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# The City as a Vacuous Common Place / Space

in John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*<sup>1</sup>

This paper explores some possibilities of interpreting the motif of the city in John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* as a multiply vacuous common sphere. First, it is shown how the spatial aspect of the city can be characterized by its twofold rendition as a place endowed with intrinsic ambiguity on the one hand, and as a defective common space on the other. Second, a structurally similar duality is investigated in the temporal experience of Dos Passos's city dwellers by distinguishing between (vacuous) present time and historicity, each associated with attributes of the city as a place and a space. Finally, it is shown that the postulated spatiotemporal vacuity of the city correlates with the pervasively aesthetic character of the urban sphere, where interpersonal relations are inherently deficient. This leads to an ultimate, moral vacuity in the common urban space; the only aspect of the vacuity discussed which is not absorbed at the end of the novel.

“How could we reach a landscape which is no longer what we see, but, on the contrary, is in which we are seen?”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to be a commonly accepted idea that in John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), a paradigmatic example of the Modernist city novel, “[i]t is not the

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1. This is a revised version of my paper which received the Academic Award from the School of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (Spring 2007).

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust*, trans. Éva John (Budapest: Atlantisz, 2002), p. 13. All uncredited translations from Hungarian to English are mine. These comprise quotations from the following works: Deleuze, *Proust*; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Teljesség és végtelen* [Totality and Infinity], trans. László Tarnay (Pécs: Jelenkor, 1999); and Jean-Paul Sartre, “A husserli fenomenológia egyik alapvető gondolata: az intencionalitás” [On Intentionality as a Fundamental Concept of Husserl's Phenomenology], trans. Péter Sándor, *Gond* 10 (1995) 155–157.

nature of the protagonist or the relationships between characters that are the *faits primitifs* of literary fiction but the chronotopic constructions,” i.e. the spatiotemporal aspects “that writers and readers associate with the text.”<sup>3</sup> Bearing on this assumption, the present paper argues that Manhattan is represented as a *vacuous common sphere* in Dos Passos’s novel, attempting to systematically unite by way of this interpretation many of the diverse chronotopic aspects of the ‘city novel,’ while also accounting for some of its peculiarities of characterization and plot-construction. In the first section, the spatial aspects of the motif of the city will be investigated. It will be argued that the spatiality of this fictional urban scene can be characterized by an inherent duality: it is more or less explicitly conceptualized at once as an unattainable place and an inescapable common space by the characters, both of these facets having their own ontological equivocalities which lead to the spatial aspects of the hypothesized vacuity in the novel. In the second part, a structurally similar ambiguity will be analyzed in the representation of temporal experience so as to demonstrate the vacuity of the fictional present time, associated with the city as a vacuous place, and the vacuity of historicity in the novel, associated with Manhattan as a vacuous space. Finally, in the last section, it will be shown that following from the unusual metaphysical characteristics of the city discussed in the previous sections, the urban scene of the novel may be regarded as an aestheticized sphere where ethics is excluded from the characters’ possible attitudes to one another. This will be the ultimate aspect of the vacuity attributed to this *common* space, and arguably the only one that will not be voided concurrently with Jimmy’s secession from the city, either.

## 1 The City as a Place / Space

“This is a funny place. . . .”

“Where?”

“Oh, I dunno, I guess everywhere. . . .” (196)<sup>4</sup>

As the first focus of the present study, this section aims to investigate the characteristics of Dos Passos’s representation of New York in terms of its spatiality, assuming that the peculiarities inherent in such a conceptualization are of primary significance

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3. Bart Keunen, “The Plurality of Chronotopes in the Modernist City Novel: The Case of *Manhattan Transfer*,” *English Studies* 82.5 (2001) 420–436, p. 420.

4. All parenthesized references are to this edition: John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (London: Constable & Co, 1927 [1925]).

in establishing the city as a vacuous *common* sphere. This investigation, also anticipating the structure of the following section, will be basically twofold. First, the notion of the city as an abstract, yet substantial *place* will be analyzed with respect to its potential perceptions by the characters and the concomitant roles it plays in characterization and narration. It will be argued that this place manifests itself, again, in a peculiar duality which is crucial to the subversive metaphysics of the city, and contributes to the narration in a way which in turn is necessitated by the vacuity of community in the urban *space*. This space will be the second aspect of spatiality discussed herein, with the aim of showing that the concept of the common, intersubjectively constituted space is vacuous in the novel, but precisely in its vacuity, holds the inhabitants of the fictional Manhattan captive in the city as a deficiently human, yet unquestionably existent, socially constructed sphere.

The conceptualization of the city as a *place*, one of the two complementary spatial aspects of the city to be tackled in this paper, is the vantage point of the outsider, which is relevant inasmuch as most of the characters are, though in various ways, outsiders or downright strangers in Dos Passos's New York, as it will be shown. Thus, for the stranger, Manhattan is conveyed in the novel as a potentially well-determinable position, an origin and a point of reference in an almost geometrical sense: it is conceived of as an entity without extension.

Apparently, it is in part due to the relative extremity of this concept (or rather percept on the part of the characters) of the city that the narration does not slow down and cease to move (at the end, either), failing to bring the novel through a more or less clear-cut itinerary. The major characters, as well as the minor ones, as it were, strive "for more than life can give," as Clark puts it,<sup>5</sup> and in an attempt to seek for this "more," or "more real," they return to or flee from the city as a point of reference against which the "more" can be measured. The motivating effect of this approach to the city could, in the first place, be illustrated with the trajectory of Bud, a character who appears to be of paramount importance, not so much despite as because of the fact that his presence in the novel extends only to the first section (i.e. the first five chapters) of the book. During this relatively brief career, however, he is emphatically present, and he is so in a most peculiar way: he has practically no connection whatsoever to any other character, which would be largely inconceivable in a narrative structure based primarily on the characters' interactions and the events unfolding from them.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Michael Clark, *Dos Passos's Early Fiction, 1912–1938* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), p. 111.

6. Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), pp. 157, 168.

