

## CHAPTER 5

### A CAUSE CÉLÈBRÈ: AMERICAN WRITERS AND THE SACCO-VANZETTI CASE

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*"I prefer the dynamiter who cares about justice to the most law-abiding person in the world who doesn't!"* Cornelia in Upton Sinclair's Boston

In 1908, the year that Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday and Harris's The Bomb were first published, the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti immigrated to the United States. "I was crazy to come to this country," Nichola Sacco said in his imperfect English during his trial, "because I was liked a free country." The two immigrants did not meet until 1917, when each planned to avoid conscription by fleeing to Mexico. They became attracted to anarchist ideas out of sympathy for their fellow workers and disillusionment about their adopted country. On April 15, 1920 in South Braintree, Massachusetts, a paymaster and guard were killed

during a robbery; three weeks later Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and charged with the crime. The evidence was problematic and both men had alibis, but after seven years of imprisonment, many motions, and a last-minute review of the case by the Governor of Massachusetts and the Presidents of Harvard and MIT, Sacco and Vanzetti were found guilty and subsequently executed.

Both as a historical event and as a neglected issue in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature, the Sacco-Vanzetti case raises a number of interrelated, layered issues: first, the racialized class politics of the trial, with its overt anti-immigrant animus; secondly, the rich history of the trial's setting, which seemed to underscore the issues of rebellion and freedom; thirdly, the formal strategies of the writers who attempted to represent the trial, and the way in which assumptions about gender participated in, or were resisted by, those representations; and finally, the current neglect of these texts and others of the period, in a country whose apparently brief historical memory allowed its media to dub the O.J. Simpson case "the trial of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century."

Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted on August 23, 1927. Their case had attracted the attention of writers and intellectuals worldwide. Bernard Shaw, Anatole France, and Albert Einstein wrote letters on their behalf.<sup>1</sup> Romain Rolland sent a telegram to

Governor Fuller. Despite such illustrious support, the two anarchists knew throughout their trial and imprisonment that they were doomed men. In an eloquent speech, Vanzetti tried to appropriate the meaning of their deaths for the anarchist cause. Instead of merely shouting, in the tradition of French anarchists on the verge of execution, Vive l'anarchie!, he offered an interpretation:

If it had not been for this, I might have live out my life, talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we do such a work for tolerance, for justice, for man`s understanding of man, as we now do by an accident. Our words — our lives— our pains— nothing! The taking of our lives — lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler — all! The last moment belongs to us — that agony is our triumph!<sup>2</sup>

Vanzetti represented the executions as a successful act of "propaganda by the deed" that takes as its simultaneous target and place of origin the anarchists themselves. The case had preserved

their words from the oblivion of transitory street-corner conversations with "scorning men." It had taken their faces and ideas from local obscurity to the international spotlight and the historical record. In a sense, Vanzetti was right. Although neither the Haymarket trial and executions, nor the Boston trial and executions made anarchism more attractive to the American public, historians and governors came to acknowledge the injustices of both trials and verdicts and thus by implication the fallibility of law and the State.

#### The Contradictions of Boston

More than any other American city, Boston is a complex site of rebellion and tradition, of hereditary class privilege and immigration — all elements of the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts had been the setting of prior infamous trials, both historical (the Salem witch trials) and fictional (The Scarlet Letter). The executions of the two Italian anarchists, like those of the Haymarket anarchists, exposed contradictions in the social imaginary of a unified America, embodied in the figure of Liberty welcoming immigrants to these shores. The executions also fulfilled the predictions of anarchist theorists that justice and the State were incompatible. As Sacco



and Vanzetti's literary supporters recognized, it was therefore both ironic and appropriate that Boston was the location of the two anarchists' trial and execution.

In his novel about the case, entitled simply Boston, Upton Sinclair often alludes to the history of the city : the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, the Liberty Bell, the Brahmins who claimed descent from the first Puritan settlers. "An odd turn of fate," writes Sinclair of Vanzetti, "that this Italian seeker of liberty should have been convicted within sight of Plymouth Rock, and killed on ground over which Paul Revere had ridden." <sup>3</sup> Boston is the home of Harvard, the first American university, whose President Lowell would play an important role in the case and whose medical school would acquire the brains and hearts of the executed men. William Lloyd Garrison published the antislavery newspaper The Liberator in Boston. It is the setting of Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Henry James's The Bostonians ("Boston marriages") and the beginning of The Education of Henry Adams , whose author observes, "Politics ... had always been the systematic organization of hatreds, and Massachusetts politics had been as harsh as the climate." <sup>4</sup>

As a character in Sinclair's novel Boston points out, there are some philosophical similarities between anarchism and New England transcendentalism. Certain sympathies are, for instance,

evident between William Godwin and Henry Thoreau.

"Government was intended to suppress injustice," Godwin wrote in his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice , "but its effect has been to embody and perpetuate it." <sup>5</sup> Governments corrupt, he argued, by maintaining the unequal distribution of wealth, by the coercive force of its police, army, and law courts (the state monopoly on violence), and by substituting for individual "moral self-direction" the decisions and authority of parliaments and kings.<sup>6</sup> In Book VII of Political Justice , entitled "Of Crimes and Punishment," Godwin notes three official rationales for punishment—restraint, reformation, and example—and comes to the following conclusion: "Had legislators confined their views to reformation and restraint, their exertions of power, though mistaken, would still have borne the stamp of humanity. But the moment vengeance presented itself as a stimulus on the one side, or the exhibition of a terrible example on the other, no barbarity was thought too great." <sup>7</sup>

In his political essays Thoreau, who like Godwin has been called a "philosophical anarchist,"<sup>8</sup> also inveighed against institutionalized forms of injustice — in particular the Fugitive Slave Act, the Mexican War, and the execution of John Brown. Thoreau's general criticisms of government often echo Godwin's. The opening sentences of "Civil Disobedience" are still quoted by anarchists; Thoreau's criticism of voting ("all voting is a sort of

gaming ... playing with moral questions"), his distrust of law and institutions, and his advocacy of rebellion against state-sanctioned injustice are intrinsic to anarchist theory. His bitter attack on his home state in the essay "Slavery in Massachusetts," an assault on its judges, governor, press, and complacent citizenry, prefigures many of critiques made by Sacco and Vanzetti`s supporters. "My thoughts are murder to the State," Thoreau wrote of Massachusetts`s enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, "and invariably go plotting against her." <sup>9</sup> In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau even endorsed the use of force in a righteous cause. Emma Goldman called him "the greatest American Anarchist."

#### Writers on the Picket Lines

Katherine Anne Porter, Dorothy Parker, John Dos Passos, and Edna St. Vincent Millay were among those who picketed and were arrested at the trial.<sup>10</sup> Porter (1890-1980) was a Texas-born short-story writer and novelist who made a name for herself with her first collection, Flowering Judas (1930). Her most famous novel was Ship of Fools (1962), which she had worked on for two decades; it was made into a film with an international cast. In 1966 Porter was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National



Book Award. Millay, born in Maine two years after Porter and a graduate of Vassar, was most famous for her lyric poems and sonnets. She had published numerous collections by the time of her death in 1950 and secured a place in American literary history.

Dos Passos, born in 1896 in Chicago, was a graduate of Harvard who went on to drive an ambulance in France during World War I and then to write about his first book about his war experiences. His most famous literary achievement is the trilogy entitled U.S.A., which describes the lives of both fictional and historical characters in the social dramas and conflicts of the first decades of the twentieth century. The third volume of the trilogy, The Big Money, takes the Sacco-Vanzetti case as exemplary of a number of disturbing trends in the American public sphere—corruption, commercialism, exploitation, injustice. Upton Sinclair, whose novel Boston is the longest text dedicated to the subject of Sacco and Vanzetti, belonged to another generation than Porter, Millay, and Dos Passos; born in 1878 in Baltimore, he is known primarily as a socialist, California candidate for public office, and muckraking novelist, who published more than 100 works of fiction and nonfiction between 1901-1940 and who continued writing into his last years.

