

## TALKING ABOUT A REVOLUTION IN MANHATTAN TRANSFER

Ana M.<sup>3</sup> MANZANAS CALVO

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

*Dont' you know  
They are talking about a revolution  
It sounds like a whisper...*

Tracy Chapman<sup>1</sup>

*«A fellow from Capua got up to speck [...]. He said that there would be no more force when after the revolution nobody lived off another's man work... police, governments, armies, presidents, kings... all that is force. Force is not real; it is illusion».*

Dos Passos, «Metropolis»<sup>2</sup>

It is ironic that almost at the outset of *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos' characters are already «talking about a revolution» to which naive characters (Marco, Emile, Congo and Bud) arrive to, as if drawn by the vision of the «promised land», which does not provide its fruits and its social and human rights as magnanimously as expected.

It is within the limits of the dream and the vision of the generous land that the characters, who represent a wide range of individuals of American society, project their illusions to bring about a change in their lives. They expect to materialize their dream in a twist of fate, a propitious turn on the wheel of Fortune.

Like so many anonymous immigrants, deportees, simple workers or mere idealists, Marco, Congo, Emile, Bud, Ed Thatcher, his daughter Ellen, and Jim Herf struggle throughout the book to enact their personal chimeras, and effect their desired «transfers», their own interpretations of the word «revolution». The purpose of this paper is to examine the trajectory of Dos Passos' characters, their illusions and disillusion, their rise and fall on the wheel of Fortune; and to peruse their failure and success in making a favourable «transfer» in their lives.

<sup>1</sup> TRACY CHAPMAN, *Talking 'bout a Revolution*, an album recorded in California in 1988.

<sup>2</sup> JOHN DOS PASSOS, *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976) All quotes are hereafter taken from this edition.

The envisionings of «change» in the lives of Dos Passos' characters vary greatly according to the social status of each individual; while Ed Thatcher wishes that his illusion «might happen some day», so that he can run his own company, «Edward C. Thatcher and Co., Certified Accountants» (62), Bud roams the streets of Broadway only to hear that «Aint no good place to look for a good job...» (24).

As Dos Passos' dramatis personae long for the dream, they speculate on the different ways to make it material, and once more, the different strategies to bring it about change substantially according to the social position of the speaker.

Ed Thatcher holds high expectations for the saving account he is about to open for Ellen, his newborn daughter; if he deposits ten dollars a week, «in ten years without the interest that would come to more than five thousand dollars» (12). For Thatcher, the continuous increase in quantity produces a change in quality (and by implication, in social status); and he despises the barman's advice: «Get a close tip and take a chance, that's the only system» (9), which Thatcher sums up as «nothing but gambling» (9). The desired change may lie in the hands of time, which will double the value of the land. One just has to listen to his opportunity knocking on his door.

For the anonymous newcomers to «the center of things» (who Dos Passos individualizes in the character of Bud), their longing for a «transfer» withers as they realize the city transforms them into homeless, unemployed, unnamed bums. Fortune, like an unconscious blind wheel, brings them down to the lowest status of society and discards them as useless (see Bud jumping off the bridge p. 125).

It is worth noting that the aliens are the ones who bring revolutionary winds to the novel, and the ones who are aware of their status as working class. Marco's speech shows his awakening to social and political matters, and his intention to communicate it to his fellow workers in the form of a revolutionary password: «wake up» (38). He dreams with the ideal society which will come when «working people awake from slavery»:

You will walk out in the street and the police will run away, you will go into a bank and there will be money poured out on the floor and you won't stoop to pick it up, no more good... [...] (38).

Marco's idea of «change» is then collective and economic. The gesture of not picking up the money lying in the bank is a sharp contrast with the money hunger of the characters who desperately hold on to the propitious motion of the wheel of fortune. For him, Manhattan is a potential field for the development and transmission of his message. No matter how passionate Marco's words sound, they do not have the power to «convert» his listeners, Emile and Congo.

Emile, feeling disdained by a refined red-haired girl at the restaurant he was working in, automatically wishes they belonged to the same status:

«[the girl] wont look at me because I am a waiter» (30), and almost unconsciously enters the same alienating tendency of going up the social ladder: «When I make some money I'll show'em» (30).