Bud's aspiration is well summarized by his recurring phrase: "If I could git more *into the center of things*" (24, my italics). This center, as it were, appears to him (as much as to the other immigrant characters, e.g. Émile) a place in the city that is in some sense more "real" than anywhere else. The quest for such an (external embodiment of the) quality of reality, so typical of all the major characters,<sup>7</sup> manifests itself in the search for a job as well as a hiding place in Bud's case. One of the very few dialogs he participates in reveals, in a most ironic manner, the radicalism of this concept of "reality" as it is *collated* with that of centrality in spatial terms:

[Bud:] "Say. . . er. . . kin you tell me about *where's a good place* to find out about gettin' a job?" The butcher boy threw back his head and laughed.  
 ". . . I guess *you ain't a Newyorker*. . . I'll tell you what to do. You *keep right on down Broadway* till you get to City Hall." . . .  
 "Is that kinder *the centre of things*?"  
 "Sure it is. . . An' then you go upstairs and ask the Mayor. . . ."  
 (24, my italics)

The absurdity of this seek, of course, partly consists in the fact that the "center" is only virtually existent. Broadway, arguably the most central entity in the city, meanders through the heart of Manhattan without offering one single point of reference – or, for that matter, one single job: the quest, thus, at least ideally, becomes an incessant process. (Even if in non-ideal terms, it comes to an abrupt end in Bud's case.) It seems one either is eternally involved in the course of searching for *the* city as a place, or simply is there, in the sense that one can identify oneself with the place as an abstract center.

Consequently, Dos Passos's city as a radically reduced place appears to be physically unattainable, and this peculiarity contributes to the narration as it guarantees that the paradox situation of constructing a novel out of the lives of people who live in the same place but have no real connection with one another, or no "social nexus",<sup>8</sup> does not result in the breakdown of the narrative.<sup>9</sup> The fictional Manhattan

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7. Blanche Housman Gelfant, "The Search for Identity in the Novels of John Dos Passos," in *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 156–196, p. 177.

8. Joseph Warren Beach, "Manhattan Transfer. Collectivism and Abstract Composition," in *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 54–69, p. 61.

9. John Wrenn also ventures as far as to claim that "the apparent chaos of the whirlwind itself provides the form and the action" (quoted in Clark, p. 98) in *Manhattan Transfer*, meaning the drift of the city by this "whirlwind" which is analyzed here in spatial terms.

may thus be regarded as transphenomenal – it is not a place in the strict physical or geometrical sense, as it is represented in the novel, but at the same time its transphenomenal character does not at all compel one to draw the conclusion that it is not “real” or has a non-substantial existence.<sup>10</sup> Thus the quest for the city manifests itself as the pursuit of something more “real” or substantial and at once that of something *exterior* to the characters. From this perspective, it is not only the abstractness of the concept of the city which is so striking, but also its abstract *exteriority*: the fact that it cannot simply be reduced to a ‘mental place,’ an individual’s private construct. Its mythic power can in part be traced back to the fact that this external existence is experienced by all of the city dwellers individually, thus transforming them into a virtual, ideal community, and yet this exteriority remains elusive to each of them, precisely because it has this tinge of interpersonality which renders it inaccessible to the otherwise unrelated characters.

Such a rendition of the characters’ experience of the city as a place in *Manhattan Transfer* can be further enlightened by having recourse to the notion of intentionality as it is used in continental philosophy, particularly in Sartre’s existentialist re-reading of the concept, which is aptly summarized in one of his earliest writings as follows:

To be is to explode into the world, to depart from the Nothingness of the world and that of the consciousness, and *to explode as a consciousness-in-the-world*. When the consciousness . . . imprisoned in itself, attempts to grasp itself again, to eventually coincide with itself, it is annihilated. The necessity of the consciousness to be the *consciousness of something external to it* is called intentionality.<sup>11</sup>

Sartre’s explosion of the consciousness (a *pro-jection* in a most direct sense) is not aimed at the sudden attainment and incorporation of the external. On the contrary, the consciousness (the self, as it were, which is primordially vacuous in his conceptualization) is constituted in the process of its continuous outward *motion*,<sup>12</sup> toward something “real,” irreducibly substantial and *different*: in short, toward the Other whose power is rooted in its substantial exteriority and unattainability. In this light, the city as a place is also of particular significance in Dos Passos’s novel since it

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10. The expression “transphenomenal” is not to be equated with the epistemically isolated substance of the “thing-in-itself [Ding an Sich] of Kantian critical philosophy. A transphenomenal entity can enter into various relations with the consciousness of the subject and vice versa (e.g. such is Lévinas’s concept of the transphenomenal ‘face’).

11. Sartre, “On Intentionality,” p. 157; my italics.

12. Sartre, “On Intentionality,” p. 156.

serves as the principal self-constituting Other for most of the characters, instead of the characters themselves serving as such for one another. In other words, it is the city as a motivating Other that prevents (most of the) characters' lives from "closing in on themselves,"<sup>13</sup> by relating to each of them while none of them is fundamentally related to another. – This is one of the ways in which the city can be considered common, but vacuously so.

At the same time, the active motion of the characters with reference to the city as a static, passive point is only one relevant conceptualization of the city as a place in *Manhattan Transfer*, while it is also crucial to emphasize the potentially active role of the city itself in the narrative and character-constitutive processes described above. Thus it is also possible to conceive of this active (ideal) motion of the city itself as its intrusion into the characters' lives and identities, perceived as a kind of *implosion* or impression (in a very direct sense) on the part of Dos Passos's city dwellers. This approach is particularly important as it complements the postulated transphenomenal character adherent to the city which is thus also experienced by the characters in an almost disconcertingly direct, sensual manner throughout the novel. It is the inability to cope with the paradoxical, irreducible duality of abstractness and sensual reality in Bud's perception of Manhattan that may also contribute, from a certain viewpoint, to his death, since the city as a place with its irresistible lure of being invariably far away and at the same time, with its threat of being seemingly always too close does not allow him to settle before the fatal end of his journey. (It is to be recalled that he is also seeking for a hiding place.)<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, not only does the city as a place function as the Other for Bud and the other characters, but they also exist as the Other of this transphenomenal Other (the abstract, yet substantial Manhattan itself). The abstract and at once sensual impression (implosion) created by the city thus becomes constitutive of the characters as much as their explosion or outward movement toward or from the city as described above.<sup>15</sup> It is this actively constitutive, intrusive aspect attributed to the city which may

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13. Jean-Paul Sartre, "John Dos Passos and 1919," in *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 70–80, p. 74.

14. As Clark puts it, "if the vortex suggests feverish activity, it also suggests the quiet center, the attainment of which *seems* to offer satisfaction, relief from anxiety" (p. 104, emphasis mine [A. M.]).

