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THE LOSING STREAK:  
FAILURE IN THE NOVELS  
OF JOHN DOS PASSOS

Thesis for the Degree of Ph.D

Iain Colley.



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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS.

The aim of this thesis will be to conduct a critical analysis of the novels of John Dos Passos. Dos Passos will be treated essentially as a novelist, with a novelist's means and purposes, and not as a propagandist of ideas or a political case-study. As far as politics are concerned, they will be used as referents only where they emerge as relevant dramatic or aesthetic elements in the fiction.

In particular, I shall concentrate on Dos Passos' depiction of failure and disappointment, and the manner in which these qualities are the recurrent concerns shaping the form of his writing. The argument will not be that Dos Passos was personally an unhappy or embittered man, but that the signal tenor of his outlook as it is expressed in the novels is predominantly pessimistic. An attempt to investigate and define this pessimism - in terms of its nature and parameters, the extent to which it is successfully realised in his art, the character typology to which it gives rise, and its relation to various historical normative currents in the United States - is the central intention. I have chosen throughout to use the expression "engrammatic" to describe what seems to me to be the most distinctive character of his attitude and style. This word, as I employ it, is implicitly opposed to "traumatic", and I mean it to signify the view that life, though painful, frustrating and futile, is not tragic; that the individual's spirit is worn down by a series of squalid minor reverses. The strongly "behaviouristic" method of character portrayal I find to be the aesthetic equivalent of this belief, and concomitant with it is a scepticism about meaning, pattern and cause.

I have attempted to evaluate each novel as I deal with it, and to indicate what seems to me the fundamental line of development. I have no quarrel with the generally accepted judgement that USA is the peak achievement, though I feel that its actual significance (and that of other works) has been obscured by the grinding of extra-literary axes and probably by a certain amount of critical embarrassment about Dos Passos' career. Briefly, my



argument is that the pre-Manhattan Transfer novels are traumatic in their efforts to suggest tragic possibilities in life and their inclusion of redemptive heroes; that Manhattan Transfer and USA are engrammatic novels par excellence, and have acquired a voice in which to render the engrammatic vision; and that as Dos Passos attempts to renounce scepticism in the later, more overtly tendentious books, there is a profound failure of artistic conviction.

The broad context of this study is American literature; for specific comparisons within that field, I have chosen to treat Dos Passos as a member of the Lost Generation. Knowing his contemporaries Hemingway and Fitzgerald, always alert to their achievements, he yet pursued his own course. Between the tragedy of heroic endeavour and the tragedy of nympholeptic romance, he set himself to tackle the chronically untragic; the near-at-hand; the commonplace and sordid. I hope to indicate the precise value and truth of this accomplishment.

My thanks are due to Keith Carabine for his unflagging encouragement and support.

Iain Colley  
November, 1975.



## INTRODUCTION

To define, analyse and judge the meaning of failure in the work of a serious modern novelist is to treat his work as an appreciation of life, enlarging and informing our comprehension not simply of literature but of the intimacies and the public gestures of ourselves and our contemporaries. Failure, or a sense of it, seems to be a decisive, fundamental human experience - endemic in our time, if not in all history. The two major writers of his generation most familiar to Dos Passos - F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway - both saw failure as a dominant theme. In Fitzgerald's writing the disjunction between the world as it is pictured by the romantically enhanced imagination and life as it must be lived in rooms and streets is conveyed in images of extreme grace and sensitivity. Hemingway is the principal creditor of twentieth-century American letters: if he could be conjured away, almost everyone would be out of debt. With the courtesy of an actor, each played his role to the hilt. Their lives and their art invade one another. Both died in a conspicuously fitting manner, a textbook case for the moralist or psychoanalyst. Yet both stood for the tragic view, the recognition that an immaterial good survives the ruin of the honest, the brave and the young; time, death and corruption achieve a Pyrrhic victory over the questing hero.

Dos Passos is not a tragedian, and as a man he is so elusive as to be a source of embarrassment. USA is known, and widely appreciated - particularly by those who are free from the preconceptions of the literary specialist - but the most generally known fact about Dos Passos is that he switched political sides. For this he has been anathematized, and I happen to think that anger and disappointment are reasonable reactions to his change of course. Nevertheless, my intention is to deal with the popularly unknown Dos Passos - the novelist with a career of forty years. I shall therefore be concerned with his politics only insofar as they relate to his fiction; which means, not much. For in Dos Passos I sense an unusual distance between his personal life-activity and his art. His writing is often autobiographical and it makes extensive use of



political referents, but I seldom receive - what I overwhelmingly have of Fitzgerald and Hemingway - a definite impression of the man. True, the facts of his life are known; but only from the portrait of Hugo Bamman, in Edmund Wilson's I Thought of Daisy, do I gather more than the predominantly external data which any critical investigation of this kind throws up:

...Hugo was really on close terms with no one. As soon as he had sampled the conversation and caught the social flavour of a household or group, he would simply go straight away and bottle a specimen for his books, where he would assign it to its proper place in the economic structure. He distrusted his family and his early associates, because he believed that they had sold their souls to capitalist institutions; but though he chose to live exclusively with outlaws.... he never managed really to be one of them and perhaps never trusted them, either. So tough remained the insulation between himself and the rest of humanity...<sup>1</sup>

Hugo Bamman is a figure in fiction, but he is drawn from Dos Passos and provides a rare clue to the character of Dos Passos in 1929 as observed by the keenest and most intelligent critic of his generation. Above, all Bamman's shyness and detachment help to explain the difficulty of envisaging Dos Passos as a person. Like Bamman, he seems to have swum in and out of people's lives as, according to Carlos Baker,<sup>2</sup> he disastrously swam into Hemingway's. I have not - as the research student is reputed to do - been able to live with my subject as with a fascinating but exigent house-guest, though some knowledge of him has helped to illumine my personal motives. Throughout the following chapters, whenever I write of "Dos Passos" I shall mean (unless I specifically state otherwise) the novelist and not the person.

From American writers born around the turn of the century there grew up the "Lost Generation". The tag now has the air of a faded romantic slogan, yet, as Malcolm Cowley wrote,

the generation deserved for a long time the adjective that Gertrude Stein had applied to it... It was lost because its training had prepared it for another world than existed after the war... It was lost because it tried to live in exile... The generation belonged to a period of transition from values already fixed to values that had



to be created.<sup>3</sup>

But normative insecurity is a stimulant to men of spirit, to iconoclasts, anarchists and poets. Randolph Bourne saw in the decay of the old values their very inadequacy, and called for a upsurge of creative innovation:

Our intellectuals have failed us as value-creators, even as value-emphasizers... The allure of fresh and true ideas, of free speculation, of artistic vigor, of cultural styles, of intelligence suffused by feeling, and feeling given fibre and outline by intelligence... can hardly come... while our reigning philosophy is an instrumental one.<sup>4</sup>

In the same month, before Fitzgerald had received his commission and while Hemingway was still a cub reporter with the Kansas City Star, John Dos Passos was on ambulance duty in the Argonne. In a letter to Rumsey Marvin dated September 12, 1917 he had written of "the net of slavery".<sup>5</sup> No excuse of pragmatic expediency justified the war to him: the profound moral sensitivity that was to distinguish the Lost Generation had been tempered in fire.

Dos Passos and Hemingway first met in Italy in 1918, shortly before the latter's "traumatic wounding" at Fossalta di Piave. They were regular companions after 1924, when Hemingway was living at the sawmill in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs and Dos Passos arrived for what he later described as "one of my fitful stopovers in Paris".<sup>6</sup> Dos Passos was to write of the Hemingway of the early days with affection and respect - "The School of Paris was already full enough of faddism to make a cat sick, but Hem never fell for the shoddy".<sup>7</sup> In Hemingway's memoirs of that time Dos Passos is identified - though not by name - as the "pilot fish", and denounced with paranoid vindictiveness:

He is always going somewhere, or coming from somewhere, and he is never around for very long. He enters and leaves politics or the theatre in the same way as he enters and leaves people's lives and countries in his early days.... He has the irreplaceable early training of the bastard, and a latent and long-denied love of money. He ends up rich himself, having moved one dollar's width to the right with every dollar that he made.<sup>8</sup>

And after the publication of Chosen Country Hemingway mentioned in a letter that "the Finca Vigia supported a pack of fierce dogs and cats trained to attack one-



eyed Portuguese bastards who wrote lies about their friends".<sup>9</sup>

Hemingway's quarrelsome and competitive nature tended to make trouble even where there was no real cause, though for many years the two writers were close friends and companions. Dos Passos married Katherine Smith, a close friend of the Hemingway family since Ernest's boyhood, and the couples used to see each other regularly, especially during the winters at Key West, until well into the thirties. The end of their friendship occurred through the Spanish war, a political cataclysm that broke down many personal affiliations. Both men went to Spain to work on a documentary movie, "The Spanish Earth". They already had differing approaches to the project, but what divided them radically was the death, at about the time of their arrival - early in 1937, of Dos Passos' Spanish translator, José Robles. A professor at Johns Hopkins, Robles had been vacationing in Spain at the outbreak of war and had stayed on to support the Republican cause. With the onset of a Stalinist purge, he was arrested and shot for some real or imagined heresy. Dos Passos felt horror and outrage; Hemingway took the view that bigger issues were at stake, and in breaking the news to Dos Passos he either assumed Robles' guilt or dismissed his death as a negligible incident. Hemingway thought Dos Passos a naïve liberal for taking the matter hard. Dos Passos was becoming unpopular with many literary fellow-travellers: Malcolm Cowley, reviewing Adventures of a Young Man<sup>10</sup> took Robles' execution as sure evidence of guilt, and the New Masses<sup>11</sup> called Dos Passos a Trotskyite wrecker. Dos Passos' friendship with Hemingway was a casualty of the time, and their estrangement was virtually final; each softened later, and even corresponded, but the closeness of the nineteen-twenties never returned.

As authors, writes Alfred Kazin, "Hemingway and Dos Passos were as essentially unlike each other as two contemporaries sharing a common situation can ever be";<sup>12</sup> yet he also refers to "the hard and deliberately plain prose which Hemingway and Dos Passos... established as their own".<sup>13</sup> Kazin is right both to stress the realistic lineage of Dos Passos and to suggest the difference between him and Hemingway as artists. Hemingway is an apostle of heroism, and



his archetypal hero is the lone individual afflicted by the pain and injustice of life yet redeeming all by his courage. Hemingway's art is mythopoeic; the universe in which his stricken gladiators suffer "timeless" and "perennial"; his range of effects narrow but intensely concentrated. The short story was his natural medium, and his comparative neglect of the historical dimension handicapped him as a novelist. Dos Passos spotted this weakness in reviewing The Sun Also Rises:

It's an extraordinary wellwritten book, so wellwritten that while I was reading it I kept telling myself I must be getting dough-headed as a critic for not getting it... I mean that anywhere I open it and read a few sentences they seem very good; it's only after reading a page that the bottom begins to drop out. Maybe the trouble was sitting down to write a novel...<sup>14</sup>

But in his stories Hemingway showed creative vigour of an exceptional kind. He rendered a fantastically simple philosophy in terms of the utmost literary sophistication; sharp, clear paragraphs, painstakingly constructed, not only trace the features of an epoch but communicate a lasting, credible image of human dignity. Perhaps no critic could admire Hemingway as much as he admired himself - with the progressive degeneration of his talent he became a supremely obnoxious character - but even the sneering Fiedler is obliged to admit that

His authentic work has a single subject: the flirtation with death, the approach to the void. And this subject he managed to treat in a kind of language which betrays neither the bitterness of death nor the terror of the void.<sup>15</sup>

Hemingway had to believe in heroism and tragedy because he also believed in a religious pessimism that located the agent of destruction in some immanent hostile principle: the mysterious They who kill you the first time they catch you off base, who send fatal thunderbolts, who load the dice and fix the odds so that man, necessarily a loser, can only prove his worth, to himself or to God, by foredoomed acts of self-assertion or endurance. Such an outlook has its



contingent weaknesses - the self-pity that Fiedler mentions, and the Job-like sanctity surrounding Hemingway's heroes in books such as A Farewell to Arms in which there is a chronic failure to objectify. But above all it paradoxically restores human significance to the post-1918 disaster area, and it does so by taking man outside history. Though the Nobel Prize citation justly praised Hemingway for reproducing "the genuine features of the hard countenance of the age", he is a writer with a severely <sup>restricted</sup> historical awareness. He is consequently a major short-story writer but a defective novelist, and when he stretches the narrative line to produce a longer work he produces a succession of linked sketches rather than an organic book: For Whom The Bell Tolls, in particular, with its detachable set-pieces, is an anthologist's dream.

Hemingway's individual struggles against fate, and although he cannot win outright the author insists that "a man can be destroyed but not defeated".<sup>16</sup> The circumstances of his destruction may be set in a historical context - war, revolution, après-guerre dislocation - but these tend to be local definitions ("the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion"<sup>17</sup>) of an eternal human destiny. Unlike Dos Passos, Hemingway does not picture a golden past. Even the stories from In Our Time which have a pre-war setting concentrate on pain and loss, and the power and freshness of the best ones - Indian Camp, for example - still communicate the sickening shock of innocence blenching before necessary horrors. Hemingway's art strains to picture the big existential moments as they occur, vivid and traumatic; he cultivates a deliberate indifference to the stream of historical events that lie outside the individual challenging encounter. He rejected "timeliness", and his characters are archetypal; he is essentially concerned with values and could not have written, as Dos Passos did in 1934:

the business of a novelist is, in my opinion, to create characters first and foremost, and then to set them in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate permanent record of a phase of history.<sup>18</sup>



Yet Dos Passos, by creating characters who are intended to chart the currents of their time, is often charged with neglecting the inner dynamism of human relationships, and it is true that at his weakest <sup>he</sup> has the air of beach-combing, of turning over every object in his path without considering its essential value. Hemingway, on the other hand, found a totem and a style very early in his career, and the peak of his development, reached so early, left him only a long decline. Hemingway's superb professional discipline eventually tightened so fiercely on his art that it distorted it; there was no room for natural growth. In the early books, one can see how exactly his observation and technique correspond to his understanding of a tragic fate:

Once in camp I put a log on top of the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first towards the centre where the fire was; then turned back and ran towards the end. When there were enough on the end they fell off into the fire. Some got out, their bodies burnt and flattened, and went off not knowing where they were going. But most of them went toward the fire and back toward the end and swarmed on the cool end and finally fell off into the fire.<sup>19</sup>

Here is the "delusive simplicity" of Hemingway's writing; "like wit from a stammering man... the residuum after the inessential - patter, convention, rhetoric - has been cleared away".<sup>20</sup> The third sentence, with its understated irony distilled in the word "enough", transforms description into comment and prepares the reader for the significance of the next two sentences, relating the memory to the panicky retreat from Caporetto and to Henry's impending loss of Catherine in childbirth. It is a model of artistic detachment. In comparison, a fairly representative passage of early Dos Passos collapses because the writer lacks the confidence to let his situations speak for themselves:

There were tiny green frogs in one of the putty-colored puddles by the roadside. John Andrews fell out of the slowly advancing column a moment to look at them. The frogs triangular heads stuck out of the water in the middle of the puddle. He leaned over, his hands on his knees, easing the weight of the



equipment on his back. That way he could see their tiny jewelled eyes, topaz-colored. His eyes felt as if tears were coming to them with tenderness towards the minute lithe bodies of the frogs.<sup>21</sup>

And when he glimpses his own militarized reflection in the water he concludes - redundantly - "So this was what they had made of him". The temptation to press his hero's claims in explicit terms that enfeeble the impersonal imagery has overcome Dos Passos. (It can overcome Hemingway also, and in the novels quite often does so; Frederic Henry frequently narrows the reader's focus by his limiting viewpoint.)

But a further, and more serious, result of Hemingway's early adoption of a settled logos is the quandary induced by the need of an author with little scope for development to try and avoid static repetition. The stresses created by this problem are never satisfactorily solved: they result in the disappointing non-fiction (Death in the Afternoon and Green Hills of Africa) published during the years when Dos Passos was at his most creative; the degeneration of tragedy into stylised brutality; the fatal flirtation with politics; the supersession of the young genius by a messiah of the ex cathedra judgement, suspicious, vain and boastful; the lapse of a memorable style into ludicrous self-parody. The lack of personal direction and the over-receptivity to influences one finds in the youthful work of Dos Passos become a positive virtue once his maturing consciousness and his agnostic, enquiring attitude of mind have formed themselves in a coherent relationship with his subject-matter and treatment. A Farewell to Arms had been Hemingway's farewell to society, and its demands upon the individual; when he returned to society - in To Have and Have Not - his manner proved too inflexible to accommodate the fluidity of his material. Social relationships resist the simple imperatives of tragedy, and Henry Morgan the crippled machismo-hero, a sort of literary Popeye the sailor-man, articulates in his death-ravings a message of solidarity that is hopelessly incongruent with the fundamental persuasions out of which Hemingway writes: "No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody chance".<sup>22</sup>



The fiction of Dos Passos never relies upon popular-front sloganeering; though he shares with Hemingway a pessimistic outlook, his pessimism is of a radically different kind. For Hemingway, death is so near that you must show your fortitude while you can: "grace under pressure". To prove your manhood and to seize the opportunities offered by immediate sensual pleasure are the only means of cheating death of total victory. There is truth and nobility in this view. We know that each man dies alone, and we all have the instinct to leave behind us something more than a record of shabby compromises. Hemingway's normative urgency, where it is rendered with profound conviction in his stories, more than compensates for the stark simplicity of his beliefs.

The fact remains, though, that shabby compromise is a more general feature of life than heroic defiance. Dos Passos does not deny nobility, but he accepts that it is largely vitiated by a host of countervailing forces. While Hemingway "is most successful when he starts from his hero's private sense of experience and moves outward towards general... judgements",<sup>23</sup> Dos Passos, after the conventional wistful romanticism of Streets of Night and Three Soldiers, reaches for objectivity by focussing on the aspects of experience that are never quite private. In Manhattan Transfer one encounters a method and a viewpoint that remind one curiously of James' description of Maupassant:

If he is inveterately synthetic, he is never more so than in the way he brings this hard, short, intelligent gaze to bear. His vision of the world is for the most part a vision of ugliness, and even when it is not, there is in his easy power to generalise a certain absence of love, a sort of bird's-eye-view contempt. If he glances into a railway carriage... a dozen dreary lives map themselves out in a flash.<sup>24</sup>

James deplores Maupassant's view that the artist can ignore, in capturing "movement, colour, the bustle of life", all "motives, reasons, relations, explanations". This orientation, which may reasonably be called "behaviouristic", is just what one finds in Dos Passos. Though he draws on the naturalistic



and realistic tradition, he never definitively ascribes human actions to either biological drives or social conditioning. Still less does he celebrate the energy of the human will. What Dos Passos shows - with an admirable determination to face the facts as he sees them - is the attrition of the human soul by engrammatic onslaught, the multiplicity of pinpricks, almost arbitrarily directed, that kill by slow aggregation. But his reluctance to diagnose or to prescribe does not imply a distaste for the sufferers.

What unites Dos Passos and Hemingway is a respect for craftsmanship. Dos Passos wrote of A Farewell to Arms that it was "a first-rate piece of craftsmanship by a man who knows his job. It gives you the sort of pleasure line by line that you get from handling a piece of well-finished carpenter's work".<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Hemingway referred to the "instrument he wrote with", which he would rather have

bent and dulled and know that I had  
to put it on the grindstone again and hammer  
it into shape and put a whetstone to it  
and know that I had something to write  
about, than to have it bright and shiny  
and nothing to say, or smooth and well  
oiled in the closet, but unused.<sup>26</sup>

And Dos Passos frankly stated that "a novel is a commodity that fulfils a certain need". Their seriousness is well illustrated by their consideration of literature as an object with a use-value. They both recognised the need to come to terms with contemporary experience - raw, frightening and sad - and to make of their art a means of understanding it. That Hemingway chose to make his standpoint that of timeless tragedy might be what Gertrude Stein suggested by her mischievous charge that he "looks like a modern and smells of the museum". He underlines the possibility of action, Dos Passos the institutional restrictions on action. Dos Passos characters are experts on working up an enthusiasm only to deflate it, Hemingway's mute figures who husband their resources for the testing moment. Hemingway brings to life those unforgettable flashes of intensity when man, in contact with elemental themes, transcends his own mortality in the depths of pain. Dos Passos, always more interested in the non-exceptional



person, follows with a detached sympathy "This strange disease of modern life/With its sick hurry, its divided aims".

Of Scott Fitzgerald Dos Passos wrote, in an acute obituary essay:

The establishment of a frame of reference for common humanity has been the main achievement and the main utility of writing which in other times and places has come to be called great. It requires, as well as the necessary skill with the tools of the trade, standards of judgement that can only be called ethical... The fact that at the end of a life of brilliant worldly successes and crushing disasters Scott Fitzgerald was engaged so ably in a work of such importance proves him to have been the first-rate novelist his friends believed him to be.<sup>27</sup>

This was a typically magnanimous tribute to a writer who had been slighted by his inferiors. Yet it is no more than Fitzgerald deserves. Of all the writers of his generation, not excepting Faulkner, he is the most complete. From his own divided nature he created the "dual vision" that permitted him to objectify his situations while at the same time sharing in the sense of romantic enchantment that he communicated to his readers. Dos Passos never joined in the game of disparaging the Fitzgeralds, though he was possibly less plagued by their irresponsible behaviour than other of their friends. Dos Passos first met them in 1922, and noted that "They were celebrities in the Sunday supplement sense of the word... and they loved it".<sup>28</sup>

It is true that, by contrast with the retiring Dos Passos, Fitzgerald enjoyed the limelight; yet he never grew to be a grand old man like the venerable Papa Hemingway - he was cast as revel-master to the roaring twenties. Only since his death has there been an established recognition of his importance; now, fortunately, critics are ready to admit that an egoistic and tiresome hedonist can co-exist with the mature, responsible and serious writer that Fitzgerald was, while his letters have revealed his personal development - through failure and bitterness - into a concerned, intelligent man and father. Henry Dan Piper has spoken of the "new disillusion"<sup>29</sup> for which Fitzgerald's



sensitivity made him a spokesman: the adoption of a critical, pessimistic and indignant attitude towards America. In Fitzgerald's case this is most evident in The Beautiful and Damned, which echoes the spirit of Stearns' Civilisation in the United States. But Fitzgerald's topicality was the least of his strengths as a writer; his great gift was to combine a curiosity about the world as it is with a richly endowed romantic imagination that seeks to transform it. The defeat that emerges from this primary conflict is the subject of his two finest novels.

John William Ward, comparing Fitzgerald and Dos Passos, observes that "Both The Great Gatsby and USA are sad books, books of defeat".<sup>30</sup> It is true of all the most accomplished works of both writers. Gatsby is certainly a romantic failure, but not as Jimmy Herf, Dos Passos' hero of 1925, is. For Gatsby represents a concentrated and fanatical form of romantic desire, while Herf disintegrates because he is fundamentally a hypnotised victim of the various impulses that fascinate and repel him. Gatsby is a man who made a fortune so he could get the girl he fell in love with when he was younger; he is also a prodigy of selfless love who almost achieves an impossible feat of time-redemption and who casts away the world's glory with a quixotic gesture when sudden death confronts him with the impossibility of realising his dream. Fitzgerald was able to portray both Gatsbies through his superlative use of the narrator, Nick Carraway, and through his capacity, well described by Arthur Mizener, for investing the events he made public in his stories with a strong impression of personal intimacy.

Fitzgerald's work is full of precisely observed external detail, for which he had a formidable memory, and it is this gift of observation which has led to the superficial opinion that he was nothing but a chronicler of the social surface, particularly of the twenties. Yet, for all its concrete external detail, his work is very personal.<sup>31</sup>

As death is the central value in Hemingway, the incontrovertible fact that gives meaning to life, so love is with Fitzgerald. Despite his fascination



with that class in society which is privileged to acquire distinction and style through its freedom from economic anxiety, the touchstone of his art is spiritual fulfilment through romantic love. But he recognises that love is not an independent value; it is extensively modified by the operations of society, and Fitzgerald's keen sense of society enabled him to observe and portray this fact with the wary eye of an "outsider".

The man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity, towards the leisure class - not the conviction of a revolutionist but the smouldering hatred of the peasant. In the years since then I have never been able to stop wondering where my friends' money came from, nor to stop thinking that at one time a sort of droit de seigneur might have been exercised to give one of them my girl.<sup>32</sup>

The plot of *Gatsby* derives from this very possibility, and from Gatsby's prodigious plan to reverse the facts of history by harnessing the success-dream to the ends of his Utopian imagination. Nick Carraway knows that Gatsby... represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn"<sup>33</sup>, yet despite his prudence and conventionality he is impelled to be Gatsby's champion. Gatsby's essential innocence - the quality of heart that redeems the shoddiness of the crooked bootlegger - expands into a vision of the verdant American past: "Gatsby's story and the meaning of his failure are somehow linked to the meaning of the American experience... If Jay Gatsby has failed in the pursuit of some ideal vision, so (we are made to feel) has America".<sup>34</sup>

Yet so complete is Fitzgerald's view of his subject, and so positive his clear-eyed respect for the ideal Gatsby represents, that the story, in the rhythms of its beautiful closing sentences, makes the reader understand the worthiness of a struggle against the chains of time and corruption, even at the cost of wholesale and repeated failure. Dos Passos' *America*, on the evidence of Manhattan Transfer, is a graveyard of ideals. Instead of the utterly dedicated passion of Jay Gatsby, there is a bone-deep weariness and discontent, and Fitzgerald's one vivid metaphor for modern urban desolation - the valley of



ashes, over which are suspended the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg - is replaced by the hectic tawdry glitter of New York City:

... bruised notes of foxtrots go limping  
out of doors, blues, waltzes (We'd Danced the  
Whole Night Through) trail gyrating tinsel memories.  
... On Sixth Avenue on Fourteenth there are  
still fly-specked stereopticons where for a nickel  
you can peep at yellowed yesterdays. Beside the  
peppering shooting gallery you stoop into the flicker,  
A HOT TIME, THE BACHELOR'S SURPRISE, THE STOLEN  
GARTER... waste basket of torn up day-dreams...  
A nickel before midnight buys our yesterdays.<sup>35</sup>

The scaling-down of the proposition that money can buy back the vanished past is of a piece with Dos Passos' looser, flatter depiction of New York in the twenties. Where Fitzgerald imbues his creations with ultimate meanings that lie behind them, Dos Passos takes the "bird's-eye-view" of the street spectator who leads his life in separate successive moments. The thirst for vicarious experience in a civilisation that cuts off more personal satisfactions is a kind of drug; temporarily, it eases the pain, but finally it creates a dependence more virulent than the original malady.

Dos Passos' treatment of love is not exempted from this rule. Gatsby's love for Daisy is all-encompassing. It is a fundamental explanation of his motives that accounts for his status as a wealthy parvenu and for the gentlemanly white lie that leads to his death - he is both more vulgar and more decent than Tom Buchanan. Love in Manhattan Transfer is another species of trap - like the success-trap, the politics-trap, the art-trap. In particular, it is not so much a transcendent goal as an urge to evade misery by obtaining libidinous gratification from another, equally hapless person. Viewed through the synoptic perspectives of Manhattan Transfer, Ellen Thatcher is a heartless dispenser of the love-drug:

As she goes through the shining, soundless  
revolving doors, that spin before her gloved hand  
touches the glass, there shoots through her a  
sudden pang of something forgotten... What did  
I forget in the taxicab? But already she is  
advancing, smiling, towards two grey men  
in black, with white shirt fronts, getting  
to their feet, smiling, holding out their  
hands.<sup>36</sup>



Ellen is victim and persecutor; like the city, she is geared for movement, and her destructiveness is not self-willed but automatic. The glamour she radiates is the world's glamour, tarnished and deceptive. But Daisy Buchanan, as the reader sees her via Nick Carraway's sudden empathetic sharing of Gatsby's consciousness, stands for something more than a parvenu's fantasy:

"She's got an indiscreet voice", I remarked. "It's full of - " I hesitated.

"Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.

That was it. I'd never understood before.

It was full of money - that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the cymbals' song of it... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl.<sup>37</sup>

The effect of Gatsby's intensity, of which Carraway is the sensitive yet critical conductor, is to make us admit the relevance of his vision. Fitzgerald manages this not with the illusionist's sleight-of-hand but by a masterly transcription of reality; and reality does not merely consist of the visible. The impulse to dismiss Daisy as unworthy of Gatsby's emotions and Gatsby as a childish dreamer is surpassed by a realisation that human passion itself is a creative instinct. In expressing this truth, the author is not simply faithful to his role; he is faithful to experience. "Scott Fitzgerald was perhaps the only successor to James who did justice to the attitude of wonder and also moved towards an increasingly profound analysis of it - its shortcomings and frailties, its poetry and its fate".<sup>38</sup> Though disillusionment is a major theme of Fitzgerald's, he repudiates "cynical disillusion", and the tantalising gulf between prosaic reality and the human aspirations that yearn to transform it appears as a tragic disparity.

The possibility of bridging the gulf remains; without it, Fitzgerald's art would much more closely resemble Dos Passos'. As it is, Fitzgerald's completes the tragic equation. The "icy, despairing"<sup>39</sup> books of Dos Passos cancel it. When Fitzgerald deals, in his "novel of deterioration", Tender is the Night, with a related type of failure - with loss of what has been gained, rather than a failure to grasp - he is working slightly closer to Dos Passos



territory. Yet his writing preserves its essential character. The progressive breakdown of Dick Diver, the lapse of his charm and distinction into a "trick of the heart" performed with increasing fatigue until it gives out, is dynamised by all Fitzgerald's anguished sympathy for the dissipation of a vital quality. The novel appeared at a time when the twenties' bubble had burst, and at a superficial level its subject-matter was unfashionable, but its insistence that "splendour is something in the heart"<sup>40</sup> carried forward Fitzgerald's efforts to show the emotional and moral verities that lie behind social appearances. Dick's magnetism is consciously applied but its basic sincerity springs from more than a desire to please and be liked. Even where Fitzgerald mildly deflates his hero's romanticism through characters such as Abe North he keeps in view the noble, civilised attitudes which constantly inform it.

"Why, this was a love battle - there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle."

"You want to hand this battle over to D.H. Lawrence," said Abe.<sup>41</sup>

And Dick's seriousness is audible through the wry plangency of his conversational style: "The silver cord is cut and the golden bowl is broken and all that, but an old romantic like me can't do anything about it".<sup>42</sup>

Dick Diver's fall is partly due to his association with the cruder imperatives of the wealthy, but he collaborates in it as a means of setting Nicole free; he "uses up the emotional energy which is the source of his personal discipline and of his power to feed other people".<sup>43</sup> This energy he will never recover - the final paragraphs that vaguely report his later movements could be the tale of any failed doctor - and the society he leaves closes ranks with something like the relief felt by Baby Warren: its mediocrity has ceased to be challenged. Tender is the Night is an ambitious novel, and its defects have been widely noted. Yet to call Dick Diver's story "less a tragedy of will than of circumstance"<sup>44</sup> is a curious judgement. Such a description might be reserved for the characters of Dos Passos, and in USA one encounters



a man of comparable qualities who degenerates amid vicious squalor.

Like Dick Diver, Richard Ellsworth Savage is an intellectual and he is to a large degree composed from the author's own direct experience. Savage has charm and intelligence; he responds to the impressiveness of European civilization; he is taken up by a group of people whose interests are conventional and whose motives are self-serving. However, he does not have Dick Diver's "lifting trick". Savage's life is recounted in great detail throughout 1919 and The Big Money, and it is a record of ascending worldly position bought at the cost of innumerable petty betrayals. Despite his dubious heredity, Savage had seemed a young man of promise. But he is saturated with the corruption of his environment: he forsakes culture and ethics to become the hired slave and satellite of J. Ward Morehouse. His rottenness is credible, yet it is registered as the sum total of swarming indignities; he never surrenders a passionate vision of splendour:

Blackmail, Oh, Christ. How would it be when  
Mother came home from Florida to find her  
son earning twentyfive thousand a year, junior  
partner of J. Ward Morehouse being blackmailed  
by two nigger whores, male prostitutes receiving  
males? Christ... It would ruin his life.<sup>45</sup>

Scandal, maternal disapproval, exposure are the penalties Savage fears, and they fully express the shallowness of his assumptions. After Dick Diver's nightclub disgrace, one is made to feel how an incident as commonplace as a drunken brawl can imply resonating depths of significance:

What had happened to him was so awful  
that nothing could make any difference  
unless he could choke it to death, and, as  
this was unlikely, he was hopeless. He would  
be a different person henceforward, and in his  
raw state he had bizarre feelings of what  
the new self would be. The matter had about  
it the impersonal quality of an act of God.<sup>46</sup>

Savage's instant of remorse is the respectable man's terror of having his secret vices uncovered; Dick Diver's is much more. The difference lies not purely in the literary treatment, but in the convictions from which each writer



proceeds. Dick Diver's actions are those of a man who believes in heightened romantic possibilities. By his charismatic example, he makes others, less perceptive, aware of them, and by untiring artistry Fitzgerald makes the reader aware. There is a sense of life expanding in limitless perspectives, whereas Dos Passos pictures the closing-in of squalid necessities and the desperate immediacy of the life-draining convention.

