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The Camera's I: The Problem of Vision in Dos Passos' U.S.A. Trilogy

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The Camera's I: The Problem of Vision in Dos Passos' U.S.A. Trilogy

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

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in Candidacy for the Degree of

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in

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Abstract

This paper argues for a revised understanding of privilege and subjectivity within the Camera Eye segments of the *U. S. A.* trilogy. Departing from the typical focuses on biographical accuracy and film theory in the Camera Eyes, this paper uses close reading and analysis to make sense of Dos Passos's language of vision and its connection to class status. The narrator of the Camera Eye, rather than moving from comfortable privilege to rejection of it through radical politics, occupies a position of separation and alienation throughout the trilogy. The early Camera Eyes elucidate the imperfect techniques used to create a privileged way of seeing the world; later Camera Eyes explore unsuccessful attempts to escape the "bellglass" of privilege. In the end, the narrator admits his incorporation of a privileged lens and turns to an ethics of doubt. The paper closes with a call for more clear-eyed study of Dos Passos.

The Camera's I: The Problem of Vision in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* Trilogy

John Dos Passos was born into a family of wealth and privilege and received a Harvard education. He also became an important figure of the Left, reporting and protesting the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, covering workers' strikes, writing with the New Playwrights, and exposing the struggles of the average American in works such as his *U.S.A.* trilogy. Dos Passos was never entirely comfortable, however, with either his position of privilege or his later position in the official left. As he aged, his politics became markedly more conservative, described by Juan Suarez as a "nostalgic Jeffersonianism" (63). Dos Passos wrote about his psychopolitical struggles in his 1968 autobiography *The Best Times*. In a letter to his pacifist college friend Arthur McComb, sent while he was at the Army camp in Allentown, PA, Dos Passos explained his reason for joining the army: "I've always wanted to divest myself of class and the moneyed background—the army seemed the best way. From the bottom, thought I, one can see clear" (*Best Times* 73). Seth Moglen, describing Dos Passos's early radical bohemianism in his book *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism*, says, "He derided his elite education as 'nothing but a wall that keeps [people] from seeing the world'" (96). Dos Passos's emphasis on sight, on attempting to shift one's position to "see clear" or to remove the "wall" that blocks one's vision, is essential when considering the "impressionistic autobiography" (Ludington 443) of the "Camera Eye" sections of the *U.S.A.* trilogy.

Each novel of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy (the first volume of which was published in 1930) is composed of four alternating modes: several traditional character-centered narratives; Newsreel segments which juxtapose and squish together newspaper

headlines, reports, overheard speech, popular songs, and images and dialogue from newsreels; short prose-poem biographies of figures such as Eugene Debs, Thomas Edison, Teddy Roosevelt, Isadora Duncan and the Unknown Soldier; and the Camera Eyes—semi-autobiographical, experimental pieces that trace the development from childhood to adulthood of a young man of the upper class. The Camera Eyes cover quite a lot of ground, including the narrator’s early memories of his father and mother, his time at various schools, his first sexual experience, the death of his parents, his involvement in the First World War, and his later work protesting the execution of Saccho and Vanzetti.

In his 1969 *Paris Review* interview, Dos Passos claimed he included the Camera Eye as a part of his larger attempt throughout the trilogy to achieve “total objectivity.”

Discussing his plan for *U.S.A.*, he says,

By that time I was really taken with the idea of montage. I had tried it out in *Manhattan Transfer*—using pieces of popular songs. By the time it evolved into such compartments as the camera eye of the *U.S.A.* trilogy it served a useful function—which in that case was to distill my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described. My hope was to achieve the objective approach of a Fielding, or a Flaubert, particularly as one sees it in Flaubert’s letters, which are remarkable. In the biographies, in the newsreels, and even the narrative, I aimed at a total objectivity by giving conflicting views—using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier. (17)

He states afterward that he no longer used the Camera Eye form as he was now “more in control” of his personal responses (17). Both the text of the trilogy and Dos Passos’s statement reveal a considerable anxiety about the subjective, an anxiety visible throughout the *Paris Review* interview. Dos Passos consistently places himself somewhere between objective observer and personal memoirist, historian and novelist, political thinker and fiction writer (4, 7, 16); his “contemporary chronicles” challenge genre boundaries (8). As a result, the interview focuses more on his role as an “observer”

than a writer (4). Of course, he writes his observations down, but it is the act of observing itself that receives the most attention (8). Dos Passos discusses even his war experiences in terms of observation and objectivity; his position in the ambulance service gave him a “more objective point of view” than those who fought in the trenches (5).

Dos Passos’s claim about the Camera Eye as a distillation or “safety valve” for his subjectivity is, however, a little disingenuous. As Donald Pizer explains, “the Camera Eye . . . is intimately related in its themes to those of the trilogy as a whole” (418). As a result, there exists a blurring between the Camera Eye and the character narratives; many of the events described in the Camera Eye are repeated or echoed in the stories of the characters. Also, Richard Ellsworth Savage, one of the characters introduced in *1919*, experiences the war in a way very similar to Dos Passos himself. The oddest quality of the Camera Eye, however, is that it often doesn’t seem subjective at all.¹ Many of the Camera Eye segments read as detached recordings of the world around the narrator. In fact, given the title of these segments and Dos Passos’s admitted experimentation with montage, it is easy to connect this representational mode to what is often thought of as the impersonal and detached eye of a camera. David Sanders, the interviewer for the *Paris Review* discussion, fittingly notes this problem in his introduction to Dos Passos: “[D]espite even the autobiographical thread in his work, he has been a writer of unusual detachment” (1). It is this tension which makes the Camera Eye (and all of Dos Passos’s oeuvre) so intriguing and challenging for the literary critic: how can the most autobiographical, supposedly highly subjective, elements of the text also be some of the most objective and distanced?

¹ Nor do the biographies and narrative sections seem particularly objective.

The Camera Eye series has sparked a variety of critical response. As Stephen Hock says, “None of the four modes of writing in U.S.A.—biography, narrative, Newsreel, and Camera Eye—has generated as much critical confusion, disagreement, and outright derision as the Camera Eye” (20). Scholarship on the Camera Eye has developed in two directions, both heavily dependent on outside historical sources. The first type of criticism, begun during the 1970s with the publications of Dos Passos’s autobiography *The Best Times*, his journals and letters, uses these biographical materials to match (or question the difference between) events in Dos Passos’s life and events in the Camera Eye.² The other strain of criticism, picking up on Dos Passos’s mention of montage, interprets the style of the Camera Eye using the film theories of D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Andre Bazin, or the left documentary filmmakers of the 1930s. But few scholars have focused on the meaning developed through the combination of content and form in the Camera Eye.

Those critics who discuss the meaning of the Camera Eye see a straightforward development of the narrator, from a sheltered, sensitive child to an adult who has broken from his family and committed himself to radical causes. To these critics, much of the Camera Eye series functions as a bildungsroman. Suarez refers to it as a “‘novel of education’ of sorts” (61), the story of the education in the real world of a privileged man. Townsend Ludington, in 1977, claimed “by the final Camera Eye . . . he has found an identity . . . we see Dos Passos coming of age as a public man, committed to the cause of the average person, if not to the rigid doctrines of the Communist Party” (445-6). While some Dos Passos scholars such as Donald Pizer agree with the hopefulness of the ending, others such as Westerhoven and Moglen have seen the final “we have only words

² For examples of this type of criticism, see Westerhoven and Ludington.

against” (*BM* 420) as a mark of “despair” (Westerhoven 364), a come-down after the hopefulness and solidarity in response to the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. Much of the critical discussion of the Camera Eye series has thus focused on the entries in *The Big Money* and the debate about the ending’s relative hopefulness or negativity, often reading backward in response to the conservatism of Dos Passos’s later years.