15. The example of Bud has already demonstrated a character's active motion *toward* the city, but Manhattan as a place also serves as a point of reference *from* which it is possible to flee – this is going to be Jimmy Herf's route.

well be captured in a Lévinasian conceptualization of the city as a self-constitutive Other for Dos Passos's characters. Even more so as the *idea of infinity* seems to be unalienable from the concept of the city as a place. On the one hand, it may account for its strangeness and alterity which curiously does *not* coincide with a full-fledged objectivity (i.e. a phenomenal submission to or incorporation into the consciousness of its inhabitants). On the other hand, the *desire* which pervades those who are incessantly seeking for the emphatically substantial, yet unfathomable reality of the city may also be interpreted as stemming from its infinity in a Lévinasian sense:

Infinity is *not the object* of contemplation, that is, is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of infinity is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is a *desire*. Desire "measures" the infinity of the infinite.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, in approaching Dos Passos's city with this notion of infinity, it is indispensable to take into consideration that in Lévinas's framework,

[t]he true *desire* is that which the desired does not satisfy, but hollows out. It is goodness. [!] It *does not refer to a lost fatherland* or plenitude; *it is not homesickness*, is not nostalgia. It is the lack in a being which **is** completely, and lacks nothing.<sup>17</sup>

The prima facie incompatibility of Lévinas's desire of the infinite (herein applied as the desire of the city) with homesickness (a notion that could be accommodated in Sartre's system) seems to be in need of some resolution if the apparently plausible supposition that "homelessness shapes the pattern of [the generic hero's] life" in Dos Passos's novel is to be sustained.<sup>18</sup> The profound terminological and conceptual difference between the Sartrean and Lévinasian frameworks is more clearly reflected in Lévinas's following statement:

The thinker who has the idea of infinity is *more than himself*, and this inflating, this surplus, does not come from within, as in the celebrated *project* of modern philosophers, in which the subject surpasses himself by creating.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Emmanuel Lévinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht–Boston–Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 47–59, p. 56, emphases added.

17. Lévinas, "Philosophy," p. 56; my italics, Lévinas's bold italics.

18. Gelfant, "The Search," p. 159.

19. Lévinas, "Philosophy," p. 54; italics in original.

The “celebrated project” here refers either to the Sartrean concept of *projection* [pro-jet, pro-jeter] mentioned above, or to the Heideggerian notion of man as a project [Entwurf].<sup>20</sup> Both entail a principle of subjectivity *extending itself* toward alterity, as opposed to Lévinas’s subjectivity which is constituted and extended *by alterity*. However, it has been shown that, crucially, the city as a place may well be conceived in *both terms*: as Gelfant significantly observes, for instance, Jimmy Herf’s attitude to Manhattan is characterized by a peculiar duality, namely that Jimmy approaches New York as a stranger, a holiday tourist, and remains an outsider throughout, but at the very same time, he also demonstrates high emotional involvement in the city. In other words, Jimmy extends himself toward the city (it is in this, Sartrean concept of desire for the city as something external that homesickness is possible at all), while the city also attempts to extend him by extending itself *into* him (creating in him a desire that cannot be homesickness, as it is not directed toward something external): this accounts for the duality of his behavior as well as in part for the fundamentally problematic nature of his subjectivity itself.

Thus, with regard to the conceptualization of the city as a place in Dos Passos’s work, the compossibility and actual co-appearance of the Sartrean approach underscoring the constitutive significance of the characters’ movement toward the city on the one hand, and the Lévinasian approach emphasizing the city’s intrusion into the characters’ lives on the other is intrinsically paradoxical – and this paradox does not appear to be reducible. On the contrary, the outlines of these thinkers’ opposing views on subjectivity prove fruitful in so far as they cast light upon the fact that this very duality is partly responsible for the singularity of New York and its inhabitants as represented in *Manhattan Transfer*. It seems therefore that Sartre’s description of Dos Passos’s *1919* (1932) equally holds for this novel: “Dos Passos’ world . . . is impossible because it is contradictory. But therein lies its beauty,”<sup>21</sup> or at least in part the peculiarity of its narrative structure and that of the characterization from which this structure is inseparable.

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After having scrutinized the concept of the city as a place, an abstract point of reference, the representation of the city as (a) *space* in Dos Passos’s work is to be discussed with a view to mapping the irreducible *duality* of place vs. space in the fictional Manhattan, which is held to give further insight into the instabilities of the

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20. See Lingis’s note in Lévinas, “Philosophy,” p. 54.

21. Sartre, “Dos Passos,” p. 80.



postulated urban sphere of the novel. As one of the minor characters in the novel, George Baldwin formulates this duality in a rather succinct manner, “[t]he terrible thing about having New York go stale on you is that there’s nowhere else. It’s the top of the world. All we can do is go round and round in a squirrel cage” (207). That is, whereas Manhattan is the “top,” a mere position, it is also a space – more precisely, *the* space: the phrase “there’s nowhere else” does not only imply that there is no other (higher, more “real,” substantial) place to go in a social sense. It also entails that New York is like physical space in a most abstract and, at the very same time, most concrete sense: one cannot escape it, or happen to be (get) outside of it, since it is the coordinate-system itself wherein things may happen at all.

This seems to be especially remarkable, if not definitely problematic, in *Manhattan Transfer*, since the actual scene of the novel hardly seems to play a significant role in determining or at least giving rise to the characters’ interactions. The city as space, i.e. a potential sphere of social interaction, is often considered in Dos Passos’s work to have no “reference to interests shared, sentiments reciprocated, ideals held in common. It is an atomistic world, a moral chaos, set in a frame of cosmic order.”<sup>22</sup> As Nanney puts it, the novel is primarily concerned with “the individual’s relationship to the system,”<sup>23</sup> meaning the city itself by this “system,” rather than the individuals’ relationship with one another. (Similarly to the characters’ separate relations to the city as a place. However, the crucial difference is that [the notion of] the city as a space is by definition created interpersonally, by a hypothetical community.) Again, to quote Lévinas, “The intimacy assumed by feeling at home is intimacy *with somebody*. The interior of withdrawal is already a solitude in a human world” – and it is precisely this intimacy that is missing in Dos Passos’s Manhattan as a space,<sup>24</sup> which thus provides its inhabitants with no home proper but with a curiously empty concept of a common sphere that is constituted intersubjectively, yet leaves no opportunity for positive interpersonal relations.

Consequently, the curiosity of this space consists in the realization that whoever enters it may neither reach the state of solitude in a profoundly intersubjective sense nor establish deep relationships with other city dwellers – nor feel capable of leaving, for that matter. This is one of the senses in which Nanney’s statement that the characters of *Manhattan Transfer* are “stripped of community or individuality by the city” can be particularly enlightening, as well as Vanderwerken’s simile that “[t]he

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22. Beach, p. 62.

