

Biographies in/or Fiction? Discussing Dos Passos's The Big Money

Christine Chollier

► **To cite this version:**

Christine Chollier. Biographies in/or Fiction? Discussing Dos Passos's The Big Money. Imaginaires, Presses universitaires de Reims, 2014, Les mots : entre pouvoir et puissance. Literary texts: the power and the possible, pp.105-124. hal-02561357

HAL Id: hal-02561357

<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02561357>

Submitted on 3 May 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Biographies in/or Fiction? Discussing Dos Passos's *The Big Money*

CHRISTINE CHOLLIER

Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, France

According to the Call for Papers, the likely course of action attributed to words/texts can be located somewhere between some kind of pressure exerted on readers and some kind of actualization of semantic opportunities. Raising the issue of the likely course of action of words/texts in these terms presupposes that we are acted upon by words and that we are no agents in the process of interpreting. I suggest that we begin by examining what's underlying this way of looking at the issue. What does 'power' imply? What does 'actualization' imply?

The 'power' of words is described in the Call for Papers as a limitation of body and mind. Words are said to control and constrain us. And given the glorification of individual freedom in our western societies, this limitation is consequently given a negative value. Now, we can certainly be grateful for the fact that a given network of words precludes a certain number of interpretations, otherwise we would be faced with an unlimited number, with a proliferation which would only lead to something close to "anything goes."

As for the 'actualization' performed by words/texts ('potential' in the Call for Papers), it is defined as the opening of new opportunities, a widening of our cognitive faculties, an increase of 'our' semantic complexity. Thus, what is implied is first that this 'increase' is valuable; and secondly that interpreters, not texts, are endowed with semantic complexity. Now, while interpreting is certainly a boon, it is hard to subscribe to the second assertion. However, it can be objected that:

Nous retrouvons ici l'antique opposition entre la *puissance* et l'*acte*, encore si vivace en linguistique – où l'on parle encore de *signifié de puissance*, d'*actualisation*, etc. Cette opposition est un des fondements de l'ontologie, dans la mesure où elle permet de sauvegarder l'unité invariable de l'Être et de réduire l'action à la manifestation ou mise en œuvre d'une puissance. De fait, la distinction aristotélicienne entre la puissance, le mouvement-changement et l'acte fonde encore les théories de l'énonciation et de l'actualisation : on retrouve par exemple ses pôles dans l'opposition chomskyenne entre compétence et performance. L'objectif de la linguistique reste présenté comme la description de la « puissance », c'est-à-dire de la compétence : par une illumination régressive, on passe de la surface à la profondeur, de l'énoncé à l'énonciation, du texte au discours, etc. » [...] Or « la puissance ne préexiste pas à l'acte, elle en est indissociable, et l'on ne peut l'en distinguer que par une rationalisation extérieure. [...] Bref, le rapport entre compétence et performance ne se réduit pas à l'actualisation d'une puissance (Rastier, "Parcours de production et d'interprétation" 223-226).

Indeed, competence and performance are always already closely intertwined. You learn reading by reading and you improve your reading competence by reading. The same goes for interpreting: you improve your interpreting abilities by interpreting. Thus, competence and performance are separated only when it is absolutely necessary to distinguish various courses of action, in order to place them under scrutiny or to theorize about them, for example. Other than that, in actual life, rather than theoretical models, they are constantly interlaced.

So, words/texts have no power *per se*: they need a context and an interpreter. Neither do they actualize anything in terms of semantic meaning. I say 'in terms of semantic meaning' because I tend to reduce the interpreter to a rational being.¹

1. But the reader cannot be reduced to a rational being, it will be objected. A model of the real reader was once put forward by French colleague Michel Picard (I say "the real reader" because in *La Lecture comme jeu* (1986), Picard's research object is the *real* reader, as opposed to the "implicit reader" (see W. Iser), the "abstract reader" (J. Lintvelt), the "ideal reader" (U. Eco), and the "arch-reader" (M. Riffaterre)). According to his model, the real reader is the product of the interaction between 3 forces: the subconscious instance (which is 'read' rather than reading, hence "le lu"), the physical person reading the