It is clear that, in order to think thoroughly about the final lines and the series as a whole, we must look more carefully at this particular mode, beyond biographical studies or surface-level attentions to its form. It is also time to re-write the linear progression of the narrator’s development to take into account the early ambivalence he feels about his position of privilege. Taking inspiration from the work of Moglen and, to a certain extent, Pizer, I will take a few first steps in this paper toward this larger, shared critical effort. Moglen’s chapter on the Camera Eye in *Mourning Modernity* is helpful for its model of a close reading of the Camera Eyes and the brief sketch of the progression of the series he gives as context for his close reading of the final two Camera Eye. For Moglen, the Camera Eye of *The 42nd Parallel* “subtly render the intimate processes by which a bourgeois white male subjectivity is formed” (220); it is the war experience of 1919 that “make[s] a mockery of the genteel social vision that he has internalized,” leading in the final novel to increased frustrations “with the painful contradictions of his own personality” (221). My understanding of the progression of the Camera Eye is quite similar to Moglen’s, but what I want to emphasize here is that the narrator of the Camera Eye is *never* at ease in the privileged position of his youth, and that much of the story of the Camera Eye is about the narrator’s repeated attempts to fully escape the “genteel social vision” that filters how he sees the world.

Through attention to Dos Passos's language of vision—in the Camera Eye and in his personal writing—and his repeatedly stated desire for objectivity we can better grasp the personal development demonstrated by the Camera Eye. The Camera Eye ask us to think explicitly about observation: what does it mean to be an observer? How are our observations shaped? Throughout the trilogy, the narrator of the Camera Eye wrestles with his own position of privilege, a position that alienates him from the outside world, even as he attempts to develop, and act on, a consciousness of political injustice. The Camera Eye, for Dos Passos, is *not* an objective way of seeing, but a lens, shaped in his childhood, that distorts his vision of the world around him. Dos Passos's interest in a visual metaphor for the struggle with class privilege is not limited to the title of the Camera Eye series. Throughout the trilogy's fifty-one Camera Eye, Dos Passos emphasizes how the narrator is seeing. The early Camera Eye of the *42nd Parallel* give a detailed account of the pressures a privileged background exerts to shape a young mind as well as the slight opportunities for the young man to escape (often unintentionally) complete incorporation into that privilege. The series continues in *1919* with an example of how easy it is to misidentify the exact constraints of privilege, and *The Big Money* finally shows an acknowledgement of how deeply and permanently one's vision is influenced, despite one's attempts to move beyond the lens imposed by one's upbringing. Dos Passos was aware, long before contemporary theory, of how the class position of one's birth creates a permanent distortion of sight that we must acknowledge and work within.

In this paper, I will do two things. First, I would like to focus on a few of the key Camera Eye entries from the *42nd Parallel* to unpack how Dos Passos imagines the

formation of a privileged way of seeing and the difficult creation of a more socially-conscious response to that early perspective. Second, I want to trace quickly through the rest of the trilogy his response to his past and his ideas of the possible futures available to him. I will demonstrate how focusing on Dos Passos's attempts to describe and make present the lens of privilege can change the way we perceive and study the Camera Eye.

Fear and the *The 42nd Parallel*—developing the lens

The opening Camera Eye begins with what appears to be the whimsical musing of a precocious child: “when you walk along the street you have to step carefully always on the cobbles so as not to step on the bright anxious grassblades” (42P 3). As a child, the narrator³ sees beauty in the “bright anxious grassblades,” but also understands that their beauty is fragile and delicate, that the grassblades have reason to be “anxious.” The grassblades can be destroyed so easily if one is not careful and precise. The type of precision needed to avoid stepping on the grassblades can be gained through cooperation with an adult figure: “easier if you hold Mother’s hand and hang on it that way you can kick up your toes.” The child recognizes that he needs support and aid himself, if he is to avoid “tread[ing]” on the grass. The child is not concerned for the grassblades solely because of their beauty. He describes them as “green tongues.” These tongues have something to say; to the child, the grassblades have a voice that can be crushed or destroyed.

³ Although the Camera Eyes *are* heavily autobiographical—Dos Passos’s attempt to contain the subjective—I am choosing throughout not to refer to the speaker as Dos Passos himself, using instead terms such as “the narrator,” “the speaker,” “the child,” “the young man,” “the Camera Eye’s consciousness,” etc. In this way, I hope to avoid the biographical focus that has often narrowed critical possibilities and to keep a distance between Dos Passos and the character that arises from the form of the Camera Eyes themselves (“I,” “my,” etc. is rarely used).

The child makes his reflection on the grassblades in a moment of considerable anxiety. He and his mother are being followed by “people [who] are so angry and follow[ing] us shaking their fists they’re throwing stones grownup people throwing stones.” The child’s concern for the grass is not only a projection of the child’s own fear and anxiety—will he, too, be trampled?—although this is certainly part of it. The child also wonders if the reason he and his mother are being chased is *because* they have crushed the grass; he says, “maybe that’s why those people are so angry and follow us.” The child doesn’t understand that the people are chasing them as a result of larger geopolitical dynamics. The child internalizes the blame, thinking of what he might have done to have caused the “grownup people” to behave in what the child perceives to be a distinctly non-grownup way (throwing stones, chasing his mother and him).

This is a fascinating way to begin an autobiographical series and to represent the formation of a particular privileged subjectivity. The first memory of the child that we have access to is one in which, as a result of larger societal forces (in this case, the Boer war), the child is anxious and fearful. The Camera Eye shows that children are deeply affected by events of the world; a war on the other side of the globe can have a tremendous impact on a young child’s life. (This theme is repeated through the first volume, as in Camera Eye 6 when a group of school children almost get in a fight based on who each child’s parent is voting for.) Yet, even within this anxiety, the child’s attention is drawn to the beautiful grassblades. As he runs, he tries to avoid the “poor trodden grassblades” that his mother with “her pointed toes sticking out sharp” has crushed. The Camera Eye thus provokes us to ask how children develop a sense of injustice, the harm one can do to the helpless in the surrounding world. Is a sense of the

beauty and fragility of the natural world inherent in a young child? Or does this image of the natural world come as a result of a growing sense of one's own strength and power: a child cannot recognize how fragile or temporary a bright green grassblade can be until the child has trodden on it ("the poor hurt green tongues shrink under your feet")? Or, perhaps, it is the attempt to construct meaning about events beyond the scope of the child's understanding that develops a sense of responsibility to others that will later mature into political consciousness; it is the child's possible wrongdoing—treading on the grassblades—that provokes the ire of the adults. No matter which particular interpretation (or combination of the three) is emphasized, what this passage says, and what other moments in the trilogy support, is that these moments of anxiety and fear are instrumental in a child being able to sympathize and understand the fears and anxieties of others, even if those others are, in this case, just grassblades. Early on the child forms through fear an ethical mindset which demands care and precision in response to one's surroundings.

Yet because this ethical behavior is a response of fear, its relationship to *privilege* becomes complicated. The narrator's multilayered concern about trampling the grassblades forces him to walk only on the cobblestones. This very feeling—there is only one possible, narrow and difficult path on which one can safely walk without injuring others—can contribute to regulating behavior or limiting one's options. Sensitivity and concern about the surrounding world, rather than spurring one to action, can actually cause someone to remain in positions of privilege and safety, where the link remains blurry or unseen between one's privileged behavior and the intentional or unintentional harm of others. That is, a sympathetic individual may be so deeply affected and paralyzed by the seemingly inescapable pain his/her actions could cause another that it becomes

easiest for that individual to hide among one of the greatest privileges of the privileged: ignorance. Additionally, even though the child desires not to tread on the grassblades, he must. Treading on grassblades is not the central problem, but that “walking fast you have to tread on *too many* grassblades” (emphasis mine). Already there is an acceptance of the necessary destruction of outward things that accompanies living.

Yet, while this fear is foundational to a troubled ethical sensibility, one which can easily reinforce privilege as much as it offer an escape to it, the fear and anxiety of this first Camera Eye also positions the child at an early age as an outsider: an outsider to an understanding of the adult world, a visitor in a foreign land, a listener to a hodgepodge of unfamiliar languages (3-4). In this way, the Camera Eye sets the tone for the development of this particular subjectivity, a combination of two forces that continues throughout the series: on the one hand, fear bonds the child to his privilege (his nationality, his mother, his right to trample on the grassblades to protect himself), yet it is fear that also allows him access to a world outside that privilege, that enables him to sympathize with the grassblades. The boy’s uncomfortable feelings will give him a small sliver of common ground with others who are not at home in his social world and will mobilize him to search for a place and mode of living which provides him with the sense of comfort he’s lacking. As we will see, the Camera Eye makes a powerful argument that it is easier to break with a privileged position if one never really felt as if one belonged to it in the first place, simply because of the desire to belong and the lack of strong bonds of loyalty.

