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THE IMAGE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SELECTED AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE 1920S

I.

Following the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century, the first decades of the twentieth century could generally be characterized as a period of coming to terms with technology by the wider population of the United States. The previous, merely sporadic encounters with technology that were thrilling, awe-inspiring, or frightening a generation or two before gradually became a part of the everyday reality for the average American. No longer would a grandson of Henry Adams, in a walk through an exposition, stumble upon a huge dynamo (or, to provide a chronologically more appropriate example, an early experimental television set such as the one first publicly demonstrated in 1927), and respond to it with the same mixture of admiration, curiosity, and apprehension as his grandfather did. The assimilation of the machine into the modern American psyche and existence that took place in the first third of our century made such technological epiphanies once and for all obsolete in the U.S.A.

The decade of the 1920s was chosen in this paper for the purposes of demonstrating the reflection of this growing technological awareness in American literature for two reasons. In the first place, it appears that the processes of industrialization, mechanization, urbanization, and standardization that had continued for several decades culminated in the decade following World War I, finally to reach a stage where quantitative changes have turned into qualitative

ones. Never before were such wide layers of American society immediately affected in their lifestyles and general standards of living by technology as in the 1920s. As will be seen from some of the examples and statistics below, several important events marked the Twenties not necessarily as a decade of technological breakthroughs, but rather as a period when the changes brought about by progress must have become apparent for the population at large. The 1920s was in many ways *the* decade of widespread assimilation of technology into American culture.

Browsing through the years between 1920 and 1929 in *The Chronicle of America*, several curious facts, as elements of a larger mosaic, strike the reader's eyes. Census figures in 1920 showed for the first time an urban population larger than a rural one. In his address on July 4, 1926, on the 150th anniversary of the United States, novelist Sherwood Anderson remarked: "The machine (has caused) the herding of men into towns and cities [...] . Minds began to be standardized as were the clothes men wore" (qtd. in Clifton 631). Motorization was undoubtedly one of the most conspicuous changes in the country. By 1920, Americans owned 8 million cars; in other terms, for every automobile there were two horses in the country. With 24 million automobiles (78% of the world's cars) registered by 1927, this proportion was very soon reversed (Lewis and Goldstein 142). Catering to the changing needs of the motoring public, the first drive-in restaurant, J. G. Kirby's self-ironically named "Pig-Stand" opened in Dallas, Texas, in 1921.

In aviation, the year 1923 saw the first non-stop flight across the American continent; then, in 1927, America celebrated Charles Lindbergh's 33-and-half-hour non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic from New York to Paris. In telecommunications, the first national radio broadcast, the announcement of the results of the presidential elections, occurred in 1920. Between 1920 and 1924 the number of registered radios leaped from 2,000 to 2.5 million. These facts and figures are but arbitrarily chosen examples of the very rapid quantitative changes that took place in the decade, yet they clearly illustrate the nature of the impact that the overwhelming presence of technology must have had on the generation of the 1920s: technology

had become an inseparable part of modern American existence, lifestyle, and psyche.

The other reason why the literature of the 1920s is especially useful for studying patterns of changes in American technological consciousness is more practical. The 1920s is regarded by general consensus as a golden age of American letters, a sort of second American Renaissance, second only perhaps to the 1850s. The mere output and quality of the literature produced in this short period would warrant special attention, but more important is the fact that the writers of the Twenties, as will be shown below, appear to have been especially attentive to the changes brought about by technological progress in the period. As much as literature can be accepted as a singular way of documentation and reflection of social, economic, and psychological changes in a given place and period, a number of novels written in the 1920s clearly attest to the above claims about the significance of the decade in any serious consideration of the interaction of technology and American literature.

