

“There is no right life in the wrong one”:<sup>1</sup> The Dialectic of Drink and  
Abstinence in John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA*

Sixta Quassdorf

ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of alcohol in John Dos Passos’s major works, *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA*, has been widely noticed. Yet abstinence, the opposite, is just as conspicuous. This article explores the dialectical implications of drink vs. abstinence, which—together with considerations of the cultural history and contemporaneous political issues connected with alcohol—reveal that drink plays an intricate role in Dos Passos’s socio-political critique. While drink symbolizes human life with all its complexities and contradictions, its opposite, abstinence, exemplifies the inhumaneness of a reduced world view that prioritizes the instrumental logic of capitalism and demands unquestioning subjugation to the given conditions.

Contemporaneous critics of John Dos Passos’s *USA* trilogy complained that “almost everyone lives from bar to bed” and that the characters “drink enough liquor to make this the most eloquent temperance tract since *The Beautiful and Damned*” (“Unsigned review” 147; De Voto 127).<sup>2</sup> Since then, other critics have remarked on the prominence of drink in Dos Passos’s works. Colin Hutchinson, for example, compares drink and hedonism in *USA* with their role in Pynchon’s *Against the Day*. He argues for a putative Puritanism in Dos Passos, as the heavy drinkers all meet with “grim fates” (178). But, pace Hutchinson, the “grim fates”

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are not only reserved for those who “cavort ruinously” and fail to defer “gratification in the name of a distant goal” (178, 180). Instead, in Dos Passos’s works, both the “wet” and the “dry” characters are barred from leading a “right life” (Adorno 43): the former tend to lose their lives literally, while the latter, who are superficially successful, tend to lose their souls. It is not only the manifestation of drink which is conspicuous, but also its negation. Drink thus needs to be analyzed dialectically, in the light of its obverse.

A dialectical reading invites comparisons with and receives support from two major advocates of dialectical thinking of the time: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who analyze US society in the early twentieth century in their joint work *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Following their method of studying the particular, the “micrological detail” as symptomatic for the whole (Miller 79), I will use drink and its negation as an analytical tool to approach the whole of Dos Passos’s project in *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA*. A dialectical reading is also implicitly called for by Donald Pizer’s observation that Dos Passos aimed at an “underlying ‘geometry’ of meaning” through recurrent thematic juxtaposition (15).

As a micrological detail, drink lends itself to the analysis of more general concerns not only through text-immanent criticism, but also through its particular role in American history and its pervasive presence in Western culture since Biblical times. Although the negative effects of alcohol abuse have been documented since antiquity, only the nineteenth century saw noteworthy anti-drink movements. The reasons for the heightened sensitivity towards alcohol abuse, especially in the United States, are certainly complex and are much debated among historians. Puritan zeal, social stratification with an emerging middle-class norm of moral behavior, the transfer and mixing of different drinking cultures through colonial trade and migration, the growing availability of alcohol as a consumer good for the poor, dire and crowded housing conditions in rapidly growing cities, and the need for

reliable, punctual and concentrated workers in the newly-founded factories are all suggested as factors which made drink a socio-political issue.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it was mainly the corollaries of industrialization that seem to have aggravated the problem of abuse, so that several historians even maintain that addiction—whether to alcohol, other drugs or to the conspicuous consumption required by an excessive, capitalist production—is a modern concept.<sup>4</sup>

The rising power of the temperance movements, especially the Anti-Saloon League, and the reality of Prohibition in the USA both politicized drink. The call for abstinence increasingly turned into a means of control over the lower classes by ensuring that they stayed sober, remained industrious, and did not organize in saloons.<sup>5</sup> Thus, workers were required to forego habits for the sake of industrial production. They were to “model their body and soul according to the technical apparatus” (Horkheimer and Adorno 29) and turn “into a living appendage of the machine” (Marx, *Capital* 484). The closure of saloons, which were much more than mere drinking places, as a form of negating drink to workers, thus came to be felt as a palpable means of suppression.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, when temperance campaigns became increasingly dominated by white Protestant nationalists (in the beginning, temperance was also propagated by many groups with a civil-rights agenda), anti-drink crusades strove to undermine lower-class solidarity by especially blaming the non-Protestant immigrants, such as the wine-drinking Italians, the whiskey-drinking Irish, and the vodka-drinking East European Jews.<sup>7</sup> Nativist temperance propaganda contributed to a general shift in the perception of social conflict, away from class struggle towards cultural difference. Alan Trachtenberg, for instance, shows in his extensive study that the ideology of identifying Americanness with the successful, white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant businessman also made the white American working class appear to be “foreign, alien, in need of Americanizing,” as they lived indecently in crowded homes and

drank too much, like any foreigner (87). This perception is echoed by Dos Passos in *Camera Eye* 51: “they have made us foreigners in the land where we were born” (*USA* 1209). Hence the growing nationalism and conservatism of the temperance movements benefitted the elites as they helped make the “social divisions and lines of control all but invisible” (Trachtenberg 161).

A nationalist, exclusive agenda seems incompatible with Dos Passos’s obvious veneration of “our storybook democracy” (*USA* 893). The numerous references to Walt Whitman, especially in *USA*, reveal Dos Passos’s high esteem for an American tradition that reveres the ideals of democracy, integrity and plurality.<sup>8</sup> This high esteem becomes visible, amongst other things, through his plot structure, where a plurality of characters are represented as forming the backbone of a city or a nation; and his narrative strategy proposes a plurality in unity through the diverse stylistic modes which characterize his works. It can be said that he gives the US state-political maxim of *E pluribus unum* a socio-political meaning.

