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Living (in Flames) Behind Glass: Urban Perception in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)

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English

Abstract

Olivia Bartz had a long-standing interest in American literature of the 1920s, which led to her taking a course on the subject offered by Professor Godden. Through that course, she was exposed to John Dos Passos' frenetic portrayal of Manhattan during the early 20th century and became particularly interested in the different realms that occupy his novel—namely, the realms of production and consumerism—and the ways in which these realms manipulate bodies. Throughout her project, Olivia truly enjoyed being able to work independently, and to change direction according to the directions her interests were taking her. After graduation, Olivia intends to pursue a graduate degree in English.

We often think of our bodies as ahistorical. But Marx argues for a historical reading of bodies, in which sense-certainty (a person's first attempt to grasp the nature of a thing) proves to be merely the history of its process. John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* has often been read as offering an impression of early 20th Century Manhattan, rather than a full depiction of any one character. And yet, his book includes apparently dissociated portrayals of various "bodies" as they work, window shop, and socialize in the city. What happens if we read the various bodies that populate Dos Passos' Manhattan, as Marx might, within their historical processes? Does doing so shift the way in which we read other structural events in the novel? Ewen's account of the search for sexual satisfaction in the market place, Marx's account of commodity fetishism, and Haug's account of commodity aesthetics work together to create a paradigm of early 20th century Fordist production and advertising through which the consumer's and laborer's bodies can usefully be glossed in *Manhattan Transfer*. Situating these bodies within their historical processes reveals the presence of other determining structures within the novel, such as reification as forgetting, and the structural trauma involved in Fordist production.

Faculty Mentor

Olivia sought to extend her interest in literary language and its close-reading as that language both appealed to and grew from economic and filmic imperatives. In our weekly discussions, Dos Passos' "Manhattan Transfer" (1925), and most typically single paragraphs or sentences from that text, served as points of access through which the "interference" of language, urban experience and the imaging of commodity, one with another, might be addressed. Olivia's focused and gradual recognition of the dense singularity of literary knowledge was a pleasure to witness. Olivia's sustained research and her equally sustained revision of her paper, additionally (and by her own report) had lasting consequences for the confidence with which she writes. On which basis, I would hazard the suggestion, after Paul Goodman, that style matters because "style is a hypothesis about how the world is."

Key Terms

- ♦ Capitalist Realism
- ♦ Commodity Aesthetics
- ♦ Commodity Fetishism
- ♦ Parataxis
- ♦ Promissory Body
- ♦ Window Shopping

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Defining Historical Processes: Early 20th Century Fordist Production and Advertising

John Dos Passos opens *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) with two arrivals: the first of men and women looking for work in New York, “crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press” and the second of a newborn baby squirming “like a knot of earthworms” in the maternity ward of a New York City hospital where “smells of alcohol and iodoform hung writhing” (Dos Passos 3). Struggling with the trauma of a difficult birth, Susie and Ed Thatcher name their baby, Ellen (6). Elsewhere, and by implication at the same time, migrants from small towns and rural areas (the “apples”) flood into the city, seeking to engage in a different but equally difficult labor. Arrivals like Bud Korpenning—named for birth (Bud) and death (corpse)—come to New York for employment in the new forms of industrial production associated with Fordism (the speeded line and the standardized body).

I will now indulge in a theoretical interlude in order to establish the parameters and implications of Fordism as a mode of production and consumption relevant to my analysis of Dos Passos’ novel. Martha Banta characterizes Fordism as exhibiting a threefold form of attention—to man as laborer, as citizen, and as homeowner: “to implement the standardization of one element in this basic triad was to attempt the standardization of all three: the worker, the citizen, the single-family home” (Banta 215). She enumerates the Fordist commitment to “rationalizing and simplifying the materials, the tools, the human element, and the working environment in the shop and the office” (229). Fordism sought full organization not just of production, but also of consumption; accordingly, not just of the factory but of those consumer sites, the store and the home. In *Captains of Consciousness* Stuart Ewen argues that the advertiser’s job, given hugely increased levels of commodity production during the twenties, was to organize or standardize desire, thereby preventing overproduction. To achieve as much, advertisers sought to create a dependable mass of consumers by playing upon their fears and frustrations. Advertisements worked to convince shoppers that their dissatisfaction arose from faults in themselves: bad breath, body odor. Smell is a particularly incriminating corporeal trait that both Ewen and Wolfgang Haug (in his *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*) address. For example, the Listerine company put an odor, via the term “halitosis,” into the minds of consumers as a smell that might stand between themselves and “greater business success”: for Ewen, the ad “attempted to focus man’s critique against himself—his

body had kept him from happiness” (Ewen 46). It would follow that “if man was the victim of himself, the fruits of mass production were his savior” (46).