23. Nanney, p. 155.

24. Lévinas, *Totality*, p. 126; italics in original.

inhabitants of Dos Passos' New York are scattered about the city much as the ancient Babelites are scattered about the world."<sup>25</sup> In other words, characters seem to achieve a very peculiar state in which, instead of the full-fledged evolution of their human interiority *and* exteriority, i.e. the development of their means of relating to the modes of existence which may be summarized in broad terms as subjectivity and alterity, they are eventually mutilated *both* in their (human) interiority and exteriority. City dwellers thus become reduced to "abstract urban states of mind,"<sup>26</sup> they are "individuals [but] they are not quite *persons*."<sup>27</sup> Sartre, in discussing one of the author's later novels, draws a remarkably similar conclusion, although from different premises, as he observes that "Dos Passos' man is a hybrid creature, an interior-exterior being."<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically enough, then, the idea of infinity which, in Lévinas's framework, constitutes alterity (or exteriority) and "hollows out" subjectivity (or interiority) does not seem to operate in Dos Passos's representation of the city on the level of *space*, while, on the other hand, it does operate, as it has been shown, on the level of *place*. (Although it is crucial to recall that even the emerging alterity and subjectivity of the characters with regard to the city as a *place* is ambiguous *per se*, with the city embodying both a passive, external, Sartrean alterity and an active; intrusive, Lévinasian one, as it has already been referred to.) This state of affairs, taken together with some of the aspects of temporality to be dealt with in detail in the next section, results in the complete subversion of the 'metaphysics' of the urban space-time of Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* in comparison with the expectations of the meta-/physical 'lifeworld,' exerting an intriguing impact on the system of the city's 'degrees of freedom.' In the 'regular' (meta)physics of the 'lifeworld,' the three spatial dimensions of space-time are considered as one's degrees of freedom, with the additional dimension of time usually excluded due to its strict directionality. Thus, it is customarily impossible to speak about degrees of freedom with regard to a 'place.' However, as it has been shown, Dos Passos's New York operates in an exactly converse way in its duality. On the one hand, since subjectivity and alterity are not developed in their full sense in Manhattan as a *space*, and as it has been shown, there is

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25. David L. Vanderwerken, "Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos' Babel Story," *American Literature* 49.2 (1977) 253–267, p. 254.

26. Blanche Housman Gelfant, "John Dos Passos: The Synoptic Novel," in *Dos Passos. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Andrew Hook (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 36–52, p. 44.

27. Beach, p. 57.

28. Sartre, "Dos Passos," p. 79.

no possibility of positive, meaningful movement in it, it is not univocally consequential to attribute any degrees of freedom to it. On the other hand, however, together with the partially existent subjectivity and alterity, an other degree of freedom is constituted precisely in the characters' relations to Manhattan as a *place*, namely, as it has already been emphasized, a potentiality of primarily linear movement in an abstract sense toward or away from the city as a point of reference.

In conclusion, it is exactly this fundamental place-space duality that, while upholding the curious substantiality of the city in its various aspects, leads to a certain vacuity in the concept of the city as a common space / place in *Manhattan Transfer* by allowing for the (problematic) subjectivity and alterity of the characters being dependent on the city (as a place) instead of other human beings, as well as by metaphysically precluding any kind of substantial interaction between the inhabitants of the freedomless urban space. In consequence, although Manhattan exists in Dos Passos's novel as a common property / construct of its inhabitants, it is never a place / space truly *shared* by them. This, in addition to the spatial facets of metaphysical vacuity, also has profound consequences for the city as a potentially ethical sphere, an aspect of the novel which will be discussed after exploring the temporal facet of the metaphysical vacuity characterizing the urban sphere.

## 2 Unlived Present and Unshared History

“Look, when are we going to see each other again, really see each other, really. . . .” (131)

The present section aims to show how temporality in the fictional space-time of *Manhattan Transfer* is subject to metaphysical subversions as much as spatiality, and how these peculiarities tend to be profoundly intertwined with the somewhat ‘irregular’ spatial characteristics of the urban sphere both in terms of their structure and their consequences. Thus, a certain intrinsic vacuity will be traced in the way characters perceive *present time*, on the one hand, and in the manner *history* as a temporal perspective is represented in the novel, on the other. This duality will then be shown to amount to a fundamentally vacuous (a)temporal experience extending throughout the whole novel, but finally ending in the emergence of a non-vacuous, inherently positive temporality together with substantial alterations in the spatial structure of the city.

First of all, the peculiar vacuity of *present time*, the temporal aspect which can be associated with the city as a *place*, partly stems from the experience of the charac-

ters that Manhattan as an abstract place in the novel always appears to lie either entirely in the *future* or entirely in the *past* of the individuals' lives. A dialog between Mr. Harpsicourt and Ellen Thatcher in the 4th chapter of Section 3, where the former tries to persuade the latter to direct the organization of a new periodical on the latest fads and fashions of city life, exemplifies this attitude with remarkable explicitness: as it seems, the notion of "being in the center" of the city is inseparably associated with this center lying in the *future* for the majority of city dwellers:

[Harpsicourt:] "What we need on such a periodical [*sic*], that I'm sure you could explain it to me far better."

"Of course what you want to do is make every reader feel Johnny on the spot in the centre of things."

"As if she were having lunch right here at the Algonquin."

"Not to-day but to-morrow," added Ellen. (345)

In a similar fashion, Bud's failure can also be grasped by his inability to live in present time, being at once haunted by the appearances of the *past* and those of the *future*. It might as well be due to this marked 'impresence' that some critics do not even find convincing the idea that he committed suicide: Clark, for instance, argues that it is next to impossible to decide whether he jumped or fell from Brooklyn Bridge<sup>29</sup> – most probably because in order to make plausible such a determination, even if the decision was made on the spur of the *moment*, it is necessary to live in earnest in *that* very moment, not the previous or the next one, nor in a sort of abyss in between. Furthermore, Jimmy's secession may similarly instantiate the split temporal nature of the urban sphere conceived as a place: since he declines the city as his future, given the lack of an ontologically positive present time, he has no other choice left in the end but to treat it as his *past* and eventually forget it as such: "He can't seem to remember anything, there is no future but the foggy river and the ferry looming big with its lights in a row" (377). In his ultimate amnesia, Jimmy breaks with the infinity of the city as the atemporal, non-present place, and this climactic *moment*, in addition to changing his temporal experience, will also have an impact on his approach to the spatial characteristics of the city. Not only does he feel abruptly that the city is no longer the *space* for him, with its principle of "nowhere else," but he also senses that the city as a *place* does not possess him any more with its own intrinsic Sartrean-Lévinasian dichotomy, either. The concept of the urban sphere as a place eventually becomes unambiguous, a fatherland ultimately lost: a

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29. Clark, p. 115.

passive, external, Sartrean Other, as Jimmy grows to reject the city constituting him from *within*, i.e. the second, Lévinasian, internal aspect, the infinity that cannot “refer to a lost fatherland.” He therefore seems to flee from the city which, to paraphrase Sartre, “closes in on itself.”