In declining to employ a background of heroic and romantic postulates such as provide affirmative values in the writing of his contemporaries, Dos Passos approaches the terminal despair of Samuel Beckett. But unlike Beckett, he is an author with a lively sense of historical detail. The slick and easy pessimism towards which his conception of failure can drift - and which can be observed in the stories of a narrowly realistic writer like John O'Hara - is warded off by a synchronism of multiple aspects. He does not, as Joyce did, celebrate the "whatness" of life in all its teeming manifestations; often, he seems insufficiently assured, and he lacks the great literary illusionist's art of dominating reality by the force of strong imperatives. His commitment is to truth, to a common language of ordinary experience. The great contribution of Dos Passos is to have engineered, in four major novels, a means of articulating his "negative capability" so as to impress the reader with a faithful, bone-hard picture of alienation. To judge these books purely as tendenz-literatur is to misread him. To analyse a certain continuity of prevailing themes can be more useful. But above all, his waywardness, the overall inconsistency of his performance, needs to be viewed in relation to an altering definition of success and failure in terms of his chosen material. In these terms Dos Passos not only appears as an authentic member of the Lost Generation but as a writer who has been as eloquent as any in our time in expressing what it means to lose and be lost.



## CHAPTER I

### THE ETHER CONE: HARVARD AND STREETS OF NIGHT.

Though Dos Passos did not firmly establish his metier as a writer of fiction until his service with the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, he had begun to show evidence of his literary interests while at Harvard, especially through his contributions to the Harvard Monthly. In a review of Dos Passos' university years, Charles Bernardin more or less dismisses the celebrated "Harvard aestheticism" as a camp joke on the part of the more artistically-minded students, a fairly conscious burlesque of the attitudes of the nineties. Bernardin pictures Dos Passos as in most respects a normal intelligent young American of his generation who enjoyed cultured conversation, eagerly satisfied his epicurean tastes, and graduated cum laude without exerting himself in his studies. But he does note that the author, whose upbringing had been plutocratic-cosmopolitan, was "eager to lay hold on life"<sup>1</sup> and wanted to "become a part of the 'vulgar herd'"<sup>2</sup> - dominant attributes of the early Dos Passos heroes. Though Bernardin draws attention to the parallels with the undergraduate career of Dick Savage, he does not mention Streets of Night, the novel begun at Harvard which carries such a powerful charge of ambivalent emotion about the Harvard experience.

Dos Passos' first story appeared in the Harvard Monthly for July 1913. Thereafter he contributed regularly until July 1916, when he embarked for Spain to study architecture, having postponed his entry into the ambulance service at the request of his father. His first four pieces for the magazine are, of course, inconsiderable by the canons of mature fiction, but they suggest the themes and conflicts that drew his attention and were to persist in his writing: disillusion, failure, entropy. "The Almeh" (July 1913) recounts an adventure of two Anglo-Saxon tourists in Cairo. Dick Mansford and Jack Hazen. English and American companions contrasted as to character



and outlook, are conducting an investigation of the native quarter. Dick is attracted by its exotic and colourful atmosphere; Jack is repelled by the dirt and smells.

[He] seemed far more interested in the donkeys than in anything else; he complained constantly of the heat and the smells, and did not seem to be very much carried away with the picturesque strangeness of the street along which they were passing.<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly, during a street fracas, Dick glimpses "a face exquisitely fair and of great beauty"<sup>4</sup>: the face of an Arab girl whose veil has accidentally fallen away. Jack, who has meanwhile been staring at the scarred backside of a donkey, scoffs at his friend's romantic enchantment. Earth-bound and sceptical, he insists that the girl is merely a common woman of the bazaar, and in his heavy kidding of Dick he reveals his American preferences for the modern and the material over art, romance and tradition. Dick, who is an artist and a believer in the inner reality, finds that the haunting face of the Almah comes between him and his attempts to capture in paint the corny, familiar tourist scenes of the Middle East.

For some reason nothing came out right; sand got into his palette, and stuck to the canvas; his colours were hard and would not squeeze from the tubes. Finally, giving up in despair, he set to work scrawling with a pencil on an old sheet of paper. He started outlining women's heads, but he seemed to be able to draw nothing but a pair of dark eyes and a pale face under a black hood.<sup>5</sup>

The face is an obsession, and it becomes the cause and symbol of a growing conflict between the two friends. However, they see the girl again, unexpectedly, at a dancing house at which she gives her performance after a succession of "over-painted women, loaded with ugly jewellery." Her distinction is instantly apparent:

Hers was real dancing. Her steps were different from those of her predecessors, culminating in a wild whirl about the room. She tore the veil from her head as the dance came to a stop, and stood smiling in the center of the floor, amid the applause of the crowd.<sup>6</sup>



Jack Hazen steps in fast to drag Dick away before the latter can make a foolish or impulsive gesture; but that night Dick stays up to work with special intensity on a fresh picture. In the morning he proudly shows to the worried American "a nearly finished oil representing a lovely Almeh dancing in the light of a flaring torch."<sup>7</sup> Even Jack has to call it a "masterpiece"; but in the denouement of the story Dick is made to face reality of a kind he has rejected. There is an after-breakfast donkey-ride. They are led by their guide past a mud hut, which he boastfully points out as the house of his father. "He sheik - rich man. He pay hundred pounds English for wife for me."<sup>8</sup> And the two visitors are looking at "a little group of grimy, naked brats.... playing about a young woman, who sat at the doorway... preparing the mid-day meal. Every now and then she would scream at the children in a harsh voice. Flies swarmed about her, and about the food."<sup>9</sup>

The young woman is, of course, the beautiful object of Dick's nympholeptic desire. She is now portrayed in her daytime habitat, and the dream so lovingly put on to canvas is destroyed. Yet though the imaginings of the artist have been spoiled, there is little satisfaction in the outcome for the coarse and practical American. Though it lacks a definite personal style and is cast in the form of a conventional magazine story, "The Almeh" mirrors with remarkable fidelity the preoccupations of its seventeen year-old author. There are, for instance, the alien and exotic setting, in which even a donkey-boy may bear the name of Saladin; the brash, "athletic" American youth who is incapable of sympathising with the creative instincts of the painter; and the European artist who produces ideal images of loveliness but cannot square the vision of his inward eye with the unprepossessing facts of sordid reality. The two characters of the story foreshadow Telemachus and Lyaeus in Rosinante to the Road Again, the one "freely indulging in the pleasures of the moment"<sup>10</sup>, the other with his "genteel preoccupations"<sup>11</sup> - and to some extent even Martin Howe and Tom Randolph of One Man's Initiation. Yet what is striking about the story is the neutrality of its conclusion. It does not



attempt to satirise either man at the expense of the other, but contents itself with depicting the limitations of both. Dick does not, in the end, have the courage to ignore the flies and the dirt, the sand that interferes with his efforts to immortalise the girl, and the repellent details that attend her domestic life. Beauty must exist in an acceptably pure and abstract form if he is to acknowledge it. Jack, on the other hand, wins a kind of cheap victory: the girl is a bought wife, she lives in squalor with "naked brats", everything he has hinted to Dick is true. But it is not a final truth, nor one which he has any good cause to be satisfied with.

For the work of a very youthful writer, "The Almeh" is a surprisingly self-assured sketch. True, there are a number of flat sentences and dead phrases: "the thousand strange sights and sounds", "the enchanted region of the Mouske", "exquisitely fair", "an unceasing din"; but there is little embarrassingly purple writing, and though there is no special distinction of style it is the structural form that seems most derivative. From the first paragraph, with its kaleidoscopic scene-setting, to the predictable "snapper" ending, the story is recognisable as the product of the school of commercial short-story writing. There is nothing dishonourable about this - and actually Dos Passos has absorbed much of the professionalism of the "well-made" magazine story. In the description and the pacing of the narrative there are the signs of technical facility, and he is learning the difficult art of showing the passage of time - the action is divided into three episodes, spread over three days, and each part is given a suitable dramatic weight relative to the others.

Dos Passos' next contribution was a story set against a background of the Greek War of Independence. "The Honor of a Klepht" appeared in the Harvard Monthly for February, 1914. It, too, has the flavour of romance associated with distant lands and mysterious foreign names. "Mouske", "Almeh" and "Hourri" give way to "Klephts", "fustanellas", "papas", and serve the same purpose of ringing a romantic bell. This story has a much more



frankly melodramatic colouring - "If that really is Ali of Telepen encamped over there, there will be little left of Itea by tomorrow's sunset"<sup>12</sup> - but there is a continuity of theme: in this case the disillusion is both romantic and sexual. A young klepht, preparing to face the Turkish invader, arranges that Louka, his girl, shall join him and his warrior band in the mountains. As the Turkish army launches its attack, chaos engulfs the townspeople. Christos waits in vain for Louka at the mountain rendezvous. Later he sees her dragged off, resisting violently, by the leader of the Turks. On the following day the klephts counterattack the enemy, and during the battle Christos fights his way to Ali Pasha's tent. There he finds Louka "sitting before him on a divan... She was dressed in costly silks and leaning against a pile of embroidered cushions. Behind sat a slave girl fanning her."<sup>13</sup> Christos stays only long enough to pronounce her dead; then he returns to the battle. It is a losing battle for the klephts, and as the Turkish soldiers increasingly press their advantage Christos leads his men in a mass suicide leap. "The Turks took no klephtish heads as trophies from that battle."<sup>14</sup>

"The Honor of a Klepht" is a slight romantic tale, undergraduate fiction from an Ivy League university. It is less well conceived than "The Almeh" and the central formula - love, death, mystery - is baldly presented. At its heart, however, is the tension between the exceptional man (artist, warrior) and the reality which he attempts to transfigure by the force of his ideals but which resists and disillusion him. No reasons are given for Louka's submission. There is an aura of the adolescent's view of women as fickle and treacherous, and some sense of the hopelessness of love-in-war that makes her kin to Criseyde; certainly there is no psychology. For a young man's work, it lacks introspection: the plot hinges on a crucial betrayal, but the betrayal cannot be said to arise from personal culpability. It is in the nature of things that profound hopes are disappointed. This pessimism as



yet is unsupported by experience or practiced artistry, but it lurks even in the stagey romance as a half-conviction awaiting solid proof and expression.

Dos Passos' next fiction for the Harvard Monthly shows definite advance. The perfumed atmosphere of oriental antiquity is abandoned, and though the content remains serious it is tinged with the comic. The owlshly solemn student with his incense burner gives way to a contemporary American author whose writing has started to bear an individual accent.

The little man alighted from his buggy and hurried into the house. He was hot and flustered; for the July night was absolutely airless, and the thought that he was late had made him perspire. He had realized suddenly only a few minutes before that his wife would probably be waiting dinner for him.<sup>15</sup>

So begins "The Poet of Cordale" by "R. Dos Passos" (December 1914), but this could equally well be a paragraph from Manhattan Transfer: the precise and dispassionate selection of a single figure or face from the crowd whose life and aspirations are behaviouristically examined. In fact, since the context and patterning of the later novels remain to be discovered, the story could well pass, stylistically, as a piece of O. Henry, where characters are merely sketched in as necessary adjuncts to the plot. And in some respects it is a snapper-story in the Henry-Harte vein, with the dualism of its hero rendered in homely and familiar terms:

Corby Hardwick was a mistake, a changeling. Outwardly, he was a moderately prosperous rural "travelling man", a stout, precise little person; inwardly he was a poet. Nature had constructed a commercial traveller, perfect in every way - his art in wheedling people into purchases amounted to genius; then, by some whimsical freak, she had added a sense of rhythm.<sup>16</sup>

In Dos Passos' modified veritism, the comments are made not from within the subject's own world, but externally and with the faintly amused smile of a sophisticate. But Hardwick the "grotesque" is still a man who challenges his environment by daring to be more than a drummer; and while the writing, with its occasional archaisms and quaint inversions, partly points backward to the old magazine tale, the content is assuming the character of Dos Passos' adult work.



Hardwick represents the Jack-Dick polarity located in a single figure. He is at one and the same time a conforming citizen of the commercial world and the imaginative man who desires to see a higher reality embodied in art. In particular, he loves "to recite passages, whose meaning he hardly understood, but whose form he loved, from the verses of a certain Persian philosopher."<sup>17</sup> The Rubaiyat had not yet become, as it did in the post-war period, a transient popular cult of Babbitry; indeed, perhaps some self-satire is intended by the author. In any case, its rather obvious poeticism and the vague profundity of its hedonistic argument have a natural appeal for the commercial drudge. Hardwick, of course, is sincere in his admiration for it. As the small-town routineer yearning for cultural satisfactions he anticipates Lardner's "Maysville Minstrel" by almost fourteen years - though he is a reciter, not a poet. Invited to perform at a local Independence Day celebration, Hardwick (or his wife) decides that "Barbara Frietchie" would be the most suitable offering. Omar, naturally, would be profane and indecent. "Barbara Frietchie" is de-sensitized, acceptable poetry.

Very nervously, Hardwick prepares for the great event. "He took a long while in dressing and shaving that morning, and Susan had to call him twice before he came to breakfast at table. He found he could eat nothing; his coffee seemed to have no flavour."<sup>18</sup> Flat, stiff, behaviouristic: the manner is growing familiar. But the reader is also heartily nudged with the information that "Corby Hardwick... like most people, had his share of obstinacy."<sup>19</sup> For his apprehension is not wholly due to stage fright: he is guiltily planning - mainly in order to spite his wife - to deliver an encore. Sure enough, "Barbara Frietchie" is so well received that the audience demands another poem, and Hardwick reels off The "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayaam" to a gathering of chapel-faced Chautauquans - the very soul and essence of Mencken's rural "booboisie". Especially noticeable in the verse's catalogue of earthly delights are urgent supplications for "wine, wine, wine". The temperance-minded congregation are scandalised, and amid the growing consternation Hardwick rushes out, flings away the text, and sits by the roadside "hunched



up in the middle of the little vehicle, sobbing."

So once more Dos Passos writes of grief issuing from the conflict of differing realities. In this instance there is a prime emphasis on the incompatibility of art with American puritan morality and the American success credo. The little man who dares to mix the two is a twofold failure - the boobs despise him, and he lacks the ultimate confidence in art that would permit him happily to forfeit their respect. And this conflict - art versus the world - is a genuine one for Dos Passos, as for other educated Americans of his generation. Despite the relative artistic naivete of his Harvard pieces, it makes itself felt as a potentially serious dilemma.

Art, however, was beginning to cede priority in Dos Passos' mind to "current affairs". As the war in Europe continued he was drawn more and more to political matters. This side of his interests appears in the fourth Harvard Monthly story he published, in March 1915. Titled "Malbrouck", it is a mood-sketch involving a French war-widow whose child insists that she sing a song which touches, in the words of its refrain, the very theme of her bereavement. In images such as that which compares a moving searchlight to "the feeler of a frightened insect"<sup>20</sup> the growing confidence of the apprentice writer can be sensed. Otherwise, the story is evidence of Dos Passos' sympathy with the Allied cause and his belief, as a youth who had no direct experience of war, that "the glory of France" was at stake. It is essentially a sentimental attachment, though the record shows that he was awakening to subjects other than art or personal emotions. "His sixteen contributions before 1916 included ten stories; among his thirteen contributions during 1916 he included only three stories; and his two final publications in the Monthly were serious essays about American domestic and foreign policies."<sup>21</sup> His first paid article, the phillipic "Against American Literature" appeared in the New Republic in the fall of 1916, shortly before his departure for Europe; in this, he appeared as a cultural critic, calling for a fresh, masculine and vital approach to fiction. But after leaving Harvard he



effectively ceased to be a short-story writer: the need he developed for a historical perspective on his characters and situation obviated the use of such a form. "July" was a dry run for the character of Jimmy Herf in Manhattan Transfer, and the later sketches he published in various periodicals were incorporated, with minor changes, into the USA trilogy.

Though his reading tastes at Harvard were naturally eclectic, Dos Passos' especial preference was for Gibbon and The Golden Bough. More than one critic has noted the significance of such favourites in the light of his subsequent reputation as an author of broad and panoramic "social" novels. Certainly one cannot imagine the most familiar Dos Passos technique being put to use as the mode of a truly successful short story. Moreover, the tradition of analysing and judging public affairs resided in the family. His father, that awesome self-made man who placed his forensic talent at the service of the trusts, had held, and written of a conviction of the civilising mission of the Anglo-Saxon nations. The war, and his own material contribution as a member of the Norton-Harjes Corps, had the effect of arousing political sympathies. What is remarkable is the comparative unimportance of his political attitudes, particularly in his fiction. The romantic pessimism of his student writing changes, but it does not evolve into a strongly committed acceptance of the hopefulness of the radical cause. On the contrary, it deepens into a recognition that even on the personal or aesthetic level there is no ultimate self-redemption.

It takes time to develop, of course, since there is all the difference in the world between an adolescent feeling that the world is hopelessly wrong and an artistically formed pessimism. Dos Passos' "Harvard novel" is strictly a young man's book - self-pitying, melodramatic, solemn - and was published in 1923, after the author's success with Three Soldiers. F.P.A. recorded a popular view of its central theme when he wrote in The Diary of Our Own Samuel Pepys that it was "a tale of two lads and a



girl, who are so torn by conflicting purposes that they do naught but talk about it, and so life passes them by. Rather it sneaks by them. And they were three humorless persons who took themselves far more seriously than was good for them." The setting is chiefly Boston before the First World War, and the three principal figures - Wenny, Fanshaw, Nan - are perpetually divided between "art" and "life". One major fault in the construction of the novel is evidently due to the time-lag between the book's inception and its final published form, which gave Dos Passos time to reconsider his material and to extend its chronology to take the war into account. The most natural ending would be Wenny's suicide, or at least a scene in which the surviving friends discuss their reactions to it. In fact, this occurs about two-thirds of the way through, and the later sections have a detached and dangling air.

The exact process of alteration and revision is not clear in detail - even the author seemed to forget<sup>23</sup> - but it appears that Streets of Night was begun during his Harvard period, dropped when he volunteered for the Norton Harjes Ambulance Corps, and later resumed. Dos Passos' diary for March, 1916 has an entry entitled "Le Grand Roman" which sketches an outline, but almost eighteen months later it becomes plain that his war service has modified the original idea:

The great war novel is forming gradually in my mind. I have almost a feeling that the Streets at Night will get incorporated - will be part I. Let's for the splendour of God have an outline!

1. Streets of Night

X and Y friendship

Miss Z -

The new Egoist -

From two points of view first serious  
Cantabridgian atmosphere - European motif -  
calling and recalling...

Death of X

Damnation of Z - alma

Part II The war ... the philosophy of scorn

De trop de la delicatesses

J'ai perdu la vie ...<sup>24</sup>



This sounds much more like Streets of Night than either of the war books, though the "philosophy of scorn" belongs to John Andrews. The European motif" is ambiguous - perhaps it refers to Fanshaw's belief that for authentic beauty and truly elevated feeling in art Americans must reject their own materialist civilisation and turn to European models. The two-line tag from Verlaine certainly expresses Wenny's feelings in Streets of Night, while the "new Egoist" title identifies Dos Passos as a member of the generation raised on Wells and Shaw; Fitzgerald, one remembers first planned to call This Side of Paradise "The Romantic Egoist". However, as things turned out, Harvard and the war were not thematically married into one book. Streets of Night centres on Harvard and Boston, and it treats its situations with none of Fitzgerald's youthful enthusiasm and wonderment. Its main subject is not so much self-discovery as inadequacy and the impotence of the lonely individual who attempts to found his life on a principled denial of tradition. It is also "heroic" in the sense that the protagonist chooses death rather than an acceptance of his own helplessness.

Streets of Night begins by introducing Fanshaw McDougan. The picture of Fanshaw as a substitute blind date on a river picnic with his friend Cham and a pair of chorus girls has a certain satirical promise - a promise so typically never quite kept. Fanshaw is the type of the unpopular, priggish snob, yet he suffers inner conflict - more or less rationalised as the struggle between native sensuality and official Victorian sex-doctrines - and he finds it hard not to offend his partner by keeping an aloof distance. There are suggestions of a class-difference between the two friends. Cham has the automatic self-assurance of the wealthy-born, and is never in two minds about permitted maraudings of the libido. This is also official, but cold comfort for Fanshaw, who afterwards swings up and down the register of imaginary erotic experience as he confronts an essay on French classical literature. "Marriage was for ordinary people, but for him, love, two souls pressed each to each, consumed with a single fire."<sup>25</sup>



The foreshortened syntax of interior monologue heralds Fanshaw's reflections through Poe to a memory of Elise's "common" perfume. And whether or not the reader is intended to interpret his pen-flicking as symbolic masturbation, there remains an image of Fanshaw as a prissy, effeminate and life-denying soul whose vitality is dried up in pedantic snobbery. Like the other characters, he feels the pull of life, but it is unlikely he will ever grasp life. His narcissism and his reduction of the good life to visions of a dead European past disqualify him, and his homoerotic tendencies are generally well repressed. In the schematic framework of the novel, he stands all too evidently for the man who has substituted art for life - and consequently has failed to realise the true significance of either.

But Fanshaw, like the very different Fuselli in Three Soldiers, is adjunct and reagent. Wenny is the true hero of the book, and his problem is an opposite one: not to scratch away the nagging itch of desire and find a protective illusion, but actively to stimulate himself to reject the society that has nurtured him and that offers him comfort and distinction at the price of his heart's desire. His role in the story is to attempt to formulate the terms of this fugitive desire, while Fanshaw and Nan witness his deterioration and failure. Always half-visible, like the fogbound landscape of Boston itself, it tends to be dissipated in the undergraduate rhetoric of earnest intellectual debate or to seize as its temporary focus a single nympholeptic passion. Wenny's urge to find for himself a means of life better and more satisfying than that Harvard can offer him is real and urgent. It cannot be explained by ascription to his rebellion against his father (who features principally as a concentrated symbol of everything Wenny rejects) and it never finds political expression. His friends speak of Wenny as being "alive", or "too alive", but his case is precisely that he can never feel alive enough in the dead Boston atmosphere, and his first prophetic words are "I'm about dead".<sup>26</sup>



Despite the self-conscious erudition of the three young people, they never provide a fully analysed intellectual definition of the forces in their native culture which they feel to be so repressive. The antithesis in which the conflicts are rendered remain at a metaphysical level, though there are two major sources of imagery that suggest the conditions of their restlessness. Pro- and anti-life tendencies revolve, in the first place, around indices of class. These begin early - in chapter two. "Wenny wore a woolly suit that had been wet, as it had been raining; the smell of it mixed with a tang of tobacco filled her nostrils."<sup>27</sup> Such is Nan's perception. Wenny is like someone who works outdoors, cannot shelter from the rain, and picks up cigarette fumes - perhaps does not wash or change his clothes as often as a respectable Bostonian should. "He has the hands of a ditch-digger"<sup>28</sup> - unlike Fanshaw with his neat, effeminate appearance and "limp hands"<sup>29</sup> - and Nan pictures "the moulding of the muscles of his arms, the hollow between the shoulders, the hard bulge of the calves"<sup>30</sup>. To her he is akin to a classical sculpture or a manual labourer; the one an approved sublimation of eros, the other a fearful threat. Wenny's collar has "a line of grime around it",<sup>31</sup> and Nan's mind flickers between fantasy and truth, guarded longing and maidish disapproval. Warming to Miss Fitzhugh's story of Mabel Worthington and the garlic-smelling ruffian",<sup>32</sup> she imagines a serviceable conjunction of the vulgar and the sublime: the girl who played the violin in the Fadettes had run off with an Italian who smelt of garlic like a young Greek god."<sup>33</sup> This idea fits on to her shamefaced admiration of Wenny's "ditch-digger's" hands. The subversive implications of a myth about lower-class sexuality are merged in the safely antique physical perfection of "Greek gods". This potentially disturbing mixture - Wenny with his "shambling walk like an Italian labourer's"<sup>34</sup> and the immigrant who snatched Mabel away from the Fadettes - is further disinfected when Nan adds the ingredient of universal wisdom. The southern European immigrants of the congested Boston slums are transformed into Greek gods who, though they chew garlic, make "epigrams". Wenny the agonised seeker disappears under the



mask of Wenny the idealised statue, and is therefore easier to reject when he lays his ditch-digger's hands on Nan's body.

While Nan makes a sugar-coated equation of lust with plebeianism, Fanshaw the parvenu professional aesthete bears a reactionary hatred towards the United States which he virtually regards as the territory of a race of savages. Dissociating the Old World from its immediate connotations of unskilled immigrant labour, he looks backward to an aristocratic Mediterranean civilisation where taste and culture had no need to struggle against extinction by democratic levelling. A "midwestern disciple of Pater",<sup>35</sup> he has a mind filled with evocations of the European past, from the collection of ornaments in his Nebraskan drawing-room cabinet to Titian and Canaletto. In his purple daydreams the three of them, unshackled from democracy and industrialism, drift along "in a barge out of a Canaletto carnival, gilt and dull vermillion, beautiful, lean-faced people of the Renaissance."<sup>36</sup> With a pedant's instinct to annotate his own thoughts, he smothers his instinct for beauty in names and references which provide vicarious equivalents for the sensations he cannot bring himself to experience directly. Even Wenny, for whom he has a protective, platonically homosexual affection, becomes in Fanshaw's mind a literary case-history. "Verlaine's last absinthe-haunted days; Lord Byron; a puffy-faced Don Juan; the verdict of history."<sup>37</sup> At Cham's wedding, of which he can snobbishly enjoy the social and epicurean distinction, he is revolted by the coarse dialogue of the male guests and the earthy carnality underlying the ceremonial. Eternally divided between his sterile vision of a vanished Old World culture and the Boston which gives him a good living but abounds with commercialism and vulgarity, Fanshaw becomes an abject figure for satire whose ultimate ironic destiny is to flee homeward from the bed of an Italian whore to whom he has at last surrendered his virginity.

For Nan and Fanshaw the symbols and fantasies of their inner lives act as drugs to make more acceptable prevailing realities by shrouding and suppressing unstabilising drives and impulses. They shrink the universe to



manageable proportions. In Wenny's case, the universe endlessly expands as he attempts to make an existential fight against the environment in which he feels so ill at ease. The Boston low life of which Nan feels the power in a fantasised way and which to Fanshaw is unspeakably "common" draws Wenny like a magnet. For the middle-class rebel, there are generally three outlets: *nostalgie de la boue*, art and ideas, radical politics. Frequently and naturally (and above all in Dos Passos' writing) they may be associated - perhaps especially the first two, with their exciting lure of bohemianism. Wenny is most strongly attracted to *nostalgie de la boue*. Protestant uplift, the ruling principle of his father and of New England, has provoked in him the desire to de-intellectualize himself. However, in pursuit of his Byronic ideal of living through the senses he finds himself continually enslaved by his background and upbringing. Desperate to grow away from the likeness of his father, he grows into the likeness of his father's early manhood, sharing what the clergyman has described to him as "bitter moments of profligacy and despair."<sup>38</sup> Only frustration arises from his efforts to achieve selfhood by adopting attitudes of revolt which he finds he cannot live with full conviction.

"That's me alright, except he got the profligacy and I got the despair. Go whoring and repent yours is the Kingdom of God. A fine system alright, but he repented so damned hard he spoiled my fun. Like being a eunuch, funny that, a generation of eunuchs."<sup>39</sup>

This *cri de coeur*, later to be echoed in the bitterness of John Andrews in Three Soldiers, stresses the element of psychological determinism. If your parents have strong beliefs, you will end up reproducing those beliefs, either directly or by straightforward reaction. But Wenny aims to escape from the bonds of social determinism by locating the underground culture of America (so fascinating to the author) in Boston's brothels and saloons and through his association with Whitey, the first of Dos Passos' "vags", who can speak from experience of life on the bum. He starts to create a positive to set beside Fanshaw's cultivation of the sensibilities and Nan's violin lessons. "Whitey



loafing on street corners in New Orleans watching the high yallers drive by in barouches. By God, I must live all that."<sup>40</sup> Talahassee and South Bend" are strung along with "Paris and Helsingfors and Khiva and Budapest and Khlorasam."<sup>41</sup> Yet this too is illusion. Wenny cannot manage to leave Boston, and he has ignored Whitey's warning that "this ain't no life for a white man."<sup>42</sup> He cannot even make love to the tramp Ellen - he behaves like the sexual novice he is. In the end, suicide and the pathetic seamen's union ticket he acquires are the proof of his sincerity. All he can do in the face of a world that casually negates his every spasmodic gesture of protest is to offer it the existential "No".

Wenny, feeble and bemused despite his craving to plumb the depths of experience, is a true Dos Passos loser, though he is largely drawn as a projected adolescent self-image. The story of his passage to self-extinction is awkwardly told. The mixture of stylistic approaches, not yet fully synthesized, suggests an intermittent process of composition and several changes of mind and experience. True, Dos Passos can here produce sentences of the type that appear in later, realistic books:

They walked beside the water. Along the path  
were mashed crackerboxes, orange peel, banana skins.  
The river was full of canoes now...<sup>43</sup>

Fanshaw found himself staring with a faint internal  
shudder at the red knuckles as his fingers moved  
round swiftly in glass after glass under the faucet.  
They drank orangeade in silence, Wenny paid the girl  
behind the cash register, who showed two gold teeth  
in a smile as they went out.<sup>44</sup>

But he can never resist the temptation to create wordy, "literary" and decadent passages in which the prose is intended to glow with emotions that derive from objects and sensations themselves and that flow over the onlooker.

Her white bedroom was full of sunlight that poured  
through the white window opposite her bed, smouldered  
hotly on the red and blue of the carpet, glinted on the  
tall mahogany bedpost and finally struck a warm tingling  
coverlet over her feet and legs.<sup>45</sup>



The flow between reporting that gathers up realistic narrative with an undertow of "objective epitome" and poetic description that aims to drown the senses with a revelation of platonic properties is spasmodic - far too spasmodic, actually, to serve as a means of establishing the two worlds of the novel and relating them satirically. The dissonances which the author feels and tries to express have not been sufficiently lived to appear as more than the sketches of a fictive conflict. There are too many occasions when one feels he is reaching out for a phrase that will suit the tenor of a fulsomely romantic passage, and when the phrase comes it has the counterfeit ring of cliché. "Drowsy quietude", "encompassed them about", "gleaming cascades", and similar operators culled from the herb-garden of romantic rhetoric all too often deaden the prose. Nor do such expressions conjure up the "music" of a particular character, announcing or distinguishing his or her presence.

The appeal of the archaic to Dos Passos appears to lie in the sense (which he certainly shares with the odious Fanshaw) that it is the voice of a culture which, though obsolescent and unserviceable, has given a universal language to artistic genius. But it is exactly for this reason - that, as author, he shares so many of his characters' ambiguities and puzzlements - that he fails to make Streets of Night a conclusive illustration of the forces which enervate and destroy people.

"We don't fit here. We are like people floating down a stream in a barge out of a Canaletto carnival, gilt and dull vermilion, beautiful lean-faced people of the Renaissance lost in a marsh, in a stagnant canal overwhelmed by black walls and towering steel girders."<sup>46</sup>

So thinks Fanshaw, in his absurd elitist reverie, and one can imagine all too easily the undergraduate author making such a remark to a fellow student, with a wry inflexion. Fanshaw is wildly mistaken, just as Nan is wrong when she fantasises Wenny into the Italian labourer and re-fantasises the labourer image into one of the "Greeks who made epigrams" in order to disinfect the residual carnality of her imagination. The trouble is that it is generally very difficult for the reader to care deeply, on the aesthetic



evidence, whether Fanshaw and Nan are right or not, or about their frustrations and sufferings, or even about their failure to suffer and articulate with any kind of conviction. These figures are portrayed either with suffocating closeness, or with the angular outlines of over-intention, and they show that the author has not yet discovered a secure and personal literary voice in which to realise his conceptions.

However, evidence of his search for such a voice is plainly present in Streets of Night: paradoxically, in the signs of derivation. Notable among such evidence are the frequent, and sometimes curiously apt, echoes of the early poetry of T.S. Eliot. Most of Streets of Night, as it eventually appeared, was probably written during Eliots' association with The Egoist; Eliot had left Harvard at about the time that Dos Passos entered. "Prufrock", though, had appeared in 1915, and by the time Streets of Night was published Eliot had produced his first three volumes of verse. Though it is hardly the case that Dos Passos successfully imitated the distinctive elements of Eliot's style - "a concise diction, a dry irony, the use of descending cadences"<sup>47</sup> - there is little doubt that he was influenced by some of the typical atmospherics of Eliots' early work. For example,

Nan was out in the street again. A dusty wind  
had come up and was making dead leaves and scraps  
of newspaper dance in the gutters and tearing ragged  
holes in the clouds through which blue sky shone.<sup>48</sup>

is by no means direct plagiarism, but the vocabulary and tone is so close to parts of the "Preludes" that it is hard to believe it could have been written if Dos Passos had not read

Six o'clock.  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
And now a gusty shower wraps  
The grimy scraps  
Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots;

Throughout the novel appears - effectively, much of the time - a persistent image of the Boston fog: cold and insidious, inimical to the rebellious and



free life that lurks, pining for self-expression, beneath all the failure and frustration. Its symbolic purpose is fairly specific:

Slowly, the yellow fog, the cold, enormous fog that had somehow a rhythm of slow, vague smells out at sea sifted in upon her, blurred the focus of herself that had been for a moment intensely sharp.<sup>49</sup>

Prufrock's "yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes" inevitably springs to mind. More than that, Nan herself is so much a female Prufrock, timidly withdrawing from the intense challenges of life; sometimes related quite closely to Prufrock by parallel imagery. "Nan let the brown croutons slide off the spoon... I'm twenty-eight and every seventh day of my life I must have done this. Twenty-eight by fifty-two, what does that make?"<sup>50</sup>

Even Eliot's working-class bogey-man Sweeney is evoked by the appearance of Boston "muckers" who stimulate in Nan ambivalent feelings of menace and allure.

