

The Illusion of Profit and Easy Money in John Dos Passos's *The Big Money*: A Myth of the 1920's

وهم الربح و الكسب السريع في رواية 'المال الوفير' لجون دوس باسوس :
اسطورة العشرينات

“L'illusion du profit et de l'argent facile dans 'La grosse galette' de John Dos Passos: un mythe des années 20”

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Introduction

The Big Money is the last volume of John Dos Passos's trilogy, *USA*, a fable of America's materialistic success and moral decline. In this novel, the 'Lost Generation' writer deplores the failure of the liberal bourgeois ruling-class in which Alexander Hamilton, one of America's founding fathers, had once put great hopes. As Dos Passos himself belonged to this class, he was the first to feel the falling apart of that American myth. As a brave and enduring writer, he could not escape the disturbance of his conscience : he felt he did not have the right to remain useless and silent. He thus decided to clarify the drama of the American nation through the creation of a group of ex-war aces who, after taking part in the First World War in Europe, come back to their country determined to embark on a competition for power, money and social status. Facing an uncertain future, they give up their talents for the sake of wealth and subvert human and moral values to economic ones. They are represented by Charley Anderson, an excellent mechanic engineer and Richard Savage, a well-known poet who, instead of making a career as an artist, chooses to succeed to the public counsel, J. Ward Moorehouse in his mission of falsifying the real American values to protect the ideology professed by the industrialists and the businessmen maintaining the status quo. The present article highlights John Dos Passos's analysis of this situation and the literary devices he used to demonstrate to his contemporaries the whole mechanism of such a disastrous system.

1.The Engineer Destroyed by the Power of Industry

Charley Anderson, the devoted mechanic engineer, is the typical figure of *the Big Money*. Through him, the writer portrays the destruction of the American

social and moral values in the 1920's, a decade dominated by commercialism, extreme materialism and rising bull-marked absurdities speeding towards the economic crush of 1929. Dos Passos presents him as the engineer destroyed by the power of industry. And it is this power which is accused in each page of the novel. Charley starts as a distinguished member in the labor movement, joins the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and participates in an IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) strike. He works as a skilful mechanic before he goes to World War One which makes of him a flying ace. When he regains America after the armistice, he is still in possession of the best American national virtues: courage, bravery and naivety. But he is soon faced with a new unrecognizable America, an America devoid of any moral content, an America haunted by material, "well, Charley, that's where they keep all the money. We got to get some of it away from'em" ; says Joe Askew his friend (Dos Passos 735). "Wish I knew how to start in, Joe" (Dos Passos 735), answers Charley. This shows that he could have been an excellent cow-boy, a very correct Western-hero incarnating traditional values, such as bravery and brotherly friendship. Unfortunately, this man who appears strong, brave and self-confident proves to be very weak as he falls prey to those new myths of the America of the 1920's, those collective representations that besiege him from everywhere and to which he soon surrenders.

Charley's downfall starts from the moment he decides to sacrifice his vocation of engineer/ inventor to become a non-productive capitalist, a "tycoon". Right after coming back from the European battlefields as an aviation ace, he creates – with his friend Joe Askew – 'the Askew - Merritt Aviation Company', thus throwing himself in the midst of money. Unfortunately, he does not find his happiness in material success. As soon as he embraces metropolitan life, he gets acquainted with Eveline Hutchins, a married woman who starts a career in illicit sexual relationships. After several failed love affairs which lead him to a series of drunken jugs, he sells his shares of 'the Askew - Merritt Company' and enters the world of speculation. Once he rises socially, he betrays all his friends and abandons his passion for mechanics .He leaves for Detroit where he gets involved in stock-market gambling and a high society marriage with Gladys Wheatley, daughter of a famous businessman. Unable to bear the disdain of the American industrialists, he goes from one disaster to another. Foreseeing his downfall, Gladys divorces him and his friends the bankers drive him out of his company and then out of the stock market itself. Feeling lonely, he engages in a commercialized sexual relationship with Margo Dowling, another prostitute who puts an end to his glittering career.