What is thus conspicuously missing in Dos Passos’s novel until the very end is the Bergsonian “lived time,” or the “true time of the novel,” time as the “dense continuity of living tissue,” as Magny articulates it.<sup>30</sup> He underscores that the novel uses a technique of recounting “characters’ lives in that terrible preterit that *deadens* events as soon as they are described to us,”<sup>31</sup> i.e. what is so uncanny about this preterit is that it is related to the *present* instead of the past. There is no moment in which things, events are presented as “living” – deadening takes place without delay, in the moment of presentation. Events are not deadened, but *are* dead: they happen in a vacuous present time – they are deprived of positive temporality and consequently are only endowed with spatiality.<sup>32</sup> Sartre ventures as far as to claim that in Dos Passos’s fiction, “[t]here is no narrative, rather a jerky unreeling of a rough and uneven memory. . . like our real memory, it is a fumble of miniatures and frescoes.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, “characters move within a ‘dead time’ – or rather ‘deadened time’ – with neither spurts nor continuity, where each instant comes to the fore only to be immediately replunged into nothingness.”<sup>34</sup> A kind of concomitant discontinuity in the “psychological awareness of the characters” is also often remarked.<sup>35</sup> In Beach’s view, this may be the underlying reason for the remarkable lack of intervals or transitions between the scenes of the narrative: since personalities are “not bound together by a consistency of aim or objective,” something that would “fill” time, i.e. render the present a real and formable matter, there is no need for continuity in the narration, either. He also articulates the same idea in an even more radical way, stressing that the novel is “made up of separate and unrelated moments – at best, a succession of stimuli followed by responses,” again reinforcing the vacuous nature of the fictional present.<sup>36</sup>

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30. Claude-Edmonde Magny, “Time in Dos Passos,” in *Dos Passos. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Andrew Hook (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 128–144, pp. 132–133.

31. Magny, p. 131.

32. Beach also notes that the “cumulative” epigraphs heading the chapters of *Manhattan Transfer* rather concentrate on the “building up” of a “physical background” than convey temporal experience (Beach, p. 67). That is, they emphasize again spatiality as opposed to temporality.

33. Sartre, “Dos Passos,” p. 72.

34. Magny, p. 133.

35. Magny, p. 133; Beach, p. 63.

36. Beach, p. 64.

Apart from the (vacuous) present time hitherto discussed, however, it is often pointed out that the dominant feature of temporality in *Manhattan Transfer* is its *historical* or social perspective,<sup>37</sup> i.e. the second element in the present time / history duality of the city, the one which can be attributed to Manhattan as an (ideally, but not actually) common *space*. This postulated primacy of history, in fact, seems to be partly in line with the observation put forward herein that characters throughout the novel live in/at/for the past or the future as their temporal reality, which in turn correlates with the lack of positive ontological determination in the fictional present time as analyzed above. Nevertheless, the characters' past previously referred to in this context is still markedly different from a historical past: historicity may be termed as a past *shared*, but the past (or the future, for that matter) of the novel's characters is no such time. It is only the vacuous present that seems to be shared, but this deficient present can never be transformed into a shared, positive past. That is the reason why Sartre's claim that "past things retain a flavor of the present," that of a vacuous present, as it has been shown, may hold for Dos Passos's novel, along with the observation that "[t]he novel . . . unfolds in the present. The perfect tense exists on the surface only."<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, when Dos Passos includes, for instance, clues to historical events in his novel (e.g. the violent death of the architect Stanford White), his aim seems to be the *factualization* of his fiction: he purports "to represent the city as a historically charged space"<sup>39</sup> exactly in an attempt to admit positive, "real," historical time into his fictional world. Therein lies the true relevance of speaking about *historical time* in his fiction. However, such a blurring of a work of art and the history in which it is embedded is an inevitably twofold process itself: the factualization of fiction necessarily implies the "fictionalization of historical events,"<sup>40</sup> which in turn equals to the loss of the quality of unquestionable positivity attributed to these events before they enter the vacuous shared present of the novel. Thus, in the end, when history enters the novel, it can do so only in a more or less petrified form, becoming merely an additional aspect of the vacuous fictional temporality: historical time paradoxically enters the novel as a spurious present, again with "[t]he perfect tense [existing] on the surface only."

In conclusion, with respect to both the present and the historical aspects of temporality in *Manhattan Transfer*, the often cited emphatic "synchronism" of the

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37. See, for example, Gelfant, "The Search," p. 159; Magny, p. 133.

38. Sartre, "Dos Passos," p. 72.

39. Keunen, p. 426.

40. Clark, p. 120.

novel<sup>41</sup> seems to amount to its actually *vacuous temporality*, which is transformed into a positive one at the *dénouement* only when the city as a space is abandoned with its fictionalized history, and the vacuous present of Manhattan as a place, as it cannot be turned into a proper, shared past, is radically forgotten. Thus, it is in this rupture, this ultimate temporal abyss, in which positive time begins and Jimmy Herf is finally enabled to *move* and/or to make *decisions*. In consequence, if Jimmy is posited to be the main character of *Manhattan Transfer*, he is arguably born as a *protagonist* precisely at the very end of the novel, with the break from the vacuously (a)temporal fictional space-time. Similarly, Magny's observation that the "major character" of the book is Time itself may also hold from exactly the same moment.<sup>42</sup> Intriguingly, therefore, Time and protagonist are fully established with the *dénouement*, instead of the beginning,<sup>43</sup> which adds a distinctively Post-modern touch to the novel. Finally, the place-space duality of the novel is thus replaced by a place-time (and not space-time!) duality, which is concurrent with the rise of this new, positive temporality as well, while also leading to major consequences with regard to the conceptualization of the city as an aesthetic or a potentially ethical sphere.

### 3 Aesthetics and Ethics in Dos Passos's New York

"I'm so sick of all that stuff. . . . Oh, just everything like that aesthetic dancing and literature . . . . Just an overdose I guess." (322)

"The pressure exerted by a gas on the walls of its container does not depend upon the individual histories of the molecules composing it."<sup>44</sup>

Having examined the characteristic spatiotemporal relations of the representation of New York in Dos Passos's novel, it has become clear that the abstract, multiply vacu-

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41. Nanney, p. 155.

42. Magny, p. 131.

43. Gelfant's comparison of *Manhattan Transfer* with *Chosen Country*, one of Dos Passos's later novels, is particularly interesting in view of these assumptions. She argues that the latter work "ends with a beginning," offering a prospective perspective in which "[t]he work of creating a civilization out of a wilderness still remains to be done" ("The Search," p. 192), much like the way the work in question is analyzed herein. In contrast, she opines that *Manhattan Transfer* is characterized by its unalterable retrospectivity, disregarding the final turn of the novel.