A very comprehensive analysis of this theme in the considerably large corpus of literature of the 1920s would not be possible in the confines of a relatively short paper as this. What follows, then, is a quick survey of the treatments of this interaction in three novels of three selected, now canonical, novelists from the period. The decision to limit the scope of this paper to novels is just as necessarily arbitrary as the selection of the texts—Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)—discussed below. While these novels do not necessarily represent the full scope, and especially not the extremes, of literary responses to technological civilization in the 1920s, in their range of treatments of machine culture they do serve the task of illustrating the image of technology in the literature of the 1920s.

II.

In the chapter called "Courting the Technological Sublime: Babbitt's Dance" in his analysis of *Babbitt*, Glen A. Love situates Sinclair Lewis's novel in the tradition of American writers "struggl[ing] with the contradictory meanings of a new machine

civilization [...] developing in America" (75). Undoubtedly, technology is an omnipresent entity throughout *Babbitt*: not only is it an integral part of Lewis's descriptions of the everyday life of his middle-class character, but, as will be shown, several of the governing metaphors of the novel are also technologically conceived.

Unlike several of his contemporaries, however, who at best exhibited a highly ambivalent attitude toward technological civilization, Lewis had a sincere belief in, even an admiration for, progress, technology, and efficiency. *Babbitt* is the most straightforward presentation of his real concern about technological development, which was over the tension between "the high achievements of a technologically advanced civilization—as represented by the bold skyline of Zenith—and the soft-bellied underachievers who are the city's inhabitants" (Love 75–76). Babbitt takes pride in being a part of the progress and efficiency he sees embodied in Zenith without ever realizing that his own contribution to the development of the city is rather insignificant. His own peculiar relationship to technology may be seen as a microcosmic representation of the larger relationship between humanity and the heroic modern world of science and technology.

Thanks to Lewis's almost photorealistically descriptive style whereby he frequently characterizes through objects, Babbitt is routinely seen as interacting with technology. No doubt, Babbitt is very comfortable with technology: he surrounds himself with the most up-to-date, scientifically designed and expensive gadgetry available on the market. His "nationally advertised and quantitatively produced" alarm-clock (7), his "very best of water-coolers, up-to-date, scientific, and right-thinking" (31), and his "priceless time-saver" of an electric cigar-lighter (46) are only a few examples of his obsession with keeping abreast with modern times. As the omniscient narrator reveals, however, Babbitt's worship of machinery does not originate from a true understanding of the same:

> He had enormous and poetic admiration, though very little understanding, of all mechanical devices. They were his symbols of truth and beauty. Regarding each new intricate mechanism—metal lathe, two-jet carburetor, machine gun, oxyacetylene welder—he

> learned one good realistic-sounding phrase, and used it over and over, with a delightful feeling of being technical and initiated. (58)

Babbitt may be seen here as epitomizing one of the predicaments of modern twentieth-century existence: too far removed from an immediate contact with his material environment, making "nothing in particular, neither butter, nor shoes, nor poetry" (6), he is stuck with a blind faith in progress and technology without comprehending the entirety of his situation and the potential dangers inherent in the kind of existence he leads.

The most prominent and symbolically most complex piece of machinery Babbitt (and his family) is seen interacting with in the novel is undoubtedly his automobile. The car, an extension and an expression of his own personality means "poetry and tragedy, love and heroism" to Babbitt: "The office was his pirate ship but the car his perilous excursion abroad" (23). He is noted to take good care of his automobile—little wonder since it is one of the most visible status symbols in his possession. He even takes his car for the three-and-a-half-block ride from his office to the Athletic Club—an ultimate example of wastefulness, inefficiency, and what Thorstein Veblen would call "conspicuous consumption."

The automobile is also a frequent topic of conversation in the Babbitt household. In one of the early scenes Babbitt gets the whole family excited by announcing that he was "[s]ort o' thinking about buying a new car" (62). The discussion about the practical advantages of sedans over open cars eventually boils down to "everybody's got a closed car now, except us" (63), which allows the sarcastic narrator to remark that "in the city of Zenith, in the barbarous twentieth century, a family's motor car indicated its social rank as precisely as the grades of the peerage determined the rank of an English family" (63). Having a car is not primarily about transportation—it is about social class. Such a misuse of technology originates from a misunderstanding of it, just as in the case of the scores of gadgets Babbitt accumulates.