In order to understand Ewen’s argument concerning consumer conviction as to the redemptive nature of commodities, an explanation from Marx on the dual nature of the commodity will be necessary: Marx argues that commodities possess a “natural” or “use-value” form and a “value” or “exchange-value” (the exchange relation of commodities) form (Marx 138). For Marx, there is no mystery in a commodity’s use-value: human labor changes the forms of the materials of nature so that they are useful to man or satisfy his needs (163). For example, a carpenter alters the form of wood to make a table, though the table continues wooden—a sensuous thing. However, once the table becomes a commodity, it acquires an exchange value and transcends its own sensuousness: it is given a price on the market that makes it comparable to other commodities. While the labor that went into the commodity’s production is precisely what determines its price, this price appears as an objective quality of the commodity itself, and therefore, as divorced from labor time and factory floor. Consumers engage in reification (or thingification), which amounts to forgetting: they are instructed to forget the social characteristics of human labor and instead see an objective characteristic of the products of labor themselves (164). Marx calls the transformation of definite social relations between men (the producers) into a fantastic relation between things, a “fetishism” which attaches itself to the products of human labor as soon as they become commodities (165). The fetish effectively hides the fullness of social relations and the sensuous quality of the commodity recedes. Jacques Derrida views the commodity’s transcendence of its own sensuousness as the commodity retaining a “bodiless body” or “transcendence...renders the non-sensuous sensuous (Derrida 89). Referencing the example of the table from Marx, Derrida argues that once the table becomes a commodity “its body becomes alive, it erects its whole self like an institution, it stands up and addresses itself to others, first of all to other commodities, its fellow beings in phantomaticity” (Derrida 90). While the concreteness and particularity of the commodity recedes, it acquires a secondary body in the eye of the consumer, a body which Haug would call the promissory body: the commodity’s price both renders it comparable to other commodities and obliterates the particularity of its sources. The priced commodity, in the shop window, makes promises to the consumer even as it induces forgetting.

When a consumer enters into the realm of commodities, on the selling floor or simply by looking through a shop window, the concreteness of her own primary body—of biological needs—recedes as well, displaced by her secondary body of learned desires. As she shops, so she looks to the marketplace for the solution to her fears and frustration. An ad for Madame Surilla Perfume read, “very often the subtlety of an exquisity odeur, and not the lady herself, does the befuddling” (Ewen 179). In this instance of commodity fetishism, the woman’s body takes on a second skin through the advertisement, similar to the second skin of the commodity (Haug 16). She takes on the advertiser’s suggestion that the commodity will save her from her biological body’s failing. Haug argues that advertisers of the 1920s encouraged a commodity aesthetic, whereby consumers were instructed to construct a landscape or commodity-filled stage within their home, one that would induce change within the interior landscape (or body) of the consumer. For example, the advertising copy, “Angelika - furniture for sophisticated lovers,” links ‘love’ to ‘furniture,’ offering a new lifestyle in which the interior of the home, resourced by Angelika, proves sexually gratifying: perhaps the woman of the house will increase her desirability, by becoming ‘Angel-like’ (Haug 93). In *Cinema and Experience*, Miriam Hansen argues for the rendering anachronistic of “subjectivity, interiority, and individuality” (Hansen 26). Hansen suggests that a void replaces the emotional interiority of early 20th century feminized consumers; in Haug’s terms, the primary gives way to the secondary body. Haug argues for a transformation: buyers, he suggests, construct a commodity-filled theater in the void. The buyer fills this stage with gleaming bodies, as if purchases will fulfill sexual desires: by such means, consumers internalize what’s around them, believing it to be their second nature.

Dos Passos and the Feminized Consumer

Reading the arrivals at the beginning of *Manhattan Transfer* through this paradigm of early 20th century Fordist production and advertising reveals that the arrivals insist on primary bodies and the forgotten spaces they inhabit—the realm of production the workers will enter and the maternity ward of a different kind of labor, pain, and fear that advertising suppresses and distorts. Ellen Thatcher literally enters the novel as the product of maternal labor, the description of her birth framed by descriptions of a migratory surge towards the urban, among whose number, Bud Korpenning searches for the “center of things” in Manhattan (Dos Passos 4). I plan to show that Dos Passos develops Ellen as the “type” of the feminized consumer: born into a world

of primary bodies, as a child she constructs a theater to manage her fears and anxieties, a theater that anticipates her future “commodity-filled stage.” As an adult her stage becomes the shop window and, accordingly, like all window-shoppers, she learns to forget the labor congealed in the objects of her desire, and so to suppress the traumas associated with Fordist production (of which more later).

