; it is reproduced in Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, pp.149-150.

Constituting an ideological either/or, this, as of the depressed summer of 1932, was the political quandary with which Dos Passos was faced. The attempt to “deal with the raw structure of history” depended on the extent of Dos Passos’ fealty toward one of two (problematically linked) conceptual models: he could “Marxianize the American tradition” or he could “Americanize Marx”. Dos Passos would fidget between these two conceptual ontologies in his attempt to find a practical solution to the social, political and economic inequities upon which American capitalism was predicated. The arguments that follow seek to show, however, that as work continued on *Nineteen Nineteen*, Dos Passos slips from the first to the second ideological position.

By situating Marxist ideologies within a modernist - specifically Fordist - paradigm Dos Passos sought to engineer a viable and notably efficient means of dealing with the proliferations of the capitalist superstructure. Dialectically configured, the proposed alignment of Marx and Ford was expressly mandated to “leaven the lump of glucose that the combination of the ideals of the man in the swivel-chair with decayed Puritanism has made of our national consciousness.”³³³ Extorted from labour and pugged away as commodities, this “lump” connoted a form of congealed social capital that, as of the beginning of the thirties, demanded breaking down. Given the materialist coloration of this historical “need”, Dos Passos formal choices are perhaps a little surprising. As a machined form that implements a Fordist grammar as a means of sloughing off - and thus concentrating - surplus textual capital into designated channels or hoards, *The Camera Eye* problematizes Dos Passos’ attempt to “leaven the lump”. Indeed, the amalgamation of Marx and Ford generates supplementary semantic residues which compound rather than palliate the “lump”, aggravating the already fraught relation between capital and labour, the lumpers and the lumped. As a conduit which mediates a tension

³³³ Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) in Ludington (ed.), *Dos Passos: Travel Books and Other Writings, 1916-41* (New York: Library of America, 2003), p.63.

between use and surplus, *The Camera Eye* formalises, first, the ideological struggle for “value” that would sit at the heart of capitalist modes of production and, second, the alienation that would ensue from its appropriation.

In his 1938 essay, “John Dos Passos and 1919,” Sartre captures, perhaps more astutely than any other contemporary critic, the alienated agency that pervades U.S.A.’s middle novel:

[t]he lives he tells about are all closed in on themselves. They resemble those Bergsonian memories which, after the body’s death, float about, lifeless and full of odours and lights and cries, through some forgotten limbo [...] But beneath the violent colours of these beautiful, motley objects that Dos Passos presents *there is something petrified. Their significance is fixed. Close your eyes and try to remember your own life, try to remember it that way; you will stifle.* It is this unrelieved stifling that Dos Passos wanted to express. In capitalist society, men do not have lives, they have only destinies. He never says this, but he makes it felt throughout. He expresses it discreetly, cautiously, until we feel like smashing our destinies. We have become rebels; he has achieved his purpose.

We are rebels behind the looking-glass.³³⁴

Sartre’s word “petrified” is the key by which the conceptual ontology of *Nineteen Nineteen* can be unlocked. The term is also central in theorising the “closed-in-ness” - or “hoarded-ness” of the novel’s fifteen *Camera Eyes*. From the Greek root “petra” meaning “rock” and the Latin “facere”, or sometimes “factum”, meaning “to make”, “petrified” evokes “paralysed” and, by association, “congealed”. Located at the centre of a material(ist) process in which liquidities undergo concretion, growing “hard as stone”, this cluster of linked terms occupies the centre of present efforts to theorise, along materialist lines, the historical sediment that “deposits” itself in *The Camera Eye*. Not only does “petrification”, as per the Sartrean schema, encapsulate the *general* structural underpinnings of *The Camera Eyes* - how they form and why - but it

³³⁴ Sartre, “1919”, p.171.

proves useful as a “keyword”, in Williams’ term, by which one might begin to conceptualise *The Camera Eyes* as individual and shifting articulations of a dynamic and increasingly fraught relation between historical contingency and the materiality of textual formations.

DIALECTICAL DILATIONS: DECANTING MARX

The Camera Eye (28), the first of *Nineteen Nineteen*’s fifteen *Camera Eyes* and the only one to “report” in any significant measure from the United States, complicates and problematises the phenomenal fixity that Sartre describes. [APPENDIX: B] This *Camera Eye*’s first (historical) phase occurs in late April 1915, the cruellest month of this - or perhaps any - year for the sensitive graduand Dos Passos, designating the moment at which he, three years into his study under the decidedly Sartrean “bellglass” of Harvard University, receives the “shock” news, disseminated via “telegram”, of the impending death of his mother. (Lucy Dos Passos died on the 15th of May 1915.) The second phase shifts focus, turning its gaze from the United States toward Europe, more exactly to Madrid at the end of January 1917, and denotes the moment at which Dos Passos receives news, this time via the technics of a “cable” of the sudden death of his father. (John Randolph Dos Passos died on the 12th of January 1917.) A third phase traces, in its first articulation, Dos Passos’ reluctant return to the United States on the *Espagne* on the 12th of August 1918 (“Autobiographical” 356) and, in its second, the diurnal and mundane war work to which Dos Passos was previously commandeered. *The Camera Eye* (28) is germane to present concerns on two linked fronts: first, it constitutes U.S.A.’s preeminent prose poem; second, it constitutes the trilogy’s singular exemplification of a materialist conception of historical praxis. *The Camera Eye* (28) connotes, in short, the moment at which Dos Passos formalises the dialectic.

In the first instance this camera-text formalises a constellation of private

“grief”, zooming in on Dos Passos’ recollection of three of the defining crises - or “shock[s]” of his early life: the terminal illness of his mother; the sudden death of his father; and the “vast cancer” of (capitalist) war.³³⁵ Certainly, these three events fractured Dos Passos’ social experience, providing the “historical” - that is to say the autobiographical - materials for his fictions. While these personal losses were resonant for Dos Passos, they function as a guise behind which a different sort of “grief” achieves tacit expression. In fact, the “shattered” formalism of *The Camera Eye* (28) infers an (unspoken) response to a collective rather than a personal set of bereavements. Specifically, this camera-text provides a textual analogue for the fractured sociality that attended “the drift of the Fordized world”.

Stationed only six pages from the beginning of U.S.A.’s most politically charged novel, *The Camera Eye* (28) provides an index for the shifting and dynamic relation between aesthetics and politics as it manifests in the compositional context of U.S.A. Responsive to and pursuivant of the crystallisation of Dos Passos’ leftism as it manifested at the inception of the long thirties, this *Camera Eye* provides the novel’s - and by extension the trilogy’s - singular exemplification of “consciousness open to the effects of history”, in the locution of Hans-Georg Gadamer.³³⁶ Tantamount to no more than a “flash” in Benjamin’s lexicon - and more, a “flash” that U.S.A. is destined never to repeat - this is the materialist moment. The “moment” is fleeting - a single expression within a vast folio of fifty-one *Camera Eyes* - yet its brevity does not impugn its materialist aspect. It completes it. As Benjamin notes in the fifth thesis, “[t]he true picture of the past *whizzes* by. Only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability, is the past to be held fast [*Stillstellung*].” Properly conceived, of course, this flashing “moment” is not a

³³⁵ Ludington (ed.), *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.92.

³³⁶ The translation is Ricoeur’s and is discussed in the translators’ preface to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.16.

“moment” at all but a cluster of fragmented moments that enter into a reciprocal relation.

The juxtaposition of chronologically disparate memories represents a unique development in the context of *The Camera Eye*. All of U.S.A.’s fifty-one *Camera Eyes*, barring (28), focus on a single event which proceeds without interruption across an unbroken period “in time”. Each “event” may last a minute (as per Dos Passos’ dash for a train, portrayed in *The Camera Eye* [2]) or a week (as per his protracted journeying through France to Italy, portrayed in *The Camera Eye* [33]). In each case, though, and without exception, *The Camera Eye* focuses exclusively on *that* memory, *that* minute or *that* week. *The Camera Eye* (28) departs from this strict obeisance to a singular, unified and linear conception of historical time and, by so doing, infers an entirely different semantic protocol. Unique in its conception of historical time as a “constellation” of disparate moments that are brought into a reciprocal relation, this *Camera Eye* designates the only point in U.S.A. at which Dos Passos historicises his formal practice in strict accordance with Marxian precepts. That he does this, and that he does it here is heavy with consequence for the dialectic. As Benjamin writes in the *Passagen-Werk*, “[t]he destructive or critical moment in the materialist writing of history comes into play in *that blasting apart of historical continuity* with which, first and foremost, the historical object constitutes itself.”³³⁷ As a textual artefact of historical “blastedness” *The Camera Eye* (28) is without peer. Here, and for the only time in the trilogy, the “existential density” of *The Camera Eye*, underpinned, as Sartre noted, by a tendency toward constriction and “stifling” (see *The Camera Eye* [10; 25]) is blasted apart by the centrifugal force of dialectical materialism.³³⁸ Cutting

³³⁷ Benjamin is cited in Susan Buck-Morss, “Dream World of Mass Culture: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Modernity and the Dialectics of Seeing” in David Michael Levine (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp.309-338, p.319, italics added.

³³⁸ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p.259.

against, if not fully across, its own existential inflections and thus generating a dialectical tension *with* them, *The Camera Eye* (28) exhibits impeccable materialist credentials. Impressively, this episode exceeds “historicism”, a modality which, as Benjamin notes in an addendum to his essay *On the Concept of History*, “contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history.” Benjamin continues his commentary in a circumspect vein:

no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millennia. The historian who starts from this, ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like the beads of a rosary. He records [*erfasst*] the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as that of the here-and-now [a *jetztzeit* or “now-time”] in which splinters of messianic time are shot through.

The “various moments” that constitute Dos Passos’ camera-text, April 1915, January 1917 and August 1918, are not “separated from” each other by “millennia” but by a more modest period, a little over three years. Despite its compressed chronology the materialist principle holds. Apportioned into “petrified” or “shivered cubes” (“beads”, in Benjamin’s lexicon) this episode institutes a *jetztzeit* or “now-time” within which “splinters” of discontinuous (now)time (“Ahora Now Maintenant [/] Vita Nuova”) are “shot through.” This is a plurality that exceeds dialogism, however. By “align[ing] multiple temporalities”, to use visual historian Leigh Raiford’s term, Dos Passos engineers a composite historiography in which pieces of (now)time interact, their limits or edges rubbing together, com[ing] into contact with each other. “History” thus formulated, and in the idiom of Volosinov, becomes a “site of incessant interaction and conflict.”³³⁹ Here, then, and only here, the Marxian notion of historical contingency gains traction and does so as a means of

³³⁹ Volosinov, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.90.

expressing the shocks, lapses and ruptures that must, according to Benjamin, attend properly “historical” formations. In accordance with the materialist notion of historical contingency and subsumed under the principle rubric of modernity this temporal (re)configuration entirely refutes - that is, it *explodes* - the bourgeois conceptualisation of “history” as an intrinsically fluid process only rarely interrupted or punctured by turbulence. Interruption is the rule rather than the exception as regard this constellated *Eye*. The time, to cite a princely formula, is out of joint.

This camera-text is not *chronologic* but what Volosinov/Bakhtin calls *chronotopic*. The chronotope as conceived of by Bakhtin is instructive with regard to the semantic economy of this constellated textual “now”. Literally meaning “time-space”, the designation “chronotope” refers, in Bakhtin’s wording, to “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed in literature”.³⁴⁰ The velocity of the materialist “blast” does more than blow holes out of (or into) history. It blows holes out of (or into) the text itself. Representing breaches or gullies in the textual “terrain” these metrical vacancies segment the camera-text into discreet historical epochs; they *entrench* them. The notion of textual “entrenchment” resonates on three linked levels: aesthetically, historically, and ideologically. I wish to explore these in turn.

ENTRENCHED FORMS: AN AESTHETICS OF RUPTURE

From the French verb “trancher”, meaning to cut or slice, “entrench” implicates Dos Passos’ textual praxis to the “scissoring” that would gain aesthetic traction

³⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.84.

as a formal component of French Surrealism.³⁴¹ More exactly, Dos Passos' temporal and spatial fragmentation infers an aesthetic intimacy with surrealist "collage", a process which sought, as Adamowicz writes, to "reveal the mechanisms of the assembling process by displaying its breaks."³⁴² Thus invested in "the overt staging of seams, material tears, semantic incoherence, iconographic anomalies or narrative nonsequiturs", surrealist compositional practice, so set out, provides an appropriate stylistic reference point for the cutting and pasting to which *The Camera Eye* (28) commits.³⁴³ Constituted by a series of prose "splinters", this materialist blasting deliberately eschews "semantic coherence" and "seamless narrative"; it facilitates the "appropriation and assemblage of disparate fragments"; it makes a feature of its "material tears". A number of formal similarities thus provide reasonable grounds for an aesthetic comparison between surrealist and materialist positions. Indeed, if we consider as pertinent Benjamin's assertion that "[t]o write history means giving dates their physiognomy", the surrealist inflections of *The Camera Eye* (28) become more pronounced.³⁴⁴ The inferred corporealization of the literary text supposes a surgical textuality. Here lies a text that, etherised upon the historicist table, goes under the knife. There is a significant reason, however, why we might hesitate in giving the green light to surrealism as the major aesthetic impetus. The sort of dismemberment to which Dos Passos' camera-text refers is keyed into the notion of ripping up the *social text*. Surrealism, in contrast, "reads

³⁴¹ Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage*; Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look – An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997); Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975). Dos Passos' compositional praxis also bears a residual connection to Tristan Tzara's Dadaist poetics.

³⁴² Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage*, p.15.

³⁴³ Idem.

³⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, p.164. That Benjamin proved more amenable to the surrealist position than many of his Marxist allies, Lukács, for example, is an establish fact, and one which lends support to the contention that Dos Passos' text, as the preeminent exemplification of a historical "constellation", is surrealistically inflected.

fragmentation not in terms of social breakdown but the world opened to desire – a lifeworld thus disarticulated through the fetish of the desiring I/eye.”³⁴⁵ *The Camera Eye* (28) is less an artefact of desire than it is a formalisation of an antagonistic relation between individual consciousness and an ever accelerating means of production.³⁴⁶

The dialectical montage of the Russian avant-garde film director Sergei Eisenstein proves a more telling aesthetic influence on Dos Passos’ formal practice than the “scissoring” of French Surrealism. The contact between the two men has been copiously mapped by Dos Passos’ biographers; I do not intend to rehash it here.³⁴⁷ Suffice it to say that Dos Passos met with Eisenstein in Moscow in 1928 and discussed at length the technique of montage. The meeting would leave a lasting impression on a literary formalism that would absorb “filmic” inflections.³⁴⁸ Justin Edwards maps the terrain:

Eisenstein's development of montage to incorporate Marxist ideology into the structure of his art must have appealed to Dos Passos, and provided the vision for the socialist employment of editing that was lacking in the work of Griffith. As a result, dialectical montage became a way for Dos Passos to represent the ways in which sociological forces and personal experiences perpetually come into conflict with each other.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ I am indebted to Douglas Haynes for offering his astute observations as regard the desiring “I”/“eye” of surrealist practice.

³⁴⁶ Marxism and Surrealism indeed jar in the present connexion yet this is not to say that there were no concerted efforts during the thirties to render them compatible. In 1938 Andre Breton endeavored to align Surrealism with a collective class struggle. Under the acronym FIARI (the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art) and with the help of with Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera, Breton produced a manifesto, “For an Independent Revolutionary Art”. For a history of FIARI, see Helena Lewis, “Surrealists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists: Theories of Art and Revolution in France between the Wars”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 61-68.

³⁴⁷ See Carr, *A Life*; and Townsend Ludington (ed.), *Twentieth Century Odyssey*.

³⁴⁸ As Compton Mackenzie would write in a contemporary review, “one lays down *Nineteen Nineteen* after reading it in much the same mood as one emerges from a good film”. Mackenzie, “Film or Book?”, p.4.

³⁴⁹ Edwards, “The Man”, unpaginated.

And yet “dialectical montage”, as it manifests in *The Camera Eye* (28), does more than solicit a representational strategy by which the intersections of the “I” and the “we” might be captured. While the technique indeed provides Dos Passos with an apposite means of formalizing the crisis of modernization, it simultaneously opens up, as a counter-impulse, a technological space within which the psychic injuries inflicted by late capital might be remedied. It is in this way, as Buck-Morss notes, “that technological *reproduction* can give back to humanity that very capacity for experience which technological *production* threatens to take away”. Such a provision, Buck-Morss continues, is visually sedimented and as such, informs the “optical unconscious” of this camera-text:

If industrialization has caused a crisis in perception due to the speeding-up of time and the fragmentation of space, film shows a healing potential by slowing down time and, through montage, constructing “synthetic realities” as new spatio-temporal orders, wherein “fragmented images” are brought together “according to a new law.”³⁵⁰

The “healing potential” that inheres in mechanical *reproduction* gathers in the caesura or “cuts” of *The Camera Eye* (28), that is, in their “trenches”. These white spaces, what Deleuze, in his discussion of cinema calls “internal splits”, are ideologically mandated, cutting against, if not fully *across*, the epistemic assumptions of the Fordist economy.³⁵¹ As moments of respite from (metrical) “activity”, these (line) “breaks” or pauses in “output” rank as “idle time” and thus prove antagonistic to the operations of a textual “system” that is calibrated to move without interruption, breaks or delays in production. Countering what Irr refers to as the “brutal and often lethal pace of modern technology” these

³⁵⁰ Buck-Morss, “Dream World”, pp.322-3.

³⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005), p.214.

vacancies in syntax gain semantic traction as pockets of resistance to the encroachment of technological modernity.³⁵² Evidently, the syntax of this historicist “edit” reneges on the *Camera Eye*’s previous commitments to continuous prose movement. Indeed, Dos Passos eschews the fluid and streamlined formal grammar that characterises the other fifty *Eyes*, implementing instead what Marjorie Perloff calls a “language of rupture”.³⁵³ The ruination of the sequential is in no way arbitrary but instigates what Siegfried Kracauer, in his writings on cinema, calls a “strategic interruption.”³⁵⁴ Against a backdrop of otherwise constant (textual) activity, then, these channels resonate as corridors of (metrical) inactivity within which the industry of textual production must cease. By opening up - that is by *engineering* - a set of enclaves within which the incessant activity of Fordist regimes falter, this camera-text serves, in Ian Balfour’s formula, to “perform a history understood as the reach for the emergency brake.”³⁵⁵ In effect, these syntactical breaks/brakes impart “drag” within an otherwise sleek and continuous prose mechanism; by implication, they imperil the efficiency of the prose machine. The incorporation of “blanks” into the textual system creates a formal entropy that problematises the camera-text’s (Fordist) rhythms. The efficiency of the prose system is thus annihilated by what Tichi, following Veblen, dubs “lag leak and friction”.³⁵⁶ *The Camera Eye*’s claims to “efficiency” are duly countermanded by a textuality that is resistant to the forms and syntax of Fordist productivity. Stubbornly, uniquely, and *radically* blank, these intervals facilitate, in Iser’s terms, “the release of hitherto unseen possibilities”. In sum, these ruptures

³⁵² Irr, *Suburbs of Dissent*, p.47.

³⁵³ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³⁵⁴ Kracauer, cited in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p.192.

³⁵⁵ Ian Balfour, “Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin’s History)”, *MLN*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (April 1991), pp.622-647, p.646.

³⁵⁶ Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, p.134.

