

Mediations

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Modernism in the Balance: Lukács with Dos Passos

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The narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), passes time at a London café in idly sorting the passers-by by social type. When an elderly man's face arrests his "whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression," the narrator abandons his post at the window to track this individual for the next twenty-four hours.¹ It turns out that the eccentric merely follows the crowds and as soon as one crowd disperses, he seeks out a new one. The narrator pursues, but he learns nothing about his would-be protagonist except the traffic patterns in which he participates. Nevertheless, the narrator finds himself "in the wildest amazement, resolute not to abandon a scrutiny in which... [he] now felt an interest all absorbing."² When he finally gives up the chase, it is not because he satisfies his curiosity or achieves a resolution to his narrative, but because he grows "wearied until death."³

Once the reader realizes that Poe's narrator describes his subjective experience of immediacy and that he records it on par with the objective movements of the protagonist, she must realize also that the mode of narration represented in "The Man of the Crowd" contradicts the precept that the author himself sets in his 1846 critical essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." Poe declares that any author who begins a narrative without having first conceived its dénouement commits a "radical error."⁴ An author must know where the narrative is heading so that he can appropriately muster his resources in anticipation of a climax that produces the resolution for his narrative, which, in turn, makes the totality of the work intelligible. Poe makes this point explicit early in the essay: "It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation" by making all constituent parts "tend to the development of intention."⁵ He defends his argument further by demonstrating the advantage of having written the climactic stanza of "The Raven" first, so that "by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding" parts.⁶

When we look at “The Man of the Crowd” however, we find that the narrator, in defiance of the author’s principles, delivers himself of his observations only a few steps behind his character. Because this mode of narration instantiates “the radical error” by renouncing the methods of a deliberate composition, it brings the despairing narrator to a declaration that the object of his pursuit is illegible: “It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.”⁷ It really is “vain to follow” because even if the narrator were to learn something, it would be too late to subordinate what he has already told to what he might yet discover. The narrative is a running record of our narrator’s experiences and not a composition. About the protagonist we learn only what is given by the cautionary frame, which is that “*er lasst sich nicht lesen*,” but the fault lies not at the level of content with character development, but with the order of writing.⁸ To tell it intelligibly, Poe’s narrator ought to have figured out the point of his tale before he began the telling of it. As it is, the narrator’s epiphany, “It will be in vain to follow,” serves as the climax to an allegory of composition, in which Poe makes his narrator’s quest for the immediacy of effect understood as a failure to mediate his experience and thereby as an object lesson about the failure to meet the conditions of narrative legibility.⁹

“The Man of the Crowd” represents exactly the kind of experience that the constraint upon length to the limit of one sitting ought to preempt in the genre of the short story, namely the intrusion of life upon the effect of composition. Poe recommends the length limit to preserve the unity of poetical effect, “for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed.”¹⁰ “The Man of the Crowd” can be read in one sitting, but it records exclusively those “affairs of the world” that interfere with the composition, that is, immediate impressions and traffic patterns. Consequently, the story demonstrates that the unity of effect does not follow inevitably from formal constraints and subordination emerges not only as immanent and necessary, but also as the sufficient condition for a composition. Poe theorizes this point with “The Raven,” a poem, dramatizes it in the “Man of the Crowd,” a short story, and opens “The Philosophy of Composition” with a nod to his 1842 review of *Barnaby Rudge*, a novel, in which he praises and criticizes Dickens precisely to the extent that his novel stands as composition. The review first presents a chronologically reconstructed outline of events and follows with an account of narrative withholdings and disclosures plotted to optimize the effects of the murder mystery.¹¹ Poe’s basic point is that Dickens achieves his aesthetic effects by subordinating the order of events to the order of writing, which, we learned from “The Man of the Crowd,” is distinct from the order of impressions experienced by the narrator. Poe admires some of the effects in *Barnaby Rudge* even upon rereading when he already knows the plot and when the narrative illuminates for him the graduated construction of the novel. These effects testify to the artistry of the composition, but there are also effects that are simply casualties of serial publishing that do not require of an installment to apprehend the totality

of a finished work. Those effects mystify the reader only for the sake of absorption. Whether the conditions of production require any integrity of composition or not, Poe insists that the philosophy of composition demands subordination to count as a composition at all. This we have to accept if we are to understand Poe's "radical error" as an error that is in fact radical.

Whereas Poe's review of the novel is invested in the autonomy of composition for art's sake, György Lukács revisits *Barnaby Rudge* in *The Historical Novel* (1955) worried by a literary development that understands the historical novel as a genre. Although it seems at first glance that no two people could be drawn to *Barnaby Rudge* by interests more divergent than Poe, who scoffs at the novel's historical ambitions, and Lukács, who is alarmed by the erosion of "the artistic expression of an historicized attitude to life," both are mobilized by the same threat posed to the formal unity of a concrete work by a formalization of that unity, or, in Lukácsian terms, by the problem of totality threatened by reification.¹² Both find in Dickens's treatment of historical material in *Barnaby Rudge* an incipient formalism that spurs them to develop their respective accounts of formal autonomy. We saw already that Poe separates the order of events from the order of composition. Lukács identifies in the Dickensian social critique a weakness for applying an "abstract-moral attitude towards concrete social-moral phenomena."¹³ He complains that when the historical aspect of the novel is reduced to a setting of "purely accidental circumstances for 'purely human' tragedies," then neither critical nor aesthetic judgment of a concrete case arising in its essential social totality is possible.¹⁴ What offers itself instead is the temptation to moral judgment that belongs entirely to the reader and the propriety of which is categorically questionable with regard to fiction. Lukács concludes that this is the kind of subjective distortion that "was only an occasional blurring of line," but that becomes "an essential defect in the entire composition" when historicity is reducible to a generic formula.¹⁵ Whereas Scott's historical novel addressed itself to a "growing historical understanding for the problems of contemporary society," this new historical novel finds the present unknowable, and when it turns to the past to write about history, it yields either "dead facts" or "subjective arbitrariness."¹⁶ At this point, Lukács's objections to a trend that formalizes the historical novel as a genre dedicated to the past start to sound a lot like Poe's critique of the mode of narration set too closely in the present to the narrator's experience: subjective arbitrariness chasing after dead facts could very well serve as the subtitle for "The Man of the Crowd." Lambasting as a dead fact the kind of objective immediacy that can be indexed by means of a costume and dismissing as arbitrariness the subjective immediacy of the reader's moral judgment, Lukács arrives at the same account of the wrong way to write fiction as the art-for-art's-sake Poe.

It would have surprised Theodor Adorno, certainly, to see Lukács in the company of Poe, the American vanguard of French and Russian decadence, and even more so, to entertain the Lukácsian commitment to realism as a commitment to form.