Prohibition is, however, not the only phenomenon that gives alcoholic drink a prominent role in history. Western tradition itself is inseparable from a culture of drink and drinking (Nicholls, “Bottling Up” 106; “Introduction”). Researchers maintain that ancient civilizations typically had a specific holy drug for cultic purposes and medical treatment.<sup>9</sup> While Native Americans chose tobacco, alcohol was the holy drug of Greek myth and the Judeo-Christian tradition, upon which societies in Europe and modern America are molded. The Dionysus cult celebrated vitality and the joy of life with drink; wine and strong drink are important gifts from and offerings to the God of the Old Testament (Numbers 28:7; Deuteronomy 14:26); the New Testament tells of Christ’s first miracle at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11), where “he made the water wine” (John 4:46). Furthermore, it is an alcoholic drink that in Catholic belief transubstantiates into divine blood at Communion. Thus drink is linked to life as given and protected by God, a life that—as the wedding

suggests— procreates thus engendering plurality (Arendt) and a life that vouches for social communion as symbolized by the Last Supper. The formal centrality of a drunkard like Stan Emery to *Manhattan Transfer* and Dos Passos's critical representation of abstinence in *USA* become more plausible when considering this cultural legacy with its fundamentally life-affirming symbolism of drink.

The cultural bond between drink and religion, moreover, has affinities to a key aspect of the Critical Theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, that is, to the concepts of “objective reason” or “rationality.”<sup>10</sup> Objective reason focuses “on the idea of the greatest good, on the problem of human destiny, and on the way of realization of ultimate goals” (Horkheimer 2). Religion is one traditional form of objective reason, as it establishes an objective rationality transcending the horizon of the individual subject. Enlightenment, however, together with the development of the sciences and the corollary aspiration to become as knowledgeable as God Himself, is said to have provoked a change of paradigm. “Subjective” or “instrumental reason” became dominant:

[Subjective reason] is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable. If it concerns itself at all with ends, it takes for granted that they too are reasonable in the subjective sense, i.e. that they serve the subject's interest in relation to self-preservation. (Horkheimer 1)<sup>11</sup>

Instrumental reason tends to see an idea or an object as related to a purpose and no longer as “a thing in itself.” According to Horkheimer's and Adorno's analyses, the growing dominance of instrumental reason promotes the evaluation of everything and everyone in

terms of utility. Capitalism, flourishing alongside and fostering the paradigm shift from objective to subjective rationality further transforms the use value of everything and everyone into exchange value, which results in reification and alienation.<sup>12</sup> The alienation produced by the growing transformation of everything, including interpersonal relationships, into categories of utility and exchange value, leads to suffering as it precludes an authentic human life. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, it is the broken promise to better the conditions of life for the whole of humanity, despite providing the means to do so, that constitutes the failure of Enlightenment, and for that matter, of capitalism.

Dialectical thinking disallows simple dichotomies of objective vs. instrumental rationality. Objective rationality is not free of adverse effects—such as the subjugation of the self in a transcending collective narrative, which, historically, tends to cause self-delusion (not unlike drink-induced self-beguilement)—nor do Horkheimer and Adorno argue against Enlightenment as such. Rather, they criticize the fact that it has not been understood radically enough, that is, it has not been understood that human beings are both rational and irrational creatures. If either human irrationality or human rationality is suppressed in favor of the other, people will continue to suffer. Moreover, the one is not to be had without the other: Horkheimer and Adorno convincingly argue that religious myth is born out of rational ideas and that an exclusive focus on instrumental rationality reverts into mythical belief.

Dos Passos's texts about US society and the suffering of the people in the first decades of the twentieth century come remarkably close to that philosophical analysis. They provide an overt critique of the suffering that is caused by the myth-like superelevation of instrumental rationality and its "betrayed promise" (Buell 399).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the texts also explore the counterbalancing potential of different forms of objective reason. Drink plays a central role in this endeavor: In *Manhattan Transfer*, drink, qua Christian tradition, is associated with the countervailing hope that objective reason may redeem those whom the

instrumental logic of self-preservation and self-perpetuation has led merely to individual isolation. However, Dos Passos also exposes the limitations of the traditional, Christian concept of objective reason, *qua* drink. Not surprisingly, in the later *USA* trilogy, the religious undertone is less strong, and the political aspects of drink and abstinence in the specific American context are foregrounded. The trilogy not only explores drink and abuse but, most prominently, the negation of drink with all its political, social and psychological consequences—in Buell’s words, “the genius of *USA*’s collective aesthetic is that it dramatizes not just the results of standardization but also the psychic and moral messiness of the adaptational process” (395). Hence, the complex symbolism of drink in Dos Passos’s works, as an Adorno-like ‘micrological detail,’ calls for a dialectical and dynamic approach to life’s challenges and eschews simplistic either/or rigidities.

#### *Manhattan Transfer*: Instrumental Rationality and Christian Tradition

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the “logical subject” subscribing to instrumental rationality must consider a “life without any rational reference to self-preservation” to be as “idiotic as drunkenness” (29). Stan Emery, the central drunk in *Manhattan Transfer*, seems to act out that “idiocy” as a subversive critique of instrumental reason. He claims the right to irrational behavior and maintains that life should be varied, adventurous, incalculable: “gosh . . . burglary, adultery, sneaking down fireescapes . . . , etc. . . . Judas it’s a great life” (*MT* 613). He also epitomizes imagination and sensitivity. His girlfriend, Ellen Thatcher, senses his ‘otherworldly’ dimension: he makes her “feel there were other things . . . , unbelievable things” (*MT* 714). Emery longs for an alternative world to that of pure facts and reason. In contrast to the other characters, he seems to imagine Horkheimer and Adorno’s other “god[s] not postulated by the self” (29).

