

“Pecuniary Culture and Consuming the Jazz Age in the Big City: the Case of *Manhattan Transfer*”*

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Abstract:

*This essay addresses the problem of the gendered and stratified pecuniary culture consumption of the Jazz Age in Dos Passos’s novel on New York, **Manhattan Transfer**. It examines Dos Passos’s textual response to the representation of the Jazz age in Fitzgerald’s novels set in New York such as **This Side of Paradise** and **The Beautiful and Damned**. The findings of this analysis reveal cultural consumption patterns which are indicative of the emergence of segregated cultural spaces in modern New York, rendering certain cultures inadmissible to some consumers while posing levels of access to the others.*

Key words:

Jazz Age, culture, consumption, Manhattan Transfer, New York, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald

The new Soul of the City speaks a new language, which soon comes to be tantamount to the language of the Culture itself.

– Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars.

– F. Scot Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

The harbor is packed with zebra-striped skunkstriped piebald steamboats, the Narrows are choked with bullion, they are piling gold sovereigns up to the ceilings of the Subtreasury. Dollars whine on the radio, all the cables tap out dollars.

– Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*

In *American Culture in the 1920s* (2009), Susan Currell synthesizes the complex structure of the Jazz Age in the following revealing comment on its universally recognized chronicler – Scott Fitzgerald:

Fitzgerald called the 1920s ‘The Jazz Age’ not because his wealthy elite expressed their desultory freedom by dancing to jazz, but because jazz was the experimental and improvisational score that set the pace for this new America. Jazz was the beat and

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rhythm of unavoidable cultural change, a hybrid sound of the southern past and the industrial North, the 'primitive' keeping time with Ford's production line. (70)

If Fitzgerald was more concerned with the glamor of this epoch and its consumption in the city of New York where three of his novels are set – *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) was addressing in depth the other, darker side of the great cultural transformation. He did so in a novel on the machine city of Manhattan (New York), which arguably captured the metropolitan 1920s even better than Fitzgerald did, as it covered the epoch more fully as a space of cultural changes. This portrayal also included the immigrant experience in a city where 42% were foreign born. Indeed, Fitzgerald's books are profound romances of dreams of success and love as well as of the inevitable shattering of these dreams as neatly summarized in the final lines of *This Side of Paradise*, revelatory of a generation "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" (304). The "Gods" that Fitzgerald speaks of are certainly the all-American ones of the Christian faith as the main religion, but also of Mammon, which would have Mumford see the new times as a "sinister world" (*The Golden Day* 282) containing the establishment of business as the new culture of the epoch. The residual "inner elegance" (165) that he mentions could be related to people's dreams in the city transmuted into the outer glamor of the Jazz Age.

The 1920s received the name of the Jazz Age by their best chronicler – Fitzgerald. However, it was in Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* published in the same year as *The Great Gatsby* that the discordant rhythms of Jazz resounded in a multilevel experience of the big city:

Manhattan Transfer has been called a fictional counterpart of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The effect of Dos Passos's jazz diction and nervous modern sentences and apparently incoherent sequences is decidedly tonal and orchestral. The novel is the discordant harmony of New York – the cymbal-crash of the contending forces created by the modern industrialism which New York more than any other city in the world represents. (Loggins 280)

Dos Passos in "The Business of a Novelist" (1934) saw the writer's goal in setting a city inhabitant "in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate permanent record of a phase of history" (160-1), thus aiming at a true rendition of a historical period, which was intrinsically multifaceted and contradictory.

The experience of the Jazz Age as the age of "miracles," "art" and "excess" as succinctly summarized by Fitzgerald (*My Lost City* 131) in Dos Passos also includes the poignant sensation of the importance of "success" in New York, which can be seen as societal advancement, and which determines a city inhabitant's staying in or leaving the metropolis. These aspects will be examined in *Manhattan Transfer* and their thorough coverage by Dos Passos will be considered as addressing the major cultural trends of the Jazz Age in the big city.