Porter describes members of her picket line being bailed out on a regular basis by Edward James, the nephew of Henry.



"As late as the 1920s," writes James Joll, a historian of anarchism, "two Italian anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti, were to provide a cause célèbre in which a whole generation of American liberals came of age." <sup>11</sup> Explaining the prominence of artists among the protestors, Malcolm Cowley said that some of the Massachusetts officials "turned themselves into parodies of everything that artists hate in the bourgeoisie," <sup>12</sup> and Upton Sinclair remarked in Boston that "the case worked upon the consciences of persons who were cursed with artistic temperaments." <sup>13</sup> John Dos Passos wrote the following account of the artistic community of Greenwich Village after World War I, a description consciously resonant of the anarchists and artists in fin-de-siècle France:

American Bohemia was in revolt against Main Street, against the power of money, against Victorian morals. Freedom was the theme. ... The businessman could never understand. It was part of a worldwide revolt of artists and would-be artists and thinkers and would-be thinkers against a society where most of the rewards went to people skillful in the manipulation of money ... When artists and writers found it hard to make themselves a niche in industrial society, they repudiated the whole

business. Greenwich Village was their refuge, the free commune of Montmartre on American soil.

Les bourgeois à la lanterne. <sup>14</sup>

Canonical modernism as it has been constructed by some major theorists on both the left and the right excludes or marginalizes texts written about the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the authors who wrote them, largely because such theorists argue about the same writers—Joyce, Kafka, Eliot—and understand modernism as either protofascist or apolitical, thereby excluding not only "traditional realism" but also what Fredric Jameson calls "old-fashioned political art of the socialist realist type" <sup>15</sup>—a label that might be applied to Sinclair.

Nineteenth-century European novels are not excluded from the canon because of their engagement with contemporary political issues or even because of a didacticism about those issues.

Dickens's novels are often sentimental. Anna Karenina is often preachy. The emphasis in Les Misérables on poverty and injustice irritated the Goncourts, who compared its author to "those English preachers who harangue strollers in the park on a Sunday." <sup>16</sup> In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, novels critical of the existing social structure, with its restricted distribution of wealth and power and concomitant injustices, tended toward realism and

naturalism. Proponents of this art considered accessibility, sentiment, and realism necessary political weapons in the arsenal of opposition.

### Modernism, Sentimentality, and the Feminine

Yet theorists of modernism like Brecht and Adorno argued that these tactics, having been coopted by the "culture industry," were not conducive to the demystification of social structures. While Lukács condemned modernism for its complicity with the dissolution of the subject and social relations under capitalism, Adorno attacked American mass culture, arguing that "hermetic works can be, and are, more critical of the status quo than those that go in for tangible social criticism but in so doing make use of non-radical forms, thus giving tacit recognition to the rampantly flourishing culture industry." <sup>17</sup>

Three of the texts in this chapter —Upton Sinclair's Boston, Katherine Anne Porter's memoir The Never-Ending Wrong, and Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Justice Denied in Massachusetts"— do go in, contrary to Adorno's negative aesthetics, for "tangible social criticism" in "non-radical forms"; the fourth, John Dos Passos's The Big Money, deploys its modernist innovations in the service of political engagement and



has accordingly remained on the margins of the canon. The protestors adopted different strategies to record their obsessive or enduring interest in the case. Porter's memoir is a brief, conflicted retrospective of her personal involvement in the protests. Sinclair's massive two-volume "documentary novel" Boston, rather like a forerunner of Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel," attempts after much research to present both the historical specifics of the case and imagined supplementary characters and conversations. By contrast, Dos Passos's The Big Money, like its two predecessors in the trilogy USA, adopts modernist narrative strategies not to evade the political or to invent a private language but to represent the various public discourses and ideological conflicts of the 1920s, including the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Many more novels, plays, and poems were written about Sacco and Vanzetti; an overview of this literature appears in Louis Joughin and Edmund Morgan's The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti. Of the reception of these works the authors comment:

Novels of the extreme left usually suffer a curious fate; they are overpraised by those whose political sympathies lie with the author, and are undervalued by neutral or liberal critics. This fact is not entirely irrelevant to the Sacco-Vanzetti literature; it, too, as



a class of writing, has usually met the same judgment by predisposition. <sup>18</sup>

Most of those who wrote about the case were not anarchists, but all were moved to action by the injustice of the trial, apparently a replay of the Haymarket trial, which had also attracted the sympathy of intellectuals for the accused anarchists. The American intellectuals involved in the Sacco-Vanzetti case were fellow travelers of sorts, partially attracted by anarchism's humanitarian principles, its outrage against social and economic injustice, its ambivalence toward modernity, but simultaneously critical of the anarchist reputation for violence. Because all four authors were personally and emotionally involved in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, their texts are deliberate acts of memory and reparation, variations of the elegy; they are thus engaged with sentiment, with feeling, which is, as Suzanne Clark has argued, taboo in canonical modernism.

Explaining how this taboo functions to exclude women writers, Clark notes that "as an epithet, sentimental condenses the way gender still operates as a political unconscious within criticism to trigger shame, embarrassment, and disgust." <sup>19</sup> Male writers of this period who espoused oppositional politics were also accused of sentimentality. Edmund Wilson wrote disparagingly:

"When a man as intelligent as Dos Passos—that is, a man a good deal more intelligent than, say, Michael Gold or Upton Sinclair [both defenders of Sacco and Vanzetti], who hold similar political views—when so intelligent a man and so good an artist allows his bias so to falsify his picture of life that, in spite of all the accurate observation and all the imaginative insight, its values are partly those of melodrama—we begin to guess some stubborn sentimentalism at the bottom of the whole thing, some deeply buried streak of hysteria " [italics added].<sup>20</sup> In Wilson's account, gender is not a matter of a writer's biological sex but of his or her politics; male writers can be sentimental, melodramatic, and hysterical if they adopt oppositional politics, which Wilson represents in traditionally feminine terms, perhaps because, as Ford Madox Ford says of anarchist bombers, the opposition seems inspired by "pity" for the poor and suffering, rather than by "masculine" reason and facts. It is women, according to this essentialism, who because of their maternal instincts, care about the underdog.

According to Adorno, however, the taboo on the sentimental predates modernism: "Hegel was the first to have taken up a firm position against sentimentalism in aesthetics. Sentimentalism sought to discover the content of art in its effect rather than in the works themselves. " <sup>21</sup> But before Hegel, the

German Romantics, particularly Schiller, had a different sense of "sentimental." Schiller's Über Naive und Sentimentalische Dichtung (1795) opposed the "naive" poet of antiquity—prototypically Homer—to the "sentimental" poet of modernity, who does not merely emote but "reflects," does not rely on inspiration but is self-critical.<sup>22</sup> The historical shift from "naive" to "sentimental" marks for Schiller a shift from nature as experience and subject to nature as object and idea. The aesthetic evaluation of "sentimental" has clearly changed since the late eighteenth century when Schiller defined sentimental poetry much in the sense of Wordsworth's formulation, "emotion recollected in tranquility."<sup>23</sup>

Millay's poem "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" is, according to Allen Tate, "sentimental" in the contemporary sense, but it might be argued to be sentimental in Schiller's sense as well and thus to belong, not to the minor verse of the "poetess," but to a larger tradition of modern poetry with which modernism, according to its canonizers, broke. In What is Art? (1896) Tolstoy had written: "it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself that the activity of art is based."<sup>24</sup> Even Eliot acknowledges in "The Social Function of Poetry" that "poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion."<sup>25</sup> The New Critics



and the Frankfurt School were, for different reasons, to diverge from such accounts of literature and implicitly to gender communication and sentiment as feminine.