The next Camera Eye to develop this theme with increased complexity is CE 11, but it is worth taking a few moments to sketch highlights of the Camera Eyes between the two. The sixth to eighth Camera Eye illustrate how children, picking up on the behavior

and attitudes of adults, enforce hegemony (45, 64). Camera Eye 7 reinforces the alienation felt by the young boy, locked “between two worlds” (Pizer 421). He is aware of the mills looming over the ice pond where the boys skate, and he knows he is not one of the “bonhunk and polak kids” (64). However, his poor skating keeps him from fitting in with the “clean young American Rover Boys” (64). The eighth Camera Eye demonstrates the role institutions play in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of children, by the absence of institutional authority as much as its presence (68). In a brief two paragraphs, the narrator relates his reluctant involvement in a fight which presumably takes place at a boarding school. The other boys pressure the narrator into a fight with the Kid, marking his foreignness by calling him “Frenchie” and threatening him with the label “girlboy” if he refuses. The narrator dominates early in the fight, provoking the rest of the boys to all gang up on him. The authorities at the school don’t seem to punish the children who instigated the fight. They may not even be aware of it; we do not hear any information about them investigating what must have been bruises and other hurts on the bodies of the Kid and Frenchie. Instead, the unclear ending, “the bell rang for lights and everybody ran to their rooms . . . Hoppy was tiptoeing round the hall and caught Gummer trying to get back to his room and he got his” (68), suggests that the only rule that is strictly enforced is the children’s bedtime. The attitudes of the children who spark the fight are left unchallenged; the lack of aid and respect given to the narrator teaches him that he cannot expect to receive help from the school, reinforcing his discomfort in the world he supposedly belongs.

The role of institutions in shaping the mind of children continues in the eleventh Camera Eye (86). Like the eighth Camera Eye, the silences of those in authority, what the

institutional leadership refuses to acknowledge, have the greatest impact on the development of the young narrator. In this *Camera Eye*, the Pennypackers, representing the power of family names and of wealth (and, of course, a name that speaks of their wealth), and the Presbyterian church (Mr. Pennypacker “was a deacon in the church”) act as institutions of forgetting. The space of the church attempts to expel any inappropriate or problematic knowledge that could be introduced to the child; however, the institution is porous. The child, gazing through the windows, can sense a different narrative than that provided by the church rituals, even if his vision (looking out from inside) remains distorted.

This *Camera Eye* describes a Pennsylvania church service attended by the school-age child. Throughout the service he is haunted by two questions: “who were the Molly Maguires?”⁴ (repeated five times) and will he be struck by lightning (or punished in some other way) for partaking of communion “not believing or baptized or Presbyterian?”⁵ Neither question is answered. The boy cannot get the information he needs because “it was too late you couldn’t talk in church.” When he asks about communion, “all eyes looked shut up when I started to whisper to Con.” The community exerts pressure on the child in the way the congregation looks—or refuses to look—at him, “all eyes looked shut up.” The eyes are sending a look, a glance, which tells him to stop asking questions, to “shut up.” Yet the eyes looking “shut up” also means that the eyes are closed, as if they

⁴ Westerhoven provides basic information about the Molly Maguires: “The Molly Maguires were militant miners from northern Pennsylvania, who caused labor unrest in the northern counties between 1862 and 1876” (346).

⁵ There is another implied question about the burgeoning sexuality of the young boy. Donald Pizer notes, “In juxtaposed *Camera Eye* sequences, he sits in a well-to-do suburban Pennsylvania church listening to girls singing ‘chilly shrill soprano’ in the choir and watching them in their ‘best hats and pretty pink green blue yellow dresses’ (42*P*, p. 108). Then in the *Camera Eye* which follows, he has his first sexual experience, as Jeanne, the young family maid from the Jura, takes him into her bed one night” (421-22). The role of the young girls in *Camera Eye* 11 deserves further critical study, along with the position of women throughout the series.

are refusing to see both the child's questions and the answers to them. The community controls the space of the church, to the extent that the boy cannot get the answers to his questions, cannot completely verbalize them in the first place, and even has his internal thoughts interrupted.⁶

The control and pressure of the church community is evident throughout the rituals involved in worship. A naming/greeting ritual accompanies entrance into and exit from the space of the church: "everybody was greeted when they went into church" and "everybody was filing out and being greeted as they went out." This greeting is a form of acknowledgement and recognition, but it is also a means of control—determining who is allowed in and who is not, who is regularly attending and who is not. The restriction continues as the boy and the Pennypackers "all filed into the pew." "Filed" implies the same rote, controlled behavior as the entrance in and out of the church. Additionally, standards of behavior are imposed beyond the previously-mentioned silence and movement. There is a particular way in which to take the communion: "you *had to* gulp the bread and put your handkerchief over your mouth and *look holy*" (emphasis mine). Throughout the Camera Eye it is made clear that attendees to the worship service are looked at and as a result must control their appearance.

The awareness of being looked at is part of why the boy gets that "itchy in the back of my neck" feeling when eating the communion. He is being forced to participate in a ritual that he doesn't believe in and doesn't really understand. All he understands is that he does not belong, and if you participate in something in which you don't belong, you could be punished, "struck by lightning," implying, of course, that God is also

⁶ "Con" could be a nickname, but given its position at the end of the paragraph, the spatial break makes an argument for a break in the boy's stream of thought, interrupted by the demand to take communion in the next paragraph.

watching, controlling. The child's fear of retaliation for wrong-doing connects to the first Camera Eye when he was, for no reason evident to him, punished for not belonging, being foreign; although he is older and now more able to articulate a reason why he does not belong (not baptized, not a believer, not Presbyterian), the punishment is much more abstract (nature, lightning).

Interestingly, the fear of divine punishment for participating in a false communion is directly connected through the sentence structure to the boy's fearful curiosity concerning the Molly Maguires: "me not believing or baptized or Presbyterian and who were the Molly. Maguires?" The boy's knowledge of the Molly Maguires is confined to a few images united under their name: "thoughts, bulletholes in an old barn abandoned mine pits black skeleton tipples weedgrown dumps . . . masked men riding at night shooting bullets into barns at night." The words, although they can be put together in various combinations (i.e. "bulletholes in an old barn," "an old barn abandoned"), all represent darkness, incompleteness, gaps (bulletholes, mine pits), violence, death, and decay ("abandoned," "skeleton," "weedgrown," "dumps"). It is clear that the Molly Maguires were involved in the coal industry ("mine pits," "tipples"), but the boy cannot figure out, "what were they after in the oldtime night?"

Amongst the variety of images here, it is perhaps the phrase "oldtime night" that demands careful consideration. "Oldtime" links the events associated with the Molly Maguires to the past; perhaps this temporal location is a result of a half-answer from an adult figure, attempting to assuage the boy's fears of potential violence. Yet, even as a young boy, the narrator's insistent questioning betrays some level of awareness that, no matter how distant the events, they must be discussed and acknowledged. The Molly

Maguires can't be shut out, confined to the past, and erased. Again, the boy has the itchy feeling on the back of his neck: "itchy in the back of the neck scary with masked men riding Molly Maguires." Forced by silence to look forward at the present and future, the boy is afraid of what is behind him ("masked men riding"), afraid of the consequences of a denial of history, afraid he will again have to run with his mother, trampling the "bright anxious grassblades" (3).

However, "oldtime" does not stand alone; it is also used as a way to describe "night." "Night" functions to separate the labor protests of the Molly Maguires from the present "sunny brightblue sunday" in much the same way that "oldtime" attempts to relegate the masked men to the past. "Night" emphasizes the difference between the current, regulated, bright world and the violence and anger of the labor protestors. Yet, the visual reminders in the day time of the nighttime actions—abandoned barns riddled with bulletholes, weedgrown dumps, etc.—make the separation impossible. What happens in the night has implications for the sunny, Sunday, daytime world, and so, too, does the daytime world link to the actions of the night, even if the boy is not yet able to fully recognize and identify those linkages.