The glamor of the Jazz Age related to alimentary practices in the ambiance of jazz music so amply portrayed by Fitzgerald, in Dos Passos is roughly divided between the unknown parvenus consuming it at fancy balls and well-known aspiring middle-class people with professions like George Baldwin or Ellen Thatcher, who may occasionally disregard consuming restaurant food. Unlike the romantic treatment in *The Great Gatsby*, still implying T.S. Eliot's *hollow men* from the eponymous poem, the *nouveaux-riches* are here stripped of their romantic halo (*MT*) and are seen in the light of "the modern barbarians" (Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*). Neither do we ever find the shimmering brilliance of the city at night experienced by the Jazz Age consumer as is the case of a big city initiate – Amory Blaine. He discovers a New York of electric lights, piercing eyes of women from the Astor in the ambiance of Fitzgerald's "nervous twanging and discord of untuned violins and the

sensuous fragrance of paint and powder” (*This Side of Paradise* 22) floating in “epicurean delight” (22). Fitzgerald renders Jazz Age consumption as an overwhelming sensation of mass culture in the glamor of “flowing, chattering, chuckling, foaming, slow-rolling wave effect of this cheerful sea of people as ... it poured its glittering torrent into the artificial lake of laughter” (*The Beautiful and the Damned* 25).

The rendition of parvenus as Jazz Age consumers in Dos Passos is perhaps due to the immediate association with the source of their riches, their success rendered repulsive, usually depicted in terms of animal morphism or synecdochically represented by inanimate objects. The underprivileged are their menial servants there, confined to servicing the parvenus through *unworthy* “productive work” (Veblen 33) – Emile, Congo, Marco (all immigrants). There is, however, another niche reserved for the consumption of this culture to three sorts of people. They are city dwellers like Jimmy Herf – the effeminate boy coming from a well-off family who loses his mother and has to make it in a tough world of business (he fails as he lacks the survival skills needed for the metropolis). The second type includes individuals like the lawyer George Baldwin, who strikes out for himself and is successful thanks to his business daring and ingeniousness, a symbol of the promise of success realized in the American Dream. The third type are women like Elaine (Ellie, Ellen), the burgeoning actress, who has changed her name and bewitches George Baldwin and many others, and is the ultimate expression of the modern woman in a spiritually decadent world – independent, beautiful, epitomizing the Jazz Age by having “all the love, mystery and glitter” (*MT* 187).

A dominant urban trend in the novel is the emergence of a “sinister” substitute of culture (Mumford, *The Golden Day* 282), corresponding to the concepts of recent developments of culture as “a system of beliefs and ways of being” (Parker 139), “an abstraction and an absolute... a whole way of life” (Williams xvi). It is associated with the *inorganic megalopolis* (Spengler 148) as opposed to the spirituality of Western culture discussed by Spengler in *Decline of the West* (1: 159-64). It can be defined as a powerful modern drive for economic and societal advancement related to consumerism in the tension between potentially available propitious positions in the metropolis and the actual ability of the city inhabitant to occupy such positions. It also comprises the universal belief shared by city inhabitants that this advancement is what determines their living in the city with varying degrees of completion from the unnamed old man with the biblical gourd (*MT* 109) to George Baldwin, Emery from Emery & Emery, etc., especially prominent in male characters. Their success is strictly dependent on their degree of compliance or lack thereof with the cultural code, a part of the set of codes (e.g. spatial code, etc.) that the city residents need in order to integrate in the American metropolis; this system of urban beliefs and practices closely correspond to Veblen’s idea of “pecuniary culture”. As such, it can be considered the mammonic side of consuming the Jazz Age in the Big City.