### Millay's Elegy

Because of her loyalty to traditional poetic forms, many critics have not assigned Edna St. Vincent Millay to the modernist canon. "Justice Denied" is marked by rhymes and archaic inversions of word order, both contrary to Pound's account of modernist practice. Millay might be characterized as the opposite of a canonical modernist like Eliot; her way of life was bohemian, her politics progressive, but her poetry formally conservative. Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, older than Millay and just as traditional formally, have been anthologized as modernists where she is not.<sup>26</sup>

Only the title of Millay's poem, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts," denotes a specific event; it does not refer to executions, courthouses, picket lines. In its lack of referential directness and its oblique imagery, "Justice Denied" might at first reading be interpreted as a flight from the political. Displacing its subject from the city of Boston to the countryside, Millay's poem is a lament, mourning both the executed men and a generation's fruitless efforts to save them, couched in imagery instantly



recognizable as "poetic" — natural, autumnal — making an extended analogy between the event of the title and a blight upon nature. It is a poem about the failure of agency and opposition. The two displacements — from society to nature and from city to country — might seem in accordance with familiar Marxist critiques as they suggest a naturalizing, even a depoliticizing, of the subject. The poem's inclusive gesture toward the reader ( "Let us abandon then our gardens" ) is reminiscent of Eliot's "Prufrock." The "we" of the poem, which presumably refers to the protestors or to their generation, does possess a certain resonance, since it takes the place of the traditional, solitary, lyrical subjectivity, and suggests some form of comradeship, even in defeat. It is, however, apparently a private "we" — hence the retreat to domestic space— and not the public, political "we" of, for example, "We the People." The poem in its entirety reads as follows:

#### JUSTICE DENIED IN MASSACHUSETTS

Let us abandon then our gardens and go  
home  
And sit in the sitting room.

Shall the larkspur blossom or the corn grow  
under this cloud?

Sour to the fruitful seed

Is the cold earth under this cloud,

Fostering quack and weed, we have marched  
upon but cannot conquer;

We have bent the blades of our hoes against  
the stalks of them.

Let us go home, and sit in the sitting room.

Not in our day

Shall the cloud go over and the sun rise as  
before,

Beneficent upon us

Out of the glittering bay,

And the warm winds be blown inward from  
the sea

Moving the blades of corn

With a peaceful sound.

Forlorn, forlorn,

Stands the blue hay-rack by the empty mow.

And the petals drop to the ground,

Leaving the tree unfruited.

The sun that warmed our stooping backs and  
withered the weed uprooted

We shall not feel it again.

We shall die in darkness, and be buried in  
the rain.

What from the splendid dead

We have inherited —

Furrows sweet to the grain, and the weed  
subdued —

See now the slug and the mildew plunder.

Evil does overwhelm

The larkspur and the corn;

We have seen them go under.

Let us sit here, sit still,

Here is the sitting-room until we die;

At the step of Death on the walk, rise and  
go;

Leaving to our children`s children this  
beautiful doorway,

And this elm,

And a blighted earth to till

With a broken hoe.

In the essay "Tension in Poetry" Allen Tate uses "Justice Denied" as an example of "the poetry of mass language" which he finds present "equally in a ladylike lyric and in much of the political poetry of our time."<sup>27</sup> Mass language, he explains, is "the medium of communication, and its users are less interested in bringing to formal order what is sometimes called the affective state than in arousing that state." (Tate's valorization of "formal order" is in opposition to an implicit anarchy.) In expressing this view Tate might seem to be in accord with Adorno's condemnation of "non-radical forms." But while both Tate and Adorno seem to champion some formal departure from familiar conventions, their motives differ. Adorno understands modernist "negative aesthetics" as subversive of the culture industry and the commodity form. But when Tate writes that "today many poets are driven to inventing private languages, or very narrow ones, because public speech has become heavily tainted with mass feeling," he is blaming democracy, not capitalism, for the decline of the aesthetic. "Mass" is his code word, which he sets in explicit opposition to the "language of the people which interested the late W.B. Yeats." In this context "people" is a counterpart of *Volk*, Yeats having taken as his ideal a hierarchical, agricultural society ruled by a hereditary



aristocracy.<sup>28</sup> And Tate's opposition people/mass is, of course, gendered. As Andreas Huyssen observes, "The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always also a fear of woman."

29

As a poet's critique, Tate's attack on "Justice Denied" is rather peculiar. He writes:

From this stanza by Miss Millay we infer that her splendid ancestors made the earth a good place that has somehow gone bad — and you get the reason from the title: "Justice Denied in Massachusetts." How Massachusetts could cause a general desiccation, why (as we are told in a footnote to the poem) the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti should have anything to do with the rotting of the crops, it is never made clear. These lines are mass language: they arouse an affective state in one set of terms, and suddenly an object quite unrelated to those terms gets the benefit of it; and this effect, which is usually achieved, as I think it is here, without conscious effort, is sentimentality.

Apparently metaphor itself, even in such a traditional comparison as Millay`s, is for Tate a violation of good taste or poetic "tension." His misunderstanding of the metaphor seems willful; clearly, it is not "Massachusetts" but "the denial of justice" that has caused "a general desiccation." Adopting Tate`s logic, one might make a similar objection to the impotence of the Fisher King and the drought of The Waste Land. Tate finally dismisses "Justice Denied" as follows: "the lines and even the entire poem are impossibly obscure. I am attacking here the fallacy of communication in poetry. (I am not attacking social justice.)" He seems to endorse a Mallarméan retreat from communication while simultaneously condemning poetic obscurity. An avowed reactionary himself (one 1936 book is entitled Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas ) Tate does not accuse Millay of reactionary poetics. Adorno would have agreed with Tate that communication was not a desideratum for modern art but he would not have agreed on the reason. "What is called communication today," Adorno writes, "is the adaptation of spirit [Geist ] to useful aims, and worse, to commodity fetishism." <sup>30</sup>

But the implication that the poem merely cedes political terrain to the victor is problematic in view of Millay`s passionate opposition to the injustice that inspired the poem. She did not, after all, sit in her room and read the newspapers; still less did she

approve of the trial. In fact, she first read "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" at a public rally on Salem Street, perhaps on August 11, 1927, about two weeks before the execution, or (which seems more likely ) hours before on August 22.<sup>31</sup> Communication was clearly her intent. The context suggests that the poem was written for an act of public mourning.

On the picket line Millay had carried a sign that read: "If these men are executed, justice is dead in Massachusetts."<sup>32</sup> The similarity to the poem's title is obvious, but whereas the placard is unequivocal, the poem is elusive. The blunt "dead" is replaced by the judicial "denied" (as in "the appeal was denied"). The message of the placard having failed, the poem replaces it. Read in public, it instantiates the private. The public "we" of the crowd dissolves after the execution into the private "we" of the poem.

Malcolm Cowley described that night in Exile's Return: "Afterward I talked with some of the people who had joined in that strange nocturnal march . . . [After the execution] suddenly they wept or fell silent, they separated, and many of them walked the streets alone, all night. Just as the fight for a common cause had brought the intellectuals together, so the defeat drove them apart, each into his personal isolation."<sup>33</sup>



"Incurable Wounds"

The sad, defeated quality of "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" finds an echo in Katherine Anne Porter's 1977 memoir The Never-Ending Wrong, written, from notes made during the protests, three years before the author's death at age 90 and published on the fiftieth anniversary of the execution. The memoir bears interesting similarities to Boston, "Justice Denied," and The Big Money. Like "Justice Denied," the memoir is about an "incurable wound" to the protestor's sense of justice and humanity (NEW, 50, 62).