“come into meaning” (Bull) as enforced cessations of textual production that alleviate the oppressive density of the *Camera Eye*.³⁵⁷ The camera-text is thus downgraded from what Deleuze calls an “opaque screen of information” to a more porous and potentially more *habitable* textual site.³⁵⁸ There is, it seems, some space that exceeds the limits of capital, some space, that is, in which to “breathe”. Albeit fleetingly, then, the “stifling” that attends the incessant productivity of industrial capital is suspended, resisted, broken down. Dos Passos’ textual practice, in this instance, offers itself as a sort of “language” or “practical consciousness”, in Marx’s terms, which cuts (*tranches*) across, thus resisting the formal grammar of late modernity. The resistance is fleeting, denoting but a glimmer of the dialectic. Yet despite the brevity of its realisation, this exchange resonates as *the* primary textual site within which the contradictions of capital can be thrashed out. In short, the materialist reflexes of *The Camera Eye* (28) betray what Paula Rabinowitz calls an “aesthetics of social significance”.³⁵⁹

CONTRACTIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS: RECASTING MARX

The second half of this chapter seeks to interrogate some of the ways in which the conceptual ontologism of two later *Camera Eyes* - the thirty-ninth and the fortieth - complicate and problematise the materialist intuitions that “flash up” in *The Camera Eye* (28). *The Camera Eye* (39) follows Dos Passos, now aged twenty-three and, in his own terms, “more red”³⁶⁰ than ever, as he immerses himself in the cultural ferment of Paris on the “first day” (NN 651) of the (politically radical) spring of 1919. Here, as it was in *The Camera Eye* (28) it is

³⁵⁷ Iser, *Act of Reading*, p.184.

³⁵⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p.14.

³⁵⁹ Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.60

³⁶⁰ Landsberg (ed.), *Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, p.47.

“spring”, a period of regrowth in which the shoots of the new begin to emerge through the spent wood of the old. As an occasion for juvenescence and, by implication, a forum for (regime) change “spring” is an opportune moment to “MAKE IT NEW”.³⁶¹ *The Camera Eye* (39) is clearly au fait with the Poundian idiom. Here are its “terminal” moments:

the dates fly

off the calendar we'll make everything new today is the
 Year I Today is the sunny morning of the first day of
 spring We gulp our coffee splash water on us jump into
 our clothes run downstairs step out wideawake into the
 first morning of the first day of the first year (NN 651)

Dismissive of historical precedent and peppered with claims to experiential “first[s]” these ebullient lines seem sufficiently equipped (or sufficiently blinkered) to “leaven the lump” that the “man in the swivel chair ha[d] made of” America’s “national consciousness”. Paradoxically, this camera-text can only “make everything new” by recycling the old, that is to say, by appropriating its own extant materials. This exchange recalls the dying moments of *The Camera Eye* (28), the anaphoric rhythms of which mark a similarly insistent desire to “make it new”: “tomorrow I hoped would be the first day of the first month / of the first year” (NN 370). *The Camera Eye* (39) exploits strikingly similar vocabulary in an attempt to delineate a “first year” or “Year I”, yet this is a call that has been heard somewhere before. Cut, then, from previous material and “zipped” into the fabric of the present exchange, this is an insistently self referential manoeuvre. Occasioning what Benjamin might refer to as a “deja vu”, these textual returns, in which *The Camera Eye* (28) is recast through *The*

³⁶¹ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p.265. It needs noting that the newness Pound sought was a means of mobilizing “renovation” rather than “revolution”.

Camera Eye (39), problematise the notion of the “new” and, in addition, snuff out any lingering claims to textual autonomy.³⁶² Evidently, the “new” can only thrive by poaching on the “old”. Filtered, or *shot through* “the dialectical “optics” of a modernity that is both ancient and new” this contradiction is symptomatic of an aesthetic modernity that sustains, and in turn, is sustained by generative tensions between dominant and emergent social forms, between that which is an established part of a particular cultural formation and that which seeks to displace it.³⁶³ As Richard W. Allen, following Adorno, notes: “[i]nnovation appears as repetition in the images of itself modernity secretes, but they also reveal to the cultural historian the eternal promise of the new in the guise of the always already old.”³⁶⁴

The impatience with which this thirty-ninth camera-text seeks to coax something new from the (shell of the) old, connotes an essentially antihistorical impulse. Sustaining an attempt to refresh and enliven, Dos Passos’ prose-conveyor gainsays history; better yet, it gainsays history’s history, the materiality of which came vibrantly - if painfully - to the fore in *The Camera Eye* (28). Dos Passos’ verb tenses, for example, reinforce the fetish that modernity makes of the present: “the dates fly” and “we gulp” constitute grammatical forms that spurn the past tense within which the majority of *The Camera Eyes* are couched.³⁶⁵ (The anaphorically invested phrasing “when the” that appears in *The Camera Eye* (28) provides arguably the preeminent exemplification of a prose vernacular that is grammatically tethered to the past tense.) Obsessive in

³⁶² In “Some Remarks on Folk Art” [1929] Benjamin delineates his notion of *deja vu*. See Jennings (et al.), *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 1, pp.278-280, p.279.

³⁶³ Buck-Morss, “Dream World”, p.314.

³⁶⁴ Richard W. Allen, “The Aesthetic Experience of Modernity: Benjamin, Adorno, and Contemporary Film Theory”, *New German Critique*, No. 40 (Winter, 1987), pp.225-240, p.232.

³⁶⁵ In the final phases of his essay “Surrealism”, Benjamin writes: “only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.” Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 1, pp.207-221, p.217.

its focus on “presentness” yet residually indebted to the past, this camera-text incites a fetish of immediacy which presupposes energy, action and vibrancy, what Dos Passos called, in 1922, “vigor, force, modernity”.³⁶⁶ Impelled by a desire that his prose text might sear through the “stodgy complacency of the nineteenth century”, *The Camera Eye* (39) “burns up last year’s diagrams” (NN 651), “leaven[ing] the lump”, as it were.³⁶⁷ The “antihistorical” impulse of this *Eye* gives rise to an internal contradiction, however. As Dos Passos cauterises the past he simultaneously reduces to cinders the context against which any comprehension of the “new” must ultimately depend.

This high-modernist reconceptualisation of the new as a now without a was is further problematised by Dos Passos’ inadequate treatment of political newness, the possibility, that is, of social revolution.³⁶⁸ As many commentators have noted, the late teens and early twenties was a period of immense social turbulence. Peter Nicholls stresses that “[t]he ‘Red Summer’ of 1919 was the spectacular but inevitable expression of the pent-up violence provoked by the ‘Red Scare’ of the late teens and that would continue into the early twenties.”³⁶⁹ Dos Passos would testify to the difficulties that many on the left faced in their attempt to displace industrial capitalism as a dominant ideological formation. As Dos Passos put it in *Nineteen Nineteen*, “[t]o be a red in the summer of 1919 was worse than being a hun or a pacifist in the summer of 1917.” (NN 747) Despite the diurnal dangers that flanked affiliation with the left, many were energised toward political activity. Characterised by mass political suppressions and bitter class conflict, the period seemed ripe for a radical realignment of the means of production. As my next chapter attests, the revolution did not work

³⁶⁶ Dos Passos, *Rosinante*, in Ludington (ed.), *Travel Books*, p.30.

³⁶⁷ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.32.

³⁶⁸ The high modernism, that is, of Eliot rather than Pound, for whom the “was” was always important.

³⁶⁹ Peter Nicholls, “Destinations: *Broom* (1921-1924) and *Secession* (1922-1924)”, p.6.

out as many had hoped, yet as potential “time of overturn”, 1919 was considered by many Marxists, especially in Europe, as the seedbed for the social revolution. As Dos Passos wrote in 1932, the spring of 1919 “seemed the beginning of the flood instead of the beginning of the ebb.”³⁷⁰ Given the incendiary political atmosphere that enveloped Paris in the spring of 1919 it is noteworthy that the “revolution” (NN 651) to which Dos Passos refers is artistically rather than politically derived.³⁷¹ Couched in “la poesie of manifestoes” (NN 651), the “revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower” has much to do with “Cezanne Picasso Modigliani” and somewhat less to do with Marx. Indeed, the “Paris of 1919 / paris-mutuel”, as drawn here by Dos Passos, proves less a space of political “turnaround” than a vortex of cultural consumption.³⁷² Visually stimulated by the “sedate architecture” of the “Louvre” (NN 650) and aurally by the “steeplechase gravity of cellos tun-/ing up on the stage at the Salle Gaveau oboes and a tri-/angle” Dos Passos subordinates the material concerns of “the real world” to the ephemeral, bourgeois pleasures of the “Cirque Medrano”. The “spiritual malady of tourism”, to cite Gold’s idiomatic phrasing, seems to have wriggled its way back into Dos Passos’ camera-text. Indeed, the political distinction between *The Camera Eye* (39) and *The Camera Eye* (28) is stark: whereas the earlier exchange embeds Marx in its structure, the latter does no more than “chalk” him up, partially, and in translation, on the grimy walls of a Paris pissoir. This is the Marxian “interlude” as given by *The Camera Eye* (39):

³⁷⁰ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.146.

³⁷¹ It is also noteworthy that the majority of Dos Passos’ novel is set in France rather than the United States. That political tensions in Paris in the Spring of 1919 were dwarfed by those in the United States is a point of record. Given the political radicalism of *Nineteen Nineteen*, Dos Passos’ decision to locate almost all of his novel in a Europe “groggy with theatre and painting and music” adds to the political ambivalence of the text and suggests, ultimately, an inability to deal with “the raw structure of history” as it would manifest in the politically hostile climate of the United States.

³⁷² Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.146.

la poesie of manifestos always freshtinted on the kiosks
 and slogans scrawled in chalk on the urinals L'UNION DES
 TRAVAILLEURS FERA LA PAIX DU MONDE
 revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower (NN 651)

Typographically distinct from the rest of the camera-text, a brief political citation - L'UNION DES TRAVAILLEURS FERA LA PAIX DU MONDE - provides *The Camera Eye* (39)'s only direct evocation of a "political unconscious" in Jameson's definition.³⁷³ Dos Passos' "capitalised" typography, which locks this flashing reacquaintance with Marx in the "upper case", may be a visual pun on the rapid (self-)aggrandisement of capital, a "value" that congeals in the camera's eye; it may not. What it *is*, of course, is a translation from German into French of the final, similarly "capitalised" line of *The Communist Manifesto*: "PROLETARIER ALLER LÄNDER VEREINIGT EUCH!" ("Workers Of All Countries Unite!") Cut from arguably the formative document of nineteenth century political economy and grafted onto the (antagonistic) Fordist prose-conveyor, this (famously) Marxian refrain seems, in the first instance, adequately positioned to pose a viable challenge to the ideological underpinnings of monopoly capitalism. Indeed, a case could be made that by re-invoking the Marxian remit in a Fordist context this moment might, figuratively speaking, knock out capital's antibodies, thus facilitating substantive changes to the "social metabolism." A different argument will be made here. The brief appeal to Marx is not, I argue, *The Camera Eye*'s greatest political asset but its signal frailty. Marx is this camera-text's toxic asset. As a fleeting and entirely superficial political "event" this intrusion of Marxian vocabulary into the camera-text's stringently Fordist vernacular does not connote an upsurge (or "flash") of a hitherto dormant radicalism but a *mea culpa*

³⁷³ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981), p.20.

for Dos Passos' dwindling Marxism. This, in short, is the point at which Dos Passos' socialism starts to slide. Again, *The Camera Eye* (28) is the pertinent reference against which the political insufficiencies of *The Camera Eye* (39) can be gauged. Recall that in *The Camera Eye* (28) Dos Passos implements a materialist methodology as a theoretical centre around which an eminently historical "constellation" traces its orbit. In *The Camera Eye* (39) an entirely different etiquette obtains. Political meaning inheres not in the deep structures of the text but on its surface. Specifically the "political" graces the surface a single machined epithet lifted from Marx: "L'UNION DES TRAVAILLEURS FERA LA PAIX DU MONDE".

The incorporation of this brief political "slogan" into the Fordist context is problematic on two linked levels. First, it vitiates the political context from which it is taken; second it testifies to the souring of Dos Passos' leftism. By selecting for integration in his own text this particular excerpt from Marx's, and *only* this excerpt, Dos Passos reduces to a "soundbite" the entire corpus of Marxian political economy. As a "part" that is (mis)taken for a whole, this metonymic assertion belches out an automated response to an unspoken complexity. This is Marxism *reductio ad absurdum*; into a single compact and portable textual location issues the putative "essence" of Marxian thought. The miniaturisation of Marx is a logical, if not *inevitable*, consequence of its subjection to the forms and syntax of aesthetic Fordism. "Marx" is embedded *in* and held fast [*stillstellung*] by a textual regime that constantly seeks to streamline its operations, rid itself of unnecessary parts and motions, eradicate "waste" (now with scatological undertones) and thus maximise its "productivity". Estranged from the theoretically saturated context in which it originally appeared and "zipped" into an antagonistic modernist paradigm, "class" is subjected to the directives of the efficiency movement. Impounded by the syntax of the Fordist conveyor, this reference to Marxian political thought infers Dos Passos recanting on his previous commitments to "Marxianize the

American tradition.” Instead, he “Americanize[s] Marx” and, by so doing, evidences a shift in formal practice. Here, Marxism is the “thing” that is subjected to the demands of the Fordist economy. Deemed unwieldy and in need of trimming, Miniaturised and plugged into the Fordist context, Marx’s writings are “streamlined” and thus tailored (that is, “Taylored”) to meet specifically modern dimensions. This “reduction” is, of course, only one side of the dialectic. Incorporated into the Fordist situation, “Marx”, and by implication, the sociality to which he synecdochically refers, is simultaneously subjected to the machinery of mass production. *Reduced* but at the same time *reproduced*, Marx is limited by the apparatus of modernity yet emboldened by the wide circulation which it necessarily infers. Thus, “expansion” clashes with “contraction” to produce a new synthetic outcome for a political discourse that, for many Marxists, was in need of enlivening.³⁷⁴ Jammed between the interlocking cogs of “miniaturisation” and “massification”, Dos Passos’ textual system invokes a wider “system” of accumulation, emergent Fordism, a system that strives to massify its own products yet simultaneously render discreet the (social) processes by which these products are produced.

A second degradation issues from the first, and concerns the vitiation of Dos Passos’ political subjectivity. Once more, *The Camera Eye* (28) provides the pertinent frame of reference for *The Camera Eye* (39). If the former episode implements a fully blown materialist conception of history, the latter implements a casual, superficial one. By *The Camera Eye* (39) Dos Passos, it seems, lacks the energy - and perhaps the enthusiasm - to muster up and subsequently work through a Marxian “system” that might formalise the dialectic. The limitations of Dos Passos’ leftism appear to have been reached.

³⁷⁴ For a valuable discussion on the “profound dilemma” that confronted European Marxists as regard the emergence of Taylorism, see Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, p.241.

THE LOCATION OF POLITICS: RADICALISM IN A PISSOIR

The physical location within which this brief “evocation” of Marx receives articulation confirms our suspicion of Dos Passos’ growing hostility toward the Marxian position. Despite its direct citation of Marx this camera-text sets out a space within which the Marxian discourse can only stifle. Indeed, it is *through* its mention of Marx that *The Camera Eye* (39) provides something to squeeze. Confined to the cramped dimensions of a Parisian pissoir, radical political sentiment is “brought inside”. Decanted into individual “kiosks”, the call for class solidarity is “internalised”, “disseminated” and “consumed” in “private” booths. The Marxian citation is “smuggled away from society” and denuded of the sociality upon which its political assumptions depend. As a private expression of class solidarity this signatory act metaphorically evokes the growing discomfort between the “I” and the “we” that would become embedded in Dos Passos’ prose writing by 1932. In addition to its impounding at the level of syntax, then, “L’UNION DES TRAVAILLEURS FERA LA PAIX DU MONDE” is “held fast” [*Stillstellung*] by a cramped physicality. Penned into a strangled ideological no-space, Marxian thought is “inscribed” only to be “frozen” or *petrified*, in Sartre’s terms; its significance is “fixed”. This Marxian citation, and more urgently, the radical politics to which it refers, is duly prevented from spilling out into the social context. In an ironic feint, then, the “arrival” of “Marx” is the “event” which guarantees his disappearance. “[S] crawled in chalk” in a “kiosk” Marx is, in effect, “withdrawn from social circulation”; he, to adapt a term from chapter 5, has become “hoardable”. That these physical “kiosks” constitute “holding cells” that immobilise and thus render inert potentially difficult political meaning is entirely in keeping with the ideological function of *The Camera Eye* which seeks, in short, to provide designated textual spaces - kiosks - within which surplus semantic liquidities can proliferate. This stifled call to class consciousness is privy to a battery of restrictions. Impounded by its syntax, smuggled into physical “kiosks” and

embedded in the “safety-valve” that is *The Camera Eye*, Marx is firmly secured. The chances of a socialist leak are slim indeed.

The notion of leakage as a form of excreted social surplus can be tied to Georges Bataille’s notion of “ebullition”. In his study *The Accursed Share* (1991), Bataille, a base materialist indeed, reasons that

[i]f the space is completely occupied, if there is no outlet anywhere, nothing bursts; but the pressure is there. In a sense life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources possibly involving large squanderings of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: without, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion.³⁷⁵

Indebted to Sartre’s theorization of capital as an airless chamber within which one can only stifle, Bataille’s notion of ebullition sits flush with the ideological imperatives of the *Camera Eye*, a “closed container” for the pooling of subjective liquidities. We might in fact have drawn upon Bataille as a pertinent means of theorizing the “waste” or “excess” that “bursts” and “pours out” into the gullies or “trenches” that segment *The Camera Eye* (28). This previous moment, rendered porous by the collapse and fragmentation of time and space, indeed “involv[es] large squanderings of energy”; it ultimately “enters into ebullition”. The notion of ebullition is especially pertinent in the context of *The Camera Eye* (39), however. The dialectical tension between expulsion and withholding, the conflict that is, between “forcing out” and “keeping in” is resonant not just at the syntactical level but at the physical.

It is worth noting that as conduits for the expulsion and channelling of waste products, the camera-texts take on Freudian resonances. Specifically, the dialectical tension between ridding and retention, between withholding and

³⁷⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: A Theory of General Economy, Volume 1: Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p.30.

proliferation, is flanked by Dos Passos' (strengthening) compulsion to control the release of surplus matter. *The Camera Eye* signifies as an aesthetic "excretion" that link in suggestive ways to the Freudian conception of anal fixation. Given the political ridding to which Dos Passos was concomitantly committed, this expelling is worth consideration. In this moment of abjection, political and aesthetic degradations elide. Indeed, and in an image that might appeal to the surrealist imagination of, say, Tristan Tzara, Dos Passos here commits to shitting through the eye. The comparison of "anus" and "eye" / "I" as organs for purging or omitting matter deemed excessive to the physical "system", provides a theoretical context *for* and a useful counterweight *to* the Marxian notion of hoarded waste. If money, as the pulped and laundered mass of an excreted and degraded labour, can be conceived of as a form of "shit" - money, that is, as labour which has been reconstituted as exchange value - the association comes into relief. Freud's thought on waste thus provides a supplementary means of conceptualizing the paucity - or drying up - of *Camera Eyes* as the trilogy develops. Indeed, Dos Passos' ability to "hold in" the waste products of a degraded (political) past are entirely in keeping with the Freudian model. As Dos Passos gets older his control over the surplus - the waste or shit - seemingly tightens; he has "trained himself", we might say, to hold in, or better yet, "control" the (bowel) movements of his camera-text.³⁷⁶ Thus as Dos Passos gets older, and moves to the right, less (leftist) "shit" flows through the system. Our brief recourse to Freud is intended as a suggestive way of supporting the Marxian analysis, not of displacing it. Indeed, Freud, I would argue, is subordinated to Marx as the dominant theoretical lens through we come to view this channeling of flows.