Through Charley, Dos Passos comments on the hollowness of the American success myth during those boom years of the 1920's. The engineer adores money in a sacrilegious way : when he opened his wallet and counted his cash, "he brought [the bills] up to his nose to sniff the new sweet sharp smell of the ink. Before he knew what he had done, he had kissed them. He laughed out loud [...]. Jesus, he was feeling good" (Dos Passos 910)). He also demonstrates the sabotage of production by the pursuit of profit and the reduction of high technology "know-how" into a means of material ascendancy. For money, Charley sells out the most precious thing he possesses : the instinct of workmanship. But he never reaches accomplishment ; he never succeeds in having access to the reality of money, nor to that of women ; hence his desperate love relations and his incessant frustrations. For example, when he bought his new car, "a sackard Sports phaeton with a long law custombody upholstered in red leather" (Dos Passos 908), he immediately drove down to the dock to meet his girl friend, the wealthy Doris and her mother Mrs Humphries who were coming back from London. He was very happy to park his car near those "well-dressed people chattering round piles of pigskin suitcases, patent leather hat boxes, ward robe trunks with the labels of Ritz hotels on them, in the central part of the wharf building" (Dos Passos 908). But to his surprise, Mrs Humphries did not like the car. Charley is seized with anger and remorse ; he drinks more and more heavily and is finally frozen out by his Detroit partners .The speculators who ruin Charley will first lead him to treason .He betrays his old friend Joe Askew by trading away the stock in his company to go and work for his competitors. He accidentally kills his best friend, the mechanic Bill Cermak , the only worker in the novel, and abandons his passion for mechanics.

From time to time, he realizes that moving up from his position of mechanic to that of businessman makes him lose his soul ; but he gets this feeling only when he is drinking with his loyal friend Bill Cermak. When the latter calls him "Boss", though drunk, Charley gets angry, "Hell, I ain't no boss, I belong with the mechanics.... Don't I Bill ? You and me Bill, the mechanics against the world." (Dos Passos 980). They happen to quarrel when Bill tells Charley who is now so removed from production that he no longer knows what is happening in his shop and that the workers are exhausted, "you'll lose all your best guys", says Bill, "slavedrivin may be all right in the automobile business, but buildin' an airplane motor's skilled labor" (Dos Passos 980), Charley replies. He carries on, "Aw, Christ, I wish I was still tinkerin' with that damn motor and didn't have to worry about money all the time..." (Dos Passos 980). He feels guilty at losing his skill. But after another drink, he changes his mind and says, "I know what

the boys are up against but I know what the management's up against too" (Dos Passos 983). While he used to be a great supporter of labor, he now forgets his own origin and tells Bill how the company intends to handle the conflict between managers and workers :

- We're goin' to fire the whole outfit....hell, if they don't like it workin' for us, let'em try to like it workin' for somebody else....
- This is a free country ; I wouldn't want to keep a man against his will (Dos Passos 981).

He wants Bill to understand that he is under a great pressure, "the pressure's too great now. If every department don't click like a machine, we're rooked" (Dos Passos 983). The managers no longer care about the quality of what is produced ; they want more production. There is a degradation of techniques by finance, of genius by greed, of moral values by material.

Dos Passos illustrates this idea by referring to the disaster that happened when Bill and Charley were testing the new "Tern Light Plane" to see whether it could fly or not. Something in it went wrong and she cracked on taking off. Charley was badly injured but Bill passed away immediately. His death was caused by the speed up against which he had vainly protested. So the pressure Charley was referring to was not the pressure of industrial efficiency but rather that of technically careless profit expansion. This accident shows that Charley, the supervisor of the ship's construction, betrays his job for money. He indeed means well but the blind need for money profits takes him to his death. He symbolically ends up being run over by a locomotive after he drunkenly tries to race it with his car, killed by the machine.

To prove the dishonesty and failure of Charley, Dos Passos creates parallels between him and the great real – life committed scientist , the American aviator Charles A. Lindbergh who made the first solo non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927, which gained him international fame (Giblin 8). Lindberg worked with millionaires businessmen but, unlike Charley, he never sacrificed his genius for money. Indeed he made fortune in aviation shares, but he did not throw himself into that awful race for the dollar. He was the pride of the Americans with his flight. His plane attested to the great development of American manufacturing techniques and hence to the truth of progress. Nevertheless, Dos Passos would have preferred him to have worked alone, not to have been helped by businessmen who in fact financed the cost of the plane he used in his non-stop flight. Likewise, he did not want him to work with great millionaires – like Daniel Guggenheim- to encourage aviation – related research (giblin 9). That is why he juxtaposes him to the Wright Brothers.