While multiple attempts are made to control the boy's behavior and thoughts, the physical space of the church cannot keep itself contained, separate from the demands of the outside world, much as the "oldtime night" cannot be fully severed from the present day. On the one hand, the church does form a space distinct from the outside: people must go "into church"; "*outside* the summer leaves on the trees wigwagged greenblueyellow through the windows"; again, "all the quiet church in the middle of whiteoaks wigwagging," "in the middle of squirrels and minetipples in the middle of the

blue Pennsylvania summer Sunday.” The church is located in the “middle” or center of Pennsylvanian society and the upstanding citizens’ relationship with nature (“whiteoaks”) and “minetipples.” The middle space represents the church’s dominance; it is the place which the outside world centers around. Yet, this middle space also indicates the church’s vulnerability; it is *surrounded* by all that it would keep out—the Molly Maguires, the mines, the squirrels, the non-believers. The boy can bring these thoughts of the Molly Maguires and his non-belief into the church, and what he sees through the windows can reinforce his thoughts and distract him from proper attention to the service.

The “wigwagging” of the oaks and the “scolding” of the squirrel are allied with the narrator’s thoughts about non-belief and labor protest. The squirrel is introduced as something separate from the service: “a squirrel was scolding in the whiteoak *but* the Pennypacker girls all the young ladies in their best hats singing the anthem.” The squirrel and the wagging of the trees, like the tongues of the “grassblades” from Camera Eye 1, have something to say to the boy. They seem to be “scolding” the narrator for *not* asking his questions, for not seeking determinedly enough for an answer, as the run-on sentence makes clear: “the squirrel scolding who were the Molly Maguires?” It is worth noting that nature later becomes the boy’s alternative to institutionalized religion. In Camera Eye 17, he decides “he wouldn’t be confirmed because [he] believed in camping and canoeing and Halley’s Comet and the Universe and the sound the rain made on the tent” (42*P* 163). The squirrel’s chatter and the wagging of the trees, seen through the windows, can’t be kept out of the space of privilege the church represents; nature consistently attempts to tell a different story, to direct the boy’s attention to different concerns.

What is most important about the eleventh Camera Eye is its relevance to the formation of a privileged subjectivity, particularly its depiction of a simultaneous undercutting of the boy's possible comfort in that position. As before, fear is central to the boy's experience (fear of God, fear of the church people, fear of the Molly Maguires), as is being an outsider—not Presbyterian, not believing. The boy, more than before, is aware of his spatial position. Within the privileged space of the church, he is allied with and protected by the money, status, and power represented there. Yet, he is also drawn outward, attuned to the signs of violence and scars of injustice in the world around him, as well as the role of nature in communicating history and its implications for the present. Neither fully within or without, the boy occupies an ambiguous position. Aware of his discomfort, the boy can represent the position he finds himself in: trapped in privilege, fearful of violence related to it, but looking through glass in an attempt to understand what exists beyond the world of his upbringing. The windows are lenses that give him access to that world, but also distort it and keep it distant. This glass lens will be given a new form when the young man begins more actively to reflect on his position in the world during his years at college.

Before he reaches college-age, through the eleventh and twenty-fifth Camera Eyes, the narrator continues to develop. He has his first sexual experience (CE 12) and begins to express desire (CE 19). He forms his own opinions, as when he refuses to be confirmed. More and more of the Camera Eye are records, observations, with less and less obvious emotional comment (i.e. "I felt," etc.).⁷ In the twenty-fourth Camera Eye, describing a trip to Quebec, we see him chafing against the Catasauqua Lecturer and the

⁷ One of the most prominent examples of the lack of "I" in the Camera Eye series is Camera Eye 20 and the very painful retelling of the tragic story two friends who break the streetcar strike (192-193).

“too friendly baritone,” with a desire to walk the streets to get away from their oppressive society (222-223). The discomfort with the strictures placed on him and the desire to be in the streets comes to a head in the twenty-fifth Camera Eye, the climax of *The 42nd Parallel*'s Camera Eye series.

In the twenty-fifth Camera Eye the narrator, now a student at Harvard, finally describes his understanding of his privilege, its seeming inescapability, and the rage this engenders within him: the “bellglass” (236). A bellglass is a glass dome that both protects and displays a figurine or some other precious object. The bellglass is a means of separation, like the space of the church in Camera Eye 11. The young man can look out at the world, but he cannot join or participate in anything happening outside the bellglass. The Camera Eye's consciousness now associates the upper class “with a destructive social blindness” (Pizer 422). He cannot even see out clearly. A bell glass is curved, like a lens, at the top and along the sides; the curve would distort one's vision, just as the glass of the church's windows could distort the boy's vision of the squirrels and the marks of the Molly Maguires. The glass does not only allow the narrator to see out—it allows others to see in. The young man is put on display within the glass dome. Inside the bellglass, he is expected to perform, to behave in the appropriate fashion. As he puts it directly below the line quoted above, “be a good boy . . . get A's in some courses but don't be a grind be interested in literature but remain a gentleman don't be seen with Jews or socialists/and all the pleasant contacts will be useful in Later Life say hello pleasantly to everybody crossing the yard” (a litany of commands that is later repeated in *1919*'s biography of John Reed, “Playboy”). The young man's role is reduced to being looked at and “looking out into the twilight of the pleasantest four years of [his] life.”

The Camera Eye makes clear, however, that there is nothing “pleasant” for the young man about this existence. The Camera Eye brims with frustration, not only with being told what to do (and being watched to ensure that one follows directions appropriately), but also with the expectation to remain inactive, impotent, in the face of the exciting world beyond, whose noises, like the squirrel’s “scolding,” reach through the bellglass. The Camera Eye describes him being inside, reading, unable to sleep as he hears the noises of the outside world:

went mad listening to the streetcarwheels screech grinding in a rattle of loose trucks round Harvard Square and the trains crying across the saltmarshes and the rumbling siren of a steamboat leaving dock and the blue peter flying and millworkers marching with a red brass band through the streets of Lawrence Massachusetts.

The narrator is being driven crazy by his separation from the outside world of activity: streetcars moving among districts of the city, trains crossing the country, steamboats travelling up and down rivers, birds flying, “millworkers marching.” In the midst of those “spring nights,” the young man must stay inside, sleepless, inactive.

The only activity expected (and allowed) of the young man is to “grow cold” by sitting forgotten indoors under the bellglass. He must “grow cold with culture like a cup of tea forgotten between an incenseburner and a volume of Oscar Wilde cold and not strong like a claret lemonade drunk at a Pop Concert in Symphony Hall.” The young man, represented by the cup of tea, is an aesthetic object, as the reference to Oscar Wilde highlights. Compared to the movement all around him, the cup of tea between an “incenseburner and a volume of Oscar Wilde” is a still life—not moving, perhaps beautiful, but meaningless. Weak, “not strong,” undrunk, “forgotten,” alone. The narrator, if he was ever entirely swept up in the world of illusion created by his privileged

upbringing, is now disillusioned, if for more selfish reasons (the restraints on him personally) than those he will later come to during and after the war.

Of course, the narrator isn't entirely passive; he is reading and receiving an education. This activity, however, does not move across space in the way the transportation he hears outside does. He "tossed with eyes smarting all the spring night reading *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*." His tossing back and forth, unable to get comfortable as he tries to read or sleep, is an action that takes energy but does not move or progress anywhere. He is stuck, and the literature he reads provides no escape.

The college student is influenced by what he reads—Marx, Swift, Rimbaud, Marlowe—the names pepper the Camera Eye. Critically, however, he cannot articulate how his reading helps him to understand his place in the world and at college. Rather than directly saying what it is that he feels, the names of authors jump into his thoughts:

four years I didn't know you could do what you Michaelangelo
wanted say
Marx
to all
the professors with a small Swift break all the Greenoughs in the
shooting gallery
but tossed with eyes smarting all the spring night reading *The
Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* . . .
and I hadn't the nerve
to jump up and walk out of doors and tell them all to
go take a flying
Rimbaud
at the moon

The sentence structure reflects both the college student's limitations in expression and the degree to which the reading overwhelms him. He cannot get his own thoughts out because they are lost within the material being read, lectured on, and discussed. The writers, like Rimbaud, may eventually provide a bridge for the author to move to a world

beyond that in which he was raised, but at this moment, they obscure, overwhelm, and replace the young man who repeats their names.

All of this reading impairs the young man's vision: his eyes are "smarting." His eyes could be smarting for a number of reasons: lack of sleep, physical discomfort, being emotionally affected by his reading, or being frustrated by the very fact that he must read. But the reading, in any event, affects his way of seeing. The smarting causes his vision to be blurred, increasing the distortion already caused by the bellglass.