Consequently, texts can be described as linguistic contexts into which words are dipped, those words both forming the context and modifying it, while being modified by it. Words are forces exerting pressure on their milieu which also exerts pressure on them. But someone is needed to observe and exert this or that kind of pressure on both context and words which are jolted into constant interaction as soon as a reader/interpreter comes into play. Therefore, rather than ascribe to words the power to actualize a competence which has been laid in us – by magic, or by God – or conversely the power to restrict our liberty, we want to suggest that it is necessary to forget the description of texts as bags of strictly separated words. The issue of meaning/making sense leads us to consider texts as non unchanging networks of signs. They need interpreters to interact with, especially as their authors are bound to be far away in time and space, like the original readership, and even the first ‘referent’ or ‘intension’. Interpreters see their referential impressions constrained by the assembled words but they can exert their liberty by delineating some itinerary within the linguistic labyrinth. Of course, the blind interpreter – blinded by subconscious forces or by ideological considerations – will always violently impose on texts preconceived meaning coming from elsewhere than the text itself. At the other end of the spectrum, the weak interpreter will find it hard to actualize relationships between signs and reduce texts to basic meaning. However, meaning, not being put here or there, is neither located within the text, nor situated only within the interpreter. Thus, interpretations can best be described both as processes defined as interactions and as temporarily stabilized moments, not as unchanging forms reified by and in

book (“le liseur”), and the rational mind (“le lectant”). When one force happens to dominate the other two, balance is lost: for example, the “lu” is submerged by emotions and imaginary scenarios; if the rational part takes over, literature is turned into an ideological tool. But those are extreme cases, Picard says, in which what is expected from the act of reading is not something new and different but the everlasting return of the same. As for Vincent Jouve’s subconscious *lu*, it is strictly limited to the reader who finds a reflection of his own fantasy in all texts; this makes it necessary to come up with a fourth force, that of the *lisant*, who is lying under the spell of the make-believe world described in the texts he is reading. The latter force was included in Picard’s *lu*.

texts. The interpretive trajectory inevitably presupposes a reader interacting with a text in which he/she establishes relationships between signifieds, or between signifiers, or between signifiers and signifieds. What we perceive when interpreting are semantic backgrounds and forms, the latter standing out against the former. But while establishing regularities, we might want to focus on the changes that reshape those regularities.

The *USA trilogy* by Dos Passos undeniably deals with the increasing and indomitable power of finance stifling the opportunities that politics and the economy are expected to open; and it does so with a vengeance, we might even say. But it is not this thematic and dialectical approach that we are interested in. It is rather how the text acquires its power of representation/suggestion; what endows the fiction with such a powerful force; how the literary text gives rise to our referential impressions. The reason why the phrase 'referential illusion' will not be used here is that it is strongly negatively connoted. Instead the expression 'referential impression' will suggest that what we take for referents are fiercely constrained by linguistic signs, not the other way round.

I want to venture that the *USA trilogy* is a collection of social novels in which readers expect fiction to form strong powerful referential impressions. Which it does. But although it contains a good deal of nonfiction, it is nevertheless found on the FICTION shelf. So, what is to be made of those biographical sections scattered over the whole thing? Indeed, each volume of the trilogy alternates not three but four types of text: Newsreels, Camera Eye sections, fictional strands, and biographies.

The conventional fictional narratives of 'common' Americans present lives intended to be illustrative, not necessarily exemplary, and concentrate on symbolic moments in those lives. The Newsreels contain "everything. Songs and slogans, political aspirations and prejudices, ideals, hopes, delusions, frauds, crack-pot notions, clippings out of the daily newspapers." ("What Makes a Novelist" 31): "they are the nightmare of history, uncolored and uncontrolled by the private voice of the Camera Eye" (Marz 403). The 'Camera Eye' sections indicate the position of the observer. They have been described as

stream-of-consciousness (Wrenn 155) charting the development of different kinds of consciousnesses in an unnamed narrator from childhood to adulthood (Nanney 195).

Dos Passos described the function of the four types of narrative in the introduction to the 1937 Modern Library Edition of *The 42nd Parallel*: “Biographies of ‘real people are interlarded in the pauses of the narrative because their lives seem to embody so well a quality of the soil in which Americans of these generations grew.’ ‘Newsreel’ sequences, which consist of fragments of newspapers headlines, popular songs, speeches, advertisements, ‘give an inkling of the common mind of the epoch.’ The ‘Camera Eye’ aims to indicate the position of the observer” (“Introduction to 1937 Modern Library Edition” vii, qtd in Nanney 178).