Dos Passos repeatedly fuses drink and Christian imagery in the character of Emery. In Emery’s final delirium, a song alluding to Noah’s ark, sings in his head: “*Two by two the*

*elephant and the kangaroo*” (MT 700, 702). The song evokes his ethical precept that life be a value in itself. God destroyed civilization through the flood, yet He saved life through Noah’s ark and eventually made a covenant so that all creatures live, whether they are pleasing to Him or not (Genesis 9:15-17). Emery recalls that Christian faith teaches that one does not need to earn one’s right to live; one has it already (cf. the parable about the birds and lilies which neither “sow” or “reap,” “toil” or “spin” in Christ’s sermon on the Mount in Matt. 6 and Luke 12). Therefore, he wants to be, not merely behave. He opposes the modern classificatory dichotomy of failure and success in society, which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as follows:

Through the countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed on the individual as the only natural, respectable, and rational ones. He defines himself only as a thing, as a static element, as success or failure. His yardstick is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful approximation to the objectivity of his function and the models established for it. Everything else, idea and crime, suffers the force of the collective, which monitors it from the classroom to the trade union. (Horkheimer and Adorno 28)

Emery’s fundamental presupposition that life be a value in itself, supported by Christian faith, makes him a failure in the eyes of society. Emery’s “having a lot of personality” does not suffice to make him a respected human being. Instrumental rationality counts for more than objective reason. Emery should “work,” that is, make himself useful and do what everyone does; he should not indulge in what people mean by “rais[ing] Cain” (MT 602).

In contrast to the people around him, Emery sees the tautological irrationality in capitalist logic, whereby capital needs to breed ever more capital, and where “nothing succeeds like success” (MT 715). In a society which primarily focuses on the means to achieve something, people unlearn asking for the ends. Nobody in *Manhattan Transfer* can



point out the “center of things” (*MT* passim). Everyone brushes the question aside as naïve (just as Enlightenment thinking brushes aside objective reason as “mythic superstition,” Horkheimer and Adorno 29). A center of things would require objective categories. Only Emery seems to be able to perceive the city as a whole (Isernhagen 139).

Emery insists on asking for the ends: “Why the hell does everybody want to succeed? I’d like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That’s the only sublime thing” (*MT* 634). He questions the self-perpetuating logic of success, which has become the “controlling force” for almost everyone (Pizer 16; Isernhagen 159). The “bitch-goddess success,” as William James once called it (260), turns her believers into slaves; to be free, one has to resist. In a central dialogue between Emery and his friend Jimmy Herf, Emery unmasks success as inessential: “You cant eat or drink it” (*MT* 634). He is not distracted by the futility of success as an end in itself as he does not need “to scurry round and get” money (*MT* 634). Thanks to his father’s wealth, Emery is free to evaluate success from a detached, almost objective perspective. When he advises Herf about his lack of direction, he explicitly evokes a Christian notion: “God decided that for you” (*MT* 634). Furthermore, Emery sees the potential of failure. Failure can trigger truly unpremeditated, new options—hence “the only sublime thing” (*MT* 634).

On the other hand, Emery is entrapped in a dilemma. Through the all-pervasive importance of money, he is as dependent on the system as everyone else. He is a “Baa baa black sheep,” but still one of the herd (*MT* 634). Being one of the herd but unable or unwilling to succumb to its (totalizing) demands, Emery has no place. The right “field of activity,” where he could become more “actively active” eludes him (*MT* 631). In Seth Moglen’s words, the sensitive young man is torn between the “desires for more humane ways of living” and the fear that these yearnings “are futile or childish,” because “resistance to the damaging forces of modernization [is] impossible, even unthinkable” (viii, 7). Religious

objective reason has been demoted to mere myth and hence has lost its potential for redemption. Dos Passos's Emery knows that an alternative world is needed but cannot fathom its nature, let alone fight for it. The only feasible option for him is a retreat into irony like that of Kierkegaard's ironic subject, who, wanting to destroy it, negates the existent but is unable to establish anything to replace it. For Kierkegaard, "Irony is . . . not the truth but the way," which leads the ironic subject to succumb to despair—instead of destroying society, he destroys himself (50, 278, 340).

Both drink and religion promise consolation from despair, but neither seems to offer a valid alternative. The founders of Marxism acknowledge the similarity when they compare religion to "opium" (Marx "Introduction") and "booze" (Lenin). However, Marx also maintains that religion and opium are symptoms that truth is needed: "*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature" who lives under "soulless conditions" in a "heartless world" (Marx "Introduction"). The god-less world, however, severs the link between drink, life and divine redemption. Instead, drink itself becomes an instrument. It is reduced to a mind-altering drug providing (temporary) consolation. The drink-related insistence on the irrational thus constitutes little more than a pseudo-protest and a fake freedom. Marx is said to have considered religion to be "the wrong answer to a right question" (Thomson), a viewpoint that Dos Passos seems to share: in *Manhattan Transfer*, both drink and religion are ineffectual against capitalism. In Stan Emery's fantasies, the (capitalist) skyscraper is likely to survive the (divine) flood (*MT* 703).

*Manhattan Transfer* often fuses drink with allusions to Christian belief in ways that highlight their presumed absurdity in modern society. The irony implied in the Noah-related song above by the ridiculous rhyming of "two by two" with "kangaroo" (*MT* 700, 702) both epitomizes how modernity likes to mock myth as irrational and illustrates the manipulative

influence of what Horkheimer and Adorno labeled “the culture industry” (120 ff.). People are induced to laugh and not to think about the deeper meaning of the old stories. “They must laugh and be content with laughter” and not become “suspicious” that an alternate view or “resistance” is possible (Horkheimer and Adorno 141).