Lewd in its setting and, for many, in its subject matter, this socialist

³⁷⁶ See Sigmund Freud "The Excretory Functions in Psychoanalysis and Folklore" in Philip Rieff (ed.), *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier, 1963), pp.219-22; "Anal Erotism and the Castration Complex", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1959) pp.72-88.

graffiti, antisocially inflected, connotes what Taussig calls “defacement”. To deface, Taussig claims, is to besmirch or desecrate that which was previously held as sacred, a flag perhaps, a statue, or paper money. Defacement, in short, is “what happens when something precious is despoiled.”³⁷⁷ In the first instance the thing “despoiled” is *The Communist Manifesto* - the bible, perhaps, of mid nineteenth century social protest movements. Additionally, this act of defacement sullies the materialist moment that proved so pristine in *The Camera Eye* (28). That Marx is “scrawled in chalk on the urinals” is indicative not just of the brutal abridgement of Marxian thought, then, but the degradation of Dos Passos’ socialist sympathies. This Marxian doggerel resonates as a clandestine - and conceivably shameful - “expression”, that is to say, a “letting out” of Dos Passos’ previous commitments to the political left. Both Marx and Dos Passos are tarnished by what Taussig calls “the proliferating effect of defacement”.³⁷⁸ The “kiosks” of subaltern Paris offer themselves as “semantically generative space[s] of annulment” that, in turn, provide a cramped location, a space of obscenity, for the dissemination of a degraded radicalism.³⁷⁹ With “communism” degraded and figuratively banished to the pisser it is becoming plain that Dos Passos’ belief in revolutionary politics as an agent of substantive social change is starting to wobble (or, to shadow the camera-text’s “Vorticist” inflections, beginning to disappear down the plughole).

If this *Camera Eye* provides scant evidence of a Marxian reflex, it provides abundant evidence of an *aesthetic* one. Having plumbed the semantic realisations of the “slogan” and pondered its confinement to the “kiosks”, I seek, in the closing section of this reading, to concentrate on the materiality of the urinal itself. That a French urinal provides the inscriptional surface upon

³⁷⁷ Taussig, *Defacement*, p.1-2.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. p.29.

³⁷⁹ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (London: Chicago University Press, 1987), p.460.

which the degradation of Dos Passos' leftism achieves articulation substantiates the contention that the "revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower" (NN 651) is aesthetically rather than politically mediated. *The Camera Eye* (39) makes explicit reference to "Cezanne Picasso [and] Modigliani", yet the primary aesthetic reference is to Marcel Duchamp. More exactly, the graffitied "urinal" begs comparison with Duchamp's famous piss-take, *Fountain* (1917; Fig. 2), an installation with which Dos Passos was patently familiar by the time he began composition of *Nineteen Nineteen* in 1930.



Fig. 2, Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917), as photographed by Alfred Stieglitz.

Selected and inscribed "R. Mutt '17", and submitted anonymously, *Fountain* was slated to appear in a New York exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists in April 1917.³⁸⁰ Duchamp's "readymade", however, would never receive a proper airing. *Fountain* was exhibited behind a partition which ran along the length of the gallery; the work was thus hidden from public view. The exhibition would take place, yet *Fountain* remained behind the arras. As does the urinal that bears the (anonymous) imprimatur of Marx, *Fountain*

³⁸⁰ Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1993), p.413.

would secrete itself in a private space, an individual “kiosk”. Both urinals, then, and by association the meanings that congeal in their inscriptions, are “smuggled away from society”. Two signatory manoeuvres are semantically complicit in a joint project of defacement; two urinals, one signed “R. Mutt” by a Frenchman in America, the other signed “K. Marx” by an American in France, sustain a chiasmic transatlantic relation. I deem the “urinal”, as a medium tapped first by Duchamp and then by Dos Passos to be what Godden, in an altogether different context, designates a “crackable euphemism”:³⁸¹ for Duchamp it provided a means of degrading, by rendering banal, aesthetic discourse;³⁸² for Dos Passos it resonated as a means of extracting and disposing the waste products of a dangerously bloated political ideology. Notwithstanding the slippage between these two epistemologies, the tension between Mutt and Marx provides an aesthetic reference for “the tarnished idea of socialism [which] increasingly pervaded Dos Passos’s political thinking”.³⁸³ If Benjamin is right that the “logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” this daubing, replete with Duchampian inflections, resonates as textual evidence of a first stage in Dos Passos’ lurch to the political right.³⁸⁴

Thus politics is subordinated to aesthetics. As set out in the context of *The Camera Eye* (39), the “Paris of 1919 / paris-mutuel” is reminiscent of a city in the thrall of aesthetic rotations. The “roulettewheel that spins round the Tour Eiffel” infers an aleatory turning that privileges aesthetic “revolutions” over

³⁸¹ Godden, “Quentin Compson: Tyrrhenian Vase or Crucible of Race?” in Noel Polk (ed.), *New Essays on Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 99-137, p.99.

³⁸² For an incisive commentary on the aesthetic signification of Duchamp’s “Readymades” see the preface to Arthur C. Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp.1-32.

³⁸³ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, p.119.

³⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.234.

social ones. For Dos Passos, as for myriad expats and sojourners, Paris was a dynamic centre of cultural capital from which energy would radiate through Europe and across to the United States. Certainly, for Dos Passos, who situates all but one of his *Camera Eyes* in France, Paris was the epicentre of the modernist vortex, the “point of maximum energy.”³⁸⁵ It was, at the same time, the (plug) hole through which Dos Passos’ politics plummets.

In distinction to *The Camera Eye* (39), which forces a “Marxian” history of the class struggle into a set of cramped semantic locations, *The Camera Eye* (40) affords what seems ample room to a portrayal of a city in the thrall of massive social upheaval. “Class” is no longer a shameful conversation that secretes itself in a public loo; it, having “spilled out” onto the streets, comes out into the open. The opacities that dog the previous camera-text are thus subordinated, in *The Camera Eye* (40), to a more fluid, transparent formal prose. Indeed, *Nineteen Nineteen*’s pre-penultimate camera-text evokes, and evokes with a lucidity that eclipses any other *Camera Eye*, the bitter class antagonisms that suffused capital and labour in Paris in the radical summer of 1919. Referring most likely to the second week of June, Dos Passos’ camera-text thus fixes its “Eye”/“I” on a “flashpoint” in the social history of the class struggle, a point at which capital sought to deflate the insurrectionary pressure of organized labour.³⁸⁶ What begins as a saunter quickly turns into a blitz:

I walked all over town general strike no busses no
taxicabs the gates of the Metro closed Place de Iéna I
saw red flags Anatole France in a white beard placards
MUTILES DE LA GUERRE and the nutcracker faces of
the agents de sûreté

³⁸⁵ Ezra Pound, “Vortex” *BLAST*, Vol. 1 (1914), p.153.

³⁸⁶ The “general strike” to which Dos Passos refers is most likely a reference not to a full scale shutdown but to the steel strike that brought Paris to a “standstill” [*stillstellung*] in the days following June 9, 1919.

Mort aux Vaches

at the place de la Concorde the Republican Guards in
christmastree helmets were riding among the crowd whack
-ing the Parisians with the flats of their swords scraps of
the *International* worriedlooking soldiers in their helmets
lounging with grounded arms all along the Grands
Boulevards

Vive les poilus

at the Republique à bas de guerre MORT AUX
VACHES à bas la Paix des Assassins (NN 699)

Via metaphoric comparisons, Dos Passos evokes capital's desire to obliterate the resistance of a unionized workforce; "agents de sûreté" with "nutcracker faces" (NN 699) personify the literal crackdown on social dissent that would provide 1919 with its historical identity. As custodians of capital who guarantee the continued fluidity of moveable property, these (anticoagulant) "agents" clash with the bearers of (blood) "red flags" (699) that seek, by striking, to bring the flux of capital to a "standstill", to make it clot. This *Eye* focuses, then, on the dialectical interactions between two antagonistic ideological imperatives. In the blue corner: capital, primed to unleash a "RUTHLESS WAR TO CRUSH REDS" (697); in the red corner: labour, "united in a mighty bloc against all domination and exploitation" (698). Here, and in stark contrast to *The Camera Eye* (39), the "eye"/"I" of the camera appears to be in the service of labour rather than an agent of its squeezing. Indeed, *The Camera Eye* (40) proffers a sympathetic portrait of labour's efforts to resist its liquidation - in both senses of this term - by corporate capital: "Barricades we must build barricades" (699) Dos Passos notes, as a means of defending from the

cav-

alry charging twelve abreast firecracker faces scared and

mean behind their big moustaches under their
christmastree helmets (NN 699-700)

As a supplementary line of defence Dos Passos erects a set of rhetorical barricades that lend additional support to labour's attempts at repelling what Dos Passos slyly dubs the "charging" of corporate capital. The invective "Mort aux Vaches", literally "Death to Pigs" or logically extended "Fuck the Police", is an epithet which recurs throughout this episode and connotes a vehement verbal assault on dominant power structures. A series of "placards" daubed with political "slogans" add to the rhetorical intensity of the exchange. "MUTILES DE LA GUERRE" and "Vive les poilus" refer to injured French soldiers who, having fought in what Dos Passos describes as a "cockeyed lunatic asylum of war" (NN 529) to "*Safeguard the Morgan Loans*" (449), were now being targeted as political agitators in a parallel war for "social justice" (513). That Dos Passos seems broadly to support the cause of organised labor does not mean that his socialist sympathies have re-emerged from the u-bend, however. This camera-text may have temporarily brought "class" into the open but its critique of capital fails to permeate beneath the level of rhetorical insistence. Here a "class consciousness" resides not in a centrally politicized structure, as was fleetingly the case in *The Camera Eye* (28) but in a set of "slogans" that, while "political" in coloration, remain peripheral in their sociality; these sayings, even when coupled with "*scraps of the Internationale*" (NN 699) connote little more than "protests scrawled on the margins."³⁸⁷ If *The Camera Eye* (28) was a site of ideological struggle, a space within which tacit semantic realizations push through dialectically accountable cracks in structure, *The Camera Eye* (40) is a choked space, one which displays a hermetic formal unity. In contrast to its predecessor, this later exchange exemplifies a rhetorical, and by implication a *superficial*, engagement with the

³⁸⁷ See Dos Passos' retrospectively written "Preface", *U.S.A.*, p.1.

class struggle.

The final lines of *The Camera Eye* (40) underscore the ideological shortfall and, ultimately, testify to a fuller disintegration of a coherent socialist position. Impelled to relocate by “revolver shots” fired into the crowd by the “gendarmerie nationale” (699), Dos Passos flees from the epicentre (or vortex) of social activity; moving back “inside”, he takes up a detached position in the “dark and quiet” sanctuary of a “little cafe” in a Parisian “side street” (idem). Dos Passos’ “relocation” is metaphorically inflected. Having figuratively channelled himself away from the (political) centre and embezzled himself within a private location, Dos Passos maintains a safe distance from the social. Thus hoarded, Dos Passos talks revolution with the “working men”, some of whom inform him that “the revolution had triumphed in Marseilles and Lille”. Perhaps contended by the news, perhaps made anxious by it, Dos Passos “drink [s] grog americain”; he worries about his wet shoes. (700) Convinced that the coast is clear, Dos Passos “peeps out from under the sliding shutter”. An occluded peep through a crack between the floor and through the “hard rain” yields to Dos Passos’ eye a pair of seemingly mismatched and quotidian artefacts: a “smashed umbrella and an old checked cap”. At the literal level, “umbrella” and “cap” are simply “dead objects”, erstwhile repositories of use value that, “smashed” and “old” have been laid to rest in the “clean stone gutter”. Despite being drained of their use value, however, these tarnished coverings are semantically viable. Indeed, it is *as* “dead objects” and *because* of their draining that these items become metaphorically accountable. “[U]mbrella” and “cap” constitute (ruined) things that stand in for other (ruined) things. Implicated in a perverse paratactical embrace (placed, that is, “side by side”) “umbrella” and “cap” invoke the forlorn *mood* of the French left in the wake of capital’s “smash[ing]” of labor. The sense of desolation and defeat is palpable; the political energy that attended the recent surge of resistance to capital has been siphoned off; aside from “smashed”, “old” and “torn”

artefacts, the streets are “empty”. With this depletion of social energy “the dreams of a saner social order of those who can’t stand the law of dawg eat dawg” (FTC 45) drain away.

Crucially, Dos Passos also eyes a fragment of a fragment that seems to have been seen somewhere before. Laying in the “clean stone gutter” next to the “smashed umbrella” and “old cap” is “a torn handbill”, the text of which reads: “L’UNION DES TRAVAILLEURS FERA”. This discarded scrap of paper constitutes a remnant of the Marxian discourse that was “scrawled in chalk” (NN 651) in the previous *Eye*. An eroded form of an already fraught political pronouncement, this fragment of a fragment invokes the vestigial remains of a squeezed and, finally, tattered sociality. As the next chapter seeks to show, it is in *The Big Money* that the “shutters” finally come down on Dos Passos’ affiliations with the left.

CHAPTER SIX

EYES, RIGHT: *THE BIG MONEY*

In the last twenty-five years a change has come over the visual habits of Americans [...] From being a wordminded people we are becoming an eyeminded people.

Dos Passos, "George Grosz Comes to America" (1936).³⁸⁸

Following the twenty-seven *Camera Eyes* of *The 42nd Parallel* come fifteen in *Nineteen Nineteen*. The final instalment of the trilogy, *The Big Money* (1936), yields only nine.³⁸⁹ During the course of its composition, then, *U.S.A.* loosens its reliance upon *The Camera Eye* as a means of formal expression. This final chapter explores - and subsequently seeks to theorise - the consequences of this conspicuous yet "seldom noted" gear change.³⁹⁰ The critical pile tends toward silence with regard to this particular shift in textual practice. The most significant mapping of *The Camera Eye* remains Westerhoven's useful albeit entirely uncritical essay of 1976, "Autobiographical Elements in the Camera Eye." Drawing extensively on archival materials, diaries, and correspondences, Westerhoven plots, with painstaking precision, the compositional history of *The Camera Eyes* and, by so doing, leavens some of the opacities that attend these narratives. Despite the rigour of his researches, however, Westerhoven ducks out of the difficulty that these episodes infer. Here is his rather flimsy judgement as to the reasoning behind the waning "camera consciousness"³⁹¹ in the context of *The Big Money*:

³⁸⁸ Dos Passos' article was first published in the September 1936 edition of *Esquire*; it is reprinted in Ludington (ed.), *Travel Books*, p.610.

³⁸⁹ *The Big Money* is also the longest of the three novels at 471 pages. *The 42nd Parallel* is 345 pages; *Nineteen Nineteen* is 398 pages.

³⁹⁰ In an essay of 1977 Townsend Ludington notes that "critics have seldom noted the twenty-seven-fifteen-nine order and to my knowledge have never discussed its significance." Ludington, *American Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Nov., 1977), pp.443-446, p.444.

³⁹¹ Deleuze, *Cinema*, Vol. 1, p.76.

*For some reason, Dos Passos used the Camera Eye less as his trilogy progressed. The Big Money contains only nine Camera Eyes, most of them very general in character, as if the author had decided that his personal memories are not really as important as he had thought originally. Whatever his motives, the authorial presence in the Camera Eye is diminished dramatically; most of the observations could have been written by anyone who lived in New York during the twenties or who was emotionally involved in the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Nevertheless it is useful to point out that Dos Passos did all these things, that he knew what he was writing about from first hand experience.*³⁹²

The phrasing “as if”, “most of”, “whatever” and “could have been” prod vaguely in the direction of exegesis yet reveal a floundering that mimics, rather than critiques its subject. Westerhoven is quite right to assert that *The Camera Eyes* have “diminished dramatically” by the end of the trilogy; he is also correct in his claim that “most of” *The Big Money’s Camera Eyes* are “very general in character”. He makes no attempt, however, to engage with *why* they are so few nor *why* they might be so “general”. I seek to remedy this two-pronged inadequacy in the coming pages.

The disavowal of the camera-text is neither sudden nor abrupt in its realisation. It does not connote a revelatory “flash” or an “explosion” in the materialist sense as set out in chapter 6. In fact, the “dethronement of the eye [/"I"]” is part of a protracted and attritional process.³⁹³ Stretching across over 1200 pages of text,³⁹⁴ covering thirty years of “historical” time (1898-1927) and nine years of personal chronology (1927-1936), it takes a while for *U.S.A.* to work the camera out of its “system”. It takes a while, that is, to excrete the excreted. Despite the gradualism with which Dos Passos omits/emits *The Camera Eyes* as a structuring narrative, the change is marked in its impact. The

³⁹² Westerhoven, “Autobiographical Elements”, p.362, emphases added.

³⁹³ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.216.

³⁹⁴ In the Library of America edition, *U.S.A.* comprises of 1240 pages; other editions, including the first edition, published in 1938, exceeds 1500 pages.

present chapter argues that the (incremental) phasing out of the (excremental) *Camera Eye* resonates on three linked levels. First, as an opening section suggests, the shift is visually freighted. The attenuation of the textual “Eye” / “I” is indicative *of* and accountable *to* the “regime of attentiveness and distraction” that flanked the transition from production to consumption in the first third of the twentieth century.³⁹⁵ Second, it will be argued that the de-intensification of the textual *Eye* is economically inflected. Building upon the argument of chapter 5 that *The Camera Eyes* function as visual hoards within which surplus textual liquidities gather, I contend that the depletion constitutes a tacit recapitalization of the textual economy. Third, I suggest that the loss of visual traction is politically derived. If *Nineteen Nineteen* represents the point at which Dos Passos’ Marxian commitments begin to feel the squeeze, *The Big Money* represents the point at which these commitments are finally choked off. Three attenuations: visual, economic, and political thus inform what Ricoeur might call the “conceptual need” of *The Camera Eye* and provide critical direction for the coming arguments.³⁹⁶

ANTI-RETINAL AESTHETICS: *THE BIG MONEY*

The twenty-seven - fifteen - nine trajectory prizes loose, if it doesn’t fully disable, the “eye grasp”³⁹⁷ that asserts a “binding grip”³⁹⁸ on *The 42nd Parallel* and to a lesser extent *Nineteen Nineteen*. Having played a formative role in the trilogy’s first two books, Dos Passos’ “kino-eye” asserts a dubious authority in

³⁹⁵ Crary, *Suspension of Perception*, p.30.

³⁹⁶ Ricoeur, “The Metaphoric Process”, p.146.

³⁹⁷ Currell, in Acland (ed.), *Residual Media*, p.353.