Examination of the Jazz Age as a cultural space in Dos Passos shows it to be essentially segregated with very different consumption of it by the *haves* and the *have-nots* on both sides of pecuniary culture. Underprivileged women occupy a special position being elevated to escorts of the parvenus, thus temporarily transcending the boundary between the different strata of pecuniary culture consumption, consuming vicariously, an emanation of modernity the same parvenus only encouraged. There is also the fine epitome of the Jazz Age in the portrayal of Elaine, who, having become accustomed to dealing with solitude and scarce parental care in her childhood, is practicing a symbolic profession for those times – that of the actress, and is ready to conquer the metropolis.

An example of the divided consumption of the Jazz Age, incorporating pecuniary culture, is the following passage among many referring to the beginning of this cultural period:

When he saw the headwaiter bow outside the door Emile compressed his lips into a deferential smile. There was a longtoothed blond woman in a salmon opera cloak swishing on the arm of a moonfaced man who carried his top hat ahead of him like a bumper; there was a little curlyhaired girl in blue who was showing her teeth and laughing, a stout woman in a tiara with a black velvet ribbon round her neck, a bottlenose, a long cigarcolored face [...] shirtfronts, hands straitening white ties, black gleams on top hats and patent leather shoes; there was a weazlish man with gold teeth who kept waving his arms spitting greetings in a voice like a crow's and wore a diamond the size of a nickel in his shirtfront. (MT 23)

The only consumers of this cultural space in the scene who are portrayed with distinctive features are the immigrants, who are given different names (Emile, Congo). As for the parvenus flaunting opulence, they are typically depicted in a synecdochic manner, made distinct by different parts of their bodies or attire being shown in motion. They also remain nameless and can only be distinguished when likened to inanimate objects – *moonfaced*, *the man with the diamond*, etc. Where other features of theirs come into play, they are invariably animalistic: *weazlish man*, suggesting a cunning nature; *a voice like a crow's*, implying his being coarse, bordering on the inarticulate. Their escorts do not fare any better being given similar unpleasant associations: *longtoothed blond woman*, *bottlenose*, *cigarcolored face*, reduced to consuming food and new women's freedoms – smoking and drinking. This very low level of cultural space consumption is thus shown as transmuting its consumers into embodiments of what they consume.

Viewed against Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure," the parvenus are the conspicuous consumers of leisure, demonstrating their pecuniary strength led by emulation – the invidious desire to imitate and even excel their equals in both, and thus keep a pecuniary standard (Veblen 70). The escorts consume vicariously in both aspects of "pecuniary culture," being paid by the parvenus to keep them company and consume food at parties. The immigrants fall into the category of those who are denied simultaneous experience of leisure with the parvenus and are allotted a rather meager share of "pecuniary culture" in general, which is of the third order: "since labour is their recognized and accepted mode of life, they take some emulative pride in a reputation for efficiency in their work, this being often the only line of emulation open to them" (Veblen 28).

The *deferential smile* in Emile's *compressed lips*, although showing subservience, does not provide much evidence of "emulative pride". This attitude stems from the fact that *emulation* and *pecuniary reputability*, achieved through diligence and parsimony (Veblen 28), do not quite fit the promise of the American dream that greeted them from the ferryboat when approaching the futuristic Manhattan with its high-rise skyline and glassy glamor.

The people who succeed by exploring the opportunities that the modern metropolis is offering are represented as urban inhabitants coping with the city without having strings pulled for them. Again, unlike Antony Patch (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and the Damned*), who is undone by idling away his time in New York waiting for an inheritance, Jimmy Herf refuses his uncle's help, choosing independence, which allows him to test the metropolis against his preconceptions of it, and which ultimately results in a fuller city experience. City inhabitants like him rely exclusively on themselves, at ephemeral moments embodying the American Dream (e.g. Elaine Thatcher and George Baldwin) in the fiercely dynamic metropolis and, as a result, are more adept consumers of this cultural space in the glamorous fancy restaurant as "there can be little argument that eating out had already become a cultural barometer" (Jane 88):