Babbitt's relationship to technology could be characterized as a mixture of self-righteous pride in achievements he has no real part in on the one hand, and a spiritual reverence stemming from his ultimate lack of understanding of the workings of technology on the other. Business (or his peculiarly distorted business ethic) is one of his

substitute religions, but technology is also frequently presented in spiritual or semi-religious terms: his god is "Modern Appliances" (8), or "the God of Progress" (11). His automobile, this ultimate symbol of technology in the novel, is at the center of Babbitt's substitute theological universe as indicated by Lewis's choice of words in the following and other examples: Babbitt is "a *pious* motorist" (7), buying gasoline is a familiar "*rite*" (26), and motoring is among the "*sacred* and unchangeable sports of Babbitt and Paul Riesling" (56; emphases added). Even Ted and Verona are referred to as "devotees of the Great God Motor, [as] they hymned the patch on the spare inner-tube, and the lost jack-handle" (19). Only a few pages before Babbitt himself was singing, inspired by "the lovely sight" of the skyline and the rhythm of his beloved city, his peculiar secular hymn to the God of Progress:

> He beheld the tower as a temple-spire of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men; and as he clumped down to breakfast he whistled the ballad "Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo" as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble. (15)

In addition to characterizing Babbitt through his interaction with machinery, Lewis suggests, throughout the novel, the machine-like qualities of Babbitt himself. He leads a mechanical existence: waking up every day at the same hour, driving routinely to and from his office, engaging after work in all the standardized social activities prescribed for middle-class suburban people like himself. As the plot progresses, Babbitt is beginning to resemble a malfunctioning machine that needs to be fixed, or perhaps even more a malfunctioning cogwheel in the larger machinery of society. In this larger system of interchangeable parts, there is, of course, a danger that the malfunctioning part, Babbitt, will easily be replaced by another identical part as in the case of the real estate deal lost to the competition, the Sanders, Torrey and Wing Real Estate.

Mechanization and standardization are the two ultimate technological metaphors employed by Lewis to signify his objections to middle-class lifestyle. In his rebellious state of mind Babbitt himself is eventually beginning to realize how sterile, standardized, and mechanized the existence he leads really is. He deliberately

abandons his routine and attempts to break out from the monotony of his personal and public life. Babbitt never gets far beyond the recognition of the dreariness of his life: the prospects of losing the security offered by this kind of existence, however bleak, frightens him and he backs off at the first opportunity. As merely a part of a larger mechanism without an individuality of his own, he can only function properly in place in the bigger machine of middle-class existence. Even though the novel ends on a happy note for Babbitt himself, the reader is made acutely aware of the sad state of affairs for George F. Babbitt and the millions of Babbitts throughout the world in the 1920s or in the 1990s.

The radical lawyer, Seneca Doane, who could be considered more than anybody in the novel as Lewis's mouthpiece, resolves best the ambivalent relationship toward progress and technology. Just like Babbitt (or Lewis, for that matter) he is an admirer of material and technological progress: "Zenith is a city with gigantic power—gigantic buildings, gigantic machines, gigantic transportation" (84), he says exaltedly to the less than enthusiastic scientist, Kurt Yavitch. Significantly, he defends the notion of standardization as necessary for efficiency and progress, but insists that it should be confined to its place in the technological sphere. What he is fighting against is the standardization of thought, in other words, the extension of the technological and industrial principles to society. He (and through his voice, Lewis) insists that an element of incalculability will always remain necessary in order to maintain our basic human nature and to avoid the danger of becoming machines ourselves: "Personally, I prefer a city with a future so unknown that it excites my imagination" (85), he says. Whether the next generation of Zenith's inhabitants, best personified by young Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt will measure up to this new technological civilization remains an open question at the end of the novel, signaling Lewis's own doubts about the outcome of the interaction between humanity and technology.