The Wrights, Orville and Wilber, were pioneers of the pure type, and the aircraft they built and put in the air was their own creation. Belonging to the pre-war period, they stood against the Commercial spirit of the 1920's as well as against the impersonality and the complexity of the decade's organisation. They were pure inventors.

The writer evaluates Charley's behaviour along with that of the Wright Brothers to whom he devotes a biography. If Charley is destroyed by success, the Wright Brothers, despite their fame and honors, "don't seem to have been very much impressed by the upholstery and the braid and the gold medals and the parades of push horses ; they remained practical mechanics and insisted on doing all their own work themselves, even to filling the gasoline tank" (Dos Passos 959). Unlike the Wrights and Lindberg, Charley is blinded by his obsession with money. He says to an acquaintance that "if [he] could pull out with enough jack [he]'d like to build [him] a wind tunnel all [his] own". But as soon as he makes more money, he forgets this ambition. The Wrights, however, built an air tunnel when they were still poor mechanics and it was "their first contribution to the science of flying and tried out model planes in it" (Dos Passos 998). They symbolized old American individualism ; they believed that workmanship could not be based on cooperation ; it was personal .They were against industrial development because they were afraid of the consequences of technology which Charley ignored totally.

2. Fall of the Poet : the Snares of Corporate Arts

To the disintegration of Charley is associated the disintegration of many other characters in the novel. J.Ward Moorehouse, the public counsel, is seriously ill ; Richard Elsworth Savage, the former Harvard intellectual and potential radical, replaces him in his role of publicity wizard, but he soon succumbs to the influence of the 'Big Money'. He ends up bankrupted, surrendering to prostitutes, exposing himself to defeat, disgrace and loss, missing thus the possibility of becoming a great artist.

From a bourgeois family – his mother being a general's daughter– he studied at Harvard and wrote poems while still a student, as he is endowed with a nice artistic sensibility. When America enters World War One, he serves as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross. But as he becomes conscious of the atrocity of war, he voices his convictions and pacifist sentiments and is consequently fired.

He seeks refuge in poetry which he transforms into a means of raising the consciousness of the people, of inciting them to revolt against the Establishment. But as soon as he gets a commission in the army, he betrays his pacifist

feelings and surrenders to the pressure of the machine. Feeling guilty, he writes a long sarcastic letter in verse about his gaining the commission. But again, when he gets a chance of becoming an officer, he throws the letter in the toilet and puts an end to his independence. In France, he is introduced to the world of business and refuses to marry Ann Elizabeth, the girl he has impregnated for fear of affecting his career. The young woman soon dies in a plane accident.

After the war, Savage joins J. Ward Moorehouse, whose job in *the Big Money* consists in showing that the 'Big Enterprise' in the American society works for the happiness and prosperity of all, proving that friendly cooperation between the worker and his boss is easy to achieve in America. He makes his own Moorehouse's mission of betraying the American people, of making them believe in the myth he created – conciliation between the workers and the monopolies- a myth he himself cannot believe in ; he accepts to play that soulless game with Moorehouse and his gang : Senator Planet, Doc Bingham and judge/Colonel Cassidy. Like these people, he detaches himself from the ancient culture and submits entirely to the new idols. He becomes no more than a ruin who thinks only of acquiring more wealth, a mere prototype of the ruthless American opportunist. Through this succession, Dos Passos suggests that the process of rotting is intensifying ; moreover it seems to be transmitted from a generation to another ; that is why it ought to be stressed.