"I should say you'd done exactly what you wanted to all your life. Oh, Elaine if you'd only let me do what I want to now. I want you to let me make you happy. You're such a

brave little girl making your way all alone the way you do. By gad you are so full of love and mystery and glitter..." He faltered, took a deep swallow of wine, went on with flushing face. "I feel like a schoolboy... I'm making a fool of myself. Elaine I'd do anything in the world for you." "Well, all I'm going to ask you to do is send away this lobster. I don't think it's terribly good." "The devil ... maybe it isn't. ... Here waiter! ... I was so rattled I didn't know I was eating it." (MT 187)

This is perhaps the closest an inhabitant from Dos Passos's Manhattan comes to fulfilling the epitome of the Jazz Age in the portrayal of Elaine the way she is perceived by the lawyer Baldwin as *love, mystery and glitter*, embodying the refined spirit of this culture concordant with Fitzgerald's label for it: *stars and champagne*. Jazz culture is fully consumed here by the two city inhabitants Elaine and George, immersing themselves in the jazz music played there while George is declaring his love for Elaine with expensive restaurant food staying unconsumed – the lobster. Their abstention from consumption of fancy delicacies fully implements the fine idea of the spirituality of jazz culture as the space where love based on the attraction of two independent parties should be consummated within the ambiance of the sound and movements of jazz music and dancing. The space of the fancy restaurant creates sequences of temporality of a conspicuous leisure class where, unlike the parvenus, George and Ellen can flaunt abstention from consumption for which they have paid. Thus, they even further demonstrate their *pecuniary achievement* (Veblen 66), realized in the fact that they frown upon what everyone else strives for.

Dos Passos sees Manhattan as a machine city of mechanical consumption and commodification of its inhabitants, this view being revealed in a multitude of scenes, permeating virtually every passage of the novel. For example, Elaine (Ellen) crosses her paths with Jimmy Herf on a numerous occasions, and then her consumption of the Jazz Age in a dance with him, is made mechanical by the underscoring naturalist view of the metropolis and its inhabitants. Likewise, Robert Crunden sees in the pervasive mechanization in Dos Passos the "diastole and systole of the city: you put it up, you tear it down, machines dictating the emotional level" (101). Gradually Ellen becomes much like any other urban structure, "a stiff castiron figure in her metalgreen evening dress" (MT 261). She blends with the inanimate world of the city as it produces spaces in continuous reactions with one another, the cultural space of jazz music interacting with the social space of everyday urban practice. As a result, the two dancers turn into a mechanical figurine statue with Ellen (Elaine) taking on the shape of "an intricate machine of sawtooth steel" (MT 228). She changes color in his arms chameleon-like in a mechanical dance not unlike the *danse macabre* where the city inhabitants only appear to be human, but the body is just a form harboring no soul. The city thus acts as a beautiful glamorous entity with myriads of shimmering lights and colors, sucking in newcomers and turning out dehumanized inhabitants as the mechanical cogs that trigger and perpetuate its interactions, thus denying them its glamor.

The mechanical experience of the alimentary side of the Jazz Age, just like its aspect of pecuniary culture, in Dos Passos leads to people turning into inanimate objects of consumption, the only exception being the sensitive flâneur represented by Jimmy Herf. By contrast to his portrayal, Ellen evolves through degrees of commodification, often manifested in consuming restaurant food.

With Ellen, who identifies completely with New York as a city of relentless consumption and commodification, we can observe how she is literally turning into a commodity in a scene very different from the one discussed above, where she is still resisting this identification by abstaining from eating. Ellen's *jolty* movements towards George Baldwin in the novel are finally represented synecdochically and visually in her approaching him in the space of a taxicab with her still retaining warm images of the world of Jimmy Herf – her current husband. These images, in the sequence of the taxi, make her feel tired and are seen as

crystalizing into the cold world of financial success that she is about to embrace through her relationship with her future husband rendered through her becoming a mechanized object: “All her nerves were sharp steel jangled wires cutting into her temples” (MT 316).