Adorno misses this crucial point entirely. And yet, Adorno's surprise would have been no greater than Lukács's, as I will later show, upon a discovery of a disciple of Poe and an able exponent of his own aesthetic theory in John Dos Passos. The substance of Adorno's critique is that Lukács, committed as he is to "the great philosophical tradition that conceives of art as knowledge which has assumed concrete shape," discounts those concrete shapes of aesthetic stylization that properly belong to art and "satisfies himself with the dregs, namely with the subject-matter."¹⁷ In other words, Adorno's Lukács fails to maintain "'aesthetic distance' from existence."¹⁸ Although the thrust of his critique presents Lukács as an ideologue without a valid aesthetic claim, Adorno actually concedes to Lukács those tenets that are in fact constitutive of Lukácsian aesthetics. He places Lukács in the Hegelian dialectical tradition that posits the concrete artwork as a legitimate object of knowledge insofar as it mediates an immediate experience of the empirical phenomena. He also recognizes Lukács as the "first dialectical materialist to apply the category of reification systematically to philosophy."¹⁹

Lukács argues in the *History of Class Consciousness* (1923) that the processes of rationally cooperative production that transform the relations between people into relations between things have their equivalents in every sphere of social activity. This is most visible in the stratified systems of bureaucratic governance that make use of quantitative protocols to manage individual cases predictably without a qualitative justification for them, but reification infiltrates ethics, science, and art as well.²⁰ The result is that "the whole which diverges *qualitatively and in principle* from the laws regulating the parts" is irrational because "the concrete material totality of what can and should be known" is not in the end reducible to rational forms.²¹ It is because of this irreducibility that Lukács denies that knowledge of the formal structures that organize social life constitutes an understanding of the total social organization of society and claims that totality should be the aim of understanding. History serves as an alternative model of knowledge because it organizes its subject matter causally. It is much more interested in the conditions of possibility for a historical genesis of specific social logics than it is in the rational reduction that uses social facts to illustrate a schema of understanding.²² Adorno seizes at Lukács's commitment to history and, regardless of Lukács's professed loyalty to immanent critique, accuses Lukács of locating his totality outside of the work of art.²³

Adorno's critique has a weakness. When he accuses Lukács of reducing the "notion of 'the immanent meaning of life' from *The Theory of the Novel*" to a "dictum that life in a society building up socialism is in fact full of meaning," Adorno seems to forget that Lukácsian injunction to "master the arbitrary" is in place precisely as a check to keep the literary critique immanent.²⁴ This shows most conspicuously in the opening pages of "Narrate or Describe?" (1936) where Lukács argues for the "absolute divergence of intentions" between the horse race scenes in Émile Zola's *Nana* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.²⁵ The problem that Lukács finds with Zola lies precisely in that the author is

true to life and that this kind of authenticity produces a description of indexical value. Its purpose is to vouch that it accurately describes its referent, but it “has nothing to do with the lives of characters” and “[a]rtistically, it is superfluous.”²⁶ In contrast, it matters little what the audience knows about horse races in *Anna Karenina*; Tolstoy narrates the race in such a way that the scene becomes integrally necessary to the advancement of the plot. Like Poe who emphasizes the development of intention, Lukács insists on mediation, which he distinguishes from historical causality by discussing the status of chance in fiction: “Objectively, attendance at or participation in a race is only an incident in life. Tolstoy integrated such an incident into a critical dramatic context as tightly as it was possible to do.”²⁷ The horse racing scene in *Anna Karenina* merits Lukács’s praise because it justifies its place in the novel instead of verifying its relation to reality. The task of realism, as Lukács would have it, is to narrate the essential conflict of the age rather than validate the authenticity of its props. Realism is no more real than any of the movements comprising modernism, but, Lukács believes, unlike modernism, realism can support mediation.

Disaffected as Adorno may have been with Lukács’s particular set of political commitments before as well as after the Second World War, he could not dismiss easily the exhortation to socially committed literature that was implicit in the censure that “lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”²⁸ The enduring legacy of Adorno’s essay on “Commitment” (1961) is his claim that “autonomous rather than committed art should be encouraged” because “committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease.”²⁹ Less satisfactory is Adorno’s development of that argument. He acknowledges that the aesthetic distance commanded by the artwork converts whatever the artwork represents into a reader’s aesthetic experience and recognizes this as a distinct problem for committed art: “The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it.”³⁰ He seeks an antidote to the problem of pleasure in the works written by Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett that can “arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about.”³¹ If, by valorizing existential fear, Adorno evades the pleasure that aesthetic distance makes possible as well as the trap of self-congratulation that a committed work lays out for the author and reader alike, he does not escape the more fundamental problem that he creates for himself by turning to affect. A preference for one kind of affect over another profiles the reader as a certain kind of consumer, but it does nothing to establish the autonomy of the artwork.³² Adorno has a better account of modernism than Lukács, but when he takes up the problem of commitment, he fails to imagine a version of the committed work that is theoretically more sound than the one proffered by Lukács.³³

Near the end of “Commitment,” Adorno proclaims that “the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects but their own inherent structure.”³⁴ Adorno and Lukács do not disagree on this point. In fact, Lukács draws a

distinction between those effects that belong to the work of art and those that belong to the spectator:

Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial “present” confers a temporal “present” on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past. But the contemporaneity of the observer making a description is the antithesis of the contemporaneity of the drama.³⁵

Since action in drama unfolds in the presence of the spectator, it necessarily materializes itself in the spectator’s present. Lukács rightly notices that this condition of theatrical production obscures the difference between two different kinds of effects. There are outcomes produced by the drama that belong to the diegetic present of represented action and there are effects that the observer experiences as present to herself. The subjective effects of the second type constitute a description antithetical to drama, according to Lukács, and we delude ourselves when we think that they are part of the artwork. Let us remember that Poe dedicates “The Philosophy of Composition” to advice about the kinds of effects upon the audience that writing can create, but that he also stages a contradiction in “The Man of the Crowd” with a narrator who records his impressions, but produces no diegetic effects. In Lukácsian terms, his subjective narration yields only a description. It is a description of a narration in which the formal structure of narration materializes, but nothing obtains a concrete form as a result of that narration. Fundamentally, Poe and Lukács agree that effects that belong to the spectator do not belong to the artwork. Lukács sees an opportunity in the novel to circumvent the intrusions of the descriptive mode by employing the device of past tense, but this solution is merely formal and the problem reasserts itself in the historical novel under a different guise. The contemporaneity of present effects plagues modernism with what Lukács calls spurious subjectivism. Since a contemporaneity of the effects set in the past gives rise to spurious objectivism, we should recognize it as a challenge peculiar to naturalism as well as a threat to the historical novel.³⁶ More concerned about separating the effects of art from the effects of life than he is about the time in which the contemporaneity of these effects occurs, Lukács exposes the difficulty that, in his view, modernism and naturalism have with sustaining the autonomy of the artwork. In the context of my argument, the attention that he pays to the contemporaneity of these effects serves to demonstrate a commitment to totality in the work that is predicated on a commitment to autonomy.