Explaining her own participation, Porter specifies the role of sentiment: "I still had my reasons for being there to protest the terrible penalty they were condemned to suffer; these reasons were of the heart, which I believe appears in these pages with emphasis" [italics added].<sup>34</sup> An editorial in The Nation, August 31, 1927, also affirmed the "heart": "The human heart is not yet so corroded that it can read off the extinction of these two men without a shock to the very roots of its belief in justice and humanity." But as Porter's memoir makes clear, this sympathy is problematic in view of the barrier of social class; Porter quotes Vanzetti, who formulated the opposition thus in a letter: "Although we are one heart, unfortunately we represent two opposite class" [italics added] (NEW, 11). As history would prove, social class would



take precedence over sentiment, as members of the Brahmin class joined forces to execute the immigrant workers. But sentiment retains a utopian element, a potential for uniting people, particularly women, across class interests. After describing other women`s reponses to Mrs. Sacco, Porter writes:

I was mistaken in my anxiety — their wish to help, to show her their concern was real, their feelings were true and lasting, no matter how awkwardly expressed; their love and tenderness and wish to help were from the heart. All through those last days in Boston, those strangely innocent women enlisted their altar societies, their card clubs, their literary round tables, their music circles, and their various charities in the campaign to save Sacco and Vanzetti...bringing money they had collected in the endless, wittily devious ways of women`s organizations. They would talk among themselves and to her about how they felt, with tears in their eyes, promising to come again soon with more help. They were known as "sob sisters" by the cynics and the hangers-on of the committee I belonged to who

took their money and described their activities as  
"sentimental orgies." (NEW, 37-38)

While identifying to some degree with these women, Porter also attempts to stake out a political stance that is distinct from that of anarchists, communists, and capitalists, but her sympathies shift back and forth throughout the text. The Never-Ending Wrong expresses some of the ambivalence of the fellow traveler while confessing to a "lifelong sympathy for the cause to which they [Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin] devoted their lives—to ameliorate the anguish that human beings inflict on each other—the never-ending wrong, forever incurable" (NEW, 62). Porter describes herself as a "registered member of the Democratic Party, a convinced liberal" (NEW, 14) and as bourgeois; she expresses hostility to both the communists involved in the protests and to the capitalists who celebrate the executions. She expresses an anarchist's critique of the communist obedience to the party hierarchy : "The air was stiff with the cold, mindless, irrational compliance with orders from `higher up` " (NEW, 13). After the execution, Porter's wrath is directed at the Brahmins and capitalists. She describes taking the elevator

with three entirely correct old gentlemen looking much alike in their sleekness, pinkness, baldness, glossiness of grooming, such stereotypes as no proletarian novelist of the time would have dared to use as the example of a capitalist monster in his novel...One of them said to the others in a cream-cheese voice, "It is very pleasant to know we may expect things to settle down properly again, " and the others nodded with wise, smug, complacent faces. To this day I can feel again my violent desire just to slap his whole slick face all over at once, hard, with the flat of my hand, or better, some kind of washing bat or any useful domestic appliance being applied where it would really make an impression — a butter paddle — something he would feel through that smug layer of too-well-fed fat. (NEW, 49)

In this incident Porter seems infected with the violence generally attributed to anarchists, who had much the same motive, but her urge takes explicitly gendered terms — "washing bat," "butter paddle" — as if she were pitting the female domestic worker against the male capitalist. Her fantasies become more violent —

"pushing him down an endless flight of stairs, or dropping him without warning into a bottomless well, or stringing him up to a stout beam" (NEW, 50). But she is horrified by these thoughts; recognizing that the unfair executions had caused "some incurable wound to her very humanity," she writes: "My conscience stirs as if, in my impulse to do violence to my enemy, I had assisted at his crime" (NEW, 50). Her violent anger is another kind of "sentiment," not sympathy but outrage, also taboo as an unseemly emotion. Unable to align herself wholeheartedly with either the women`s clubs, the anarchists, or the communists, Porter is exemplary of the fellow traveler who is committed in opposition to a specific injustice but not committed to a particular totalizing critique of its cause. This negative stance is both the virtue and the weakness of the fellow traveler, who remains uncontaminated but isolated and therefore powerless.

Porter recognizes the explosiveness of Sacco and Vanzetti`s particular political loyalty, with its reputation for violence: "A fearful word had been used to cover the whole list of prejudices and misinformation, and in some deeply mysterious way, their [Sacco and Vanzetti`s] name had been associated with it — Anarchy ... not even the word `Communism` struck such terror, anger, and hatred into the popular mind" (NEW, 6). Sometimes Porter endorses an anarchist assessment of the ills of society, and



at other times she voices the most stereotypical objection to the elimination of government, as in the following passage:

Fascism, Nazism, new names for very ancient evil forms of government — tyranny and dictatorship — came into fashion almost at the same time with Communism ... But Anarchy had been here all the nineteenth century, with its sinister offspring Nihilism, and it is a simple truth that the human mind can face better the most oppressive government, the most rigid restrictions, than the awful prospect of a lawless, frontierless world. Freedom is a dangerous intoxicant and very few people can tolerate it in any quantity; it brings out the old raiding, oppressing, murderous instincts, the rage for revenge, for power, the lust for bloodshed.

(NEW, 7)

This Hobbesian passage exposes the limits of Porter's political thinking, assuming the worst of human beings' "instincts" and preferring totalitarianism to freedom.

In her memoir Porter imagines political engagement not in terms of a conversion narrative but of a fall from grace, from

"youthful" faith in humanity and optimism about the future into "mature" disillusionment and pessimism. She affirms the value of sentiment but sees it as impotent, writing of Vanzetti's final words, his idealism: "It is very grand and noble in words and grand, noble souls have died for it — it is worth weeping for. But it doesn't work out so well" (NEW, 61 ). The end of Millay's poem situates the "we" in a posture of resignation; similarly, Porter describes the mood after the executions: " In my whole life I have never felt such a weight of pure bitterness, helpless anger in utter defeat, outraged love and hope as hung over us in that room" (NEW, 48).

Although she failed to grasp some of its key tenets, it is clear from the memoir that Porter had taken an interest in anarchism; she mentions having read Goldman's autobiography and Kropotkin's Memoirs of a Revolutionist, and she quotes Nietzsche as saying, "The State is the coldest of all cold monsters." The State lacks heart, is devoid of sentiment. Porter's memoir closes with a description of a meeting, in 1935, with Emma Goldman at the Select in Paris. In the conversation she recounts, Goldman seems at first to espouse Porter's own disillusioned attitudes: "she finally came to admit sadly that the human race in its weakness demanded government and all government was evil because human nature was basically weak and weakness is evil." But then in response to a platitude of Porter's, Goldman rouses

herself: "What have I just said? There is no such thing as a good government. There never was. There can't be" (NEW, 62-63).

### A Non-Fiction Novel

Porter and Millay's written responses to the Sacco-Vanzetti case are personal and epiphanic. In this they contrast with Upton Sinclair's Boston, a novel over 750 pages long which attempts to detail every aspect of the case. Sinclair considered himself a socialist, but he had read and been influenced by Kropotkin's books, Mutual Aid and Appeal to the Young.<sup>35</sup> In the author's preface Sinclair calls Boston "a contemporary historical novel" and acknowledges that it is "an unusual art-form," compounded of real and imaginary characters (B, xxxv). Boston is not a roman à clef; the historical characters — Sacco, Vanzetti, Judge Thayer, Governor Fuller, and others involved in the trial — are called by their real names. "The story has no hero but the truth," Sinclair explained, "and its heroines are two women, one old and the other young, who are ardently seeking the truth" (B, xxxvi). Howard Zinn refers to the novel's "feminist impulse," explaining that Sinclair's first wife, Meta Fuller, had given him Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Women and Economics which, along with subsequent feminist reading, led Sinclair to support birth control and pay for



housewives, among other women`s issues.<sup>36</sup> His choice of an older (sixty-year-old) woman as the main character is particularly striking in light of the conventions of the novel: the German Bildungsroman, the young Frenchman from the provinces who comes to the city, the protagonist of the modernist novel who is, like Joseph K. of The Trial, a thirty-year-old man. Sinclair, who received a lot of hate mail, was attacked for his feminist beliefs; in a response to one, he wrote, "I am grateful to you for your kindness in seeking to educate me, but I think I ought to explain to you that you are dealing with a hopeless case. I was one of the few men who marched in the first woman suffrage parade in New York more than twenty years ago, and I am an ardent feminist." <sup>37</sup>