Unlike the previous restaurant scene with George, here both of them indulge in ravenous food consumption inaugurated by Ellen’s admission that she is “starved” (317), symbolic of her future consumerist patterns. In the course of the expensive dinner, with the immediacy of consumption stimuli, the crystalizing coldness in her is finally cemented:

Through dinner she felt a gradual icy coldness stealing through her like novocaine. She had made up her mind. It seemed as if she had set the photograph of herself in her own place, forever frozen into a single gesture. An invisible silk band of bitterness was tightening round her throat, strangling. Beyond the plates, the ivory pink lamp, the broken pieces of bread, his face above the blank shirtfront jerked and nodded; the flush grew on his cheeks; his nose caught the light now on one side, now on the other, his taut lips moved eloquently over his yellow teeth. Ellen felt herself sitting with her ankles crossed, rigid as a porcelain figure under her clothes, everything about her seemed to be growing hard and enameled, the air bluestreaked [sic] with cigarettesmoke, [sic] was turning to glass. (MT 318)

The solidification of matter, animate and inanimate rendered *enameled*, is linked to George Baldwin’s *yellow teeth*, an expression of mechanical consumption and decay, but also an evocation of her father’s “uneven yellow teeth” (5), a confirmed materialist identity with the father conspicuously absent from her childhood. George’s confession that he felt like *a hollow tin mechanical toy* (319) makes her shudder as it cements her *protentional*¹ pattern (Augoyard 130) of identification with the metropolis, which is nothing less than spiritual death realized through mechanized love where the city inhabitant is completely stripped of spiritual properties.

Even though he professes emptiness in his life that she will fill, there can be little doubt as to the kind of filling she is to effectuate as his lips close “inexorably” (319) on hers in a taxicab after-dinner kiss. This protracted extended metaphor of masticating teeth in Ellen and Baldwin invokes Veblen’s discussion of “vicarious consumption” (58) in women. In her acquired capacity of a ceremonial consumer of goods purchased by him, Ellen may be viewed as eternally consigned to “chattel slavery” (58), supplying yet another piece to the city as *grinding teeth* – from the apple-mincer of a ferryboat (3) through the public spaces – streets and parks with serrated edges abrasive to the city inhabitants. The metal shavings (115) released in this friction of automatons moving in sensory-thick space climaxes into a mechanical consumption of love.

Another dimension of restaurant space can be observed in a meal had by Jimmy Herf and Ruth where restaurant food bridges urban culture and consumption, becoming the comestible expression of potential foreplay:

“Jimmy you shock me. ...She keeps losing her false teeth,” began Ruth; an L train drowned out the rest. The restaurant door closing behind them choked off the roar of wheels on rails. An orchestra was playing *When It’s Appleblossom Time in Normandee*. The place was full of smokewrithing slants of sunlight, paper festoons, signs

¹ In *Step by Step* (1979) Augoyard discusses walking rhetoric and inhabitant rhetoric connected to appropriation of urban spaces. *Protention* here is related to consistent topological movements towards spaces of consumption. The other two basic types of Augoyard’s inhabitant rhetoric are *retention* and *eurythmic composition*; the third is a combination of the first two types.

announcing LOBSTERS ARRIVE DAILY, EAT CLAMS NOW, TRY OUR DELICIOUS FRENCH STYLE STEAMED MUSSELS (Recommended by the Department of Agriculture). They sat down under a redlettered placard BEEFSTEAK PARTIES UPSTAIRS and Ruth made a pass at him with a breadstick. “Jimmy do you think it’d be immoral to eat scallops for breakfast? But first I’ve got to have coffee coffee coffee...” “I’m going to eat a small steak and onions.” “Not if you’re intending to spend the afternoon with me, Mr. Herf.” “Oh all right. Ruth I lay my onions at your feet.” “That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you kiss me.” “What ... on the Palisades?” Ruth’s giggle broke into a whoop of laughter. Jimmy blushed crimson. “I never axed [sic] you madam, he say-ed” [sic]. (MT 115)

The urban scene of the restaurant at New York Palisades offers a myriad of signs where altering *signifier* and *signified* are being reinterpreted in the conversation between the two city dwellers regularly drowned in the deafening noise of the ubiquitous L train. The seafood delicacies are elevated by engrafting moral and poetic connotations on to them. Thus, the respective higher register referents are reduced to food items as in dreams from Yeats’s *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* (1899). Here dreams turn into *onions* that Jimmy lays at Ruth’s feet, to be deftly parried by Ruth in an established connection between literary culture and corporeal consumption. The amalgam and mutual reinterpretation of the two results from the interaction between them and evokes potential carnal pleasures.

