

Discussion Questions—John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)

MENG 6710, Thinking Jazz, Michael Wutz, Fall 2015

(1) **Literature, Labor, and the Red Scare.** All of the writers in our course so far show more or less strong affinities for the working classes and the pro-labor political developments in the first decades of this century. F. Scott Fitzgerald, though fairly well-off and hobnobbing with the jet set of the 20s, has strong sympathies for the labor (remember our allegorical reading of “The Camel’s Back”), while exposing the wasteful and unproductive lifestyle of the ocean liner crowd (and, in the process, making \$ of it ☺). William Carlos Williams could easily have become a private physician for a select group of Greenwich Village *litterati*, but instead chose to exercise his profession among “the people” in Rutherford, New Jersey. He, too, drew stimulation and vitality from “The Poor” (as in the poem by that title) that he did not seem to receive from his more wealthy acquaintances; and even though he lamented time and again that his professional commitments robbed him of valuable time for writing, he never ceased to practice (for very little money) in the labor districts of his hometown. — Dos Passos, too, enjoyed a wealthy (though lonely) upbringing, and his sympathies for the working classes are evident in his work as well, almost as a reaction formation to the corporate clients of his father’s law practice. Dos Passos was also particularly interested in the “big social experiment” occurring at the time in the former Russia (and even visited the Soviet Union in the late 20s). He contributed for a while to the pro-communist magazine *The New Masses*, was actively involved in the New Theatre Playwrights, a heavily ideological group in New York, before eventually becoming politically rather conservative, if not reactionary. What political trends and persuasions can you detect in *Manhattan Transfer*? What legitimate inferences can you make about Dos Passos’ own beliefs in the 20s as you take a more distanced look at the novel (specific evidence)? Can you relate the novel to current political events we’ve talked about?

(2) **History and Narrative.** Dos Passos once described his novels as “historical chronicles,” as fictional renditions of the political climate and developments of the time. You may remember that his characters frequently function in a fundamentally sociological sense, in effect preventing the reader from any substantial empathetic identification with them while illustrating, paradigmatically, the vicissitudes of history. Characters, in that sense, demonstrate the behavior of the masses—they become case studies in behavior during the emergent consumer culture of the 20th century. Try to identify some of these character particles in *Manhattan Transfer* that you find particularly revealing about the novel’s historical moment(s). More importantly, what changes do you recognize in the progression of sections I, II, III, and what might these changes suggest about Dos Passos’ understanding of the first decades of this century? Does Dos Passos succeed in giving us a good “feel” or impression of what we think the 20s might have been like? If history is presumed to be constructed as the linear unfolding of time, how do the temporal dislocations of the novel (which are easily disorienting) affect our understanding of history?

(3) **Postprint Fiction, or, the Sensory Encyclopedia.** We have repeatedly talked about the reciprocities between the different media in the Jazz Age, and in modernism generally, and particularly about the interactions between print, sound storage (the phonograph & the gramophone) and visual storage (photography & film). Fitzgerald, Williams, and Dos Passos all variously reacted—both biographically and within their work—to the cultural pressure exerted upon them by the new, postprint media. Rethinking *Manhattan Transfer*, and keeping in mind the work of (our) other modernist writers, what evidence do you see of the novel's reaction to these media? To what degree do these media compete with, supplement, or perhaps (and perhaps paradoxically) enhance the medium of print? How does the novel, in the largest sense, react to the presence of these postprint media on both the level of theme (content) and form (structure). Think about instances when modern media appear in the novel, about the narrative innovations peculiar to *Manhattan Transfer* (including word choice, the appearance of words on the page) and, perhaps, even the tense in which the narrative is written. “Speculate and theorize!,” as Picard would say to Data.

(4) **Technology and the Writer.** Dos Passos identified himself as an observer and critic of technology, arguing that in the 20th century, “machinery” is “the core of human life” and that “among the most important tasks before novelists today” is “to tell truly, and not romantically or sentimentally, about the relation between men and machines” (“The World We Live In,” *Prose* 163). Elsewhere, invoking Milton, he summarily observed that the writer’s “business is to justify the ways of machinery to man” (“The Duty of the Writer,” *Prose* 205), and he described the writer’s business—that is, the act of writing—in technological terms: “A writer is after all only a machine for absorbing and arranging certain sequences of words out of the lives of the people around him The old idea of genius being a sort of spontaneous generation, the way they used to think worms came from slime, can I think safely be discarded” (☺ “The Making of a Writer,” *Prose* 117). What connections or relays, and at what levels, can you locate in *Manhattan Transfer* to support such observations? What connections do you see between writing (in the 20th century) and technology in the largest sense?