44. Sartre, "Dos Passos," p. 78.

ous, yet substantial reality of the city with its ahistorical space offering no degrees of freedom bears peculiar resemblance to the somewhat aloof Modernist conceptualizations of the *work of art*. Accordingly, the aim of the present section is to demonstrate how the city as a *space* is constituted as an *aesthetic sphere* in *Manhattan Transfer*, and how this affects the narration and characterization of the novel by transforming its city dwellers into works of art, or even artifacts on the one hand, and prospective artists, on the other, thereby creating a special urban space in which *ethics* as such is rendered virtually nonexistent. In Clark's opinion, Dos Passos "sees aesthetic response to life as a moral experience,"<sup>45</sup> but it will be shown how, on the contrary, such an aestheticization of the city, i.e. a space in which (fictional, though putatively) human beings live, poses an imminent danger to these characters exactly because it *amoralizes* (or "demoralizes,"<sup>46</sup> but not *immoralizes*) this sphere. This will evidently contribute to another sense of vacuity in Manhattan as a common space with regard to the impossibility of responsible action and intersubjective relations in the fictional city, and it is exclusively this aspect of the multifaceted vacuity herein discussed that will also be argued to be left with an at best dubitable resolution at the end of the novel.

Dos Passos's New York is a city in which inhabitants are thus frequently observed to undergo a kind of "dehumanization":<sup>47</sup> they are "petrified,"<sup>48</sup> become isolated *aesthetic objects* themselves, endowed only with a pseudo-solitude which has no intersubjective reference, since the relations constituting subjectivity and alterity are intrinsically deficient in the characters inhabiting this space, as it was shown above. Events for these beings become "things," "alien" and "solitary,"<sup>49</sup> resulting in a world that is fearfully close to the Benjaminian dystopia: "Fiat ars – pereat mundus."<sup>50</sup> The most prominent example (i.e. victim) of this process of dehumanizing aestheticization is Ellen Thatcher, who is held to represent "a beautiful illusion that lacks substance" (an individual with a "missing center"<sup>51</sup>), a human being reduced to something like an ornament.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, her seemingly "schizophrenic" self-

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45. Clark, p. 110.

46. Gelfant, "Dos Passos," p. 52.

47. Gelfant, "The Search," p. 187.

48. Sartre, "Dos Passos," p. 74.

49. Sartre, "Dos Passos," p. 71.

50. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *The Berkeley Institute of Design* <<http://bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html>>. Date of retrieval: March 10, 2007. "Epilogue."

51. Beach, p. 57.

52. Clark, p. 114.



consciousness<sup>53</sup> compels her to feel as if she were a photograph of herself instead of herself proper,<sup>54</sup> and “[l]ike *a sense of a mirror* behind her she felt the smart, probing glances of men and women at the tables round about” at Algonquin (345, my italics [A. M.]), as though regarding other people as *representations*, or, at other times, simply as objects.<sup>55</sup> As Vanderwerken puts it, “to remain in the city is to risk the loss of one’s humanity, to risk metamorphosing, like Ellen Thatcher Herf, into a porcelain doll – hollow, rigid, artificial, and cold.”<sup>56</sup> By the same token, the plans of the architect Specker to create a city that “does not divorce nature from the urban landscape,” in which the most important aim may be the construction of truly “*communal building[s]*,” with nature representing the morally judgeable world in a nature vs. (corrupt) culture dichotomy, are also ironically fulfilled in Ellen, who becomes the much-dreamed-of “vitreous” creature, repeatedly invested in flowers, much like the skyscraper whose entrance could not be found by Jimmy.<sup>57</sup>

At the heart of this dehumanization is again the curious city-space and time which allow for no degrees of freedom. As it was argued in the previous sections, the (otherwise unstable) subjectivity and alterity of the city dwellers is constituted with regard to the city as a place itself, i.e. not on an intersubjective basis, while the city as a space, although an intersubjective construct per se, has been shown to be a space definitely not *shared*, not even in the form of mature human solitude. Profound intersubjective relations are therefore metaphysically precluded in Dos Passos’s city, although it were exactly these the presence of which would *per definitionem* result in a moral sphere, for instance in Lévinas’s framework:

[T]he situation in which one is not alone is not reducible to the fortunate meeting of fraternal souls that greet one another and converse. This situation is the *moral conscience*, the exposedness of freedom to the judgment of the other. It is a disalignment which has authorized us to catch sight of the dimension of height and the ideal in the gaze of him to whom justice is due.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, although the aesthetic nature of the city and its inhabitants has hitherto been demonstrated by means of analogies taken from the field of visual arts, it is crucial to remark that *language* and the city dwellers as its users also undergo an

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53. Clark, p. 107.

54. Nanney, p. 159.

55. Gelfant, “Dos Passos,” p. 48.

56. Vanderwerken, p. 256.

57. Clark, pp. 100, 114, 102.

58. Lévinas, “Philosophy,” p. 59, emphasis added.

analogical process of aestheticization and dehumanization in the urban sphere of Dos Passos's *Manhattan*. Clark, implicitly assuming a simple, yet characteristically Modernist theory of semiotics on pragmatist grounds, argues that Jimmy "cannot have faith in words because people permit language to drift away from being a valid sign for reality," also quoting Craig Carver, who claims that for Dos Passos, newspapers, for instance, symbolized "corrupt language."<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, it is not necessary to limit the construal of this "validity" to any specific criterion of adequation between language and "reality," even though Dos Passos most probably had something similar in mind in his "theory of identity," according to which language is supposed to "mirror" reality.<sup>60</sup> The "corruptedness" of language might be more generally interpreted in the novel's context as consisting in the utter lack of such external criteria, i.e. in the lack of any referentiality whatsoever. Thus, without external references, language becomes a mere stock of "single utterances," "cut off from the thought," "statements in the Press" drawing upon the inexhaustible "Platonic heaven of words and commonplaces [and] gestures" ("With every deep breath Herf breathed in rumble and grind and painted phrases until he began to swell," 330), at the very same time these inevitably becoming a bunch of "maxims,"<sup>61</sup> whose truth-value is at once self-justified and simply irrelevant for want of any criterion of adequation. – This is the point where the overwhelmingly "journalistic" language of *Manhattan* paradoxically assumes the characteristics of the Modernist work of art as a self-sufficient source of truth, which, in its extreme conceptualization, is independent of truth conditions 'external' to the work itself.