³⁹⁸ Crary, *Suspension of Perception*, p.126.

its third.³⁹⁹ The “extraordinary visual orientation of Dos Passos’s great trilogy”, in North’s wording, appears to lose a significant amount of traction by the publication of *The Big Money*.⁴⁰⁰ Now only nine in number, the machined visions of *The Big Money* seem to problematise Dos Passos’ affirmation that “Americans” were becoming “eyeminded”. If “the visual habits of Americans” had strengthened, as Dos Passos claims, one might justifiably query why *The Camera Eye*, as U.S.A.’s preeminently “eyeminded” narrative mode, doesn’t play a more significant role in the final volume of the text. Conceivably, by banishing to the periphery of the text the “kino-eye”, replete with its Fordist mannerisms and objectives, the “formal premises of modernist opticality”, in the idiom of Rosalind Krauss, are undermined rather than confirmed.⁴⁰¹

I seek to posit a counter-argument here. That *The Big Money* retains so few *Camera Eyes* reinforces rather than denigrates Dos Passos’ contention that, by the mid thirties, “Americans” were acquiring proficiency in the eye-dialect of American modernity. Between 1911 and 1936, the period demarcated by Dos Passos as one of visual realignment, the “iconicity” of modern industrial capitalism, voluminously made manifest in corporate skyscrapers, suspension bridges and, most urgently, in consumable goods, would burn itself onto the collective retina of the national consciousness.⁴⁰² It is beyond the bounds of this chapter to theorise adequately the mobility of the “eye”/“I” as it scans the various locations of American capital. Suffice it to say that by the publication of *The Big Money* in 1936 many Americans had come to accept as normal the ideological prerequisites of a visual culture that would have jarred on the

³⁹⁹ In his diaries, Dziga Vertov would boast of his influence over Dos Passos: “I am accused”, he would write, “of corrupting Dos Passos by having infected him with kino-eye. Otherwise he might have become a good writer, some say. Others object and say that if it were not for kino-eye, we wouldn’t have heard of Dos Passos.” Cited in Alexander N. Lavrentiev (ed.), *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p.xliii.

⁴⁰⁰ North, *Camera Works*, p.140.

⁴⁰¹ Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, p.52.

⁴⁰² Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

“eye”/“I” of the previous generation.⁴⁰³ A rich tradition of cultural historiography attests to the notion that, by the mid thirties, the forms and syntax of industrial modernity had, in Lukács’ idiom, become “second nature”.⁴⁰⁴ If Americans were becoming more prone than ever before to “think optically”, in Zygmunt Tonecky’s phrase, it makes sense that fewer “prompts” would be needed to remind them of their responsibilities as spec(tac)ular subjects.⁴⁰⁵ *The Camera Eyes*, conceived of here as U.S.A.’s ideological stabilisers, could come off. Americans, it seemed, had learned how to use their eyes. As Dos Passos asserts in his biographical portrait of Frank Lloyd-Wright, “*The crude purpose of pioneering days has been accomplished. The scaffolding may be taken down and the true work, the culture of a civilization, may appear*” (TBM 1131, italics in original). The “culture” of this particular “civilization”, under construction for the previous twenty-five years, was a culture of consumption.

Between 1911 and 1936 consumption not only acquired legitimacy as a cultural practice but it became, in Alissa Karl’s terms, “a national moral imperative”.⁴⁰⁶ The commodity was the determining agent of this new found “morality”. Indeed, the “goodness” of “goods” fell only a little short of their “god-ness”. God-like in its omnipresence and serenely all-knowing, the commodity, a totem of a congealed labour at once “dead” yet at once resurrected, sat sentry over the transition from production to consumption

⁴⁰³ On the origins of consumer capitalism in the United States see Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Kathleen Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

⁴⁰⁴ Lukács uses the term in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1967).

⁴⁰⁵ Zygmunt Tonecky is cited in North, *Camera Works*, p.104.

⁴⁰⁶ Alissa Karl, “Modernism’s Risky Business: Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, and American Consumer Capitalism”, *American Literature*, Vol. 80, Iss. 1 (2008), pp.83-109, p.83.

economies. Hoarding its secrets (in the form of secreted labour) the commodity would deliver its sermons from the corporate alters of “showwindows” (TBM 894); through plate-glass the commodity would capture the attentions of coerced congregations. Devotees to a new church, those beholden were enchanted by the possibility that commodities might plug the hole that industrial modernity had (deliberately) punched in the social fabric. All of this is an elaborate way of making a simple point: during the first third of the twentieth century human vision was steadily, and with intensifying effect, becoming co-opted by the Fordized logic of the marketplace. This was a period in which the “ideology of consumption” migrated from the periphery to the centre of the American consciousness, cementing itself (becoming *entrenched*) in the national “eye” / “I”.⁴⁰⁷ Two things had to happen for consumer capitalism to flourish within this new visual order, and they had to happen simultaneously: first, the commodity had to be seen; second, the labour upon which its “being” was predicated had to remain hidden. As Marx notes, the “movement through which this process has been mediated vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind.”⁴⁰⁸ This “endless back-and-forth of revelation and concealment” proved key to the dilations and contractions that attended monopoly capitalism - key, in short, to its *contradictions*.⁴⁰⁹

The concretisation of a culture of consumption in the United States elicited a crisis of perception that imperilled what Merleau-Ponty calls “the labor of vision.”⁴¹⁰ Glistening from “showwindows”, commodities became agents of forced perceptual relocations. The eye, in short, was made to move. Enchanted by the sheen of commodities the modernising “Eye” / “I” was lured “into” the matrices of consumerist space that simply did not exist a generation

⁴⁰⁷ Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, p.19.

⁴⁰⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, p.148.

⁴⁰⁹ Taussig, *Defacement*, p.3.

⁴¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, p.168.

before. Displaced from its (premodern) sockets, the commodified “I” / “eye” duly wriggled its way into brand new topographies (or perhaps better *newly branded* topographies) that, in turn, provided access to new intensities. These “wriggles” would prove habit forming. Indeed, the onset of a commodity culture assigned to the perceptual faculty a musculature that rendered effortless, at least for some, the latest phase in the transition from a premodern past dreary with use values to a dynamic and conceivably liberatory modern period of exchange. America would indeed gorge on its exchange values, yet the gorging, as Veblen noted at the turn of the century, had to be accompanied by a sense of display: American consumption had to be seen to be believed.⁴¹¹ Rachel Bowlby writes that the “transformation of merchandise into a spectacle” would erode the “limits of an older economy of scarcity and moral restraint”, thus unleashing “the free floating possibilities of a commodified world”.⁴¹² Duly emancipated from old forms of attention Americans could enjoy, in Ownby’s term, a “sense of freedom in shopping”.⁴¹³ On one hand, then, commodities “demanded an ambulatory visual consumption”⁴¹⁴ that would enliven the eye, generating what Dos Passos later called a “visual freshness”.⁴¹⁵ On the other hand, however, commodities, as an alienated form of extracted labour, occasioned what the semiotician Umberto Eco refers to as a “sort of perceptual cramp”.⁴¹⁶ To see was not to see. In *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (1978) Alfred Sohn-Rethel sets about exposing as fraudulent these claims to “visual freshness”:

⁴¹¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] (London: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴¹² Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.4; p.37.

⁴¹³ Ownby, *American Dreams*, p.71.

⁴¹⁴ Crary, *Suspension of Perception*, p.131.

⁴¹⁵ Dos Passos and Amiel Francke, “The Truth About Visual Training” (1941-1970).

⁴¹⁶ Eco, *A Theory*, p.205.

There, in the market-place and in shop windows, things stand still. They are under the spell of one activity only; to change owners. They stand there waiting to be sold. While they are there for exchange they are there not for use. A commodity marked out at a definite price, for instance, is looked upon as being frozen to absolute immutability throughout the time during which its price remains unaltered. And the spell does not only bind the doings of man. Even nature herself is supposed to abstain from any ravages in the body of this commodity and to hold her breath, as it were, for the sake of this social business of man. Evidently, even the aspect of non-human nature is affected by the banishment of use from the sphere of exchange.⁴¹⁷

As manifestations of a congealed and degraded labour, commodities thus connote a sort of petrification; they are “looked upon as being frozen to absolute immutability”. Sohn-Rethel’s arguments constitute a challenge to the supposed transparency of a phantasmagoric world vibrant with commodities. His is a refutation of the phenomenology of the “free-floating” world noted by Bowlby.

To channel the labour of the eye into the shallow locations of commodity culture (while maintaining an illusion of breadth and variety) was key to the ideological requirements of consumer capital. As Stuart Gilbert reports from the pages of *transition* in 1937, “the art of living is largely an art of elimination and selection; we are constantly narrowing down, sometimes deliberately, sometimes automatically, the field of our attention, in order to cope with the exigencies of daily life.”⁴¹⁸ An aptitude for visual selectivity had, for Gilbert, become a pressing need, a means of safely negotiating an “image choked world”.⁴¹⁹ Only by “narrowing down” the glut of (commercial) traffic that sought to pass through the (des[pai]ring) eye/“I” could one “cope with” the

⁴¹⁷ Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, p.25.

⁴¹⁸ Stuart Gilbert, “The Subliminal Tongue”, *transition*, No. 26 (Feb., 1937), pp.141-153, p.149.

⁴¹⁹ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.15.

“sheer visual bewilderment” of technological modernity.⁴²⁰ The “elimination and selection” to which Gilbert refers did not merely seek to restrict the *volume* of signification but, and perhaps more urgently, to control its composition. To “narrow down” meant to filter - or “sieve”, to prompt a coming term - exchange values from the labour without which the commodity cannot obtain. Evidently, the spectral world of consumption had to find a way of concealing the opacities of production behind a sheen of exchange. Rendered narrow by the generalisation of commodification, the “eye”/“I” was duly co-opted into the ideological work of consumption. The commodified “I” was thus hamstrung by what Taussig calls “the ambivalence of active not-seeing.”⁴²¹ That is, the “eye”/“I”, becoming narrow, was expected to “see” exchange values and simultaneously “not see” (or maybe more accurately not *admit to seeing*) the fundamental and fundamentally *social* process by which these values were created. Commodification would thus occasion a sort of “a sort of ontological freeze”; labour would be erased by its own becoming.⁴²²

The cultural cramps that issue from commodification originate *in* the eye but they are not limited *to* it. Paying close attention to *The Camera Eye* (43), the first of *The Big Money*, clearly shows that the “eye”/“I”-cramp induced *by* and symptomatic *of* emergent Fordism spreads to the “throat” and, later, to the “spine”. That the stress is shouldered by body parts other than the eye does not undermine the eye as the cardinal location for the fluctuations and contra(di)ctions of American capital. Indeed, the eye remains the preeminent site of ideological paralysis in *The Big Money*, yet it is not the only organ that proves susceptible to the cultural cramping of emergent modernity. By roaming around the metabolism, Dos Passos draws to the attenuated “eye” a pair of linked contractions that thicken, and notably thicken through metaphor, the opacities

⁴²⁰ North, *Camera Works*, p.128.

⁴²¹ Taussig, *Defacement*, p.50.

⁴²² *Ibid.* p.113.

of visual reference. To note these parallel tightenings is to provide a more extensive musculature for the contra(di)ctions that inhere in emergent Fordism. The cramping of throat and spine routes the cramping of “eye” into a wider (social) physiognomy.

The Camera Eye (43) tracks a begrudging reintegration to the United States of September 1920, through what Dos Passos dubs “the painful sieve of Ellis Island”.⁴²³ Shot through with Sartrean inflections of muscular rigidity, the “eye” of Dos Passos’ petrified narrative “opens” only to be met by a “throat” that contracts:

throat tightens when the redstacked steamer churning
the faintlyheaving slatecolored swell swerves shaking in a
long greenmarbled curve past the red lightship
spine stiffens with the remembered chill of the offshore
Atlantic (*TBM* 788, emphases added)

Awash with sibilants and swamped by alliteration this (syntactically) turbulent approach to the United States elicits in Dos Passos a physical response that lodges first, in the “throat” and subsequently the “spine”. “[T]hroat” and “spine”, under the auspices of “eye”, are linked somatic locations within which, in the first instance, the reverberations of a “redstacked steamer churning” manifest and, in the second, the bracing sensation of a “remembered chill” (again, we think: “petrify”). The materiality of this transatlantic return is pronounced, yet the linked contractions of “throat” and “spine” draw from muscles that spasm a broader sociality.

The opening phases of *The Camera Eye* (43) provide a pair of linked and anatomically precise metaphors - “throat tightens” and “spine stiffens” - that refer to the perceptual cramping attendant upon the fetishisation of

⁴²³ Ludington (ed.), *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.45.

commodities. Throat and spine share with eye a materialist reflex. As “eye”, confronted with the generalisation or “dilation” of exchange values, contracts at (the thought of) goods in “storewindows”, throat and spine contract at the (thought of) “America”, the preeminent national window for consumptive economics. Vis a vis a metaphor, an act of substitution, the tight throat and stiff spine that feature in this contracted *Eye* ruin the literal, creating the textual conditions through which “a new semantic congruence or pertinence” can emerge.⁴²⁴ Ricoeur writes that “[w]e can describe the word as having a ‘metaphorical use’ or a ‘non-literal meaning’: the word is always the bearer of the ‘emergent meaning’ which specific contexts confer upon it.”⁴²⁵

Located within the specular (textual) realm of *The Camera Eye*, the joint attenuations of “throat” and “spine” provide Dos Passos with a means of referring to the contractions of capital by non-visual means. Given the amount of ideological work that the eye must do to maintain the fantasy of value which sees exchange split from labour, the co-opting of throat and spine is significant. Pulling the attention from the eye and thus taking on some of its own ideological labour, throat and spine alleviate the semantic burden that presses down on the eye - an oversubscribed faculty, an organ that works to full capacity, if only to “survive”. Routed into larger questions of restriction and cramp, these parallel contractions provide parallel narrations or perhaps more accurately, narrations *within narrations*; “throat” and “spine”, as linked elements in the nervous cortex, narrate stories of the “stifling” (*TBM* 789) aspect of life under the “ethercone” (*NN* 370) of American capitalism. As textual “events” that accrue metaphoricity, these moments constitute “stories told sideways out of the big mouth” (*TBM* 789).

Having claimed for the metaphorical, or “sideways” possibilities of these “compacted doctrines”, I seek to show how their “metaphoricity” inclines to

⁴²⁴ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, p.153.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.* p.166.

“historicity”. Historical pressures provide the “extralinguistic” context to which these metaphors, as “*work[s] in miniature*”, ultimately refer.⁴²⁶ In the first instance, the tightening of Dos Passos’ throat is an analogue for an insistently historical contraction. The Emergency Quota Act, implemented in May 1921, only eight months after Dos Passos’ readmission to the United States provides a specific, and chronologically pertinent legislative framing within which an attenuated throat invokes the tightening of United States’ immigration policy in the aftermath of the First World War. The “quota” - from which “professionals”, regardless of national origin, were exempted - was set annually at three percent of the total number of persons of that nationality resident in the United States as recorded in the census of 1910.⁴²⁷ The effect of the Emergency Quota Act was immediately felt. Figures gleaned from the *Historical Statistics of the United States* show that admissions into America waned from around 800,000 in 1921 to a little over 300,000 in 1922.

With the passage of the Johnson-Reed bill in May 1924, quotas would “tighten” further; three percent contracted to two. Under the later legislation, which contained, as an (inflamed?) appendix, the notorious Asian Exclusion Act, quotas were derived not from the census of 1910 but of 1890.⁴²⁸ Section 11, subsection (a) of the Bill reads as follows: “[t]he annual quota of any nationality shall be 2 per centum of the number of foreign-born individuals of such nationality resident in continental United States as determined by the United States census of 1890.”⁴²⁹ Narrow numbers indeed. The efficacy of these two implicitly racist interventions is clear from the above graphic. Tightening in the

⁴²⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, p.167, italics in original.

⁴²⁷ Phillip Cole, *Philosophies of Exclusion: Liberal Political Theory and Immigration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.34.

⁴²⁸ For comment on the ramifications of the Johnson Reed Act see David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), p.164.

⁴²⁹ “Act of May 26, 1924: The Immigration Act of 1924”, taken from <http://immigration.procon.org/sourcefiles/1924Johnson-ReedImmigrationAct.pdf> last accessed 22nd August, 2011.

autumn of “that delirious year 1920” (FTC 25) and doing so at the point of his in-migration, Dos Passos’ “throat” becomes the “painful sieve” through which he, following multitudes of others, seeks to pass.⁴³⁰ This difficult “channel” is phenomenologically affiliated to the “inlets barred with trestles” that restrict free passage through the neck of the United States. (TBM 788) Dos Passos’ suddenly tight throat - tight at the thought of America as much as at the “churning” of engines - coincides *with* and semanticises *around* the ideological cramping of the national throat which, stricken with delirium and predisposed toward isolationism, would contract in May 1920 and contract again in July 1924.⁴³¹ Two throats, then, one personal and one national, are topographically twinned. As analogous channels “throat” and “port” resonate as regions of confined dimension into which an international cargo seeks passage. The congruence of corporeal and national throats is noteworthy, yet the semantic implications of “throat” extend beyond its (narrowing) topographic parameters.

Unusually, given the massified forms to which U.S.A. commits, Dos Passos’ tight throat signifies at the linguistic level. The phonic coupling “*th* [...] *ti*” implements, across two linked phases - “fricative” and “plosive” respectively - the ideological mandates of the national “throat”. Expressed simply, *th* and *ti* regulate, at the phonic level, what gets through and what gets stopped. To grasp how this is achieved it is necessary, first, to schematise the aero-acoustics of the expulsive *th* of *throat*. The preliminary phoneme of the word “throat” - the “th” sound - exemplifies what linguists refer to as an “unvoiced” or “aspirated” fricative. This particular phonic articulation is “unvoiced” in that it does not engage the vocal chords in its speaking. In lieu of sound or “voice” comes the hushed turbulence of an expulsive fricative; a blast

⁴³⁰ Dos Passos’ ambivalence toward his readmission into the American context is no doubt inflected by a general anxiety toward questions of nationality and citizenship.

⁴³¹ Metaphoric comparisons obtain between the national “neck”, which admits through its system a limited amount of social traffic and the “u-bend” of the Parisian urinal that proved a cramped location for the draining off of Dos Passos Marxism. Both “drainage systems” function as “painful sieves” through which certain flows pass, and certain are refused.

of air is forced, almost silently, through the tunnel. The *th* of *throat* plays no part in what linguists refer to as “phonation”; it is only at “ro” that “throat” becomes “voiced”.⁴³² If, in the first instance, the phonic identity of “throat” is determined by its “voicelessness”, it is determined in its second by its *place of articulation*, that is, the point at which the obstruction occurs in the mouth. The initial phone of *throat* brings together the tip of the tongue and the front teeth, hence the “dental” assignation. The adjacency of teeth and tongue effects an almost complete closure of the oral cavity; the flux of “traffic” that seeks to pass (“sideways” and thus “metaphorically”) through the mouth is subsequently impeded. It is less as a “dental” articulation than as a fricative, however, that the *th* of *throat* gains semantic traction. The OED proffers a working definition of the term fricative: “[o]f a consonant sound: [p]roduced by the friction of the breath through a narrow opening between two of the mouth organs.” The “narrowing down” of the “mouth organs” conditions the opening expulsive sound of *The Camera Eye* (43). Yet this speech sound is, in Ricoeur’s phrasing, “related to an extralinguistic reality”.⁴³³ There is, as it were, a world to which this word refers. Predicated as it is on the expulsion of air through a narrow opening in the “big mouth” (*TBM* 789), the fricative is the appropriate means of semanticising the cramping of the national throat. The aspirated dental fricative *th* realises a grammatical friction that corresponds in significant yet suggestive ways to Dos Passos’ difficult readmission through the narrowing, that is, “choked” neck of the United States (*TBM* 789). Additionally, and usefully, for present purposes, it also provides an analogue for the visual “contractions” upon which the flow of capital had come to depend. Two types of “friction” - phonic and social - coalesce or better yet *lodge* in a single phoneme, the obstruent *th* of “throat”. Mediated via the whispered workings of a phoneme,

⁴³² For a classic account of “phonation” see John Wilson Black, *Voice and Diction: Phonation and Phonology* (London: C.E.Merrill, 1969).