Dos Passos’s dialectical twists and turns also become evident in the passage in which Emery deplores his unsuitability in society:

[Stan:] “I admit that as an organism I’m incomplete.”

[Ellen:] “You won’t be an organism of any kind if you don’t sober up.”

[Stan:] “I’m going to drink . . . I’m going to drink till when I cut myself whiskey runs out. What’s the good of blood when you can have whiskey?” (*MT* 664)

The Catholic image of transubstantiation connotes objective rationality. However, instead of wine transubstantiating into blood, Stan Emery imagines his blood turning into a stronger drink, whiskey. By choosing a negative dialectical approach through the reversal of the Christian Sacrament, Dos Passos reveals the anti-human implications connected with capitalist principles. First, the instrumental rationality of capitalism would require sterner stuff than wine, or religion for that matter, to provide a worthwhile concept of life (which chimes with the skyscraper surviving the flood). Second, instrumental rationality is perverse: it tends to value man-made stuff, that is whiskey, higher than the natural stuff, blood. Such a notion again recalls Horkheimer and Adorno’s diagnoses: people are to believe that their own creations make them independent from God and nature, which consequently makes them dismiss objective categories.

Third, Dos Passos captures a further aspect to Emery’s despair: if he were able to replace his natural blood by man-made whiskey, he would be able to drown his humanity and better fit the machine called mainstream society—he would lose his black sheep’s fleece. He would be artificial, yet no longer “incomplete” (*MT* 664). The last remark of Phineas

Blackhead in *MT*, the investor representing capital, seems to corroborate this point: “Don’t you see that it’s only the whiskey that was keeping me going?” (*MT* 828). Whiskey, the man-made drug, keeps the man going to do his capitalist job. Whiskey enables him to be effective in a system that itself runs by the logic of addiction—it craves for ever more and more. One must internalize that logic to succeed, not merely consume it.

Superficially, on the plot level, the non-conformist drunk who allegedly does nothing but “raise Cain” is ineffective and punished with early death. However, as Hartwig Isernhagen observes, Emery seems vindicated on a formal and conceptual level: for a moment, he becomes the “central consciousness” and thus reclaims the position of objective rationality (138, 155). Emery’s delirious death is the only place where the many recurring motifs combine which otherwise float freely across the narratives: the skyscraper, the fire engine, the siren, dollars, Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus, the great lady on the white horse and many more. Thus, Dos Passos offers a condition of possibility for an integrative view through the delirium of the non-conformist drunkard. All the other protagonists experience the city only in fragments. The only other occasion of reunion in the novel is also connected to drink: in the chapter *Went to the animals farm*, several of the otherwise scattered characters meet in a bar. Drink as an irrational counterpoint to instrumental thinking is endowed with the integrative powers that objective reason is supposed to provide, and thus reclaimed as a symbol of life.

As suggested earlier, the symbolism of drink in *Manhattan Transfer* differs from that in *USA*. While the former evokes the general cultural heritage of alcohol in Western societies, the latter relates more strongly to the particular US socio-political situation of temperance movements and the Prohibition era. The micrological detail drink in *USA* no longer explores religious notions of objective reason as a possible counterforce to capitalism but explores social radicalism instead. Moreover, by the negative-dialectic practice of explicitly shifting

attention to abstinence, Dos Passos further elaborates the symbolism of drink as a socio-economic criticism of the dominance of capitalist instrumentality.

#### *USA: Abstinence as the Negation of Drink: Life Reduced to Instrumental Rationality*

The drunk non-conformist Stan Emery tries to resist instrumental rationality and fails. What it means to yield can be gathered from Ellen Thatcher's and George Baldwin's life stories. Both are increasingly represented in terms of inertness, e.g., by recurrent doll metaphors: the "Elliedoll" (*MT* 745) becomes "rigid as a porcelain figure" (*MT* 811) and is "getting a hard look" (*MT* 831), while Baldwin has the "wooden face of a marionette" (*MT* 811). On several occasions, Thatcher rejects drink for professional reasons, while Baldwin gives up alcohol altogether. Their tales anticipate a narrative device that is more clearly developed in *USA*: the connection between the negation of drink, submission to instrumental reason and lifelessness. While the narrator of the trilogy tends to invite sympathy with the human weaknesses of most wet characters, for example Mac, Eveline Hutchins, Charlie Anderson or Joe Williams, who suffer in a world that has gone, in Adorno's sense, "wrong" (43), the dry ones, and especially the powerful among them, tend actively to support and further this wrong world for their own benefit. Whether fictional or historical, they are typically depicted as some kind of non-person.<sup>14</sup>

The "Boy Orator," whose "lips had never touched liquor," is thus diminished to his relevant body parts: he is a "silver tongue" and a "big mouth," not a person (*USA* 151 ff.). His name, (William Jennings) Bryan, is mentioned only once, in passing. The biography of Theodore Roosevelt who, "in spite of not drinking," went to "clubs that were his right," questions Roosevelt's integrity by underlining the incongruity between presumptions and reality, his words and his deeds (481). The title of the biography of Frederick Winslow Taylor, who "never smoked tobacco or drank liquor or used tea or coffee," reduces the

engineer to his abstract project: “The American Plan” of scientific management. Henry Ford, on the other hand, who did not “drink, smoke, gamble, or get into debt” because his mother told him not to, is identified with his most famous product, the “Tin Lizzie” (784; 808). Thus, the chapter titles reify the two resourceful engineers. Moreover, the naïve worldviews of these personages seem to insinuate that abstinence and a full understanding of the world are incompatible (note that also Brecht’s Puntila [1940] cannot see half of the world when sober). Without drink, complexity seems to vanish.