It is in this context that Jimmy Herf, of whom "[e]verybody says [he has] given up newspaper work and [is] going to write" (337), is expected to 'recuperate' language by means of creative writing, by switching into an artistic mode of existence. (As Clark puts it, the writer's trade is "the only honest living that can be imagined in the novel."<sup>62</sup>) However, this apparent opportunity of escape entails an immense paradox: it is a futile attempt to redeem language by aestheticizing it, since its problematicness has its roots exactly in its already well marked aesthetic quality.<sup>63</sup> The

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59. Clark, p. 116.

60. Clark, p. 119.

61. Sartre, "Dos Passos," pp. 76–77.

62. Clark, p. 105.

63. Another aspect of the same paradox can be illustrated by the fact that city dwellers in Dos Passos's *Manhattan* usually do not feel at all that they inhabit an aesthetic sphere: "It's all right at night when you can't see it [the city]. There's no artistic sense, no beautiful buildin's . . . that's what's the matter with it" (246). On the contrary, part of the matter may be that

pitfall awaiting the creative writer in this environment of linguistic non-referentiality is the inevitable *superfluity* of language. Given a concept of “journalistic” language (in a most disapproving sense) as non-referential (‘purely aesthetic’), non-individual, superfluous utterance, something that is not even thought of as a matter of responsibility, the writer’s goal should thus be the ‘restoration’ of language as a vehicle of strictly referential, at once universally valid and fundamentally individual expression, something for which somebody is *responsible*. Strangely enough, however, the actual utterance of linguistic signs in this ideal, “cleansed” language, once attained, would not even be important, since the point is precisely that the signifier should not assume a particular significance of its own. In Lévinas’s framework, if the city as a space could provide its inhabitants with a sense of “feeling at home,” something that can never be achieved in an aestheticized sphere, the urban scene would, in like manner, be characterized as “a place to live [where] unuttered language remains a possibility.”<sup>64</sup> – However, the project of redeeming language by its aestheticization, i.e. creative writing, is bound to fail since, as it has been underscored, exactly those of its peculiarities are in need of redemptive aestheticization which are to be associated with its already aesthetic character. Consequently, the ‘aesthetic turn’ could only aggravate the “corruptedness” of language. And although Jimmy Herf does have a restricted number of futile attempts to “cleanse” language, these, even more paradoxically, consist in its ironization,<sup>65</sup> a technique which is evidently unsuitable for stabilizing linguistic referentiality. Thus, Jimmy eventually seems to realize that there is no way of using the over-aestheticized language in a *satisfactorily human* (i.e. not amoral) way, hence his lost “faith in words.”<sup>66</sup>

Throughout the narrative, therefore, the predominantly aesthetic character of the city results, again, in its vacuity as a *common* space, by excluding moral life as such: the “social nexus” with its common values is altogether absent, characters “continue to ignore and deny the moral bonds that [would!] unite them.”<sup>67</sup> Still, there

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buildings etc. *are* beautiful, in the Kantian sense of the word: they exist without being *objectified*, and thus cannot function as a *home*, which, ideally rooted in intersubjective relations, is still much more a notion of ethics than that of aesthetics.

64. Lévinas, *Totality*, p. 127.

65. Vanderwerken, p. 263.

66. Nanney, p. 162.

67. Beach, pp. 61, 65. Yet it is noteworthy that there are a very limited number of vague, momentary examples. For instance, on the scene of Anna Cohen’s accident, Ellen “wants to go away, but she can’t, she’s waiting for something. . . . She tries to puzzle out why she is so moved; it is as if some part of her were going to be wrapped in bandages, carried away on a

is arguably more to Jimmy's secession from this vacuous community than, as Cowley seems to suggest, the wistful Poet's resignation:<sup>68</sup> his abandonment of the city can be interpreted as an attempt of redemption, a genuinely *ethical* attempt, even if this enterprise will be shown to be as paradoxical as the idea of redemption by further aestheticization.<sup>69</sup> For Jimmy's task is no less than to disregard Manhattan as a common space, as it is to be recalled that as long as it exists for any given character in the novel, "there's nowhere else" for him or her, and thus the possibility of escape is restricted to Bud's 'solution.' Leaving this common space, nonetheless, however vacuous it may be, also entails the withdrawal from society, the only (though deficiently) common sphere as such, thereby precluding the emergence of a morally founded, non-vacuous community.

Clark, dismissing this point, argues for the existence of an "ideal order" in the novel: not that of an ideal society, but that of nature. Thus, in his view, the attainment of this ideal is represented by "Jimmy Herf turning his back on the city and fleeing to an indeterminate place."<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, this "natural" order could be regarded as *prima facie* ideal inasmuch as it breaks away from the over-aestheticized urban sphere, and might be hoped to lead to a moral, fully human world. On the

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stretcher. Too soon it comes out, between the routine faces, the dark uniforms of the attendants. . . . Why should I be so excited? she keeps asking herself. Just somebody's bad luck, the sort of thing that happens every day. . . . She's got to meet some one [*sic*] somewhere, she can't think where. There's a horrible tired blankness inside her. O, dear, what shall I do? she whimpers to herself" (373–374). It is remarkable how the feeling of sympathy is mixed with a peculiar vagueness, emptiness and the inability to move. This emptiness, however, might have been a positive sign: a sign of the human Other *hollowing out* one's full-fledged subjectivity in Lévinas's sense. The incapacity to move, on the other hand, is especially intriguing inasmuch as it hints for a single moment at an otherwise never attained, ideal working of the (here practically nonexistent) community, in which motionlessness is not only due to the lack of certain degrees of freedom, as it usually is in Manhattan as a space, but also to that of shared intimacy.

68. Malcolm Cowley, "John Dos Passos: The Poet and the World," in *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 22–34, p. 26.

69. The questionability of Herf's endeavor is clearly reflected, for instance, in the sharp contrast between the picture of the thirty-something Christ-like Jimmy conveyed by Clark (p. 115) and D. H. Lawrence's view of him as "a failure of perhaps something under forty" at the end of the book ("[Review of Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*]," in *Dos Passos: the Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine [London and New York: Routledge, 1988], 74–77, p. 76).