⁴³³ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, p.168.

the “literary” text becomes complicit in the work of *patrolling*, if not fully *controlling* the ideological traffic which passes through the narrow “inlet” of “throat” and “mouth”.

The restricted passage of air through the “narrow opening” of the mouth, exemplified here by the *th* of *throat*, is narrowed further by the plosive articulations of a second obstruent: the *ti* of *tightens*. A “plosive” consonant, sometimes dubbed a “stop” or “occlusive”, refers to a class of phonic articulations in which the passage of air is completely blocked, “caught” (that is, held in the mouth) and suddenly released. The *k* sound in *kitch*, the *p* in *export*, and the initial *t* in *tightens* are typical examples of the plosive phoneme; each “plosion” generates an audible puff of air at the moment of its articulation. Each “stop” is classified, in John Lyons’ phrasing, “according to the place at which the obstruction occurs”.⁴³⁴ The *ti* of *tightens* is deemed an “alveolar” plosive, an orientation in which the tongue comes into contact with the “alveolar ridge”, the part of the mouth that houses the sockets of the upper front teeth.⁴³⁵ The place of articulation is less important than the fact that in striking where it does on the mouth the tongue shuts off the gap through which air might otherwise pass. Herein lies the key distinction between fricative and plosive orientations. Whereas *th* admits a steady, if thin amount of air through the oesophagus, *ti* is less permissive, preventing air from passing through (thus escaping from) the mouth. Staunchly opposed to free movement, *ti* blocks the narrow channel between the tongue and the teeth through which the fricative sound *th*, albeit silently and despite heavy restriction, has successfully passed. Aspiration is duly “choke[d]” by a lively tongue that catches behind the top front teeth. Albeit briefly, the reader’s tongue is politicised; it becomes a sitting

⁴³⁴ John Lyons, *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.75.

⁴³⁵ For a useful guide to the speech sounds that I discuss here see chapter 2 of Andrew Radford et al., *Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially pp. 27-46.

sentry or, better yet, a “stopper” within an occluded - and not so “big” (NN 789) - mouth. Snuffing out the aspiration generated by *th*, *ti* precludes transit from freely issuing through the “painful sieve” of the readerly throat. Inasmuch as it informs the broader sociality of the *national* throat, this unaspirated stop is socially aggregated. Duty bound to block, hinder and control, *ti* tightens, and thus chokes off a social sort of “aspiration”, that is to say the “desire”, held by myriad immigrants during the early part of the twenties to pursue a better, perhaps less “constricted” life in the United States.

This desire for “freedom” was inextricably, if often subconsciously, bound up with a desire to consume.⁴³⁶ A tight throat thickens, via a metaphoric contraction, the “perceptual cramp” that inheres in the viewing of commodities. From one tightness issues a second. As organs which tighten at or around the notion of commodification, throat and eye are ideologically freighted organs that work in tandem: the “eye” generates the “desire”; the throat provides a demographic fit to consume.⁴³⁷ This, then, is a moment of stifling, and one that is implicitly linked to the demands of the United States economy. A phonetic “stop” is drawn to an ideological “stop”. As it “tightens”, then, Dos Passos’ “throat” synecdochically affirms the socially determined “contraction” of entry points to the United States circa September 1920. A “choked” throat functions as a common if implicitly provided semantic reference for a pair of related obstructions, one phatic and one social.

This discreet pair of fricative sounds, the former aspirated, the latter occlusive, are drawn to a second pair: “spine stiffens”. This second alliterative coupling complicates the phonic cramping of which “throat tightens” is an able example. As was previously the case, semantic meaning coalesces in word openings. The sibilant speech sounds “*sp* [...] *st*” provide corollary phatic

⁴³⁶ See Andrew Heinze, “From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer” in Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society*, pp.190-206.

⁴³⁷ For analyses of the metaphoric capabilities of the throat as an agent of consumption see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

injunctions to “*th* [...] *ti*” and thus reiterate the epistemic mandates of the (narrowing) channel. The opening consonant cluster of “spine” consists not of one phonic orientation, as is the case with *th* and with *ti*, but of two. The “unvoiced” sibilant fricative *s* is followed by an “expulsive” *p*. Linguists refer to the *p* sound in *spine* as a voiceless bilabial plosive. The terms “voiceless” and “plosive” are by now familiar to us; “bilabial” less so. A “bilabial” denotes a consonant formation whose articulation occasions the meeting, “catching” and, subsequently the parting of both lips. Whereas the sibilant *s* of *spine* pushes air steadily and slowly between the teeth, the plosive *p* explodes, from between the lips, with violent force.

s and *p* are not only at variance as regard their *place of articulation*, but they also prove at odds concerning the materiality of the stuff that issues from the mouth. Whereas the speaking of *th* and *ti* occasioned, later to *occlude*, a stream of *dry* air, the speaking of *sp* and *st* occasions, or threatens, the expulsion of wet. Given the nature of the terrain across which Dos Passos travels, the inferred distinction between “dry” and “wet” sounds is not as eccentric as it might initially seem. Indeed, to differentiate between *th* [...] *ti*, as an exemplum of phonic aridity and *sp* [...] *st* as an example of precipitate provides a useful axis upon which we might plot the amphibious character of Dos Passos’ “offshore” narration. The spittle that threatens to spray from the mouth in the speaking - or more precisely the *spitting* - of *spine* evokes, in the first instance, the spume and spray that engulfs Dos Passos on his return through the great American neck. Spat words evoke spat scenes; *spit* in fact carries a number of connotative and denotative inflections that add to the materiality of the account. “[S]pit” connotes the “fluid secreted by the glands of the mouth, esp. when ejected [from the metabolism]; saliva, spittle, a clot of this.” More than this, “spit” carries geographical connotations. Referring to “a small, low point or tongue of land, projecting into the water; a long narrow reef, shoal or sandbank extending from the shore”, the *sp* sound of “spine” offers a

(submerged) reference to “tongues” of land that lick their way, saltily, out into the Atlantic. “Abounding in phlegm” and attuned to the contours of the sediment to which it describes, *spit* is an appropriate term by which to evoke the “context” of this *Eye*.⁴³⁸

The above discussions relate “throat” and “spine” to the ideological contractions that inhere in American capital. In the pages that follow I seek to provide a theoretical frame through which the attenuation of the “I” might be adequately conceptualised. These arguments issue from a central assumption: that the suppression of the camera-text, and the “narrowing down” to which it refers, aestheticises fluctuations in American productivity. Having offered Marx, in chapter 5, as a pertinent theoretical location within which the workings of *The Camera Eye* can be situated I seek to interrogate more thoroughly the diminished role that these episodes play as the trilogy reaches its conclusion. If, as it has been argued, *The Camera Eyes* constitute agglomerations of surplus textual capital that are “ejected from the sphere of circulation” and secreted on its margins, we might want to consider the ramifications of their dissolving. Why are the “hoard forming tendencies” of *The Big Money* less pronounced than they are in the previous two novels?⁴³⁹ A case will be made in the coming pages that the comprehensive de-hoarding of the narrative carries meaning that, while congealing in the eye, transcends its workings.

Marx’s conception of the hoard as formulated in the *Critique* provides a first step in determining the dialectic relation between textual “paucity” and economic “abundance”. Here, Marx writes that hoards “act as channels for the supply or withdrawal of circulating money, so that the amount of money circulating as coin is always just adequate to the immediate requirements of

⁴³⁸ The OED cites this as a definition of “phlegmatic”.

⁴³⁹ Costas Lapavistas, “On Marx’s Analysis of Money Hoarding in the Turnover of Capital”, *Review of Political Economy*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2000), p.222.

circulation.”⁴⁴⁰ As a mechanism which can be triggered if the amount of circulating money needs controlling or adjusting, the hoard is the “safety valve” of the monetary economy. From a general definition of the hoard as a means of correction that balances the system, Marx moves, in a subsequent passage, to a more precise analysis of the exact conditions that determine the vicissitudes of the hoard. He writes

[i]f the total volume of circulation suddenly expands and the fluid unity of sale and purchase predominates, so that the total amount of prices to be realized grows even faster than does the velocity of circulation of money, then the hoards dwindle visibly; whenever an abnormal stagnation prevails in the movement as a whole, that is when the separation of sale from purchase predominates, then the medium of circulation solidifies into money to a remarkable extent and the reservoirs of the hoarders are filled far above their average level.⁴⁴¹

To simplify: in an economy awash with exchange values, the hoard is impoverished; drained of its resources it “dwindles visibly”. Conversely, if “stagnation prevails” the “medium of circulation solidifies into money”, replenishing the hoard. The Marxian schema is pertinent with regard to the (meagre) dialectic expenditures to which *The Big Money* commits. The chronology of *The Big Money* brackets off a period of vigorous economic activity. Between 1919 and 1929, the United States economy enjoyed almost uninterrupted aggregate growth, swelling at an average rate of 4.2% per year.⁴⁴² Having expanded throughout the teens and twenties, “money” had become “big”. Aside from a sharp fall in deflation in 1920-21, which would occasion a brief but intense contraction of the national economy (and national “throat”) this was a period in which the “total amount of prices” would outstrip the

⁴⁴⁰ Marx, *Contribution*, p.136, italics added.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid. pp.136-7.

⁴⁴² Gene Smiley, “The U.S. Economy in the 1920s”, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/smiley.1920s.final>, last accessed 29th August 2011.

“velocity of circulation of money.”⁴⁴³ Stimulated by the acceleration of industrial production, the spread of electrification, and fuller access to consumer credit, America’s gross per capita national product would expand from \$4,800 in 1919 to \$5,800 in 1929.⁴⁴⁴ As the American economy expanded, then, the amount of money held in hoards dwindled. And as money became “big”, *The Camera Eye* became “small”. Dos Passos’ textual practice can thus be seen not just as a “safety valve” for its own complex economy but an outlet for the fluctuations of the monetary economy, which was accelerating at considerable velocity during the twenties. It is in this light that *The Camera Eyes* of *The Big Money* can be thought of as textual responses to an economy that threatened bigness too soon. That the massification of capital accelerated during the teens and twenties has become a critical commonplace.⁴⁴⁵ Less attention has been paid to the volume of capital held in reserve, the amount of “material product” that, to return to Harvey, exceeded the amount that was deemed “necessary to reproduce society in its existing state”.⁴⁴⁶ Y. S. Leong has shown that between 1914 and 1926 - the period to which eight of the nine *Eyes* refer - the amount of money in vault in the United States would undergo significant depreciation.⁴⁴⁷ According to Leong, American vaults held in reserve close to \$1700,000,000 (1700 million) dollars as the United States primed itself for war in

⁴⁴³ The Depression of 1920-21 was brief yet it was sharply felt, occasioning the single steepest percentage decline in inflation in 140 years. On the crisis see Warren M. Persons, “The Crisis of 1920 in the United States: A Quantitative Survey”, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Mar., 1922), pp.5-19; Frederick V. Waugh, “The Marginal Utility of Money in the United States from 1917 to 1921 and from 1922 to 1932”, *Econometrica*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct., 1935), pp.376-399.

⁴⁴⁴ Christina Duckworth Romer, “World War I and the Postwar Depression; A Reinterpretation Based on Alternative Estimates of GNP”, *Journal of Monetary Economics* Vol. 22, Iss. 1 (July, 1988), pp.91-115, p.107.

⁴⁴⁵ For a classic account of the onset of massification see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso Press, 1997).

⁴⁴⁶ Harvey, *Social Justice*, pp.219-220.

⁴⁴⁷ Y. S. Leong, “An Estimate of the Amount of Money Held by the Banks and of the Amount of Money in General Circulation in the United States”, *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Apr., 1930), pp.164-193.

1914. By the time that Dos Passos started writing *U.S.A.* in 1926, however, American vaults had shipped more than half their previous load. Only \$800,000,000 (800 million) was held in vault as of January of that year.⁴⁴⁸

The economic depreciation furnishes a parallel context within which the depletion of *The Camera Eye* can be conceptualised. The massive proliferations of the American economy during the twenties rendered *The Camera Eye*, as examples of hoarded surplus, anathema. What was in abundance before the first world war was pumped, after it, back into circulation. It would not be until the crash at the end of the twenties that the hoard would replenish (hence a glut of *Camera Eyes* in the final seventy pages of *The Big Money*). *The Camera Eyes* do not disappear entirely in this final novel yet they do give the lie, through their dwindling, to the fantasy of ever proliferating surplus values, a fantasy upon which American notions of abundance and prosperity intimately relied. These fluctuations infer that there are, in fact, finite resources from which to draw; the limits of capital are inscribed at the level of Dos Passos' text. For the moment there are resources to cover any "expansion", yet the "safety valves" of capital are being stretched. Having provided a way of reading *The Camera Eye* as a vessel for cultural and economic expenditures I seek, in the second half of this chapter, to focus on how *The Camera Eyes* of *The Big Money* generate tensions at the level of aesthetic form that further complicate their function as repositories for textual capital.

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The Camera Eyes (45), (46), and (47) - *The Big Money's* three "New York" *Eyes* - constitute a distinctive cluster. While these narrations clearly refer to different events, they achieve a coherent semantic identity only when they are read collectively. Arguably, these three episodes connote the most avant-garde of *U.S.A.'s Camera Eyes*. They are certainly the most opaque. Yet from a detailed

⁴⁴⁸ Leong, "An Estimate", p.182.

explication one can yield significant insights into Dos Passos' shifting attitudes to the increasingly vexed relation between aesthetic and political commitments as manifest in *U.S.A.*'s final volume. *The Camera Eye* (45) focuses on Dos Passos' attendance of and subsequent departure from a social gathering of April 1922, held in a crowded apartment in New York's Greenwich Village. [APPENDIX, C] Reprising the "narrow" environs of *The Camera Eye* (43) which evokes, in turn, the cubicles of *The Camera Eye* (39), this "narrow yellow room" with "low ceiling" usurps Dos Passos' "throat" as the designated space for a host of "choked" articulations. Again, then, "eye" inclines toward "throat". An oesophagus fashioned from "brick" (*TBM* 872), this distended space - a stifling chamber in the Sartrean sense - encloses, hoards, or "pigeonhole[s]" the "talk" that issues from the throats of unidentified others. Indeed, the "throaty laugh" of the "warmvoiced woman" who "distribut[es] with teasing looks the parts in the fiveoclock drama" hacks across this claustrophobic and intently disconcerting *Camera Eye*. Dos Passos is keen to vacate this strange yellow room, to escape the "crinkling tendrils of cigarettesmoke" that threaten to choke him and free himself from the "aviary squawkings of the literary gentry" from which he often felt unable to escape.⁴⁴⁹ Dos Passos' apparent distaste for the artistic ferment of "Greenwich Village" jars, however, with the highly aestheticised and intently avant-garde character of this text. Suffused with a cubist syntax, this *Camera Eye* offers an anatomical study of the materiality of the body. Here Dos Passos conceives of the body not as an organic unit but as a scattered set of component "parts", "curve[s]" and "rims". Occasioning a rhetoric of atomisation the camera-text segments the body into "noses", "ears", the "curve of a wet / cheek a pair of freshcolored lips / a weatherlined neck a / gnarled grimed hand an old man's bloodshot eye". The "crinkling cigarettesmoke", itself a formation that is in the process of breaking up (it is

⁴⁴⁹ Dos Passos to Arthur McComb, May 28, 1922, cited in Landsberg (ed.), *Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, p.197.

crinkling and thus *becoming* “crinkled”), is the unifying agent of this fragmenting *Eye*. “[C]igarettesmoke is the (immaterial) presence that links together the fragments of the body, it “twine[s] blue / and fade[s] round noses behind ears under the rims of wom-/en’s hats (872).

The eye of the camera zooms in on the body in its second phase, magnifying it to cellular proportions. These are its final exchanges:

the salty in all of us ocean the protoplasm throbbing
 through cells growing dividing sprouting into the the billion
 diverse not yet labeled not yet named
 always they slip through the fingers
 the changeable the multitudinous lives)
 box dizzingly the compass (*TBM* 873)

This is a point of maximum dilation. Here, the lens of the camera-text opens as wide as it can, in an attempt to capture the amoebic essence of human life. The telescopic manoeuvre occasions an opacity that seems almost impossible to retract; *The Camera* thus occasions an acute, and very visual disorientation. Indeed, the telescoping recalls a lament that Dos Passos made in 1916:

It is possible that, from over preoccupation with what is at the other end of our telescopes and microscopes, we have lost our true sense of proportion. In learning the habits of the cells of a man’s epidermis, it is easy to forget his body as a unit. In the last analysis, the universe is but as we see it: all is relative to the sense perceptions of the body.⁴⁵⁰

Unable to stick to his own advice, this is precisely the sort of forgetting to which *The Camera Eye* (45) commits. By moving toward - and indeed *into* - the “cells”

⁴⁵⁰ Dos Passos, “A Humble Protest”, *Harvard Monthly*, No. 62 (June 1916), pp.115-20, cited in Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.33.

of the “epidermis”, Dos Passos returns to a pre-plasmic epoch, one in which the body is yet to achieve concretion.

If *The Camera Eye* (45) proves the cardinal expression of an aesthetic turn, that is to say, “changing arrangements” at the formal level, *The Camera Eye* (46), coming only twenty pages after its predecessor, connotes a turn in Dos Passos’ politics. Composed more than a decade after the events to which it refers, this camera-text recalls Dos Passos’ political ruminations in the spring or summer of 1923.⁴⁵¹ Its first session tracks Dos Passos as he, scouring the Lower East Side, attempts to locate a political meeting at which he is due to deliver an oration, “a speech urging action”. (TBM 892) Dos Passos’ search for the “crowded hall” (892) - a space that replicates (and conceivably de-aestheticises) the cramped environs of *The Camera Eye* (45) - is flanked by hesitation and uncertainty. Dos Passos’ political destinations are opaque: “an address you don’t quite know you’ve forgotten the number the street may be in Brooklyn”. Despite Dos Passos’ utilisation of the second person, a grammatical register into which *The Camera Eye* rarely intrudes, the epistemological frailty of this *Eye* (“you don’t quite know”; “you’ve forgotten”) is notably *his*; more, it is *as his* that the fraught search for a “hall” takes on broader meaning. The opacities that subtend Dos Passos’ orientation - nominated by an inability to recall an address in 1923 - are less the product of organisational ineptitude than they are consequent of what Ray Lewis White refers to as Dos Passos’ “steadfast distancing of himself from socialist or communist sympathies since the mid-1930s”.⁴⁵² This is a faux forgetting, an amnesiac response retrospectively ascribed on a period of “action” (892).

Political ambivalence is *The Camera Eye* (46)’s sedimented material.

⁴⁵¹ The events described in *The Camera Eye* (46) cannot be dated precisely yet the reference to the death of Warren G. Harding in *Newsreel LII*, which precedes this *Camera Eye*, leads one to conclude that *The Camera Eye* (46) takes place before the 2nd of August 1923.

⁴⁵² Ray Lewis White, “John Dos Passos and the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, No. 14 (1987), pp.97-110, p.109.