A fat man threw away his cigarette and advanced towards a blonde girl who had just crossed the street; with one hand he was straightening his necktie. The smile on his puffy, razor-scraped face kindled in her straight lips.<sup>51</sup>

This man is kin to the Sweeney who "knows the female temperament. And wipes the suds around his face" and to the apish, horrifying lout in stanza one of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales". Yet in one sense, of course, Dos Passos' employment of the Eliot imagery is a trick. He has not the matured and dedicated purpose of Eliot, who is conscious both of the tradition out of which he works and of his pioneering role and whose world-view informs his controlled, saturnine poetry. Eliot's pessimism has little in common with the pessimism of the adolescent confronted by a world of stuffy inhibitions that blocks his aspirations and saps his energy. Eliot was always prematurely aged. Even so, in seizing on the chronically peevish aspects of Eliot - the mood of cultural disintegration and its contingent imagery - Dos Passos gives to his novel a strong sense of urban loneliness and darkness, of weary dog-days and crowds who are all strangers to one another, that partly compensates for the weakness of his characterization.



Nan is a rather clinical study of repression leading to hysteria; Fanshaw might almost be a caricature of Eliot himself. Both are woodenly constructed, and come alive only at rare moments, usually when they are animated by their concern for Wenny. Wenny is the central subject. Though he is insufficiently objectified, he commands special attention by his foreground significance and because he speaks with the essential voice of the author when he is freed from the technical drudgery of "creating character". At least one critic has chosen to treat Wenny as an almost pure reduction of the writer's adolescent self.

In Streets of Night the hero's wish to change places with a double is unrealized, and therefore the explorations of the relationship between hero and Vag remains (sic) tentative. The two come together at a moment when Wenny faces the collapse of his dreams of love, adventure, and "reality"; he has failed to "burst through the stagnant film of dreams" into "headlong adventure" (p.116), he has been humiliated in his confession of love to Nancibel; he has lost his chance for recognition, personal contact, marriage - his one chance "to live like a human being."<sup>52</sup>

And it has to be agreed that the encounter with Whitey is of vital importance to Wenny: such encounters recur, and the figure of the low-life "outsider" (hobo, immigrant, Wobbly) is of continuing appeal to Dos Passos. Yet the conclusion that Whitey represents an acceptable father-image from the "real" side of life is to make a false reduction. Wenny's problems are never exclusively psychological. He never simply rebels against his father, but against an environment and a value-system - Harvard, puritanism, intellectual orthodoxy, a genteel tradition in decline. Alas, this system is engrained in his soul, and it endlessly brings to nothing - with the aid of his friends, parlour-rebels - each of his sincerest impulses. Fanshaw and Nan implicitly accept Harvard standards, but to Wenny they signify an indulgence of the sensibility that cuts out "real life". "Culture, you mean. God, I'd rather rot in Child's Dairy Lunches."<sup>53</sup>

In fact, the novel principally comes alive in the pages where Dos Passos touches the nerve-centre of Wenny's unease. The satirical pageants



of Bostonian refined society that punctuate the diverging relationships of the three protagonists are thoroughly feeble. The language tends to slide away from the intended forms of significance, and the drawing room conversations become painfully and tediously thin. Yet when Wenny, in his instants of revelatory self-knowledge, including the knowledge (reached by Amory Blaine at the conclusion of his story) that self-knowledge is a relatively poor and limited attainment, starts to mock his own solemnity, there is a hard pictorial gusto to the writing. It moves and resounds with the right kind of graphic vigour: the later and most typical strength of Dos Passos as a novelist.

What's the good of dreams? Its hard actuality I want, will have. Yama, yama, blare of brass bands, striped flags waving against picture postcard scenery, brown oarsmen with flashing teeth and roses behind their ears, and Nan, both of us rolling on red cushions in the leaping stern. Bay of Naples and musical comedy moonlight and a phonograph in a flat in a smell of baby carriages and cabbage grinding out love songs, "Funiculi, funicula."<sup>54</sup>

Though this faculty is never so completely acquired as to be free from "aesthetic" incursions. In this burlesque of Fanshew's imaginings the comic juxtaposition of grand and vulgar sensations presented through impacted grammar and sensory association permits the reader to follow the author's track into the character's mind. It is never plumbed - it does not need to be - but the freeness of flow reflects Dos Passos' ability to forsake the artificial writing-up of an ultra-literary consciousness and create a true moment of life. This manner works best at the level of sympathetic irony, where the reader is not challenged by tense ambiguity or dramatic conflict. However, it is easily spoiled by an opulence of vocabulary or an excess of highly literary metaphors.

The men at the table around him were tiny and gesticulating like things seen through the wrong end of a telescope. The cocktail stung his mouth, sent writhing gold haze all through him. The glass was the centre of a vortex into which were sucked the cutting edges of light, flickering cones of green and red brightness, the voices and the throbbing, rubber faces of the men in the bar.<sup>55</sup>



An urge to depict the visually distorted face of things as they appear to a drunk, fatigued, deeply alienated man will be a staple in Dos Passos' fiction. Here he has not yet learned to avoid clumsy and weak images verging on cliché in conjunction with vague mystic abstractions and sudden poised shocks. The vagueness of the passage, the uncertainty about whose point of view is being adopted, and the "writhing gold haze" in all its misleading echoes mitigate the effectiveness of the scene. It is mannered and unintentionally comic. Yet Dos Passos was to persevere: the death of Joe Williams in 1919 would show, in its economy and the finely chosen colloquialisms of its narration, how such incidents could be conveyed in all their hallucinatory physical ugliness.

Streets of Night largely fails because it seems unable consistently to use the voice either of experience or innocence, because it has a hasty patchwork air, and the mixture of styles and attitudes is never balanced or synthesised. Probably the elapse of time between inception and publication is partly to blame. Chiefly, though, it is a novel that never fully analyses what its central problems are: it fails concretely to establish or demarcate the lines of conflict. Dos Passos can never withdraw far enough from his chosen subject to make its specifications clear and objective, and when he attempts to render the inner life of his characters he is often overwhelmed by emotions and ideas that derive more from his reading and reflection than from his direct experience of life. Hence one of Wenny's most popular complaints, that he cannot seem to get beyond books and confront life itself, has no objective frame. As a self-image, Wenny does live: he carries the weight of the author's contempt for Harvard, and that contempt succeeds partially in animating the character and making his fate credible. Hence one sympathizes, even with the ideas of Fanshaw who manages to make of Wenny's suicide a further excuse for hating the vulgarities of a democratic popular press:

The headlines seemed reflected in their ghoulish  
leering as they read gluttonously every detail of  
the bullet searing the warm flesh, the warm flesh



quenched in the water of the basin, the body that people had loved, talked to, walked with, floating like an old coat among the melting ice-cakes at eight-twenty this morning. Their sallow, flabby-jowled faces as they read greedily like vampire. Youth had been killed.<sup>56</sup>

Wenny, of course, redeemed himself by taking the irrevocable way out. Nan is left with the ouija-board, Fanshaw with his Harvard lectureship in the history of art: pale substitutes. But despite the downbeat and self-pitying mood, the "romantic sociology" (as Dos Passos called it in a letter from Harvard) of the Boston backstreets provides an exciting and vivid locale for the story. The letter makes clear Dos Passos' delight in touring the low-life areas.

The reflections of the orange and yellow lights are so gay on the wet streets - Particularly Saturday night - there's a wonderful atmosphere of gaiety & a sort of paganism about which always delights me - I mean in the cheaper parts of the city - those are the only parts of the city that are ever alive -<sup>57</sup>

It is to this atmosphere of teeming vitality to which Wenny is drawn, yet from which he is inevitably cut off by his habits, nature and upbringing.

According to Charles Bernardin, Dos Passos was not as unhappy at Harvard as Streets of Night and some of the episodes of USA might suggest. "In a sense "Camera Eye Twenty-five" is an anachronism since it represents more accurately the novelist's feelings at the end of the twenties (when the passage was written) than those of a prewar collegian".<sup>58</sup> Certainly the writer's correspondence during his college years does not suggest a sick and tortured mind bearing towards thoughts of suicide: it much more reflects the wonder and enjoyment of a young man whose mind is being opened to new ideas and experiences. But it is a familiar discovery in examining Dos Passos' career that his personal life and emotions are not necessarily strictly correlated with the attitudes of his fiction. Nor is there any reason why they should be correlated. The independence of his art from purely biographical or political facts is a factor too often undervalued. Dos Passos has not the great imaginative gift



of Fitzgerald, of transforming public facts so completely by passing them through the prism of his creative sensibility, but neither is he a scissors-and-paste reporter, arranging data that has scarcely been subject to the fictionalizing process at all.

Streets of Night, though it draws on Dos Passos' Harvard experience, is patently not a transliteration of his student career; it uses Harvard and Boston gentility to suggest the stifling, oppressive institutions that deny the hero his freedom. If this device fails, it fails partly because Harvard and Boston will not quite bear the symbolic weight with which the author desires to freight them. Universities, however tiresome, however trifling in their academic absorptions and inimical to real intellectual-growth, are not themselves the prime cause of cultural conflict and are not, except perhaps in the hands of a more developed artist, apt symbols for the cheating and suffering which life imposes on the individual. One human institution which can be so used, and which often in its horror and violence stimulates a forced growth even in the very young and insouciant, is war. And war was to be a subject with which Dos Passos was quickly to find himself at home.

In Streets of Night the alienation and paralysis of the central figures are conceived as rather clinical deviations from an ideal which is not only never stated but not even given the reality of imaginative suggestion. This is often the method of the satirist - which is what Dos Passos claimed to be - but there is little trace of the indignation and scorn that feed satirical humour. Nan cannot realise herself; as a woman she is sexually repressed; her emancipation is of the mind only, and her devotion to the violin - at which, as her instructor tells her, she can never excel - is a palliative, a self-deceiving reassurance of the spirit that cowers before life. Fanshaw realises himself only as a socially mobile intellectual, ashamed of his lowly origins; as a man, he sublimates homoerotic impulses in a religion of beauty; he is parasitic on the arts, uncreative, a pedant who uses knowledge to avoid self-



knowledge. Wenny, more vital yet more deeply estranged than either, is drawn towards the lower depths, in which the "muckers" seems to promise a life rich in basic satisfactions and an extinction of the self-tormenting intellect. But there is no political edge to this desire. It is formulated as a means of learning the Boston-Harvard-Protestant ethic world that in fact he can only leave by leaving life altogether. Wenny views the urge to proselytise revolt as "maudlin", and in his mind's eye both the popular orator and his audience are ridiculous.

Wenny saw himself in bitter distortion,  
standing on a hydrant confessing idiocies to crowds  
who wore his face as a mask on their own, and  
bleated approval after every word he said. It all  
dissolved into an obscene muddle of leering faces. -  
If only I could stop thinking.<sup>59</sup>

The last sentence is the typical cri de coeur of the sensitive adolescent who has not yet assimilated the experience that will allow him to accept the intensity of his own emotions. The artist is a "perpetual adolescent" to the extent that his acquisition of experience does not blunt that intensity, and in his work he attempts to synthesise a means of relating the two in a significant nexus. This aspect of the artist appears with a peculiarly open honesty in the writings of authors of the Lost Generation. In Fitzgerald it takes the form of a highly sensitized romantic nympholepsy. In Hemingway, it appears as the test and trial of virility, courage, honour. In both cases it can lapse into a form of expression that is itself adolescent (This Side of Paradise, A Farewell to Arms) but it can also be rendered maturely and credibly as a permanent and necessary quality, by no means exclusively adolescent. Dos Passos is a specialist in disillusion and failure. That sensation of young manhood in which every dawn brings a new quantum of meaninglessness is the prevailing atmosphere of Streets of Night. That life itself has no objective meaning is a plausible proposition, and the "existentialist" draws from this premise the conclusion that he must create meaning for himself as he lives. By this canon, Wenny is an existential failure. He seizes on the



single freedom he knows, to put to an end his anguished and humiliating existence. The self-immolating act will continue to be a feature of Dos Passos' heroes up to Manhattan Transfer and beyond. The loser escapes his unavoidable losses by leaving the game. Yet in Streets of Night there is no perspective other than Wenny's by which to judge his decision - if it can be called a decision. Trapped inside the adolescent soul of the self-image, the reader can feel and appreciate the influences that direct the hero's path to destruction, but he cannot relate him to anything more solid and familiar than the supremely painful palpitations of his own nerve-ends.

John Wrenn, in asserting that Streets of Night is an affirmative work not intended to express despair, argues that a failure of artistry in certain respects has led to interpretations more pessimistic than the author's intention warrants:

As both artist and critic, Dos Passos seems to have been aware almost immediately of a central weakness of Streets of Night - the fact that neither Wenny's suicide nor Whitey's escape into mere vagabondage is a valid solution to the problem of living. He also recognised that Whitey and Mabel Worthington were not strongly enough emphasised to carry convincingly the novel's essentially humanistic thesis.<sup>60</sup>

But though the book is undeniably weak and immature, there is little evidence either in it or in later works that Dos Passos is an author devoted to providing a "valid solution to the problem of living". Indeed, the fact that Whitey and Mabel Worthington, who are certainly outside the middle-class society that Wenny finds so constricting, each fail to achieve any worthwhile freedom only stresses the despair. Break out of one vicious circle, and you find yourself in another. Wenny can only idealise the existences of "muckers" and "vags" because he has not learnt this truth from experience. Ethical arguments about the value of suicide may continue for ever, but there is no question that for the victim it is a valid solution to the problem of suffering.



The despair of Streets of Night seems juvenile because it is not objectified in an artistically satisfying form. However, despair of itself is not juvenile. The novels of Dos Passos speak of it with an ever greater eloquence and conviction, and the books written out of his war experience, and later, will elevate it to a serious and disturbingly truthful response to the suffering inflicted by life.



## CHAPTER II

### GETTING IN BAD: ONE MAN'S INITIATION: 1917

#### AND THREE SOLDIERS

"The overwhelming majority of conscripts went into the army unwillingly and once there they were debauched by the twin forces of official propaganda... and a harsh, unintelligent discipline. The first made them almost incapable of soldierly thought and conduct; the second converted them into cringing goose-steppers."<sup>1</sup> In writing his analysis of World War I's effects on the drafted American soldier, Mencken naturally stressed what he saw as the craven and ignorant nature of the American people. He added that, although there might come a time when the slaves would revolt against their leaders, the American citizen pitched into a European conflict "got no farther than academic protests against the brutal usage he had to face in the army".<sup>2</sup> Mencken does not specify any writers in this charge (which in any case is a self-serving portion of a typically tendentious article) but to look at Dos Passos' two novels of the war is to realise how hard he strove to absorb his experiences as part of his non-academic education, to realise the horror he encountered as a means of identifying his own relationship to the world. Though he was never a conscript and saw the war as a member of the celebrated "finishing school" of the Lost Generation, the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, he was able to share the bewilderment and pain of the common soldier - and though he is exceptional in having the need and the facility to render this fact in literature, he does so in One Man's Initiation: 1917 with a unique freshness.

Such freshness almost necessarily precludes the technical sophistication that shapes out of the raw-material of life a finished and harmonious work. The literary innocence of the young Dos Passos reveals itself in the loose arrangement of One Man's Initiation as a series of autobiographical sketches. The episodic form prefigures the later fiction, but it lacks the controlling aesthetic and the resources of style. As the author was later to write,



in apologising for what he took to be the half-baked dogmatic complacency of his youth:

Young people think they are so smart. Alas the doctrines they spout with such fervor turn out to be mostly parroted from their elders. What the young have that is unique is an unjaded apparatus for registering experience; keen eyes, sharp ears, eager senses.<sup>3</sup>

And it is just these qualities which lend to the book an unmediated clarity seldom again to be found in his work. His sensibility is not thoroughly naive - here, after all, is a Harvard graduate and assiduous student of literature - but it moves in many passages with a striking freedom.

The book begins with an introductory chapter written in the dramatic present. This favourite device is well used: it carries the reader along with Martin Howe's first direct impressions of a country which for him has always denoted high civilisation - a culture rich both in the magnitude of its artistic achievements and in its provisions for man's private sensual gratifications. Martin himself is initially presented as a young man totally unscarred by disillusion, ready to inherit what history has prepared for him.

Sky and sea are opal grey. Martin is stretched on the deck in the bow of the boat with an unopened book beside him. He has never been so happy in his life. The future is nothing to him, the past is nothing to him. All his life is effaced in the grey languor of the sea, in the soft surge of the water about the ship's bow as she ploughs through the long swell eastward.<sup>4</sup>

In the relaxed, observant lyricism of these sentences one becomes aware of a true and conscientious effort to portray the character of a mind preparing itself to receive unimagined experiences. It is drowsy, unafraid and hopeful. What in the Harvard pieces had been strained and derivative is almost unself-conscious. The lyrical colouring is there, but relevantly there, not borrowed from a stagey conception of what literature ought to be; it does not observe, or attempt to substitute for, an absence of direct personal feeling. It expresses, pure and simple. And the whole of this first chapter, which serves



as an evocative preface for what is to follow, finely relates the short-lived innocence of the young American who has had no serious emotional preparation for what he is about to witness and who cannot understand the seemingly blood-thirsty and inhuman prejudices of the French civilians. Howe's first glimpses of France are shown through the lens of a lyrical imagination, yet it is as though the subject-matter itself has imposed on Dos Passos' prose an unstudious authenticity. There are no heated and festering distortions, no lurid or decadent incongruities to screen an essential artifice. In the imagistic colourings of the landscape - quiet, controlled - is evidence of a vision alert for the precise appearance of new sights and reluctant to force on to them any purely literary significance or any ironic, fateful premonitions.

Through his port-hole in the yet colourless dawn  
he saw the reddish water of the river with black-hulled  
sailing-boats on it and a few lanky steamers of a  
pattern he had never seen before. Again he breathed  
deep of the new indefinable smell of the land.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from a faintly portentous archaism in the final sentence, the innocence of the prose is remarkable. It is, without being individual, perfectly adapted to the purpose of allowing the reader to share with Martin Howe a sharpness of physical perception unarrested by thought. Martin's own innocence is thus underlined, an innocence in its way just as fundamental as that of the other ambulance-men, non-artists, with their western casualness of speech and their native, unreflecting puritanism.

Martin's original lightheartedness of attitude, which is summed up in a song that treats the war as "the Hamburg show" cannot last, and actually begins to fade well before he has seen any military action. The first shock arrives very suddenly, as Martin is seated under the awning of a Paris cafe, where he can drink in the enchanting unfamiliar colours of the townscape. As he contemplates the dish of wild strawberries in front of him, a woman in mourning and a wounded soldier take seats at the table next to him.



He found himself staring at a face, a face that still had some of the chubbiness of boyhood. Between the pale-brown frightened eyes, where the nose should have been, was a triangular black patch that ended in some mechanical contrivance with shiny little black metal rods that took the place of the jaw. He could not take his eyes from the soldier's eyes, that were like those of a hurt animal, full of meek dismay.<sup>6</sup>

The transition is well effected, and though the ironic contrast is never profound or complex it arises from an experience that is so natural and recognizable, and so concisely presented, that it strikes home with assurance and credibility. The image of the disfigured soldier haunting cafes and pleasure-spots far from the front lines is a central one. It helps define the protected innocence of the Americans; and one remembers that Fitzgerald, who always regretted never getting "over there", kept to the end of his life a volume of photographs of mutilated combatants. DosPassos uses the image here with attentiveness and sincerity, exhibiting a serious artistic respect for his material.

But One Man's Initiation is not a book thoroughly earmarked by this approach. The author's innocence is partial and intermittent. The style which can legitimately and carefully provoke a reader's sympathies by showing "the sequence of motion and fact that made the emotion" can lapse into false dramatization, showiness and a miscalculated sentimentality.

Martin sat, his chair tilted back, his hands trembling, staring with compressed lips at the men who jolted by on the strident, thrabbing camions. A word formed in his mind: tumbrils.<sup>7</sup>

Martin is watching soldiers on their way to the front, and the context stresses how like sacrificial animals they are, how neglectful is the official war machine of the individuals with minds and souls who ought never to be treated as animals. Martin has not yet been to the front, and the concern he feels is the pity of a spectator who can only guess at the suffering of the battlefield. Yet the focus of this paragraph is Martin's sensibility and the vibrations of that sensibility, far from being graded and objectified, are given a dense weight of feeling, and the subject of that feeling seems not to be the pity of



war. It seems to be the self-conscious attitudes of Martin Howe. One Man's Initiation is largely a personal report, in the sense that the author and his fictional persona are seldom distinct. For this reason, shock and outrage are felt instantly and vividly by the reader. But for this reason also, there are moments when the exquisite savouring of ideas on the part of the auctorial self-image blocks that vividness. The word that "formed in his mind" (a typical Dos Passos formulation) is vague and fustian. The troops of a modern democratic army have little in common with the aristocratic victims of revolution - but if they happen to be going to their deaths and if you have been impressed by your reading of Carlyle, it is a tempting allusion. Martin Howe is such a young man, and so is his creator: there is no aesthetic perspective on Martin's thoughts.

The absence of a dual vision - a means whereby the hero can be known at firsthand yet effectively placed in some critical setting - makes of One Man's Initiation a "young man's book". Yet its immaturity gives it a paradoxical strength. It is the one work by Dos Passos in which passion and hope are not conceived of as thoroughly futile, and in its concentration upon emotions that were fundamental and recent it is genuinely traumatic. The work of the mature Dos Passos is "enграмmatic"<sup>8</sup>: it analyses not moments of cataclysmic shock - which leave to man still the possibility of heroism - but the niggling and low-keyed disappointments that pave the way to extinction. One Man's Initiation holds a residue of American optimism, and this optimism, as it collides with the brute facts of experience, creates a sombrely tragic resonance in the language.

Infantry tramped by, the rain spattering with a cold glitter on grey helmets, on gun-barrels, on the straps of equipment. Red sweating faces, drooping under the hard rims of helmets, turned to the ground with the struggle with the weight of the equipment; rows and patches of faces were the only warmth in the desolation of putty-coloured mud and bowed mud-coloured bodies and dripping mud-coloured sky.<sup>9</sup>

The poeticism of the treatment - especially in the final cadences - in no way diminishes the experiential value of the scene. The subject - as in a



Käthe Kollwitz sketch - demands a sense of beauty in the drawing, since otherwise there is nothing but a bare statement of human insignificance. But there are no refinements of self-obsession here: one can see how Martin's fate is linked to those of the soldiers, without being made privy to Martin's ideas. The next sentence happens to reveal these ideas (doomed youth) but passages such as this have a right to stand by themselves, because they are self-expressive; here the picture is composed of words and images that might naturally be used by an observer. There is no attempt to milk it for extraneous emotions, to reflect pity back from the war to the psyche of the reporter, or to dissolve its essential meaning in a bath of lapidary descriptiveness.

Martin, too, is ultimately not altogether either a receptive node who transmits to the reader a sense of profound horror or a sensitive and introspective projection of the author's inner conflicts. One Man's Initiation has something of the shape of a bildungsroman, and a crucial part of its meaning is to articulate the changes wrought in Martin Howe's outlook. Unlike the characters of Streets of Night, who are virtually incapable of doing anything but talk, Martin has involved himself in a world of action. His motives for doing so are mixed: "Perhaps it's only curiosity"<sup>10</sup> he tells the woman who is treating him as a defender of civilisation, not without truth. Like Dos Passos, he wants to "see the show", and though his feelings are against the war it is reasonable for a young man of his type to be attracted to what can easily be made to appear an "adventure". At first, the undertaking is not adventurous enough. Caught in an administrative machinery full of muddle and mystification, Martin and a fellow-volunteer confess - in a youthful, literary manner - their disillusion.

"What do you think of all this anyway?" said the wet man suddenly, lowering his voice stealthily.

"I don't know. I never did expect it to be what we were taught to believe... Things aren't."

"But you can't have guessed that it was like this..."



like Alice in Wonderland, like an ill-intentioned Drury Lane pantomime, like all the dusty futility of Barnum and Bailey's circus."

"No, I thought it would be hair-raising," said Martin.<sup>11</sup>

The attitudes struck are false and callow, but they belong to the characters. Moreover, although "dusty futility" is to remain a central theme in Dos Passos fiction, Martin does discover that war can be "hair-raising". The faintly affected ennui of the bureaucratic mismanagement of affairs is displaced by a "passionate revolt". Though this revolt is limited to a turbulence of mind and feeling its causes lie not in theoretical dissatisfaction but in concrete experience.

His eyes followed along the shapeless bundles of blood-flecked uniform till they suddenly turned away. Where the middle of the man had been, where had been the curved belly and the genitals, where the thighs had joined with a strong swerving of muscles to the trunk, was a depression, a hollow pool of blood, that glinted a little in the cold diffusion of grey light from the west.<sup>12</sup>

Only the over-deliberate touch of lyrical sentiment in its conclusion spoils this moment. Otherwise, in its solid simplicity it achieves exactly what has hitherto been missing: the location of a single barbarity compelling and insuppressible in its ghastliness. This is not dusty futility, and there can be no sardonic amusement in the response to it. Death in such an immediate form educates; it cannot be made to serve as the stimulus of sophomoric disdain. In the succeeding episode Tom Randolph maintains his viewpoint of amused disgust, but Martin is touched by agony: "Why do they enjoy hatred so?"<sup>13</sup>

The overcoming of this hatred - a hatred never felt by him personally, but thickly swarming around him - becomes a primary need for Martin. One of the finest pieces of writing in the book is an account of Martin's rescue of an enemy soldier. In dragging the mortally wounded German to a dugout, Martin suddenly realizes that he has justified himself by a single act.



Sweat dripped from Martin's face, on the man's face, and he felt the arm-muscles and the ribs pressed against his body as he clutched the wounded man tightly to him in the effort of carrying him towards the dugout. The effort gave Martin a strange contentment. It was as if his body were taking part in the agony of this man's body. At last they were washed out, all the hatred, all the lies, in blood and sweat. Nothing was left but the quiet friendliness of beings alike in every part, eternally alike.<sup>14</sup>

The language, purified to the degree where it is coterminous with the experience it describes, has the sure and unmistakable feel of authenticity. Dos Passos was the man, he suffered, he was there and in One Man's Initiation - itself a relatively inconsiderable work - he can energise some of his situations with the tensions of real emotional truth. Certainly when he writes under the pressure of circumstances that bear for him a major personal significance he creates passages of fine intensity. At these points Martin Howe lives as credibly as Nick Adams. But One Man's Initiation is never as concentrated as the early Hemingway stories, it attempts to include a polemical vein, and in adding to the story of a traumatised young man a certain amount of political rhetoric - partly offered as Martin's conversion as a result of his war experience - it dilutes the value of that experience.

I shall never forget the flags, the menacing exultant flags along all the streets before we went to war, the gradual unbaring of teeth, gradual lulling to sleep of people's humanity and sense by the phrases, the phrases... America, as you know, is ruled by the press. And the press is ruled by whom? Who shall ever know what dark forces bought and bought until we should be ready to go blind and gagged to war?... People seem to so love to be fooled. Intellect used to mean freedom, a light struggling against darkness. Now the darkness is using the light for its own purposes... We are slaves of bought intellect, willing slaves.<sup>15</sup>

So Martin orates in the climactic chapter which theatrically relates a debate among ordinary soldiers who have come to see through war propaganda and to understand that they were cheated. In a rather synthetic way, Dos Passos ensures that there is a sufficient variety of opinion to give the discussion some energy of ideas. It notably lacks lifelike characterization -



except in the case of Tom Randolph - but it is a reasonable portrait of the young men forced to think by the intensity of their wartime initiation. In the savagery of nationalistic struggle they have sensed the crisis of a civilisation, and each has his proposal for a juster and more stable future. A "blonde Norman", Jesuit-educated in Texas, has kept his faith in organised religion, and he argues that once total power is given to the Catholic Church it will have the strength and wisdom to ensure a reign of peace. "All the evil of the Church... comes from her struggles to attain supremacy. Once assured of triumph, established as the rule of the world, it becomes the natural channel through which the wise rule and direct the stupid, not for their own interest, not for ambition for worldly things, but for the love that is in them."<sup>16</sup> Merrier argues the case for revolutionary socialism - "organisation from the bottom... by the ungreedy, by the humane, by the uncunning";<sup>17</sup> Lully the anarchist denounces the evil of all government, and insists that "Overorganisation is death. It is disorganisation, not organisation, that is the aim of life."<sup>18</sup> André Dubois, frustrated by the recognition that they are talking helplessly in a void, speaks for the "stupid average working-people" who may achieve, if they can find the levers of action, what the intellectuals are impotent to do.

All four share a passionate disgust with the status quo and an eagerness to redress the wrongs of an oppressive system. Martin feels that "all his friends were gathered in that room".<sup>19</sup> Yet in the final chapter all are dead and Martin has to be content with the fact that he has been "initiated" in all the circles of hell."<sup>20</sup> Martin's own contribution to their symposium is the phillip against American hypocrisy that amply illustrates both the depths of his disillusion and his powerlessness to do more than protest vocally. For unlike Frederic Henry, Martin makes no bid to escape the war and find satisfaction in an ideal private life. Dos Passos himself had recorded in his letters the same sentiments, but despite getting "in bad" with the Italian authorities he had done no more.



My first letters home were full of hurlyburly about stringing up capitalist warmongers to the lampposts on Fifth Avenue, but by the time I'd lived through a few months of war, though I hardly admitted it to myself, I had inwardly decided to let others storm the barricades. My business was to tell the tale.<sup>21</sup>

And One Man's Initiation does tell the tale - graphically, and without didactic conclusions. However juvenile and incomplete, it relates with admirable fidelity the receptiveness of the adolescent awareness. Martin Howe, a frank self-image of the author, learns that the world outside America and its universities is a violent and terrifying place. He never learns how it may be restored to harmony, but he does have glimpses of a harmony that the imagination can bestow on certain timeless scenes - the abbey among the beech-woods, for instance, built over the years in several of the great European architectural styles and surviving into the age of mustard-gas and the machine-gun. This, and the "salmon-coloured villa" that recurs in Dos Passos' novels, symbolise a beauty and continuity that are threatened not only by war but by the existence of modern industrial society itself and that will prove to be unreachable. Yet Martin's restlessness nags him - a restlessness composed of his intellectuality, his aesthetic responses, and his questioning attitude to a world that will not permit him to be a mere adventurer of the spirit. Martin's alienation, though less explicit, is as profound as Nick Adams'. He can never accept the free, positive and apparently "sane" attitude of his friend Tom Randolph.

"Laugh and be individually as decent as you can, and don't worry your head about the rest of the world; and have a good time in spite of the God-damned scoundrels... No use worrying yourself into the grave over a thing you can't help."<sup>22</sup>

Martin Howe will be a worrier, though. His curiosity and sensitivity compel him to analyse the meaning of the hell he is subjected to, but largely because he implicitly shares the view of Lully that "disorganisation.... is the aim of life" he is barred from constructing an outlook that will completely make sense of the suffering he has witnessed and help him prescribe a remedy. The radical rhetoric in which he excoriates those responsible for suffering may



may be the real Martin, but it is never as real artistically as those moments in which, sick and horrified, he is brought face to face with the fact of death. As a testament of experience, One Man's Initiation is still valid. As the art of a novice, it is excusable. As the first step in a career which will attempt to look unflinchingly at the conditions of human failure it has not yet faced the worst horrors of all.

In a larger and far more ambitious work published two years after One Man's Initiation, Dos Passos produced a novel in which the essential material of his service with the Ambulance Corps is more fully treated and made to serve general conclusions. Three Soldiers has three protagonists but only one hero: John Andrews is its "focus of sensibility"<sup>23</sup> and the story is principally concerned with his effort - and failure - to discover a means of personal self-realisation that will redeem the impersonal and inhuman mechanism of army existence. Paradoxically, his original motive for enlisting had been to submerge his identity in the mass.

They were all so alike that they seemed at moments to be but one organism. This was what he had sought when he had enlisted, he said to himself. It was in this that he would take refuge from the horror of the world that had fallen upon him. He was sick of revolt, of thought, of carrying his individuality like a banner above the turmoil. This was much better, to let everything go, to stamp out his maddening desire for music, to humble himself into the mud of common slavery.<sup>24</sup>

Nostalgie de la boue is a regular theme in Dos Passos' fiction, but it always operates in an uneasy alliance with a more or less parallel tendency to prove oneself creative or vital. Andrews' attraction towards a self-submergence in the common identity of ordinary people is a reasonable index of his lack of a sense of reality. The mass only seems attractive when you are not a part of it and have the leisure for ultimate refinements of your own world-weariness. Andrews is the Eastern intellectual, crippled by class guilt and an over-indulgence in literature and ideas, who discovers, by a slow and painful process of direct experience, that he must positively strike out



against authority if he ever means to achieve freedom to work and create as he wishes. This process involves the realization that common people are not mysterious and romantic beings, deriving from their native simplicity profound satisfactions withheld from intellectuals, but simply common people - and "common slavery" is what it says, not an edifying or aesthetically enjoyable principle. Dos Passos is aware of this - necessarily, since the book derives largely from his own experience - and there are anti-lyrical descriptive passages that render with a judicious neutrality the sense-data of communal life.