The two paragraphs portray different degrees of commodification of city inhabitants and cultural realia. Unlike Ellen and George, Jimmy remains immune to complete identification with New York, thus preserving his humanity to a bigger extent than Ellen does in spite of the full display of mechanization around him at the restaurant. This uneven distribution of commodification in city inhabitants has provoked reactions from critics such as Edmund Wilson. For this critic, it is a biased pronouncement of spiritual hollowness in the rich, leading to this critic’s refusal to validate exclusivity of emotions and qualities inherent only in the “class-conscious workers and their leaders” (143).

The different patterns of advancing in the metropolis as a mass cultural practice in the Jazz Age, therefore, form different representational spaces in the stratified society of the metropolis and renders cultural space divided into two parts: one of them seeking decadent spirituality (Fitzgerald, *My Lost City* 132), music and dance while the other is a mercantile social practice. Both of them represent different faces of modernity and of the Jazz Age, containing privileged and underprivileged cultural space users. This division and consequent segregation of cultural space in the 1920s was expressed in different representations of space: means of transport, institutions, bars and restaurants, hotels, etc.

In spite of these difficulties in the New York of the 1920s, the extant and potential opportunities made it the city of choice for many immigrants disillusioned with Europe:

“But what’s the matter?” “Lost my job that’s all... I won’t have to take any more off that guy. Come over and drink a coffee.” They ordered coffee and doughnuts in a lunchwagon on a vacant lot. “Eh bien you like it this sacred pig of a country?” asked Marco. “Why not? I like it anywhere. It’s all the same, in France you are paid badly and live well; here you are paid well and live badly?” (MT 31)

What Congo refers to is the fact that with the explosion of urbanity in the USA, big cities would feature dominant business practices, effectively cutting off immigrants from the consumption of the Jazz Age as it also has a financial side – expensive restaurants, fancy balls,

reducing their eating practices in public places to the usual *lunchwagon*. The Jazz Age also featured the more repulsive, conspicuous consumption and reflected the decadent spirit of a consumerist age. Thus, their being largely excluded from it in Dos Passos's representations, also excludes them from experiencing its true spirit. As a result, external immigrants like Congo, Emile and Marco find themselves not only in a New World, but on a new planet where they miss out on everything that is happening around them, being compelled to work incessantly. They rent rooms in abject tenements and appreciate the fact that in spite of all this, they are still earning better than back in Europe. Conversely, the chronicler of this cultural wave, Fitzgerald states that experiencing the Jazz Age equaled a mass culture. Still what he means by that is people who were representatives of his class or above, as he depicts them in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, and corroborates his own statement that they were "the whole upper tenth" of the nation (*My Lost City* 137).

The other dominant city trend within the Jazz Age to be examined in this paper was associated with the emergence of business practices and consumerism, which featured an impetus for societal advancement. In short, for all practical purposes, everything was money and nothing succeeded like success (*MT* 225). That was the phrase of the day and that was the reason why immigrants from within the country and from abroad had come to New York. If they were not successful in New York, that was the ultimate proof of human (urban) ineptitude. That was also the sole criterion by which they were judged in society and very often in the family. That was ultimately, the latest translation of social Darwinism in the epoch: only the fittest would survive, and they were the people who made it to the middle and upper-middle classes. *Pecuniary culture*, which best summarizes these urban practices, found its place in occupying a considerable part of the social practice of the city inhabitants in Dos Passos's represented spaces. New York was the city where it was made manifest and where each city inhabitant made it his/her goal to advance to a more propitious position in it.