To the college student, the bellglass seems unbearably permanent. He laments: "haven't got the nerve to break out of the bellglass." It is hard to break out of the bellglass not only because it takes "nerve," but because the air in the bellglass is limited and controlled. It follows that the speaker would describe his experience as an "ethercone." He says, "four years under the ethercone breathe deep gently now that's the way be a good boy one two three four five six get A's."⁸ Ether is an anesthetic, the very point of which is to dull the "nerves," so one cannot feel or act. The speaker not have the "nerve" to break out of the bellglass, and he doesn't seem to quite believe that would be possible. He says, "it was like the Magdeburg spheres the pressure outside sustained the vacuum within." The Magdeburg spheres could not be pulled apart unless the air pressure inside the spheres was lessened. It becomes clear how controlled the atmosphere is from the narrator's viewpoint, how impossible it seems to be able to leave, to just "jump up and walk out of doors."

⁸ Dos Passos returns to this formulation in his *Paris Review* interview: "I got quite a little out of being at Harvard, although I was kicking all of the time that I was there, complaining about the 'ethercone' atmosphere I described in camera eye. I probably wouldn't have stayed if it hadn't been for my father, who was anxious for me to go through" (4).

Despite the initial sense that, perhaps, the young man has left the bellglass behind after his passionate “go take a flying/Rimbaud/at the moon” ends the twenty-fifth Camera Eye, he is not yet free of the habits of his privilege. The frustration of the twenty-fifth Camera Eye gives way to euphoria and a sense of community in the next installment where the narrator attends an Emma Goldman speech, although the narrator’s attempts to be radical are possible partly because of his “bellglass” privilege. The night ends with the narrator “comfortable in bed” after “several drinks and welsh rabbits” (273).⁹ The final Camera Eye of *The 42nd Parallel* finds the narrator moving, travelling across the Atlantic, yet the first Camera Eye of the second book in the trilogy, *1919*, makes clear that any sense of freedom was merely a temporary release.

Breaking out of the Bellglass

One can speak so confidently about the continuing presence of the “bellglass” in the last two Camera Eyes of *The 42nd Parallel* because it returns so clearly and distinctly in the first Camera Eye of *1919*. The twenty-eighth Camera Eye has numerous linguistic similarities to the twenty-fifth Camera Eye and *The 42nd Parallel* as a whole, reinforcing the continuities between the Camera Eye series and these two volumes of the trilogy. In this Camera Eye, the young man learns of the deaths of his parents and believes (wrongly, as we shall see in the discussion of *The Big Money* below) that, as a result, the bellglass has shattered; without parental presence, he no longer feels on display or under pressure. The Camera Eye ends with the narrator’s beginning direct involvement in the First World War.

⁹ Pizer also recognizes the hesitancy behind this communal moment: “Dos Passos’ occasional efforts to break out of the bellglass end not in action or commitment but in a seemingly inevitable return to his class” (432).

Camera Eye 28 is one of the longer and more difficult Camera Eye, composed of three distinct sections, separated by asterisks. It is filled with a sense of grief and death—the death of the young man’s parents, the looming deaths of many young men in the war. Yet the Camera Eye also brims with a sense of joy and newness, the blooming of previously unrecognized possibilities. In order to understand the relationship of the bellglass of privilege and the narrator’s burgeoning political sensibility, it is necessary to move slowly through each of the Camera Eye’s sections.

Fittingly for a Camera Eye dwelling on rebirth and death, the Camera Eye begins in spring. The narrator asks a question, marked by parentheses: “(have you ever never been able to sleep for a week in April?)” (6). It’s unclear who the question is addressed to—possibly the reader—but it vividly conjures up the sleepless periods of the “spring nights” in *The 42nd Parallel* (236). In contrast to the Harvard spring previously described, the narrator is out in the midst of this burgeoning season; “the roadsides steamed with spring.” It is “April enough to shock the world” (6).¹⁰ The heat of the new season, the increased smells and colors after the muted winter, are shocking. This is a violent, ugly spring. The young man’s senses seem especially attuned to pick up on what is happening around him, but he remains detached from it, much as he did when anesthetized by the ethercone in the twenty-fifth Camera Eye.

The role of nature here seems different from its early importance to the young boy, who saw bright grassblades, waving trees, beautiful colors “greenblueyellow” (42P 86). In this Camera Eye, nature reflects and contributes to the ambiguous tone of the whole. A potentially peaceful image—“walking around Fresh Pond the smell of puddle-

¹⁰ Most readers must hear resonances of the famous opening lines of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Like that poem, this Camera Eye, and *1919* as a whole, is firmly aware of the cruelty and death underlying the birth of the new.

water willowbuds”—is interrupted by the “raw wind shrieking” (6). The colors that are mentioned are deeper than the pastels of the child, and they are almost aggressive in their strength: “my eyes were stinging with vermilion bronze and chrome-green inks that oozed from the spinning April hills” (6).¹¹ The word “inks” strikes a curiously artificial tone, although it also points to a possible awareness on the speaker’s part of his rising artistic consciousness and the later imprint of this moment, these images, in writing. The “spinning hills” and the “oozed” take away any stability of the landscape; it is a landscape of decomposition. Perhaps linking to the scolding squirrel of the eleventh Camera Eye, here “there were mockingbirds in the graveyard” (6). Nature jars, disrupts, oozes, mocks—in all, it “shock[s] the world.”

This harsh but very real April is juxtaposed with artificial uses of nature, such as “the waxen odor of lilies in the parlor” (6). The “waxen” description of the lilies’ perfume marks them as in some way artificial and false. This connotation is reinforced by the association of lilies with the “very fashionable lady” of *The 42nd Parallel*, Camera Eye 18 (176). Another link between the powerful smell, fragility, artificiality, and femininity of lilies occurs in the following segment, Camera Eye 19. The minister’s wife “talked in a bell-like voice about how things were lovely as a lily,” even as she seems to desire the young man’s romantic attentions (42P 187). The lilies are, perhaps, the closest the opening section comes to representing typical funeral associations, for the lilies in the parlor are from his mother’s funeral; they replace her living presence.

This is, after all, a Camera Eye about grief and the difficulty of grieving. It opens with the reception of the news of his mother’s illness: “when the telegram came that she

¹¹ It is also worth noting that the speaker’s eyes are again in pain. In the twenty-fifth camera eye they “smart[ed]” (236); now they “sting.” His way of seeing is still under assault.

was dying” (6). The same phrase also opens the second full paragraph, in the midst of which we learn, “She’s gone Jack” (6). It is unclear where grief is supposed to fit in this landscape, where the hills “ooze” color and mockingbirds haunt the graveyard. Like the tension between the ugly physicality of April’s shocking presence and the distant, waxy artificiality of the lilies, grief is both real and performed. In both of the first paragraphs, the narrator repeats, “grief isn’t a uniform” (6). The second paragraph implies that this particular phrasing comes from his father (“He”). The meaning of this phrase and the young man’s attitude toward it are ambiguous. On the one hand, it implies that grief is not something that can be taken on and off. The excess of grief transcends the typical performed, controlled behavior previously ingrained by the privileged world of the young man’s childhood. He cannot control it by “step[ping] carefully always on the cobbles,” “put[ting his] handkerchief over [his] mouth and look[ing] holy,” or “get[ting] A’s in some courses” (42P 3, 86, 236). It is not solely duty, in the way a uniform typically makes known the wearer’s responsibilities. Grief transcends the expected manners of the social class; it demands authenticity.

Yet, while this understanding may be partly true, and while grief might be an important and necessary emotion that helps the young man move beyond the world of his parents, there is a suspicion of the phrase revealed in the parenthetical aside at the end of the second paragraph: “(He and I we must bury the uniform of grief)” (6). Here, grief is unequivocally a “uniform.” The phrase exposes the artificiality behind the supposedly authentic thought “grief is not a uniform.” It seems to suggest that, like the waxen lilies, the twice-repeated phrase is actually part of the performance of grief, rather than a separation of grief from expected traditions of mourning. Of course, it is unclear where

the narrator is positioned in relation to these parenthetical phrases. Is the separation indicative of their honesty? Or are they perhaps moments of uncertainty, not expressed in the main body of the Camera Eye because they are not opinions or ideas held with confidence? Are they attempts to interrupt a dominant narrative? Given that the aside mentioned previously referred directly to a previous Camera Eye, it seems most likely that the parentheses represent internal, honest attitudes of the speaker,¹² but regardless, this moment undercuts the confident “grief is not a uniform.” The desire to “bury” the uniform of grief might be part of the same desire to move beyond expected behavior. It might, too, express a need to move on, to put grief to rest and look to the future. It is, perhaps, itself an expression of loss: the loss of the boy’s mother who will be buried, the loss of the many men in uniform in the war.