To have vindicated Lukács from Adorno’s indictment that he is a demagogue without a valid aesthetic theory is one thing; to reconcile him to modernism is another. Lukács relies on understanding to cohere the totality of the work and to evaluate its autonomy

against reification and arbitrary intrusions. He is not satisfied that the novel produces literary effects, but requires it to justify the effects that it produces with regard to the meaning of the whole. The fact that Adorno seeks in the experience of existential terror a refuge from the effects of aesthetic distance does not exactly validate Lukács's fears that modernism's tendency to evacuate content from the work of art leads to the immediacy of affect, but it does make those fears intelligible as a concern about form.³⁷ But from Lukács's own theoretical perspective, it should not matter whether the immediacy of the reader's experience is provoked by positive content or the absence of content. Either way, the immediate experience constitutes an intrusion upon the mediated form and any such intrusion is by definition arbitrary. Lukács seems to have underestimated the strength that his aesthetic theory draws from the principle of immanent necessity. The modernist tendency to evacuate mimetic reflection from the artwork does not invariably result in the lack of meaning. If the artwork has a subordinate structure, then the legibility of purpose that the parts obtain in the constitution of the whole lends itself to understanding and the formal relationships become the work's content. The mediation that this kind of modernist work sustains is formally reflexive, but it is immanent. It may fail to meet Lukács's political objectives, but it does not stand in contradiction to his aesthetics the way that the immediacy of affect does. What must become crucial to a Lukácsian critique, by the logic of Lukács's own theory, is not the presence of a particular formal structure at the level of content, such as plot, but the presence of a subordinating structure that organizes the content in such a way as to close the form of mediation against the intrusions of subjective and objective immediacy.

We saw in "The Man of the Crowd" a case in which narration lacks internal means to produce a resolution because a narrator who does not know the end himself does not know what he needs in the narrative and for what purpose. The question that now remains to be settled is whether a modernist work that looks like an open structure, such as John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, might nevertheless sustain a resolution of form if it does have an end toward which everything tends. Although critical analyses of the *U.S.A.* trilogy implicitly pay tribute to its open form, particularly those that attend to the author's technical innovations and focus on the work's modal structure, panoramic vision, collective representation, architectural honeycomb, the ironies of juxtaposition, the technique of montage, and the network model, the author himself declared a commitment to Poe's principle that the end is "where all works of art should begin."³⁸ In a 1968 interview for the *Paris Review*, Dos Passos admits to David Sanders that *U.S.A.* was not originally intended as a trilogy, but "there was so much that I wanted to get in that it got to be three books very soon... before *42nd Parallel* was finished." However, when pressed whether he began "with the idea of just taking the years up to the war," Dos Passos responds: "No, I had the basic idea for the whole thing."³⁹ In other words, closure is built into the work by a design that imagines the limits of "the whole thing" and is therefore formally independent from the limits

imposed on the work by its capacity to accumulate content. A work that is closed by design remains closed in principle even if it balloons from one to three or even to a hundred volumes, whereas the open work keeps on going until, for some arbitrary reason, it cannot go on any more.

When interviewed by Frank Gado that same year, Dos Passos defends the trilogy as a closed form by invoking Poe. He recalls that he “did have a plan about the end particularly” and leaves the interviewer with this word of advice: “Poe, you know, gives a very good maxim in one of his critical pieces: an author should always know what the end of a story is going to be before he starts the beginning.”⁴⁰ Of course, the author’s endorsement of a critical principle does not guarantee a successful execution of its commitments in the finished form of the work, but it solicits more than a phenomenological description of that form: it warrants an interpretation. Since we know that Dos Passos wanted to bring *U.S.A.* to a resolution, we can examine the trilogy to identify what would formally count as a resolution. We can still describe how the work is put together, but we are now also invited to interpret what the work means. If Dos Passos’s trilogy can be demonstrated to have a formal resolution as Poe prescribes, its diverse parts must be subordinated to support a reading that is not only possible, but necessary and sufficient to account for the meaning of the work.

Clearly, there are similarities between Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” and Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy. Both authors recognize the basic expectation of the reader that to read a fictional narrative is to follow a character or a group of characters. There is nothing remarkable about that. But it is noteworthy that both authors fulfill this expectation in ways that produce fatigue. The representations of a reader and a writer are collapsed in the figure of Poe’s narrator because he narrates his reading, or rather his inability to read the character whom he follows. We remember that he learns nothing about his protagonist and that he gives up exhausted. The reader of *U.S.A.* learns plenty, but to no avail. The burden of information is exhausting, but somehow not exhaustive. The critical question that emerges now with some force is how can characters whose lives are so full and about whom we know so much nonetheless fail to absorb us? And how can this happen consistently not in one fictional narrative, but in twelve? Let us turn to the early reviews for answers. In 1930, in a review of *42nd Parallel* for the *New Masses*, Upton Sinclair insists that “[w]hat we have really is five novelettes, tied together with frail and slender threads” with “a lot of vaudeville material” in between.⁴¹ He complains that Dos Passos ignores “the fundamental fact of human psychology, that when we have got interested in a person we want to know more about him” and that we resent an author who chooses to “just shunt us off to some other character.”⁴² Writing for the *New York Herald* in the same year, Mary Ross agrees with Sinclair that the fictional characters “are picked up and set down like marionettes handled by an erratic puppeteer” and observes that the “book abandons the ordinary structures of fiction for a form as intricate as that of a symphony. It gives no satisfaction at all for those who would know how the story

'comes out.'"⁴³ It is not a defensible position that readers want to know *more* about any of the characters in *U.S.A.* There is an excess of information for any one of them as it is. What we want is a resolution that will make what we already know worth knowing. Dos Passos produces no grounds for us to anticipate a dénouement for his narratives, so readers are frustrated when one narrative for which we eagerly await a resolution is interrupted by another, also without a resolution in sight.

Whereas Ross expects the resolution in terms of a plot structure that forces the meaning to "come out" of the narrative, Sinclair wants the resolution to be psychologically motivated. The difference between critiques launched by Ross and Sinclair helps us understand precisely what expectations Dos Passos frustrates, but, to be clear, Dos Passos does not admit a resolution of either kind. If Dos Passos is committed to closed form, that closure is not to be had in the fictional narratives. He evacuates every opportunity for a dénouement and goes so far as to deny to death its prerogative to confer meaning upon a complete life. Because Dos Passos is not finally concerned with how individuals come to understand the world from their subject positions, no event of the plot emerges for the reader as psychologically meaningful. Eveline's apparent suicide does not even conclude her own narrative. It is reported by telephone as hearsay at the end of Mary French's narrative where Mary dismisses the news with, "I have too much to do to spend my time taking care of hysterical women on a day like this."⁴⁴ Dos Passos does not dramatize Eveline's experience of the events leading to her death.⁴⁵ Instead, he stages a death that formally tests the legibility of her intentions. Suicide is an act that invites speculations about its meaning. The reader tacitly understands that a self-inflicted death admits of some kind of failure, even if it is only an accidental failure to administer the correct dosage of the medicine. Eveline has failed as an artist and those aspirations are recognized posthumously with the kind of null generosity that befits a eulogy: "so talented, an artist really."⁴⁶ She also fails as a patron of the arts, but this is not generally legible to her social circle. Dos Passos represents her failed ambition by imagining the societal conditions that would have to obtain for it to succeed. Eveline would have to have in attendance guests looking to invest in art and inspire them with confidence against the risk of investment. Moorehouse is the one who spells out for the reader the fact that Eveline does not meet these conditions: "I like to help old friends... but it occurred to me that if the Shuberts thought there was money in it they'd be putting it in themselves.... Of course Mrs. Johnson's very artistic."⁴⁷ He allows that Eveline possesses talent and taste, but will not put up the money for her project.