Dos Passos offers an early instance of Ellen’s consumerist education. As a young girl she dances between her parents on a Sunday afternoon; her father accompanies her at the piano:

Between them, stepping carefully among the roses on the sunny field of the carpet, little Ellen danced. Two small hands held up the pinkfrilled dress and now and then an emphatic little voice said, ‘Mummy watch my expression.’

‘Just look at the child,’ said Thatcher, still playing. ‘She’s a regular little ballet dancer.’

Sheets of the Sunday paper lay where they had fallen from the table; Ellen started dancing on them, tearing the sheets under her nimble tiny feet. (16)

Ellen participates in a double performance. Probably unaware of the implications of her words, she imitates a specific group of adults—those who control their expressions on stage. Ellen’s mimetic behavior is precursive; she will become a professional actress and a window shopper. However, Ellen’s mother, noticing that Ellen tears the newspaper while she dances, repeatedly asks her to stop. Ellen does not understand the request, protesting that she can continue to dance in spite of the newspaper under her feet. In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss writes on Walter Benjamin’s notion that children “are less intrigued by the performed world that adults have created than by its waste products,” adding that “they are drawn to the apparently valueless, intentionless things” (Buck-Morss 262). Benjamin argues that “in using these things [children] do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifacts produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive relationship” (Benjamin 93 (1924)). Paradoxically, the lack of value that young Ellen attaches to this “waste product”—the discarded newspaper—anticipates her future “forgetting” as an adult. In contradistinction, the rebukes of Ellen’s parents focus the reader on their daughter’s careless destruction of the newspaper, and in doing indicate that she tears precisely what advertising suppresses and distorts.

Ed and Susie each take turns scolding Ellen until Ed gives her an economic lesson, oriented to production rather than consumption:

‘Ellen you should always mind when mummy speaks to you, and dear you shouldn’t be so destructive. It costs money to make that paper and people worked on it and daddy went out to buy it and he hasn’t finished reading it yet [...] We need construction and not destruction in this world.’ Then he went on with the Barcarole and Ellen went on dancing, stepping carefully among the roses on the sunny field of the carpet. (Dos Passos 16)

Ellen’s father exposes that which advertising works to occlude: the social labor that went into the paper’s production and the social relations that exist behind the commodity’s price. Benjamin saw child’s play as worthy of attention because of its intuitive nature: “[c]hildren got to know objects by laying hold of them and using them creatively, releasing from them new possibilities of meaning” (Buck-Morss 264). Ellen’s spontaneous relationship and tactile interaction with the newspaper anticipates her amnesia over the social relations that go into a commodity’s production. Ellen’s father explains the ramifications of her actions, yet she shows no noticeable reaction—she continues to dance, pretending to be a ballerina in a sunny field. Ellen’s relatively benign behavior as a child anticipates her consumer behavior as an adult.

Commodity Fetishism: A Contained Childhood Exuberance

As Ellen grows, she uses theater to manage her fears and anxieties. On one occasion, Ellen and her childhood friend, Alice, decide whether to cut through the park on their way home after school:

“But Ellen those dreadful kidnappers. . . .”

“I told you not to call me Ellen anymore.”

“Well Elaine then, Elaine the lily maid of Astolat.”

[...]“They’re dreadful men sitting on that bench. Come along Elaine the fair, let’s go home.”

“I’m not scared of them. I could fly like Peter Pan if I wanted to.” (Dos Passos 45)

In Ewen’s account of theatricality as a means to managing anxiety in industrial society, the buyer places herself on a commodity-filled stage that anticipates the lifestyle she desires to possess. Ellen wishes to be called “Elaine” in a reference to “Elaine the Fair,” a character who inspired Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott,” in which a lady is cursed to live in a tower, weaving together reflections and shadows of the world outside, as seen in her mirror. When she attempts to leave her tower in pursuit of love she dies; by implication, she cannot survive in the real world and may only experience a mediated version of the world beyond the mirror (Tennyson, 1842). Having cast herself as “Elaine,” Ellen then takes on the role of Peter Pan, the child who does not age, and lives in the fantastic Neverland (Barrie, 1950). Ellen’s fantasmic entry into bodies that necessarily exist apart from reality anticipates the ease with which she will later adapt her form to the promissory forms of advertising.