I continue my analysis with the already mentioned highly competitive nature of consumption of this cultural space as an inhibiting factor that makes city inhabitants dream of escaping the confines of the metropolis and returning to their previous points of departure or another place, which could offer a bucolic consumption of non-city culture. What New York invariably offered the mass users of the city was a job that was good enough for them to survive in the metropolis, always hoping to upgrade it to a better one. However, with most of them, this remained an unattainable dream as intimated in Bud Korpenning's case, who, walking down Broadway amidst urban chaos caused by abandoned construction sites, makeshift buildings and all sorts of small shops, bumps into a New York old timer. The stranger invokes sixty years of working experience as a proof of the unavailability of good jobs (*MT* 21). The sense of despair for the present and hope for the future is shared between two fathers – Ed Thatcher and a German immigrant, Mr Zucher. As they retreat into a cheap pub to discuss fatherhood and its responsibilities, Mr Zucher expresses his hope that "ven my poy drinks to his poy, it vill be champagne vine" (*MT* 8). As the place does not entail privacy, they are overheard by the bartender who observes them, as they are drinking beer. Ed Thatcher expresses his vision of the kind of girl he would prefer his baby girl (Ellen) to be – patriarchal complying with a city code that is already obsolescent, retained in the memory of the immigrants, thus expressing his disapproval of the modernist city of New York and the liberties with which it endows young women, marking a breaking point. This point is neatly captured by Fitzgerald's remark "none of the Victorian mothers – and most of the mothers were Victorian – had any idea of how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed" (*This Side of Paradise* 64). The dynamics of advancement in the city as a mass cultural practice is made prominent by the bartender who joins the discussion. A previous financial crisis forebodes the forthcoming one, a decade later as he recalls the bankruptcy of a bank where he used to keep his savings. Success in the big city as the ultimate act of consuming this culture is

finally reduced to risking it all on a bold move: “Get a close tip and take a chance, that’s the only system” (8).

New York and America is the only place where “pecuniary success” is perceived as possible, resulting from hard work and a good job, which is a recurrent motif in the discussions of the immigrants Emile and Congo. They express the conviction that trying to advance in the city leads to commodifying everything as well as to feasible success: In “America a fellow can get ahead. Birth don’t [sic] matter, education don’t [sic] matter. It’s all getting ahead” (MT18).

The social practice related to this culture meant a possible advance (*getting ahead*) in the New World with the old one posing restrictions, arising from abiding by old social codes. This shared conviction, glorifying glamorous success and denigrating despicable defeat, reads societal advancement in the city like a coin one side of which spelt success and the other one failure as poignantly depicted against commodified dimensions of fatherhood in the following passage:

“Don’t be so bitter Jimmy, it’s just temporary.” “Life’s just temporary for that matter.” The taxi drew up. Jimmy paid him with his last dollar. Ellie had her key in the outside door. The street was a confusion of driving absintheblurred snow. The door of their apartment closed behind them. Chairs, tables, books, windowcurtains crowded about them bitter with the dust of yesterday, the day before, the day before that. Smells of diapers and coffeepots and typewriter oil and Dutch Cleanser oppressed them. Ellen put out the empty milkbottle and went to bed. Jimmy kept walking nervously about the front room. His drunkenness ebbed away leaving him icily sober. In the empty chamber of his brain a doublefaced word clanked like a coin: Success Failure, Success Failure. (MT 258)

The sensation of not realizing the American Dream when it is potentially available and tantalizingly accessible results in transforming the city inhabitants of the modern American metropolis into automatons (Mumford 179). Moreover, as remarked by Veblen, the major shortcoming of “pecuniary success” lies in the fact that it is related to “pecuniary emulation” (27), which always leads to frustration arising from invidiousness and inability for its practitioners to reach a point of sufficiency, always aiming for a higher pecuniary standard (26). Success should not be perceived here as earning a living or surviving in the metropolis, which could be the definition of *success* for impecunious city inhabitants. As Veblen argues, once having reached a point of sufficiency set by a city inhabitant, he will push forward to another point “as high as the earning capacity of the class will permit” (76), thus leaving him permanently dissatisfied.