The multiplicity of interpretations of the narrator’s feelings toward the uniform of grief is possible, perhaps, because the mother’s death itself produces such mixed feelings in the narrator, as the reference to the “bellglass” makes clear. Immediately after the reception of the first telegram, the young man, in parentheses again, thinks “(the streetcarwheels screeched round the bellglass like all the pencils on all the slates in all the schools)” (6). Here we have the clearest possible reference to the twenty-fifth Camera Eye. The telegram makes the young man both aware of his mother and the bellglass, yet also marks the bellglass’s limitations. The streetcars circle around the bellglass, defining it and making the world outside visible. Their screeching is an aural reminder of the

¹² Hock provides a general understanding of the parentheses throughout the Camera Eye series: “In this way [by using parentheses] the Camera Eye gives the appearance of avoiding the elision of details effected by the Newsreels’ extensive use of ellipses. Instead, the Camera Eye works to cram as many details as possible into the limited space allowed it. In so doing, the Camera Eye sections function as parenthetical notations to the rest of the text, providing the personally involved view of the reality that the other sections describe only at a distance” (24). While this is helpful, each use of parentheses throughout the Camera Eyes of the trilogy should receive careful attention; as this Camera Eye demonstrates, it isn’t clear that there are simply additional “details” being crammed in.

potential for the streetcars to disrupt the contained world within the bellglass (as happens with the strike in *Camera Eye* 20). The reference to “pencils on all the slates in all the schools” takes us back to academic institutions. The mundane details of the process of education (the pencils scratching against slates) are linked to the screeching of the streetcars, both marking and creating the boundaries of the bellglass (as the speaker’s Harvard education does even more overtly) and providing an escape from it. The sound of the streetcars pervades the moment of the *Camera Eye*, linking itself even to the spring wind: “the smell of puddle-water willowbuds in the raw wind shrieking streetcarwheels rattling on loose trucks through the Boston suburbs” (6).

The meaning of the reemergence of the bellglass and streetcars becomes clear at the beginning of the next paragraph. Like the “trucks,” the world is coming “loose:” “when the telegram came that she was dying the bellglass cracked in a screech of slate pencils” (6). The sounds—of education, of the streetcars—and the young man’s knowledge of his mother’s passing crack the bellglass. The “screech of slate pencils” emphasizes the power of writing: writing creates a sound that can crack the bellglass. And for the young man, his mother’s death has the power to break the confining bellglass that formed itself in the boy’s mind throughout his childhood. There is certainly painful violence here; the breaking of the bellglass in response to the shrieking begins the process of losing a safe, contained world. Yet, because of the bellglass’s primarily negative connotation, this possibility can only bring the type of murky hope represented by spring.

The speaker of the *Camera Eye* believes deeply in the semi-illusion that one’s parents have control over one’s behavior only while they remain alive. While the young man would still have to face the disapproval of respected families such as the

Pennypackers, he believes that the bellglass is kept in place only through the continued pressure of his mother and father. Without them, he will be free. This is made crystal clear in the next section, beginning with the announcement of his father's death: "when the cable came that He was dead" (7). Announced in the same form as his mother's illness, this news finally releases the speaker from the bellglass; he reveals its state a few lines later: "the shattered iridescent bellglass" (7). The bellglass is not only lifted off but broken, irreparable, shattered. It is worth noting that it is not simply the combined absence of both parents that destroys the bellglass. The significance of the total break occurring at the death of his father—the capital-H "He" of the Camera Eyes—is important. The father is a God-like figure; it is only a loss of that level of influence and control that can pull apart the "Magdeburg spheres" (42*P* 236).¹³

Accordingly, the young man's response to this loss is different from the response to the death of his mother, where there was ambiguity and a muted tone (perhaps because the young man is on foreign soil and thus has a particular freedom of response). Now, the world explodes into movement and color:

He was dead I walked through the streets full of fiveoclock Madrid seething with twilight in shivered cubes of aguardiente redwine gaslampgreen sunsetpink tileochre eyes lips red cheeks brown pillar of the throat climbed on the night train at the Norte station without knowing why (7)

As Donald Pizer eloquently describes it, "Gone is the protective shield they [his parents] provided . . . and gone, too, therefore, is the barrier between himself and experience which their protectiveness included" (424). No longer "a cup of tea forgotten between an

¹³ It is here that my argument diverges most significantly from Pizer's focus in "The Sexual Center." For Pizer, the narrator eventually becomes his father; it is the mother that is associated with upper-class restraint (420). However, as I mention here, the father of the young man is central to maintaining the pressure of the bellglass, even if the descriptions of the father might not seem as stereotypically privileged and cultured as those of the mother.

incenseburner and a volume of Oscar Wilde” (42*P* 236), the young man and his world is full of movement. He walks the “full” streets, which are “seething.” He actively “climb[s]” on a train. There is spontaneity in the man’s decision to hop on the train, a joy in adventure, even if the movement is without meaning or, at least, articulation: “without knowing why.” The phrasing itself conveys rapid movement, as the prose hops from word to word, with little time spent in the slow business of connection. The post-bellglass world bursts into color, vivid red, green, pink, ochre. The “shivered cubes” of color are in part a distortion from the aguardiente (an alcoholic beverage) and the “redwine” and also from the man’s rapid movement as he walks down the street.¹⁴ The man is alive to the world around him, seeing the beauty in objects and people, perhaps including himself—“eyes lips red cheeks brown pillar of the throat” (7). The world is transformed. Interestingly, it is possible that the man’s sight is still influenced by the bellglass. Its “iridescent” pieces, with the reflection of all the colors of the rainbow, add exaggeration and sparkle to the streets of Madrid. He may no longer be trapped under the bellglass, but even in its shattering, the bellglass has the power to shape the man’s vision.

The euphoria described here is a result of death, and it also comes before the darker experiences of the narrator’s war years. Remembering the spring-setting of the beginning of the Camera Eye, it is essential to remember that this joy comes from destruction. The man is very clear about what has been destroyed: “the shattered iridescent bellglass the carefully copied busts the architectural details the grammar of styles” (7). This brief segment hits on the sense of the restraint that marked the bellglass: “carefully,” “details,” “grammar.” All of these words are about being precise, about

¹⁴ The language of “cubes,” abstract imagery and bright colors could also be an allusion to cubism, expressionism, and other new movements developing in painting and art.

working within rules, paying attention to the little things. They all describe static, aesthetic objects. This stillness (deadness) is in sharp contrast to the shivered cubes of color, the spontaneous trip on a night train, the movement.

The next paragraph further expounds on what will be left behind: “it was the end of that book and I left the Oxford poets in the little noisy room that smelt of stale oliveoil in the Pension Boston” (7). The young man hopes to end the book that was started in a moment of anxious trampling on grassblades and continued through suffocating church services and the Harvard years. Coming at the beginning of 1919, this *Camera Eye* provides finality to the storylines of *The 42nd Parallel*, and it also describes the end of a certain type of literature, the literature of the “Oxford poets,” creating a space for the *U.S.A.* trilogy itself. Nonchalantly left behind “in the little noisy room that smelt of stale oliveoil” (7), the context emphasizes the inappropriateness of the book for its surroundings in the first place. The book is bound to its location (Oxford and its associates); it is no longer necessary.

The next paragraph is the climax of the *Camera Eye*, building on themes from its beginning and from the twenty-fifth *Camera Eye*:

but

we
who had heard Copey’s beautiful reading voice and read the handsomely bound books and breathed deep (breath deep one two three four) of the waxwork lilies and the artificial parmaviolet scent under the ethercone and sat breakfasting in the library where the bust was of Octavius
were now dead at the cableoffice (7)

The “we” separated from yet connected to those “who had heard Copey’s” lectures,¹⁵ makes clear that the speaker is still a man with a Harvard education, an alumnus, yet who

¹⁵ Copey’s reading is also mentioned in the biography of Jack Reed which immediately follows this *Camera Eye* and in the first introduction to the narrative of Richard Ellsworth Savage.

keeps his distance, for all that is associated with that education is dead to him. The “ethercone” no longer has the power to numb with the smell of “waxwork lilies and artificial parmaviolet.” All of the artificial and aesthetic beauty—“Copey’s beautiful reading voice,” “the handsomely bound books,” “the bust,” etc.—all of this is now without power to restrain. Of course, this “death” is not simply about the young man’s newfound freedom, nor is it simply symbolic. With the war, many young Harvard men are actually dead, killed in the trenches of World War I. The narrator has achieved a sort of freedom, but that freedom is not free of death and pain.