Transforming the park into a stage, Ellen attends to her costume:

Ellen walked down the asphalt path among the shrubbery kicking her toes in the air. Ellen in her new dress of Black Watch plaid mummy’d bought at Hearn’s walked down the asphalt path kicking her toes in the air. There was a silver thistle brooch on the shoulder of the new dress of Black Watch plaid mummy’d bought at Hearn’s. Elaine of Lammermoor was going to be married. Betrothed. Wangnaan nainainai, went the bagpipes going through the rye. The man on the bench has a patch over his eye. (Dos Passos 46)

As she walks, Ellen, displaced, observes herself: the structure shared by her first two sentences highlights a mental shift by way of which Ellen sees herself through the commodity form (the Black Watch plaid). Ellen eventually edits out the action of her body altogether, and limits any view of herself to the brooch on the shoulder of her dress. Seeing through the stencil of her Black Watch Plaid leads her to Sir Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*: the dress’s pattern takes its name from a fusion of allusions to the uniforms of an infantry regiment of Highlanders, and to Sir Walter Scott’s novel set in the Lammermuir Hills of south-east Scotland. Within a viewpoint determined by commodity (“bought at Hearn’s”), Ellen imagines achieving a relatively normal social relation, marriage, though within a theatrical setting. In Scott’s narrative, Lucy, the principal character, is engaged twice, though neither engagement results in a successful marriage—a character that anticipates Ellen’s

future marriages (Scott, 1906). Still seeing through the plaid, Ellen recalls a traditional Scottish song “Comin’ Thro’ The Rye,” thereby situating and containing the potential kidnapper within a child’s rhyme. Her fear is accordingly reduced. The plaid purchased at Hearn’s limits Ellen’s perception of the man to the patch he wears. Ellen’s desire to control the man determines her theatrical purposes: as one for whom shopping will prove central, relations between things are more manageable than relations between people. She narrows her sight to “a watching black patch. A black watching patch. The kidnapper of the Black Watch, among the rustling shrubs kidnappers keep their Black Watch” (Dos Passos 46). Ellen plays with different combinations of repeated words, minimizing the man to the patch he wears. Buck-Morss argues that for Benjamin, children’s gestures in theater allow an “untamed release of...fantasy” (Buck-Morss 264). In observing the mimetic capacity of children, adults are said to be able to rediscover “a previously possessed mode of cognition, that had deteriorated both phylogenetically and ontogenetically” under pressure from “Bourgeois socialization” (Buck-Morss 265). In contradistinction, Ellen’s childish exuberance already exhibits a fetishizing socialization. Ellen’s exuberance as a child does not deteriorate with bourgeois socialization but becomes contained through commodity fetishism. Her future commitment to commodity is anticipated in her momentary fetishism of the man’s black patch: the patch watches, rather than the man. The Black Watch plaid initially becomes a threatening group (a Black Watch) to which the kidnapper belongs, before becoming the kidnapper’s sight (that which watches). Because Ellen imagines the kidnapper as one who—like herself—literally sees through the commodity, his potentially harmless gaze grows menacing to her. To fulfill his duty as a kidnapper he must keep a “Black Watch,” effectively containing and expressing his menacing characteristics in a moment of fetishism.

Despite Ellen’s efforts to control the kidnapper, instances of his and her own primary body escape, seeping through her commodified perception:

Ellen’s toes don’t kick in the air. Ellen is terribly scared of the kidnapper of the Black Watch, big smelly man of the Black Watch with a patch over his eye. She’s scared to run. Her heavy feet scrape on the asphalt as she tries to run fast down the path. She’s scared to turn her head. The kidnapper of the Black Watch is right behind. (Dos Passos 46)

The man’s smell tears through Ellen’s veil of theatricality, so that the offending smell threatens her control over the

kidnapper, even as her own feet betray her, taking on a weight that prevents her from running. As though an audience to her own performance, she continues to dramatize her experience of fear: she calls the man the “kidnapper of the Black Watch” and narrates movements in the park as though they constitute a dramatic chase scene, with the kidnapper “right behind.” Ellen manages her fear by shifting her perception of her own body: instead of running away from the man, she imagines herself running toward comforting and familiar signposts: “When I get to the lamppost I’ll run as far as the nurse and the baby, when I get to the nurse and the baby I’ll run as far as the big tree, when I get to the big tree...” (46). The return to “I,” effectively releases “Elaine” from her own theatrical scene and signals her fearful return to her primary body, a return that breaks through her commodified perception: “Oh I’m so tired...I’ll run onto Central Park West and down the street home. She was scared to turn around. She ran with a stitch in her side. She ran till her mouth tasted like pennies” (46). Ellen’s signposts for the distance she’s run become points of tension lodged within her primary body: pains in the side, copper taste in the mouth. However, even now, Ellen balances between primary and secondary bodies—the copper taste in her mouth also tastes like money.

The Move to Capitalist Realism: Seeing through the Shop Window (or Camera Lens)

Prone to distorting reality as a child in order to manage her anxiety, Ellen, as an adult, takes comfort in the distortion of advertising and the shop window’s occlusion of that which consumerism renders unthinkable—production. Roland Marchand calls “reality” as conditioned by the consumer market “Capitalist Realism”: “like the paintings and murals of Socialist Realism, the illustrations in American advertising portrayed the ideals and aspirations of the system more accurately than its reality” (Marchand xviii). Advertisers present an ideal version of reality—one in which consumer anxieties and fears, arising from problems within themselves, could be solved by the buying of commodities. Consumerism, as a cultural dominant, deflected attention from the social conditions (often associated with the onset of Fordist industrial production), from which problems, both private and public, most typically arose.