If the genetic regime of the trilogy is based on a modernist experimental opposition between apparent fragmentation vs. underground links, the mimetic regime of the work is also very strong, relying as it does on newsreels, biographies and a represented observer whose subjectivity is more and more preoccupied by the collective life in his country. I want to insist on the conspicuous inclusion of those biographical sections in what is supposed to be a literary text. Whether they are called biographies, or essays, as the case may be (Ferré), they belong to the field of nonfiction whereas the fictional strands, the poetical Camera Eye sections and the songs from the Newsreels all come from fiction. Thus, they raise the question of the status of *nonfiction* in the field of *literature*.²

2. The critics usually grant each term with the definitions that best suit them. For example, in *L'Emprise des signes*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle opposes literature, that category which includes lasting monuments of eternal value, to *doxa*, namely what is so bad that it falls into oblivion. The differences in value come from the roles played by language within each category: literary language is said to estrange, defamiliarize, subvert, invent with language – such is the subversive function of art in general – whereas doxic language resumes, supports or reinforces preexisting networks of signs. What is striking is the political force of subversion of language attributed to language itself. Other critics would rather define fiction as the land of make-believe (Schaeffer says “feintise ludique par tagée”): fiction thus has something to do with the figments of our imagination. François Rastier usually envisages literature as a given social practice, just as

It can be put forward that each volume in Dos Passos's Trilogy is a literary work including fictional and nonfictional sections. The twofold challenge for us is to assess the connections between the various modes – which has successfully been done by critics – and to question the role and nature of those biographical sections in a literary work. Rastier wrote: “l'opposition entre fiction et non fiction entrave l'analyse des œuvres” (*Mondes* 7). It is indeed more than paradoxical to simultaneously consider works as reflections of or discourses on the real and preclude nonfiction from the literary field. Our critical stand is different: nonfictional texts need to stress their mimetic regime even more than do fictional ones. More precisely, the idea I want to develop and support now is that the biographies are testimonies because in *Camera Eye* 49 and 50, the represented writer/narrator/demonstrator is blended with a speaker who becomes involved in an implicit commitment to testify to the economic and political violence the people are submitted to by an organized system. The young man become writer is pledged to describing the programmed erosion of individual and collective lives. ‘I was there’; ‘I saw it all,’ he seems to say.

A short presentation

The 3 volumes alternate twenty-seven biographies of political or union leaders, of magnates, artists or inventors.³ They are

law, medicine, science are social practices which have produced their own discursive practices, among which rank their generic practices. Consequently, literature includes works of both fiction and nonfiction. It would indeed be more than contradictory to both consider literature as a reflection of/discourse on real situations and preclude nonfiction from the literary corpus. Both critical stands miss the point: our referential impressions are given rise to by complex networks of signs and we end up seeing reality through those constructs; and literature includes both fiction and nonfiction.

3. In *The Big Money* (page references from the Signet Classic edition), the biographies concern: The American Plan = F. Taylor (scientific management); Tin Lizzie = H. Ford (the car company); The Bitter Drink = T. Veblen (the economist); Art and Isadora = I. Duncan (the artist); Adagio Dancer = R. Valentino (the artist); The Campers at Kitty Hawk = the Wright brothers (the two mechanics); Architect = F. L. Wright; Poor Little Rich Boy = W. R. Hearst (the press magnate/tycoon); Power Superpower = S. Insull (the capitalist monopoly)

usually from 1 to 11 pages long, usually 4 or 5, which is short for hagiographic biography, and are diversely designated as biographies, portraits, but also as poems, 'effigies in stone' or simply 'passages of a page or two.' Upton Sinclair sees them as interpolations, another critic as "interludes." Dos Passos himself was not very explicit about them but we know that he modified his initial project: instead of writing a series of reports, in which some characters would be recurrent, he added biographies in order (as he put it himself) "to get different facets of my subject and [...] to get something a little more accurate than fiction. The aim was always to produce fiction. [...] I was sort of on the edge between [fiction and nonfiction], moving from one field to the other very rapidly"⁴. So since the other three types belong more or less to fiction, only the biographies seem to pull entirely in the direction of nonfiction, or 'accuracy.'

Indeed, biographies generally establish a specific reading contract: they tell the lives of real historical figures (not fictional characters); this is done by a writer usually writing in his own name (no pseudonym; no fictional narrator), in prose, and bundled up by an implicit vow or commitment to tell the truth in terms of verisimilitude. Since Saussure, we have been familiar with the idea that realism, or truth, in verbal sequences is a matter of referential impressions produced by a mimetic mode. Arbitrary signs are cut off from their referents, which makes it necessary for nonfictional texts to emphasize their mimetic regime and emphasize their reading contract. In the Trilogy, the beginnings and endings of those parts definitely remind us of biographies. But they are images of biographies included in a larger project. As such, they are determined by this more global project. How do they articulate the fictional project with the literary one?

founder). *The Big Money* thus begins with new modern capitalism while it ends with the corruption of power and justice by money. The loop seems to be looped: the sense of an ending is imparted to the western world led by the USA.