Savage, by the end of the novel, is presented as someone who incarnates defeat by abdication, intelligence without any moral capacity. He could have become a great poet had he stuck to his early principles, but the system turned him into a public counsel, associate and then successor of the most dishonest, non- productive character of the novel. On the point of becoming a big boss, he succumbs to the forces of death : alcoholism, erotism and moral breakdown, "I feel lonely and hellish, my life is a shambles" (Dos Passos 1124), says he to his friend, Eveline. The brilliant Savage has now become a lonely drunken man begging love from prostitutes, victim a despairing night of some hooligans who steal his money and make him live with the fear of being black mailed. Here again, Dos Passos does not hesitate to turn to irony : the advertising campaign in which Savage succeeds to Moorehouse recommends an auto-therapy for everybody.

Both Moorehouse and Dick Savage are aware of the reality and both choose – consciously – to surrender to the machine. Yet, Moorehouse is less condemnable because he gives himself to the system as it is ; he never hesitates to join it even when he is profoundly wounded by it : Annabelle Mary Strang, the wealthy aristocratic lady, betrays him, but he does not hesitate to marry her for material

reasons. Dick Savage, on the other hand, corrupts himself in a conscious way. He understands better the machine before he makes his choice. His experience in the war could have helped him take an intelligent decision. Yet, when the moment of choice comes, he gives up his poetry and even his conscience. He is blinded by greed. And because he is conscious of the depravity of his choice, Dos Passos punishes him and provides for his complete degradation.

To understand Dick Savage – and thus Moorehouse – better, Dos Passos resorts to another literary device : he precedes his segment by the biography of one of the symbols of the perversion of the American democratic press, William Randolph Hearst, a famous publishing tycoon who had a great influence on American journalism and who was known with his “yellow Journalism” which Martin Lee and Norman Solomon defined as “Hearst’s routinely invented sensational stories, faked interviews, ran phony pictures and distorted real events” (*Unreliable Sources : A guide to detecting Bias in New Media* 186). Hearst treated news in an unprofessional and unethical fashion. Dos Passos describes him as an immoral person, ready to write anything that would increase his paper’s circulation. He violently attacks his comment, “when there is no news, make news” (Dos Passos 1112). According to the writer, Hearst became the boss of the press by corrupting democracy and the right to information and freedom of the press, relying “on the gee whizz emotion” (Dos Passos, *The Big Money* 1112).

Upton Sinclair criticized him in his book *entitled The Brass Check : A Study of American Journalism*. He accused him of inciting nations to enmity and driving them to murderous war. According to him, in the 20th Century, Hearst’s newspapers lied remorselessly about radicals, banned the word ‘socialist’ from their columns, “Jail the Reds” (p.1116) and rewrote the news already published in the London Morning papers and then fraudulently republished them in American Afternoon Papers under the names of non-existent Hearst correspondents in many capitals like London, Paris, Berlin, Rome and Venice (Sinclair 95). He was also charged with accepting bribery from foreign countries to slant the news (Seldes 67). At the same time, he was considered as a hypocrite who, in public, lambasted magnates such as JP Morgan but in private entered into partnership with them in lucrative ventures (Lee and Solomon 67).

What gives a great value to the biography of Hearst is Dos Passos’s impartiality. He neither blames nor stigmatizes him ; nevertheless, in each sentence he writes, we feel his indignation. His indictment is not even based on Hearst’s acts but rather on his essential insufficiency. Dos Passos succeeds in presenting him as he is actually, in condemning him only by describing him faithfully.

These characters who have all succumbed to the snares of corporate arts and luxury are not the maudlin romantics of the English nobility and the American industrialist leisure class ; they are the pawns who get knocked over by the games of the rich. That is why Dos Passos calls them “the strangers”, a kind of summary to the human disintegration of the 1920's. Be they real people cited in the biographies, such as Hearst or mere products of the writer's imagination, such as Charley Anderson and Dick Savage , they are un-American because their words and actions betray and deny the “old words”, the values and principles on which the ‘founding fathers’ built their democratic America. They are typical products of that era of material abundance which the American theoretician and economist Thorstein Veblen predicted in his economic treatise *The Theory of the Leisure Class* which is, just like *The Big Money*, a social satire about the American way of life and the pursuit of prestige through the ownership of consumer goods. Dos Passos resorts to irony and satire to denounce these traitors and sometimes even to mock them. He punishes them severely : some are killed, others are destroyed economically and some others end up with moral break down.