Ellen’s play-acting as a child traceably develops into her participation in capitalist realism as an adult. As an adult, Ellen perfects the theatrical distance between her primary and her secondary bodies, transforming it (presumably through habit) into the equivalent of a glass divide, which might use-

fully be glossed as the shop window or the camera lens. In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin writes that in film, “the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance” (Benjamin 229). Benjamin cites Pirandello who characterizes the film actor as possessing an “inexplicable emptiness”: unlike an actor on a stage (whose full presence is available to an audience) the film actor—her body mediated through the camera—becomes partial. Her body loses its corporeality; for example, “the noises caused by [her] moving about... [are] changed into a mute image,” one that flickers on the screen in one instant and vanishes the next (Benjamin 228 (1968)). The actor’s performance, subject to a series of optical tests via the camera lens, subdivided becomes in effect “many separate performances” (228, 230). On film, the actor cannot adjust her performance to her particular audience. Instead, the audience takes the “position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor” (228). As a result, the audience no longer identifies with the actor but with the camera. The camera lens establishes a distance between the actress and her audience, by means of which the character’s production is hidden from and forgotten by that audience. Benjamin writes, “the equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology” (233). The cut-and-mounted “reality” produced in film grants a seamless totality to the actor’s performance, though it is precisely this seamlessness that transforms and situates the film actor within a heightened artifice (the “orchid”). Dos Passos portrays Ellen situated in such a space toward the end of the novel. Seated “at the end of a long room jingling with talk and twinkle of chandeliers and jewelry” she is one in a series of commodities from which this particular interior forms (Dos Passos 154). Ellen experiences a distance between what might be thought of as her primary body and a perfectly constructed secondary body:

Ellen sits in the armchair drowsily listening, coolness of powder on her face and arms, fatness of rouge on her lips, her body just bathed fresh as a violet under the silk dress, under the silk underclothes. (154)

A repeated use of “under” implies the residual presence of a primary body, hidden and distanced from the version of herself that attracts the men around her (her audience): Ellen beckons them toward her, while withdrawing from them:

She sits up cold white out of reach like a lighthouse. Men’s hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men’s looks blunder and flutter against it

helpless as moths. But in deep pitblackness inside something clangs like a fire engine. (154)

Before unpacking this text, I must explain my adoption of the pronoun “she” in the argument that follows. Frequently, in his account of Ellen’s perceptual habits, Dos Passos approaches those habits so nearly that the narrative voice all but passes into the purview of his character. As an exponent of free indirect discourse, rather than interior monologue, Dos Passos’ position always remains marginally distinct from that of his character. In order to manage these nuances, I have adopted the pronoun “she” when addressing Ellen’s perception. I do so because the processes of free indirect discourse are not my subject.

Returning to the above quotation, ambiguity over that against which the men’s looks “blunder and flutter” suggests that Ellen (whose perception is adopted by the text) has created an unperceived wall between herself and her audience: just as bugs try uselessly to fight their way through glass, so the film audience forgets the mediation of the camera lens, and the buyer ignores the distortion of the shop window. Ellen’s description of her buried interiority as a “deep pitblackness” recalls the more likely phrase, “pitch blackness,” thereby creating a tacit and antonymic reference to pitch, a substance often used industrially, to seal and solidify surfaces. The substitution of “pit” for “pitch” also recalls both the “pit of one’s stomach,” both a location of visceral response, and an industrial site (the “pit” or “mine” in “coal pit”). Ellen’s place of anxiety and fear—locus of her raw emotional responses—resides deep within her (thoroughly sealed off from her audience), yet, by implication at least, it takes its form from veiled industrial residues. As Ellen’s observations move to her emotional interiority, so she uses increasingly figurative language, ultimately stating, “inside something clangs like a fire engine” (154). The simile combines nonspecificity (“something”) and alarm (“fire engine”), indicating the degree to which her interiority is unavailable to her.

The Buried Interiority

In order to understand Ellen’s simile (interior as fire engine), some account of parataxis will be necessary. The simile might be understood as a paratactic figure, one in which an announced conjunction of terms serves to create a distance, whose awkwardness requires the reader to account for an initially incompatible resemblance. The gap between the linked terms prompts a question: how may difference be remade as semblance, or dissociation become association? The solution amounts to a small narrative as the reader cre-

ates an explanatory story. Theodor Adorno argues that in the paratactic narrative “aconceptual synthesis turns against its medium; it becomes a constitutive dissociation” (130). It follows that, for Adorno, a paratactic narrative “inherently eludes subsumption under ideas” (134). These paratactic images—Ellen as a lighthouse; the men as bugs pushing against glass; Ellen’s interiority as a fire engine—create a linked set conceptual needs, focused through Dos Passos’ portmanteau word, “firebug,” a conjunction which occurs three times in the novel (Dos Passos 13, 70, 96).