70. Clark, p. 97.

other hand, this move is highly ironic again. First, because Jimmy's destination is 'specified' rather succinctly as "pretty far" in the last words of the novel (378), and the flee from Manhattan can therefore be termed as "another flight into nowhere, to land upon nothingness" instead of reaching any sort of ideal – an apt *dénouement* for a novel which itself may be considered a "great ravel of flights from nowhere to nowhere," as it was articulated in D. H. Lawrence's notorious review of the book.<sup>71</sup> Second, even if the yearned-after natural order is achieved, as in Vanderwerken's rendition of the ending as a "returning to the pastoral world,"<sup>72</sup> the idea still exhibits bitter (although most probably unintended) irony, since this pastoral scene would most probably also be a partly aestheticized sphere, as it is customarily represented in the Euro-American literary and artistic tradition. Finally, Jimmy's burst into the "natural" or "pastoral" world might as well be considered as the explicit failure of the writer's attempt to regain "the old words," the language of genuine expression. These things considered, the ending may imply nothing else but the astoundingly cynical, incessant, "unalienable pursuit" (342), in constant, hopeless search of a truly *common*, shared place / space where the relevance of ethics can be regained.

Nevertheless, even though Jimmy's departure does not appear to result in the emergence of an ethical sphere, his secession itself can be an ethically relevant attempt, a deed which is outstanding because it is irreconcilable with the aesthetic sphere of New York regardless of its success. This, strangely enough, may hold even if Jimmy does *not* set *himself* free by an act following (perhaps an ever so brief) conscious deliberation. His eventually disillusioned ideal seems to be a man who simply *is set* free – no matter whether of his own accord or by chance or under external compulsion, whether by action or by omission. "That's a real hero for you;" he comments on his straw-hatted "saint" who fell victim to the crowd because of wearing the wrong hat at a wrong place and occasion, "the golden legend of the man who would wear a straw hat out of season" (375) – and out of reason, one might add.<sup>73</sup> Jimmy's

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71. Lawrence, pp. 77, 75.

72. Vanderwerken, p. 266.

73. Regarding the use of the term "saint" by Jimmy to refer to his (more or less ironic) ideal, it is interesting to take into account that Clark discusses Jimmy Herf's final turn in terms of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, comparing the change in his attitude to the characteristics of saints' conversion as outlined in James's work. It is also relevant that Jimmy's choice of abandoning the city and its negatively posited, vacuous, but in a sense still human world may be interpreted alternatively as the ultimate, deliberate renouncement of *communication*, and its means, *language* as such. This, again, calls for Jimmy's placement in a non-ethical as much as in a non-aesthetic phase, for ethics is, at least

ideal, the “saint” may in some respect complement him: while Jimmy can be argued to commit a paradigmatic *action gratuite* by his secession, which is praised simply on the strength of escaping the moral vacuity of the city and thus implementing a (from a consequentialist perspective) pointless, yet still *ethical*, free act, the “saint” commits some sort of a ‘*passion gratuite*,’ not so much of a deed but rather the effect of mere chance, which is also seemingly pointless but still has some ethical relevance. The “saint’s” death, therefore, apparently differs from Bud’s suicidal in merely one respect: the former is even more clearly unintentional. Still, paradoxically enough, it is the straw-hatted man and not Bud who (is compelled to) commit a deed which is in a sense exemplary, precisely because it does *not* follow in any way from the metaphysical and moral vacuity of Dos Passos’s Manhattan. He is the ideal of Jimmy because he is capable of *disregarding* (or, in fact, incapable of regarding) the city as a deficient intersubjective space, which grants him a sort of freedom other characters are deprived of, and which theoretically is a suitable basis for the abandonment of the irredeemably vacuous common space. It is this ‘passive resistance’ to the city that is also manifest in Jimmy’s final amnesia, the prerequisite of his more or less active departure from Manhattan, in the course of which he thus appears to take a (semi-) conscious decision *and* to be simply drafted almost at the very same time.<sup>74</sup>

In conclusion, although Jimmy Herf fails to change the predominantly aesthetic quality adhering to Dos Passos’s urban space, its inhabitants and the language they use, he eventually manages to release himself (or to be released) from the aestheticized world of the city, thereby committing an ethical act. By disregarding Manhattan as an amoral, deficient intersubjective space which, until that very moment, held him, he is finally set free from the inherent contradictions and the concomitant multiple vacuity of urban metaphysics (including Manhattan as an intrinsically ambiguous, ‘presentless’ place and also as a partly ahistoricized, aestheticized space). It is

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in the frameworks applied herein, necessarily *common* and thus communicable, even if through Lévinas’s “unuttered language” (*Totality*, p. 127). Jimmy Herf, however, might thus be assumed to have reached *beyond* that stage of communicability. These considered, the male protagonist might (although hardly on the assumptions of the present paper) be regarded as having achieved a kind of post-ethical stage that nevertheless may be characterized as “goodness,” that is, “true desire” in Lévinas’s sense, which, as already quoted above, “does not refer to a lost fatherland . . . it is not homesickness, is not nostalgia” (“Philosophy,” p. 57). (Note that Jimmy at the end “can’t seem to remember anything,” 377.) However, on the basis of the above, it still appears to be a better founded assumption to regard Herf as stuck in a *pre-ethical* phase, instead of having reached a *post-ethical* one.

74. Gelfant, “Dos Passos,” p. 52.

only at the point when he is able to relate to the city exclusively as a place from which it is possible to move and which it is possible to forget that he establishes a new, “lived” present time. And in this new, positive temporality, Jimmy may, i.e. is enabled *and* is compelled to move at last, for in a positive present (which is also suitable for becoming one’s positive past), one cannot choose but to move with and act in this ‘real time.’ Nonetheless, even though Jimmy’s move is an act of considerable ethical significance, it cannot lead to the establishment of a non-vacuous moral sphere as it entails the ultimate abandonment of human bonds, thus retaining a central aspect of the vacuity of Manhattan as a common space.

#### 4 Conclusion

The present paper aimed to link together some of the ways in which the motif of the city in John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* may be conceived as inherently vacuous, with a view to showing how these aspects can be considered central to the interpretation of a novel set in a deficient common sphere. Beginning with the analysis of a postulated spatial duality intrinsic to this urban scene, it has been argued that the city, whether it is approached as an abstract place or an ideal space, demonstrates some sort of metaphysical vacuity that leads to an unusual distribution of the degrees of freedom in the fictional Manhattan. The two facets of spatiality have also been shown to be closely connected to a similarly twofold conceptualization of temporal experience in the novel: the present time and historicity of the narrative have equally been found to be vacuous from a number of different perspectives. Finally, bearing on the irregularities of urban metaphysics, the city as a predominantly aesthetic, as opposed to ethical, sphere has been investigated, where intersubjective relations are markedly defective, which in turn renders Manhattan a morally vacuous space. Although Jimmy Herf eventually succeeds in absorbing the spatial and temporal vacuity of the city, he has been argued to fail in this ultimate respect: subsequently to his flight, the morally non-vacuous common sphere that was lacking in Dos Passos’s New York still remains “[p]retty far” (378).