Boston opens with an emancipation. Cornelia Thornwell`s husband, a Brahmin whose inherited wealth came from the ownership of cotton mills, is found dead at his desk in a manner reminiscent of Hawthorne`s example of "property is theft," Colonel Pyncheon. Cornelia is consequently "told of her release" (B, 1). She sheds no tears for her dead husband, tolerates with some difficulty the squabbings of her children and grandchildren over their inheritance, and leaves after the funeral to become a lodger in the same house where Vanzetti lives and to work in a cordage factory owned by a family friend. Cornelia`s late rebellion against her class is partially explicable in terms of her



own origins, which are Irish, not Brahmin. But she explains her departure as consistent with New England history and thought:

"For forty years [Cornelia says] I did what I was told was my duty ... Now for the rest of my life I am going to be an individual, and not a cog in the family machine. And while that may seem terrible to you, you can comfort yourself with the fact that it is real `Boston`—old `Boston`,` the very best there is. Everything that is glorious in our history has been made by people who have `come out`,` and fought some prevailing sentiment [she names Sam and John Quincy Adams, Emerson, Thoreau, Garrison, Wendell Philllips, James Russell Lowell, Thomas Wentworth Higginson] ... Boston history has been made by the `saving minority.`" (B, 120-21)

In The Education, the self-proclaimed "conservative Christian anarchist" Henry Adams concurs: "resistance to something was the law of New England nature."<sup>38</sup>

In Boston, as in The Never-Ending Wrong, the opposition between social class and sentiment is foregrounded, and again the

utopian hope is that sentiment can bridge the gulf between classes. Like the "sob sisters" of Porter's account, Cornelia is accounted a sentimentalist by both the "revolutionists" and the wealthy, who believe that class interests will always ultimately take precedence over humanitarian feelings:

The Brinis [the family in whose house she boards] had long ago found out who Cornelia was; they knew that she came from a great rich family; yet not all the cruel "class consciousness" could weaken their trust in her. It seemed to Cornelia that this offered some hint of how to avoid the stresses of the war between capital and labor; also for the bitter strife between the old Yankees and the new foreigners, and for the "crime wave," and many other troubles of the time. But when she told that theory to her friends of the great world, they called it "sentimental," and went on with their wiser and more practical plan of jailing and deporting and killing. Also most of the so-called "class-consciousness" revolutionists would have agreed that Cornelia's program was "sentimental"; so

apparently the jailing and deporting and killing had to continue. (B, 199)

Despite or perhaps partly because of the violence on both sides, Sinclair underlines the similarities between the ideas of revolutionary New England and those of anarchists and revolutionaries. Told of the anarchist doctrine that each person is "a law unto himself," Cornelia responds: "That ought to frighten me, but we New Englanders were raised on that creed — we called it Transcendentalism" (B, 232). Cousin Letitia, a proper spinster who chaperones Cornelia's granddaughter Betty around Europe, meets some of these revolutionaries; in a letter home Betty writes: "When she [Letitia] was in school, she was taught to admire the revolutionary leaders of New England, and now that she meets those in Europe, she finds them highly educated men" (B, 185). And a French communist editor observes that "there are few anarchist book shops without copies of Thoreau's 'Duty of Civil Disobedience'" (B, 232). The conflict between the anarchist cause and the Brahmins is formulated as another moment in Boston's historical dialectic between liberty and consolidated power.

The clear division between the Brahmin class and their social subordinates is, Sinclair suggests, destabilized by the

American preoccupation with race. As Italians, Sacco and Vanzetti's "whiteness" is questioned by their American-born fellow workers, who therefore align themselves with the Brahmins. As was the case with Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century, white skin is not a matter of European descent; it is put into question by the immigrants' poverty. The anarchists' alibis for the robbery were supported only by their fellow countrymen; by contrast, another accused man, Orciani, "had been able to produce an American alibi ... he could produce his boss and several other 'white men' to swear he had been at his machine all day" (B, 237). The "white" jurors are also unsympathetic to the Italians:

One by one the jurors were selected; Arthur W. Burgess, shoemaker of the town of Hanson, Henry S. Burgess, caretaker of the town of Wareham, Joseph Frawley, shoe-finisher of the town of Brockton, Charles A. Gale, clerk, of the town of Norwell—so it went, all Anglo-Saxon names...such little people of the old stock, having failed for one reason or another to become rich, looked with bitter contempt upon the immigrants who came pouring into the country, to beat down wages and make life harder for the "white men" of New England. Far



from having any sense of class solidarity, they clung to the American idea that their children would rise and join the leisure class; their attitude to the Italian was that of the poor whites of the south to the Negroes. "All these wops stand together," said one jurymen to another, discussing the case at lunch in a restaurant. (B, 251)

While the jurors cherish the American dream of unlimited upward mobility, the judge of the Sacco-Vanzetti case is tormented by awareness of the limits of that mobility. Sinclair sees class anxiety at work in the unjudicial behavior of Judge Web Thayer, who publicly expressed animosity toward the anarchists while the case was before him ("Did you see what I did to those anarchistic bastards?"); Thayer did not come from a "blue-blood" family, lived in Worcester, not the Back Bay, and had attended Dartmouth instead of Harvard (B, 249-50). As a member of the class to which Thayer aspires in vain, Cornelia Thornwell recognizes Thayer's "inferiority complex, a sense of the gulf which yawned between him and the great ones of his community, and which he would never cross, even though he won his way to the Supreme Judicial Bench" (B, 249). While the women of Sinclair's Boston are fluid,

able to transgress class boundaries, the men are fixed in place by anxiety over racial, economic, or social status.

If the class system seems to encourage a Manichean mentality that can lead to cruelty, anarchism, despite its violent reputation, is sometimes imbued with a singular gentleness. According to Sinclair, who knew him, Vanzetti was exceptionally kind-hearted, good with children and animals; in the novel he nurses a sick kitten back to health and practices vegetarianism.<sup>39</sup> He is "a little of the child ... a poet and a dreamer, who cannot get himself accustomed to a harsh world."<sup>40</sup> The "childlike" state of the anarchist valorized in Vanzetti is not that of the constitutionally childish Stevie of The Secret Agent but one that refuses conventional "adult" excuses for any socially accepted practices that entail violence. Anarchist gentleness of this sort seemed to many sturdy, consciously masculine opponents to be further evidence of its feminine nature, and this in turn may explain the many fictional female travelers of anarchism, from the Princess Casamassima and the female character in Conrad's "The Informer" to the women sympathizers of Boston and The Big Money.

In true anarchist fashion Boston argues that capitalism and the state are the chief practitioners of violence; the villains are either bankers and factory magnates, like Cornelia's Brahmin in-laws, or state officials, like Governor Fuller and Judge Thayer.

Having researched all the shady aspects of the case, Sinclair presents in detail the manipulations and deceptions of those in power. While Sacco and Vanzetti express the views of workers and anarchists, Cornelia's function in the novel is to articulate from "inside" criticisms of privilege, prejudices, and court procedure; her high social standing allows her access to the powerful historical figures of the case, whom she confronts. His only modernist strategy is that of juxtaposition: contrasting scenes for ironic effect. He even collected funds to send signed copies of Boston to as many university libraries as possible.<sup>41</sup> Public access to the information he accumulated for the novel was part of his reason for writing it.