The company stood at attention, each man looking straight before him at the empty parade ground, where the cinder piles showed purple with evening. On the wind that smelt of barracks and disinfectant there was a faint greasiness of food cooking. At the other side of the wide field long lines of men shuffled slowly into the narrow wooden shanty that was the mess hall. Chins down, chests out, legs twitching and tired from the afternoon's drilling, the company stood at attention.<sup>25</sup>

Almost a "khaki demonstration": in its impersonality, its concentration on what can simply be observed and its tacit denial of individual feelings in the assembled group of soldiers, the opening paragraph of Three Soldiers prefigures the later, "objective" Dos Passos. But objectivity is never a consistent value in the novel. Nor is there a disciplined balance, as in Manhattan Transfer, between the individual in his own little hell and the social inferno that surrounds him. The eponymous figures are not drawn to the same scale. The novel is excessively long and ambitious; it suffers from digressions and from erratic variations of style. What makes it significant from the point of view of the Dos Passos oeuvre is the drawing of the hero. Andrews is a sympathetic hero, unlike Chrisfield and Fuselli who have a restricted and representative meaning, and he is, as Stanley Cooperman writes, "a development from rather than the parallel to the 'half-baked' twenty-two-year-old of First Encounter."<sup>26</sup> Andrews is the most pure and extreme form of the early Dos Passos hero, the man who fails but in his failure creates his own



identity and gives an existential meaning to the act of revolt for which he is condemned. In John Andrews' case, it is art that stands for the fulfilled life, as opposed to the iron and inhuman imperatives of the army. In his composer's vocation he glimpses a purpose that will rescue him from the machine to which he has surrendered himself and from which he increasingly feels the necessity to break free. Music is art in an especially 'pure' form - in the sense that it is largely free of ethical or ideological content - and Andrews is faced with the problem of adapting his almost religious belief in music to the bitterness of reality. Washing windows at his training camp (another recurrent image, the author's lasting memory of unproductive drudgery) he senses "a rhythm... pushing its way through the hard core of his mind".<sup>27</sup> This is the rhythm of military life itself, powerful and insistent, and it spurs Andrews to resolve that "he must fix it in himself, so that he could make it into music and write it down, so that orchestras could play it and make the ears of multitudes feel it."<sup>28</sup> His original conception had been a "Queen of Sheba" symphony, music on a theme distant and exotic, as unreal as his belief that he could renounce his own individuality. "Instead of finding comradeship, he learns that each man is isolated by military routine into his niche within the system."<sup>29</sup>

His service, therefore, provides a radical education for John Andrews. The academic views he brings with him are subjected to a cruel reappraisal as he is drawn through the inner works of the grinding servo-mechanism. This mechanism - the metaphor of a machine is underlined by the section-titles - is brutally indifferent to the welfare of the individual. At the same time, the hostile forces in Three Soldiers are presented quite differently from those in One Man's Initiation. The immediacy of a violent confrontation with pain and death has been abandoned, and in its place is the slow, dismal and demoralising process of the erosion of vitality. It is in this context that Andrews' initial inspirational heroism has to be modified. Like Anthony Patch, Andrews is the young man of bourgeois background who stays



in the ranks, where he is unpopular, cannot accept official views of the war, and finds himself rotting away in a state of acedia and frustration. Up to a point, the remorselessly applied external discipline quells the urge to rebel, or limits it to a nagging introspection. Andrews has begun with more heroic motives than Patch, but even after his wounding, while he is recovering in hospital, his urge to protest wears an abstract and contemplative air. He imagines a roster of self-sacrificing heroes from the past - "Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, Christ" - and resolves to strike a positive blow for individuality:

he felt a crazy desire to join the forlorn ones, to throw himself into inevitable defeat, to live his life as he saw it in spite of everything, to proclaim once more the falseness of the gospels under cover of which greed and fear filled with more and yet more pain the already unbearable agony of human life.

As soon as he got out of hospital he would desert... This was his last run with the pack.<sup>30</sup>

The reversal of his earlier idealistic intentions is a forcible consequence of his discovery of the 'real' world; and even this resolution is not instantly carried out. Made one day before the armistice, it is forgotten once Andrews sees the opportunity of studying music in Paris - ironically, under army auspices. Here, in a limbo world, he enters half-voluntarily another field of his worldly education: the pool of trimmers and adventurers, high-minded aesthetes, playboys and gentlemen who build themselves nests within the official bureaucracy and settle down to play their opportunist games. With this galère - Walters, Sheffield, Henslave and their ilk - he has in common a cultivated bourgeois background, and he almost cynically uses their sense of class solidarity to engineer his transfer to Paris and the Schola Cantorum. This affair he knows to be contemptible, but he feels it is implicitly validated by his vision of grand perspectives - high civilisation in an appropriate European setting and "The Queen of Sheba". The fundamental error and illusion of this course of action - its purely temporary palliative effect on the disgust and disillusion that has led him



to a position of indignant pacifism, is at first obscured by the patent advantages and delights that Paris can offer him. To this extent, Paris is an apt symbol for the very concept of art - as a separate self-justifying entity - that he must ultimately reject. It furnishes a garden of epicurean delights: good food and drink, sex, stimulating companions - all the attractive surface aspects of living that make rebellion so difficult - appear as a kind of Jamesian tableau in which Andrews takes his place, subduing the emotions of anger and injustice he had felt in hospital. Jeanne with her snobbish respectability and warmth and Genevieve Rod the pedantic refined apostle of drawing-room culture take the edge off his despair. He falls into a backward-looking romanticism, expressed in the formulae of a vague and slothful resentment.

Man seemed to have shrunk in stature before the vastness of the mechanical contrivances they had invented... Today everything was congestion, the scurrying crowds; men had become ant-like. Perhaps it was inevitable that the crowds should sink deeper and deeper into slavery. Whichever won, tyranny from above or spontaneous organization from below, there could be no individuals.<sup>31</sup>

A defeatist lament for the disappearance of personal self-responsibility, or of the belief that it can be a sustaining value, subsequently underlined in the picture of "white marble halls" in which "his real self... his name and number"<sup>32</sup> lie at the mercy of the engulfing machine. Outside Paris, arcadia beckons, and Andrews, absent without leave in order to spend an idyllic day with Genevieve, is arrested by M.P.s. They are coarse, unimaginative men who embody the inflexible harshness of their service, of which the heart and core is the dreaded labour battalion to which Andrews is sentenced. Here Andrews, finally driven to a point at which no evasion or compromise is possible, must cease to be a half-hearted rebel. He must choose either to embrace the system or to commit a definitive act of protest. He can no longer waver or dream. In the event, his escape is made on the example of a seventeen year-old thief, but it is a willed and conscious action, far more so than the casual negligence of rules that led to his punishment. Andrews means it to be absolute



and irrevocable; moreover, he has the courage to insist that it shall be so when the gentleman-ranker element in Paris later suggests that he can easily clear himself.

"I'm not crazy, you know, I've figured up the balance perfectly sanely. The only thing is, you fellows can't understand. Have you ever been in a labour battalion?... Good God, you don't know what you are talking about, you two... I've got to be free, now. I don't care at what cost Being free's the only thing that matters."<sup>33</sup>

Andrews' break with the alien prescriptions of the machine involves purification by water and a shedding of his former identity with the doffing of his uniform. Like Wenny in Streets of Night, once he deserts his desertion is total. He falls straight through conventional society, with its ranges and levels of accommodation, to a pit of anarchists, outcasts and renegades in the lower depths. However, his exhilaration at having committed himself so unequivocally - "It's us against the universe" - does not last, for in that transfigured landscape beyond the machine but also beyond the possibility of easy self-redemption all his newly discovered values are stripped of their romantic, affirmative character and stand out as naked indices of isolation and impotence. The loneliness of barrack communality gives way to the ache of the fugitive. In the ostensibly regenerative countryside of Poissac, which can now have no meaning for Andrews, his frankly agonised attempts to explain himself to Genevieve break against her defensive barriers of small talk and timid assumptions. In an effort to make sense of his experience and to unite his aesthetic aspirations with the lessons of service to the machine he proposes to entitle his symphony "On the Soul and Body of John Brown". He contemplates the history of the great American fanatic, and the example of faith he has bequeathed.

The stockade was built; not one of the sheep would escape. And those that were not sheep? They were deserters; every rifle muzzle held death for them; they would not live long. And yet other nightmares had been thrown off the shoulders of men. Every man who stood up courageously to die loosened the grip of the nightmare.<sup>34</sup>



The instinctive horror with which Genevieve repudiates the doctrine of revolutionary defeatism is no longer an invitation for him to temporise.

The pull of her world has ceased to fascinate; but equally Andrews senses that he cannot give himself to an organized movement of rebellion.

And why, instead of writing music that would have been worth while if he hadn't been a deserter, he kept asking himself, hadn't he tried long ago to act, to make a gesture, however feeble, however forlorn, for other people's freedom? Half by accident he had managed to free himself from the treadmill. Couldn't he have helped others? If only he had his life to live over again. No: he had not lived up to the name of John Brown.<sup>35</sup>

This is the end of the road for John Andrews' personal rebellion, yet the broadening of consciousness and action that would relate his stand to a more general "spontaneous organization", such as the May Day strike in Paris, seems impossible for him to achieve. In one sense, he has travelled far: he has broken the rules, has stopped outside the bounds of legality and thus deprived himself of the tolerance or safety attached to the purely intellectual rebel. Yet he remains paralysed by tension; he cannot see a next step. Although he knows that his landlady is liable to betray him, he makes no decisive effort to ensure his freedom. The M.P.s arrive to collect him. He confesses his crime. The final image of the novel is of the sheets of paper on which he has been composing being fluttered from the table by a breeze "until the floor was littered with them". Andrews has made a gesture, but it is essentially a gesture of renunciation, a profound, despairing and intransigent, "no".

Andrews' defeat is conclusive, but it is informed by tragedy insofar as it bestows moral credit on him. Andrews is a true hero, whatever reservations one may have about his presentment.

If Andrews' method of renunciatory action does appear somewhat too precious, too "arty" and melodramatic, this may well be a comment on our own moral environment rather than his. For Andrews... a gesture of renunciation could be both deeply courageous and authentically moving precisely because of the aesthetic sacrifice involved.<sup>36</sup>



So writes Stanley Cooperman. Yet it is surely not the case that Andrews' sacrifice is exclusively "aesthetic". It is true that what Andrews has to endure is repellent to an earnest sense of beauty, and true also that his defeat as an opponent of the system entails the defeat of his plans to be a creator, but the central sacrifice is a sacrifice of human values. These values, though necessarily vague, can be recognised in Andrews' proposed change of title for his symphony. They fail to emerge as positive criteria partly because Andrews is too confused and too much under the pressure of a bombardment of variegated stimuli to establish a coherent philosophy. The chief contradiction of his situation is that his only means of registering a protest against the world that mistreats him is negated already by the very conditions which provoke it. It is not "art" which is the victim in Three Soldiers but the individual as a self-willed being; the underlying conflict is between "organic" life and institutionalised power forms - between life that is disorganized yet harmonious and the omnivorous "system". Unfortunately, Andrews does not fit either of those categories. He is the self-questioning intellectual, who can neither integrate his sensibility with a natural order nor bow to the demands of society. For this reason, the conflict is artistically muddled. Andrews is unmistakably the Dos Passos hero, and in his admirably brave and defiant refusal to serve he commands sympathy. Yet he is one of three soldiers; among those three he stands out as a figure conceived in quite different terms. Dos Passos has not yet learnt to gather around his major characters lesser characters drawn in reasonable proportion.

Some of the difficulty does arise from the fact that "Andrews all but vanishes beneath the height of adjectives, literary and musical allusions, colour poems, chiaroscuro 'moments' and enameled surfaces which have little to do with the experience to be rendered".<sup>37</sup> Three Soldiers does suffer from residual aestheticism, and from a frequently out of control mixture of styles. Andrews is often hard to identify amid the "scenic absorption" but even more inimical to the portraiture is his curiously mid-way position between the



early Dos Passos tendency to draw romantic heroes who are in some sense their own masters and who fail tragically and his later preoccupation with people who are essentially victims and whose fate is largely determined by the stimuli of impersonal circumstances. Of course, this dilemma is precisely Andrews' own; but since there is an author's dilemma superceding it, it is denied fully cogent expression.

One aspect of the background imagery of the novel is "nature" - but nature is too often facilely conceived as a purely literary contrast with the man-made devastation of war. Within three pages, for instance, the following sentences occur: "The larks filled the wine-tinged air with a constant chiming of bells."<sup>38</sup> "They walked on, hearing the constant chirrup of the larks..."<sup>39</sup> They stood still in the darkening field, staring up at the sky, where a few larks still hung chirruping".<sup>40</sup> "Birds chirped and rustled among the young leaves".<sup>41</sup> Such ironies, perfectly fair in themselves, register the incongruities which the author desires to elicit from the observable fact that birds still fly above the war-torn countryside. Yet they weaken and lose their meaning with repetition and through the unresourceful lyricism of the style. Too much of Three Soldiers is pure "writing", uneconomical and of limited relevance. Rhetoric of this nature clogs and delays the dynamism of the action without penetrating deeply. However, there are signs of a fresh development: appearing not for the first time but now in a definite and insistent pattern come the very characteristic engrammatic reports on feeling, memory, states of mind.

As he worked a rhythm began pushing its way through the hard core of his mind, leavening it, making it fluid.<sup>42</sup>

Memories of movies flickered in his mind.<sup>43</sup>

The phrase came to Andrews' mind amid an avalanche of popular tunes, of visions of patriotic numbers on the vaudeville stage.<sup>44</sup>

A vivid picture came to his mind of the puddle with its putty-coloured water and the little triangular heads of the frogs.<sup>45</sup>



These occasions, especially associated with John Andrews, embody the "detailed recording of sense data" that is to be more completely developed in Manhattan Transfer. John Andrews is not so obscured by "fine writing" that we are not aware of the process by which these sense data impose themselves on him and cumulatively mould his disposition. But owing to the closeness of identification between author and subject, never entirely overcome, Andrews is given too much weight to carry in a theoretically "tripartite" novel and the structure bulges with this burden of unassimilated emotion. Relatively, he effaces and makes almost superfluous the life-stories of Chrisfield and Fuselli which, potentially interesting in themselves, almost appear as elements of a separate work. He is both a victim - a restless, other directed half-being in the grip of a life-denying organization - and an existential fighter for a lost cause that ennobles his destruction. Three Soldiers illustrates the high-water mark of Dos Passos' taste for self-conscious literary "art", for showy and second-hand effects that seriously diminish the truth of his writing and hints at the direction which his interests will take in the future. The formal duality of nature and art versus regimentation and ordered chaos never quite works because it is forced on to a historical situation that will no longer support it. But in tackling the problem, even if he has not managed to solve it, Dos Passos has freed himself to look more closely at real and urgent matters, including the conditions of human failure, and has begun to acquire the technical means to express his altering purpose. Nature as a substantial alternative to an increasingly mechanical world cannot supply a credibly balanced equation. From Three Soldiers on, it will appear as little more than a stated or implied quality of the agrarian past from which modern society has become radically estranged and which can never be reclaimed. Art as the supreme achievement of the creative individual will also lose its primary significance.

In the final pages of Three Soldiers occurs an almost prophetic passage on the usurpation of the world of natural growth and organic energy by the encroaching universe of remorseless things. John Andrews may not



completely understand it, in the still unfaded glow of his sacrifice, but the objects which he piles on his bed, and which symbolise to him his material poverty, are just that aggregate of manufactured objects that signifies - and will be used by Dos Passos to signify - the invasion of the dying self-willed cosmos by reification.

Three pencils, a fountain pen. Automatically he reached for his watch, but he remembered he'd given it to Al to pawn in case he didn't decide to give himself up, and needed money. A toothbrush. A shaving set. A piece of soap. A hairbrush and a broken comb. Anything else? He groped in the musette that hung on the foot of the bed. A box of matches. A knife with one blade missing, and a mashed cigarette. Amusement growing on him every minute, he contemplated the pile.<sup>46</sup>

This method - the list of the tangible - will grow in Dos Passos' hands to be a principle mode of realising his fictive world. John Andrews' has finally fallen "under the wheels" of a machine too powerful for him to fight. There is heroism in his disavowal, but a heroism markedly tempered by hopelessness - the "dusty futility" of Martin Howe. Andrews' "vague feeling of revolt against the senseless waste of life and material" focuses on the army as a specific enemy. But the true enemy is not the army, not Harvard, not philistinism or capitalism. The true enemy is the whole of modern life which denies to Andrews the opportunities for grand-scale romantic fulfilment, and to which the isolated individual can only offer the response of negation. Not even revolutionary politics can provide a reassuring philosophy. How can mass action ever wipe out the trapped echoes of engrammatic despair? The hypersensitive John Andrews, when he tries to explain his desertion, voices only fatalistic apathy.

"It seems to me... that human society has always been that, and perhaps will be always that: organizations growing and stifling individuals, and individuals revolting hopelessly against them, and at last forming new societies to crush the old societies and becoming slaves again in their turn..."<sup>47</sup>

To which Genevieve quite naturally replies "I thought you were a socialist". But in fact there is nothing in Andrews' experience that could possibly give



him grounds for belief in socialism, other than as a source for quasi-poetic slogans. The "system is not simply the gearing-up for emergency conditions of an exploitative society for which there may be social remedies. The system is life itself, modified by the particular course of social development but always hostile to freedom, justice and hope.

As David Sanders writes "(Andrews') wound has no effect comparable to the mortar explosion at Fossalta del Piave; it is chiefly a transitional device as the novel suddenly becomes centred about its artistic hero".<sup>48</sup> In a word, it is not traumatic, and John Andrews' heroism, though authentic, is in the last analysis unrelated to its context. There is brutality and oppression in the army, but more often than not, there is pointlessness, irritation and inefficiency. Heroism becomes a living objective when it is transcendent; when there is nothing to transcend it becomes stagey or comic. It is never quite so in Andrews' case: with at least one half of his mind he lives the part of the Byronic antinomian so intensely that his destruction is awesome. However, Dos Passos is moving in a different direction from Hemingway. He cannot accept the world as a testing-ground for honour and courage, where a man can be destroyed without being defeated. What he does see is "a context of pain, a context created by hundreds of personal pains - getting sick at the stomach, the morning after, being disillusioned with parents or children, mean family quarrels, ulcers, loneliness, the wasting of a talent, incurable diseases, garbage cans in alleys, the smell of unwashed bodies."<sup>49</sup>

In this accurate description of the Dos Passos understanding of the engrammatic quality of life can be discerned the basis of his rejection of heroism. How does one overcome such heartaches and natural shocks? If at all, by aspirin, resignation, or oblivion. Certainly not by dramatic triumphs of machismo. The war itself lends enough dramatic resonance to Andrews' struggle to ensure that his solution carries the flavour of an existential coup de main. Nevertheless, Andrews is the last Dos Passos protagonist who can reasonably be called heroic, as Hemingway would understand



the term. Increasingly, the author's aim will be to register the commonplace and inevitable assault on human organisms of the numerous small pangs that together abrade what aspiration men begin life with - not to explain them or offer a cure, but to face them with unflinching realism.

In order to survey his material in this fashion, Dos Passos has to broaden its scope. The individual consciousness as the centre of attention is required by stories of individual prowess, where it deepens and concentrates the effect of the hero's personal contest. In choosing to portray engrammatically and with an abundance of familiar detail the ubiquity of failure and the ordinariness of pain, Dos Passos introduces the "common man" - in all his incarnations - into his work. Common people, such as Whitey in Streets of Night, the Italian labourers who fascinate Nan, the "muckers" imagined by young Herf in Manhattan Transfer, cease to appear as enigmatic ghosts. In Three Soldiers Chrisfield and Fuselli represent the American masses who are obliged to make an adaptation to the demands of the military machine. They are not introspective, "artistic", or self-torturing like John Andrews and they are not pictured with the same complexity of inner life. Both have prepared schemes of adjustment to the army naively based on their experience of civilian life, but in each case the forces operating against successful adjustment are overwhelming. The army is far from being a perfect analogue of either business or arable farming. It has an overriding will and purpose of its own, not altogether responsive to human control even at the high levels of command and inflexibly unresponsive to the needs of the enlisted man. Both Chrisfield and Fuselli are failures by the army's standards, though they actually have - at least in the beginning - no principled quarrel with it, and given more reasonable chances might even do well in it.

Instead, they are smashed by the machine, forced to assume roles that fill them with misery and shame, war casualties in the strictest sense. Their ordeal reveals a social truth: when civil society grants exceptional powers to the army on which it relies for protection, it effectively subordinates itself



to the army and abolishes the reality of democratic government while hysterically flourishing the clichés of democratic theory. What this critical measure practically means for the mass of men is told in the histories of Chrisfield and Fuselli. Either they accustom themselves to the absolute loss of their own humanity or they fall and are crushed beneath the wheels. In Chrisfield there are elements of the old populist "man with the hoe", the rural slave abused by a cruel master. If his awareness could be adequately aroused, he would be the potential unsung hero of the revolution, as Andrews recognises when he tells Chrisfield that "It's you that it matters to kill".<sup>50</sup> But Chrisfield, for all his basic humanity, is not the type of man to seek revolutionary answers. Fuselli, the model of the myth-swallowing city underdog Dos Passos was to analyse more closely in Manhattan Transfer and other novels, complains that the army will never give him a chance to rise and prove himself; but his own personality, so snivellingly concentrated on blunt self-advancement at whatever cost to his dignity as a man, catches on the mechanism. Individualistic in a narrow and ignorant way, he has no natural place either in the stern hierarchical structure of the service or among the broad, free fellowship of men who accept each other as comrades and equals. Both are statuesque figures, included for their representative value: the farm boy whose innocence can never square with an industrialised society and the mystified slave who donates his loyalty to a system that preaches social mobility yet maintains the hegemony of a master class.

Fuselli is most prominent during the book's first two sections, when John Andrews has not yet emerged as the centre of interest. From California, very much an "average" man, he is almost a perfect picture of the Menckonian "boob". Uneducated and unreflective, his approach to the life of an enlisted man is coloured by unreality, since he has always accepted the officially propagated attitudes. Indeed, he is made to feel "important, truculent" by the ritual of the draft board; he is obsessed with the need to be "careful not to do anything... wrong"<sup>51</sup>: and he is genuinely shocked by the unconscious protest his



mind makes in a dream in which he has assaulted an officer and broken out of jail. Fuselli obsequiously strives, despite the bewildering changes in his routine and the difficulty of perceiving exactly what is required of him to make a rewarding adjustment. Impressionable and stupid, he sinks himself into the group personality, lives the lying fantasies of the anti-German propaganda movies, and yet manages partly to inhabit a civilian world of individual opportunity, where the lure of self-advancement is still present.

"Gee," he said to himself, "this war's a lucky thing for me. I might have been in the R.C. Vicker Company's store for five years an' never got a raise. An' here in the army I got a chance to do almost anything."<sup>52</sup>

Fuselli never sees action, though he certainly knows the fear of death during his voyage to France. His war, like Andrews' and Chrisfield's, is principally a behind-the-lines process of alienation, discomfort and enforced obedience to pettifogging rules. Though humiliated almost to revolt by the casual despotism of the officers, he never finds the will or energy to strike back. His fear of getting "in bad" is deep rooted: at the core of his ingrained feelings of social inferiority lies the willing slave's futile but never abandoned hopes of "getting on".

Something of the gesture with which the lieutenant drew on his gloves caught in the mind of Fuselli. He had seen people making gestures like that in the movies, stout dignified people in evening suits. The president of the company that owned the optical goods store, where he had worked, at home in Frisco, had something of that gesture about him.

And he pictured himself drawing on a pair of gloves that way, importantly, finger by finger, with a little wave of self-satisfaction when the gesture was completed...<sup>53</sup>

He has set his mind on a corporalship - a low enough distinction, but one which is constantly to elude him. Meanwhile, he oscillates between a grinding despair at being trapped in an institution that seems to conspire against his ambitions and a sense of excitement and importance at the thought of being given a chance to rise. As an accompaniment to camp life, there are the intermittent pleasures of the soldier posted abroad - talk, alcohol, women, the foci for adolescent



dreams and sensuality. In these matters the great hero of the bistros and apostle of "s'en foutisme" is Dan Cohan. Cohan, like Tom Randolph in One Man's Initiation, somehow triumphs over circumstances by being breezily natural and not worrying. He does worry Fuselli, though: Cohan's irreverence strikes Fuselli with the fear that it "might get him in wrong". Even to sex Fuselli brings his solemn and illusory expectations of self-improvement. He takes his romance with Yvonne especially seriously because it becomes infused with something more than physical gratification: it is laden with prospects of soothing domesticity in a grand house with ornate cornices, like the one he has seen at Fontainebleau. Tragically divided between the personal ethic he has accepted before his conscription and the actuality of a collectively disciplined life, he innocently panders his girl to the top sergeant. Immediately afterwards, his modest ambition to make corporal is ruined by the return of the Red Sox outfielder from hospital. Such blows are too heavy even for Fuselli, and his attitude to military life is conclusively altered. Previously a blend of fear, respect, indoctrination and the desire to make good, it now becomes the grudging acquiescence of the broken spirit, in which fear and resentment predominate.

All the flood of bitterness that had been collecting in his spirit seethed to the surface. They had not treated him right. He felt full of hopeless anger against this vast tread ill to which he was bound... He felt he couldn't go on, yet he knew that he must and would go on, that there was no stopping, that his feet would go on beating in time to the steps of the treadmill.<sup>54</sup>

And this is a truth which the repeated failure of his absurd hopes has made him realise. Although his faith is momentarily restored by his transfer to the camp stores when the rest of his company leaves for the front, his disillusion is sealed at the end of section two, "The Metal Cools". Made to perform tedious donkeywork, he finds himself a witness to the death of the boy soldier Stockton. Fuselli has decided Stockton, who cannot raise himself from the bed, is "crazy" for disobeying orders. A lieutenant is called, and orders that court-martial papers be drawn up. But Stockton is dead, and the



victory of organised insanity over every kind of human principle is clear.

Fuselli's fate is determined for him: his individualism, or at least his belief in the individual's freedom to rise by initiative and loyalty, is powerless against external forces. Chrisfield too, though a contrasting specimen, suffers a parallel victimisation. He is a Hoosier farm boy, unlettered, brave and practical, and his rural American qualities are stressed by association with the novel's pastoral imagery, such as the "smells of moist fields and of manure from fresh-sowed patches and of cows and pasture lands coming into flower".<sup>55</sup> Chrisfield is attracted by the view, which offers to his relatively simple make-up a pattern of familiar tasks. He is attuned to a basic rhythm, the flow of agrarian life. In springtime he sows, at harvest-time he reaps, and when his government announces that the killing-time has arrived he puts on his uniform and shoulders a gun. Chrisfield accepts the naturalness of taking life, but he finally cannot adopt the posture of unquestioning submission demanded by the military juggernaut. The army corrupts him, by accentuating his killer instinct and using it for purposes that cannot be justified by regular imperatives of survival, and then makes him declare himself an outlaw. Unlike the lumpen-proletarian Fuselli, Chrisfield really has exercised self-reliance, and to push him too far is to make him strike back with instinctive savagery.

Though he is not naturally articulate, Chrisfield quickly learns to understand the conditions of alienation. Stalking through the forest on a reconnaissance mission which he subsequently relates to John Andrews alone, he is filled with terror as his helmet is tweaked off by a branch. "'Ah'll make them pay for that,' he muttered between clenched teeth".<sup>56</sup> Shortly afterwards he discovers the corpse of a German soldier who has shot himself, and the hideously mutilated body begins to haunt his dreams. This experience is crucial for Chrisfield. A pioneer type, he is not squeamish, but large-scale political murder cannot share the justification and the relation to a natural world-order



as the organic struggles of life. The artificial character of army regulations is highlighted for him by the development of a feud with Anderson, who plays it all by the book others have written for him and who is the born antagonist of men like Chrisfield. This is a quarrel much more real to him than the conflicts of nations. Chrisfield likes to feel solidarity with his fellow-men, and he likes to conduct disputes on an informal man-to-man basis, which arbitrary divisions of rank make impossible. But Chrisfield's opportunity comes: during an infantry battle, Anderson is wounded. He begs a drink of water from Chrisfield; once it has been given, he reverts to the tone of the bullying officer. Chrisfield, scarcely thinking what he is about to do pulls a grenade from his pocket and kills his enemy. There is no guilt, no remorse.

Chrisfield looked straight ahead of him. He did not feel lonely any more now that he was marching in ranks again. His feet beat the ground in time with other feet. He would not have to think whether to go to the right or to the left. He would do as the others did.<sup>57</sup>

But this assurance is purely temporary. Like most men, Chrisfield seeks both community and identity, but the army denies him both. In its clutch, men are both isolated and anonymous. The "treadmill" that broke Fuselli will do its work on Chrisfield. His need to be part of a group is quite foreign to the jingoistic and false togetherness whipped up by the 'Y' men, with their repulsive mixture of soft soap and nationalistic brainwashing. Chrisfield may prefer to march with men who speak his language and share his culture, but he was effectively willing to perform the work of the German army in settling his score with Anderson. He is not "defeatist", and would never understand the political case for pacifism and desertion that appeals intellectually to John Andrews, but there are limits to his tolerance of authority. Unlike the poor Fuselli, he does "get on" with his fellows; and unlike Fuselli, he "gets ahead" by achieving promotion - the only one of the protagonists to do so. However, the individual and collective urges working upon him set up a conflict that drives him to desert. Though he feels no personal regret at



at having killed Anderson, he fears institutional punishment if he is exposed, and the idea that exposure is near makes up his mind.

Chrisfield is reduced to living in hiding in a huge capital city, performing casual work in the market for a few francs, unsure of his future and half-wishing - as he tells Andrews - that he could reinstate himself. But as Andrews points out to Al, the army "is not the sort of thing a man can make good in".<sup>58</sup> Chrisfield is the kind of man who, given respect and responsibility, might have made a good combat soldier, just as Fuselli might have made an efficient orderly or clerk. Their waste as human material illustrates the blindness of the system that cannot find a suitable corporate place for each individual. Both in the end are defeated: Chrisfield in his Paris rathole, Fuselli in the labour battalion, where he has been sent for contracting V.D.

Chrisfield and Fuselli stand for urban and agrarian man in the novel's scheme - are in fact rather schematically drawn, without the individualised perceptions accorded to John Andrews. The partial degree of accommodation each achieves, and their ultimate failure or refusal to come to terms with army life as it actually exists, mirror the traditional aims and beliefs of their backgrounds. They are not existential figures, they are deliberately broad types whose careers are more or less socially determined. Fuselli is a particular city type, the proletarian victim of "false consciousness" who has accepted the American opportunity gospel and who is frustrated by his gradual awareness that he will not be allowed to "make good". The army is even more rigid and hierarchical than civilian society. Chrisfield, a midwesterner, stoic and heroic, has lived by the harmonious currents of nature; his thinking is limited by the very simplicity that makes him likeable. His mental life is elementary, and he is at a loss when removed from his native environment to a strange and hostile one. Amid a disturbing and disorienting setting they lose their paths, and their failure is accentuated by the irony that, unlike John Andrews, they have no reasoned philosophy to explain their "getting in wrong" - or to defend it.



Though Chrisfield and Fuselli to some extent throw Andrews into relief, they usually appear to be characters in a different kind of book. Their destruction is conceived in semi-allegorical terms, as a revelation of how society and history have betrayed the small people who cannot cope with change or deceit. The realistic detail surrounding them never has the conviction of the sense-data that is refracted through John Andrews' sophisticated perceptions, and as subordinate characters they are not on the same plan as he. What they share with him, though it is not integrated as a literary value, is the impotence and despair of the hopeless case. Though there is no decent human being in the novel above the rank of corporal, and though Dos Passos concentrates on the experience of the ordinary infantryman, he does not infuse his creations with any substantial degree of the invincible heroism of the common man.

For this reason, it is hard to share Hemingway's view that Three Soldiers was "written under the influence of Barbusse".<sup>59</sup> Three Soldiers mingles a realistic treatment of war with lyrical interludes and with explorations of the consciousness of John Andrews, the alienated intellectual. Its major strength though, lies in its use of the conditions of service life as a metaphor for the ever-present doom of modern existence: the dull heartache, the niggling oppressions, the difficulty of forming positive convictions. The officer-system and the barbarous enforcement of discipline provide a marginal opportunity for heroism, but none for escape or victory. Andrews' desertion is therefore almost an acte gratuite, and carries no further implications than the expression of his own denial of the forces that have denied him. Even as a non-social act, it has attenuated value. "A Hemingway character can take matters into his own hands, when he has seen violence and suffering enough, and make a private peace - there is always a Catherine Barkley and a retreat in Switzerland. He has at least retained the power to act... Andrews has nothing left but the concentration of his rage."<sup>60</sup>



Or the thin wine of his despair, for Andrews at the last is apathetic and resigned. Andrews' mind wavers and fluctuates, or is paralysed: the artist's consciousness, theoretically capable of taking in so much of life and reducing it to harmony by understanding it, is overcome by the brute facts of experience. The sentence from Stendhal which Dos Passos chose as the epigraph for his novel stresses the plangency of this opposition: "Les contemporains qui souffrent de certaines choses ne peuvent s'en souvenir qu'avec une horreur qui paralyse tout autre plaisir, même celui de lire un conte".<sup>61</sup> Yet it would not be fair to dismiss Andrews as a sensitive soul badly treated by a wicked world: he is an author's self-image, true, but he is likely to be a reader's self-image as well especially for the intellectually-minded reader. There are many moments when the presentment of his character is flawed by self-pity or by verbal extravagance, but the pain and humiliation he suffers are authentic, and few could be expected to face them with absolute heroism. The futility of his desertion matches the futility of the "machine" he seeks to evade, but there is no reason to believe acquiescence is either preferable or possible.

Dos Passos' two "war books" offer evidence of the progressive continuity of his subject matter and of a technique gradually becoming adapted to the demands of a life-view. However much the war served as a catalyst for this process he does not, as does Hemingway, become fixated as a novelist of action. Like Cummings, he is an accidental casualty; but he is not a celebrant. The sympathetic neutrality he exhibits towards most of his creations is not informed by a creed of hope, either political or artistic.