III.

"Like many of his generation, Dos Passos had a love-hate relationship to the machine age" (202), writes Cecelia Tichi in her

analysis of technology, literature, and culture in modernist America. His ambivalence toward technology and urbanization clearly pervades his 1925 novel, *Manhattan Transfer*. "A great deal is going to happen in the next few years. All these mechanical inventions—telephones, electricity, steel bridges, horseless vehicles—they are all leading somewhere," prophesies the real-estate agent at the very beginning of the novel; then he adds: "It's up to us to be on the inside, in the forefront of progress" (15). Mechanical inventions, progress, technology—these concepts seem to be central to Dos Passos's rather pessimistic vision of modernity. It is not technological development *per se*, however, that Dos Passos was protesting against; rather, it was the accompanying disappearance of certain human values. The acute problems with interpersonal relationships are made clear in the novel: friendships are superficial, marriages are breaking up, families are becoming dysfunctional in the microcosm of *Manhattan Transfer*. It appears that human relationships are just as disposable, or freely replacable with one another, as if they were standardized pieces of machinery.

While the automobile is not a central symbol for Dos Passos as it is in Fitzgerald's work, its significance in the novel cannot be overlooked. Instead of individual cars, Dos Passos frequently uses big-city traffic as a background to the story of *Manhattan Transfer*: the emphasis is thus put on the facelessness and impersonality of urban existence, since even the singularity of the vehicles is dissolved in the mass of automobiles comprising the traffic, let alone the individuality of the passengers in those vehicles.

It is interesting to note in the following examples how Dos Passos recreates the urban atmosphere by using repetition as a device to underscore the notion communicated and to suggest monotony also on a linguistic level. "Behind them automobiles *slithered* with a constant hissing scuttle in *two streams along the roadway*" is repeated on the next page as "[b]ehind them limousines, roadsters, touringcars, sedans, *slithered along the roadway* with snaky glint of lights running in *two* smooth continuous *streams*" (163–64; emphases added). In a similar example, also involving automobiles, we see through the eyes of Ed Thatcher sitting at his window "looking out over the *endless stream of automobiles* that whirred in either direction past the

yellowbrick row of stores and the redbrick station" (197; emphasis added). The image of the monotonous (as suggested by the word "endless") lines of traffic is further impressed upon the reader when it is repeated two pages later: "Thatcher turned his face [...] to look out the window at the two *endless bands of automobiles* that passed along the road in from of the station" (198–99; emphasis added).

Characteristically, most of the individual vehicles depicted in the novel are either taxi cabs, or fire engines, with only three exceptions to this tendency. Early in the text, Dos Passos described one of the "automobile riots" (24–25) that were common on the streets of cities in the early years of the automobiles. Later, we get a detailed description of "Dingo," Stan Emery's loose-mufflered, freshly-painted blue wreck, and his ride on the streets of New York. Finally, late in the novel, we catch a quick glimpse of the Rolls-Royce of the wealthy bootlegger, Congo Jake, alias Armand Duval. Arguably, all three automobiles are presented in negative terms, although in different ways: as potential killing machine, as ugly and noisy environmental hazard, and as status symbol purchased with dirty money, respectively. These three individual cars are counterbalanced by a multitude of unnamed and unidentified vehicles making up the traffic on the streets of New York City.

Dos Passos's use of symbols of modernism in *Manhattan Transfer*—the skyscrapers, taxis, revolving hotel doors, fire engines—all underline his preference for a set of alternative values to the ones of consumerism and technological development. His apocalyptic vision of the city burning from within, as symbolized by the frequent appearance of fire engines, either horse-drawn or later motorized, makes it clear that Dos Passos's ideal was closer to the Jeffersonian model of agrarian America than to Franklinian urbanism. This is accentuated by the final pastoral image of a horsecart (as opposed to a motorized vehicle), "a horse and wagon, [...] a brokendown springwagon loaded with flowers, driven by a little brown man with high cheekbones" (403) coming aboard the ferry, with Jim Herf looking on it while deciding to leave town for good. Thus, the final conclusion of Dos Passos, at least in *Manhattan Transfer*, seems to be a rejection of the valueless modern urban existence, as presented through his various, technologically conceived, symbols.