If we return to Congo’s and Jimmy’s definition of success, we will see the different points of sufficiency they have reached. For Congo, who is a waiter from France, and who sleeps in cheap rented rooms sharing them with others, the possibility for advancement in itself is what is valuable in America unimpeded by race or education, perceived as inhibiting factors in Europe. By contrast, we find Jimmy married to Ellen, who is a promising actress with a child (not his), but penniless and although he has the prestigious job of a journalist and lives in an apartment with a woman who is perceived as the symbol of male success in the city, he senses that this point of sufficiency is unstable. Neither the reassurance he receives from Ellen that his state of insolvency is temporary, nor the fact that he lives with an American symbol can stand in the way of Congo’s *catchy* “getting ahead” as the main principle of inhabiting Manhattan spaces. The apartment is permeated with the stale smell of dust, diapers and coffee suggesting a routine incompatible with the spirit of the city. The clutter of dust in the rooms contrasts with the emptiness in his head, which registers the need for a change, but cannot provide a solution. The double-sided word *success-failure* tossed in his head is also a sign not

only of the thin line between the two in the city, but also of one being the other at all times. The fact that they are simultaneously mutually inclusive and exclusive leaves Jimmy perplexed when he is with all his thinking faculties, which calls for a different action plan.

A strong inhibitor on the way to success is the traumatizing sensation of big money present everywhere and yet inaccessible to the majority of city consumers, for whom it has been reduced to the realm of *nickelodeon* (MT 248), made prominent in the hail that “was spitting the pavements with fiftycent pieces” (MT 175). The city weather is presented as part of the mechanized face of the metropolis in a final cruel mockery at the efforts made by the city inhabitants to advance from lower to upper strata of society, the hail melting and turning into water.

The double-faced coin of city experience is manifested yet again – it is translated into success for some and failure for others. Low wages for the majority of the urban population and lack of city advancement on their part mean amassing a huge surplus value at the banks, which reads as enormous success for some at the expense of the ineptitude of the others to access higher points of sufficiency (MT 327-8).

Thus, in *Manhattan Transfer*, the Jazz Age as a cultural space remains equally restricted to the new rich and the immigrants alike in all its aspects for different reasons. As regards jazz culture consumed at restaurants, the former are too vulgar to appreciate it, while the latter, almost equally vulgar, have to resort to frequenting inexpensive snack bars where mainly alcohol, coffee and cheap snacks are served. Love confessions between couples there are rather inappropriate, the places mainly reserved for male gatherings. The second aspect of it – societal advancement expressed by *pecuniary* culture is also consumed unequally. The first generation immigrants’ chances of real success in the city are very limited as they occupy the worst niches on the job market, forming the lowermost layer of a pyramid. It rises in height in proportion to the fresh supply of low-level layers, pushing the extant layers higher and increasing chances of success for the occupants of these layers, a principle that can still be considered in force in the USA and other immigrant countries such as Canada.

This portrayal of the Jazz Age emphasizes its inclusive essence within the larger notion of “pecuniary culture” as well as its exclusive stratified structure and contains it as a period. Denied to a substantial number of New Yorkers who had to work hard, struggling with the payments for their rents and bills, its jazz culture glamor has very limited presence in Dos Passos’s portrayal of the city while its more palpable expression of societal advancement is omnipresent, unlike Fitzgerald’s case, where this two-sided structure of the Jazz Age is reversed. The social representation of the Jazz Age as a universal impetus for advancement in the big city is much better represented by Dos Passos than by Fitzgerald, revealing the complex stratified structure of the Jazz Age as a cultural space.

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