... the boy who thought he was going to be a tramp turns out a nearsighted middleclass intellectual (or a tramp; it's as bad either way). Professional deformations set in; the freeswimming young oyster fastens to the rock and grows a shell. What it amounts to is this: our beds have made us and the acutest action we can take is sit up on the edge of them and look around and think. They are our beds till we die.<sup>62</sup>

Both hindsight and prophecy, this comment from the author's introduction to the Modern Library edition of Three Soldiers amply confirms the practice of the young novelist. His job was to "tell the tale", and in telling it he makes



little allowance for the promise of regeneration by social change. Nor has he distorted his subject by imposing on it a purely literary undergraduate despair. The immaturity of One Man's Initiation and Three Soldiers springs not from the vision embodied in them but from the technical limitations which, in Manhattan Transfer, are to be resourcefully overcome. The vision of despair belongs rightly and naturally to the story, in which the helplessness of the individual twisting in discomfort on the "bed" that makes him is abundantly proved. That this vision is not the product of emergency conditions only but a necessary consequence of the tension and contradictions of twentieth-century civilisation it will be the task of other novels to expound.



### CHAPTER III

#### MANHATTAN TRANSFER: BROWNIAN MOTION.

In his published fiction up to 1925, Dos Passos had seemed still to be an apprentice; he was a sensitive recorder of experience rather than an artist complete, and the human values his writing tried to express were clustered around self-images too intimately precious to lend the novels in which they appeared the compelling authority of distance and objectivity. This is not to say that no development appears. The first book, so bleedingly raw in its depiction of battlefield shock and so rhetorically diffuse in its abstractions from that experience, barely qualifies as a novel. It is more like the diary or sketchbook of a horrified spectator - a spectator so young, impressionable and intellectually-minded that he seems divided between warning the world and reassuring himself. Irresistibly, he is forced into rebellion. This rebellion, though, is a rebellion of the mind and sensibility. It cannot be maturely absorbed as a practical conviction, a conviction, that is, which derives from traumatic disillusion the energy and will for a programme of action. Yet the essence of Martin Howe's involvement in the war is disillusion on the scale of a major personal crisis, of which the true nature is half-recognised in the author's prefaces to subsequent editions of One Man's Initiation. In 1945 Dos Passos wrote that "To us, the European war of 1914-18 seemed a horrible monstrosity... the boys who are fighting this present war drank in the brutalities of European politics with their breakfast coffee";<sup>1</sup> in 1968, anxious perhaps to disavow his younger self in the light of a more recent conversion, he added: "We were young hotheads. We took to shouting all the war-cries of the Marxist dogma."<sup>2</sup> The sheer barbarity of warfare, for which the American initiate was unprepared, and the sentimental reaction to it, peer out from the sceptical words of the middle-aged writer. Martin Howe did not go to France without preconceptions. He listens with fascination and sympathy to the debates of the French radicals. He becomes, by the novel's end, neither a case-hardened warrior nor a seriously committed socialist but a traumatised



youth whose emotional resources of pity and indignation have been touched by an encounter with bloodshed, waste and muddle.

The next incarnation of the Dos Passos hero, however, definitely revolts and is definitely defeated. John Andrews' desertion is a volitional act. It is ultimately futile - symbolic and self-sacrificial - but it does offer a gesture of defiance to the army machine which has affronted his sense and misused his less reflective comrades. It raises the question of justice, the need for an alternative system of justice to the army's degrading and remorseless discipline. What such a system could be is never adequately investigated, chiefly because Andrews has to struggle with parallel conflicts. As a would-be composer of symphonic music, he is an eccentric and would remain eccentric even in peacetime society. He suffers from contrary impulses to submerge himself in the mass of mankind and to shine as a heroic creator. The niggling enforced privations of military life interrupt his epicurean dreams. His intended solution to his manifold difficulties, the composition of a symphony to be titled "On the Soul and Body of John Brown" - a means, apparently, of radicalising his vocation - borders on the absurd. Yet Andrews does go one step beyond Martin Howe: he does not treat the war itself purely as subject-matter for his artist's instinct, he takes a personal stand, albeit a confused and unsatisfactory one, and he suffers the penalty. The timeliness of its initial publication meant that Three Soldiers was received as a "war book", to be praised or denounced according to its correspondence with official or radical attitudes on the war.<sup>3</sup> It is due to this classification as much as to its literary defects that Three Soldiers is seldom viewed as a statement of the besetting problems of self-discovery in modern life - a theme to which the fact of total war is relevant, but which should not be obscured by its setting.

Streets of Night is a loose link in the canon, but since it was published after Three Soldiers and Dos Passos therefore had an opportunity to (and was probably obliged to) revise it for publication,<sup>it</sup> may be taken as in



some measure embodying the author's sensibility immediately before Manhattan Transfer. In fact, many passages have a clarity and strength equal or superior to much of the writing in the war novels. It is a spoilt but not altogether "banal"<sup>4</sup> novel. Despite the artistic and emotional immaturity, the cheaply dramatic effects and slender characterisation and the failure to realise a setting as imaginatively telling as that of warfare, Streets of Night is thematically serious. It begins with a donnee, a predicated situation, and follows it to a credible outcome. Three young Bostonians fail to make necessary life-adjustments; two languish in guilt and fear; one kills himself. Wenny is a perfectly recognisable confrère of Howe and Andrews - trapped, hypersensitive, a frustrated rebel - and his choice of suicide has the merit of conclusiveness. He, too, is a victim of that fatal division between an inarticulate dream of the beautiful life (creative, inspiring) and the call to action (dutiful, self-abnegatory). In his case, too, every interior tension is reinforced by pressure from without and every hesitant advance to freedom is vitiated by guilt and loneliness. He remains, of course, adolescent; but the central defect of the novel lies not in its use of an adolescent hero - it lies in a failure of perspective. Like Howe and Andrews, Wenny is too nakedly the author's persona. In their case, the failure was mitigated by a stimulating profusion of sharply rendered incident. In his, it is unrelieved. And if Wenny is too raw, too undigested artistically, Fanshaw and Nan are pale, over-schematized and lifeless. What Dos Passos' concerns as a novelist demanded was a moderation of these extremes, providing a sufficiency of psychological credibility with a degree of representative significance. Only by such means can the reader hold in his awareness the blend of social and personal forces that together establish the limits of freedom. Manhattan Transfer is a bold attempt to formulate such a method.

Here, in fact, is the first thorough prose demonstration of the techniques to be associated with John Dos Passos - techniques which were treated by early reviewers for their novelty value rather than for their suitability to the aims which the author had set himself. Continuous-narrative



naturalism is abandoned. Replacing it comes a method both jarring and flexible, alternating sections of character life-history with prose-poetic epigraphs, saturnine vignettes and interior monologues. Manhattan Transfer takes place in a crowded city on a crowded planet, though it is by no means an exercise in American "unanimisme".<sup>5</sup> The individual protagonist is viewed in a context of modern urban institutions and representative types, but he is not extinct as a focus of sympathetic attention - indeed, he gains in significance from the author's careful regulation of the relative distances at which characters are seen. Moreover, Dos Passos is no longer writing the novel of pure stasis or congestion - energy contained or destructively turned inward. Motion is the key to Manhattan Transfer, and it is largely in order to convey the sense of motion - in space, in historical time, in consciousness - that the author has made his synthesis of technical innovations. But this movement never implies the possibility of hope. It is not dialectical, it heads toward no regenerating goal, it is interpreted into no pattern except that of the rush and impact of separate self-interested forces at play, directed and determined by the broad impersonal mechanisms of a giant twentieth-century metropolis. Made for man's convenience, the city reinforces the helplessness of the human will.

The movement of Manhattan Transfer, in fact, might be compared to "Brownian Motion", the irregular jostling of small particles suspended in a gas or liquid, full of backtrackings and collisions, seemingly random but obeying the physical rules of matter. The characters of the novel, like the ball-bearings in the official model of Brownian Motion, have no sense of explanation for their conduct or their fates. Hence the fund of blindly providential accounts of human destiny - or "the peculiar predominance of luck in human affairs", as Joe Harland phrases it. The personal will, a distinct but spasmodically effective quality in Dos Passos' previous fiction, dwindles to a gnawing itch for economic success or consumes itself in vain self-reproaches. Where before there had been a primary stress on the position of the rebel trying to found his struggle on personally acquired values, now the



frame is largely filled by the plight of the many who can never shake off their conditioning. There is a new effort to objectify situations by broadening the scope of the subject-matter as a whole: twenty-five years, a city of millions. The characters are defined for the reader by their being placed in an arena of probabilities - whatever happens to them is them. The urban accidents with which the book is filled are often genuinely accidental in the sense that nobody can be found to bear direct responsibility for them. They are latent in the dynamism of New York. Is the reader to sympathise? Can he sympathise with the pygmy humans overawed and smashed by monstrous machinery full of undirected energy, presented as an unvarnished fact like the Brownian model, observable but not comprehensible and supplied only with the information that this is how it happens to behave?

It is in this respect that the importance of the protagonist appears. For Manhattan Transfer is not a work simply based on the "collective" formula. It is true that most of the characters are drawn in a deliberately restricted fashion: well-sketched, cleverly chosen, without extensive inner life but admirably suited to the purpose of showing typicality. They cannot exhaust the possible range of experience in a big city, but taken together they credibly stand for enough of that experience. Yet Jimmy Herf and Elaine Thatcher are not drawn to this scale - or rather, they are not shown in the same focus. On the face of it, Herf is an unsettling influence, the unassimilated residue of Howe/Andrews/Wenny, a sensitive and self-pitying young man out of place in the city and the novel; and the proto-Herf who appears in one of Dos Passos' rare short stories probably would be.

This story - "July" - appeared in the Transatlantic Review about fifteen months before the publication of Manhattan Transfer.<sup>6</sup> "July" owes something to Sherwood Anderson. It takes place in Northern Virginia, and although it features some of the ultra-respectable relations associated with Herf in the novel, it concentrates chiefly on the confused romantic sensations of the adolescent boy. "In Egypt, Jimmy was thinking, there were no buggies;



the rowers sang as they pulled on the long sweeps of the dahabieh."<sup>7</sup> Such passages are familiar from the early writing of Dos Passos - the pagan nostalgia of Fanshaw McDougan, the pre-industrial itch that animated long sections of Rosinante to the Road Again. In "July", though, these sickened fantasies, childish and literary, are framed by the running-off together of Ole Man Oatley, the neighbourhood stud, and the preacher's wife, who has poured out her suppressed longings to young Jimmy with a stern caution not to repeat them. This affair of the priapic Oatley with Mrs. Chadwick - who, like Cassie in Manhattan Transfer, has "craved beautiful things all my life, beautiful thoughts, beautiful friends",<sup>8</sup> seems likely to disillusion both parties. Jimmy, however, does not perceive this. He assists the lovers with a warning as they head for the Potomac bridge, chased by an angry posse. They have lived what he can only taste at the level of vicarious fantasy. Jimmy has to return to the household of Uncle Jeff and Aunt Emily, a temple of puritan respectability where "romance" is harshly judged by the imperatives of Christian conformity and where "the fried chicken and spinach and potatoes were ashes in his mouth".<sup>9</sup> Dos Passos does not mean that Aunt Emily has burnt the dinner, but there is little doubt that Jimmy has suffered physically. At seventeen he inhabits a Freudian jungle of which the lushly exotic blooms, with their decadent shapes and odours, mimic the forbidden fruit of sexual passion. Disturbances ensue - "a sick feeling in the throat",<sup>10</sup> "the blood stung in his eyes",<sup>11</sup> "a sharp pain in the forehead",<sup>12</sup> and "he could hear nothing but the pumping of his blood".<sup>13</sup> After a guilty sex-dream ("Her breasts were baked apples shrivelled to bursting... He was the god Ptah. It was red. It was Egypt".<sup>14</sup>) he wakes up "trembling and sick".<sup>15</sup>

"July", a magazine story, gives no opportunity for Jimmy Herf to develop: it concludes with his "epiphany". But its hero is the recognizable kin of the even younger Herf who, in Chapter III of Manhattan Transfer, disembarks at New York with his "Muddy" on Independence Day. Though this boy has sentimental impulse to kiss the ground of his native land, his background is



cosmopolitan. The stuffed-shirt commercial mores of urban America, of which his Merivale cousins are the exemplars, are foreign and strange. He is shy, awkward, and mother-eclipsed, and he is due to live in exile at the Ritz. From his first appearance, this anguished and lonely figure - who becomes, with Ellen, a foreground figure and unifying personal history of the novel - is portrayed with greater detail and urgency than the city's human detritus. His arrival is signalled by a Joycean closeness of sensation in the prose - a closeness which binds the reader's awareness to Jimmy's. "On deck it's damp and shivery in the dawn. The ship's rail is wet when you put your hand on it."<sup>16</sup> Jimmy comes "home" to a huge metropolis of which he knows as little at firsthand as the fugitive Bud Korpenning. The strangeness and excitement he senses arouse feelings comparable to the brain-nausea of "July". "His legs ached as if they'd fall off, and when he closed his eyes he was speeding through flaming blackness on a red fire-engine that shot fire and sparks and coloured balls out of its tail."<sup>17</sup> Fires and fire-engines are the central unifying metaphors of Manhattan Transfer. They symbolise the threat of apocalyptic destruction, and the panicky and unavailing human efforts to avert it. Even the harmless firecrackers of the Fourth of July celebrations are, to Jimmy, a feverish menace. "Freedom" and "independence" cannot be sustaining realities for him.

The Ritz proves to be the enclosed pinnacle of an endlessly stratified society, a kind of luxury prison. It is here that Jimmy becomes aware of the forces of base vitality, as he gazes from the window of his mother's suite.

Below him a maid in a white cap leaned out of a window and talked to one of the furnace-men who stood looking at her with his bare grimy arms crossed over his chest. Jimmy strained his ears to hear what they were saying; to be dirty and handle coal all day and have grease in your hair and up to your armpits.<sup>18</sup>

Here is privilege's view of the "muckers", an image which has occurred previously in Dos Passos' writing - in Streets of Night, when Nan reflected how the floors of her own apartment house corresponded to the general social divisions of Boston. It is an interesting clue to the manner in which



Dos Passos approaches his material, since it is an essentially apolitical image. "Capitalist society", which Dos Passos has often been thought to deal with as a critic and diagnostician, is treated like a bourgeois family house, with its elegant drawingrooms and its dark "below stairs" regions. This is a formal figure of hierarchy, giving little true sense of the complexity of financial and productive relationships. The reader, like Herf, can never strain his ears sufficiently to catch the talk of the common people. They are a mystery, not a class to be liberated but an aggregation of tangible spirits, both frightening and glamorous. And all around the block an identical miscellany of objects persists - "A telegraph office, dry-goods stores, a dyers and cleaners, a Chinese laundry sending out a scorched mysterious smell."<sup>19</sup> This is a list, rather than a significant selection, but a list made valuable in its alienating blankness. The objects are indeed not contemplated "for the being that is theirs". They are drawn with the whirlpool of Jimmy Herf's sensibility, a sensibility in which the reader must also participate. New York can only appear whole if the synoptic perspective is matched by a view from within a separate consciousness.

In this way, and by acting as a regular (though discontinuous) presence in the story, Herf moderates the objective character of the passages from which he and Elaine are absent. There are no Jamesian depths to him, and he is largely incapable of development as a person, but as a character - depicted in a series of separate "takes" - he is able to illuminate the ubiquity of failure. As a boy, he resembles the Herf of "July", the young outsider plagued by psychosomatic upsets. On a diet of chocolate creams and suggestive encyclopaedia entries ("The Queen of the White Slaves"<sup>20</sup>) he falls asleep, and wakes to find his mother dying of thrombosis. At this point he is released into isolation, and the surge of hopelessness that fills his mind is brilliantly rendered in a passage of exceptional intensity: the solitary boy in the great impersonal hotel squashes a fly on the window-pane; memories and fears of school invade his mind; he recalls his scarcely-known



father. Jimmy's rootlessness and his inadequacy to be a positive, masculine, self-sufficient person are underlined by the intercut contrasts with the domestic life of the Merivales. These are the smarter side of the family, cocooned (as in "July") in a suffocating bourgeois domesticity. They had frowned on "poor Aunt Lily's" itinerant, unsettled existence. They are wealthy: "There were pillars of pink marble in the lower hall of Aunt Emily's apartment-house, and the elevator-boy wore a chocolate livery with brass buttons, and the elevator was square and decorated with mirrors".<sup>21</sup> But they, too, have skeletons in the cupboard. Into their cosy and contented world stumbles the family outcast, Joe Harland, the black-sheep alcoholic. He is a former speculator fallen on evil times and rewarded for his failure by ostracism and icy embarrassment. Jimmy, too, disgraces himself with a faux pas and rushes off to the "familiar crimson stairs of the Ritz".<sup>22</sup> Jimmy's association with Harland is evident, though established implicitly through his social error committed while playing a financial parlour-game. The Merivales become the supreme example of what he must avoid or reject if he is to realise his own nature - in the first instance because their pharasaical self-assurance is intimidating (like that of the school bullies who had persecuted him) and later because he senses that there are worthier principles to be followed. But Jimmy has to discover the limitations of merely rejecting uncongenial alternatives - and those limitations virtually coincide with the innate restrictions on freedom of choice.

Little more is learned of Herf's childhood - in the data given,- there is sufficient opportunity to understand the tendencies and influences with which he will later try to come to terms. He next appears at the beginning of Chapter V, shortly before the death of Bud Korpenning. Bud had killed his tyrannical father, and by coming to New York had punished himself more terribly than could the law, which, despite his fears, never tracks him down. Jimmy has recently attended his mother's funeral: the mood is lyrical and vernal.

Little worms of May were writhing in his blood... There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from



another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead... I'm so tired of violets / Take them all away... He walked faster. The blood flowed full and hot in his veins. The flaked clouds were melting into rose-coloured foam. He could hear his steps on the warm macadam. At a cross-road the sun glinted on the sticky pointed buds of a beech sapling. Opposite a sign read YONKERS. In the middle of the road teetered a dented tomato can. Kicking it hard in front of him he walked on.<sup>23</sup>

The context makes clear that this is Jimmy's farewell to childhood. The sense of liberation by his mother's death, of no longer being a child in a cot caressed by "a hand in a trailing lace-filled sleeve"<sup>24</sup> bursts through in a realisation of the simple warmth and naturalness of life. It is a fragmented moment, a pure moment unable to be savoured as the process of time sweeps one past it, and Dos Passos presents it as a blend of varied elements. It is conveyed with great freshness and a live sense of composition, relating Herf's carnal musings with the surrounding sense-data and culminating in the spontaneous gesture of a kick at a tin can. Like much of Manhattan Transfer, it could be rendered cinematically. The sensuous immediacy of the situation calls for no psychological investigations. Here is a young hero obliged to grow up fast and struggle for his independence under the shock of privation and loss - and at this point ready to make that effort.

The fade-out in medium shot located Jimmy for us when we consider what has gone before and what follows. This passage marks the extinction of the Herf character taken over from the magazine story. The "July" character, the sensitive filament, can no longer act as a satisfying centre of interest for a novel which, in its last two sections, surveys the hectic and complicated involvement of its characters with a variety of urgent difficulties. Herf's immediate problem is worldly - the problem of earning a living - and for a discussion of it he meets his uncle at the Metropolitan Club. Here, the atmosphere is well captured by bare description. "Jimmy Herf sits opposite Uncle Jeff. Each has before him on a blue plate a chop, a baked potato, a little mound of peas and a sprig of parsley."<sup>25</sup> Merivale plans to arrange a future for his nephew that will draw him into the family tradition of work, prosperity and humbug. He offers his own definition of manhood - a definition



based on the philistine success-credo; Jimmy unable or unwilling to contradict him, "stammers weakly "Whatever you say, Uncle Jeff'".<sup>26</sup> Yet as he leaves he is suddenly confronted with a vision of the city's inhabitants "fed in two endless tapes through the revolving doors",<sup>27</sup> victims of the hustle and pressure of business life. He foresees "the revolving doors grinding out his years like sausage meat".<sup>28</sup> At this instant, either through "some perverse streak"<sup>29</sup> or by an impulsive volitional somersault, Jimmy changes his mind, and almost in the words of Huck Finn renounces his "very sensible decision"<sup>30</sup> to accept the career mapped out for him by his uncle. "Uncle Jeff and his office can go plumb to hell".<sup>31</sup>

Here is indeed a new Jimmy Herf, a sixteen-year-old capable of taking sudden decisions, brushing aside prudence, asserting himself against the formidable pressure of conformism and "common sense". One would not have expected from the younger Herf this kind of strength: the courage to fight and throw away tradition, to make a fresh start on the basis of individual fulfilment, like Stephen Daedalus. Herf had always been an other-directed person whose own febrile yearnings clotted up inside him to cause circulatory trouble. And it is true that his stand is never as decisive as he wishes it to be. Later he is forced to admit that "Uncle Jeff keeps getting me jobs",<sup>32</sup> and he falls into circles of yellow journalism as bitterly futile and negative as the revolving doors of banking. Jimmy Herf's story in Manhattan Transfer signifies the end of Dos Passos' dream of the romantic hero who tries to assert himself and his identity against an overwhelming current of opposition and who, if he fails in the end to win, immolates himself in an existential tragedy that gives meaning to his rebellion. What was true of the earlier protagonists - that they guarded their integrity so painfully from the encroachments of the world that they would face death or imprisonment rather than surrender it - is no longer true of Jimmy Herf. Seemingly, the one-eyed man in the blind circle of determinism, he is in practice no freer to break out than Bud, Gus McNiel, Stanwood Emery or the other faces in the crowd. By



showing at some length and in some detail the degeneration of a gifted and perceptive young man, the author spotlights with a dual focus the heartlessly random universality of Brownian Motion.

If the tendency of Manhattan Transfer is pessimistic, however, the method and style of Books II and III are notable for the energy and colour with which Dos Passos paints his portrait of a city vibrant with misdirected movement. Herf, after an intermission of some years, reappears as an aimless young man with "pink attitudes and a disorganised private life. The Sunderland theatrical boarding-house, where he visits Ruth Prynne, and resident cast of unsuccessful actors, are treated with astringent satire. In Oglethorpe the sonorous ham, Cassandra Wilkins, lisping her virgin's prayers in a jöngle of promiscuity, and Tony Hunter the self-accusing faggot appear the types of Dos Passos' theatrical and Greenwich Village years. The loosening of moral standards and the cynical levity of the talk prefigure the emerging shape of 1919. A cult of hedonism, developing here even before the war, starts to breed misery and betrayal - "'We're not going to be too real about this, are we, George?' She laughed softly into her cup."<sup>33</sup>

Into this half-world drifts Jimmy Herf, now a Columbia graduate who has entered journalism without conviction. In the manner characteristic of an educated man who has found no vital means of self-expression, he complains that big-city life is pointless and depressing yet inertly accepts it - indeed, one cannot imagine Jimmy as anything but a city-dweller. His friend Stanwood Emery, an aesthete-playboy, drawls in a succession of juvenile paradoxes his belief that the lure of material success is a will-o-the-wisp. "Why the hell does everyone want to succeed? I'd like to meet somebody who wanted to fail in life. That's the only sublime thing".<sup>34</sup> The sentiments and the vocabulary are those of unproductive privilege, and Herf certainly finds little sublime about his own failure - a deeper failure, of course, than worldly failure. "The trouble with me is that I can't decide what I want most, so my motion is circular, helpless and confoundedly discouraging".<sup>35</sup> "Why do I go on dragging out a miserable existence in this crazy, epileptic town... that's what I want



to know".<sup>36</sup> This Wenny-like self-reproach is itself only a symptom of the disease; and perhaps the sensation of movement alone prevents him taking Wenny's step into finality. For Herf is more than an organised misfit. He is a sell-out, which means that the constant erosion of his pride and selfhood weaken his instinct to fight back. When the ridiculous cuckold Oglethorpe, in a speech of unusual dignity and truth, accuses him of having taken the "brass check" he feebly replies "I don't see what you expect me to do about it".<sup>37</sup> The pressures that help to break Herf down, the pressures of the social system, of personal inadequacy, of irresolution, sour him into a premature bitterness. As a seasoned reporter he remarks, with cynical resonance, "As if I hadn't seen enough X's marking the spot where the crime was committed".<sup>38</sup> Still, he fluctuates. Between shame and brazen indifference, alertness and boredom, sardonic resignation and sudden revivals of the will, he is pushed by the ultimately mysterious and arbitrary forces that make the city inimical to freedom and happiness. Not to go to the war is to play the "false Etruscan"<sup>39</sup>, yet his excuse to Joe Harland - that he is "poor at wangling things"<sup>40</sup> - rings hollow; he has been able to rely on Uncle Jeff to wangle jobs for him. Always he can fall back on the excuse of a "hellish rotten job"<sup>41</sup> to justify the demoralising disgust and inertia which envelop him and obstruct that free play of the will in which he sporadically believes.

Thus, the radical opinions which he acquires from Martin Schiff is never developed beyond parlour-revolutionary rhetoric, the ineffectual "opinionation" that matches so perfectly the seedy-romantic restaurant interiors redolent of Streets of Night. "There was wine spilled on the table-cloth and bits of tomato sauce from the spaghetti."<sup>42</sup> Schiff is a genuine radical, even if his formulations begin and end with a crude statement of his allegiances in the class war: "The only way of bucking the interests is for working people, the proletariat, producers and consumers, anything you want to call them, to form unions and finally get so well organised that they can take over the whole government".<sup>43</sup> This at least is a recipe for action; but Herf's major note is one of defeatism - "Oh God, everything is so Hellish"<sup>44</sup> - and the



vision which most attracts him is not of the urban American present but of the rural European past. On his return from France to the post-war prohibition saturnalia, he balances his typical cry of "Why did we come back to this rotten town, anyway?"<sup>45</sup> with a memory of times spent travelling in France - irresponsible, epicurean, safely distant from the front.

Diddlededump, going south, sing the wheels over the rails down the valley of the Rhone. Leaning in the window, smoking a broken cigarette, holding a finger over the torn place. Glub-glub glub-glub from the bushes, from the silver-dripping poplars along the track.<sup>46</sup>

Here is the authentic touch of Dos Passos the inveterate traveller and admirer of the antique, the cultivated hobo who wriggles in the trousers of the novelist of social significance. Like the "fine ram"<sup>47</sup> unearthed by Mr. Perry on the building lot and the "rickety... weatherboarded farmhouse"<sup>48</sup> still standing by the new apartment blocks, the memory denotes the irremediable deadness of the past and the secret yearning to recover it. No wonder Herf clings to this. Back, in New York his problems are redoubled. The all-prevailing ethos of success, now on the crest of a Republican wave, baits and harrasses him; he has not conclusively repudiated it, yet he cannot completely embrace it. He is oppressed by a clouded recognition that it is impossible to live as he does, straddling the two worlds of the conformist and the rebel. Unlike "Long-legged Jack of the Isthmus", he will not be able to keep clear of the rising waters. "In the empty chamber of his brain a double-faced word chinked like a coin: Success, Failure, Success, Failure".<sup>49</sup> In his professional life, he has had to learn the necessary dishonesty of the metropolitan journalist; now deception turns into self-deception. As he recounts to his friends a largely untruthful version of the hijacking episode, he seems almost able to convince himself that he actually leads "the most thrilling life".<sup>50</sup> However, despair is not so simply kept at bay.

The climax of Herf's "epic of disintegration"<sup>51</sup> springs from his rejection by Elaine - a decision made for him, and one which at first leaves him helpless with the shock of loss. "An impulse to grab her hands, to



crush her to him until he hurt her, went through him like a rocket and died... His lips knew her lips, his arms knew the twining of her arms, he knew the deep woods of her hair, he loved her... Jimmy went into the bath-room and started the water running in the tub".<sup>52</sup> The dreadful knowledge runs through an intensity of mute regret, and ends in the performance of a routine mechanical action. The end of his marriage extinguishes in Herf any residual hope for a life of integrity. His apathy, always profound, becomes total. He throws up, or is fired from, his job. In the "Skyscraper" chapter images of the multi-faceted city, teeming with the sordid stories his work has brought him into contact with, flock around him. He identifies himself with the murderer Dick Snow - the ultimate outcast - who has "met the demands of spring"<sup>53</sup> by composing in his death-cell a poem to be published by the "Evening Graphic", and with the alien radicals deported during the Red Scare.

James Herf, young newspaper man of 190, West 12th Street, recently lost his twenties. Appearing before Judge Merivale they were remanded to Ellis Island for deportation as undesirable aliens. The younger four, Sasha, Michael, Nicholas and Vladimir had been held for some time on a technical charge of vagrancy. The later ones, Bill, Tony and Joe were held under various indictments, including wife-beating, arson, assault and prostitution. All were convicted on counts of misfeasance, malfeasance, and nonfeasance.<sup>54</sup>

Here, and in the surrealistic fantasies of ribald celebrations that accompany the "trial", Herf flickers to life as the wry intellectual, surveying with ironic understanding his internal conflicts and wasted opportunities. Such a process is healthy; it may not lay the foundations for a fresh attempt at self-definition, but it banishes for a while the wringing self-torture of the "hollow man". By casting his uncle in the role of the officious A. Mitchell Palmer, he exorcises the ghost of family disapproval, which has haunted one half of his mind.

But Herf is dogged by ambiguity to the very end. He remains the thinker, though the thinker who has realised the insubstantiality of mere thoughts or mere words. "I'm beginning to have the nerve to admit to myself how much I dislike all the things I don't want"<sup>55</sup> and - echoing Hemingway -



"Don't talk... what you talk about you never do".<sup>56</sup> This disillusion is worth having; but it is a disillusion heavily tinged with regret for lost illusions. "If only... I still had faith in words".<sup>57</sup> This faith, in the magical power of words not only to signify reality but to render it orderly and harmonious, had been essential to Herf even while he abused it in the service of reporting. The recently exposed mass lying of the wartime propaganda agencies and the new discoveries in English style made by writers of his own generation ought to have persuaded Herf that language needed redemption, purification. Instead, he feels it to be itself a corrupt medium. Without such a faith, he seems to Ellen like "a busted mechanical toy".<sup>58</sup> Herf takes to pieces the ruined mechanism of this toy to show his friends. Fascinated by the broken machinery of his own soul, he sinks further into acedia. While Martin Schiff, horrified by a boundless futility that leaves him without hope, walks off to take his life, Jimmy roams the streets, spellbound by a city that shines for him at every angle with the image of his loveliest sorrow. "Ellie in a gold dress, Ellie made of thin gold foil absolutely lifelike".<sup>59</sup> It is an exact picture - Ellie in gold foil is "absolutely lifelike". She is the vital illusion of the city itself - an illusion of expanding opportunities that hides the lethal trap.

Jimmy, in a terminal hysteria of despair, seizes on a contrary image. At the Hildebrands' party he hears the anecdote of the Philadelphian who "wore his straw hat on the fourteenth of May"<sup>60</sup> and was killed for it by a town tough. Suddenly, this casually told story flaunts an ideal of idiosyncratic selfhood, the courage to step outside the bounds of propriety and risk a quixotic act: the "gesture of Castile". "Talk about the Unknown Soldier," says Herf, "That's a real hero for you; the golden legend of the man who would wear a straw hat out of season".<sup>61</sup> Directly after the party, he leaves New York on the Hudson ferry - the ferry which, at the start of the novel, had bought Bud Korpenning to look for "the centre of things". The ferry is decked with the flowers of spring on a "little warped wagon".<sup>62</sup> On the far bank, Jimmy treads the street again.



He can see nothing but fog spaced with a file of blurred arc lights. Then he walks on, taking pleasure in his breathing, in the beat of his blood, in the tread of his feet on the pavement, between rows of other-worldly frame houses. Gradually the fog thins, a pearliness is seeping in from somewhere".<sup>63</sup>

The pearliness of dawn into which he is walking scarcely suggests the "symbolic suicide"<sup>64</sup> one critic has made of the final paragraphs. Yet it is going too far to call his departure "the one progressive movement within the circle of futile and self-vitiating acts".<sup>65</sup> Herf only knows that he is going "pretty far".<sup>66</sup> But he cannot be lightin' out for the territory. There is no territory left. And though the city has been used to stress the Moloch-like voracity of the modern world as it devours humanity, there was no hint of peace outside it. The past has been built over, and even upstate there flourishes the barbarous cruelty that made Bud Korpenning a parricide. Is not Jimmy Herf, like the pulp-heroes of a later fiction, "running away from megalopolis; but in megalopolis's own product, the life-consuming machine. He'll be back; there is another town just ahead, just the same as the others. After that, another escape; and so on, till sudden death puts an end to it"?<sup>67</sup>

What saves Herf from being a duplicate of previous Dos Passos heroes - for he has much in common with them - is his location in the context of a novel of which the form is carefully adapted to secure a reasonable aesthetic distance from the protagonist. The re-creation of a whole city through tropes of style - most successfully through the adaptation of cinema techniques - and the episodic treatment of an extended period place Herf in a setting which reduces the author's licence to sanctify a self-image. Equally, other life-histories contribute to a density and movement effective in marking the degree to which he is a casualty. More fortunate than Bud Korpenning, less complacently successful than George Baldwin, he nevertheless suffers the blind misfortunes so casually inflicted by the metropolis. In his closer focus - relative to other figures - he sharpens the reader's sense of confronting personal experience rather than a remote chronicle. If the "poet and the world"<sup>68</sup> antithesis remains, it has been well integrated into a book which signifies a major advance in the author's art.



Still more impressive is a new Dos Passos creation. Ellen, though she moves at the pace and level of the swarm, illuminates them all, exhibits both change and continuity in the mutable aspects of her personality, and by saturating the work with her infinite egoism, gives to the fragments an essential unity. By comparison, Herf exists as a strangely recurring fossil in the impacted layers of time and the city. Ellen colours them all with the refractions of her "negative capability". Around her central core of wilful self-seeking spin the opportunistic shields and mirrors which protect her as they coax and dazzle her lovers and associates. Her upward progress, swifter and more sensational than Sister Carrie's, parallels the growth of the city: just as glamorous, just as lacking in social sanity. Ellen is almost another name for New York. Through her succession of roles and identities - Ellen, Elaine, Helena, Elli - she uses the men who flutter about her until she loses herself through the sheer versatility of her performances. She commits emotional destruction on the scale of a runaway automobile, or the fires which continually ravage the city. "She shall make mischief wherever she goes"<sup>69</sup> quotes Stan Emery, and only for him - because, as she half-confesses, he dies too soon for her to tire of his driven vitality - does she experience something close to affection. George Baldwin, the man of iron ambition, is practically ready to kill under the influence of the passions she has awoken in him and Ed Thatcher, after a life devoted to prudent acquisitiveness, lies spent in his retirement house at Passaic, scanning the gossip columns which report to him fresh scandals about the daughter for whom he has sacrificed so much.