The first usage of “firebug” occurs during a fire in a tenement house (Dos Passos 12). Ed Thatcher follows a commotion in the street outside his window to the fire where “a smell of burning rags” fills the street (12). Another bystander tells Ed, “Everyone of ‘em on the two top floors was trapped. It’s an incendiary done it. Some goddam firebug” (13). As Thatcher moves past a man, he “caught a smell of coaloil from the man’s clothes...Thatcher’s hands and feet went suddenly cold. The firebug. The papers say they hang round like that to watch it” (13). After Ed goes home “he couldn’t forget the smell of coaloil on the man’s clothes” (13). In this instance, an unnamed incendiary takes pleasure in watching the homes of the working classes burn. The fire particularly affects an Italian immigrant—his pregnant wife is trapped in the building and his inability to speak English prevents his communicating with the police. The smell of “coaloil” gives the firebug away and this smell haunts Ed, even as he tries to leave the traumatic scene behind. A second reference occurs during Jimmy Herf’s childhood. Young Jimmy leaves his apartment for candy at Huyler’s:

A man with a can of coaloil brushes past him, a greasy sleeve brushes against his shoulder, smells of sweat and coaloil; suppose he’s a firebug. The thought of firebug gives him gooseflesh. Fire. Fire. (70)

The smell of coal oil links the two instances: its mingling with the smell of sweat locates the firebug within the realm of production. In a third usage, Emile, on his way to meet Madame Rigaud in her store, passes a scene of firemen trying to contain a spreading fire. Two policemen “drag... out a negro whose arms snapped back and forth like broken cables. A third cop came behind cracking the negro first on one side of the head, then on the other with his billy.

“It’s a shine ‘at set the fire.”

“They caught the firebug.”

“‘At’s ‘e incendiary.”

“God he’s a meanlookin smoke.” (96)

On entering Madame Rigaud’s store, Emile shuts out the smoke and smell of the fire, before asking Madame Rigaud if she would be insured against any fire damages. Insurance anticipates fire in order to regulate it. Dos Passos links the smoke of the fire with “smoke”—a slang term for African Americans—thereby racializing “fire”: “shine,” an idiomatic usage, alluding both to the black epidermis, and to the sheen on coaloil, set within the context of violent policing and “broken cables,” carries the word “fire” toward the “sweat” of labor resistance. At the very least, in each of these instances, Ellen’s sense that a “fire engine clang[s]” deep within her suggests that her occupancy of a secondary body, devised by consumerism, has not entirely excised a resistant and primary body, associated, through devious paths, with production, the working class, and sites of struggle. However, the tension remains buried within her, accessible only through the displacements of figurative language.

The Structural Trauma of Industrialization

Ellen’s last appearance in the novel exposes that which the phrase “Ellen as lighthouse” earlier occluded: that which Ellen ultimately desires to occlude, despite the tension she feels within her own body. Ellen confronts the primary trauma of a fire in the workroom of a dress shop that contains within it the structural trauma of industrialization. Buck-Morss, addressing the “crisis in perception” that industrialization causes, notes a “speeding up of time and [a] fragmentation of space,” taking them as evidence for the way in which Fordist development wounds the working body:

Both the assembly line and the urban crowd bombard the senses with disconnected images and shocklike stimulæ. In a state of constant distraction, the consciousness of the collective acts like a shock absorber, registering sense impressions without really experiencing them. (Buck-Morss 268)

The bourgeois class in an industrializing society occupies a different realm than that of the proletariat: the former, in the realm of consumption among advertisements and shop windows, delights in “shocklike stimulæ”; the latter, in the realm of production, faces physical pains on the assembly line. However, as Marx argues in *Capital*, the traumas of the working class are hidden from and forgotten by those

who consume—in Marxian terms, the social characteristics of men's own labor become objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves: in windows and on pages, the commodity's fetish teaches purchasers amnesia (Marx 165). Ellen's entrance into Madame Soubrine's shop evidences the capitalist's requirement that shoppers forget production. Before Ellen enters Madame Soubrine's she buys a bunch of arbutus from a man on the street:

Through the smell of the arbutus she caught for a second the unwashed smell of his body, the smell of immigrants, of Ellis Island, of crowded tenements. Under the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling smell, spreading in dark slow crouching masses like corruption oozing from broken sewers, like a mob. (335)