Similarly, the fictional character John Ward Moorehouse “was twenty and didn’t drink or smoke and was keeping himself clean for the lovely girl he was going to marry” (*USA* 157–58). At the end of *The Big Money*, he tells his protégé Richard Ellsworth Savage that he “never could get much out of drinking” and “gave it up, even before prohibition” (1181). In the course of the trilogy, the name John Ward Moorehouse contracts to J Ward, then to JW until, in the end, he is only “a name,” with which does not require sympathy: “You can’t feel sorry when a name gets sick” (1199). Again, non-personhood is introduced by non-drinking, reinforced by reductive reference, and substantiated by inhumanity, such as emotional coldness. His wife Gertrude cries: “You’re cold as a fish” (294); and Eveline Hutchins learns that “no matter how much she cuddled against him, she couldn’t get to feel really warm” (627). Moorehouse admits himself that he has “been too busy working . . . [to] ever to develop that side of [his] nature” (623). Even if Moorehouse is lying at that specific moment, he is not a person for whom emotions come first. Rather, he has consciously sacrificed his humanity for the sake of advancement in a capitalist world. Tellingly, the non-person becomes inscrutable to the characters around him: “I wish I knew what he thought about anything. I’ve been working for him for years now and I don’t know whether he’s a genius *or* a stuffed shirt,” Savage muses (1177). Similarly, another character, the journalist

Jerry Burnham, sees in him “nothing but a goddam megaphone” (612). Presumably, there is nothing behind the public JW of the “handsome boyish blue eyes” (254).

Moorehouse and the other major dry characters, Eleanor Stoddard and Janey Williams, undergo a thorough transformation of their potential natural selves as sketched out in their childhood narratives. In their respective youths, Moorehouse wanted to write songs, Stoddard felt strongly about beauty and art, and Janey wanted to have a warm family life.<sup>15</sup> Art and love are two of the three potential ingredients to better the world according to Jimmy Herf in *MT*: “Nobody ever writes any music or starts any revolutions or falls in love” (649). Without a non-conformist, revolutionary attitude, such a project, however, seems doomed. While Emery insists on being, i.e., not behaving, Moorehouse, Stoddard and Janey adapt to perfection. They subjugate what Horkheimer and Adorno term their “natural I[s]” to their Marxian “character mask[s]” (“Introduction”) to such a degree that it eventually disappears in the process. While the wet characters suffer from the incongruity between the required mask and their natural self, the dry characters embody reductionist identity-thinking. Identity-thinking merges the appearance of the object with the object itself. However, as an object (or subject) is always more than its appearance according to Marxist thought, identity-thinking is unable to grasp the complexity of reality, which includes human life. At the end of the novel, a subordinate’s sententious summary of Moorehouse’s life—“not drinking [got] ‘em in the end” (*USA* 1199)—again explicitly establishes the association of not-drinking with not-living.

Dryness is associated with material success at the cost of lifelessness. Cowley describes the materially successful as condemned “to be hollow and enameled, to chirp in thin squeaky voices like insects with the pulp of life sucked out of them and nothing but poison left in their veins” (*USA* 141). They turn themselves into instruments of other self-serving characters higher up the social ladder. While Moorehouse becomes part of the

shaping powers of the world, the Janey narrative illustrates how the life of the lower classes is affected by the dominant worldview of instrumental reason. Public opinion tells Janey not to play with her black friend, so she no longer plays with her. She hears rumors that “very polite and generous” Mr. Dreyfus is a spy and quits her job with him (248). She enjoys the hospitality of the Compton family but thinks of denouncing them for their unpatriotic ideas. She loves her brother, but she refuses him the sociability of drinking together, as she does not “like beer” (297). She eventually deserts him because her colleagues would consider him inadequate. The Janey who once yearned for a family becomes incapable of disinterested personal relationships. She has learned that other people are either useful or harmful, “success or failure,” as Horkheimer and Adorno put it (28), and that a life free of penury has to be paid for by compliance with the dominant social norms. In her own self-concept, Janey has succeeded as Moorehouse’s respected secretary, a position that provides her with material comfort. In fact, however, she has become the perfect appendage to the machine, which has made her renounce all human yearnings. Her emotional failure shows in her “lined oldmaidish face” and her epithet “sour as a pickle” (*USA* 1184; 1197).

However, Moorehouse, Stoddard and Janey, although they are explicitly marked as dry, do drink champagne or wine, the refined drinks of the upper class, on several occasions. This can be understood as another expression of their conformity to social norms and, at the same time, of their lack of personal integrity. When Moorehouse and Stoddard seal their mutually useful friendship with absinthe cocktails, probably because of absinthe’s assumed magical powers, they cannot help but fall back on irrational rituals. Not only is pure rationality a myth, but the clear-cut symbolic divide between dry and wet, rational and irrational, success and failure, lifeless vs. suffering, becomes blurred since drink can also be instrumentalized, as much as everything else. The most obvious examples that seem to question the basic pattern as discussed so far are certainly the characters of E.R. Bingham and



Richard Ellsworth Savage. Bingham is represented as a compelling, self-serving character whose unscrupulous, almost satanic manipulations propel him to the very top. In *The Big Money*, he claims that he only drinks “raw milk” and that “coffee . . . is a deadly poison, as are alcohol, tea and tobacco” so that his rise in society is also marked by explicit abstinence (USA 1187 f.). In contrast to the other dries, Bingham seems to apprehend that abstinence, too (like drink and religion), is not the truth but a way that he might exploit for his own benefit. He can renounce the man-made drug, which may s(t)imulate life but which is not to be confused with the thing itself. Life is also nature, and the natural way of generating life, its productive side, lies in sex. Bingham recognizes this creative, almost God-like power, providing him with a vitality that beats the lifelessness of renunciation of the other dries. Accordingly, he tends to employ his strong sex drive, and subjects others to it (e.g., when he makes Savage entertain him in dubious clubs). By only overtly adapting his mask to society without renouncing his natural self behind it, he covertly adapts society to his desires. Not surprisingly, the mediator Moorehouse looks “small and meek beside him” (1187).