IV.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction has frequently been compared to social history, especially in regards to the 1920s, or to use the expression coined by Fitzgerald himself, "the Jazz Age." His 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby* is no exception; in fact, this is the novel that manages to capture most effectively the influence of modern technological civilization on the physical and cultural landscape of the United States in the 1920s. Fitzgerald lavishly uses in this novel many new elements of the changing American culture, including technological ones, but the most prominent and most complex technological symbol of *The Great Gatsby* is undoubtedly the one that was most visible and influential in the 1920: the automobile. The extent as well as the complexity of Fitzgerald's use of automobiles for literary purposes in *The Great Gatsby* is unprecedented. The automobile is the principal image of modernity and technology, one of Fitzgerald's most effective ways of characterization, as well as a major dramatic device in the novel. For the characters of *The Great Gatsby* it variably represents a means of transportation, commodity and "medium of exchange," object of desire, status symbol, or means of escape and freedom.

Fitzgerald defines his characters partly through their relationship to technology when commenting on the kind of car they drive on the one hand, and the way they drive on the other. The most conspicuous example of the novel's automobile symbolism is obviously Gatsby's "circus wagon" (94). It sums up, as Leo Marx states, the quality of life that Gatsby aspires for; and it serves later in the novel as "a murder weapon and the instrument of Gatsby's undoing" (*Machine* 358). The function of Gatsby's "splendid" and "gorgeous" automobile keeps changing throughout the text: initially, it is the ultimate status symbol, a mobile version of his mansion, a vulgar display of Gatsby's wealth scorned by Nick (Marx, *Pilot* 317), only to become by the end of the novel a major dramatic device, as much a killer mechanism as the gun used by Wilson.

Tom Buchanan's blue coupé, as shown by O'Meara, also functions in a variety of ways. On one level, it is seen as a piece of hardware, pure technology, a means of transportation between East Egg and New York. On a second level, similarly to Gatsby's car, the blue coupé also functions as commodity, a status symbol for the

Buchanans, a means of expressing their social and financial status. Furthermore, claims O'Meara, in specific situations between Tom and Wilson, the car also becomes a currency, a medium of exchange. Wilson (incidentally a car mechanic leading a rather mechanical existence), for whom the coupé could become a "literal and figurative means of escape" (82) hopes to buy it from Tom Buchanan so that he and Myrtle can sell it with profit and go West. Daisy Buchanan, typically of affluent women in the 1920s, has her own car: a little white roadster. It is ironic, as Echevarría points out, that at the beginning of their aborted relationship, Gatsby "has no 'chariot' to facilitate his romantic pursuit" (73); Daisy, the dream girl, however, already drives her own automobile.

The question of what the novel's characters drive situates them socially in a hierarchy similar to the one suggested by Lewis in *Babbitt*, but how they drive is an indication of personal, even moral values in the novel. *The Great Gatsby* abounds in examples of poor driving, traffic violations, accidents, and near-accidents. After Gatsby's first party a drunken guest drives his car into the ditch (45). Next, Jordan Baker (whose very name evokes automobile memories) nearly runs over a group of road workers, passing them so close that the "fender flicked a button on one man's coat" (48), thus deserving the unflattering epithet of a "rotten driver." In New York, Gatsby is pulled over for speeding, but he gets away using his "gonnections," by simply showing the officer a card from the police commissioner (54). These incidents culminate in the hit-and-run scene when Myrtle gets killed by Daisy, driving Gatsby's car on their way back from New York. It seems that Nick is perhaps the only character not in the category of careless drivers. Clearly, misuse or abuse of technology such as reckless driving may be seen as symbolic of the general wildness, carelessness, and irresponsibility of the Jazz Age (cf. Echevarría 76) and provides a way for Fitzgerald for making indirect moral statements about his characters.