Ellen Thatcher is a new portrait in the Dos Passos gallery - the prototypical bitch, later to be more completely realised as Eveline Hutchins in USA. Unlike poor inhibited Nan she goes out to meet the world, turning her weaknesses into strengths. The falseness of Ellen, the sophistication she adopts for self-defence, is the falseness of city civilisation itself. Already as a young girl she is in love with the theatre (which reminds her sick mother only of "that terrible Chicago fire"<sup>70</sup>) and whatever her gifts



as an actress may be she adapts herself in a masterly fashion to the hegemony of the male. Her desire to change her sex, to be an aggressive and dominating influence, is realised through a clever exploitation of her female identity. In her recoil from the brute facts of sexuality on her honeymoon <sup>appears</sup> her distaste for passivity, for undergoing penetration by another. And yet: "She lay giggling on the far edge of the bed, giggling desperately as she used to do with girls at school".<sup>71</sup> There is the psychology of the shrewd non-virgin. If men can be governed or made pliant through their biological needs, if they so highly value a discomfort and absurdity I can get used to, power is mine. "That girl'd marry a trolley car if she thought she could get anything by it".<sup>72</sup> remarks Ruth Prynne. But one is not obliged to accept, on the partial testimony of Ruth and Cassandra Wilkins, that Ellen is just another hard bitch out for what she can get. Ellen is not the most calculating of women, and her motives are never isolated and analysed: they merge, through the disjointed and episodic text, with the vital metabolism of the city. Ellen is not just at "the centre of things",<sup>73</sup> she is the centre. Everyone recognizes this, even the brusque and busy George Baldwin, who waits three-quarters of an hour at the Brevoort while Ellen takes her time strolling downtown. He is relegated to the position of one adoring male in a tableau of courtship while Ellen sits "laughing, balancing a small cherry tartlet that had one bite out of it between a pink, square finger and thumb".<sup>74</sup> Like the Danderine lady she is part romantic ideal, part commercial fraud. No one can exactly say how the two conjoin for, like New York, she sheds glamour and disaster arbitrarily.

Her behaviour towards the rich and "humanly young"<sup>75</sup> Stanwood Emery reflects the real charm and tenderness of which - in moments - she is capable, partly because his own fey desperation springs from a malaise as profound as her own. With Oglethorpe she strikes the attitudes of the aspiring actress; later she will become a poised woman of the world for her cocktail friends. Even the boy burglar whom she releases is overpowered by her magic. "He grabbed the hand with the bill in it and kissed it; leaning over her hand kissing it wetly



he caught a glimpse of her body under the arms in the drooping red silk sleeve... His eyes were full of tears".<sup>76</sup> In the ironic sequel to this episode, Nick discovers that the cash he has taken from her apartment is worthless stage money. Ellen usually pays off in counterfeit currency. She is in tune with the metropolitan rhythm, and she shrugs off easily the disappointments that weigh down Jimmy Herf - "Matrimony isn't much, is it?"<sup>77</sup> Reigning with almost perfect assurance over the drones who cluster round her, she has the remotest sense of an essential futility.

Ellen sits in the armchair drowsily listening, coolness of powder on her face and arms, fatness of rouge on her lips, her body just bathed fresh as a violet under the silk dress, under the silk underclothes; she sits dreamily listening. A sudden twinge of men's voices knotting about her. She sits up cold white out of reach like a lighthouse. Men's hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men's looks blunder and flutter against it helpless as moths. but in deep pit blackness inside her something clangs like a fire engine.<sup>78</sup>

Ellen is not then inhumanly void of feeling but her potential of saving self-awareness is as puny and ineffective as the fire engines that rush about the city to attend its ever-occurring conflagrations. Stanwood Emery's death and marriage do shock Ellen. But is that shock the tremor of a seriously engaged emotion or the disturbance of her egoism? Actually, in Ellen's case the two are hard to tell apart. She had so far lost herself with Stan as to risk her career, so that her dresser had reason to warn her "Don't you ever let any fellow like that come to the theatre with ye. I've seen many a good trooper ruined by things like that".<sup>79</sup> But Stan's own desperate irresponsibility had outrun Ellen's carelessness. His drunken runaway marriage to a chorus girl and his self-immolation by fire in their newly furnished apartment betray the unprotected completeness of his despair. Ellen suffers a pang for her dead lover - "from the black pinholes her pupils spread blurring till everything was black" -<sup>80</sup> but one, perhaps, which anticipates the ennui and aimlessness increasingly to beset her. Such incidents never radically alter the basic Ellen, but accelerate in her young life the growth of cynical detachment, just as the onrush of technical



discovery speeds up the growth of the sprawling impersonal city. "Can you understand" she asks Harry Goldweiser, "a woman who wants to be a harlot, a common tart, sometimes?"<sup>81</sup>

Unlike Jimmy Herf - such a nervous barometer of life's moods in the intensity of his chequered responses - Ellen has the benefit of a purely spontaneous self-deception. She never needs to contrive to mask her insincerity; a natural actress, she takes her cue perfectly. "'I'm going to have a baby... Stan's baby. I'm going to give up this silly life and raise it. I don't care what happens'. 'Oh God, that's the bravest thing I ever heard of a woman doing... Oh Ellie you're so wonderful,'"<sup>82</sup> How cosy it is to capture the sympathy of the decent young man. In reality, Ellen's need to be "the centre of things" drives her on. Book II ends not with parturition but with the abortionist's parlour and his "dazzling sharp glass case of sharp instruments".<sup>83</sup> The current of necessity in which Ellen lives sweeps aside the fickle choice of a momentary pose.

In the final section of the novel Ellen does appear with a child - Jimmy's child, Martin - yet the role of mother is one she finds it impossible to perform with conviction. Young Martin in his cot is prey to the fear and loneliness which both his parents had felt as children.

Outside dark, and beyond walls and outside again the horrible great dark of grown-up people, rumbling, jiggling, creeping in chunks through the windows, putting fingers through the cracks in the door. From outside above the roar of wheels comes a strangling wail clutching his throat.<sup>84</sup>

The note of the fire-engine's siren sounds the continuance of the unbroken circle of alienation. The Herfs' son is fated to repeat the hopelessness which his parents have learned to identify as the pervading tenor of life but not to overcome or avert.

And Ellen's rise progresses as she assumes the editorship of a society journal. In her recoil from the "hobohemian", Greenwich-village aspects of the post-war New York scene she enters a more affluent and sedate level of society, the plane of complacent bourgeois success. She has "arrived", and her arrival



matches her with the politician on the make, George Baldwin, who regards Jimmy as "abolshhevik pacifist and IWW agitator".<sup>85</sup> To this congested formulation of prejudice she adds her own expression of distaste for "all that stuff... Oh, just everything like that aesthetic dancing and literature and radicalism and psycho-analysis... Just an overdose I guess... Yes, I guess that's it George... I guess I'm growing up".<sup>86</sup> The contrast of "maturity on one hand with a complex of unAmerican, anti-Babbitt attitudes on the other is perfect in its unreflective worldliness. Once again Ellen's seemingly heartfelt beliefs coincide with the new altered direction of her self-interest. Her awareness of the false face of the city, not quite concealing its fundamental corruption, ironically mirrors the truth of her own situation:

Under all the nickel plated, gold plated streets  
enamelled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling  
smell, spreading in dark slow, crouching masses, like  
corruption oozing from the broken sewers, like a mob.<sup>87</sup>

At this point one can observe how thoroughly Ellen has become absorbed into the city of which she has been made the familiar spirit. Now a kind of urban Rusalka, she scarcely exists in human terms; she is a projection of the gaudily disguised pitfalls of New York, like the gilded Ellens Herf imagines to be gazing down on him from the skyscraper windows. In particular her neurotic concern with appearances, with preserving deceitful surfaces, has all but extinguished the "weakness" of natural human response. Only a bad shock can stimulate the vestiges of these responses, and the final transient indices of an alternative Ellen, capable of relating authentically to others, are seen after the fire at Madame Soubrine's, in which the seamstress Anna has been dreadfully burned.

These are lives to be lived if only you didn't  
care. Care for what, for what; the opinion of  
mankind, money, success, hotel lobbies, health  
umbrellas, Uneda biscuits...? It's like a busted mechanical  
toy the way my mind goes brrr all the time. I hope they  
haven't ordered dinner. I'll make them go somewhere else  
if they haven't. She opens her vanity case and begins to  
powder her nose.<sup>88</sup>

Yes: Ellen does care for those things. In a practical sense she cares for them enough to ignore or suppress the twinges of dissatisfaction that tell her life



is a fraud. She can no more undo the tendency to follow the metropolitan urge for smartness, sophistication and wealth than Brooklyn Flats can be cleared for snipe-shooting. But like the city she is an endlessly fascinating illusion. Dos Passos' portrait of Ellen is like his conception of New York as "a great lonely man-killer, indifferent to the humanity she devours, at base romantic".<sup>89</sup>

In Manhattan Transfer, however the romanticism is latent, and is combined with a series of objectifying devices to create a novel much more complete and satisfying than Dos Passos' earlier work. Brownian Motion is studied not with the disinterested curiosity of the scientist but through the prism of a growing sensibility. It is a sensibility not wholly freed from aestheticism and inverted romanticism: there can still be a self-conscious lingering over decay and squalor, as in the "broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between splintered plank walls"<sup>90</sup> carried over from a description of the awful picnic in Streets of Night and set in the prose-cadenza epigraph to Chapter I. But the vivid and evocative aspects of the apprentice style are merged with a "synoptic"<sup>91</sup> outlook that helps to stabilise them and make them less cloying. The famous romantic pessimism is less adolescent, more centred in a real understanding of the horrors of modern existence and conveyed with a much surer literary control. The first piece of narrative - fewer than eight lines - is an account of Ellen Thatcher's birth in a clinically repellent atmosphere of hospital smells. The process of birth is attended with no affirmations of emerging life. It is concentrated on the infant's appearance, borne by the nurse "at arm's length"<sup>92</sup> as though it were a bedpan, squirming "feebly, like a knot of earthworms".<sup>93</sup> An unattractive picture, but a true and honest one: and it is imagery of this kind that links Ellen to Bud Korpenning, the upstate parricide who has sailed in on the ferry to search for "the centre of things".<sup>94</sup> Bud with his "skinny turkey's throat"<sup>95</sup> and the aged violinist with his "monkey's face"<sup>96</sup> are unloaded at the dock like coal or potatoes, no respect paid to their humanity. Just as Ellen falls involuntarily into the world, Bud is shoved off the boat, ignorant and afraid. He responds automatically to the big-city imperatives - "EAT" - and the advice he is given



by the owner of the lunch-wagon, when he explains his willingness to work, is "It's looks that count in this city."<sup>97</sup> Externals are everything - a principle recognised by the Jewish immigrant in Chapter I's final sketch. He shaves off his beard in dumb obedience to King C. Gillette's "dollarbland smile",<sup>98</sup> paying his own small tribute of assimilation to the American success credo. Mrs. Thatcher wants to reject her child because "it hasn't any label on it"<sup>99</sup> and therefore lacks an approved identity. Her husband, for once throwing caution to the winds in his euphoria of paternity, finds himself landed with a bar tab by the ostensibly congenial Zucher. At the smart restaurant in which Emile has found work as a commis-waiter appear a vulgarly plutocratic set - "longtoothed", "moon-faced", "bottlenose", "weazlish".<sup>100</sup> They drink to excess, talk loudly of sex and money, and finish their evening of self-indulgence with a disgusting squabble. There is little doubt that mankind, in the opening chapters of Manhattan Transfer, "is described in disagreeable or derogatory images".<sup>101</sup> Moreover, these images are closely rendered in unpleasant detail, dryly realistic and anti-heroic. Men are not giant paragons of evil, they are mean and contemptible.

Yet:

There were Babylon and Nineveh; they were built of brick, Athens was gold marble columns. Rome was held up on broad arches of rubble. In Constantinople the minarets flame like great candles round the Golden Horn.... Steel, glass tile, concrete will be the materials of the skyscrapers. Crammed on the narrow island the million-windowed buildings will jut glittering, pyramid on pyramid like the white cloudhead above a thunderstorm.<sup>102</sup>

This is the epigraph to "Metropolis", and it is this series of impressions which runs through the mind of Stanwood Emery immediately before his death. Compared with its population of puny and ineffectual human beings, how glamorous New York is made to seem. It promises to rival the great cities of antiquity as a dominant civilisation, though like them it is probably under sentence of doom. In this "dustreeking girder forest"<sup>103</sup> Bud Korpenning can easily (too easily) lose himself "like a needle in a haystack".<sup>104</sup> Through the ironic translocation of the novel simile there is conveyed his dreadful and inexorable loneliness. Cheated, pushed around or simply faced with indifference, Bud finds



himself isolated beyond hope of recovery. This atomisation of the individual - the recognition that New York, apparently a single community of millions, separates and fragments the experience of the men and women who inhabit it - is a thematic keystone of Manhattan Transfer. It is not included though, precisely as social analysis and there is no suggestion that it can be cured by social protest or reform. The insight is the insight of an artist - "not so much the historian's verdict as the poet's lament"<sup>105</sup> - and it remains a valid diagnosis not because the author is sociologically perceptive (though he is that) but thanks to the discovery of a form that will express for him a troubled and serious vision.

This is where the significance of Manhattan Transfer lies. It is so vital an advance on the books which preceded it because it has synthesised a method of showing in a coherent manner what was previously strangulated, hysterical or unrealised. The form must be called a synthesis, at least in purely literary terms, because its elements are not revolutionary or original - they derive from the efforts of true experimentalists (Stein, Joyce), from Carl Sandburg, from Dreiser, Hemingway and John Reed. But Dos Passos has not merely been alert and receptive. He has considered the relevance of the discoveries which he uses and adapts and his skill in applying them to his own (more popular) concerns is remarkable. Sinclair Lewis, writing from a more or less middlebrow point of view, seemed to half-grasp this achievement when he wrote:

Manhattan Transfer (is) more important in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar, Mr. Joyce's Ulysses. For Mr. Dos Passos can use, and deftly does, all their experimental psychology and style, all their revolt against the molds of classic fiction. But the difference! Dos Passos is interesting! Their novels are treatises on harmony, very scholarly and confoundedly dull; Manhattan Transfer is the moving symphony itself.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the extravagance of the comparative literary judgements, there is a hidden truth in the assertion that Dos Passos is "interesting". For Dos Passos, with all his borrowings, is still a practitioner of American realism - an un-academic form, readable for its own sake by the unprofessional public and unrivalled in its facility to present the reader with a world he knows in his



ordinary instinctual life. Manhattan Transfer is not "difficult". When it employs innovations, it uses them contextually and responsibly but in no sense esoterically. Mason Wade reinforced Lewis's description when he concluded that:

Dos Passos owes to Joyce the conception of a novel devoted to the life of a city... to Proust the use of significant detail and careful documentation, to Stein... people and the effectiveness of bald narration. But he added to his borrowings a great deal of his own.<sup>107</sup>

What Dos Passos added was a concern to make literature available. He tended to write of his art as a craftsman solving technical production problems, and his amalgamation of modernist devices with a popular aesthetic make of Manhattan Transfer "lively art",<sup>108</sup> accessible but not commercial. Thus the imagistic fragment, still part of his style three years after A Pushcart at the Curb, is allowed to express the sweet-sour aftermath of a day in the speakeasies.

Parlour-snakes and flappers joggle hugging downtown, uptown, hug joggling grey square after grey square, until they see the new moon giggling over Weehawken and feel the gusty wind of a dead Sunday blowing dust in their faces, dust of a tipsy twilight.<sup>109</sup>

The adequacy of the verbal effects - musical, atmospheric - is soundly judged. Too loose and casual to be satisfying on its own, the passage complements the narrative and psychological elements and the impression of a teeming Manhattan arises from the flux and alternation of varying perspectives. The deployment of a changing focus is the essence of the process, and even where Dos Passos has frankly borrowed the borrowing is made to work for him.

The man on the bench has a patch over his eye. A watching black patch. A black watching patch. The kidnappers of the Black Watch, among the rustling shrubs kidnappers keep their Black Watch. Ellen's toes don't kick in the air.<sup>110</sup>

The sudden inward plunge, the identification with Ellen's half-conscious fears of crude male sexuality, her shaky refinement, reaches a level at which the reader is made aware of her significance. For Ellen, though increasingly made a symbol of the city, is a "lead character": she needs occasionally to live in her inwardness, to recall the impact on the individual organism of what is



otherwise viewed broadly. Even so, the exploration of her fears is arrested at the level of pure sensation. To go further would be to risk explaining, to supply reasons for what is seen as basically random and mysterious. The occasional failures of style - they are relatively minor - are all Dos Passos' own, and they spring from an over-confidence in words, a straining to force more from them in terms of instantaneous effect and colour than the subject demands. The result is an effusive literariness, as in the over-personification of objects pictured through the intoxicated eyes of Stan Emery just before his death. "The table turned a somersault. The china closet jumped on the table. Oak chairs climbed on top of the gas jet... Kerosene, whispered a greasy-faced can in the corner of the kitchen".<sup>111</sup> The atrocious cartoon-image in the last sentence subverts the description into anti-climax. Equally, there are examples of near-logorrhea, when a stream of evocative phrases is poured into a space it cannot quite fill with significance. "Inside he fizzled like soda-water into sweet April syrups, strawberry, sarsaparilla, chocolate cherry, vanilla dripping foam through the mild gasoline-blue air".<sup>112</sup> Inside he did that - and the casual reader will perhaps rest easy with the impression that Jimmy Herf is a vessel of conflicting emotions. But the words, once savoured, fail quite to tell us what we need to know about Jimmy. In fact, he generally lacks the dimension of qualified inwardness given to Ellen - and this is where Joyce could have been helpful. A less fulsome attraction to pictorial strikingness, a closer discipline of language, would imbue Jimmy Herf with at least a sufficient measure of the spiritual self-examination of Stephen Daedalus: "Not to fall was too hard, too hard; and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling, but not yet fallen, still unfallen, but about to fall".<sup>113</sup>

However, Dos Passos' neglect of detailed psychology is largely mitigated by the choice of an episodic narrative; in each separate life the reader sees instances of the pattern, but never the pattern itself. Indeed, if the pattern exists it is arbitrary and not accessible to human control. Congo, for example,



turns up at intervals throughout the book. We know that he cannot curb his wanderlust to settle down and make a determined pitch for success like Emile. We know he tends bar, loses a leg in the war, climbs probably more by luck than judgement to the status of a society bootlegger. "The effect of the continual shift of scene and character is to fix them in a series of positions; we have to accept these positions as evidence of their fates, but we cannot follow in detail the steps by which they came to be".<sup>114</sup> This effect is perfectly in keeping with the philosophy of Manhattan Transfer. Good fortune and ill-luck are distributed by fate with no regard to merit. People rise and fall, propelled by forces outside their own wills, forces associated with the opaque complexity of the modern city yet prevailing in life itself. Actually, Manhattan is life itself - there is no escape, no regenerating alternative. All the characters are at the mercy of a big, dirty, heartless town, but they "won't go out of New York whatever happens".<sup>115</sup> New York is both repellent and attractive, but even Jimmy Herf, who hates it most and has had an opportunity to contrast it with the European cities, cannot leave until he is virtually forced to do so by the collapse of his professional and conjugal relationships. When the characters feel sick and miserable, or they lose their money, or their marriages break up, they blame everything on "fate" or put it down to "the peculiar predominance of luck in human affairs".<sup>116</sup> And there is little in the facts to contradict this. The very discontinuity of the story isolates each life-history into a series of engrammatic collisions with destiny. Drive, initiative and courage - even where they exist - have little correspondence with achievement. Achievement itself is ashes in the mouth. Yet the book remains stimulating, in its panorama of failure and disillusion.

One major reason for this is Dos Passos' exploitation of extraliterary means of expression. Manhattan <sup>Transfer</sup> has more in common with cinema techniques, and with other visual arts, than the jump-cutting sequence of exposition alone. All told, it probably owes more to his assimilation of movie grammar than to his reading of other fiction-writers. "I suspect I got interested in Eisenstein's montage while I was working on Manhattan Transfer, though I



can't remember exactly. Anyway montage was in the air. Notions of that sort spread like viruses, one hardly knows why".<sup>117</sup> Dos Passos' sensitive nose for "what was in the air" helps to explain his intelligent adaptation of cinematic methods. Though he had neither the peculiar fanaticism of Gertrude Stein nor Joyce's world-recreating imagination, he did possess, besides a naturally rich aptitude for words, a very keen visual awareness. As a young man, he had planned at one stage to become a painter and architect, and he provided illustrations for several of his own books, including the original dust-jacket of Manhattan Transfer. The silent motion picture, then in the process of formulating its visual grammar, was an art uniquely suited to portray the qualities he wished to develop in fiction: movement, vividness, a sharp evocation of the concrete and a focal versatility allowing for rapid transitions between the particular and the general. Not only montage was available to him, but also the scenic division of the feature film and its capacity to alternate rapidly between the individual subject and his surroundings. Translated into literary terms, this facility gives a distinctly cinematic feel to passages in which a situation can be studied from several viewpoints as the location or angle of the controlling sensibility changes.

Picking his teeth he walked through the grimy, dark entrance to Brooklyn Bridge. A man in a derby hat was smoking a cigar in the middle of the broad tunnel. Bud brushed past him, walking with a tough swagger. I don't care about him; let him follow me. The arching footway was empty except for a single policeman who stood, yawning, looking up at the sky. It was like walking among the stars. Below, in either direction, streets tapered into dotted lines of lights between square, black windowed buildings.<sup>118</sup>

The successive centres of attention - the tunnel, the man with the cigar, Bud's reaction, the policeman, the wider extensions of the city - are knitted into a complex entity that states with compulsive thoroughness Bud's problem and relates his fears to the implicit threat of strangers and policemen and the black, anonymous avenues of New York. The facts are made known to the reader in as graphic a fashion as the moving picture which can show without verbalising yet convinces by the immediacy and latitude of its images. Similarly,



one senses "in the air" of Manhattan Transfer the influence of metropolitan artists and caricaturists. Some of the tropes are quite specific: one of the most cutting episodes in the earlier chapters, for example, is the restaurant supper-party at which Emile, the outsider who wants to get on, witnesses the behaviour of a party of rich Americans. The table has been beautifully prepared - "A goblet for Rhine wine hobnobbed with a champagne glass at each place along the glittering white oval table"<sup>119</sup> - but the company comprises the most hoggish kind of overfed business types and their brittle chattering girlfriends. Marco and the French boys wait on them, unnoticed as long as the service is satisfactory, mere "animated dress suits".<sup>120</sup> The contrast is an eloquent commentary on the inequality of life even in a democracy; but the astringent satire is familiar. It is an almost exact literary equivalent of the Berlin drawings of George Grosz, an artist with whose work Dos Passos had become acquainted in Paris at the end of the war. It represents the same "cirrhosis of nineteenth century civilisation"<sup>121</sup> Dos Passos subsequently described Grosz as portraying. In later scenes - especially where the setting is Greenwich Village or the downtown speakeasy circuit - the prose acquires the Déco animation of the paintings of Joseph Webster Golinkin. The interiors glitter with the jarring mobility of angular mirror surfaces, while the people go on living automatically, without vitality or conviction.

"Gosh... let's have another cocktail". He felt paralysed like in a nightmare; she was a porcelain figure under a bell-glass. A current of fresh snow-rinsed air from somewhere eddied all of a sudden through the blurred, packed, jangling glare of the restaurant, cut the reek of food and drink and tobacco. For an instant he caught the smell of her hair. The cocktails burned in him. God, I don't want to pass out.<sup>122</sup>

The intensity with which the scenes are realised helps to unify and place them, and their interrelation is established not only by the manner of their juxtaposition and a central unity of character and theme. They all proceed from a definite view of the pain and difficulty of life, and the inevitability of failure that is stressed by the tensions of modern civilisation but ultimately is an unavoidable condition of life. This failure is studied



most particularly in the figures of Jimmy and Ellen Herf, but it is undergone by all the characters, both those like Bud who never stood a chance and those like Baldwin who have been levered up to positions of wealth or power. The ubiquity of failure in Manhattan Transfer is patent; but what often appears in doubt is the author's attitude towards the misery his characters undergo. There is little scope in the material for the comradely compassion of Three Soldiers. A "mysterious occult force"<sup>123</sup> grips and represses humanity: this force is represented by the city, though it is more than the city. Occasionally, in a sketch aside from the main narrative, a pang of pity emerges.

The old man in the checked cap sits on the brown stone stoop with his face in his hands. With the glare of Broadway in their backs there is a continual flickering of people past him towards the theatres down the street. The old man is sobbing through his fingers in a sour reek of gin. Once in a while he raises his head and shouts hoarsely "I can't, don't you see, I can't?" The voice is inhuman like the splitting of a plank.<sup>124</sup>

In a painting by E.H. Suydam of Times Square in 1927 the huge skyscraper blocks with their signs and illuminations are shown dwarfing the crowds sketched in as a blurred mass at the bottom of the picture. To such a scene Dos Passos adds the pointed detail of the lost individual crying his helplessness. Yet the pity is not warm or involved - the man's cry is, after all, "inhuman", and in illustrating the indifference of the crowd to this pathetic victim the author employs the "indifferent sympathy" of the watchful artist. This has led to the accusation that Manhattan Transfer "had the effect.... of condemning the sufferers along with the disease";<sup>125</sup> yet in revealing the calamity of life Dos Passos does not despise the sufferers. In treating a subject so broad and inclusive, he allows each detail to speak for itself. This alone is a valuable advance in technique, and in confidence.

Jimmy Herf, naturally, is a "special judgement".<sup>126</sup> Part Hamletian intellectual, part spoilt child, he acts as a reflecting consciousness to demonstrate the opposing tensions of the city as Dos Passos conceives it. New York is at one and the same time a megalopolis which with its aggregate of hostile



"things" cruelly chops off the exploring tendrils of human self-realization and a glamorous whirlpool of experience. The machine - the Brownian model and its colliding streams of ball bearings - is ugly and dangerous, but it is the only place to be. The past is dead - it goes by in a succession of nightmarish tableaux - and the future can never be what you make of it because the sum total of influences operating from the moment of your birth are likely to determine even the choices you thought you freely made. But Manhattan Transfer is not a tragedy of social determination and Jimmy Herf is no Clyde Griffiths. Dreiser's book, despite its apparently portentous title, is a tragedy because its pathetic hero undertakes the Herculean task of trying to become what his culture has falsely encouraged him to think he can become and ends by accepting a personal responsibility that will console those who survive him. An American Tragedy has genuinely radical implications: it implies that the sacred dream of social mobility is an evil fraud, just as The Great Gatsby implies that the dream is more than a dream of material acquisition. The horrible powerlessness of Clyde and the matchless power of Gatsby to do everything but "bring back the past" are weighty and heroic values. A rediscovery of America is suggested through a criticism of contemporary American practice. "Tragedy" and "greatness" are ruled out by Dos Passos. His book is named after a railway station, and its tone of flux and negation precludes heroism. One is most aware in Manhattan Transfer of the aimlessness of life: in its perpetual movement there is little discernible pattern, except for the repeated chance encounters with misery that wear down hope and energy. These moments - the "engrams" of disillusion, commonplace and familiar yet perceptive even through the transient excitements of life - provide the most definite and typical instances of the impossibility of happiness. They may be childishly personal - Jimmy getting only a small cup with his purchase of candy; or painful and absurd - Gas McNiel's accident on the trolley tracks; or vague and nagging - Stanwood Emery's failure to discover a permanent, serious mode of life that will put a stop to his compulsive hedonism. In every case, they suggest the irrevocable disappearance of a grand strategy in life and its



supercession by the disease of ennui and anxiety - a disease suffered by all, and of which Jimmy Herf is only a more conscious and articulate victim. "In headaches and in worry / Vaguely life leaks away / And Time will have his fancy / Tomorrow or today".<sup>127</sup>

But just as Jimmy Herf is no longer quite the self-pitying self-image with whose disappointments in life the reader is pressed nakedly to sympathise, so Manhattan Transfer is a novel which defies its own pessimism. In denying the possibility of heroism, it aims for a truth close to the marrow of human experience, and it expresses that truth in a form energised by cinematic images that give the camera-like directness of participation in what is depicted which is the cinema's great strength. He is able to show the anarchy which he fears and the apolitical anarchism towards which he is sentimentally attracted without forcing didactic preferences or dislikes on to the work itself. The overlying mentality of Manhattan Transfer - a neutrality breached by minimal doses of pity - is compounded of a dual awareness that civilisation, and specifically the city culture, is both necessary and harmful. Thus the accusation that "the world he pictures is so completely dominated by a philosophy at variance with what he holds, that the ordinary reader is left with a dreary sense of human nature as a mean and shallow lot"<sup>128</sup> is a natural one. Yet it is made with an unfortunate illusion of hindsight, if it implies that Manhattan Transfer was the creation of an optimistic radical. Dos Passos' New York years (1922-1925) saw the publication of two novels, a volume of verse, a travel book, the short story "July" and finally Manhattan Transfer. His periodical contributions during these years consisted chiefly of travel pieces, with occasional reviews and poems. During 1925 he published only one magazine article - on the theatre - in "Vanity Fair", and although his sympathies were broadly radical and humanitarian there is small evidence of his accepting a radical philosophy until the "New Masses" started publication in 1926. Even during his association with "New Masses" and his involvement with the Sacco-Vanzetti case he was not to become a programmatic political thinker - and at the time of Manhattan Transfer his professed aim was above all "to put to the test existing institutions and



to strip the veils from them".<sup>129</sup>

This questioning and sceptical attitude may not succeed in formulating definitive conclusions, but it is likely to seed a curiosity about the conditions of defeat (a *donnée* or observation reasonably to be taken for granted). Specifically, these conditions lie in the manner in which people are obliged to live together yet cruelly isolated; perhaps an eternal fact of life, but one certainly aggravated by the nature of the megalopolis. Manhattan Transfer is a milestone in Dos Passos' career, a transitional work, but one in which the maturing artist has begun to integrate his world-view with a form that will most coherently express it. The shrinking explorations of the young aesthete have been transformed into an abrasive loneliness and alienation properly located in a social and historical framework, and the engrammatic pinpricks are painfully and realistically transmitted. Manhattan Transfer effectively contradicts the proposition that "New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy, and of the solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the free and fully developed individual with the paramount aggregate".<sup>130</sup> In the idiom of a serious and mature, though unesoteric, novel, it touches the pulse of the modern city fever.



## CHAPTER IV

### USA : AMERICA CAN BREAK YOUR HEART.

#### 1. "A Lost Republic That Had Never Existed".

By 1930, when The Forty-Second Parallel appeared in print, Dos Passos had associated himself with "New Masses", the editor of which noted, towards the end of the decade, that "the American artist is a split personality. His roots were partly in the machine age, which he damned, in the America which he fled; and partly in the culture of that Europe to which he now exiled himself".<sup>1</sup> This had been true of Dos Passos, the immigrant's grandson who had felt unsure of his cultural identity and who, in his travels, had been taken by the "gesture of Castile" which seemed to promise a greater relaxed spontaneity of life than America could offer. Now, at a time when many of his contemporaries were surveying the world from Paris or the Riviera, he addressed himself to the task - a natural progression from Manhattan Transfer - of treating the collective life of the nation in a major trilogy. He has not abandoned the sensitive young man - indeed he has baldly presented him without fictional dressing, in the Camera Eye series of ironical grace-notes - but he has primarily aimed for the amplitude of scope that will enable the artist to be an imaginative historian.

In social and historical terms, America is two nations: though Dos Passos does not make this explicit until much later in USA, deprivation and inequality supply much of the energy that distinguishes the work. The political coloration is used in a new and effective way. Whereas previously radical talk had been reported, or overheard by his hero-observers, themselves too neurasthenic to join a political crusade, here politics is central. But it is present in a specific manner, as an artistic treatment of the subject-matter, not as blunt didacticism. Michael Millgate has remarked that Dos Passos employs social-political categories to show the distribution of the author's sympathies.<sup>2</sup> But to call USA "a Marxist epic" or to read its main intention as directly political is to ignore the achievement and continuity of Dos Passos' work. The author's



sympathies, and his use of a political rhetoric to serve his literary concerns, do not amount to a principled argument in favour of revolutionary socialism.

A clear prophecy of this truth can be read from the epigraphical quotation to

The Forty-Second Parallel, a passage from Hodgins' American Climatology:

These general storms have been a subject of inexhaustible interest in all American meteorological research and great labour has been expended on the various hypotheses in regard to their laws. Some of these laws, and particularly those relating to exterior features and general movements, may be regarded as very well determined; their general phenomena have been so conspicuous and so frequent of occurrence that some conclusions of this sort could not fail to result from the most imperfect observation...<sup>3</sup>

But these conclusions are purely external, it seems. The paths, speed and direction of the storms are known, but virtually nothing about their causes. Hodgins' cautious and weighty scientific language fails to conceal that these storms which rage along the forty-second parallel are ultimately mysterious forces. But to a Marxist, society is not mysterious: it has discoverable laws of change, conflict and development. Moreover, by learning these laws and applying them, the observer can become agent, free to take part in assisting the movement of the dialectic. It is no accident that Dos Passos has chosen to cite Hodgins. American Climatology rather than The Communist Manifesto is the model for his narrative. "Brownian Motion" has been superceded by a closer tracking and plotting of the characters in "their exterior features and general movements", but Dos Passos remains as neutrally agnostic as Hodgins in his refusal to draw any conclusions from these movements that will give meaning or hope to the aims of political radicalism. Hodgins may impress you with his meteorology from the lecture-platform; but you will get rained on just the same. Dos Passos, wearing the licence of the artist, draws the reader's attention to his interesting examples of chaos. American chaos! Guaranteed more chaotic than all other forms.