Dos Passos produces in Eveline a character to whom other characters grant liberally her artistic nature as long as this recognition does not entail an obligation that would bind them to action. But, of course, Eveline's ambition is to compel people to action. She is frustrated because she is unable to mobilize any of the forces in the world to any consequence. In other words, she cannot make her personal adventures mean anything more than her personal adventures. She would have a Parisian salon, but she

only has a Prohibition era cocktail den. Commendations of Eveline's artistic nature amount to no more than a formulaic acknowledgment of her subjectivity. People accept it regardless of evidence, and rightfully so, because evidence cannot prove a subjective experience wrong. At the same time, an actual recognition ought to have produced an obligation and this obligation does not materialize. Dos Passos suppresses Eveline's account of reasons for her suicide to reveal the gap between the recognition of a person who understands herself as an artist and a person who is an artist. This difference, the difference that produces an obligation, provides a sufficient objective explanation for Eveline's suicide. Dos Passos doubts that a subjective experience of the world can be a real force in it and he confirms this stance as programmatic when he draws a distinction between himself and Joyce with the declaration that his "interests were the opposite: I wanted to write objectively."⁴⁸

If we accept that Dos Passos's idea of writing objectively entails a representation of historical forces and should be understood in opposition to subjective writing that depicts mental states, we have to account for his choice to use free indirect discourse in the first place. Is not the whole point of this kind of narration to represent the inner states of a character and yet deliver them filtered through the subjectivity of the narrator? The most compelling explanation of Dos Passos's narrative style is not his own, but Jean-Paul Sartre's.⁴⁹ Sartre compares the reading of a novel to diving into a mirror. People and things in a reflection only resemble reality, but they speak to us, whereas we find the real world mute when we close the book. Dos Passos invents "an art of story-telling," Sartre explains, when he discovers that the writer can make the reflected world speak the language of the real world and that this innovation creates aesthetic distance.⁵⁰ He demonstrates:

Yesterday you saw your best friend and expressed to him your passionate hatred of war. Now try to relate this conversation to yourself in the style of Dos Passos. "And they ordered two beers and said that war was hateful. Paul declared he would rather do anything than fight and John said he agreed with him and both got excited and said they were glad they agreed. On his way home, Paul decided to see John more often." You will start hating yourself immediately. It will not take you long, however, to decide that you *cannot* use this tone in talking about yourself.⁵¹

That this is a language of "ritual statements and sacred gestures" is one way of putting it; that it is the language of sound bites in "the style of a statement to the Press" is a way of saying the same thing without resorting to a religious metaphor.⁵² Dos Passos's style of narration rebuffs sympathy with every utterance and with every utterance claims us as participants in social discourse. Sartre argues that whenever a cliché is at all intelligible to us, we "play the role of the obliging chorus."⁵³ This, Sartre explains, is "the source of the shame and uneasiness with which Dos Passos knows how to fill

the reader.”⁵⁴ The genius of Sartre’s reading lies not in deconstructing the discourse of the press or ritual, but in recognizing that Dos Passos invents the “art of story-telling” when he withholds from the reader the pleasure of immediacy. He solves the problem of aesthetic distance identified by Adorno, but does it in the way urged by Lukács: he defies the subjectivity of the reader and produces a work in which precisely those elements of construction that create aesthetic distance also invite critical judgment.

All the characters in *U.S.A.* speak this language even though the particular assortment of platitudes is tailored to suit the character. “It is as if,” Sartre reports, “there were a Platonic heaven of words and commonplaces to which we all go to find words suitable to a given situation.”⁵⁵ It is deployed most glibly by J. W. Moorehouse, the fictional public relations counsel for the Morgans and the Rockefellers. His strength as a negotiator consists of a realization that his words need not represent reality; it is sufficient that they reach out to the desires of his listener. He welcomes G. H. Barrow, a labor leader who feels more at home in his role as an executive than in his commitment to labor, with an assurance that the

great leaders of American capital, as you probably realize, Mr. Barrow, are firm believers in fairplay and democracy and are only too anxious to give the worker his share of the proceeds of industry if they can only see their way to do so in fairness to the public and the investor. After all, the public is the investor whom we all aim to serve.⁵⁶

By a sleight of hand the competing interests of the working class and of the investors are brought together under the umbrella of public interest and emerge again as the sole interest of the investors who are the public.

This kind of trick is possible, says Sartre, when it no longer matters what the speaker “had in mind when he spoke that sentence. What matters is that it has been uttered.”⁵⁷ What matters to G. H. Barrow is not what is said about labor demands and work stoppage, but the gratification he derives from being coddled as an interlocutor. In the appeal that Moorehouse makes to Barrow, Dos Passos brings together a critique of political corruption with a critique of subjectivism. Because Barrow’s interest in the negotiations is limited to the interest he has vested in his own prestige, Moorehouse is able to obviate any influence Barrow may have had as a negotiator with the comforts of subtle flattery. Barrow gets his pleasure and labor gets whatever deal J. W. Moorehouse and Senator Planet work out between them as if no labor delegate were present. Barrow wants his person to count, but because that is all he wants, he counts for nothing as a representative. Like Eveline, Barrow receives the kind of recognition that does not obligate anyone to action. It is true that Eveline is a major character and Barrow a minor one, that Eveline’s professional ambitions are frustrated and Barrow’s are narrowly met, and that Eveline’s ambitions are not legible to her set and Barrow’s are to his, but these differences of positive and negative representation are

immaterial. What matters is that subjective immediacy defines neither character: Eveline is not an artist and Barrow does not count.

U.S.A. focuses its narratives around twelve major characters to whom it denies transformations and epiphanies of the kind that could define them by action or experience. Instead of plots that facilitate these effects, the novel forges its own compositional device and tasks it not with a test of character, but with a test of principle or belief. Toward the end of *42nd Parallel*, the first volume of the trilogy, J.W. Moorehouse goes to Europe as a publicity expert for the Red Cross while still under the employ of the Morgans and the Rockefellers for whom he “runs pro-war stuff through a feature syndicate.”⁵⁸ Probably no other character has a better first hand knowledge of the financial interests that the American bankers have in the European war, so as Moorehouse fans the flames of war, he already recognizes the financial advantages of the eventual peace. He deliberates

about the gigantic era of expansion that would dawn for America after the war. America the good Samaritan healing the wounds of wartorn Europe. It was as if he was rehearsing a speech, when he got to the end of it he looked at Eveline with a funny deprecatory smile and said, “And the joke of it is, it’s true.”⁵⁹

The contradiction Moorehouse notices concerns agents who have moral principles. No such contradiction arises for the banks who are motivated by profit and who hire publicists to make the unintended but anticipated consequences acceptable to the public’s moral palate. The task of the publicist is exactly the opposite from that which Lukács assigns to the novelist: the novelist brings out the conflict while the publicist makes it disappear. Dos Passos brings out the conflict by showing us how Moorehouse makes it disappear. Moorehouse’s “joke” extricates his clients from the compromising appearance of straddling a contradiction by resolving it for the public temporally as first knowing one thing and then knowing another: a commitment to peace plausibly follows a commitment to war. Even though Moorehouse knows that the money that will make profit from the reconstruction is the same money that fuels the war, he identifies surprise as a formal element of the joke’s mechanism. Surprise constitutes the form of the public’s experience of contradiction without recognizing it as contradiction.