Ellen's sensitivity to the smell of the worker's unwashed body suggests that she still retains the possibility of resistance to her own secondary body as she enters the dress shop. That the odor should retain an associative network linking tenements, immigrants, and Ellis Island to the smell of the worker's body points more generally to a realm of laboring bodies that Ellen usually forgets. The portmanteau terms "nickelplated, goldplated" reference money (price "obliterates" how that to which it refers was made) even as they nod towards an industrial shock largely displaced from bourgeois experience—a shock in which smell triggers fears of the urban mass. Ellen experiences that smell and all its associations as something uncontrolled and corrupting, threatening to break the veil of theatricality or capitalist realism that advertisements and shop windows construct. However, once inside the shop, "she forgot everything in the catlike smile of Madame Soubrine herself" (Dos Passos 335). As seller, Madame Soubrine becomes a walking, talking advertisement on the sales' floor; one who inspires in Ellen the necessary forgetting of the worker encountered outside. As Soubrine pins the evening dress on Ellen, she mutters, "Perfect Greek simplicity, wellgirdled like Diana... Spiritual with Spring...the ultimate restraint of an Annette Kellermann, holding up the lamp of liberty, the wise virgin" (336). Madame Soubrine gives voice to commodity fetishism as a series of compressed and generic advertising catch phrases, each designed to tell Ellen that the new evening dress will transform her into a promissory image. Haug writes, "the buyer's weak points are ignorance coupled with a belief in her own talents. Accordingly, an admiration for these imagined skills, and the pretense of being impressed by them, are part of the seller's act" (59). Ellen's internalization of Soubrine's instruction has consequences for her

subsequent train of thought: "Then my figure'll go, the menopause haunting beauty parlors, packed in boncilla, having your face raised" (336). Ellen, confronting a momentary intimation of the mutability of her primary (or biological) body, corrects it by way of market responses: "boncilla" successfully lifts her face, so that "my face" becomes the generic face of the consumer whose desires are molded by advertising ("your face").

However, a fire in the workroom at Madame Soubrine's forces Ellen to recall the structural trauma of industrialization. Ellen, pulled from her inner monologue by the pained response of her own body to smoke, "suddenly felt hot, tangled in some prickly web, a horrible stuffiness of dyed silks and crêpes and muslins was making her head ache; she was anxious to be out on the street again" (336). The pain shifts Ellen's perception from the fetishized image of the completed garments to the fabrics that went into their making—dyed silks and muslins. Dos Passos locates the implicit divide between the realms of consumerism and production in the pierglass in Soubrine's dress shop. To find the source of the smoke, the shop girl and Madame Soubrine "disappeared through a mirrorcovered door"—initially, for Ellen, a fixed pierglass—and enter the back room (or the site of production) (336). The pierglass (a mirrorcovered door) provides access to what the mirror occludes. Carried behind the pierglass, the reader's point of view shifts from Ellen, the feminized consumer, to Anna Cohen, a factory worker: "*Charley my boy, Oh Charley my boy*, she hums, stitching the future with swift tiny stitches" (336). Samuel Haber writes of Frederick Taylor's system of early 20th Century labor management:

One of the most important general principles of Taylor's system was that the man who did the work could not derive or fully understand its science. The result was a radical separation of thinking from doing. Those who understood were to plan the work and set the procedures; the workmen were simply to carry them into effect. (Haber 24)

The account of Anna envisioning a romantic future, even as she stitches a garment, reflects the capacity of daydreams to service or intensify production: the dream relieves her from thinking about her habit body (a body trained in the garment industry), and she consequently works more swiftly. Haug writes, "[t]he individuals whom capital conditions to be either its functionaries, capitalists themselves, or its wage labourers, share, at least formally, a common instinctual fate in spite of their radical differences: their sensual immediacy must be disrupted and rendered absolutely controllable"

(47). Just as Ellen internalizes learned desires from the capitalist (in the sphere of consumption), so Anna's thoughts reflect those practiced reactions required of laborers by capital in its Fordist form (in the sphere of production). Anna's dream moves from thoughts on marriage to revolution, and ultimately to "Elmer, loving as Valentino, crushing me to him with Doug-strong arms, hot as flame, Elmer" (337). Anna's displacement of her own attention from the task at hand, to a sexualized daydream, aids the speed of her hand and hence her productivity on behalf of Madame Soubrine. Just as with Ellen, so with Anna's daydream, the fire breaks through the daydream, and in Anna's case interrupts her capacity to produce: white fingers beckon "through the dream she is stitching," but "red hands clutch suddenly out of the tulle" and she "cant fight off the red tulle all around her biting into her, coiled about her head" (337). That the fire takes the form of "red hands"—Anna's means to labor—locates her extreme pain within production itself. These hands are no longer extensions of Anna's boss, in that Anna's head ceases to be the creator of sexualized fantasies dedicated to an increase in production. Pain objectifies these parts of Anna's body. The location of the fire within the workroom and behind the pierglass suggests that its primary trauma (impacting on Anna's body) reflects a more general structural trauma inherent in industrialization.