This is not, of course, to say that his view of America is chauvinistic: the book's beginning is satirical and ironic. "CITY GREET'S CENTURY'S DAWN" is



the title of Section I, but the first big headline of Newsreel I is "CAPITAL CITY'S CENTURY CLOSED", followed by a report of General Miles' losing his seat and his dignity at a military review. The nationalistic oratory of Gilded Age windbags is set beside the memory of "many a good man" who has died in the cause of McKinley's imperialist adventure. This is official America, the bully of the "two nations", the spreader of popular dope and mystification. By contrast, Fenian McCreary's childhood is presented in terms of familiar, affectionate, innocent contacts with the world of youth. These perceptions and experiences are not overshadowed by the somehow remoter effects of cruelty and injustice - they are precisely what Mac has to lose. With the death of his father (an inadequate father, naturally - but who isn't?) Mac is obliged to leave Connecticut for Chicago, where he will grow up under the influence of his radically-minded uncle. Mac's own subsequent experience, therefore, including his sincere but fitful allegiance to Wobbly principles, is made to derive as much from the particular shape of his early home circumstances as from his practical understanding of the wage system. Perhaps this makes Camera Eye 2, in which John Dos Passos, Sr. is seen exercising the teasing dogmatism of the independent-minded lawyer, wryly apologetic. In any case, it tends to make Mac's political convictions largely a matter of early psychological reinforcement. Between this reinforcement and the exigencies of day-to-day living, Mac finds his grasp on his convictions tenuous and fluctuating.

Dos Passos, receptive as always to ideas that are "in the air" uses the repressive character of capitalism alertly. Uncle Tim, though an essentially ineffectual rebel who talks more than he does, is bankrupted by the Chicago businessmen who buy up his outstanding debts. This is viewed as common justice by his wife, upon whom the burden of making ends meet falls and who makes no distinction between personal vices like excessive drinking and the holding of unorthodox opinions. The effect of the domestic conflict is to launch Mac, not into serious and disciplined work for the cause, but on a typical American adventure in the company of Doc Bingham. Bingham is the small-time counterpart



of a monopolist like Andrew Carnegie, who in Newsreel 2 announces, during a banquet of ostentatious luxury, that "Manual labour has been found to be the best foundation for the greatest work of the brain".<sup>4</sup> The humbug in both cases is more or less complete, but Doc Bingham seems more excusable. The folk-figure of a huckster, almost a character from Mark Twain, for ever one jump ahead of the law or an angry cuckold, he peddles uplift and pornography with the same dogged assurance and recites Othello (as the author's father was fond of doing) in the brass tones of a patent-medicine salesman.

Doc Bingham is pure W.C. Fields. He is also Mac's third father, not the sick failure or the defeated radical but the worldly scoundrel who shows him the cynic's vision of "things as they are": humanity is divided into gullible sheep and those who fleece them. Here is a philosophy totally opposed to the Socialist analysis, of which it reflects in coarse caricature only the exploiter/victim syndrome. Though Mac never consciously accepts Doc Bingham's outlook, its partial truth is evident, and he never manages quite to lose an air of rootlessness and other-directed drifting. Moreover, another father-image lurks in the vicinity: Eugene Debs, "Lover of Mankind", the subject of the first Biography. Deb's brand of inspiratorial socialism - idealistic, disinterested, much concerned with the setting of a personal example - is deeply in the American grain. He was justifiably a well-loved man, as Dos Passos' approving cadences emphasise, but in his lack of revolutionary arrogance and cunning and in the naive kindness he showed even towards his jailors, he made of himself a victim rather than a true leader. In the "gusty rhetoric" of the "old kindly uncle" can be detected the attraction of Debs for Dos Passos and the more general attraction of situations in which people for high-minded excuses can be made find themselves beaten or lost. Ironically, Doc Bingham's peripatetic dishonesty seems a better recipe for survival.

Following Mac's separation from Bingham, the fictional narrative is suspended for five consecutive Newsreel and Camera Eye episodes which bring into focus related public events of the time - about 1904-5 - and refract the author's



own childish awareness of them. American newspapers report the Russo-Japanese war and the 1904 presidential campaign, while Dos Passos (at school in England) learns of them at an intimate, domestic level through the old British salt and the American boy who tries to pick a fight. For him, they are subjects impossible to grasp except in a distorted, symbolic fashion through the reports of distant correspondence and the enclosed sensibility of a child. The Newsreels, working by reference to the public world, and the Camera Eyes, transmitting from within, supply fragments of a composite picture. Even so, the picture is incomplete: causes and relations are irrecoverable. In the same way the characters of the main narrative strive but fail to interpret their experience - so real to them - into a satisfying pattern.

Mac's life becomes a sequence of temporary accommodations - on the bum, freighthopping, jobs held long enough to accumulate a "stake" instantly spent on immediate pleasures, after which the exhausting cycle is resumed. Mac is no fool, and in moments of hangover and spent resources he gropes for the clarity to formulate his dearest aspirations:

"I feel like hell... I wanta study an' work for things; you know what I mean, not to get to be a goddam slave-driver but to work for socialism and the revolution an' like that, not work an' go on a bat an' work an' go on a bat like those damn yaps on the railroad".<sup>5</sup>

But "PRAISE MONOPOLY AS BOON TO ALL",<sup>6</sup> shriek the headlines, and Mac succeeds in putting a stop to his repetitive drifting only by his marriage to the Lardnerian shopgirl Maisie, a marriage which in its enslaving futility and in Maisie's indifference to anything but the prospects of "getting on" represents only the stability of stagnation. Whether on the road or settled in marital stalemate, Mac gets little satisfaction. His escape to Nevada to support the local IWW in their struggle against the mineowners is a transient effort to ward off Maisie, and he is forced to rat on his comrades when he learns she is pregnant. The picture of a Wobbly strike is well drawn, and Fred Hoff is of the utmost hardened revolutionary breed - perhaps more so, in the puritannical discipline of his allegiance, than were most Wobbly leaders, including Big Bill Haywood, the subject



of the third Biography. The Wobbllys' blend of pioneer stoicism and syndicalist agitation has plain romantic appeal for Dos Passos - the more so because they were the great failed movement of native American radicalism. Though their membership was large, it was diffuse and shifting, their great successes were localised; their great days were ended by government persecution during the first world war; they are notable for their martyrs. In this large-scale movement of losers appears the perfect Dos Passos image of the Byronic outcasts, defying the machine. From the viewpoint of the late nineteen-twenties, there is an elegiac note to his celebration of their hopeless endeavour.

Mac cannot hope to match the stature and dynamism of a figure like Haywood, who with his Desperate Dan oratory and careless private life appears mythologically great. As the Newsreels build up a frenzied picture of finance-capitalism completely dominating the existence of the labouring men who sweat and die to create its profits, Mac sinks further into the quicksand of compromise that will drag him deeper into self-disgust and frustration. "It was understood between them now that he had to do everything that Maisie wanted because he'd given her such a tough time before they were married".<sup>7</sup> Married life in California turns out to be a dispiriting affair, but Mac's realisation of the weak and dishonourable bargain he has struck is so much keener than his active resolution to do something about it that he moves towards the next (and final) stage of his career in a succession of blundering impulses. By now suffering from "mauvaise foi", he does not put it that way to himself. On arrival in Mexico he makes his grandiloquent vow not to be "a goddam booster like the rest of them"<sup>8</sup> sound bold and definite. It is not. But he has, at least, somehow done right for himself as an average sensual man. The movie-fade ending of Section I leaves him

at the door of Encarnacion's little room that had a bed, a picture of the virgin and a new photograph of Madero stuck up by a pin. Encarnacion closed the door, bolted it and sat down on the bed looking up at Mac.<sup>9</sup>



In his pitilessly objective description Dos Passos manages to suggest the material poverty of the Mexican girl bemused by a time of upheaval and the spiritual poverty which she and Mac share: intimate strangers, locked in the primitive Mexican shack with its bed and its cheap icons.

"Old Glory" begins with Newsreel 10, a patchwork of items from separate dates: the triumph of Madero (1911), Roosevelt's election victory (1904), a denial of a report that General Grant (d.1885) had undergone an operation for cancer, a popular son of 1911. The effect of mixing major and trivial news items is to suggest the inconsequentiality of the popular press and, more generally, the rush of miscellaneous data that the ordinary person has no opportunity to examine critically. The chaotic nature of modern society serves as sardonic commentary on the lives of the fictional characters. Janey Williams' story, now due to start is prefaced by a Camera Eye which evokes through the frightening tales of a French maid about the "Loup Garou" the nausea and fear Janey will feel about sex and the carnal side of life and which she will seek, through the acquisition of "refinement", to avoid.

Again, the basis for both Janey's and Joe's rejection of the family is laid in their early circumstances. Socially insecure, the Williamses inhabit a district also populated by negroes, to whom they must always try to adopt an attitude of superiority - an attitude desperately at odds with actuality. "Popper", a clerk at the patent office and therefore a bureaucratic servant of real American know-how, runs a household that will give him maximum peace and quiet in which to reflect on his secret disappointments. When disturbed by Joe, he beats the boy up with incredible viciousness. Joe's escape is into the streets; Janey's into the mass-produced fantasies of popular fiction.

She was a plain thinfaced sandy haired girl, quiet and popular with the teachers. Her fingers were quick and she picked up typing and shorthand easily. She liked to read and used to get books like The Inside of the Cup, The Battle of the Strong, The Winning of Barbara Worth out of the library. Her mother kept telling her that she'd spoil her eyes if she read so



much. When she read she used to imagine that she was the heroine, that the weak brother who went to the bad but was a gentleman at core and capable of every sacrifice like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* was Joe and that the hero was Alec.<sup>10</sup>

But Alec the dream lover does not see her as a desirable woman, as she discovers on a boating expedition. "After that Janey never cried much; things upset her but she got a cold hard feeling all over instead".<sup>11</sup> Alec recedes as a frozen statue in her private pantheon. Even his death scarcely stirs her, though it does provide Joe with the impetus to leave home and join the merchant marine. It is Joe, in fact, who becomes what the young Dos Passos (*Camera Eye* 14) imagined himself to be - Philip Nolan, the man without a country. Joe shrinks, as the narrative is adapted to Janey's point of view, to a figure who sends "a picture of the waterfront at Havana or the harbour at Marseille or Villefranche or a photograph of a girl in peasant costume inside a tinsel horseshoe... never a word about himself."<sup>12</sup> Janey discovers that she can earn a reasonable living, thus freeing herself from dependence on the family in Georgetown, and she learns - within the scope of her pinched and narrow attitudes - to handle the men she meets; to be tolerable company and to keep their amorousness at bay by acting the part of the "good pal".

*Camera Eye* 15 takes up the family theme in the person of the writer's cantankerous Portuguese grandfather, who would throw his food out of the window in a fit of rage, while *Newsreel* 12 recounts dissensions in the national "family". Reports of political wrangling at the 1912 conventions are interleaved with press accounts of squalid, self-interested crimes. The immediately ensuing Biography of William Jennings Bryan sardonically relates the corruption entailed by the pursuit of political power. "Bryan grew grey in the hot air of Chautauqua tents, in the applause, the handshakes, the backpatting, the cigarsmoky air of committee rooms at Democratic conventions, a silver tongue in a big mouth".<sup>13</sup> Then a further *Camera Eye*, once more centring on John Randolph Dos Passos, a man who grew so contemptuous of the hypocrisy of democratic politics that he "couldn't





get to be elected notary public in any county in the state not with all the money in the world".<sup>14</sup> This convergence of the extra-narrative devices upon the machinery of politics is acutely relevant to this stage of Janey's story. She lives and works in Washington, where the presence of Congress, of the various lobbies, of every facet and association of federal power, helps to create an atmosphere of wheeling, dealing, and sharpened knives. It also prefigures the subject of the next narrative strand, which concerns the childhood (spent not too far from Washington) of J. Ward Morehouse, one of Dos Passos' most memorable creations. Morehouse's father is a drunken n'er-do-well; the son quickly begins to state his reaction by an inordinate industry and ambition. His interests are entirely conventional:

Outside of the Strenuous Life and a lovely girl to fall in love with him there was one thing Johnny Morehouse's mind dwelt on as he sat at his desk listing desirable five and sevenroom dwelling-houses, drawing room, dining room, kitchen and butler's pantry, three master's bedrooms and bath, maid's room, water, electricity, gas, healthy location on gravelly soil in restricted residential area: he wanted to be a songwriter.<sup>15</sup>

But even his first efforts in this field are "boosting". They hint at the J. Ward Morehouse to be, the pastmaster of mystification who handles words with such practical success and so thorough an absence of any personal conviction in what he utters. During the time he spends as a realtor's assistant in Ocean City (an episode enlivened by two of Dos Passos' cameos, the venerable frauds Strang and Wedgewood), the fast maturing Morehouse psychology develops. Even emotional disillusion can supply the means for exploiting material advantages:

For a while he thought he'd go down to the station and take the first train out and throw the whole business to ballyhack, but there was the booklet to get out, and there was a chance that if the boom did come he might get in on the ground floor, and this connection with money and the Strangs: opportunity knocks but once on a young man's door.<sup>16</sup>

His marriage to Annabelle - farcical as it is - reveals Morehouse as a stiff, solemn young man, quite impervious to any irony in his situation and possessed of an unquestioning attachment to self-help principles. He is



naturally unresponsive to his wife's madcap hedonism (she, too, of course, is a fraud) but more than that he lacks any inkling of spontaneous warmth and any capacity to welcome it in others. "Old Glory" concludes with a view of Morehouse "breathing deep the cold coalsmoky air of the trainshed"<sup>17</sup> in Pittsburgh. The reader's knowledge of his character, however, makes it easy to predict that he will overcome his first serious setback, just as it was easy to expect that Mac would find Mexico too congenial to uproot himself again. Morehouse is going places - not altogether by accident. He is a public-relations pioneer in a society about to become increasingly dependent on the weasel words of the professional mystifier. His inborn priggishness guards him from self-criticism. In the letter breaking off relations with Annabelle he writes "I shall feel that when the divorce is satisfactorily arranged I shall be entitled to some compensation for the loss of time etc. and the injury to my career that has come through your fault"<sup>18</sup> - a reproach which, despite its lifeless commercial phrases, echoes a sincerer grievance than the reference to "the great pain your faithlessness has caused me".<sup>19</sup>

At this point in the novel - half-way through - the story has relied for its movement and significance on the variety and novelty of technique and the realistic low-key fluency of the narrative portions. Nevertheless, its interest has been the interest of kaleidoscopic display; more that of an extended "Suite Americaine" than of a work founded on a stable organizing principle. It is not hard to see the reasons why contemporary reviewers made what now appear as captious and marginal objections; they had a right to feel that, beneath the impressionistic outlines that divide up the story without ever quite reaching the tense reflexive allusiveness of poetry, there lay an essentially specious creation - something like the play that is brilliantly dramatic to watch but never serious engaged on a theme. But Dos Passos works gradually and by aggregation. The first two books of The Forty-Second Parallel amount to a tentative placement of attitudes towards the corruption of the commonwealth, the individual in search of his fate, the child-artist's vision, the role of the hero; they



await artistic integration. In the last three sections, as historical and personal crises are approached, these attitudes are amplified, developed and explained in a manner which fully expresses the strengths and limitations of Dos Passos' view of life.

"Twentieth Century: Eastbound" starts with a Camera Eye. The fourteen year-old Dos Passos is struck by a sudden awareness of the universe beyond his own mind - "Halley's Comet and the Universe." The awesome infinity of these abstractions leads him to reject received religion and to sense the first pangs of mortality. "You wondered if you'd be alive next time Halley's comet came around"<sup>20</sup>; but as is so often the case his own infancy, relatively free and comfortable, contrasts with that of his characters. Eleanor Stoddard, the next one to be introduced, "when she was small... hated everything".<sup>21</sup> She - the familiar tale - has a father who puts her off. A office-worker in the Chicago stockyards, he enjoys telling repellent stories of the slaughterhouse to his family. Eleanor is driven into self-reassuring fantasies at an early age, somewhat after the fashion of Janey Williams. Aesthetically, though, she is a cut above Janey - no absorption in girls' romances. "Art was something ivory white and very pure and noble and distant and sad".<sup>22</sup> Eleanor meets her ideal self-image in Eveline Hutchins, and together they organise a genteel cult of art and self-improvement. The provincialism of their little world is heavily satirised, partly through acquaintances like Maurice, the Berlitz teacher who greets the news that he has inherited Eleanor as a student with a coy murmur of "Vae Victis", and who paints, despite his extravagant claims of Kultur-Bolschevismus,

the loveliest pictures in pale buffs and violets of longfaced boys with big luminous eyes and long lashes and longfaced girls that looked like boys and Russian wolfhounds with big luminous eyes, and always in the back there were a few girders or a white skyscraper and a big puff of white clouds.<sup>23</sup>

Here is an entertaining microcosm of early twentieth-century bourgeois culture (it may even contain elements of self-satire). It compares wittily with the approved commercial emulation as summed up in the knockabout duo of Potter and



Sportmann, Eleanor's superiors at Marshall Fields who struggle to outdo each other and to win the favour of their prize subordinate with the "crisp little refined monied voice".<sup>24</sup>

In truth, Eleanor is a sharp little piece. Her treatment of her father, whom she presses for money but will not otherwise acknowledge, exposes the hard and dishonest edge of her egoism. It is her egoism, tastefully concealed under a "refined" surface, that enables her to cultivate Miss Perkins, more or less consciously in the expectation of material benefit. The irony of the bequest she does receive is stinging - "A handsome diamond brooch in the form of a locomotive",<sup>25</sup> the perfect example of Gilded Age taste. In the expensive trinket is summarised the monstrous greed and ruthlessness of the speculators and asset-strippers, squeezing their fortunes out of a laissez-faire bonanza while their workers starved. There is more than a touch of this epic bluff in Eveline's and Eleanor's partnership in an interior-decorating business. Somehow, "interior decorating" wipes the dirt off the money, and the enterprise is surrounded with artypretentiousness.

A photograph of Brancusi's Golden Bird over the desk... and copies of the Little Review and Poetry among the files of letters from clients and unpaid bills from the wholesalers.<sup>26</sup>

Like Janey, Eleanor adopts the role of an asexual companion to men, especially the queer actors and elderly stage-door johnnies "with nothing to do except to go to tailors and visit specialists and occasionally blackball a Jew",<sup>27</sup> and through these associations she gets the stroke of luck needed to rescue her from an increasingly equivocal situation. When the two girls board the Twentieth Century Limited to work on a New York stage contract, they face the same portents that confronted J. Ward Morehouse on his arrival in Pittsburgh: "the steelworks of Indiana Harbor, the big cement works belching puttycolored smoke, the flaring furnaces of Gary"<sup>28</sup> - all the ugly outward signs of industrial master-class hegemony, the processes that make money and consume life. The following Camera Eye (number 19: basically, the plot of "July") speaks with



the strangled voice of the author recovering, from a whirlpool of memories, a real - though childishly innocent - sense of romance from the brutal facts of success on the American plan.

What precedes the next instalment of J. Ward Morehouse's personal history is a Biography - that of Minor C. Keith. Keith is one of the least familiar biographical subjects and, as his name suggests one of the few who are not in some way prodigious. He is a rat, a scavenger who, unlike so many entrepreneurs, dirtied his hands in close contact with the contaminated sources of his wealth. "Limon was one of the worst pestholes in the Caribbean, even the Indians died there of malaria, yellow jack, dysentery... Minor Keith didn't die".<sup>29</sup> More important, he founded the United Fruit Company, that pioneer of dollar-imperialist intervention in the politics of South American states. The "uneasy look" in his eyes betrays the guilt and trepidation of his class as social antagonisms intensify. Newsreel 14 had concentrated on labour unrest and violence, and in Camera Eye 20 the death of a scab (a "gentleman volunteer", perhaps mentioned in a conversation overheard by the writer at Harvard) is recounted with an impassivity not far from gloating. The time is now just pre-1914 (the IWW-led strike against the American Woolen Company in Lawrence took place in 1912) and the growing dissatisfaction of the working class, notwithstanding the piecemeal reforms of Progressivism) colour the mood of the novel as the career of J. Ward Morehouse, only temporarily arrested, prepares to take on the character of a full-scale exercise in political deception.

Morehouse has never lost what might be termed his "platonic conception of himself". His reporter's job in Pittsburgh - a post which might satisfy a less voraciously ambitious person - fills him with discontent. The "muckers" and immigrants whose problems and difficulties surround him provoke only contempt in Morehouse: he cannot sympathise with the un-American poor, with

Mrs Piretti whose husband had been killed in a rumpus in a saloon on Locust Street or Sam Burkovitch, who'd been elected president of the Ukranian singing society,



or some woman with sudsy hands whose child had been slashed by a degenerate... And not to know any really nice people, never to get an assignment that wasn't connected with working people or foreigners or criminals; he hated it.<sup>30</sup>

These six months only confirm his prejudices. Morehouse lacks the humanity to see such people as victims and sufferers - his intelligence is directed to learning only what will suit his drive for success. When he does have the opportunity (through his lucky acquaintance with McGill) to concentrate upon his chosen objectives he does so with an energy and single-mindedness that contrast graphically with the spasmodic faltering steps of Fenian McCreary. Morehouse, with the direct impatient candour of the man who never halts to question himself, sees that his position with Bessemer Products carries implications well beyond the routine apple-polishing he is initially asked to perform. His clever advocacy of a more substantial programme of "educating the public", in the wake of the bloody strike at Homestead, leads to his appointment as the chief of an "information bureau" for the entire Pittsburgh steel industry. And this coup is crowned by marriage to Gertrude Staple (and the Staple fortune), followed by a second and more splendid European honeymoon.

But now the abyss is terrifyingly close. The "war talk" which aborts the Moorhouses' year in Europe is prophetic; the nineteenth-century afterglow is about to be dimmed. Camera Eye 21 has a wistful, elegiac tone; it recalls Virginia farm-life in the dog-days of its entropy.

The land between the rivers was flat drained of all strength by tobacco in the early Walter Raleigh John Smith Pocahontas days but what was it before the war that drained out the men and women?<sup>31</sup>

Faulkner might have an answer to that. For Dos Passos, the rhetorical question marks his farewell to the innocence of the Camera Eye device. With the advance of the "blood-dimmed tide" it can no longer function as the deeply subjective, synaesthetic reflection of a child's awareness. Increasingly, it will display the author as part of his public world and not as a palpitating organism on whom the heavens may unavailingly fall. Indeed, the next Newsreel (15) and



Camera Eye 22 echo each other's phrases: "WANT BIG WAR OR NONE... CZAR LOSES PATIENCE WITH AUSTRIA... ASSASSIN SLAYS DEPUTY JAURES"<sup>32</sup>, "obligations according to the treaty of... handed the ambassador his passports... BRITISH FLEET DESTROYED GERMAN SQUADRON OFF CAPE RACE".<sup>33</sup> Sandwiched between them, under the title "Prince of Peace" is a short, coldly devastating attack on the Gospel of Wealth. In its laconic, literal statements, its reiteration of the words "believed" and "confidence", its telling use of simple poetic phrases and its final flat qualification it paints with great force and feeling the type of American successful man most despicable in the author's eyes - the non-productive financier and stock-market operator; the kind of man for whom John Dos Passos Sr. juggled holding-company pyramids and negotiated tax concessions; the chapel-faced philistine who compounds his greed with the hypocritical and ego-gratifying vice of philanthropy, and who attempts to buy with his stolen millions the trappings of culture and lineage.<sup>34</sup>

Carnegie was the steel king of Pittsburgh, where the workers in his Homestead mills, if their struggles succeeded in raising their pay, would have preferred to spend the increase on feeding their families rather than on subscriptions to the Carnegie libraries which sprang up like mushrooms in American towns. It is precisely this interest which Morehouse has contracted to serve, and he continues to serve it when, after his return to the U.S., he founds his own agency. He has become a representative figure of the modern industry of bamboozlement and legal lying - "public relations". He now draws towards him other representative figures who, beneath the deceitful labels they wear - "labour reformer", "judge", "press reporter" - are pledged to both self-interest and the interest of the class to which they are sold. Their fluency in the use of words, like Morehouse's own, is actually a means of exploiting language. Words are no longer agreed verbal symbols for certain objects and experiences. They have been marshalled into an elaborate code of mystification.<sup>35</sup> Barrow and Judge Planet, caricatures though they are, are more significant minor characters than the cameo-sketches of the novel's earlier



chapters. Working in conjunction with Morehouse, they comprise a dangerous awkward squad of public misinformers, alert for the chances of intrigue in business and government alike, and drawn like sharks to the smell of money. Morehouse, easily the smoothest and most able of them all, wins his point with a drivelling and sentimental address to a Rotary luncheon on "Labour Troubles: a way out". Beneath his oratorical soft-soaping, the attentive Babbitts sense the usefulness of a man who offers a new and subtle weapon against organised labour. Morehouse has found his market.

Newsreel 16 explodes softly in a starburst of trivial newspaper sensations - "PLUMBER HAS 100 LOVES... UNIVERSITY EXPELS GUM" etc. Attention is switched from the propaganda arm of commerce and industry to one of its satellite worlds- bourgeois art, show-business. There is an ironical disparity of effort between the two. J. Ward Morehouse conducts his affairs blandly and sedately; it comes naturally to him. Eleanor and Eveline, pitched on to Broadway, sweat and strain to the point of exhaustion for the sake of their set decorations on an ephemeral, stupid show which closes after two weeks. The satire on the New York theatre (of which Dos Passos had some disillusioning experience in the late twenties) is pushed to its limit, and some of the disillusion is allowed to leak through to Eveline. But the chapter is important chiefly because it entails the first meeting point of the separate narrative histories. Eleanor is a natural associate for Morehouse, who is almost dead emotionally and sexually, and she in turn finds that he corresponds to her formula of the ideal man, adding to a generally gallant manner and an undemanding libido the bromide of "positive" American ideas.

he explained about the work he was doing keeping the public informed about the state of relations between capital and labour and stemming the propaganda of sentimentalists and reformers upholding American ideas against crazy German socialistic ideas and the panaceas of discontented dirt-farmers in the Northwest. Eleanor thought his ideas were very interesting but she liked better to hear about the stockexchange and how the Steel Corporation was founded and the difficulties of the oil companies in Mexico and Hearst and great fortunes. She asked him about some small investment she was making and he looked up at her with twinkly blue eyes in a white square



face whose prosperity was just beginning to curve over the squareness of the jowl and said, "Miss Stoddard, may I have the honor of being your financial adviser?"<sup>36</sup>

This must be one of the nastiest moments in modern literature; what intensifies its repellent character is the fact that, although their closest complicity is yet to come, the two have instinctively recognised each other and have relapsed into an unwonted frankness that is even less appealing than their customary starched poses. Morehouse does not usually speak like a Wall Street lout and Eleanor is much more dreadful when she is smitten with admiration for Morehouse than when she "hated everything". It is a meeting of the barren and self-serving. To be fanciful, one might view it as the instant of inspiration between the capitalist "artist" and his muse.

Janey's story is resumed "in the second year of the European war". Reacting to the mounting climate of hysteria with the fearful ignorance of a virgin, she leaves Dreyfus and Carroll, where German chauvinism prevails, and seems (like Eleanor) to be in danger of losing her economic independence when she too falls, by a combination of luck and despairing nerve, into the orbit of J. Ward Morehouse. All the different tracks of the narrative are now converging; their junction is Mexico where, a hundred and seventy pages earlier, Mac's story had been interrupted and where, in the aftermath of the overthrow of Huerta, Yankee activity is at fever pitch. The Mexican theme has been kept alive by repeated mentions in the newsreels. Now Mexico becomes a major centre of the action. Under the stress of a fluid and chaotic political situation normal attitudes are magnified, latent ones revealed. The printers and prospectors Mac meets in Mexico City, badly scared by the success of the revolution, have adopted proto-fascist opinions; the aged Pole, whose mental world of theoretical socialism has been ruined by the collapse of the Second International, takes refuge in eccentricity. "He had a theory that civilization and a mixed diet were causing the collapse of the human race".<sup>37</sup> Amidst the collapse in Mexico, Mac's relative healthiness is apparent, though his political principles have more or less lapsed. He takes advantage of the local



opportunities for sensual pleasure without letting self-indulgence bloat him; his sympathies are still progressive enough to make him friendly to the revolution, though he is never part of it; his domestic and financial arrangements are congenially in order. By contrast G. H. Barrow, crossing the border on some shady mission, proves to be a disagreeable clown: he behaves with the uncorseted, patronising recklessness of a thick-witted American tourist. In consequence, he has to be protected from the anger of the Mexicans, who have shed blood to affirm their belief that not everything can be bought for dollars. Barrow, though, is only his master's pilot-fish; when he returns to the U.S. with a whole skin, Morehouse himself travels to Mexico with the aim as he puts it,

in a purely unofficial capacity you understand to make contacts, to find out what the situation was and just what there was behind Carranza's stubborn opposition to American investors and that the big business men he was in touch with in the States desired only fair play and that he felt if their point of view could be thoroughly understood through some information bureau or the friendly coöperation of Mexican newspapermen...<sup>38</sup>

In Morehouse's view, so conditioned by bluff and deceit, every contrary opinion must have "something behind" it. Mac sums him up fairly accurately as a "smooth bastard", but he is beginning to realise again that his own position - now growing less comfortable - is essentially false. The years of wandering, of choosing any way of life that seems temporarily appealing and never picking a definite outlook to be held at any cost, have caught up with him. He has become declassed and de-naturalized. His personality has never matured. His flight to Vera Cruz and his initial panicky decision to return to the United States without Concha are the product of a shaky individualism which, however overlaid with lip-service to Wobbly doctrine, has been at the core of his failure to grow and settle. Mac drinks a toast "to the workers, to the trade unions, to the partido laborista, to the social revolution and the agraristas"<sup>39</sup> - but he does so in the safety of Vera Cruz, open to the American fleet and far from the hinterland centres of Zapatista revolt. The drink has become more important than the toast, and nothing illustrates better Mac's fundamental lack of serious



American antodidact's odyssey and the limitations of a career so crammed with "adventure". Even so, he is a member of the last generation to be able to lead such an existence; future prospects will be much grimmer.

As the Mexican imbroglio peters out in the months immediately before America's declaration of war, Morehouse's growing success is brought into focus through the admiring consciousness of Janey Williams. He has been gathering clients, of which "the biggest account of all was Southwestern Oil campaign to counter the insidious anti-American propaganda of the British oil-companies in Mexico and to oppose the intervention lobby of the Hearst interests in Washington".<sup>42</sup> Morehouse is actually ready to swim with the tide of war-sentiment. Various tensions have developed - particularly between Morehouse and Gertrude on the subject of Eleanor Stoddard - which threaten the supply of Staple capital on which he is still reliant. All this is refracted through the prism of Janey's idealization of Morehouse: a device allowing for implicit ironical exposure of each party. Janey "could see that his wife was a disagreeable peevish woman trying to use her mother's money as a means of keeping a hold on J. Ward,"<sup>43</sup> and she feels "quite indignant"<sup>44</sup> about what she views as the malicious interference of Eleanor Stoddard. Every emotion she experiences is coloured by the false vitality of a vicarious outlook, the thoughts and reactions of an unthreatened observer in a safe rear position. Janey is human life in clean gloves. By contrast, Gertrude Morehouse and Joe Williams share the reality of rankling dissatisfaction which they are not afraid to express in home truths. Gertrude understands the nature of her husband - "Oh you're cold as a fish... You're just a fish. I'd like you better if it was true, if you were having an affair with her."<sup>45</sup> - but remains his prisoner. Joe, who has suffered the worst hazards and humiliations of the "gob" merchant sailor in wartime, is greeted on his arrival in New York by a sister who has "got on" and who judges him purely by the plebeian roughness of his manners and appearance. Joe has seen enough to realise that "the whole damn war's crooked from start to finish"<sup>46</sup> - essentially, a contrivance of the Morehouse operation by other means. The time is due to



come when Morehouse will depend on the war to save his hide.

"The Yanks Are Coming" opens with a confessional Camera Eye. The scene is a mass anti-war demonstration in New York at which two national celebrities of the Left, Emma Goldman and Max Eastman, appear to rally the crowd with their speeches. The occasion is made to seem theatrical, histrionic; as the group moves from Madison Square Garden to the Bronx Casino and then to the Brevoort the great lion's roar of popular indignation dwindles to the parlour rhetoric of intellectuals who "eating frankfurters and sauerkraut... talked about red flags and barricades and suitable posts for machine-guns".<sup>47</sup> Echoes of Vera Cruz - and in the final bathetic sentence, with its mimicry of Hemingway, is a symbolic appraisal of those who, despite their ostensible radicalism and verbal defiance, have the consolations of their bourgeois status to protect. "We... went home, and opened the door with a latchkey and put on pyjamas and went to bed and it was comfortable in bed".<sup>48</sup> Set beside Newsreel 18, which cites Wilson's war oratory and reports Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station, it stresses the remoteness from proletarian experience of the radical intelligentsia, and the weakness of their convictions when they are put to the test.