Moorehouse’s joke works when the public discovers, with the requisite surprise and the help of a public relations campaign, that what it wants to do coincides with what it ought to do. The very idea of such discovery involves the public in self-deception. If ethical action is by definition free because its obligation is self-imposed, then the obligation is intentional, the action must be deliberate, and any action that unexpectedly fulfills one’s ethical obligation, though it may be good, has no claim to a moral principle. Whereas a principled stance cannot be adopted retrospectively,

the point of the publicist's joke is that nothing more than a pleasant surprise stands in the way of retroactively representing past action as principled or of attributing a principle to a coincidence. Insofar as this joke appeals to the subjectivity of the audience, offers pleasure without obligation, and engages the audience in self-deception, it commands the absorptive allure of fiction. It also mocks any aesthetic theory that puts a premium on affect. No matter how artful he is or how successfully he produces his effects on his audience, what Moorehouse does is not art. It is not politics either. Moorehouse is in the propagandist's business of shaping people's subjective experience. In the third volume of the trilogy, *Big Money*, the advertising campaign for Doc Bingham's line of health remedies finds an obstacle in legislation that proposes to regulate manufacture and sales of patent medicines. In order to turn the public against its own interests, Moorehouse intends to educate the American people that they "don't want their freedom of choice curtailed by any Washington snoopers and busybodies."⁶⁰ The publicist's joke escalates to a publicity stunt when the Founding Fathers' ideal of negative liberty finds expression in a sales formula.

This should give us pause. Although it turns out that Dos Passos remains faithful to the principles of founding liberalism, nevertheless *U.S.A.* marks a moment when he bankrupts the ideal of negative liberty to show that its logic constitutes a market mechanism. The charge is not that someone abuses the founding principles, or that they are ineffective; Dos Passos shows that understanding freedom primarily as freedom from constraint endorses a practice of freedom that shuns obligation, which then leaves the public good vulnerable to the abuses of the market. It is not my intention to read *U.S.A.* biographically as an expression of Dos Passos's beliefs.⁶¹ It is rather to consider the *U.S.A.* trilogy as his project of politicizing art, specifically as a project that understands that formal devices are insufficient to secure a meaning and that raises the question whether political intentions can obtain a form. Dos Passos's modernist execution of form looks different than Lukács's realist models, but my claim is not only that these forms are theoretically consistent, but also that Dos Passos's modernism resolves an impasse in aesthetic theory. While Adornian autonomy succeeds when it refuses to a modernist work a positive account of its political commitment and Lukács understands realism as the exclusive form of autonomy for the committed work, Dos Passos imagines the modernist form as capable of narrating the dialectic by means of which a political principle becomes a market value.

Lukács's argument hinges on disentangling the kind of writing that merely reflects reality, whether it be the reality of the reader's experience or of the empirical phenomena, from the writing that "consists in discovering the significant and vital aspects of social practice."⁶² To the counterargument that modernist experiments with form reflect the alienation of the modern life under the capitalist system, Lukács responds that this is still the kind of writing that is mere description because it records the subjective experience of fragmentation, but neither identifies the forces in conflict nor illuminates the contradiction that produces the alienation. It does

not matter for Lukács's critique of Dos Passos whether Lukács knew how Dos Passos characterized his own mode of narration. Regardless of Dos Passos's protests that he aims to represent the objective reality, Lukács lumps him and Joyce together as examples of the "most evolved subjectivism in the modern novel" because Lukács presupposes a totality of socioeconomic forces, and fragmentation represents for him always a subjective experience of that totality.⁶³ Fragmentation can only ever be accurate as a description of a subjective experience and not as knowledge about the world because Lukács classes it with immediacy against mediation. He criticizes the spurious subjectivity he finds in modernism as well as the spurious objectivity in naturalism for the same reason that both describe fragmentation instead of narrating a mediation. One describes the mental states and the other physical phenomena, but "a succession of subjective impressions no more suffices to establish an epic interrelationship than a succession of fetishized objects."⁶⁴ The result in both cases is a series of words that do not reveal what is important and why. Lukács's solution is the same as Poe's: formal subordination. Lukács expresses this most succinctly when he proclaims: "Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels."⁶⁵

My claim is that the fragmentation in *U.S.A.* is not spurious. Even though Lukács himself does not recognize it, Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* can be *understood* only in terms of Lukács's dialectical model of narration or Poe's closed form model of composition, but not in terms of a serial, modular, textile, or networked open form, even though it obviously can be described that way. In fact, description brings about a critical impasse in scholarship on Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* because critics routinely describe the novel's contents or structure and rarely succeed in explaining how the various formalisms of experimental technique resolve in a form that conveys what the novel means. If the trilogy itself produces an immediate experience of fragmentation by means of description, the more important and decisive fact is that it also narrates the contradiction in which we are embroiled by our ideological commitment to the founding principle of negative liberty. To have identified this principle with the mechanism of market subsumption makes Dos Passos the kind of prophet, even if a blind one, that Lukács denies to modernism.⁶⁶ In *Big Money*, the third volume that concentrates on the rise of corporate power and class struggle during the decade after the First World War, Dos Passos demonstrates that the principle of negative liberty loses its explanatory powers to the market. The Sacco and Vanzetti trial finds the foundational ideals "worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges," while the public utility magnate, Samuel Insull, gives the ethos of the free market a confident and public expression: "*My engineering*, he said once in a speech, when he was sufficiently czar of Chicago to allow himself the luxury of plain speaking, *has been largely concerned with engineering all I could out of the dollar.*"⁶⁷

Critics generally agree that Dos Passos began writing the novels that comprise the *U.S.A.* trilogy after the trial and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti,

two Italian anarchists convicted, Dos Passos believed, as a result of political profiling rather than any proven wrongdoing.⁶⁸ They agree also that Dos Passos wrote *U.S.A.* with the intention to shake up the nation that could bear witness to a miscarriage of justice by the court system. He had already written *Facing the Chair: The Story of Americanization of Two Foreign Born Workmen* (1927) for The Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee. It was a 127 page pamphlet that condensed some 3,500 pages of court transcripts of sworn testimony, description of evidence, interviews, and other materials. Donald Pizer affirms that even though Dos Passos had experimented with technique in *Three Soldiers* and *Manhattan Transfer*, it is the compilation and editing of documentary sources for *Facing the Chair* that forged Dos Passos's technique of modal narration as he deploys it maturely in *U.S.A.*⁶⁹ The trial is represented in Mary French's narrative, in the newsreels, and in the last three Camera Eye chapters. There is no mention of the trial in the biographies, but the last of them, entitled "Power Superpower," reports the trial of Samuel Insull that serves as foil to the Sacco and Vanzetti trial in the novel. I submit that this is the ending to which the composition of *U.S.A.* tends from its conception and the ending that Dos Passos told Frank Gado he had in mind from the very beginning.

But how does *this* ending obtain a resolution for the novel? The ideal of negative freedom has had a successful run of legitimizing union busting, strike breaking, palm greasing, and marketing of patent commodities in *U.S.A.*, but it proves curiously ineffective when tasked with the defense of the right to a fair trial. Given that Sacco and Vanzetti were in fact executed, we must conclude that not enough people or not the right people wanted to see them acquitted or pardoned. Mary French corroborates this conclusion when she reports that, "Although most of the newspapermen who had any connection with the case thought the two had been wrongly convicted they tended to say that they were just two wop anarchists, so what the hell?"⁷⁰ Even under such conditions that allow personal motivations to be redefined as principles, Sacco and Vanzetti fail to become the exponents of American justice because there is nothing at stake in the outcome favorable to the defendants that the public wants for itself.⁷¹

The question whether Insull had embezzled the investors' money did not so much matter to the public or the jury. In this respect, that the matter of the law does not matter, Insull's trial resembles Sacco's and Vanzetti's. What matters is that Insull did not want the outcome that crumbled his financial empire. The novel reports that Samuel Insull's defense portrayed him as a "captain [who] had gone down with the ship" and argued for the lack of criminal intention:

He didn't deny he'd made mistakes; who hadn't, but they were honest errors. Samuel Insull wept. Brother Martin wept. The lawyers wept. With voices choked with emotion headliners of Chicago business told from the witnessstand how much Insull had done for business in Chicago. There wasn't a dry eye in the jury.