Congo, if not immediately affected by Marco's appeal (his words in that scene are «That's the only life,... Get drunk and raise cain...» [391]), he presents a different attitude when he talks about the motives of the First World War: «You know why they have this here war... So that working men all over wont make big revolution... Too busy fighting» (227). His theory is confirmed in Joe O'Keefe's exhortation when he pictures the veterans «homecoming»:

We fought for them, didnt we [...]. And now when we come back we get the dirty end of the stick. No jobs... Our girls have gone and married other fellows... Treat us like a bunch or dirty bums and loafers [...] (184).

These deceived working and fighting men observe how their expectations for a «transfer» in their destinies are once more frustrated in their homeland. Their revolutionary messages become silenced as the red hunt, the side effect of the war, ships away supporters and sympathizers of the revolutionary cause: «It's the Communists the Department of Justice is having deported... Deportees... Reds» (289) (see also 263).

Even if Congo is aware of the governmental manipulation behind the war, and has assimilated the revolutionary message, he is the only character in the book who is dole to weigh his ambition against his chances and strike a successful balance. He starts by appearing as a «swell», respected barkeeper until he makes his debut as «the best bootleggair in New York» (300). Even if he gets «nailed» towards the end of the book and he has to go to prison (382), he has finally «made it», he has accomplished his longed for «transfer» by changing his nickname to his more refined original name «Armand Duval», and by marrying a «very pretty» woman with «very much long hair» (383). He is now in a position to employ the cook who twenty years ago used to say to him: «Armand you never make a success, too lazy, run after leetle girls too much...» (383).

However precarious and faulty Congo's success is, it is more substantial and meaningful than the two most dazzling successes in the book: Ellen Thatcher and Baldwin's. After winning McNiel's case, Baldwin is unexpectedly launched into a successful career as a lawyer. The case brought him to the «notice of various people down town» (219), and marks his promotion in law-practicing. He thus climbs the steps of an upper social status and marries into professional and social prestige. However impeccable his «rise» appears, Baldwin has lost his youthful vitality; his marital arguments with his wife (183) seem only a pantomime, an artificial dialogue compared with the intensity and the anxiety of his youthful affair with Nelly McNiel. It is not surprising, then, that as he confesses to Ellen, his apparently blooming life shelters emptiness and hollowness (220). Further, he

questions the mere meaning of the word «success»: «Oh success... success... what does it mean?» (220). His rise in his career leaves him at a stand-still point. There is no way to be successful because promotion and success have lost all their challenge:

But it is not fun anymore. All I do is sit in the office and let the young fellows do the work. My future is all cut out for me. I suppose I could get solemn and pompous and practice some little private vices... but there is more in me than that. (220)

His law practice degrades into the practice of little vices. His desired «transfer» in life becomes insubstantial and gratuitous.

The same feeling of futility permeates Ellen's ascent in the stage world. Rescued from the chorus by John Oglethrope, she started by making «a kind of a hit in Peach Blossoms» (134). Her marriage with Oglethrope guarantees her future as a young, beautiful talented actress. Nevertheless John's homosexual tendencies, and the later desertion of her lover, Stan, make her feel the first taste of futility in the words she had so much coveted: «marriage, success, love, they are just words» (267) she confesses to Larry.

Fortune spins blindly the luck of the characters; they are strung to the wheel and assume their destiny either to the bottom or the top of the social ladder. But what is the nature of this blind determination?

It is precisely a character who has tasted both ends (success and failure) that theorizes on the principle which regulates human rise or fall. From his position as Wall Street Wizard, Jose Harland's flourishing fate changes to that of a street bum who narrates the story of his «enchanted» necktie (147) in drunken spasms. His fall into the pitch of society allows him to formulate a clairvoyant remark about the intrusion of fortune in human lives. For Harland, the rise or the fall is «just another illustration of the peculiar predominance of luck» (147). It is this almost «sinister» absence or the predominance or luck-chance-fortune that regulates (or rather disrupts) «human affairs» (146).

Is it all then left up to this blind force? Does the character have any say in his destiny? Is it possible to spin one's fortune? Interestingly, it is Jim Harf, a narrator, an observer of reality and a writer of semi-fiction who attempts to have some intervention in the telling of his story and in his life.