Having found the “crowded hall” Dos Passos’ “stuttering attempt to talk straight” (892) abruptly breaks down:

you suddenly falter ashamed flush red break out in
sweat why not tell these men stamping in the wind that
we stand on a quicksand? that doubt is the whetstone of
understanding (*TBM* 893)

The terms “falter”, “quicksand” and “doubt” swell the lexicon of indecisiveness within which this “stuttering” exchange is couched. Paralysed by ambivalence and keen to begin “peeling the speculative onion of doubt” (894) - a metaphor which is conceivably “eye-minded” - Dos Passos returns to the first person and returns to his bunk. Thus reclined, Dos Passos can leisurely “ponder the course of history and / what leverage might pry the owners loose from power and / bring back (I too Walt Whitman) our storybook democracy” (893). We can only speculate as to what Gold and Lawson would have made of Dos Passos’ sedate treatment of historical contingency. Clearly, “ponder” is entirely alien to the vernacular of radical political inquiry. This benign term confirms our sense that Dos Passos has completed the “swing on the seesaw” (893) of American political life. No longer the “operating writer”, one “urging action”, Dos Passos had become the “informing” writer. If Benjamin, following Tretiakov, is right that the writer’s “mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively”, Dos Passos evidently comes up short.⁴⁵³

This is not to say that the episode is politically passive. Indeed, Dos Passos’ ponderings are punctured by an astonishing(ly) direct interjection that sheds the equivocation of earlier ambiguities: “the radicals are in their private lives such shits” (893). The eruption of hostility toward “radicals” is in keeping

⁴⁵³ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” in Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp.768-782, p.770.

with the political Dos Passos of the mid thirties. We recall, as a coterminous insult, Dos Passos' sneering reference to communists as "comrats".⁴⁵⁴ It is entirely incongruous, however, with the political Dos Passos of the early twenties. More, the derisory tone of this proclamation grates with the chronology that Dos Passos himself placed on his connections to the left. In a letter to Charles Bernadin dated January 3rd 1942, Dos Passos claimed: "probably the only time I accepted, in my own mind, any large part of the Communist thesis (ie class war, salutation by revolution, the destiny of the working class etc.) was in 1919 - 21 or thereabouts".⁴⁵⁵ If the early years of the twenties constituted a period in which Dos Passos "accepted" a "large part of the Communist thesis", we might "ponder" why this exchange, as a record of radical political activity in 1923, is made to carry a hostility toward the left that was yet to materialise. Crippled with "doubt" as to the integrity of the political "onion" and shot through with an ostentatious distrust toward the "shits" on the radical left, *The Camera Eye* (46) functions less as an objective expression of an early political radicalism than it testifies to the corrosive effects of the conservative counter-impulse that had gripped Dos Passos' thinking by 1935. This *Eye* resonates as a textual exemplification of a dialectic interaction *between* radical and conservative impulses. By bringing the early twenties into conflict with the mid thirties the episode yields a corrupted expression of the political radicalism to which Dos Passos was formerly committed.

It is perhaps unsurprising that as the "conservative" Dos Passos eats away at (thus consuming) his "radical" former self, the camera-text proves increasingly receptive to the signs and signifiers of corporate capital, icons which had gained significant cultural traction by 1923. The opening "line" of the camera-text copiously exemplifies Dos Passos' sudden attentiveness to what Dow refers to as the "ubiquitous presence of advertising": "walk the streets and

⁴⁵⁴ Ludington (ed.), *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.447.

⁴⁵⁵ John Dos Passos to Charles Bernadin, 3rd January 1942.

walk the streets inquiring of Coca Cola signs Lucky Strike ads pricetags in storewindows" (892).⁴⁵⁶ Having averted its eye for the past forty-five exchanges, the camera-text becomes curious about commodity culture. As an occasion for product placement, this camera-text provides a space through which the choked and clotted articles of corporate culture can be viewed. Given the "unlucky" strikes mapped by *The Camera Eye*, Lawrence being perhaps the most significant example (25), Dos Passos' mention of "Lucky Strike ads" seems particularly noxious. The "crinkling tendrils of cigarettesmoke" are reinvoked, this time via an advert that refers, by its own indexicality, to the incremental waste of a labour movement reduced to ash.

The spread of commercialism subsequently engulfs the city, stoking in Dos Passos an ambivalent response. In a world stood on its head by the supremacy of exchange, smoke breeds fire: "the west is flaming with gold" Dos Passos asserts; its "sky is lined with greenbacks" (894). Ablaze with exchange values and hemmed in by "dollars", the cityscape is a site of visual resplendence, yet it is simultaneously apocalyptic. The prominence with which exchange values are displayed contrasts sharply with the opacity that surrounds production: "the riveters are quiet the trucks of the producers are / shoved off onto the marginal avenues" (894). Made mute and forced into peripheral channels, labour is the camera-text's dirty secret, a problematic and shameful substance that Dos Passos seeks, in this episode, to expunge, hide from view. Capital, by contrast, is as reputable as it is plentiful; indeed, its public proliferation is an occasion for a shrill jubilation:

winnings sing from every streetcorner
crackle in the ignitions of the cars swish smooth in
ballbearings sparkle in the lights going on in the showwin-
dows croak in the klaxons tootle in the horns of imported

⁴⁵⁶ Dow, "Other Modernism", p.406.

millionaire shining towncars (894)

“winnings” are kept busy via a capitalised sort of onomatopoeia: they “sing”, “crackle”, “swish”, “sparkle”, “croak” and “tootle”. This generous kinetic outlay mutates into an erotics of value:

dollars are silky in her hair sift in her dress sprout in
the elaborately contrived rosepetals that you kiss become
pungent and crunchy (TBM 894)

Like the “crinkling” trail of “cigarettesmoke” that wraps its way around the nether regions of *The Camera Eye* (45), “dollars”, in this highly aestheticised and “elaborately contrived” episode, waft around the nape of the neck and the hemline, brokering as they go a sensuality that ushers exchange values - here fetishised as a sort of limitless confetti - to the brink of edibility. “[P]ungent and crunchy”, “dollars” seem good enough to eat. No longer do they narrowly resonate as exchange values, as a means *by which* to consume, but they themselves have taken on a delectable quality, becoming *that which is consumed*. As ends rather than means, dollars are the objects of one’s desire.

The Camera Eye (47), the final “New York” *Eye*, is a stout companion piece to *The Camera Eye* (46) inasmuch as it, like its predecessor, brokers a tension between political and aesthetic disorientations. The aperture of this *Camera Eye* opens to yield a synaesthetic injunction: “sirens bloom in the fog over the harbour” (931). Grammatically and metrically consonant with “winnings sing” (894), “sirens bloom” marries an auditory referent with a visual one. The forced reciprocity of “ear” and “eye” invokes a crisis of sensory experience that both pertains to and seeks to replicate the epistemological concussions occasioned by the onset of technological modernity and consumer culture. This surrealistically inflected conjunction forces us to consider, in Sarah Danilus’

formulation, “how to represent authentic experience in an age in which the category of experience itself has become a problem.”⁴⁵⁷ This is a quandary that the text keenly strives to answer, yet determination alone is insufficient in bringing “experience” into clearer focus. Indeed, the world appropriated by exchange is a topsy-turvy world, one in which reification has inverted social relations. Having “peel[ed] the onion of doubt” (893) Dos Passos seeks, via recourse to another epidermal metaphor, to

hock the old raincoat of incertitude (in which you
hunch alone from the upsidedown image on the retina
painstakingly out of color shape words remembered light
and dark straining
to rebuild yesterday to clip out paper figures to
simulate growth warp newsprint into faces smoothing
and wrinkling in the various barelyfelt velocities of time) (931)

Attuned to the “Bergsonian memories” that Sartre enunciated in 1932, these are projections of a fragile phenomenology. With a significant stress on the intangible - the “barelyfelt” - this *Camera Eye* denotes the emptying out of its (social) sediment, a sort of ideological dehoarding. Weightless and flimsy, again like “paper” (see “petals”, 894), this *Eye* disposes of the burdensome materiality of the phenomenological world. The stuff of human experience is draining - or better, given Dos Passos’ penchant for “sifting” metaphors, (893) “straining” - into the ether. Indeed, Dos Passos “clip[s] out paper figures to *simulate* growth” because authentic experience has become squeezed. Or more precisely, it has become inverted, as Dos Passos’ allusion to the “upsidedown image on the retina” exemplifies. This optical inversion is of course an allusion to

⁴⁵⁷ Sarah Danus, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p.3.

photographic technique, yet it refers, through symbolic allusion, to the reification which has flipped the social world on its head.

THE CAMERA EYES 49, 50, 51: EXIT, RIGHT.

The final section of this chapter argues that the diminution of *The Camera Eye* is politically freighted. Having drawn from abundant resources between 1917 and 1931, Dos Passos' political surplus has all but evaporated by the mid thirties. I read the final three *Camera Eyes* of *The Big Money* as exemplifications of this depletion. Before attending to these texts, however, I seek to provide some biographical insight into the nature of Dos Passos' political slide.

On March 6, 1934, an open letter of political protest appeared in the *New Masses* that would exemplify the growing schism between Dos Passos and the orthodox left.⁴⁵⁸ Signed by Dos Passos and "two dozen" or so other prominent socialists, including John Chamberlain, Lionel Trilling and Wilson, the letter unleashed a swingeing attack on communist intervention of a socialist rally that occurred in Madison Square Gardens on February 16.⁴⁵⁹ The rally, called by the socialist party to honour Viennese workers that had been gunned down under instruction of the Austro-fascist Chancellor Dollfuss would descend into a melee. The fracas that ensued exacerbated extant antagonisms within the ranks of the American left.⁴⁶⁰ Dos Passos' criticism of what he called the "disruptive action of the Communists" occasioned the raising of many an orthodox eyebrow.⁴⁶¹ An official rebuff came via Lawson, who proved especially receptive in his condemnation of Dos Passos' spirited anticommunism. In a thirteen page letter Lawson berated Dos Passos for his signatory act, claiming

⁴⁵⁸ "To John Dos Passos" in *New Masses*, Vol. 10 (March 6, 1934), p.8.

⁴⁵⁹ Carr, *A Life*, p.328.

⁴⁶⁰ For an account of the disturbance see Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, p.437. On Dollfuss' political career and the historical context in which this career arose see F. L. Carsten, *The First Austrian Republic, 1918-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴⁶¹ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, p.437.

that it constituted a “hasty emotional objection” and a “dirty attack on the communists”. Lawson would go on to warn Dos Passos that he was gaining amongst the left a reputation that he might well do without. The communists, he cautioned

are beginning to accuse you of consorting with their enemies [...] You’ve always (far more than myself) followed a revolutionary idea. It seems to me that now you (and all of us) are faced with a clear-cut revolutionary choice. I maintain that there is only one revolutionary line and one revolutionary party (be as sentimental as you like about the wobblies, but they do not represent the working class). What’s needed now is not sentimental adherence, but the will to fight a disciplined difficult fight.⁴⁶²

Given the fractured state of leftist politics in the mid thirties, Lawson’s assertion of a “clear-cut revolutionary choice” ranks as special pleading. However wildly Lawson overshoots the mark in claiming unity for the political left, he is spot on in his contention that, by 1934, Dos Passos was all but lost to the communist cause. Exemplified by Dos Passos’ odious responses to the Scottsboro case, it was becoming painfully clear that his fighting days were all but over.⁴⁶³ Having been in the twenties and early part of the thirties what Lawson described as “the nearest thing this country had to a proletarian writer”⁴⁶⁴ Dos Passos had, by the mid thirties, eased himself into the position of “middle-class liberal” that, as he suggested in a letter to Wilson of 1930, had been on the cards for some

⁴⁶² Carr, *A Life*, p.328.

⁴⁶³ In 1931 Dos Passos considered the Scottsboro case a “human shame” that could “be endured no more”. See Dos Passos, “Help the Scottsboro Boys” in *The New Republic*, Aug 24, 1932, p.49; and “The Two Youngest” in *The Nation*, August 24, 1932, p.172. By November 1934, however, Dos Passos’ tone had changed. In a letter to Wilson Dos Passos would refer to the Scottsboro youths as “unfortunate nigs” that were “bound to fry [...] it is one of those situations from which nobody emerges with credit - and the poor devils of nigs are done for”. Ludington, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.449.

⁴⁶⁴ Lawson to Dos Passos, “Moriches, Long Island, N.Y.”, undated.

time.⁴⁶⁵ A further letter to Wilson, dated December 23, 1934 confirms the sense that Dos Passos' alienation had crystallised into a strange loathing for the "entangling alliances" of the twenties and early thirties.⁴⁶⁶ Dos Passos' felt that the time had come to put to bed this previous affiliation: "From now on events in Russia have no more interest - except as a terrible example - for world socialism. . . . The thing has gone into its Napoleonic stage".⁴⁶⁷ Appalled by what he dubbed the "intricate and bloody machinery of the Kremlin", Dos Passos had, by 1935, rubber stamped his exit from the ranks of the American left. This year would prove key in Dos Passos' political alienation. To Wilson in January he would write: "I think the time has passed to be with any of the Marxist parties." In late May Dos Passos would reaffirm his position in a letter to Cowley:

I don't believe the Communist movement is capable of doing anything but provoke opposition and I no longer believe that the end justifies the means - means and ends have got to be one [...] I don't think the situation is improving in this country - the comrades are just parroting Russian changes of mood and opinion, which shows their impotence more than ever. ⁴⁶⁸

More and more the Russian model irked Dos Passos. Although he was, as of 1935, uncertain as to "[w]hether the Stalinist performances are intellectually

⁴⁶⁵ Dos Passos to Edmund Wilson, 1930, cited in the "Chronology" section of *U.S.A.*, p.1251.

⁴⁶⁶ Dos Passos' letter to Hemingway is undated, although its reference to the closing of *Airways Inc.* allows us to date Dos Passos letter to the first or second week of March 1929. Dos Passos' term "entangling alliance" is a derisive reference to the New Playwrights, yet the term evidences the extent to which Dos Passos' language was, by the early thirties, indebted to Jeffersonian rhetoric. In his inaugural address, of March 4, 1801, Jefferson would call for "[e]qual and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion [barring, of course, slaves], religious or political; peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none." In Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), *Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p.494.

⁴⁶⁷ Carr, *A Life*, p.338.

⁴⁶⁸ Ludington, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.477.

justifiable or not", Dos Passos was convinced that such "performances" were "alienating the working class movement of the world. What's the point" Dos Passos bitterly enquired "of losing your 'chains' if you get a firing squad instead?"⁴⁶⁹ Evidently, Dos Passos had come to view Stalinism as an execrable riposte to the abuses of modern American capital. Dos Passos would spell out his objections in a defensive letter to Wilson dated Feb 5, 1935: "it's not the possibility of Stalinism in the U.S. that's worrying me, it's the fact that the Stalinist C.P. seems doomed to fail and bring down with it all the humanitarian tendencies I personally believe in." Dos Passos continues, via an interesting rejoinder: "[n]one of that has anything to do with Marx's work - but it certainly does influence one's attitude towards a given political party. I've felt all along that the Communists were valuable as agitators as the abolitionists were before the Civil War - but now I'm not so happy about it."⁴⁷⁰ Dos Passos' political intransigence would spur him on to espouse a preference for "the despotism of Henry Ford, the United Fruit, and Standard Oil than that of Earl Browder and Amster and Mike Gold."⁴⁷¹ The anticommunist harangue would intensify throughout the thirties, placing under significant strain a number of Dos Passos' longest friendships, including Lawson, Wilson, and Hemingway.⁴⁷² As I now seek to show, the departure from the ranks of the hard left would leave an indelible mark on Dos Passos' prose.

That *The Big Money* dumps much of the social sediment that provided substance for the trilogy's first and second instalment would cause consternation among a number of Dos Passos' contemporaries. In the August

⁴⁶⁹ Carr, *A Life*, p.338.

⁴⁷⁰ Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.465.

⁴⁷¹ Carr, *A Life*, p.338.

⁴⁷² The split with Hemingway was especially painful for Dos Passos. For an account of the break, see Donald Pizer, "The Hemingway-Dos Passos Relationship", *Journal of Modern Literature*, No. 13 (1986), pp.122-125; Scott Donaldson, "Dos and Hem: A Literary Friendship", *Centennial Review*, No. 29 (1985), pp.163-85.

1936 edition of *Saturday Review* Bernard De Voto would bristle at the political windchill consequent upon Dos Passos' emergent rightism: "[T]he atoms blown about the universe by Mr. Dos Passos's intergalactic wind remain atoms, remain symbols, and do not come alive. And so the reader does not much care what happens to them - interesting, spectacular, kaleidoscopic, pyrotechnic, expertly contrived, a fine movie, but you remain untouched."⁴⁷³ "[I]t may be", De Voto dryly concludes, "that the intricate and dazzling technique that has produced this trilogy rationalizes a personal inadequacy and veils an inability to come to grips with experience".⁴⁷⁴ De Voto was not the only critic that read *The Big Money* and "smelled a Lollard".⁴⁷⁵ Wilson praised, with certain qualifications, U.S.A.'s final novel in a letter to its author, dated July 22, 1936:

I've just read *The Big Money*, and the whole thing is certainly a noble performance. The end of it suffers a little, I think, from comparison with the brilliance of the end of *1919* - it does sound as if you were getting tired of it. Aren't you a little bit perfunctory about the Sacco-Vanzetti case, for example? And I wished that when you brought your old characters on at the end, you had made them do more vividly characteristic things (though Dick Savage and Ben Compton are tellingly handled).⁴⁷⁶ When all the former mates are splitting up there, I don't think you always indicate sufficiently just what they think they are getting out of it: *it gets to seem a little automatic [...]* As the Russians say of Pushkin, the writing has become "transparent" - they mean that the objects show through, but in your case, it is experience which shows through and conveys its significance to the reader without any apparent [effort] on your part to underline it. One of the things which you have done most successfully - which I don't remember any other novelist doing - is show people in these moments when they are at loose ends or drifting or

⁴⁷³ Bernard De Voto, "John Dos Passos: Anatomist of Our Time", *Saturday Review*, August 1936, pp.3-4, cited in Maine (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p.127.

⁴⁷⁴ De Voto, "Anatomist", p.128.

⁴⁷⁵ Pizer, (ed.) *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.236.

⁴⁷⁶ Wilson originally described Dos Passos' characterisation as "marvellously" handled, yet before sending the letter silently amended it in preference for the cooler term "tellingly."

up against a blank wall.⁴⁷⁷

I cite Wilson at length to demonstrate how frequently his evaluation of *The Big Money* draws upon a language of fatigue: Dos Passos' prose, Wilson conjectured, had become "tired", "perfunctory"; lacking in "brilliance" and seemingly "automatic". For Wilson, Dos Passos' "writing ha[d] become transparent". Cast through De Voto and Wilson, *The Big Money* invokes what we might dub a literature of faded experience. In an irascible letter to Hemingway of July 1935, Dos Passos anticipated Wilson's charge that his prose writing had gotten "to seem a little automatic". Still nine months from completion, his was a "lousy superannuated hypertrophied hellinvented novel". Dos Passos' sense of relief that the project was coming to a close was in plain view: "Christ I'll be glad to be quit of the whole business; it's gotten to be a kind of quicksand."⁴⁷⁸ It is in this mood of impatience and desperation that Dos Passos produced his final three *Camera Eyes*. These proscriptive and hastily composed episodes evidence Dos Passos' desire to extricate himself from the quagmire that is his narrative. As he clawed for the exit, however, he left a number of telltale - and insistently historical - scratches on the reflective surfaces of *The Camera Eye*.