Finally driven to the wall by the prosecuting attorney Samuel Insull blurted out that yes, he had made an error of some ten million dollars in accounting but that it had been an honest error.

Verdict: Not Guilty.⁷²

In acquitting Insull, the public absolves itself of consistently leaving to serendipity the outcomes that obligation ought to have secured. Dos Passos' representation of the public who convicts Sacco and Vanzetti but finds Insull not guilty is cynical, but the author's decision to relegate to the background the case that actually was the catalyst for a three-volume novel testifies to his artistic restraint. Insull's trial illustrates how we have become a people who forfeit the principle of a fair trial as well as Sacco's and Vanzetti's, but the foil works better aesthetically because it condemns the power of affect with the power of positive content. If Dos Passos wants to show, and he does, that the problem with the public is that it attends to its sentiments when it ought to analyze evidence, evaluate arguments, and stand up for principles, then it stands to reason to pass judgment on it when it miscarries justice because of its sympathies in Insull's case rather than for the lack of them in Sacco's and Vanzetti's.

However, if the public is to stand trial in *U.S.A.*, the novel runs the risk of compromising its autonomy to public sentiment. The Sacco and Vanzetti trial offers opportunities to a reader who would find in her sympathy a corrective to history that exonerates her from the author's indictment. The Camera Eye sections present Dos Passos himself as an example of such spurious subjectivism. This is not a claim that the feelings that Dos Passos represents himself to have had are not real. Dos Passos's advocacy on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti testifies to their authenticity. So does the narrative device that couples the indexicality of the stream of consciousness technique with the evidentiary credentials of the camera.⁷³ The claim is that subjective immediacy is spurious because it is irrelevant to the mediation of the artistic form. The authenticity of Dos Passos's feelings means about as much to the formal integrity of the novel as Barrow's representation to the labor talks, and it defines *U.S.A.* as a work of art about as much as a eulogy makes an artist of Eveline. But while the authenticity of Dos Passos's feelings is simply beside the point, a focus on the authenticity of the reader's feelings can be disastrous for *U.S.A.* The one thing that this novel cannot afford is a reader who authenticates her own innocence against the charge of bad faith.

It is true that both trials lend themselves to the exploitation of affect: we see this in the newspapermen's pejorative dismissal of foreigners and in the crescendo rendition of Insull's verdict. Nevertheless, Insull's trial answers the purpose of the novel better because the sympathy extended to Insull stands accused of its contribution to class warfare, and this puts the immediacy of the reader's affect in check. No reader of this climactic scene can think that her experience of reading counts either as part of the work or as fulfillment of a moral obligation. Not even a sympathetic reader in a position of perfect identification with Insull, as another embezzler might be, can

think that her reading amounts to anything but reading. The moral judgment that imbued *Barnaby Rudge* with aesthetic pleasure, spurious on the grounds that it had no legitimate aim in addressing itself to a literary work, is deliberately foreclosed to the readers of *U.S.A.* Instead, Dos Passos posits principled judgment as an object of representation for the novel, both negative and immanent. It is everywhere lacking, but its structure of logical and temporal subordination of action to intent makes immanent necessity in the novel possible and legible by means of the publicist's joke. Let us indulge in a quick outline of what depends on the structure of this joke. Self-imposed obligation is a necessary condition for any kind of politics founded on the ideal of negative liberty. Without it, the individual's freedom is usurped by the freedom of the market. The structure of obligation calls for free indirect discourse because this type of narration makes it possible to ascertain when intention precedes action. With no obligation in place, we get the mechanism of the publicist's joke and the conditions of the market instead of politics. The market offers us the pleasure of self-justification, which is exposed in *U.S.A.* as a structural effect of bad faith. Bad faith gives a single form to Dos Passos's aesthetic and political concerns. Politically, it gives form to flight from the responsibilities of freedom; aesthetically, it accepts the pleasures of aesthetic distance as commitment. The Sacco and Vanzetti trial exemplifies bad faith in politics, but Insull's trial enables a concrete, historical mediation of both aspects of bad faith. The scene counts as a resolution of form because it is structurally anticipated by the various iterations of bad faith and because it conceptualizes the tension between commitment and aesthetic distance as a problem of bad faith, which it then overcomes with a rebuff to affect. The effect is a brilliantly singular climax that calls for both aesthetic and critical judgment.

After the 1938 publication of the trilogy in one volume, the meaning revealed by the mechanism of Moorehouse's joke is corroborated by the frame. The trilogy begins with a prologue entitled "U.S.A.," in which a young man unravels into many characters so that he can represent everything that the workingmen do. It ends in an epilogue in which all those separate lives collapse again into a figure of a vagrant looking up at a plane while attempting to hitch a ride. The differences between the lives of workers are a matter of description; the difference that narrates history is the claim that "we are two nations."⁷⁴ The epilogue presents a visual metaphor for the United States: the plane passenger is protected from the wants of others by the impassable chasm between those who have money and travel in the skies and those earthbound who do not. It is conceivable that those who have contributed most formatively to this picture of the U. S. would not recognize in it a result of their intentions. The subjects of the *U.S.A.* biographical sketches would likely object to an accusation that they have worked deliberately for the dispossession of the working poor even if this outcome were demonstrated to them as the inevitable outcome of their pursuits. Samuel Insull's "honest" mistake proves that their objections can be successfully defended before the law.⁷⁵ But even outside of the court, the claim that harm was not

meant falls on sympathetic ears. The political problem Dos Passos addresses is that the dominant forms of our experience do not meet any intention. No one sets out with a goal to cleave the United States with extreme class differences. People pursue success, but whether they succeed or fail, they do so by the means of socioeconomic mechanisms which necessarily expose many to want to indulge the few with surfeit.

In *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954*, Walter Rideout reports that even during the heyday of its production, the radical novel was generally considered to be weak artistically because it was tendentious and that Dos Passos was hailed by the Left as an author whose commitment to formal experimentation could recuperate the radical novel aesthetically. The hope was that Dos Passos's experiments with form could sublimate the proletarian ethos as Flaubert's stylization had sublimated the bourgeois interiority. The problem with this approach is that aesthetization does not advance the claim of autonomy for any novel that has political ambitions. On the contrary, *U.S.A.* would have to be understood on such reading as a work of propaganda that appropriates aesthetic forms for political purposes.