Since the somehow ominous talk with Uncle Jeff, in which apparently his future is all laid out before his eyes, Jim struggles to twist and «untwist» his own destiny. Subtly and slightly admonished for his supposedly insufficient «responsibility about money matters» and his lack of enthusiasm about earning his own living, Jim accepts Uncle Jeff's offer to work in his office for the summer. This summer job was intended to be an initiation into the business world and thus, a solid basis for his future career. By making his way «up through the firm» (119), Jim would only have to hold

on tight (with responsibility and enthusiasm) to the ascending motion of the wheel of fortune until he reached the peak of success. But he is not like that, he consciously or unconsciously strives to shape his own destiny by going to Europe with the Red Cross and back home, taking a job with a newspaper. His job as a reporter gives him an opportunity to observe and take in others' successes and failures. By reporting on them he acts as the integrating force, the one who harmonizes into a review or an article the pulse of bootleggers, deportees and abuses of power.

This position of detachment from current reality that give Jim the appearance of a timeless figure, an «old fossil» (178). In the other characters' eyes he is a mind of the past, «a pacifist and a I.W.W. agitador» (341). Jim himself observes how his job as a reporter rather shelters him from «the drama of life» (320), and makes him a «parasite» on reality. However, he feels there is still enough energy in him to manipulate his life and toy with his chances. «Throwing up» his job is then the beginning of another twist, another conscious «transfer» in his life. He even writes an imaginary final article celebrating his condition of being a deportee (353), a defector from an imposed reality. The idea of setting off from the land of opportunity in search of another land (Ellis Island, may be?), takes root in him:

I must be kinder simple minded [...] but these boats coquetting in front of Vesuvius always make me feel like getting a move somewhere... I think I'll be getting along out of here in a couple of weeks. (359)

Thus tickled by the dream, Jim reverses the trip of all the anonymous faces that at the beginning of the book converged to New York. Like them, he is curious about new worlds since the old one, (New York) has already exhausted itself. For him, this New York is not new anymore: «I just found there was nothing in it for me» (360). Even if he does not exactly know what he wants, like the rest of his «peewee generation» (360), his «not knowing» is positive: «I'm beginning to learn a few of the things I don't want»; and he can change his life consequence: «At least I'm beginning to have the nerve to admit to myself how much I dislike all the things I don't want». (360)

The idea of embarking himself on a rather anachronic, exotic trip makes him look like a curiosity almost a «freck» of the times. Martin describes in a fluid, clairvoyant speech what Jim has become:

He has no money, he has no pretty wife, no good conversation, no tips on the stock market. He is a useless fardel on society... The artist is a fardel. (361)

If he has lost all the valuable ostensible acquisitions of his life, where is left for him to go, and to pursue what?

Dos Passos gives the reader an opportunity to «look into the black pit» (361) of Jim's soul by letting the character voice the stream of consciousness

pulsing in his search: «Pursuit of happiness, unalienable pursuit... right to life and liberty...» (365). His quest has no particular destination, it takes hold of him like a dream, and feeds on his vital, anxious desire to live (see conversation with Congo p. 384).

By turning against the «peewee», dull tendencies of his time and making his own «transfer» away from Manhattan, Jim becomes the individual, potential hero of the novel<sup>3</sup>. His out-dated pursuit is parallel to the «golden legend of the man who would wear a straw hat out of season»(401) and gets «brained» for it. Indeed, Jim admits, if he were to start a religion, «he [the man] would be made a saint» (401). Like this «Unknown Soldier», Jim has internalized the two options awaiting him: «Give me liberty [...] or give me death». (402)

Although his decision has made itself audible since the moment he left his job, his «liberty» takes him now to await and roam around the ferry as if he finally could caress the proximity of his dream. His past and future dissolve in the uncertainty and possibility of the fog. His «transfer» is about to materialize, away from the center of things, as «sunrise finds him walking along a cement road» (404). He even tries to manipulate his luck by leaving «three cents for good luck, or bad for that matter» (404). Nothing is predisposed nor arranged; when the truck driver asks him «how fur» he is going, his answer does not limit himself in his pursuit: «I dunno... Pretty for». (404)

Out of all the characters in the book Jim is the only one who accomplishes a conscious revolutionary «transfer». Together with the man who would wear a straw hat, he is the individual hero, the saint in a personal religion. His achievement consists in his heroic detachment from the blind wheel of fortune, and on the same line, from the tyranny of having his story told in snapshots. At the end of the book, Jim is allowed to go «pretty for», as if his life abandoned the intrusion of fiction and were allowed to enter the continuum of life.

---

<sup>3</sup> LINDA W. WAGNER, «The End of the Search», *Dos Passos: Artist as American* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979) Wagner explains that for Dos Passos «only true heroism was individual» p. 166.