As to the ‘true Americans’, such as the Wright Brothers and Lindberg who remain faithful to the original idea of America, they are glorified. Dos Passos admires their belief in a humanly-oriented capitalism. He wants Americans to take them as examples in their consideration of great wealth and technology, not as ends in themselves but as means of achieving a just society, of realising the vast possibilities for peace and plenty offered by progress.

Conclusion

Dos Passos is indignant by the 1920's Americans' worship of money and their focus on outer appearance, but his indignation goes beyond the individuals to reach the entire system that produced them. There is a silent protest not only against capitalism, but against the human condition itself, against the world as it is, against all those people who helped develop the industries that resulted in that awful pursuit of wealth and fortune at the expense of moral values. The novel underlines the alienation, failure and despair of individual destinies destroyed by an urban money and power – obsessed society ; that is why it is marked by deep pessimism. It is important to mention that in the depression era- *the Big Money* being published in 1936- many American novels were written from a Thirties viewpoint because the stories that attracted attention then were those of failure, not those of success. The literature of that period, in general, was dominated by failure, hardship and loss, an objective response to the economic reality of the era.

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Abstract

The end of the First World War signified the beginning of an era of great material wealth and newfound prosperity in America. Such conditions provided the platform on which the nascent social class of ‘New Money’ was built during the 1920’s. In *The Big Money*, John Dos Passos denounces the ascendance of this class to a position of dominance in American life through its blind race for money profits. He condemns its economic power which, according to him, was undermining the very basis of the ‘American Dream’. Most of the Americans portrayed in the novel are ex-war aces leading a chaotic life and living a daily carnival- a spectacle of human decadence, of moral void, of life that is undirected and loose. They all illustrate the disintegration and emptiness of the new middle class, a class engaged in a destructive race for material success.

Keywords

profit, easy money, race for power, decadence, loss of moral values, human disintegration.

مستخلص

بعد الحرب العالمية الأولى عرفت الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية تقدماً اقتصادياً لم يسبق له مثيلاً بسبب المطاردة الشرسة للدولار التي خاضها معظم الأمريكيين آنذاك والتي أدت إلى انتشار الفساد وزوال القيم الأخلاقية. يشجب جون دوس باسوس في كتابه "yenoM giB ehT" (ترجم إلى العربية بعنوان مال وفير) سلطة شركات الانتماء المهيمنة على الحياة الأمريكية التي تخوض سباقات محمومة من أجل كسب الأموال. كما يدين نفوذها الاقتصادي الذي، في نظره، يقوض أساس "الحلم الأمريكي" ويضعفه. إن المجموعة الأمريكية التي يصورها الكاتب في روايته تتألف من محاربين بارعين سابقين يعيشون حياة مضطربة عبارة عن مهرجان يومي - عرض للانحطاط البشري، و الفراغ الأخلاقي - لحياة غير موجهة و

ضائعة. وتجسد أغلب الشخصيات تفكك وفراغ الطبقة المتوسطة التي تخوض سباقا فتاكا من أجل النجاح المادي

كلمات مفتاحية

المكسب، الريح السريع، السباق من أجل النفوذ، الانحطاط، فقدان القيم الأخلاقية، التفكك البشري.

Résumé

Après la première guerre mondiale, les Etats Unis deviennent une nation en plein essor. Les américains découvrent l'orgie des spéculations boursières ; l'industrialisation et la chasse au 'Dollar-Roi' battent leur plein, ce qui donne naissance à une nouvelle classe sociale, la classe des nouveaux riches, une classe qui se lance dans une aveugle course au matériel au détriment des valeurs morales. Ce qui est en jeu, c'est le destin de l'homme au 'pays de la chance'. John Dos Passos ne pouvait évidemment demeurer indifférent à cette passion de l'argent, il ne pouvait s'empêcher de dénoncer le scandale moral, l'inacceptable damnation. Dans son roman 'The Big Money'(La grosse galette), il relate la catastrophe qui engloutit , à un rythme proprement infernal, les divers participants de cette course à la puissance , au bonheur –par-les biens de ce monde , qui se révèle course vers la mort

Mots-clés.

Profit, argent facile, course au pouvoir, décadence, perte de valeurs morales, désintégration humaine.