Dos Passos's experiment attracts the attention of both Lukács and Sartre. Lukács, for whom the stakes of the political novel lie in shifting the lens of mimetic reflection from the metaphysics of perceived reality to the history of class struggle, judges Dos Passos' work to fall short of its political ambitions.⁷⁶ Lukács objects to fragmentation because it substitutes a pseudo-philosophical exercise in epistemology for knowledge about the social world; or, to use Hegelian terms, it records the immediacy of sensation instead of synthesizing a mediation; or, to use Marxist terms, it makes knowledge a commodity that gains purchase but has no use value.⁷⁷ Since I have identified in the publicist's joke a structure of subordination that confers upon the novel the form of Sartre's bad faith and that motivates a resolution of that form in Insull's trial, I argue that there is mediation in *U.S.A.* At the level of representation, the mechanism evacuates any ideology, principle, or political belief in favor of an a posteriori construction of desire as truth. At the level of ideology, Moorehouse's joke describes the mechanism of capitalist subsumption, and Dos Passos chronicles real subsumption in the relations of ordinary people which does count as a narration of class struggle. The mechanism of the joke is the same as what Sartre describes as *mauvaise foi*—bad faith. It entails a refusal to recognize that which we wish to avoid knowing. It is the mechanism that allows Sartre to assign to everyone the responsibility for that which no one wills on the grounds that the alleged absence of intention is in fact nothing but self-deception posited as self-justification.

The remarkable fact about Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is that in spite of its looks and Lukács's protests, it confirms the pith of Lukácsian aesthetics. Dos Passos's suppression of totalizing strategies of setting, character, and plot is not intended to prevent a resolution, but to prevent the kind of resolution that would enable a bad version of aesthetics to compromise the novel's politics and a bad version of politics to compromise its aesthetics. For this reason, *U.S.A.* frustrates the reader by

minimizing its opportunities for affective engagement. Dos Passos does this most controversially by suppressing the climax of his narratives. Neither Lukács nor Poe would condone this move, but Lukács and Poe both insist on plotting the narrative because plot requires subordination, and subordination is the formal condition for immanent necessity and for legibility of intent. If Dos Passos can be shown to deploy another formal structure of subordination that organizes his work as I hope to have shown, then his novel would refute Lukács's objections on aesthetic grounds whether or not Lukács likes the results. In letting go of the plot, Dos Passos does not abandon the closed form.

This defense of Dos Passos is also a defense of Lukács. Lukács believed the mode of narration to be best equipped for producing a concrete and autonomous work. He erred as a critic insofar that he mistook features of the work for a mode of writing, but this does not change the fact that as a theorist he distinguishes between the intelligibility of a concrete aesthetic form and a formalism that licenses universally, and often spuriously, both subjectively and objectively indexical description. If we take Lukács's aesthetic theory seriously, we cannot be satisfied with a Lukács who defends a particular literary movement and disparages another. We would then make the mistake that Adorno makes in taking Lukács's commitment to realism for a commitment to reality instead of a commitment to art. That would make of Lukács the same kind of formalist as the bourgeois who describes the historical novel as a genre.

Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) 235.
2. Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" 238.
3. "The Man of the Crowd" 238.
4. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) 675.
5. Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" 675.
6. "The Philosophy of Composition" 680.
7. "The Man of the Crowd" 239.
8. "The Man of the Crowd" 239. Translation from German: he does not lend himself to reading.
9. The narrator and the protagonist, i.e., the narrator and the elderly gentleman whom the narrator follows, illustrate the same problem that I will refer to as absorption (Poe's term) or immediacy (Lukács's term). The protagonist cannot tear himself from the crowds just as the narrator cannot tear himself from his protagonist. Neither one achieves any reprieve from the immediacy of his experience, but the author secures for the reader a mediation by framing the narrative as an allegory of composition. One way Poe does this is by comparing the protagonist to *Hortulus Animæ*, a prayer book that is arguably illegible because it facilitates contemplation, or, possibly, sensuous absorption. See Isaac D'Israeli's "Religious Nouvelles" *Curiosities of Literature* (1848).
10. "The Philosophy of Composition" 677.
11. Edgar Allan Poe, "Review of *Barnaby Rudge*," *Graham's Magazine* (February 1842), *The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*. <http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm42dco1.htm>
12. György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983) 231.
13. Lukács, *The Historical Novel* 243-4.
14. *The Historical Novel* 244.
15. *ibid.*
16. *The Historical Novel* 231, 236.
17. Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2007) 162, 172.
18. Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress" 160.
19. "Reconciliation under Duress" 151.
20. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," *History and Class Consciousness: Study in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 1971). Lukács reiterates this point on many occasions; here is one: "This rationalization of the world appears to be complete, it seems to penetrate the very depths of man's physical and psychic nature. It is limited, however, by its own formalism. That is to say, the rationalization of isolated aspects of life results in the creation of — formal — laws. All these things do join together into what seems to the superficial observer to constitute a unified system of general 'laws.' But the disregard of the concrete aspects of the subject matter of these laws, upon which disregard their authority as laws is based, makes itself felt in the incoherence of the system in fact" (101).

21. Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" 102-3, 109.
22. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" 144-59. "The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with the knowledge of the present, with the self-knowledge of its own social situation and with the elucidation of its necessity (i.e., its genesis). That genesis and history should coincide or, more exactly, that they should be different aspects of the same process, can only happen if two conditions are fulfilled. On the one hand, all the categories in which human existence is constructed must appear as the determinations of that existence itself (and not merely of the description of that existence). On the other hand, their succession, their coherence and their connections must appear as aspects of the historical process itself, as the structural components of the present" (159).
23. See "Reconciliation under Duress." For example: "He [Lukács] remains indifferent to the philosophical question of whether the concrete meaning of a work of art is in fact identical with the mere 'reflection of objective reality' (p. 101), a vulgar-materialist shibboleth to which he doggedly clings" (153).
24. "Reconciliation under Duress" 152-3, 162.
25. Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin P, 1978) 111.
26. Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" 132, 136.
27. "Narrate or Describe?" 112. It is true that Lukács believes that the task of the novelist is to bring out the real historical causality, but real historical causality is not simply given. If it were, Lukács would not have been in conflict with Bloch. It requires artistic intention to bring out the real historical causality in a fictional world: "an author makes interesting what requires interest" (126).
28. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 2007) 188.
29. Adorno, "Commitment" 193.
30. "Commitment" 189.
31. "Commitment." Adorno elaborates: "He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad" (191).
32. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 2000). Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in the absence of any valid criterion for judgment, the products of culture industry are identical. The only standards that exist are based on "classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape" (123).
33. This does not amount to a claim that the works of Kafka or Beckett offer nothing but or primarily affect. It is only a criticism of Adorno's argument about those works in the context of "Commitment."
34. "Commitment" 193.
35. "Narrate or Describe?" 130.
36. "Narrate or Describe?" "Matching this spurious objectivity is an equally spurious subjectivity. For from the standpoint of epic interrelationships not much is gained when a simple succession of events provides the motive principle of the composition or when a novel is based on the lyrical, self-orientated subjectivity of an isolated individual" (134).
37. I claim that Adorno seeks refuge in the experience of existential terror based on the wording of the

claim that Kafka and Beckett's works "arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about" in "Commitment" 191.