#### A Social Modernism: Dos Passos

Like Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos was active in the protests against the conviction and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. His politically engaged U.S.A. trilogy and Manhattan Transfer differ from canonical modernist novels like Ulysses and To the Lighthouse in that they incorporate the "stream of consciousness" of the public sphere as well as that of individual subjectivity. Following Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and Isidor Schneider, Barbara Foley takes the three volumes of U.S.A. as



examples of the "collective novel," formally modernist but ideologically an offspring of proletarian fiction, which in turn has its origins in the "liberal critical realist tradition ... of Bleak House, Middlemarch, and A Hazard of New Fortunes." <sup>42</sup> As a modernist, Dos Passos was inspired by European and American painting, notably the socially critical work of the German Expressionist Georg Grosz, and Futurist painting, like the dynamic urban scenes of Boccioni. <sup>43</sup> He also admired the films of D. W. Griffith and Serge Eisenstein, from whom he appropriated for fiction the concept of montage. <sup>44</sup> His adaptations of new techniques in painting and film included "The Camera Eye," the function of which is to give the position of the observer, the Newsreel, which represents media voices—headlines, advertisements, popular songs—and narrative "portraits" of historical figures like Frank Lloyd Wright, Isadora Duncan, Henry Ford, and Frederick Taylor.

But despite its daring formal innovations, the U.S.A. trilogy has remained on the borders of the canon, marginalized by its politics, its historical specificity, and the attack it makes upon the American dream of power and wealth. All-American boys who, like Charley Anderson, attempt to live out the American dream, lead dissolute, corrupt lives and die foolish, unpleasant deaths. The most positive figure of The Big Money is Thorstein Veblen, a "masterless man" and critic of monopoly capital, who "suffered



from ... an unnatural tendency to feel with the workingclass instead of with the profittakers" [TBM, 88]. The climactic event of the entire trilogy, many critics agree, is the Sacco-Vanzetti case, which, along with the stock market crash, dominates the conclusion of The Big Money.<sup>45</sup>

Of the four writers discussed here, Dos Passos was arguably the most sympathetic to and knowledgeable about anarchist theory, yet despite its anti-capitalism, The Big Money was unpopular with leftists in the 1930s. Herbert Gold attacked the novel because of its negative representation of communists and labor organizers. In this assessment of communists, Dos Passos was not alone; Katherine Anne Porter and George Orwell (in Homage to Catalonia ) express similar criticisms. There are other indications of Dos Passos's future politics in The Big Money. Contemporary readers will recognize that the novel crudely stereotypes homosexuals, Jews, and people of color. As his anti-communism increased in fervor, Dos Passos moved emphatically to the political right, voting for Goldwater, lashing out at student demonstrators, mocking Woodstock, and defending American involvement in Vietnam.

His seemingly contradictory political life can be in part explained by anarchism itself, which occupies a spectrum of political positions, from the revolutionary left to libertarian right

and which has two wings, individualist and collectivist. Private property is the major issue on which the two wings disagree; individualists defend property as an extension of individual sovereignty, while collectivists agree with Proudhon that (private) property is theft. One authority on anarchism, David Miller, describes individualist anarchism as "an extreme version of classical liberalism—extreme because it takes certain liberal attitudes (the belief in free competition, in the minimal state, and so forth) and pushes them to the limit."<sup>46</sup> Individualism has been more typically the stance of American-born anarchists. Like Thoreau, who concluded "Civil Disobedience" with the argument that the individual is higher than the State, Dos Passos's anarchist sympathies clearly lay with the individualist camp.

During the 1920s and well before The Big Money (1936), Dos Passos wrote articles and letters in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, including a 127-page pamphlet entitled Facing the Chair. In it he describes anarchism as "the outlaw creed" based on "the vanished brightness of the City of God"; New England's hostility to anarchism stems, he suggests, from its own lost hopes for the City of God, and New Englanders therefore hate "with particular bitterness, anarchists, votaries of the Perfect Commune on earth."<sup>47</sup> Dos Passos interviewed both men in prison and published an account of the interview in a bulletin of the Sacco-Vanzetti

Defense Committee. A Harvard graduate himself, Dos Passos also wrote an "open letter" to President Lowell of Harvard which was published in The Nation. Like Sinclair he understood Harvard's role in legitimating the trial and execution, the importance of social class to the whole affair, and the larger implication that "civilization" was being sustained by an act of barbarism:

You are allowing a Massachusetts politician to use the name of Harvard to cover his own bias and to whitewash all the dirty business ...The part into which you have forced Harvard University will make many a man ashamed of being one of its graduates...Your loose use of the words "socialistic" and "communistic" prove that you are ignorant or careless of the differences in mentality involved in partisanship in the various schools of revolutionary thought. This is a matter of life and death, not only for Sacco and Vanzetti but for the civilization that Harvard University is supposed to represent .. It is inconceivable that intelligent reading men can be ignorant in this day of the outlines of anarchist philosophy... It is upon men of your class and position that will rest the inevitable decision as to



whether the coming struggle for the reorganization  
of society shall be bloodless and fertile or  
inconceivably bloody and destructive... As a  
Harvard man I want to protest most solemnly  
against your smirching the university of which you  
are an officer [italics added] <sup>48</sup>

Dos Passos's involvement in the case had multiple origins. Like Sacco and Vanzetti, Dos Passos had been opposed to American participation in World War I. Of Portuguese descent and accustomed to foreign travel, one of his biographers points out, he was roused by anti-Italian sentiment. <sup>49</sup> His visits to Spain introduced him to anarchist thought, which he admired and which influenced him perhaps the rest of his life. <sup>50</sup> There are anarchist characters, and evidence of anarchist sympathies, in other Dos Passos novels. As a leftist, Dos Passos was also disturbed by the plight of workers in this era—high unemployment, the militant opposition of corporations to trade unions, the strikes.

The Camera Eye sections of The Big Money give voice to the individual consciousness of more canonical modernist novels.<sup>51</sup> They read like prose poems—unpunctuated, but with spaces for line breaks. Like the lack of punctuation, the unhyphenated combinations of words suggest the influence of James Joyce.



Camera Eyes (49) and (50) focus exclusively on Sacco and Vanzetti. Camera Eye (49) compares the earlier English immigrants—whom the Camera Eye calls "the roundheads the sackers of castles the kingkillers haters of oppression"—who settled Massachusetts Bay with the immigrant Italians who live there in the 1920s. The Camera Eye moves among them, asks questions ("you ask them") and articulates their own questions and fears:

in scared voices they ask Why won't they  
believe? We knew him We seen him every day  
why won't they believe that day we buy the eels.<sup>52</sup>

The reference is to the court's failure to believe Italian witnesses, particularly when they provided alibis for Vanzetti on the day of the robbery. For Dos Passos, there is a bitter irony in this opposition between the descendants of immigrants fleeing oppression and new immigrants fleeing oppression, an irony that further suggests the betrayal of American ideals. Only one of the new immigrants isn't scared, a boy whom Vanzetti used to help with his homework, a boy who "wants to get ahead ... wants to go to Boston University" (TBM, 391). The desire for upward mobility

persists. The speaker/seer of the Camera Eye thinks about all this on his way home:

... make them feel who are your oppressors America  
rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the  
mouths of lawyers district-attorneys  
collegepresidents Judges without the old words  
the immigrant haters of oppression brought to  
Plymouth how can you know who are your  
betrayers America  
or that this fishpeddler you have in  
Charlestown Jail is one of your founders  
Massachusetts? (TBM, 391).

Like Sinclair Dos Passos draws attention to the contradictions exposed by the case: Vanzetti the anarchist is synonymous with New England's lost spirit of rebellion, its forgotten desires for moral self-direction, a climate of tolerance, and freedom from unjust authority.

Mary French, the character in The Big Money who becomes involved in the protests against the trial, is, like Sinclair's Cornelia and Betty, a woman from the upper classes who has become sympathetic to workers' causes. After several failed

relationships with male comrades, Mary French is, like Dos Passos, arrested for picketing; she visits Sacco and Vanzetti in Dedham jail and decides optimistically, "when the case was won, she'd write a novel about Boston" (TBM, 403). Her comrades assign her to influence newspaper coverage of the trial, but the journalists are cynical. When she exclaims to one, "If the State of Massachusetts can kill those two innocent men in the face of the protest of the whole world, it'll mean there never will be any justice in America ever again" (TBM, 404), he blames the "common people" and will not become involved. In both Sinclair's and Dos Passos's cases, a woman seemingly takes the place of a male author. This is perhaps to avoid the implicit and gendered sentimentality in any human being's sympathy for another. But the female character could also be expressive of a consciously feminist stance.