4. D. Sanders, "John Dos Passos", in G. Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: The "Paris Review" interviews*, New York: Viking Press, 1976 (rep. in *Major Non-fictional Prose*, D. Pizer, ed., Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1988, 248).

Satirical parodies of biographies

Parodies of biographies

The titles of the biographies in *The Big Money* are either descriptive or ironical: descriptive when they suggest the historical figures' social practice (industrial production or invention; dancing; architecture); satirical and ironical when they establish a parallelism between Veblen and Socrates, pretend to sympathize with Mrs Hearst's 'poor little rich boy', establish the link between industrial production and monopoly capitalism ('power' means /electricity/ in the context but 'superpower' also actualizes /control/). However, the parodic nature of those biographies has to be examined more closely.

They all start with place and date of birth; continue with background (national and denominational); move on to adult life and concentrate on major landmarks in those lives; end with death and legacy. The parodic shade of the biographies is even more visible when Dos Passos inserts clauses pretending to quote sources while remaining very vague and tongue-in-cheek about them, like

- "the featurewriter wrote in 1900" (Ford)
- "we are led to believe" 170 (Duncan)
- "so the story goes" 474 (Hearst)
- "so the newspapers said" 528 (Insull)

Here, the writer pretends to report what has been suggested elsewhere while introducing considerable distance with what he actually believes to be true.

The focus on major events shows that Dos Passos is only interested in facts insomuch as they symbolize or summarize the personality that is characterized and also influences or reflects the spiritual erosion of the time. Indeed, some episodes tend to essentialize the figure:

- Taylor is the engineer who frantically wanted to implement a utopian plan increasing production and "making every firstclass American rich who was willing to work..." (48).

His death “with his watch in his hand” creates the image of someone who fought against time all his life and was finally defeated by time.

- Similarly, Ford who had been inventing new productions and new forms of production and financing, launching an irreversible phenomenon, ended his life being “a passionate antiquarian” (76), cherishing the good old days of “horses and buggies” he had destroyed forever.
- Veblen is compared to Greek philosopher Socrates who drank hemlock, “the bitter drink” because he went unrecognized all his life whereas, like Socrates, what he wanted to reach at was the truth.⁵
- Duncan is the dancer who spent her life trying to escape bills. Her life is also summarized by “Artists, Duncans, Greeks” as if the 3 categories were equated or blended.
- Valentino is the guy who so much “wanted to make good” that his whole life was a show, just like the funeral church service and his death.
- FL Wright’s passion for architecture is determined by his seeing the dome of the new state capitol in Madison, Wisc., collapse.
- Hearst is Mrs Hearst’s “poor little rich boy”: “too rich, too timid, too arrogant”. Signed as determined by excess.
- Insull is signed as the guy who wanted “no nonsense about hours or vacations” and whose money could buy everything including justice.

Dos Passos’s tendency to essentialize the figure can be even better noticed in the refrains and the comparisons established:

Taylor, who incarnates “The American plan,” “was unceremoniously fired” (47); Ford, the automobileer, is “the great American of his time” (73); Veblen is characterized by “a constitutional inability to say yes”; Duncan is signed as the woman who “gave offense”; Valentino is coded as the guy

5. Socrates was a philosopher. Veblen an economist. Let us note that Dos Passos took great care not to choose Marx, who was German-born and also went unrecognized all his life to the point of seeing some of his children starve to death. He chose a Norwegian-American economist.

who “wanted to make good”; in a final epitaph-like punchline FL Wright is “not without honor except in his own country”; Hearst is defined as the guy who has been looking for “the lowest common denominator” all his life. Insull stands for power superpower, ending up “in an odor of sanctity the deposed monarch of superpower” (528). These slogans and refrains contribute to the rhetorical power of *persuasion* and help the reader *remember*.

Another way to describe those very important persons consists in comparing them with other great historical figures, which contributes to promoting those who are deemed to deserve it. Veblen is another Socrates because both drank the bitter drink in spite of their provocative quest for truth (or because of it). The Wright brothers are reminiscent of Leonardo for their interest in flying machines. F.L. Wright is on a par with Whitman, the first American poet whose modern epics celebrated the American nation and stirred young men. Hearst is compared to Caesar but this time he is degraded, not promoted: “a spent Caesar grown old with spending / never man enough to cross the Rubicon” (479): the tycoon appears as an ageing emperor who was never bold enough to cross into politics where he was considered ratpoison. (477, 479). Similarly, Insull is a superman – Goliath (525) – but the new Odysseus ends up seasick Ulysses. These comparisons can be encomiastic or grotesque. This points in the direction of irony, which is an example of double-voiced discourse.