The sense of vigorous movement and possibility continues in the next section of text, as the narrator sails back to the United States. He sits “on the rumblebumping wooden bench on the train slamming through midnight climbing up from the steerage to get a whiff of Atlantic on the lunging steamship” (7). Moving seamlessly from the train ride to the ship, the energy here spills over into the friendships the man forms during his journey. Disconnected from the “we” of the Harvard boys, the man can form new relationships: “(the ovalfaced Swiss girl and her husband were my friends)” (7). Yet, the “lunging,” “climbing,” “slamming,” and “rumblebumping” reveal a dangerous instability within this exciting new world. Ultimately, the young Swiss girl does not make it to America—“la grippe espagnole she was dead” (7).

The abruptness of this revelation is followed by a shift in perspective, where the activity of the Camera Eye moves from a wide-ranging, broad movement to focused labor. Having enlisted, the young man is now “washing those windows,” participating in “K.P.” (kitchen patrol), and “cleaning the sparkplugs with a pocketknife” (7). Just as Dos Passos hoped his time in the camp at Allentown would help him to see clear, the narrator

of the Camera Eye is now forming new communities and participating in new activities, far from the bellglass and ethercone. Less euphoric, this section is much more material and a little darker, although there remains a sense of grandeur: “grinding the American Beauty roses to dust in that whore’s bed (the foggy night flamed with proclamations of the League of the Rights of Man) the almond smell of high explosives sending singing éclats through the sweetish puking grandiloquence of the rotting dead” (7). Not as unambiguously joyous as the initial reaction to the shattered bellglass, there is still an ironic sense of the greatness—good and bad—of the present moment. There are “proclamations,” a sexual act has the power to symbolically disrupt a national aesthetic object (“grinding the American Beauty roses to dust”), bombs carry “éclats,” and the smell of the dead speaks powerfully.

After this bleak yet energetic immersion in the war, three asterisks separate the final phrase of the twenty-eighth Camera Eye: “tomorrow I hoped would be the first day of the first month of the first year” (8). Juxtaposed with the sarcastic, manic energy of the previous passage, this phrase makes clear the deep sincerity of the narrator’s hope for a new, fresh world. The desire returns to the enthusiastic excitement present at the original reception of the news of his father’s death. The speaker exclaims, “Ahora Now Maintenant Vita Nuova” (7). Expressed in Spanish, English, and French, there is energy in “now,” linked to new life—“Vita Nuova.” Said first in a foreign language, perhaps a result of a certain hesitation that lingers in associating the sense of newness with anything from the his privileged past, the desire for a “new life,” for a “fresh beginning” lets hopefulness reign triumphant amidst the death and destruction of this Camera Eye. After the shattering of the bellglass and before the upcoming experiences of

the war, the consciousness of the Camera Eye expresses a desire to truly begin living, to start fresh, even if that “first day” is put off until “tomorrow.”

The hopeful clinging to the “first,” a fresh, unblemished slate, continues throughout the Camera Eyes in *1919*, although “the repeated use of the phrase becomes bitterly ironic” (Westerhoven 357). In the thirty-seventh Camera Eye, he describes “the first day in the year” and plans to “on the first day in the year/in the first village” drink fine wine amid poetic descriptions of nature. The pastoral dream is undermined when the men stumble upon an “old man [who] has shot the pretty peasant girl . . . and blew the top of his head off” (201-202). After the appearance of this “waxwork,” the Camera Eye ends with three separated phrases:

on this first day
of the year the sun
is shining (202)

The newness and freshness of this day, literally or figuratively a beginning of a new year, is destroyed by the irruption of violence that the soldiers encounter. No longer is there the fluid “first day of the year the sun is shining.” It is now broken and fragmented, emphasizing the irony of the young men’s desire compared to what they actually encounter in the bucolic countryside under the sun’s rays. Hope remains, however. In the next Camera Eye, the young man describes his discharge from the army and return to civilian clothing and experiences. The Camera Eye describes the long bath that is meant to wash away the blood and violence of the war experience; it “goes down the drain with a gurgle and hiss” (230).

His new cleanliness and new civilian clothing adds to the hope for social change presented in the thirty-ninth Camera Eye. At its close, he repeats a version of the phrase that ended the twenty-eighth Camera Eye:¹⁶

revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower
that burns up our last year's diagrams the dates fly off the calendar we'll
make everything new today is the Year I Today is the sunny morning of the
first day of spring We gulp our coffee splash water on us jump into our
clothes run downstairs set out wideawake into *the first morning of the first day of
the first year* (274—emphasis mine)

Like the other expressions of desire for a new year, the likelihood of the fruition of this desire seems slim. While the past is being destroyed (much as the bellglass shattered)—“burns up our last year's diagrams the dates fly off the calendar we'll make everything new”—the “sunny morning” links this moment to the two dead peasants and “spring” has always before been a time of anxiety and death, in the twenty-fifth and twenty-eighth Camera Eyes. One doesn't have to search beyond this Camera Eye to cast doubt on the hope expressed here. The Camera Eye itself links the spinning revolution to the earlier description of the “roulettewheel that spins round the Tour Eiffel red square . . . but the red colt took the jumps backwards and we lost all our money” (274). The revolution and the roulette wheel are connected; thus, the revolution is a chance, risky, and dependent on luck. It can also easily be “fixed” or corrupted. One may win, but most likely one will lose—money, time, energy.

The fortieth Camera Eye and its description of the unsuccessful strike in Paris, which ends with the description of “a torn handbill L'UNION DES TRAVAILLEURS FERA” (320), makes clear the briefness of this post-war period of possibility. The incomplete phrase, the torn handbill, represents, again, a breaking off of hope. Despite

¹⁶ Pizer notes that this “second rebirth . . . echoes almost precisely the imagery of his earlier escape from the bellglass (425).

the death of his parents, despite his relocation to Europe, despite the repeated possible “firsts,” the man’s release from the bellglass and immersion in the world around him is not free of violence, repression, and broken dreams. Accordingly, “the two ‘rebirths’ of [1919] are in truth false dawns” (Pizer 426). The final word in the final Camera Eye of *1919* is “scrap” (364). Alone on the final line, “scrap” makes clear the waste of the war, even as the leftover material suggests the possibility for rebuilding, albeit in a more broken, less “new” way than the narrator hoped upon his release from his suffocating world of privilege.

At the beginning of *1919*, the young man believed that the death of his parents would free him from the control and pressure that had alienated him from the vivid world around him. During the course of the second volume, the man learns that freedom from the bellglass is more complicated than he originally believed. The death of his parents only removes an immediate, personal force; it does not destroy the larger institutional structures that wield power in the world. The vividness seen on the other side of the bellglass that the young man hoped to reach is a space filled with violence and destruction, as much as beauty and liveliness. As *The Big Money* begins, the speaker asks himself upon his return home:

what good burying those years in the old graveyard by the brokendown
brick church that morning in the spring when the sandy lanes were streaked with
blue puddles and the air was violets and pineneedles
what good burying those hated years in the latrinestench at Brocourt under
the starshells (21-22).

Clearly returning to his hopes on the death of his mother (“that morning in spring”) and after the war, the Camera Eye of *The Big Money*, painfully explore through self-reflection this opening question, “what good burying?” Ultimately, the speaker comes to realize that

the outward constraints of his life were only symbols. Not only is the system much larger than his family, but he has himself internalized a way of seeing and perceiving the world that he must constantly wrestle with. The bellglass was never outside him, but within.