Richard Ellsworth Savage, in contrast, may be considered a socially successful drunk. According to Hemingway’s hierarchy of drunks in *The Sun Also Rises*, Savage certainly counts as a “bad drunk” (119). He opts for success and rises in society, betraying his natural I as the dry characters around him also do. However, like the wet failures in Dos Passos’s novels, he does not succeed in suppressing his self entirely. His critical intelligence keeps a sense of objective truth alive. As a result, he cannot become identical with his character mask, like Moorehouse and Janey, nor is he able to control his mask like Bingham. Drink eases the weight of the mask yet destroys his body. In this, he does not differ much from Charley Anderson, the mechanic-turned-capitalist entrepreneur. Yet through his impending marriage with Bingham’s daughter, which forces him to become abstinent, Savage has decided to sell his soul, rather than lose his biological life. Despite surface entanglements and

combinatory varieties that tend to mask the underlying conflict, the basic issue as symbolized by drink remains operative: the is of human complexity vs. the inhuman ought of instrumental reason in a capitalist society.

The micrological detail drink is part of the overall design of the novels which, in Pizer's words, attempt to "achieve a formal expression of American life" through intellectualized abstraction (17). As a worthwhile "expression of American life" requires complexity, such abstractions cannot mean a simplified, schematic juxtaposition of drink and temperance, or success and failure, merit and blame, individual and society, life and death. Accordingly, the "grim fates" of the wet characters in *MT* and *USA*, as discussed so far, partially result from both individual decisions and exterior factors—the drunken deaths are generally related to the lives that the characters lead (Hutchinson 178). Exterior conditions are perhaps most decisive in the case of Joe Williams. His life as an underdog is characterized throughout by violence, and he eventually dies when someone smashes a bottle on his head in a fight. It is the force and rigidity of the container, not the fluid drink inside that kills him. Just as Stan Emery's and Eveline's lives were neither planned nor purposeful, their deaths are not premeditated suicides. Unable to find a meaningful way to stand up against the instrumental world around them, they are simply overpowered.

Charley Anderson, the gifted engineer who loses his innocence on the way to success, dies due to technical malfunction—his car stalls at the wrong moment—but also by misjudgment. His inebriation prevents him from accurately gauging his car's and the approaching train's powers. Despite Anderson's connections with free-moving powerful airplanes, car vs. train here seems to emphasize a collision between the potential for individual mobility or agency and the irresistible force of a steam engine which, running on a network of fixed rails, will not change its course. At the moment of death, Anderson underestimates the power and destructive speed of the train; in life, he misjudged his

potential for true upward mobility—he did not arrive from a recognized station but only hopped on midway. His destructive alcoholism is thus again an expression of powerlessness: upper-class conventions prevent him from living his self-image of being “only a mechanic” and at the same time deny him full acceptance in their circles, despite his individual ingenuity and financial success (passim). He is too weak to resist the irrationality of the American Dream that presents itself as rational progress.

However, disrupting the schematic either/or pattern, it seems that even successful careers are not merely based on instrumental purposefulness. In an ironical twist, Dos Passos bases Gus McNiel’s and George Baldwin’s careers in *MT* on an accident in a state of inebriety—so failure may, indeed, become a “sublime thing” (634).

#### Drink in the Newsreel and Camera Eye Sections of *USA*

The interplay between its fictional life stories and biographies of historical figures and the trilogy’s other two narrative modes—in the Newsreel and Camera Eye sections—both add further dimensions to the micrological detail drink. The Newsreels are montages of prefabricated text from newspapers, advertisements, poems or song lyrics. As William Solomon notes, they integrate “the novel’s many ‘others’” into the novelistic text in a way that seems freed of semantic and syntactic constraints (183).<sup>16</sup> However, the formal radicalism and ostensible diversity are at odds with the ideological conservatism which they promulgate. The public voice of the Newsreel turns out to be a mouthpiece for the concerns of the social elite. Thus, drink predominantly appears in connection with either the fear of proletarian violence or with the display of wealth. The anti-communist propaganda in, for instance, “LENIN SHOT BY TROTSKY IN DRUNKEN BRAWL” associates drunken dissipation with the fear of assassination, anarchy and revolution, as do several other

clippings which reflect the propaganda by nationalist temperance movements against the lower classes, emphasizing the toxic side-effects of alcoholic excess (*USA* 649).

In contrast, Newsreel 2 foregrounds upper-class splendor, associating drink with an aspirational lifestyle of conspicuous consumption:

the luncheon which was served in the physical laboratory was replete with novel features. A miniature blastfurnace four feet high was on the banquet table and a narrowgauge railroad forty feet long ran round the edge of the table. Instead of molten metal the blastfurnace poured hot punch into small cars on the railroad. (*USA* 28)

Elsewhere, advertisements, such as “three bottles of Electric Bitters made me allright” foreground business interests as the source of capitalist wealth (150). The (ironic) artist’s sigh in the “alcoholic blues” (605 f.) is the only exception to the otherwise limited perspective on the fears, pleasures and aims of the upper classes.