If, as Eileen Sypher suggests, James and Conrad, in order "to contain the threat of anarchism find this concept of the new woman readily available to collect their terror of radical social change,"<sup>53</sup> Sinclair and Dos Passos invent positive women characters, New Women, who successfully take the traditional emotional responsiveness of women into a new realm, that of political engagement. Robert Butler contrasts Mary French's life with those of many in the U.S.A. portraits: "apparently powerful

people are brought to ruin while seemingly weak people are endowed with dignity and possibility." <sup>54</sup> As Barbara Foley points out, however, Mary French "seems motivated as much by sexual hunger and ego insecurity as by political commitment." <sup>55</sup> Sinclair makes a more persuasive feminist than Dos Passos.

Newsreel LXVI announces the executions in the public sphere; Camera Eye (50) elaborates from the private sphere. The newsreel intersperses lines of "The International" with newspaper headlines that proclaim SACCO AND VANZETTI MUST DIE. The Camera Eye describes the reaction of the Defense Committee in Salem Street: "there is nothing left to do ... we are beaten ... our work is over." It rises to a denunciation of the wealthy and powerful who control all institutions and whose existence belies American democracy:

America our nation has been beaten by strangers  
who have turned our language inside out who have  
taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made  
them slimy and foul

their hired men sit on the judge`s bench they  
sit back with their feet on the tables under the dome  
of the State House they are ignorant of our beliefs



they have the dollars the guns the armed forces the  
powerplants

they have built the electric chair and hired  
the executioner to throw the switch

all right we are two nations

...

but do they know the old words of the  
immigrants are being renewed in blood and agony  
tonight do they know the old American speech of  
the haters of oppression is new tonight in the mouth  
of an old woman from Pittsburgh of a husky  
boilermaker from Frisco who hopped freights clear  
from the Coast to come here ...

the men in the deathhouse made the old  
words new before they died. [TBM, 413, italics  
added]

The redemptive power of the executions lies most crucially for Dos  
Passos in this renewal of American rhetoric and the great  
awakening of social conscience, a renewal made manifest in the  
responses of working-class Americans like the old woman and the  
boilermaker as well as in the activism and texts of American  
writers.<sup>56</sup>

Like Millay and Porter, Dos Passos reacted to the executions with bitter disappointment. At the conclusion of *Camera Eye 50*, which incorporates a section of Vanzetti's famous, touching speech, Dos Passos writes, "we stand defeated America." But despite this sense of defeat and the recognition that, in Disraeli's words, we are "two nations" of rich and poor, immigrants and Brahmins, men and women, Dos Passos sees some grounds for hope: America and the language of democracy have been renewed by the steadfastness of Sacco and Vanzetti—who never recanted in seven years of imprisonment—and by the dedication of those who supported them, some of whom, like Dos Passos and Dorothy Parker, were soon to travel to Spain to witness the civil war in which anarchists would play a prominent role. In yet another sense, then, what William Godwin called punishment as "example" does not work. Just as the Haymarket trial and executions inspired the anarchist activity of Emma Goldman, so did the Sacco-Vanzetti case, as Vanzetti had predicted, act as "propaganda by the deed," radicalizing many writers and intellectuals who would demonstrate their new political sympathies in the decade of the Great Depression.

In the very last pages of the novel, Dos Passos constructs a deliberately ironic contrast to the outcome of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. A stockbroker named Samuel Insull is accused of defrauding

thousands of investors of their life savings. Unlike Judge Thatcher, Insull's judge is "not unfriendly" and unlike Vanzetti, Insull defends himself with platitudes: "Old Samuel Insull rambled amiably on the stand, told his lifestory: from officeboy to powermagnate, his struggle to make good, his love for his home and the kiddies" (TBM, 469). While the anarchists are opposed by the governor of Massachusetts and the president of Harvard, Insull is supported by the business elite of Chicago, who even testify on his behalf. He himself explains, weeping, that his ten-million dollar theft was "an honest error"—and is acquitted. The real villains of The Big Money, as its title suggests, are successful Ragged Dicks like Insull, who have made Faustian bargains and betrayed the founding American dream of liberty and equality.

Dos Passos does not, however, seem to recognize that there were always contradictions and betrayals in American history and ideology—that the originary purity he longs for never existed and that he idealizes the first generations of European immigrants. This blind spot in his critique is suggestive for his later politics. His representation of the Puritans as kindred spirits to the Italian anarchists is highly problematic. In the opening of the second chapter of The Scarlet Letter, having made references to the early Bostonians' scourging of unruly Indians, Quakers, and Antinomians, Hawthorne describes the Puritans as "a people

amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful." Radical Protestantism and individualist anarchism may well have intellectual affinities, as Bernard Shaw once observed, but the mainstream of anarchism has always rejected religious authority as well as secular authority.

### Repercussions

Although they were not themselves anarchists, Dos Passos, Sinclair, and Porter were familiar with the ideas of their contemporaries Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin. All four writers were profoundly affected by the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Porter was not to record her account of it for many years, but the cynicism and pessimism of Ship of Fools, which she began in the early 1930s, may owe something to the trial. The case probably marked a turning point for both Dos Passos and Millay. She lost her popularity after her turn to political poetry in the 1930s,<sup>57</sup> a turn that was probably presaged by "Justice Denied." Dos Passos's disillusionment with the left and hatred of the communists took root during the protests. Sinclair, perhaps because he had a more



sophisticated grasp of, and commitment to, radical politics, went on to new causes.

The importance of the Sacco-Vanzetti case is literary, as well as political and historical. It exposes the limits of American canon formation—the literary texts selected for study as representative of particular social eras. In 1969 an Americanist named Maxwell Geismar, describing the reworking of the canon in the 1950s, wrote the following account of its revision:

As a historian of American literature I wondered why all the major figures whom I admired—from Howells and Mark Twain to Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow and Thomas Wolfe—were in such eclipse. I wondered why Melville, a great American radical and social reformer, was being made into such a conservative. I wondered why Faulkner, a social analyst of the southern racial sickness, was being made into a religious fanatic. I wondered why Scott Fitzgerald, an attractive novelist of manners at best, was being revived so heavily, while the American Twenties were being glorified... It was then I suddenly realized why Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, Tom

Wolfe, who had all been radical figures of the period, were being read out of American literature.<sup>58</sup>

Literary critics have characterized American modernism as conservative or reactionary; they have written about Fitzgerald rather than Sinclair, Hemingway rather than Dos Passos, Eliot rather than Millay. The Sacco-Vanzetti case shows that notable American writers of the 1920s and 1930s were capable of sympathizing with, writing about, and demonstrating on behalf of adherents of a radical left politics; they were even capable of understanding the ideas of these radicals in relation to the founding ideas of the United States.

"For a time it seemed that Sacco and Vanzetti would be forgotten," wrote Malcolm Cowley afterwards. "Yet the effects of the case continued to operate, in a subterranean way, and after a few years they would once more appear on the surface .. The intelligentsia was going left; ... it was discussing the need for a new American Revolution." <sup>59</sup> The trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, according to such contemporary accounts, restored the sense of ongoing revolution as definitive of modern American literature as well as of the American Renaissance. What Sacvan Bercovitch, himself named after the two anarchists, writes of Thoreau, Melville, and Emerson in The American Jeremiad might

well be applied to Sinclair, Millay, Dos Passos, Porter and their allies as well: "To be American for our classic writers was by definition to be a radical—to turn against the past, to defy the status quo and become an agent of change."<sup>60</sup>

Americans were not the only ones outraged and disillusioned by the trial and executions. In Boston Upton Sinclair describes the French reaction: "On the evening of the 23rd [after the executions] in Paris huge masses of workers were driven about the streets by the police. They would scatter, and then reassemble, wherever Americans were to be met. They raided the cabarets of Montmartre, and showered the patrons with broken glass." In Nadja, published a year after the executions, André Breton contemplated the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle which, "in the course of the magnificent days of riot called `Sacco-Vanzetti` " was "one of the major strategic points I am looking for in matters of chaos."