38. "The Philosophy of Composition" 680. This is not an exhaustive list of readings that approach *U.S.A.* as an open form, but it may be as comprehensively representative of an open form as can be expected. For an invaluable discussion of Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* as a collective novel, see Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, Duke UP, 1993). Foley is not partial to the open form and she denies that "collective novels are doctrinally more 'open-ended' than traditionally realistic texts" or that they "hold up indeterminacy as a political value or polyphony as a rhetorical strategy," but she does observe that in the collective novel "knowledge comes 'from outside'" and that "without active participation from the reader, history in *U.S.A.* is indeed nothing more than the chaotic fragments that impinge upon the characters" (401, 441, 432). I am entirely convinced by Michael Denning's argument in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010) that Dos Passos tackles the formal problem of narrating the history of a Lincoln republic growing obsolescent. I am not convinced, however, that the honeycomb invoked by Dos Passos in his biographical portrait of Frank Lloyd Wright is "a more apt emblem of Dos Passos' own project" (169). The problem with the honeycomb as a critical metaphor is that this kind of cellular structure allows anything and invites everything to be said about a novel that already seems to be saying everything and anything. Denning himself abandons the honeycomb to describe Dos Passos's project in a way that shifts emphasis from the purposes of a self-described "second-class historian" to the means of a "four-way conveyor system." (170). This shift from the what of politics to the how of art represents well the dichotomy characteristic of Dos Passos criticism. Donald Pizer discusses the novel's technique in terms of modal segments, montage, and interlacing in *Dos Passos' U.S.A.: A Critical Study* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1988) 54, 65. In *Toward a Modernist Style: John Dos Passos* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), Pizer describes *U.S.A.* as a "compendium or *vade mecum* of fictional modernism" and adds to the existing repertoire of techniques the juxtapositional ironies of compilation, the panoramic vision of a social novel, the narrative clusters, and cross-stitching: "Through the interlacing of characters and cross-stitching of events Dos Passos appears to be saying that though we seem to be a nation of separate strands, we are in fact intertwined in a fabric of relatedness" (36, 45). For the network theory, please see Wesley Beal's "Network Narration in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy*," *digital humanities quarterly* 5.2 (2011).
39. David Sanders, "John Dos Passos, The Art of Fiction No. 44," *The Paris Review* 46 (Spring 1969). <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4202/the-art-of-fiction-no-44-john-dos-passos>
40. Frank Gado, "John Dos Passos," *First Person: Conversations on Writers & Writing*, ed. Frank Gado (Schenectady: Union College P, 1973) 43.
41. Upton Sinclair, review in *New Masses*, 5:18-19 (April 1930), *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine (New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005) 87.
42. Upton Sinclair, review in *New Masses* 88.
43. Mary Ross, review in *New York Herald Tribune Books* 3-4 (23 February 1930), *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage* 82, 78.
44. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.: The 42nd Parallel, 1919, The Big Money* (New York: The Library of America, 1996) 1238.

45. Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* 1231.
46. *ibid.*
47. *U.S.A.* 1186. Johnson is Eveline's husband's name.
48. John Dos Passos, "Contemporary Chronicles," *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988) 239. Lukács and Dos Passos may be wrong in their evaluation of Joyce as a writer who wrote subjectively, but for my purposes here, it is important simply that Dos Passos did not wish to be classified as a subjective writer, i.e., that he aspired to produce a mediation.
49. Dos Passos reserves the stream of consciousness technique of the Camera Eye sections "to distill my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described" and claims that by portraying his subjectivity directly, he keeps it from bleeding indiscriminately into his work. He characterizes the Camera Eye as a "safety valve for my own subjective feelings" and claims that it "made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier." See Sanders's "John Dos Passos, The Art of Fiction No. 44."
50. Jean-Paul Sartre, "John Dos Passos and '1919,'" *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider and Company, 1955) 89.
51. Sartre, "John Dos Passos and '1919'" 95.
52. "John Dos Passos and '1919'" 94, 93.
53. "John Dos Passos and '1919'" 94.
54. *ibid.*
55. "John Dos Passos and '1919'" 93.
56. *U.S.A.* 354, 236.
57. "John Dos Passos and '1919'" 93.
58. *U.S.A.* 354. Moorehouse goes to Europe in *Nineteen Nineteen*, but the quotation is taken from the end of *The 42nd Parallel*.
59. *U.S.A.* 551.
60. *U.S.A.* 1194.
61. Industrial development has concentrated corporate power into monopolies that are not only capable and willing to impose the conditions of necessity, but also expert at extorting consent. In "Harlan: Working under the Gun" (1931), Dos Passos documents that employers control the private life of their employees by congregating the workforce in company owned housing, for example, or by selling foodstuffs and clothing on credit against the worker's paycheck in company-owned stores. Despite the near tyrannical economic power the industrialist wields over the laborer, the *prima facie* liberal supposition remains that employment is voluntary and, therefore, not in violation of any negative right. The concept of freedom is then employed to justify the existing working and living conditions as an option the worker freely engages to earn wages. In this context, it becomes conceivable even to a liberal to petition the government for positive protections against big business instead of curbing the government's interference.
62. "Narrate or Describe?" 126. That "the significant and vital aspects of social practice" are not simply given in reality, but that they are mediated in literature by realism, is a point that anticipates Adorno's accusation of dogged clinging to the "vulgar-materialist shibboleth." See Adorno's "Reconciliation under Duress" 153.
63. "Narrate or Describe" 144.
64. "Narrate or Describe" 134.

65. "Narrate or Describe" 127.
66. György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 2007). Lukács writes, "Modernism has not, nor has it ever had, anything to do with the creation of 'prophetic figures' or with the genuine anticipation of future developments" (48). For the explanation of Dos Passos' blindness as a prophet, please see footnote 77.
67. *U.S.A.* 1136, 1210.
68. Michael Denning believes that "the night of the execution — 22 August 1927 — would remain a more important marker for Dos Passos than the October days of the 1929 Wall Street crash" (*Cultural Front* 165).
69. Donald Pizer, *Towards a Modernist Style* 35.
70. *U.S.A.* 1147.
71. Dos Passos declares himself to be "very suspicious of the fellow who claims to have a personal morality; what he means is that he has no morality at all and feels free to do you dirt." See Gado, *First Person* 47.
72. *U.S.A.* 1215.
73. I realize that the author's deployment of these particular devices testifies only to the intent of representing his feelings as sincere, that the stream of consciousness narration only represents indexicality and that the camera metaphor is not actually invested with evidentiary authority, but no one suspects Dos Passos of lying about the sincerity of his activism on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti. Any point to be made about deception here is not about what happened in life, but with regard to how this kind of authenticity functions in a narrative.
74. *U.S.A.* 1157.
75. *U.S.A.* 1215.
76. Although Lukács responds to *Manhattan Transfer*, which is much more kaleidoscopic than *U.S.A.*, his criticism of the earlier novel can be directed at *U.S.A.* See Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" 134-5.
77. Lukács is right about Dos Passos's politics. A writer who calls himself a "Jeffersonian liberal" in the twentieth century and seeks a restitution of liberal values by resuscitating moral obligation is not only not a radical, but is not even a writer for whom we can claim an understanding of capitalist subsumption. Nevertheless, even if Dos Passos indulges in self-deception, his novel narrates astutely the process of subsumption of ideology by the market. And, given Lukács's enthusiasm for the royalist Balzac, it does not seem that we have to demand a particular political affiliation to acknowledge the success of a novel that narrates history. For Dos Passos' self-description as a "Jeffersonian liberal" see Richard Whalen, "Conversation with Dos Passos," *New Leader* 42 (23 Feb. 1959), *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose* 232.