There are fewer Camera Eye segments in *The Big Money* than in the rest of the series (nine compared to fifteen in *1919* and twenty-seven in *The 42nd Parallel*), but they are some of the longest, most complex, and emotionally heightened. In several of the beginning Camera Eye, the narrator wanders from place to place, taking in the sounds, smells, and sights of the world around him, even as he increasingly becomes aware of his inner emotions. (Westerhoven describes these Camera Eye as “markedly more impersonal” [351, see also 362], but he seems to be glossing over the deeply emotional self-examination taking place throughout them.) Several of the Camera Eye dwell on the pressure of expected behavior, similar to the little boy’s experience in Camera Eye 11. He feels “stuffed into shirts,” forced to perform a role which is not his own—“in fact it was somebody else who was speaking it’s not me in uniform in the snapshot it’s a lamentable error mistake identity” (25). He tries to resist labeling: “every man his pigeonhole/the personality must be kept carefully adjusted over the face/to facilitate recognition she pins on each of us a badge” (100). He feels like a phony: “(if somebody in your head didn’t say liar to you)” (118). Increasingly, he turns to doubt, “the whetstone of understanding” (118); he walks around New York “(peeling the onion of doubt) . . . peeling the speculative onion of doubt” (119). The narrator vacillates between the opportunities offered to him by his family connections and education, and the revolutionary work for social progress he feels inclined to.

In the forty-seventh Camera Eye, this tension builds to a final uncertain moment of decision-making. He tells himself:

hock the old raincoat of incertitude (in which you hunch alone from
the upsidedown image on the retina painstakingly out of color shape words
remembered light and dark straining
to rebuild yesterday to clip out paper figures to simulate growth
warp newsprint into faces smoothing and wrinkling in the various barelyfelt
velocities of time)
tonight now the room fills with the throb and hubbub of departure
the explorer gets a few necessities together coaches himself on a beginning
better the streets first (156)

The man leaves behind the inertia of doubt, “incertitude,” choosing instead to depart on an adventure, a new beginning. Yet this beginning is not like the firsts that pepper *1919*. Older, wiser, the man retains hope for a new action, even as he recognizes the ethical imperative of wandering the streets, witnessing the world around him. He understands that his vision, shaped through fear and alienation in his wealthy upbringing, is permanently warped, even without the outside distortion of the bellglass: “from the upside down image on the retina” (156).

All of what he sees is turned upside down as it appears in and passes through his eye; his life must become a continual interpretation and un-“warp”-ing of the image. He must “shape” words, “painstakingly” re-color his environment. He must depend on his memory, “light and dark straining/to rebuild yesterday.” It is clear that overcoming the expectations and understandings of the lens of privilege requires effort (“straining”), a careful relationship to time and memory, and willingness to immerse oneself in the world. He may now and always carry the bellglass within him, but he can have increasing faith in his ability to reinterpret what he sees. He is no longer on display, a labeled and restricted item, but an individual of uncertain class position and direction,

an unidentified stranger
destination unknown
hat pulled down over the has he any? face (157).

Dos Passos helps us to explore in these semi-autobiographical prose pieces how deeply privilege works in children, how it can become internalized, and how it impacts reactions to the world even through adulthood. Dos Passos makes visible to us the ways in which we can misidentify the constraints of privilege—as the young man assumes they break after his parents' deaths. He reminds us that as much as we might wish to start fresh—"on the first day of the first year"—we always carry our past with us; it is our responsibility to come to terms with that past.

The title of the autobiographical, stream-of-consciousness mode—the "Camera Eye"—makes clear the tension in the conception of the Camera Eye pieces, as mentioned previously. Contrary to Justin Edwards, who believes that the Camera Eye "represent a close-up image of the author himself" (4), I would argue that the title's use of the organ of the body used for sight, the "eye," emphasizes that the writing is describing the subjective experience of one person as that person sees it. We are not zooming in on the narrator/author; we are seeing from his perspective. However, the "camera," a mechanical object held up to the eye to record the world in front of it, is distinctly unnatural, a mediating object between the outside world and the subjective mind. Additionally, cameras are typically thought to be recording the world in an objective manner, although the truth the camera captures is usually not as straightforward as it may appear. The title's juxtaposition of these terms asks the reader to reconsider his/her conceptions of both the camera and the eye. In this way, both the camera and the eye are both seen to be simultaneously objective and subjective. The fleeting impressions of the

eye can be recorded as permanently in the mind as the camera's impressions on film, and the camera's impressions are as fleeting and limited as the eye's (affected by light, range, and scope of vision).

Understanding the speaker's relationship to privilege—the way it separates him from the world in his youth, the ways in which he struggles to move beyond it—helps us understand this double-nature of the Camera Eye, the vision of its consciousness. The natural eye becomes a technological device, and the technological device becomes as natural a way of seeing the world as the eye. This blurring of the technological and human was in vogue during the time Dos Passos wrote; Suarez quotes Jean Epstein as saying “all these instruments: telephone, microscope, magnifying glass, cinematograph, lens . . . are not merely dead objects. At certain moments they become part of ourselves, interposing themselves between the world and us” (49). However, what is revolutionary about Dos Passos's literary treatment of this phenomenon is his internalization of this mixed mode of seeing.

Suarez believes that the Camera Eye devolves into “solipsism” (62) through the rejection in Dos Passos's prose and tone of Left documentary modes of filming. He claims that “mistrust of the liberating potential of the camera evidences suspicion of technology as a totalitarian force, a view that contrasts with contemporary attempts to enlist the machine into the social revolution” (63). What Suarez is missing, however, is that Dos Passos isn't simply distrusting a literal machine, but the machine of his *mind*, sculpted by his privileged upbringing. What we see is never natural or unmediated. We must, instead, do the work of interpretation with just the right serving of “the onion of doubt.”

The narrator's self-cast role as doubtful "observer" is cultivated throughout his childhood, as a result of his early fearful and alienated experiences. Dos Passos' later insistence on pure observation is complex—both an acceptance of what is built into him and a play with it. His claims to be objective might seem foolish in the context of our modern rejection of the possibility of any objectivity. However, looking at the Camera Eye segments of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, it becomes clear that Dos Passos's turn to the objective is actually a self-conscious attempt to think carefully about the ways in which his upbringing impacts his life—whether through the distortion of the bellglass, the reflection of its shattered iridescent pieces, or the internalization that creates the "upside-down image on the retina" (156). Thus, Dos Passos's detachment and play with the subjective mode is an attempt to represent and acknowledge a particular type of limited knowledge.¹⁷ Of course, even this ideal is problematic, and he seems to increasingly turn to his alienation as his fundamental characteristic, one that keeps him from fully fitting into any community, but that also enables him to wander anonymously, attuned especially to the sounds of language around him. However, alienation seems to become a positive mode for Dos Passos, as he purposely produces alienation within the readers of his trilogy. Moglen writes, describing a graduate class's response to Dos Passos, "these formal techniques of interruption and alienation might be intended by Dos Passos to shatter the reader's complacency about narrative and to shock us out of the state of intellectual and ideological passivity which the novel is so concerned to expose" (5). Dos Passos's alienation and doubt in his vision may not alone effect radical political

¹⁷ Barbara Foley's "From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*" provides an engaging and insightful discussion of the boundaries between history and fiction, as well as attitudes to objectivity, through her comparison of Dos Passos and E.L. Doctorow. She does not, however, focus on the Camera Eye in great detail.

change, but perhaps, if this attitude is cultivated in a wide range of subjects, it can be “part of a political project of resisting ideological pressures” (Moglen 5).

There is so much more that needs to be considered in any thorough study of the Camera Eye series and the *U.S.A.* trilogy itself. The position of each Camera Eye in relation to the other segments, the parallels in content between the Camera Eye and the other modes—all must be thoroughly considered. This essay has taken one small step in that direction, through focusing on three major Camera Eyes of *The 42nd Parallel* and the development of themes of vision and privilege in the other two books of the trilogy. For any critic, working with Dos Passos will be a challenge, but he has himself provided an ethical mode of responding to his work. In his *Paris Review* interview, he suggests we must be aware of the internalized bellglasses that shape our own interaction with literature. Dos Passos encourages critics “to look at [the trilogy] a little more objectively without preconceived ideas” (19), and he warns that “[t]he academic community is more likely to suffer from mass delusions than the general public” (27). We may or may not agree with these characterizations of our discipline, but at least they keep us peeling the onion of doubt, unwarping the upside-down images on our retinas. More than anything, we must not “try to pretend that [Dos Passos doesn’t] exist at all” (Sanders 14); Dos Passos requires increased, clear-eyed study.

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VITA

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