Irony

Italics and parentheses, brackets, are used to draw the readers’ attention to the presence of another’s discourse within the writer’s discourse. But sometimes Dos Passos does without typographical signs. So only the context can help us attribute one value to the polyphony. Indeed, according to Mikhaïl Bakhtin, the embedment of another’s language can serve several functions: pastiche (pure imitation); parody; polemics. Here, polyphony serves the last two, as critique is usually allowed in. One example of pastiche, though, might be found in Veblen’s

biography (119): the paragraph summarizing his own diagram of society dominated by monopoly capital, showing his view of the alternatives America was faced with, is built on paratactic language which makes it easier to remember, to present readers with sharply clear-cut ideas. Another example of neutral double-voiced discourse can be spotted in F.L. Wright's (440): "Building a building is building the lives of the workers and dwellers in the building. / The buildings determine civilization as the cells in the honeycomb the functions of bees." The repetition in sentence 1 and the simile in sentence 2 make for didactic language attributed to the genius.

But generally, double-voiced language is fraught with irony. Taylor's middle name was Winslow and we are told that "they called him Speedy Taylor" (44). Indeed, most of the time, double-voiced discourse shelters two discourses involved in parody and polemics: Taylor's cant (45-47) deteriorates, crumbles, falls apart as sentences become paratactic and iterative. Further down (48), italics are discarded when the two voices, America's and Taylor's, have blended. Ford's biography begins with italics and it sounds like a kind of official biography. Further down, the italics underline the anti-European prejudice in Ford's discourse (73). Veblen is described as "the drawling pernickety bookish badly-dressed young Norwegian ne'erdowell" (117). Here, Dos Passos does not care to use italics or inverted commas. But the negative judgement can easily be attributed to "People in Northfield", "The Farmers in the Northwest" found in the close context (117). The same goes for Veblen's "unnatural tendency to..." (118): 'unnatural' is someone else's judgement, embedded in the writer's language.

Examples of dramatic or tragic irony can be mentioned, too. Not only narratorial irony. Taylor's death with his watch in his hand is an example of dramatic irony: the guy who wanted to defeat time through scientific management was not saved but defeated by Kronos. Duncan's own death provides an example of tragic irony as she was strangled – symbolically decapitated – by a scarf, a piece of cloth like that which had draped her dancer's body (175-6). Insull is quoted in italics, saying: *Greece is a small but great country* (527). What he was

interested in was not the democratic past of ancient Greece but the corruption that contributed to the failure of his extradition. Similarly, at the very end of the biography, after being cleared by the court, he said: *After fifty years of work... my job is gone* (528); this comes from a guy who ruined everybody else, had a pension of 21000 \$ a year and was quoted declaring *The greatest aid in the efficiency of labor is a long line of men waiting at the gate* (525). Double-voiced discourse is not necessarily ironical. It can shelter someone's language which is just imitated. But irony is one form of double-voiced discourse. And Dos Passos makes ample use of it in the biographies. The butt of the satire can be the historical figure himself or herself when they contribute to the erosion of democracy, or the American public at large who was too blind to see its true heroes. Satire always initiates dissociation between the enunciator's evaluations and another's. The agents' universes diverge on evaluations granted to some grand thematics like politics, war, economics, justice or religion. Usually, assessments of excess show that it leads to degradation. Precisely, Dos Passos also uses the grotesque to show how exaggeration can be ridiculously detrimental.

The grotesque

As in slapstick comedy, Taylor was "unceremoniously fired" (47) by those whose interests he was serving. Valentino's biography is almost entirely grotesque, and almost entirely devoted to his death, rather than his life. He is described as a puppet entirely submitted to the dictates of show business, to the point of hiding his homosexuality, ready to do anything to be successful (to make good). The extension of words (through compounds) and sentences reflects the inflation of the ego. But the myth is deflated by the reduction of the dancer to a list of organs. Even his death is turned into a show. But of course, it is the punch-line which blows up the inflated bubble: "The funeral train arrived in Hollywood on page 23 of the *NY Times*" (209). The grotesque effect is achieved through a metalepsis, a change (leap) from one ontological level to another: not only did Valentino hit only page 23, not the headlines, but the train

does not arrive in a real-life station. Even his death belongs only to the stories written in papers. Valentino is engulfed in the sphere of representations. Hearst only likes the wars he makes, we are told, especially the war with Spain. In order to start that war and control it, he wanted to accuse the Spanish of sinking a British steamer he had planned to sink himself:

When McKinley was forced to declare war on Spain W. R. had his plans all made to buy and sink a British steamer in the Suez Canal but the Spanish fleet didn't take that route. (475)

Thus was the war-maker pathetically defeated by the unexpected. Also, "he went as far as to go to Cuba and capture 26 unarmed Spanish sailors on the beach in front of the camera" (476). The camera turns him into an opera warrior. We are also told that he failed to bridge the "tiny" Rubicon between amateur and professional politics (477). The most powerful man in America is reduced to a grotesque colossus with feet of clay: "a spent Caesar grown old with spending / never man enough to cross the Rubicon" (479).

Thus, those parts in *The Big Money* are much too short, much too parodic and much too satirical to be biographies, or essays. So, what are they? For the moment, let's say that they have shown that literature is more than just what is fictional (illusion), and more than what is just beautiful (aesthetics). It cannot be reduced to either one, not even to both of those. I want to suggest that those biographical parts are also written to be testimonies. Let's remember that Dos Passos meant to give his work a different "facet." Of course, we are not talking about concentration or extermination camp testimony, in which the dead are more important than death and various discourses are addressed to both dead and living people (Lacoste). However, the Sacco and Vanzetti Case is retrospectively presented as a symptom of a certain America's death. Therefore, due to the observer's metamorphosis into an agent involved in the defense of the two Italians and in the defense of America, the biographies in *The Big Money* become testimonies serving the four functions of the literary genre: testifying to facts located in the present or in the

recent past; paying homage to certain figures; blaming others; educating the future generations.

Testimonies

Testifying to facts

Dates and places contribute to creating a referential impression close to that of realism – empirical realism, which also relies on proper nouns, on the plural, concrete words, various tenses with chronological value, like the past tense.

This empirical realism contributes to establishing facts, asserting facts. *The Big Money's* biographies are framed by Taylor and Ford on the one hand (they are linked by the phrase “the big money” 46+72), and Hearst and Insull on the other. The former laid the basis of the big money economy which the latter used to the point of spreading corruption and contaminating the democratic nation. Taylor’s biography explains the breakdown of the American plan (Taylor’s, 47-8) when scientific management was cannibalized by greed. Both Taylor and American workers were eventually defeated by the greedy management’s side of the fence (48). What was utopian in Taylor became actualized by Ford: speed was transferred from cars to production, efficiency from machines to workmen (Ford 72). Duncan’s success in Europe and Russia is established and contrasted with her failure in America. The Wrights’ telegram (293) is the image of a telegram included after the introduction to testify that they were the first to... in 1903 – the date is the first thing given: “The figures were a little wrong because the telegram operator misread Orville’s hasty pencilled scrawl... but **the fact remains/** that a couple of young bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, / had designed, constructed, and flown/**for the first time ever** a practical airplane” (294). Wright created ‘prairie architecture’ after becoming aware that European revival was doomed to failure after the collapse of the state capitol dome in Madison. The night of Hearst’s election to Congress, he gave a show of fireworks in Madison Square garden: 100 were wounded or killed by the explosion: “that was one piece of news the Hearst men made that wasn’t spread on the front pages of the Hearst

papers” (476); since Hearst’s papers were supposed to establish news, Dos Passos re-establishes the truth by explaining how he tried to blame the sinking of a British steamer on the Spanish, how he manipulated reality to make news, and make wars (475). Insull’s biography stresses how he used the public’s money to “spread his empire” (525), put competitors out of business (or buying them out) and eventually control the country’s “light and power, coalmines and traction companies”. He eventually controlled a 12th of the power output in Am (525). It was the war economy which raised him to the peak.

Testimonies also pay tributes to the few really good persons contributing to the welfare of others.

Paying homage

Veblen is hailed as “a masterless man” (119 -121) and ‘the sharp clear prism of his mind” (122) is put forward. The Wright brothers are promoted from young mechanics to heroes of the airplane age. F.L. Wright is celebrated for imagining a national architecture, which would not be European revival, would use modern, available material (steel, glass, concrete), and would be based on the “uses and needs” of the people. Like many philosophers like Plato, Tommaso Campanella, and Thomas More, he produced his own *utopia* (ideal city), called *Usonia*. The biography’s final words ring like an epigraph:

*Frank Lloyd Wright,
patriarch of the new building,
not without honor except in his own country. (440)*

The present tense used in the biography definitely takes us away from the empirical realism to produce a kind of effigy, of eternal figure. But the biographical form is also used to identify a certain number of errors and mistakes.