The Newsreels suggest that Dos Passos was consciously simulating contemporaneous techniques of media manipulation, apparently applying the strategies to “manufacture consent” demonstrated in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, PR specialists like Ivy Ledbetter Lee, James Walter Thompson and Edward Bernays professionalized communication to a formerly unknown degree by recognizing the impact of the words that “hammer continually at the eyes and ears of America” (Bernays 113). Another tool of manipulation is, of course, to maintain silence about a subject. Compared to the other narrative modes, the Newsreel rarely refers to drink: out of 68 Newsreels, only 17 mention alcohol. Rather than reflecting the people’s thoughts and concerns, the public voice aims at controlling them.

Moreover, Dos Passos’s Newsreels are highly fragmented, incoherent montages. Linguistic noise swamps meaningful communication with floods of meaningless, non-contextualized data: reports are interrupted by advertisements, pop songs by headlines, and

essential news items appear next to trivial ones. On the one hand, these snippets reflect the superficial and jumpy practice of newspaper reading. On the other hand, Dos Passos demonstrates that the value of news is not primarily defined by content—a judgment that would call for an objective perspective. Rather, value is determined by the single norm of exchange value according to instrumental rationality. The Newsreels’ seemingly arbitrary, formally intoxicating coverage obstructs the individuals’ view of the world and thus their control over it—the ultimate aim of manipulation. The manipulative power of the public voice, again with reference to drink, is underscored in the biography of William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate: Hearst was a man who did not “drink much himself,” but who made “the other boys drunk” (*USA* 1162 f.).

In contrast, the stream-of-consciousness passages of the Camera Eye suggest authenticity through unalloyed subjectivity. One sees what Barbara Foley calls the “artist-hero” (206) struggling to express his manifold experiences and alert perceptions so that the “old words” may regain their meaning, unblemished by public influence, to revive “our storybook democracy” (*USA* 1136). The Camera Eye thus tries to form a counterpoint to the loss of reliable semantic meaning exemplified by the public voice of the Newsreels.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Camera Eye connects a multitude of contexts with drink, seeing it as an integral accompaniment to life and its irrationalities, free of value judgements. The thematic arch ranges from associations with childhood memories and adventure, mourning and frustration, (French) culture and modernity, the appreciation of nature and artistic creativity, business and class conventions, manliness and warfare, (international) camaraderie and protest, prohibition and absurdity, and from happiness, dreariness and the hunger for deep emotions to freedom and democracy.

The symbolism of drink in the Camera Eye passages interlaces several aspects of drink with each other, illustrating the complexity of life and the futility of rigid either/or

distinctions. In Camera Eye 33, for instance, the wine of Southern France is associated with the good life imagined in terms of food, strength, splendor, male camaraderie and freedom:

Nevers (Duma non de dieu) Athos Porthos and d'Artagnan had ordered a bisque at the inn we wound down slowly into red Macon that smelt of winelees and the vintage  
fais ce que voudras saute Bourgignon in the Rhone alley . . . at every stop we drank wine strong as beefsteaks rich as the palace of François Premier . . . boys we're going south to drink the red wine the popes loved best (*USA* 486)

It is, furthermore, informed by history and fiction (“Athos Porthos and d'Artagnan”), inspired by political awareness (“red Macon”) and sensual perceptiveness (“smelt of winelees and the vintage”). Camera Eye 28, in contrast, evokes a very different mood:

when the telegram came that she was dying (the streetcarwheels screeched round the bellglass like all the pencils on all the slates in all the schools) walking around Fresh Pond the smell of puddlewater willowbuds in the raw wind shrieking streetcarwheels rattling on loose trucks through the Boston suburbs grief isn't a uniform and go shock the Booch and drink wine for supper at the Lenox before catching the Federal (*USA* 368–69).

Drink offers consolation in mourning; yet mourning and suffering can turn into rebellion against the wrong world and potentially give life meaning (“go shock the Booch”).

The various concepts, emotions and experiences linked to drink in the Camera Eye convey a wealth of immaterial, non-instrumental qualities of life, including the “blind drunk” boys who are “so so noaccount” (*USA* 227). Only the harm of dryness in Camera Eye 21 is lethal: land and people are “drained out” and do “not know . . . what to do on account of the drought” (229, 227). Under such conditions, a man who does not “have money to spend on liquor” is definitely of not “much account.” A dry country can only be suffered by a “drop . . . now and then,” after which one is able to “put a good face on things” again (228).

The persona of the Camera Eye is open to all these experiences. He records observations and emotions with high sensitivity. In this, he resembles Stan Emery in *MT*, which is formally underscored by the stream-of-consciousness narration. In contrast to Emery, however, the artist-hero of the Camera Eye has found a “field of activity,” where he could become more “actively active” (*MT* 631). His perceptiveness about plurality and, as Foley notes, change leads him towards “acknowledge[ing] his own embeddedness” in society and thereby finding his authentic self (206). Drink is a natural part of such a life, adaptable to its manifold aspects, yet it is best recognized as Kierkegaard’s “way,” not as “truth.” It is decentered to make room for the real issues. In the final Camera Eye, no. 51, authentic selves are called upon to recognize the suffering of the people and to resist unjust powers, even if “we have only words against” (*USA* 1155).