Conclusion: Resolved to a State of Tension

The fire forces Ellen to confront the trauma of production and momentarily to lose her fetishized viewpoint. Ellen stands before the pierglass until, drawn by the strong smell of burning fabric, she passes through the mirror-door. The fire—an extreme form of breakage—carries Ellen into the workroom at Madame Soubrine's:

It is by their imperfections that the means of production in any process bring to our attention their character of being the products of past labour. A knife which fails to cut...forcibly reminds us of...the cutler. In a successful product, the role played by past labour in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished (Marx 289).

Ellen's reaction to the trauma she witnesses prompts annotation by way of trauma theory, not least because the fire simultaneously requires and denies expression. Once the smoke clears in the workroom, Ellen sees that "they are picking something moaning out of the charred goods. Out of the corner of her eye she sees an arm in shreds, a seared

black red face, a horrible naked head" (337). Ellen struggles to understand what she sees before her, and her perception reifies the burned body—for Ellen, a person is not lifted but an anthology of articles. Madame Soubrine instructs Ellen to go back to the front of the store and tell the other shoppers that what she saw was "nothing, absolutely nothing" (338). In effect, Madame Soubrine asks Ellen to forget a primary trauma within production. Ellen, the feminized consumer, reenters the selling floor and repeats Madame Soubrine's words, prompting other purchasers to repeat the phrase, "Nothing, absolutely nothing" (338). Their parroting of the seller evidences the persuasive power of commodity aesthetics in its reified forgetting.

Before Ellen leaves the scene she repeatedly imagines herself as the burned victim, suggesting an attempt to arrive at recognition: she "tries to puzzle out why she is so moved; it is as if some part of her were going to be wrapped in bandages, carried away on a stretcher" (338). Buck-Morss offers a useful gloss on mimetic behavior as a means to mastery or defense: she argues that "children instinctively mimic objects as a means of mastering their experiential world. Psychoanalytic theory tells us that the neurotic symptom, similarly imitates a traumatic event in an (unsuccessful) attempt at psychic defense" (268). On the way to meet George, her future and third husband, Ellen imagines, "suppose I'd been horribly burned, like that girl, disfigured for life" (339). Cathy Caruth gives an account of trauma as a double wound, suggesting that trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). Ellen confronts the primary trauma, a trauma of production figured as an industrial accident, exposure to which inhibits her capacity to remain at ease within her secondary body. Dos Passos links this moment of resistance with the sound of the fire engine: Ellen attempts to forget the grim spectacle but "the moaning turmoil and the clanging of the fireengines wont seem to fade away inside her" (Dos Passos 338). However, the sources of Ellen's unease remain deep, walled-off and barely available to her. Ultimately, the interior in which the fire engine sounds is displaced, becoming, "a horrible tired blankness inside her...She remembers it all now, at eight o'clock she's going to have dinner with Judge Shammeyer and his wife. Ought to have gone home to dress. George'll be mad when he sees me come breezing in like this. Likes to show me off all dressed up like a Christmas tree, like an Effenbee walking talking doll, damn him" (Dos Passos 338). Once again, experiencing herself as though from a distance, Ellen watches her own "remembering" as it erases that

which capital requires her to forget: dinner arrangements displace the charred victim. Halfway through her recollection she shifts into speaking in the first person, a move that evidences her renewed capacity to return to and to assume her secondary body. The reader last sees Ellen,

[a]s she goes through the shining soundless revolving doors, that spin before her gloved hand touch[ing] the glass, there shoots through her a sudden pang of something forgotten. Gloves, purse, vanity case, handkerchief. I have them all. Didn't have an umbrella. What did I forget in the taxicab? But already she is advancing smiling towards two gray men in black with white shirtfronts getting to their feet, smiling, holding out their hands. (Dos Passos 339)

That the Soubrine episode should end with Ellen entering another set of glass doors suggests that no circumstance will prove sufficient to wake Ellen from what Buck-Morss calls the “Dream World of Mass Culture” (Buck-Morss 253). As Ellen struggles to find the words to communicate what she's witnessed, she resorts to items with which she's familiar—those accessories that she might have forgotten—accessories that deny her access to the “charred something” that requires and yet recedes from expression. That Ellen should last be seen “advancing” through a second set of glass doors (but doors that revolve) suggests Ellen will remain revolving in a state of tension, balanced between two bodies.

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