Blaming

- Modern capitalism is certainly one of the targets: Taylor’s American Plan, implemented by Ford, “made America once more the Yukon of the sweated workers of the world”

(73): Dos Passos uses the slogan of the left (IWW) to blame Ford for starting the equivalent of the Gold Rush (1848-9) and pretending to open a new frontier, however fictitious, in the industrial field. The industrial field has replaced the geographical and territorial one. Ford is also indicted for his gross Anti-European prejudice (73), for being a pacifist when it suits him, a war supporter (74) when it best suits his interests : someone who knows on which side his bread is buttered. He crosses anti-Semitic and anti-European feelings when pinning the war on the Jews (“the Jews had started the war...” 74). Being blind to the excess of capitalism, he blames the crisis on gambling and getting in debt (76). He is responsible for the death of 4 marchers asking for work (76) and shot dead in 1932. And was eventually protected by a private army against the new America (76).

- A connection is established between capitalism and Puritanism (48).
- The American public is also blamed for missing their true heroes: the economist Veblen; Duncan who “found no freedom for Art in America” (173) whereas in Paris “art meant Isadora” (173), as though the land of freedom offered no opportunity for art to develop; the “doctors of philosophy” (440) who were blind to the needs of a man are sharply addressed in F. L. Wright’s biography.
- Power superpower joins Hearst and Insull. Hearst is blamed for being “**too** rich, **too** timid, **too** arrogant” (excess); for making news and making wars (475); for being cynical (477); for building an empire on ‘manure’, ‘the rot of democracy’ (475) i.e. “the lowest common denominator” that is to say for not trying to elevate man but on the contrary for capitalizing on what’s base and mean in man. His influence over “the dreams of the adolescents of the world” is described as poison and “cancer” (479). Insull is described as a cynic buying not only companies but people because he was aware of the lure of money, “the healing balm” (527); he turned his trial into a show (‘beautiful’) and so, even the “judge was not unfriendly” (528), we are told in a rhetorical understatement.

Educating

The contradictions of the time are revealed through powerful symbols: Taylor's watch underlines the bitter defeat of the man who engaged workers and management into a race around the clock; Ford's passion for antiques stresses the paradox of the man who nevertheless involved modernity in an irreversible race towards the future; Veblen's bitter drink shows how hard the life of the economist/philosopher was; Duncan's deathly scarf and car illustrate the tragic death met by an artist who found success in Greece; F. L. Wright's Usonia is a utopia for "us" based on our "uses"; Insull's favourite catchword, superpower, shows the unsound confusion/connections between economic power (electricity) and political power.

Connections are also established within the biographies and between them: the phrase "the big money" links Taylor and Ford, the theoretician and the practical manager; Puritanism and capitalism... Veblen's education is traced back to the influence he received from Darwin (whose *Origins of Species* rewrote the biblical model), Ibsen's theatre plays denouncing Victorian violence done to women, Marx's implacable logic (116). Dos Passos establishes a powerful link bet F. L. Wright and Whitman: the former's blueprints are compared to the American poet's words which "stirred" the young men. The comparison is all the more relevant as Whitman celebrated a nation sheltering the diversity of citizens, and Wright wanted to build buildings suited to "the lives of the workers and dwellers".

As Insull's cynicism goes as far as to produce his lifestory ("Old Samuel Insull rambled amiably on the stand, told his lifestory: ... there wasn't a dry eye in the jury" 528), Dos Passos's biography counters that official/authorized version. Insull is described buying everybody who got in his way: politicians, laborleaders, judges. (524) At the end, he is depicted as "the captain gone down with the ship" (528). Together with formulas, aphorisms, comparisons, this metaphor is part of the rhetorical stock-in-trade which reduces syntax to paratax and makes it easy to memorize.

In the 3 volumes of the *USA Trilogy* the biographies stand apart: their mimetic regime is stronger, to the point that they have been compared to “essays.” Their satirical, parodic flavor shows that they are literary images of biographies, determined by and included in a more global, literary project. However, they tug in the direction of nonfiction while the other narrative strands more or less pull in the opposite direction, that of language, point-of-view, story. That instance of nonfiction functions as a testimony, putting forward as it does collective life and the impact – or lack of impact – of individual behavior on collective life; processes rather than states; the present tense which intrudes on the past narratives to impart judgment values with eternal, transcendental truth; the voiceless people standing in the background. Thus, the biographies reinforce the prestige and the efficiency of the *Trilogy*.