<sup>61</sup> For anarchists also, chaos is a "strategic point"; it is related to the more expansive anarchist conception of personal freedom. The refiguration of chaos and order implies and eventually necessitates the overthrow of oppressive hierarchies in government, work, and personal relationships. Such a refiguration is not as idealist as it sounds, as the following chapter will attempt to demonstrate.

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<sup>1</sup>Miriam Gurko, Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962) 182.

<sup>2</sup>quoted in Woodcock, 467.

<sup>3</sup>Upton Sinclair, Boston (Cambridge, Mass.: Robert Bentley, Inc.1978) 262.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) 7.

<sup>5</sup>William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (New York: Penguin, 1976) 76.

<sup>6</sup>George Crowder, Classical Anarchism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 19 ) 51-60.

<sup>7</sup>Godwin, Political Justice, 647.

<sup>8</sup>David Miller, Anarchism,15. "Philosophical anarchism entails the view that the state has no right to tell me or anyone else how to behave ... Men like Thoreau would fit roughly into this category."

<sup>9</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts" in Thoreau: The Major Essays, edited by Jeffrey L. Duncan (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972) 144.

<sup>10</sup>Porter also names Lola Ridge, Paxton Hibben, Michael Gold, Helen O'Lochlain Crowe, James Rorty, Willie Gropper, and Grace Paxton. According to her biographer, Dorothy Parker was also arrested and heard Millay read "Justice Denied" at a rally.

<sup>11</sup>James Joll, The Anarchists (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1966) 111.



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<sup>12</sup>Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return, 219.

<sup>13</sup>Sinclair, Boston, 645.

<sup>14</sup>quoted in Melvin Landsberg, Dos Passos' Path to USA: A Political Biography (Boulder, Co: The Colorado Associated University Press, 1972) 103.

<sup>15</sup>Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" to Aesthetics and Politics (London: Verso, 1986)

<sup>16</sup>Victor Hugo, Les Misérables (New York: Penguin, 1984) 9.

<sup>17</sup>Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 209.

<sup>18</sup>G. Louis Joughin and Edmund Morgan, The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 434.

<sup>19</sup>Suzanne Clark, Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 11.

<sup>20</sup>Edmund Wilson, "Dos Passos and the Social Revolution" in Andrew Hook, ed., Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974) 34.

<sup>21</sup>Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) 384-85.

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<sup>22</sup> German obviously borrowed the word "sentimental" from English or the Romance languages and its meaning is the same. One German dictionary gives Gefühlsvoll as a synonym.

<sup>23</sup>F. Schiller, Über Das Schöne und die Kunst: Schriften zur Ästhetik (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1984).

<sup>24</sup>Leo Tolstoy, What is Art?, translated by Almyer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960) 50.

<sup>25</sup>T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 19.

<sup>26</sup>Donald McQuade, ed., The Harper American Literature, volume 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

<sup>27</sup>Allen Tate, Essays of Four Decades (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968) 57.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Williams writes, "Yeats's version of the 'people,' sustained at first by a broad and diverse movement, became a right-wing nationalism." The Politics of Modernism , 61.

<sup>29</sup>Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 53.

<sup>30</sup>Adorno, 109.

<sup>31</sup>According to Leslie Frewin, Parker heard Millay read the poem at a Salem Street rally on August 11th. Frewin, The Late Mrs. Dorothy Parker (New York: Macmillan, 1986)73. Millay's biographer Gurko says that she read it on Salem Street hours before the execution.

<sup>32</sup>Gurko, 185.

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<sup>33</sup>Cowley, Exile's Return , 221.

<sup>34</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, The Never-Ending Wrong (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977) 32.

<sup>35</sup> Leon Harris, Upton Sinclair: American Rebel (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1975) 60.

<sup>36</sup>Howard Zinn, Introduction to Boston, xxi.

<sup>37</sup>quoted in Harris, 277.

<sup>38</sup>Adams, The Education,7.

<sup>39</sup>Anarchist gentleness often took the form of vegetarianism. Like G.B. Shaw, Elisée Reclus was outspokenly opposed to the slaughter of animals for meat. Also like Shaw, Wagner wrote against vivisection. Tolstoy, a vegetarian and a pacifist, writes in an essay called "The First Step" that vegetarianism is the first step to a more moral way of life. Not only is the slaughtering of animals often horrifying and often pitiable, he argues, but human beings have a natural aversion to it—an aversion overcome only by habit and ignorance. For more about gender and vegetarianism, see Carol J. Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat, New York: Continuum, 1991.

<sup>40</sup>Sinclair, 153.

<sup>41</sup>I found such a signed, donated copy in the U. C. Berkeley stacks.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Foley, Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941 (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 364 and 398-

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<sup>43</sup>Michael Spindler, "John Dos Passos and the Visual Arts," Journal of American Studies (December 1981, v. 15 (3) 391-405.

<sup>44</sup>Spindler, 391-405. Eisenstein explained montage as follows: "the juxtaposition of these partial details in a given montage construction calls to life and forces into the light that general quality in which each detail has participated and which binds together all the details into a whole, namely into that generalized imagine, wherein the creator, followed by the spectator, experiences the theme. "

<sup>45</sup> "The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti occupies a privileged political place in U.S.A." Foley, Radical Representations, 435.

<sup>46</sup>Miller, Anarchism , 59.

<sup>47</sup>John Dos Passos, Facing the Chair: Story of the Americanization of Two Foreignborn Workmen (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970) 57-58.

<sup>48</sup>quoted in Landsberg, 142.

<sup>49</sup>Landsberg, 136.

<sup>50</sup>Robert C. Rosen writes, "Throughout his long journey from left to right, a certain consistency characterizes Dos Passos's thinking ... The same intense individualism that gave rise to his radical critique of the Communist party in the 1930s made him an enemy of the increasingly powerful and bureaucratic modern liberal state after the war." John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) 144.



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<sup>51</sup>Robert James Butler, "The American Quest for Pure Movement in Dos Passos' U.S.A.," Twentieth-Century Literature, v. 30, #1. Spring 1984, 90.

Butler attributes the idea to Donald Pizer.

<sup>52</sup>John Dos Passos, The Big Money (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 390.

<sup>53</sup>Sypher, "Anarchism and Gender," The Henry James Review, Winter 1988:9 (1) 2.

<sup>54</sup>Butler, 93.

<sup>55</sup>Foley, Radical Representations, 436.

<sup>56</sup> Joughin and Morgan write of Dos Passos: "Ill-informed critics have characterized this writer as a left-wing propagandist who practices his art under a thin veneer of fiction. Such a judgment seems wholly incorrect. There is no sign of the fundamental Marxist doctrine of economic determinism. On the contrary, the decadence which marks the materialistic America of the 'twenties is specifically laid to personal greed, personal grossness of nature, and personal inhumanity. And Dos Passos does not rest his hope for a reborn and purified nation upon the leadership of either a theoretical or activist radical; he tells us that the classic American hatred of oppression lives on in a boilermaker and an old woman. It is only in such people, in their virtuous indignation, that one can find the promise of something better than a separation into two nations." Legacy, 444.

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<sup>57</sup>Elaine Showalter, "Women Writers Between the Wars" in The Columbia Literary History of the United States (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 829-30.

<sup>58</sup>Joseph North, ed., New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties, prologue by Maxwell Geismar (New York: International Publishers, 1969) 5-6.

<sup>59</sup>Cowley, Exile's Return, 221.

<sup>60</sup>Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) 203.

<sup>61</sup>Andre Breton, Nadja, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960) 153.