The Great Gatsby also makes use of other elements of the technological environment, such as trains, Gatsby's hydroplane, or gas stations, but these are more for the purpose of creating an authentic modern background than conscious exploitations of a technologically conceived metaphor, such as in the case of the automobile. One of the

central symbols of the novel, however, cannot be overlooked in any discussion of technology and *The Great Gatsby*. Conceived in Eliot's newly established framework of wasteland imagery, the infamous "valley of ashes," a modern, man-made, industrial wasteland, stretching between West Egg and New York City, is thus described in the opening of Chapter Two of the novel:

> About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (21)

Critics have since identified the original of this "valley of ashes" as the Corona dumps, a swampy area in the borough of Queens filled with ashes from coal-burning factories and the garbage of the city in the 1920s. (Cf. Matthew J. Bruccoli's "Note on Geography" on page 211 of the Cambridge edition of *The Great Gatsby*.) This repugnant landscape, "modern city at its ugliest" (*Pilot* 224) as Leo Marx called it, is presented in the novel clearly as the product of modern industrial and urban existence. Industrial and urban waste becomes symbolic of moral corruption and spiritual barrenness. Significantly, Fitzgerald first evokes his version of the wasteland by agricultural metaphors ("fantastic farm," "grotesque gardens"), where the adjectives signal the inappropriateness of such rural, or pastoral imagery. The garden is transformed, then, in the same sentence, into the image of a city with houses and chimneys and men moving "dimly and already crumbling in the powdery air" (21). This passage, an excellent illustration of the intrusion of the machine—as symbolizing industry, technology, or the city—into the pastoral garden (to use the central metaphor of Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*) also indicates Fitzgerald's awareness of the potentially dismal consequences of urban and technological civilization allowed to go awry.

V.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the most conspicuous technological image shared in these and a number of other novels from the period is undoubtedly the automobile, replacing such technological icons of previous periods as the steam engine, the railroad, or Henry Adams's dynamo. While the three novelists discussed above do not offer a unified technological vision, the examination of the image of the automobile does offer a sense of continuity, or development, from Lewis's *Babbitt*, through Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*. On the one hand, the image of the automobile evolves from an innocent piece of hardware, into an alienating and potentially dangerous technology, and finally into an actual killing machine. On the other hand, association with the finest technology—as exemplified by the superb pieces of automobiles owned by Congo Jake and Jay Gatsby—seems to be tied to instances of individual corruption. Both of these tendencies seem to reinforce the negative aspects of the artists' judgments on technology's role in society.

As evidenced by the three novels discussed above, technology has become an inescapable part of modern life, one that the writers of the 1920s could hardly ignore. In his analysis of American writing in the postwar decade, Frederick J. Hoffman puts forward what he sees as the three typical responses of 1920s poetry to the machine:

> In some cases the poet looked at the machine in an attitude of respectful incomprehension, trying to find in it a kind of emotionless utopia of the spirit, but endowing it nevertheless with the language of emotion. In other cases the machine was personified—or at least some of its functions were translated into an analogy with human nature. In still other poems the machine became a symbol, as it was for a time for Henry Adams, of the metaphysical force or forces whose energies it presumably channeled and controlled. (293–94)

The novelists' response in the 1920s does not easily fit into any of these categories. The typical attitude toward the gradual assimilation of technology into mainstream culture might best be described as a mixture of fascination and condemnation, but reactions really showed a bell curve pattern: fewer novelists seemed to unambiguously reject

or fully endorse machine civilization and most of them—as exemplified by Lewis, Dos Passos, and Fitzgerald above—related to the new technological world order with a healthy ambivalence, or a somewhat skeptical enthusiasm.

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