Selective bibliography

AARON, Daniel. “U.S.A.” *American Heritage*. Vol. 47 N° 4 (July-August 1996): 63-73.

Americana N° 11. Santraud J.-M., ed. Paris: PUPS, 1994.

BLEU-SCHWENNINGER, Patricia. “L’orchestration de la modernité dans *The Big Money*.” *Études anglaises* 46 (4) (octobre-novembre 1993): 420-426.

———. *John Dos Passos, l’écriture-miroir*. Grenoble: Ellug, 1993.

CHOLLIER, Christine. “La tessiture de la conscience dans les *Camera Eyes*, ou la polyphonie de l’œil dans *U.S.A.* de Dos Passos”. *Imaginaires* N° 10 (2004). Reims: P U de Reims, 2004. 227-243.

CLARK, Michael. *Dos Passos’s Early Fiction. 1912-1938*. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated U P, 1987.

COLLEY, Iain. *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair*. London: Mac Millan, 1978.

DOS PASSOS, John. *USA*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

———. *The Big Money*. New York: Signet Classic, 1979.

———. “What Makes a Novelist”, *National Review* 20 (16 Jan 1968): 29-32.

FERRÉ, Vincent. “‘Fighting Lies.’ The Committed Essayist and the Biographies in Dos Passos’ *USA*.” *Écriture et Engagement aux États-Unis (1918-1939)*. Ed. Anne Ollivier-Mellios et Frédéric Sylvanise. Paris: Orphys, 2010, 57-69.

FOLEY, Barbara. “The Treatment of Time in *The Big Money*: An Examination of Ideology and Literary Form.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 26 (autumn 1980): 447-467.

GEISMAR, Maxwell. *American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958.

HOOK, Andrew ed. *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974.

ISER, Wolfgang. *L'Acte de lecture : théorie de l'effet esthétique*. Bruxelles: P. Mardaga, 1976.

———. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins U P, 1980.

JOUVE, Vincent. *La Lecture*. Paris: Hachette, 1993.

LACOSTE, Charlotte. “Approche sémantique d’un genre littéraire : le témoignage” (à paraître aux P U de Rennes).

LANDSBERG, Melvin. *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography*. Boulder, Colorado: Associated U P, 1972.

LYNDENBERG, Joseph. “Dos Passos *USA*: The Words of the Hollow Men”. *Studies in USA*. Compiled by David Sanders. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1972.

LUDINGTON, Townsend. *John Dos Passos. A Twentieth-Century Odyssey*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers Inc., 1980.

MAGNY, Claude-Edmonde. *L’Âge du roman américain*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1948.

Modern Fiction Studies. Vol. 26 (Autumn 1980) N° 3. 398-467.

- NANNEY, Lisa. *John Dos Passos Revisited*. Texas: Twayne Publishers, 1998.
- PICARD, Michel. *La Lecture comme jeu*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986.
- . *Lire le temps*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1989.
- . “Lecture de la perversion et perversion de la lecture.” *Comment la littérature agit-elle ?* Paris: Klincksieck, 1994. 163-205.
- RASTIER, François. “Parcours de production et d’interprétation – pour une conception unifiée dans une sémiotique de l’action.” *Parcours énonciatifs et parcours interprétatifs. Théories et applications*. Paris et Gap: Ophrys, 2003. 221-242.
- . “Du texte à l’œuvre : la valeur en question.” *Qu’est-ce qui fait la valeur des textes ?* Ed. Christine Chollier. Reims: ÉPURE, 2011. 11-74.
- . *Mondes à l’envers – De Chamfort à Beckett*. Paris: PUF, 2013.
- SAINT-ARNAUD, Pierre. *Park-Dos Passos. Metropolis. Regards croisés sur la modernité urbaine aux États-Unis*. Toulouse, Québec: P U du Mirail, P U Laval, 1997.
- SCHAEFFER, Jean-Marie. *Pourquoi la fiction ?* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, coll. « Poétique », 1999.
- VEBLEN, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Random House, 1931.
- WRENN, John H. *John Dos Passos*. New York: Twayne, 1961.
- ROSEN, Robert C. *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer*. Lincoln: Nebraska U P, 1981.