#### The World Beyond Drink

Hutchinson specifically addresses the role of drink among Dos Passos’s leftists in *USA*. The noticeable variety of drinking habits among the activists may at first glance seem puzzling. On the one hand, there is good-natured Mac who often drinks socially, but gets drunk and thus passive when he is torn between his political ideals and his desires for a private family life. There is the bad drunk George H. Barrow, a selfish pseudo-socialist, who, like Savage, consciously betrays but cannot entirely suppress his ideals. Furthermore, there are the near-abstinent unionist Fred Hoff and the communist Don Stevens who want to postpone all earthly pleasures until “after the revolution” (*USA* 96). On the other hand, Eugene Debs, Big Bill Haywood, Thorstein Veblen—Dos Passos’s historical working-class heroes—are curiously unaffected by the question of drink (as is the fictional Mary French).

This plurality of drinking habits may indicate that the left potentially offers more freedom than a capitalist logic of either/or; yet what is striking is that drink is not essential to

those leftists who abide honestly by their socialist ideals, nor to the characters who keep going in a human way, such as the Camera Eye persona in *USA*, or Jimmy Herf and the two French immigrants in *MT*, Emile and Congo Jake, alias Armand Duval. They all may drink from time to time and even get drunk, but they are not ruled by drink. They try to maintain control over their lives without resorting to negative strategies like total abstinence. Yet with the exception of Emile and Congo—who find a satisfactory existence through trading good quality drink and food—life is typically made “bitter” for those who are not altogether subjected to capitalism, as the title of the Veblen biography “The Bitter Drink” suggests (*USA* 845). They fight for an urgently needed greater good, a cause that perhaps is already deplorably lost. They do not allow themselves to be manipulated by an either/or reductionism of abstinence vs. intemperance and become the true heroes in *USA*.

The comparison of Dos Passos’s positive leftists, who are uninterested in drink, with those who drink and those who demand abstinence, keeps underscoring the basic pattern of Dos Passos’s dialectic of drink, and thus the principle underlying the conflict between notions of subjective and objective reason. Those who drink suffer. They yearn for a human, versatile and complex right life which they are unable to lead themselves for various reasons. Those who abstain subscribe to the reductive logic of dominance—be it to the dominance of objective reason by left fundamentalists who venerate a system that calls for “tin saints” (*USA* 96), or to the dominance of instrumental reason by PR moguls promoting capitalism. And those who want to break through strict dichotomies, those who decenter drink and keep working for social change and a right life for everyone, are doomed in this society. In other words, the full range of the diverse drinking patterns in Dos Passos affirms the plurality of lived lives, yet indicates that under current conditions, whatever they choose, all the characters are harmed in one way or another.



In *MT*, politics is less clearly addressed, even though Jimmy Herf at one point laments that nobody “starts any revolutions” anymore, but “all anybody ever does is get drunk and tell smutty stories” (*MT* 649). *MT* seems to evoke the Christian legacy in search for alternatives to reductive instrumental reason, while *USA* foregrounds the socio-political repercussions of a capitalist society and explores the options for a better world through political activism. Whatever the concrete form, Dos Passos seems to advocate a reconciliation between the demands of society and those of nature, including the human nature of the individual. Subjective and objective rationality should form an integral dialectic so that the subjective prevents the objective from losing sight of the individual, and the objective prevents the subjective from losing sight of the common good. Drink may be the wrong answer to the right question, yet the micrological detail drink in Dos Passos’s works highlights one important aspect: it is a reminder of the plurality of life as an unalienable value in itself. Without this fundamental appreciation, there can be no hope of life being right.

## Notes

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, No. 18: “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen,” my translation.
- 2 *USA* consists of the novels *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen-Nineteen* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936), which were first published as a trilogy in 1938; de Voto refers to the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald published in 1922.
- 3 See Crowley; Lerner; Room; Rohrer; Rosenzweig.
- 4 See Davenport-Hines; Berridge; Levine.

- 5 See Crowley; Lerner; Rosenzweig.
- 6 See Kingsdale; Lerner; Rosenzweig.
- 7 See Lerner; McGuirr; Mennell.
- 8 See Buell; Clark; Pizer.
- 9 See Rang; Rost; Smith.
- 10 In the following, the terms “reason” and “rationality” will be used interchangeably as the philosophers use both terms for very similar concepts.
- 11 In the following, the terms “subjective” and “instrumental” will be used interchangeably as the philosophers use both terms for very similar concepts.
- 12 See Marx; Horkheimer and Adorno; Sewell.
- 13 See also Pizer 28.
- 14 The non-personhood of teetotalers is, of course, a common topos in American modernist fiction, as is a classification among drunks, e.g., in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): “Mike was a bad drunk. Brett was a good drunk. Bill was a good drunk. Cohn was never drunk” (119). For the general attitude of the Lost Generation towards alcohol see especially Crowley, but also Lerner, and Room.
- 15 Note the allusion to the age-old link between poetry and drink here; Horace, for instance, already observed: “No poetry could ever live long or delight us / That water-drinkers pen” (Epistles I, xix, 2-3).
- 16 Not infrequently, this linguistic freedom creates humoristic effects that chime with Solomon’s more recent notion of “Slapstick Modernism” as developed in *Slapstick Modernism*.
- 17 Solomon, in contrast, interprets the fragmentation of the Newsreels as a counterpoint to the

illusionary narrative linearity and apparent directness of self-expression in the Camera Eye, as it uses conventional techniques of the culture industry to produce conformity. Hence, according to Solomon, the Camera Eye approach to narration needs to be overcome by Newsreel fragmentation and freedom from syntactical and semantic conventions (see 198ff.). See also Foley; Isernhagen; Pizer.

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