The Camera Eyes (49) and (51) take as their focus the two most important expressions of Dos Passos' commitment to the politics of the American Left: an involvement with the Sacco and Vanzetti defence campaign in the spring of 1927 and his work in support of striking miners at Harlan County, Kentucky, at the beginning of November 1931.⁴⁷⁹ As it is noted above, these episodes accelerated the concretisation of Dos Passos' (radical) political identity.⁴⁸⁰ By the

⁴⁷⁷Wilson to Dos Passos, July 22, 1936; Albert and Shirley, accession no. #5950, Box 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Dos Passos to Hemingway, 23rd July, '35. Albert and Shirley, #5950, Box 5.

⁴⁷⁹ Dos Passos' findings were fictionalized in *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939) and, more fleetingly, in *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 206-208.

⁴⁸⁰ Carr, *A Life*, p.307.

time that Dos Passos narrates these “radical” events, however, his belief in the left as a viable - or even desirable - political option had all but evaporated.⁴⁸¹ This “route to depletion”⁴⁸² would achieve definition in the forties yet Dos Passos’ political drift was sufficiently pronounced by 1935 to problematise the relation between the told and the telling.⁴⁸³ The final three *Camera Eyes* occasion a “semantic clash” between radical and conservative political imperatives.⁴⁸⁴

The Camera Eye (49) focuses upon an excursion undertaken in the late spring of 1927 and tracks Dos Passos as he, conceivably on a break from visiting Sacco and Vanzetti in Dedham’s county jails, trudges along the coast at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Here are its opening exchanges:

walking from Plymouth to North Plymouth through
the raw air of Massachusetts Bay at each step a small cold
squudge through the sole of one shoe
looking out past the grey framehouses under the rob-
insegg April sky across the white dories anchored in the
bottleclear shallows across the yellow sandbars and the slaty
bay ruffling to blue to the eastward (*TBM* 1134)

From a drab palette Dos Passos composes an impressionistic coastal scene that, while littered with detail, comes across as almost entirely lacking in substance.

⁴⁸¹ John Trombold argues that Dos Passos did not part from the left until 1937, stating as evidence, first, the execution of the poet Jose Robles in 1936 by communist secret police, and second, Dos Passos’ letter of resignation from the *New Masses* in 1937. These events were significant with regard to the political turn, yet Trombold pays insufficient attention to Dos Passos’ numerous comments that he was “through with” the left by 1935.

⁴⁸² Sitney, *Modernist Montage*, p.109.

⁴⁸³ Rosen, Trombold, and Landsberg supply general reports on Dos Passos’ later political attachments. For case specific commentaries see Robert Sayre, “Anglo-American Writers, the Communist Movement and the Spanish Civil War: The Case of Dos Passos”, *Revue Française Américaines* 2, No. 29 (1986), pp.263-74; see also White, “Federal Bureau”.

⁴⁸⁴ Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics”, p.146.

The intensity and vibrancy of previous *Camera Eyes* leaks from this episode like the “small cold squudge” of gritty emulsion that seeps from the hole in Dos Passos’ shoe. The immateriality of this camera-text alleviates the labour of the eye, which is free to scan its perceptual horizons. Whereas the textual sight-lines of many of the previous *Camera Eyes* are congested, thick with opacity (mired by “cigarettesmoke” [TBM 872], or “fog” [931]; “barred with trestles” [789] or “bleared with newspaperreading” [893]) this camera-text offers scant resistance to the penetrative ambitions of the textual “Eye”/“I”. Indeed it captures, with a conceivably Jamesian attention to texture and contour, the translucent (“bottleclear”) yet eminently brittle (“robinsegg”) surroundings. The viewing of viewable objects is not just permitted but actively encouraged. Dos Passos’ eye discerns “framehouses”, “dories”, “shallows” and “sandbars” (accumulations of sediment that I dub above as “tongues” or “spits”); it also discerns their coloration: “grey”, “white”, “bottleclear” and “yellow”, respectively. Notwithstanding their drab coloration, each object remains distinct from the next; only “slaty bay ruffling to blue” is suggestive of tonal ambiguity. Composed of “motley objects” that are “anchored” (1134) to impressionistic moorings, this *Eye* strives toward the condition of photography. The “visual legibility” of the exchange is indeed pronounced.⁴⁸⁵ No doubt refreshed by the extended “rest” period that separates the forty-eighth and forty-ninth *Camera Eye* - a break of 163 pages - the textual “Eye”/“I” makes short work of a perceptual horizon saturated with signification; it sees “past”, “under”, “across” and again “across” in quick succession. Bestowed with a freedom of movement, the roving “Eye” enjoys an uncontested “eastward” view across Massachusetts bay. Thus, and in Danus’ phrasing “the modernist conquest of the visual” is affirmed.⁴⁸⁶ Unlike previous episodes, then, which interfere with and thus render inefficient the labour of the eye, the opening

⁴⁸⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.5.

⁴⁸⁶ Danus, *Senses of Modernism*, p.55

session of *The Camera Eye* (49) is a preeminent example of a “transparent” formal prose. Nothing, it seems, is hidden or restricted from the probing gaze of the (reifying) eye. In transcending his visual horizons Dos Passos becomes the “transparent eyeball”: he “see[s] all.”⁴⁸⁷ Thus, and in the idiom of the phenomenologist thinker Merleau-Ponty, perception is reaffirmed as a “privileged realm of experience.”⁴⁸⁸

The pronounced “eyemindedness” of this exchange endows Dos Passos with a transhistorical subjectivity: visions become *revisions*. As Dos Passos looks “eastward” toward the “stifling cellar” of Europe, he passes - like an emulsion which seeps or “squudg[es]” - out of the “now”, relocating in the first third of the 1600s.⁴⁸⁹ “[T]his”, Dos Passos grandly proclaims of North Plymouth Bay,

is where the immigrants landed the roundheads
the sackers of castles the kingkillers the haters of oppression
this is where they stood in a cluster after landing from the
crowded ship that stank of bilge on the beach that be-
longed to no one between the ocean that belonged to
no-one and the enormous forest that belonged to no one
that stretched over the hills where the deertracks were up
the green rivervalleys where the redskins grew their tall
corn in patches forever into the incredible west (*TBM* 1134)

This dewey-eyed characterisation of a braver, freer, and more plentiful time - an epoch yet to be “choke[d]” by modern modes - marks an incipient turn in Dos

⁴⁸⁷ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1836) in Alfred R Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (eds.), *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume III, Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp.97-115.

⁴⁸⁸ Merleau Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, p.25.

⁴⁸⁹ Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.185.

Passos' historical consciousness. Having reached saturation point in his relation to the left, and having almost entirely reneged on his Marxian commitments, this is the point at which Dos Passos' previously fluid relation to Jeffersonian principles begins to solidify. The revolutionary "bilge" that threatened to rise up and spew from Dos Passos during the twenties and early part of the thirties is here suppressed by a series of bland judgements as to the structural deficiencies of the American Republic. To label as "immigrants" America's Founding Fathers constitutes a tepid critique of the imposition of an economic and political system dependant upon yet hostile toward non-native immigrant labour. The term "haters of oppression" is also insufficient. Lacking in definition, this utterance is essentially meaningless, rendering opaque the charged political context in which "America" greeted its founding colonisers. The anaphoric returns of the phrasing "belonged to no one" riff on the subsequent appropriation of territories yet the insistence of Dos Passos' repetition cannot mask the fact that this camera-text connotes an anaemic critique of ownership. The evasive and generalised tone within which this regressive historical interlude is couched confirms Rosen's assertion that "vague nostalgia creeps into the latter parts of *U.S.A.*"⁴⁹⁰ Had Dos Passos maintained the political coordinates that he followed throughout the twenties he may have found a more substantial means of uncovering the (social) source of the stench. Keen, however, to navigate the political reefs, Dos Passos deviated from the Marxian course. Here, and in an exchange that refers to the high point of his political radicalism (Summer 1927), Dos Passos tows a traditionalist appeal to a rugged, democratic, individualism.

Given Dos Passos' shift toward an asinine brand of populism in the forties it is unsurprising that he re-enacts the parable of America's founding. To invert an idiom of Gold: he does not go forward; he retreats. Muttering to himself the myriad "pencil scrawls" that fill his "notebook", and conscious that

⁴⁹⁰ Rosen, *John Dos Passos*, p.89.

the “scraps of recollection” and “mangled memories”, once collated and re-articulated efficiently, might precipitate justice for Sacco and Vanzetti (here “Bart”), Dos Passos shrinks away from “the marvellous future”, taking sanctuary in a resplendent past. This “cognitive retreat”, in Gallagher and Greenblatt’s wording, is an occasion for irony, however.⁴⁹¹ By filtering the past (1627) through the lens of the present (1927, a “present” which is “always already old” by 1935), Dos Passos not only compromises the epoch to which he seems keen to return but he annihilates the men that he strives to preserve. By invoking 1627 as a solution to a (painfully) contemporary problem Dos Passos expunges Sacco and Vanzetti, his putative “subjects”, from the historical record. In effect, their narrative has been fed through what Dos Passos referred to in 1924 as “the smoothing presses of history.”⁴⁹² To “press” in this way is to flatten, to stifle: in short, to take a photograph. Sontag’s famous account of photography provides an apposite means of historicizing the peristalses that give rhythm to the ebb of this eye. The ideological labour to which photography commits attests, *in* and *through* its very materiality, to what Sontag calls

the cumulative de-creation of the past (in the very act of preserving it), the fabrication of a new, parallel reality that makes the past immediate while underscoring its comic or tragic ineffectuality, that invests the specificity of the past with an unlimited irony, that transforms the present into the past and the past into pastness.⁴⁹³

The “comic or tragic ineffectuality” of this “parallel reality” gathers in a single moment of degradation. Pacing out a horological journey from Founding Fathers to fish float, the walk from “Plymouth” to “North Plymouth” is plagued by an irritating and unpleasant sensation, emanating from ground level: “a

⁴⁹¹ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p.49.

⁴⁹² Pizer (ed.), *Major Nonfictional Prose*, p.73.

⁴⁹³ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.77.

small cold squudge through the sole of one shoe". A salty gob of sediment (analogous to the protoplasmic gunk that throbs through *The Camera Eye* [45]) permeates a leaky, that is *inefficient*, shoe. As a moment of inefficiency, this moment is generatively linked to the notion of waste. Or, more specifically, the notion of "mess". David Trotter argues powerfully for the semantic capabilities of mess in nineteenth century literary fictions, yet a compelling case can be made for its spilling into the work of the twentieth.⁴⁹⁴ Faulkner, a writer less obviously tied to the efficiency movement, and more than a little partial to the odd spillage, might seem a more obvious point of comparison, yet Dos Passos' *Camera Eyes*, as we have argued in this thesis, do stuff with stuff.⁴⁹⁵ We have argued already that the primary duty of *The Camera Eye* is to dispose of excess liquidities, the textual surplus. A case will be made as we draw to a close that metaphoric comparisons can be drawn between a perished shoe and Dos Passos' political degradation.

The flatulent sound of fluids being admitted and ejected from a leaky shoe provides a flatulent sonic note for a deflated and degraded sense of the past. "History", by 1935, is a thing which seeps in, pollutes, and annoys. It is a disgusting "squudge" that farts from a hole in a shoe. Dos Passos fails to provide a precise location for the source of this irritating "squudge" yet there is no reason why we cannot locate it here. If the "pollution" metaphor holds thus far, we might push it a (squidgy) step further: the leak is in the "left" shoe, rather than the "right". As far as Dos Passos was concerned, the left had worn decidedly thin by the mid thirties. Fully "discredited" by 1935, American

⁴⁹⁴ David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹⁵ "Barn Burning" (1939) is amongst the most well known moments of defilement in Faulkner's oeuvre. In a much commented passage, Abner Snopes smears with horse shit a rug owned by Major de Spain. Analogous moments of defacement litter Faulkner. Be it the portentous "stain" on Caddy Compson's knickers in *The Sound and the Fury*, the pink toothpaste that the young Joe Christmas squeezes from a tube, ingests, and subsequently vomits up in *Light in August* (1932) or the clots of phlegm that so frequently stand in for "eyes" in *Sanctuary*, Faulkner's excretions are as abundant as they are problematic.

Marxism constituted, for Dos Passos, little more than “a very dangerous pseudo religion with a fake scientific base.”⁴⁹⁶

The perishing leaks into the penultimate *Camera Eye*. Incessantly anthologised and remarked upon by a legion of critics, *The Camera Eye* (50) is U.S.A.’s most familiar and celebrated passage, and frequently cited as the culmination of Dos Passos’ diatribe against American political hegemony.⁴⁹⁷ Taking as its frame of reference the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti in August 1927, this *Camera Eye* does indeed represent a point of political intensity. As Foley states, “the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti occupies a privileged political place in U.S.A.”⁴⁹⁸ Dos Passos would later testify to the effect of defeat in Massachusetts: “I had seceded privately the night Sacco and Vanzetti were executed [...] I had seceded into my private conscience like Thoreau in Concord Jail”.⁴⁹⁹ This Thoreauvian contraction jars with the broad “we” within which Dos Passos couches much of this exchange. That the two most renowned lines of the trilogy - “all right we are two nations” (1157) and “we stand defeated America” (1158) - draw upon a collective grammar which creates, in turn, a tension between mass political struggle and the individual consciousness is intently problematic. Written during a period of conservatism yet referring to a period of leftism, *The Camera Eye* (50) semanticizes the conflict between the collective and the singular, between the presumed “we” and the narrating “I”. In concert with the “we” comes a “they”, an amorphous entity toward which Dos Passos jabs an accusatory pronominal finger:

⁴⁹⁶ Dos Passos to Bernadin, Jan 3rd, 1942. Albert and Shirley, #5950, Box 5.

⁴⁹⁷ For critical response to this exchange see Foley, *Radical Representations*, p.434; Gail McDonald, *American Literature and Culture, 1900-1960: An Introduction* (Oxford Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p.77; Michael Spindler, *Veblen and Modern America: Revolutionary Iconoclast* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.141; David L. Vanderwerken, “U. S. A.: Dos Passos and the “Old Words””, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May, 1977), pp.195-228; Andrew Yerkes, *Twentieth-Century Americanism: Identity and Ideology in Depression-era Leftist Literature* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 76.

⁴⁹⁸ Foley, *Radical Representations*, p.435.

⁴⁹⁹ Ludington (ed.), *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.383.

they have clubbed us off the streets they are
 stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians
 the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with
 reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers (listen
 businessmen collegepresidents judges America will not
 forget her betrayers) they hire the men with guns the uni-
 forms the policecars the patrolwagons

Anaphorically impacted, Dos Passos' penultimate *Eye* thus opens with liberal use of an emphatic, albeit non-specific "they". In lieu of precise reference Dos Passos implements a vague syntax, the rhythms of which seek, through repetition, to hash up an insistence that might compensate for a politics that is less than solvent. From these non-specific pronominal beginnings Dos Passos' narrative shifts into a second person "you" which connotes a similar imprecision:

all right you have won you will kill the brave men our
 friends tonight
 there is nothing left to do we are beaten (1156)

Dos Passos bandies around "we", "us", "they" and "you", yet he never makes clear to whom these markers refer. What is more, this obsessive employment of the collective pronoun supposes a sociality to which Dos Passos was, by 1935, clearly hostile. Having moved away from the "we" during this period Dos Passos had, to revert to Marxian terms, withdrawn himself from the social metabolism. Less prepared to fight the socialist fight and less inclined toward the textual expenditures committed to in *The 42nd Parallel* and *Nineteen Nineteen*, Dos Passos had become "I-minded". Given the shift from "we" to "I"

we might want to consider why these final camera-texts draw so heavily upon a collective grammar. I would suggest that the abundant “we” occasions a sociality that reassures, calming the contradictions that engulfed Dos Passos’ politics. This is a narrative of compunction rather than compassion, an act of remembering that, while triggered by the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti, brings into relief Dos Passos’ “swing on the seesaw” of American political life. More than mourning the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti, *The Camera Eye* (50) mourns the death of the political Dos Passos.

The Camera Eye (51) reports on the labor dispute at Harlan County, Kentucky in the summer and autumn of 1931. The events at Harlan would connote a flashpoint in American industrial relations and a high water mark in Dos Passos’ commitment to the politics of the left. The tone of the piece is sombre, bleak, “defeated” (1158):

at the head of the valley in the dark of the hills on the
broken floor of a lurchdover cabin a man halfsits halfflies
propped up by an old woman two wrinkled girls that
might be young chunks of coal flare in the hearth flicker
in his face white and sagging as dough blacken the
cavedin mouth the taut throat the belly swelled enormous
with the wound he got working on the minetipple (1207-8)

The “tight throat” of *The Big Money’s* first *Eye* thus re-emerges as the “taut throat” of its ninth and final *Eye*. Swollen by the interventions of an extractive economy, these decrepit creatures are stripped of their labour, connoting little more than husks of erstwhile use-values. Metonymies for the collective hardship suffered by America’s working poor during the Depression, these abject “lurchdover” figures, replete with “sagging” faces, “cavedin mouth[s]” and “swelled” stomachs, counterpoint with the sharp, cubistically rendered

faces that crowded *The Camera Eye* (45). The “wrinkled girls that might be young” are a puckered and economically impoverished variant of those leisured creatures with “wise I-know-it wrinkles round the eyes/all scrubbed stroked clipped scraped with the help of lipstick/rouge shavingcream” (TBM 872). Read in concert, these two moments bring into sharp focus an imbalance between those who labour and those who consume. The polarisation of classes is stark; the United States, a capricious “nation” cleaved into “two”, wields “a power that can feed you or leave you to starve” (1209). By 1931, as America entered its most significant and lengthy economic contraction, the “big money” had clearly become “small”; the depletion, for Dos Passos at least, could be traced to an influx of marauding “they[s]” that, having passed through the “painful sieve”, sought to inflict their own sort of pain:

they are the conquering army
that has *filtered into the country* unnoticed they have taken
the hilltops by stealth they levy toll they stand at the mine-
head they stand at the polls they stand by when the
bailiffs carry the furniture of the family evicted from the
city tenement out on the sidewalk they are there when the
bankers foreclose on a farm they are ambushed and ready
to shoot down the strikers marching behind the flag up the
switchback road to the mine those that the guns spare they
jail)

the laws stares across the desk out of angry eyes

(TBM 1209, italics added)

As was the case in the previous *Eye*, an indeterminate “they” stands in for a subject that Dos Passos proves unable to formulate. That Dos Passos provides account of the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti and a report upon “Industrial

Terrorism" in Harlan when his belief in the validity of leftist struggle had evaporated problematises the political character of these episodes. Yet despite the opacities that are generated by the dialectic, it is clear from these records that Dos Passos' political "eyes" have veered to the right.

CODA:
“THE TRUTH ABOUT VISUAL TRAINING”:
A READER’S GUIDE TO U.S.A.

In 1941, three years after Harcourt, Brace and Co. published *U.S.A.* as a trilogy, Dos Passos began compiling preliminary notes on a topic that would occupy his attention, on and off, for the best part of the next thirty years. These notes, scribbled rapidly and often illegibly on the back of envelopes and pieces of scrap card, would cohere in an unpublished, yet remarkable essay, “The Truth About Visual Training”, the “Final Version” of which Dos Passos typed up sometime in 1957.⁵⁰⁰ Undertaken in collaboration with Dr. Amiel Francke, a behavioural optometrist practising in Washington, D.C., “The Truth About Visual Training” constituted an ostensibly genuine attempt to understand and subsequently rectify what Dos Passos diagnosed as the “visual deficiencies” of the American reading public.

“Visual Training” was an umbrella term for a variety of “[t]echniques for improving visual functions -- either orthoptic *training of particular muscles for correction of eyes that deviate*; or perceptual training, involving practice in making perceptual judgements” (VTFV 6, italics added). That the eye should see “straight” and without error, bias or squint, was the cardinal feature of the visual project. By harnessing “the curative powers of eye exercises” (VTFV 3) Dos Passos sought to rectify “our nationwide failure to *use* our eyes comfortably and efficiently” (VTJDP 1, italics added). Much was at stake in “straightening crooked eyes” (VTJDP 6). “Seeing is our chief medium for understanding the world around us. If you don’t see well you don’t think well.” (VTFV 3) Replete with Cartesian inflections, the “new optometric technique” (VTJDP 6) denoted a

⁵⁰⁰ The folder that comprises the various drafts and fragments of of this essay is dated “1941-1975” and is held at the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. I cite two undated versions of the essay here: a sixteen page manuscript denoted “final version” hereafter VTFV; a twenty-nine page document entitled “THE TRUTH ABOUT VISUAL TRAINING by John Dos Passos”, hereafter VTJDP.

stepping stone toward an avowedly transparent epistemology. Through “the application of very simple visual training methods” (VTFV 4), ranging from tracing the trajectory of a paper plane affixed to the end of a pencil, to the employment of green chalkboards in the classroom, to regular use of a trampoline, Dos Passos sought, under the tutelage of Francke, to develop the “muscular skills” of “laggard readers” which, once developed, would allow them to maximise their “visual gains” (VTFV 11).

The “eye” thus connoted a location from which a rich cache of visual resources might be retrieved. Thus, and in a register that would not have been unfamiliar to contemporary advertising gurus, Dos Passos guaranteed that by following the proposed visual regime the reader/patient/customer would “get more meaning from the world” (VTFV 1). Dos Passos’ terminology implicates the labour of the eye in a wider epistemology. No longer was the eye considered a passive device for the “recording” of sense impressions. It was a machine or “conveyor”, to use familiar terminology, which could be tightened, made more productive and made, crucially, to yield a kind of visual “profit”. Promising the “correction of eyes that deviate[d]” Dos Passos and Frankce were offering “easy” meaning. Semantic leakage was duly consigned to the trashcan of a wonky visuality. Eye strain was a thing of the past. In short, Dos Passos’ collaborative researches sought to make the eye *work*, to restore the primacy of vision and effect the re-throning of the eye, to poach from Martin Jay.

Given that “more people [were] having more and more trouble in getting good *use out of* their eyes” (VTFV 1, italics added) the need for action was pressing. Yet to “get” use-value “out of” the eye seemed subordinated to the extraction of a sort of visual surplus, to “get more meaning from the world”. As Francke stressed, “Vision is output and all measurements are those of output”. Lamentably, the modern eye seemed limited in its operations, inclined toward “myopia” and “squint”. Dos Passos would speculate on the origins of the “visual deficiency”, appropriately enough via a technologically inflected

metaphor: “it’s likely that our machinery for seeing, which developed in primitive man for use at a distance, has not yet adapted itself to the school, the factory, and the office” (*VTFV* 3). Concluding that “the problem, in general terms, is one of adaptation” Dos Passos continues with his own diagnoses: “[t]he human frame has adapted itself gradually, century after century, to gradually changing environments, but maybe the changes in ways of living and working during the last fifty years have been too drastic and sudden for us.” (*VTJDP* 3)

More than a little blurry in contour, Dos Passos’ rhetoric was brought into sharper focus by Francke, as much through his surgical prose as by his expertise on lenses. Forming part of “the literature on visual deficiencies” (*VTJDP* 1) “The Truth About Visual Training” constituted Dos Passos’ debut effort in the medical sciences. Novice practitioner that he was, Dos Passos looked to Francke to provide the venture with the necessary clinical credibility. As stringent as it was unswerving, Francke’s support came in the form of a seven-point manifesto, the “postulates,” of which follow thus:

1. Seeing is learned.
2. A visual problem is not an eye problem, but can create an eye problem.
3. Vision is output and all measurements are those of output.
4. Lenses are fitted to enhance performance in output, rather than the correction of structure.
5. Ocular defects, such as astigmatism, anisometropia, adverse high hypermetropia, myopia and squint, are the end results in structure of adverse changes in process.
6. The manifest ocular defects are all varying forms of adaptation to the same underlying problem.
7. The remedial measures of lenses and training are designed to bring about unimpaired output with adequate latitudes to meet imposed stresses.

Francke’s visual manifesto provided the clinical platform upon which Dos Passos hoped to establish what he immodestly dubbed “a new conception in the process of seeing.” (*VTJDP* 7) Francke’s fourth “postulate” is particularly

incisive in this connexion, providing a suggestive means of routing “The Truth About Visual Training” into wider conversations on vision and visibility as necessitated *by* and passed *through* *The Camera Eye*: “Lenses” Francke states, “are fitted to enhance performance in output, rather than the correction of structure.” To affix a lens to the eye is to maximise the visual product, not to remedy the “underlying problem” (postulate 6) that led to the “deficiency” in “structure”. Keyed into the rhetoric of the efficiency movement, Francke’s postulate rendered lenses resonated as mechanical contrivances through which a visual surplus might be engineered without a need to adjust the “underlying” causes for the laggard eye. Over the course of their collaborations, Dos Passos would come to consider the “hidden” work occasioned by these visual “transactions”. “Perhaps there was”, Dos Passos admitted, “more involved in the business of seeing than just the lense [sic] of the eye and the nerveends on the retina. Perhaps”, Dos Passos’ pondered “the use of your eyes was a skill, something you learned, like using your hands or walking or swimming. If seeing turned out to be a skill” Dos Passos concludes, “you could teach it to people.” (VTJDP 7)

The gusto with which Dos Passos carried out his research is perhaps difficult to grasp. Difficult, that is, if we read the effort at face value, that is to say, as straight science. I do not think that this is what it is. The value of Dos Passos’ paper lies less in its attempts to remedy the visual problems of “laggard readers” than in its ability to refer metaphorically to what had, by 1957, become a lengthy personal obsession with the pursuit of visual efficiency. Dos Passos’ “scientific” paper, in tandem with his “scientific” novel, enumerates a series of “visual transactions” or “eye exercises” that had been a constitutive feature of U.S.A. I would suggest, in conclusion to this thesis, that the grouped papers that constitute “The Truth About Visual Training” provide a covert metaphor for the visions and re-visions codified in U.S.A. More exactly, the “orthoptic” project tacitly affirms - without directly confronting - a “correction” of the

political visions to which Dos Passos subscribed during the twenties and first half of the thirties. “The Truth About Visual Training” resonates as a retrospective attempt to explain, and explain, under the guise of pseudo-science, the massive realignment of Dos Passos’ political sight-lines. In sum, “The Truth About Visual Training” provides post-*U.S.A.* commentary on how the modes of seeing that Dos Passos employed during the late twenties and early thirties had, by the outbreak of the Second World War, to be radically reassigned.⁵⁰¹ As this thesis has shown, “Eyes Left” became “Eyes Right” in the space of three or four years. Dos Passos’ visual research paper denotes more than just an elaborate hoax. It was, in fact, an opportunity for Dos Passos to slip us a few visual clues, outside of the surveillance of the camera’s eye, as to how we might read *U.S.A.* It was not, after all, in “The Truth About Visual Training” that the “eye exercises” were being worked out, but in *U.S.A.*

⁵⁰¹ In *Midcentury* (1961), Dos Passos returns to the kind of formal techniques that he employed in *U.S.A.*, yet these techniques are forced and lack the freshness that they had in the previous work.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the production of semantic meaning in William Faulkner and John Dos Passos, and sought to theorize how this meaning achieves formal expression. Over six interlinked chapters it has been argued that the intersections of form, vision and history in these two oeuvres generates different amounts of prose meaning in different ways and with different semantic implications. In spite of their proximate chronologies, and in spite of writing of the same historical period, Faulkner and Dos Passos are antagonistically situated, soliciting alternate formal responses to historical pressures. To note a formal divergence is not to assume that one writer is more “historical” than the other. Indeed, both Faulkner and Dos Passos place historical pressures at the centre of their formal practice. I have tried to argue here that Faulkner and Dos Passos mediate history in different ways and for different ends. Ultimately, I have been concerned with the extent to which these two modernist contemporaries are at a variance with how meaning accumulates and what should be done with it once it does. The comparative aspect of this thesis has thus provided a methodological frame through which we can draw out a number of key formal, political and epistemological differences between two of America’s primary formalists and producers of modernist texts.

The significance of this thesis is threefold. First, my opening three chapters constitute the first extended investigation of Faulkner’s grammar, and the first to specifically probe the workings of the pronoun. Second, the work on Dos Passos constitutes an initial exploration of the dialectical character of *The Camera Eye*. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this thesis has read as linked two modernists rarely discussed in the same critical discourse.

The thesis hopes to have opened up a number of areas for further study. My work on Faulkner seeks to have provided a formal grammar for the historcial contortions of a South in the wake of massive social, political and psychological upheaval. These investigations might be of benefit to further students of Southern literatures who seek to place Faulkner's formalism within a wider regional context, and to those more broadly concerned with the historical, political and ideological consequences of literary form.

My research on *The Camera Eye* hopes to spark further study into a literary figure that was once central to literary discourse but now oscillates on the borders of obscurity. Further work on the political aspect of *The Camera Eye* might yield significant insights. In particular, one might be drawn to pick up the threads of the present work and chart more fully the correlation between textual and economic forms. More exactingly, work is still to be done on the hoard, and the linkages between money and text as two potential sources of value. My final appendix has sought to chart the location, date and timings of *The Camera Eyes* in the order in which they appear in Dos Passos' text. Much of the detail proves elusive and warrants further investigations.

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APPENDICES

A) Dos Passos, *The Camera Eye* (10), from *The 42nd Parallel* (1930).

the old major who used to take me to the Capitol when the Senate and the House of Representatives were in session had been in the commissary of the Confederate Army and had very beautiful manners so the attendants bowed to the old major except for the pages who were little boys not much older than your brother was a page in the senate once and occasionally a Representative or a Senator would look at him with slit eyes may be somebody and bow or shake hearty or raise a hand

the old major dressed very well in a morningcoat and had muttonchop whiskers and we would walk very slowly through the flat sunlight in the Botanical Gardens and look at the little labels on the trees and shrubs and see the fat robins and the starlings hop across the grass and walk up the steps and through the flat air of the rotunda with the dead statues of different sizes and the Senate Chamber flat red and the committee room and the House flat green and the committee rooms and the Supreme Court I've forgotten what color the Supreme Court was and the committee rooms

and whispering behind the door of the visitors' gallery and the dead air and a voice rattling under the glass skylights and desks slammed and the long corridors full of the dead air and our legs would get very tired and I thought of the starlings on the grass and the long streets full of

dead air and my legs were tired and I had a pain between
the eyes and the old men bowing with quick slit eyes

may be somebody and big slit unkind mouths and the
dusty black felt and the smell of coatclosets and dead air
and I wonder what the old major thought about and what
I thought about maybe about that big picture at the Cor-
coran Art Gallery full of columns and steps and conspira-
tors and Caesar in purple fallen flat called Caesar dead

(42P 90-91)

*

B) Dos Passos, *The Camera Eye* (28), from *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932). (I insert dates
in parentheses as a means of flagging up the abrupt changes in chronology.)

[April 1915]

when the telegram came that she was dying (the
streetcarwheels screeched round the bellglass like all the
pencils on all the slates in all the schools) walking around
Fresh Pond the smell of puddlewater willowbuds in the raw
wind shrieking streetcarwheels rattling on loose trucks
through the Boston suburbs grief isnt a uniform and go
shock the Booch and drink wine for supper at the Lenox
before catching the Federal

I'm so tired of violets

Take them all away

when the telegram came that she was dying the bell-
glass cracked in a screech of slate pencils (have you ever

never been able to sleep for a week in April?) and He
 met me in the grey trainshed my eyes were stinging with
 vermillion bronze and chrome-green inks that oozed from
 the spinning April hills His moustaches were white the
 tired droop of an old man's cheeks She's gone Jack grief
 isn't a uniform and the in the parlor the waxen odor
 of lilies in the parlor (He and I we must bury the uniform
 of grief)

then the riversmell the shimmering Potomac reaches
 the little choppy silver waves at Indian Head there were
 mockingbirds in the graveyards and the roadsides steamed
 with spring April enough to shock the world

[January 1917]

when the cable came that He was dead I walked
 through the streets full of five o'clock Madrid seething with
 twilight in shivered cubes of aguardiente red wine gaslamp-
 green sunset pink tile ochre eyes lips red cheeks brown
 pillar of the throat climbed on the night train at the Norte
 station without knowing why

I'm so tired of violets

Take them all away

[April 1915]

the shattered iridescent bellglass the carefully copied
 busts the architectural details the grammar of styles

it was the end of that book and I left the Oxford po-
 ets in the little noisy room that smelt of stale olive oil in
 the Pension Boston Ahora Now Maintenant Vita

Nuova but we

who had heard Copey's beautiful reading voice and
read the handsomely bound books and breathed deep
(breathe deep one two three four) of the waxwork lilies
and the artificial parma-violet scent under the ethercone
and sat breakfasting in the library where the bust was of
Octavius

were now dead at the cableoffice

[August 1918]

on the rumblebumping wooden bench on the train
slamming through midnight climbing up from the steerage
to get a whiff of Atlantic on the lunging steamship (the
ovalfaced Swiss girl and her husband were my friends) she
had slightly popeyes and a little gruff way of saying *Zut
alors* and throwing us a little smile a fish to a sealion that
warmed our darkness when the immigration officer came
for her passport he couldn't send her to Ellis Island la
grippe espagnole she was dead

washing those windows

K.P.

cleaning the sparkplugs with a pocketknife

A.W.O.L.

grinding the American Beauty Roses to dust in that
whore's bed (the foggy night flamed with proclamations of
the League of the Rights of Man) the almond smell of
high explosives sending singing éclats through the sweetish
puking grandiloquence of the rotting dead

tomorrow I hoped would be the first day of the first
month of the first year

(NN 368-370)

*

C) Dos Passos, *The Camera Eye* (45), from *The Big Money* (1936).

the narrow yellow room teems with talk under the low
ceiling and crinkling tendrils of cigarettesmoke twine blue
and fade round noses behind ears under the rims of wom-
en's hats in arch looks changing arrangement of lips the
toss of a bang the wise I-know-it wrinkles round the eyes
all scrubbed stroked clipped scraped with the help of lip-
stick rouge shavingcream razorblades into a certain pattern
that implies

this warmvoiced woman who moves back and forth
with a throaty laugh head tossed a little back distributing
with teasing looks the parts in the fiveoclock drama

every man his pigeonhole

the personality must be kept carefully adjusted over
the face

to facilitate recognition she pins on each of us a badge
today entails tomorrow

Thank you but why me? Inhibited? Indeed goodbye

the old brown hat flopped faithful on the chair beside
the door successfully snatched

outside the clinking cocktail voices fade

even in this elderly brick dwellinghouse made over

with green paint orange candles a little tinted calcimine
into

Greenwich Village

the stairs go up and down

lead through a hallway ranked with bells names evok-
ing lives tangles unclassified

into the rainy twoway street where cabs slither slushing
footsteps plunk slant lights shimmer on the curve of a wet
cheek a pair of freshcolored lips a weatherlined neck a
gnarled grimed hand an old man's bloodshot eye

street twoway to the corner of the roaring avenue
where in the lilt of the rain and the din the four directions

(the salty in all of us ocean the protoplasm throbbing
through cells growing dividing sprouting into the billion
diverse not yet labelled not yet named

always they slip through the fingers

the changeable the multitudinous lives)

box dizzingly the compass

(TBM 872-3)

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D) Chart of *The Camera Eyes*.

NO.	PP.	LOCATION	DATE
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The 42nd Parallel. Composed 1927-1929; published 1930.

1	13-14	Belgium, maybe Holland,	Circa Jan 9, 1900.
2	19-20	Washington-New York-Havre de Grace, MD.	1898.
3	29-30	England to France channel crossing.	Undetermined.
4(‡)	32-33	Schuylkill River, Philadelphia.	1904.
5	55-56	Kew Gardens, London.	1904-5.

6	57	Hampstead, London.	Before summer 1906.
7	77	Simpson's Pond, near Choate School, CT.	Early 1907.
8	80-81	Choate School, CT.	1907-09.
9	86-87	Crisfield, MD ("Eastern shore of Md")	Undetermined.
10	90-91	Botanical Gardens, Washington, D.C.	Undetermined.
11(*)	99-101	Pennsylvania.	Undetermined.
12	117-118	Downtown D.C.	March, 1907-8.
13	120-121	Eastern Shore, MD.	Undetermined.
14(+)	133-134	Choate School, CT.	Undetermined.
15	149-150	Schuykill, Pennsylvania.	Undetermined.
16	154-155	Delaware.	Undetermined.
17	182-183	Choate School, CT.	May 18, 1910.
18(*)	196-197	Bow, London, England.	1909.
19	209	Northern Neck, Virginia.	Undetermined.
20	214-215	Lawrence, Massachusetts.	July 4, 1912.
21	227-229	Dos Passos' farm, North Virginia.	August, 1912.
22	231-232	Placienta Bay, Newfoundland.	Summer, 1914.
23	240-241	Magdalena River, Colombia.	Summer, 1914.
24	246-248	Rideau Canal to Ottawa, Quebec.	Summer, 1913.
25	262-263	Harvard, Massachusetts.	Late 1912, early 1913.
26(*)	301-302	Madison Square Gardens, New York.	April 19, 1916.
27(**)	313-315	Undetermined.	June 20, 1917.

Nineteen Nineteen. Composed 1930-32; published 1932.

28(‡)	368-370	Harvard, Massachusetts.	Spring, 1915; 1917; August 12, 1918.
29	420-421	Norton Harjes, France.	June 20, 1917.
30(‡)	446-447	Recicourt, France.	August, 1917.
31	467-468	Ferry crossing from Weehawken.	August or September, 1917.
32(‡)	479-480	Verdun, France.	September, 1917.
33	485-488	Paris; Fontainebleau; Rhone Valley; Genoa.	November, 1917.
34	507-509	Dolo, near Bassano, Italy.	January 4-5, 1918.
35(‡)	542-543	Left bank, Paris.	June, 1918.
36	563-564	Le Havre, France.	Mid November (likely the 12th), 1918.
37(‡)	573-575	Ferrieres en Gatinais, Lesigny, France.	Early December, 1918.
38	604-605	Tours, France.	March-July, 1919.
39	649-651	Paris, France.	March 21, 1919.
40	699-700	Paris, France.	The days following June 9, 1919.
41(‡)	715-716	Garches, France.	May 1st, 1919.
42	744-745	Gievre, France.	May-June, 1919.

The Big Money. Composed 1932-1936; published 1936.

43(‡)	788-790	Coney Island; Sandy Hook.	September, 1920.
44	791-793	Beirut, Lebanon.	January, 1922.
45	872	Greenwich Village, New York.	April, 1922.
46	892	New York City.	Sometime before August 2nd, 1923.
47	931	New York City.	1923.
48(‡)	967	Santander - Cuba.	July 8th, 1920.
49	1134	Plymouth-North Plymouth, MA.	April, 1927.
50(‡)	1156	Massachusetts.	Summer, 1927.
51(‡)	1207	Harlan County, Kentucky	Fall, 1931.

KEY TO SYMBOLS USED:

(*) denotes a comma.

(†) denotes a semi-colon.

(‡) denotes blank spaces between prose sections.