Eleanor at this time "thought that things were very exciting that winter".<sup>49</sup> By now, she is the constant companion of J. Ward Morehouse. These two dead souls substitute for the deepgoing satisfactions of an authentic relationship cheap and spurious parodies:

She burst into tears and they talked about sacrifice and dedication and J.W. held her arm tight through the fur coat and gave the organ grinder man a dollar. When they got to the theater Eleanor hurried down to the ladies room to see if her eyes had got red. But when she looked in the mirror they weren't red at all and there was a flash of heartfelt feeling in her eyes, so she just freshened up her face and went back up to the lobby, where J.W. was waiting for her with the tickets in his hand; her grey eyes were flashing and had tears in them.<sup>50</sup>

This relationship, "pure as driven snow" only in the sexual sense as Gertrude has suggested, is nevertheless a danger. It is largely responsible for the pressing financial difficulties plaguing Morehouse. The thought that he may



have to abandon her to save his career gives her yet another pang of self-dramatizing pity.

She thought of her colored maid Augustine with her unfortunate loves that she told Eleanor about and wished she'd been like that. Maybe she'd been wrong from the start to want everything so justright and beautiful.<sup>51</sup>

However, just as she contemplates making (what would almost certainly be a disastrous error) a personal appeal to Gertrude, war is declared. The crisis ends in an orgy of sentimental humbug. Morehouse accepts a dollar-a-year post in Washington, Gertrude becomes magnanimously "understanding", and Eleanor is once again able to place between herself and painful reality the familiar aspirational shields. "How beautiful the room was, like a Whistler, like Sarah Bernhardt. E Emotion misted her eyes."<sup>52</sup>

With the United States about to launch into war, the historical movement of *The Forty-Second Parallel* reaches a conclusion. Dos Passos, before he begins the story of Charley Anderson which in forty pages takes Charley through the time-scale of the whole book, appends one each of his experimental devices. Newsreel 19 is a brief compilation of press clippings, concentrated on the uplifting presentation of the nation's official war-aims and the colossal greed and dishonesty underlying them. Camera Eye 27 narrates, with a wry sense of emotions "now" and "then", Dos Passos' own voyage to France, drinking in with ardent zest the sights and sounds of his pre-combat experience, yet faced in the end with the Street of Lost Hopes and a suspicious French security agent. The final Biography aptly relates the career of Robert M. La Follette, Wisconsin's Progressive Republican governor and senator, one of the last great opponents of "entangling alliances", who led the Congressional rearguard fight against Wilson's pro-Ally policies. The subject is treated with respect, but recognised as a loser, an anachronism: "an orator haranguing from the capitol of a lost republic".<sup>53</sup>



But the war itself is not to be the subject of this novel. The narrative resumes with the story of Charley Anderson - contemporary with Mac, but destined to be the new, Veblenian American. Charley is raised by a pietistic mother; up to the time he leaves home for Minneapolis, his childhood is serene and uncomplicated: little but the normal spasms of puberty disturb it. In Minneapolis he feels "uneasy" at living under the discipline of Vogel's teutonic work-ethic, but his disinterested curiosity about mechanical things insulates him from the economic and domestic conflicts that worry his brother. "He'd buy every number of Popular Mechanics and the Scientific American and Adventure and the Wide World Magazine".<sup>54</sup> His ambition as a boy, if he imagines a goal at all, is not worldly success, but "seeing the world". Charley's early career is much like Edison's in outline and like Edison he is prone, through over-enthusiasm, to find himself in hot water with employers. Tinkering with machinery is for him an absorbing occupation. The process itself holds more attraction than any end to which it might conceivably lead. "He didn't want to get married because that wd keep him from travelling round the country and getting ahead in studying engineering".<sup>55</sup> His travels help him to mature and to broaden his sympathies, but at the same time he begins to feel the pull of self-improvement; this is no longer quite Edison's America of the freelance operator relying on luck and enterprise. Charley has what Mac lacked - a sense of purpose - and he is able to foresee the necessity of supplementing his personal gift with training and qualifications.

Charley said he was going to New York because he thought there were good chances of schooling in a big city like that and how he was an automobile mechanic and wanted to get to be a C.E. or something like that because there was no future for a working stiff without schooling.<sup>56</sup>

Under the influence of Doc Rogers, though, he chooses to enlist "before the whole thing goes bellyup". The final pages of The Forty-Second Parallel recapitulate, from Charley's point of view, the general background of the final Morehouse-Stoddard episodes. For Charley, it is all confusion, "too deep for me".<sup>57</sup> Arguments against the war, as propounded by Benny Compton and the



soapbox orator, mean even less to Charley than they do to Doc Rogers, who simply lowers his head and charges whenever he hears an "unpatriotic" idea. Charley is also Mac's opposite in his thorough ignorance of the theoretical aspects of politics. He is the practical man par excellence, and any discussion of broad impersonal issues tends to give him a headache - in this respect he resembles Chrisfield, who can only act and needs John Andrews to think for him. Charley's "manager" is Doc Rogers, upon whose suggestion Charley enlists - to leave for Europe on a French ship of which the crew will not even speak to him. The end of isolationism has not ended the isolation of the individual.

One critic has recorded the view that "Dos Passos does not call himself a Marxist, if he were more of one, he might have written a better novel."<sup>58</sup> While this view is false - "Art must make its own way and by its own means. The Marxian methods are not the same as the artistic"<sup>59</sup> - it is central to critical misunderstandings of Dos Passos. The feeling persists that he should have been a Marxist, and not necessarily just for reasons of political taste. Marxism, after all, supplies a unique means of reconciling determinism and the exercise of free will - an antithesis which, under the specific terms of the dialectic, can be regarded as false. Marxism states that there is a global tendency in history and that men can, by their own conscious efforts, help to realise it. Marxism insists that the behaviour of society can be understood and changed by using discoverable laws. To a writer like Dos Passos, instinctively drawn to the side of the governed and exploited, dealing with men in society, choosing as his protagonists men who lose hope and fail, Marxism ought, on the face of it, to be an attractive philosophy: it is both intellectually strenuous and optimistic. Yet the fiction of John Dos Passos persistently denies, in its atmosphere, situations and artistic logic, that human society can be rationally understood or that there is any reason to hope for radical improvements. The early heroes of Dos Passos had struggled to create a meaning for themselves in a hostile or indifferent universe, and all failed. Between the conditioning which limited their freedom and the illusory ideal of the self-realising individual, they lacked the will or energy to oppose the huge impersonal forces that defeated



them - the army, New England morality, the pressures of metropolitan living. Ultimately, their failures are not explained: they are shown in some detail, and with increasing credibility as the author lays his hands on the tropes that enable him to render so vividly the constant engrammatic bombardment of social and personal defeats. Manhattan Transfer in particular stresses the adventitious nature of life: penalties and rewards are distributed by accident, but the direction of all events is towards loss and disappointment. On this evidence, life is a crooked gamble in which everyone is robbed. This is the outlook of romantic pessimism (the very opposite of Marxism) but it establishes its partial truth in Manhattan Transfer by the fast, vivid and dramatic pattern of its examples. The sea of circumstances in which Jimmy Herf drowns is portrayed in energetic detail, and in The Forty-Second Parallel the method of Manhattan Transfer is extended to portray the society of a whole nation.

This method, the method of "saturation", requires the sensitive exercise of a selective faculty. Accusations that this is just what Dos Passos lacks are balanced by contrary objections that he limits his scope to too narrow a segment of American society<sup>60</sup> In fact, he has carefully selected characters of the lower-middle social strata, the ideal type of humbly-born American who is expected to "get on" and for whom, in the sanctified tradition, America is the supreme land of opportunity. The significance of the narrative passages is to show that this is a profound illusion, that the actual freedom of the individual is limited, and that whether or not he succeeds in "making it" he is lonely and doomed. Those who decline to make it suffer materially; in any case, they compromise; their humanity is diminished by victimisation and by their personal inability to realise their principles. Those who succeed sacrifice so much in doing so. There is no contradiction in this attitude, any more than there is in the belief that personality is shaped by a combination of various circumstances - background, heredity, metabolism, conscious ideas. Dos Passos refrains from explaining: his eclecticism is entailed in the behaviour of his characters and in the accompanying data which he has chosen to include in the Newsreels, Biographies, and Camera Eyes.



Hence the often-noted "behaviourism" of his character-portrayal aims for a particular kind of truth: the truth as it is observed, the facts as they appear in context. Dos Passos is not obliged to say whether he believes that men are alienated by the capitalist system of productive relations or by the nature of human life itself. Indeed, where capitalism rules, the two are effectively the same, and unless the novelist wants to play the social reformer he is not, as he works to produce a mirror of reality, required to distinguish between them. What he can do is to employ a rhetoric and imagery that expresses the shape of reality as he sees it, and for Dos Passos' purposes the imagery of class warfare could hardly be bettered. The force lines of class conflict within which his characters are drawn stand for the immediate everyday hardships of an unequal social system and for the permanent conditions of loneliness and misfortune under which mankind abides. Mac has three latent destinies corresponding to the three separate strands of his early life: ordinary sensual working guy, radical, wandering hedonist. He is incapable of making any final choice between them. Circumstances uproot him, and his fate, at the end of his personal history, is not evil or tragic but disappointing. The total weight of the novel's rhetoric contrives to suggest that he should have chosen a life of greater discipline and purpose - yet Mac is scarcely free to choose. He is free, however, to hope, no matter how inexorably his hopes are denied. The philosophy of proletarian revolution stands for his highest hopes, just as the American self-help philosophy stands for Morehouse's central aspirations, and the disparity between sustaining cultural myths and the manifold setbacks of life as it is actually lived is the major unifying tension of the book. Mac is a victim rather than an active traitor to his own ideology: his normative destiny is symbolic. Equally, J.Ward Morehouse, in one sense a Titan of self-discipline who prostitutes his talents in an unworthy cause, is in reality another victim. Whatever motivates him - and it is not a conscious desire to advance the class interests of the American bourgeoisie - leads him into the trap of the ruined individual. Such correspondences disqualify Dos Passos as a Marxist writer: a Marxist might agree that capitalism alienates



both those who serve it and those who oppose it, but he could not look upon their fates as individuals with such even-handed attention.

The importance of the individual to Dos Passos is underlined by his use of the Biographies. There are eight of these all told in The Forty-Second Parallel, of Debs, Burbank, Bryan, Keith, Carnegie, Edison, Steinmetz and Lafollette. Only two of these are unequivocally hostile - those of Minor C. Keith and Andrew Carnegie, though if the last line were omitted from the piece on Carnegie it would just be a collection of facts about a very rich man. Bryan is treated with a faintly compassionate satire - in 1930 he was only five years dead, but he stood, quaintly, for a much older America. Debs and Lafollette took the risk of speaking out against the "interest". Burbank, Steinmetz and to some extent Edison are the Veblenian heroes, the men of practical genius forced to mortgage their talents to the financial system. Each of these men is revealed to have some secret flaw or failure, but each - as T.K. Whipple has pointed out - seems to possess some superhuman quality, reducible only to the sum total of his life's endeavour, and they overshadow the bleak and jaded lives of the fictional characters. Together with the imposing figure of John Randolph Dos Passos as he appears in the Camera Eyes,<sup>61</sup> they furnish a living reproach to the modern Americans who hobble blindly through the novel's narrative portions. The lesson may be partly historical - that the Gilded Age gave freer rein to the drives of the forceful individual - and partly political - that in a democracy only a few can expect to shine - but the principal effect is to suggest a contrast between those who (for good or ill) dominated circumstances and those who are pushed about by chance or social currents. Even Morehouse, the shrewd, plausible opportunist, is a flannel-suited puppet beside Bryan or Carnegie.

The author is not, however, advancing the proposition that historical progress depends on the activity of great men. Most of his biographical subjects were alive during the period covered by The Forty-Second Parallel, but their achievements generally belong to the century before. The artistic value of the Biographies is to suggest the importance in himself of the individual and



the variety of ways in which individuality can be expressed. There is little mention, for instance, of the advantages they drew from propitious circumstances or of how far each man represented a movement. Lafollette is described as "a wilful man expressing no opinion but his own" whereas Wilson had called him one of "a group of wilful men", i.e. the Congressional rump of anti-war Insurgents. The contrast is deepened by this emphasis, and the society in which Mac, Morehouse and the others exist is given the appearance of a vast, disturbed ants' nest. Following his creations' movements, Dos Passos adopts the point of view of the dismayed ant who, observing the disaster at first hand but unable to determine its cause, runs helplessly about. The crowded yet atomised world which he depicts - a world superbly realised through the multi-faceted techniques of the novel - is not a world explicable as the product of strict historical laws. In refusing to be a social theorist, while at the same time using the observable facts from which social theorists would draw their conclusion, Dos Passos remains faithful to his vision. By throwing together the individual in all the patient and commonplace detail of his life-effort, the collective organism examined through its dominant beliefs and representative figures, and the subjective awareness of memory he creates a nexus that is the opposite of Marxian analysis, that refuses to explain or explicitly to judge, but which displays with energy and seriousness the developing life of a civilisation.

2. "Like Wrecks In a Dissolving Dream".

Paris:

The dark boulevards with here and there a blue lamp lighting up a bench and few tree-trunks, or a faint glow from inside a closed café where a boy in shirt-sleeves is sweeping the floor. Crowds of soldiers, Belgians, Americans, Canadians, civilians with canes and straw hats and well-dressed women on their arms, shopgirls in twos and threes laughing with shrill, merry voices; and everywhere girls of the street, giggling alluringly in hoarse, dissipated tones, clutching the arms of drunken soldiers, tilting them-



selves temptingly in men's way as they walk along. Cigars and cigarettes make spots of reddish light, and now and then a match lighted makes a man's face stand out in yellow relief and glints red in the eyes of the people round about.<sup>62</sup>

He came out on a broad straight avenue, where there were many American officers he had to salute, and M.P.'s and shops with wide plate-glass windows, full of objects that had a shiny, expensive look. "Another case of victories", he thought, as he went off into a side street taking with him a glimpse of the bluish-grey pile of the Opera, with its pompous windows and its naked bronze ladies holding lamps.<sup>63</sup>

It wasn't dark yet. There was almost no traffic but the boulevards were full of strollers in the blue June dusk. As it got darker women leaned out towards them from behind all the trees, girls' hands clutched their arms, here and there a dirty word in English burst like a thrown egg above the nasal singsong of French. The three of them walked arm in arm, their ears still ringing from the talk on the dangers of infection with syphilis and gonorrhea a medical officer had given them last night on the boat.<sup>64</sup>

The railhead:

Infantry tramped by, the rain spattering with a cold glitter on grey helmets, on gun-barrels, on the straps of equipment. Red sweating faces, drooping under the hard ruins of helmets, turned to the ground with the struggle with the weight of equipment; rows and patches of faces were the only warmth in the desolation of putty-colored mud and bowed mud-colored bodies and dripping mud-colored sky. In the cold colorlessness they were delicate and feeble as the faces of children, rosy and soft under the splattering of mud and the shaginess of unshaven beards.<sup>65</sup>

The men fell into line slowly, with their packs and rifles. Lieutenants hovered about the edges of the forming lines, tightly belted into their stiff trench coats, scrambling up and down the coal piles of the siding. The men were given "at ease" and stood leaning on their rifles staring at a green water-tank on three wooden legs, over the top of which had been thrown a huge piece of torn grey cheesecloth.<sup>66</sup>

It was at Fontainebleau lined up in the square in front of Francis I's palace that they first saw the big gray Fiat ambulances they were to drive. Schuyler came back from talking with the French drivers who were turning them over with the news that they were sore as hell because it meant that they had to go back into the front line. They asked why the devil the Americans couldn't stay home and mind their own business instead of coming over here and filling up all the good embusqué job.<sup>67</sup>



Blood:

Where the middle of the man had been, where had been the curved belly and the genitals, where the thighs had joined with a strong swerving of muscles to the trunk, was a depression, a hollow pool of blood, that glinted a little in the cold diffusion of gray light from the west.<sup>68</sup>

Where the face had been was a spongy mass of purple and yellow and red, half of which stuck to the russet leaves when the body rolled over. Large flies with bright shiny green bodies circled about it.<sup>69</sup>

One night they put him on duty outside the operating-room and for twelve hours he had the job of carrying out buckets of blood from which protruded occasionally a shattered bone or a piece of an arm of a leg.<sup>70</sup>

From One Man's Initiation come the studied notebook exercises in prose-poetic reporting - pictorial, imagistic. They are formally redundant fragments in the narrative, they ignore grammatical and logical rules, and their tendency is non-naturalistic. "Yellow relief" and "hollow pool" make little verbal sense, and "a cold diffusion of gray light" may be a good light to view a corpse by but tends to substitute an overconsciousness of literary effect for an attention to the human emotions evoked by violent death. In the extracts from Three Soldiers the imagery, though still intensely visual, is more the imagery of natural sensation, of a reflexive interchange between men and the environment in which they live and act. To John Andrews, Paris is not simply an impressionist canvas; it is rife with objects and people which he must learn to differentiate, judge, relate to. Soldiers bound for the front move, cough, and stamp their feet, while the corpse Chrisfield stumbles across is a real corpse, undergoing decomposition, that modifies more intensely than propaganda his attitude towards the Germans.

Even so, a residual continuity of style is as noticeable as the development of a more assured and vital understanding of the craft of fiction. Certain distinct elements of composition - colour, form, a melancholy irony of elementary contrasts - remain constant. The real change occurs in the passages from 1919. Only one phrase there could reasonably belong to one or other of the



earlier books: "the blue June dusk". Instead, the writing carries a brutal and sardonic edge, a reminder that hatred, disease and death are routine, a dies irae recited by a tired voice. It is the voice of hindsight: "Tout est raconté comme par quelqu'un qui se souvient.... Chez Dos Passos, l'événement reçoit d'abord son nom, les dés sont jetés, comme dans notre mémoire".<sup>71</sup> But Dos Passos' "temps de l'Histoire" has a deeper and more intimate quality than Sartre suggests. For in 1919 he recapitulates the setting and the specific character of his own wartime experiences (including the original impulse of his choice of métier) in a much more complete fictional form and with far greater control over his artistic means and purposes.

"Hell, I wanted to see the show" was Dos Passos' account of his motives for not having taken as he sometimes felt he should, the course of the principled pacifist. As the text of One Man's Initiation proves, a "show"<sup>72</sup> is basically the form in which the war is first represented: viewed, pari passu with the inward reflections of Martin Howe, as though it were a piece of assigned subject-matter on which the novice author could test his powers. Once this fact is recognised, it becomes easy to understand why the ostensibly more personal and more tendentious passages often fail to express authentic shock and indignation. They are practical exercises in reporting feeling and opinion, as the poetic-descriptive passages are practical exercises in rendering sense-data. And John Andrews volunteered because he was "so bored with himself"<sup>73</sup> and repelled by the unmanly privilege of the "glittering other world".<sup>74</sup> Each had a chiefly private motive, and in each of the war books the war itself, though necessary, tends to be a catalyst for foreground concerns and conflicts of a personal nature: the aesthetic explorations of Dos Passos/Howe and the adolescent value-struggles of John Andrews.

With Richard Ellsworth Savage it is otherwise. In the space of a few lines he is seen to abandon a priggish, lifeless pacifism for voluntary - though not ardent - service in the Ambulance Corps. Why? The reasons have to



be inferentially drawn, but they help to place Savage.

Everybody was drilling and going to lectures on military science.... He managed to find time to polish up a group of sonnets called Morituri Te Salutant... It won the prize but the editors wrote back that they would prefer a note of hope... Dick put in the note of hope... He discovered that if he went into war work he could get his degree that spring without taking any exams... 75

This is not only a different character from the early protagonists, a man whose motivations are more complex and ambiguous. It is a different world, a world to which the events of the post-war years have given, in Dos Passos' sensibility, a new meaning and, in his literary practice, a new style. In the terse and dismissive casualness of the prose and in the perspective that sets his characters within the collective world, instead of refracting that world through their personalities, appear the reconsidered judgements of the Dos Passos of the thirties. As Sartre writes, "Dos Passos n'a inventé qu'une chose: un art de conter. Mais ça suffit pour créer un univers." 76

His "created universe" is by no means one which he likes or wishes to accept, but it is an honest reflection of the world which he sees. It is more closely realised than the universe of "organisation" that Martin Howe would like to see undone or the Moloch-world of Three Soldiers. Dos Passos has not merely felt the prevalence of misery; he has lived through the doom of hope. The great pervading symbol in 1919 of the central fallacy of the modern organised world, the guarantee of failure and illusion, is American Progressive liberalism with its self-mystifying panaceas and its abstract faith in verbal formulas. Wilson is its arch-apostle. In 1968, confessing his "hatred" of Wilson, Dos Passos wrote "I still feel that Western civilisation would have been less imperilled if... Wilson.... had used the threat of American entry to force a negotiated peace in the summer of 1917." 77 He implies that he had always held this astonishingly unrealistic view; but actually 1919 uses Wilson in a subtler and more effective manner. Like Morehouse, he is the man so practised in deception that he conceals his aims and motives even from himself - as Mencken put it, "the self-bamboozled Presbyterian, the right-thinker, the



great moral statesman, the perfect model of a Christian cad".<sup>78</sup> In words stiff with contempt, Dos Passos paints "Maester Veelson" (a title suggesting the false god of European public opinion) as a kind of disembodied larynx uttering its slogans in the soapy accents of moral certitude:

Almighty God, Right, Truth, Justice, Freedom, Democracy,  
the Self-determination of Nations, No indemnities no  
annexations...<sup>79</sup> Cuban sugar and Caucasian manganese...  
machine gun fire and arson, starvation, lice, cholera,  
typhus; oil was trumps.<sup>80</sup>

Beneath the ectoplasm of high-minded abstractions lie the dirty facts of war, politics and commerce.

Wilson "talking to save his faith in words"<sup>81</sup> echoes the despair of Jimmy Herf, who had lost his faith but could find no acceptable substitute - like the other early heroes he had attempted to construct a magical religion out of art or literature. Yet in 1919 things have changed. The old game of "find the spell", in which the individual pits himself against the dragon and loses because he cannot exorcise the dragon from himself, has been abandoned. The figure of Richard Savage, though he is unmistakably a descendant of Howe-Andrews-Herf, "cannot be understood apart from the various devices of the novel - the camera eye episodes, the biographies, the newsreels, and other characterisations which overlap his own reality or help to define it".<sup>82</sup> In fact 1919 has the shape of a continuum, in which each technical mode and each individual "destiny" converges to create a totality inaccessible through any one aspect taken separately. The perfection of the method ensures that 1919, even more than The Forty-Second Parallel, is a genuinely "collective" novel - collective in its comprehensive relation of all its elements and approaches. Its theme is the betrayal of a civilisation - a betrayal not without its heroes and villains but at heart ascribable more to the remorseless dynamism of events than to any one man or group of men.

1919 takes pains to discipline its material. It is concerned not merely to be a "dramatic documentary" or a "large, loose baggy monster" vaguely and slackly surveying an entire culture. The formal problems and the point-of-



view question, already largely solved in The Forty-Second Parallel, are triumphantly overcome. The "authorial voice", for example, which was responsible for many of the weaknesses in the early fiction in its inseparability from the hero's consciousness, needs careful consideration. Without it, no one can speak for the supervising creative intelligence, conveying his judgement or wonder, but the collective structure must not be violated by an intrusive subjectivism. The Camera Eye's function is to bridge this gap - though it has drawn unfavourable comment. "(it) is a survival from the aesthetic Dos Passos.... why call it by such an objective, 'documentary' name when it is such a subjective device?"<sup>83</sup> Yes, but Dos Passos had survived, was a sharer and participant, willy-nilly, in the turbulence that had helped to shape and modify his "aesthetic" sympathies. And a camera is not an "objective" article: it is used by a man who chooses the pictures he wishes to take. What a camera film does is to freeze time, to record a scene for ever as it appears at the moment of exposure. That is why there is perfect justice in Sartre's idiosyncratic comments that

Dos Passos s'arrête à temps. Grâce à quoi les faits passés gardent une saveur de présent. Ils demeurent encore, dans leur exil, ce qu'ils ont été un jour, un seul jour: d'inexplicables tumultes de couleurs, de bruits, de passions. Chaque événement est une chose rutilante et solitaire, qui ne découle d'aucune autre, surgit tout à coup et s'ajoute à d'autres choses: une irréductible.<sup>84</sup>

And in making a general statement about 1919, Sartre accurately describes the effect of the Camera Eye in recording the endless engrammatic flow of sense-data on the consciousness of the artist. In fact, though the events are "inexplicable", they are not the totally secret fragments of a personal sensibility. The Camera Eye is not a separate and self-sufficient commentary or an indulgence to the author's residue of aestheticism, but interrelates continuously with the other elements.

One index of the Camera Eye's success is to examine its manner of using familiar material, i.e. material which recurs in Dos Passos' writing. Such an image is that of the garden at Recicourt in which Dos Passos and his fellow



"gentlemen volunteers" took refuge shortly after their arrival in France. He first wrote of it in a letter to Arthur McComb dated August, 1917

...a charming garden back of a little pink house of which hardly a shell remains. It smells of box and white roses and is full of tall phlox blooms - I can't imagine a more charming place, though even here lingers a faint odour of poison gas. Three lovely brown and white snails hang on a honeysuckle branch overhead. If it weren't for the guns that bellow out around us every few minutes and for the occasional Boche shells - and for the sausage balloon that hangs with ridiculous gravity in the very blue sky overhead - one would forget the war.<sup>85</sup>

In The Best Times this is worked up (probably from memory and from the original correspondence and notes) into a paragraph that dwells in more detail on the fate of the house and retains the plants, snails, honeysuckle and poison gas - though not the guns. It concludes with a nostalgic (and elderly) mention of the privy.

It was a beautiful old backhouse, pale pink stucco with a tile roof overgrown with vines. Inside the earth closet with scrubbed deal seats was still clean. There were even a few squares of old newspaper neatly stowed in a box.<sup>86</sup>

In the letter and the reminiscence one sees how strong an impression the villa garden made in its simple, eloquent contrasts: order, amenity, fragrance in the midst of war. But the same scene is used twice in 1919. In Camera Eye 30:

through the faint aftersick of mustardgas I smell the box the white roses and the white phlox with a crimson eye three brownandwhitestriped snails hang with infinite delicacy from a honeysucklebranch overhead up in the blue a sausageballoon grazes drowsily like a tethered cow there are drunken wasps clinging to the tooripe pears that fall and squash whenever the near guns spew their heavy shells that go off rumbling through the sky.... welltodo country people carefully built the walls and the little backhouse with the cleanscrubbed seat and the quartermoon in the door like the backhouse of an old farm at home carefully planted the garden and savored the fruit and flowers and carefully planned this war...<sup>87</sup>

The gardenscape is viewed in hallucinatory distortion through the "aftersick of mustard gas". The simple irony has been thickened and complicated by the association of the natural and mechanical worlds, and by the accusatory



tenor of the last phrase. The whole taut, swollen, protesting narrative is alternated with curt lists of American patriotic clichés that run through the mind of the young initiate. It is personal - almost a parody of the early personal style - but it resonates not only through the following Biography (Randolph Bourne as the truth-teller versus "Schoolmaster Wilson") but throughout the ensuing life-history sections on Eveline and Joe until, seventy pages later, Dick Savage discovers

a little garden at Recicourt... The garden had been attached to a pink villa, but the villa had been mashed to dust as if a great foot had stepped on it. The garden was untouched, only a little weedy from neglect, roses were in bloom there and butterflies and bees droned around the flowers on sunny afternoons. At first they took the bees for distant arrivés and went flat on their bellies when they heard them... What Dick liked best in the garden was the little backhouse, like the backhouse of a New England farm, with a clean scrubbed seat and a halfmoon in the door... He'd sit there with his belly aching listening to the low voices of his friends talking in the driedup fountain.<sup>88</sup>

The most idealised version is that from The Best Times: "the gravel paths were neat", the shellfire distant, making use of "the beautiful backhouse" was "a halcyon contrast"; of poison gas, "just a hint".<sup>89</sup> The tone of the letter is a relief rather than sentimental rhapsody. But for its fictional purpose the incident is radically metamorphosed. The Camera Eye stresses its nightmarish absurdity. Direct, unassimilated, like a neural snapshot, it arouses that instinctive sense of wrongness, hard to articulate but instantly recognisable, that strikes one in the presence of major contradiction in one's experience that resists analysis. The privy is like a farm privy at home - but of what use the catchwords of home? Such a collapse of familiar values threatens the sanity, and there flows into the author's mind a self-protective vision of human solidarity:

après la guerre that our fingers our blood our lungs  
our flesh under the dirty khaki feldgrau  
bleu horizon might go on sweeten grow until we  
fall from the tree ripe like the tooripe pears...<sup>90</sup>

But there is no solidarity, only the common misery of victims. In Dick Savage's garden a satirical glow illuminates the pastoral atmosphere in which the dilettante



ambulancemen bask. Their inexperience is underlined by their initial reaction to the sound of the bees' humming. Dick Savage is set apart by his aloofness and fondness for privacy. The scene about the ruined house is imbued with decadence. Dos Passos has found the means of distancing himself from the Harvard aestheticism of his youth, while making it a relevant part of his story. Dick, even though he feels "happy and at home" in the backhouse (the implication reflects a certain scorn for the college-bred intellectual), almost flippantly strikes a chord of biological despair in his friend Steve. But the physical danger of war has been omitted.

In the sonorous echolalia of the Camera Eye lies the "passé sans loi"<sup>91</sup> of which Sartre speaks. It is fixed and arrested, like the language which cunningly impersonates, without solemnly repeating, the narcissistic radiance of the apprentice work. Here is the "récul esthétique". But when the focus is altered to accommodate the entropy of universal disaster another picture emerges: Dick, Joe, Eveline are shown in social-historical context as men and women who have decisive relations with society at large. The totality of 1919 results from an overlapping of these images.

Dos Passos had begun his war service in a very O.K. fashion, with the "gentlemen volunteers" of the Norton-Harjes ambulance corps. The realities of the battlefield soon made the phrase seem laughable to him; he never forgot the sight of Dick Norton paying a pompous farewell to his men after the U.S. declaration of war had meant that they would be absorbed in the Medical Corps. To McComb he wrote, in the autumn of 1918:

Arthur... picture the scene... Richard Norton courtly in a monocle... in front of a large crowd of ambulance drivers - behind them a much shrapnel-holed barnlike structure, our cantonment - the section dog by name P2 wanders about uneasily. An occasional shell screeches overhead, makes the fatjowled gentlemen duck and blink... Mr. Norton has just finished his very modest speech ending with the wonderful phrase "As gentlemen volunteers you enlisted and as gentlemen volunteers I bid you farewell."<sup>92</sup>

In Camera Eye 32 this is expanded into a satirical sketch. Dick Norton, constantly "adjusting his monocle", lines up his section "à quatorze heures précisément"



because, it is implied, he wishes to flaunt his indifference to the shellfire which occurs regularly at that hour. "The Red Cross Majors looked pudgy and white under their new uniforms in their shined Sam Brown belts in their shined tight leather puttees so this was overseas so this was the front well well". When the shells explode, the majors scatter, but Norton refuses to abandon his performance:

Standing talking at length about gentlemen volunteers and ambulance service and la belle France... The slowest and pudgiest and whitest of the majors is still to be seen on his hands and knees with mud all over his puttees crawling into the abris and that's the last we saw of the Red Cross majors and the last we heard of gentlemen or volunteers.<sup>93</sup>

Again there is present the note of relative overstatement. Preserving the moment with all the bold sharp outlines of its insane logic, the Camera Eye bears the imprint, both critical and impressionable, of the lingering memory. When the moment recurs in the narrative, proportions shrink as the focus is re-adjusted for a more distant, neutral, external view.

When the section was disbanded and everybody sent back to Paris, Dick hated to leave the mellow woods of the Argonne. The U.S. Army was to take over the ambulance service attached to the French. Everybody got a copy of the section's citation; Dick Norton made them a speech under shellfire, never dropping his monocle out of his eye, dismissing them as gentlemen volunteers and that was the end of the section.<sup>94</sup>

The scene is built up laconically and dryly, from the personal detail of Dick's fondness for the European pastoral setting to the flat and conclusive "end". Decisions are taken; speeches are made; by some impersonal process of events people are shifted here and there. There is little time for analysis, little point in demanding reasons.

The Camera Eye does not invariably work merely by anticipating, in the idiom of the engrammatic moment of stress, what will later be observed as a part of the collective flow. But as a rule, it is used in this manner; and as a rule it succeeds. The Camera Eyes of 1919 actually cover the period from April 1916, when Dos Passos' mother died, to the spring of 1919, when, after a spell of scrap-iron shunting while the army hunted for his service record, he



finally received his discharge. Except for two journeys stateside, Dos Passos was abroad for the whole of this time, mostly serving in Norton-Harjes or the U.S.A.M.C. He had lost both his parents within the space of a year; had undergone his initiation into violence, bloodshed and the ways of a conscript army; had almost shared the fate of E.E. Cummings for his "defeatist" attitudes; had travelled extensively in four European countries; and had made up his mind to become a writer. Some of these experiences were shared with other young men of his generation, but many were not. In any case, his artist's sensibility made him especially receptive to his participation in the drama of those years. In his first books, both sensibility and expression are still adolescent: the intensity of emotions has not been assimilated and brought under the distancing control of a mature artistic discipline. But while the vital emotions of adolescence there choke his urge to articulate them, Dos Passos worked to develop the "récupération esthétique" that makes them recoverable and useable. The Camera Eyes successfully re-interpret the subject-matter of the first books and weave into the panoramic cultural biography a thread of personal history that is relevant and illuminating. The idiom they employ is a refinement of the author's former prose imagism, modified to supply one aspect of a method of multiple perspectives.

Outside of the Camera Eyes, Dos Passos takes pains to withhold from public events the highly charged current of his private imagination. The characters of 1919 exist through their relations with the "loud world"; their experiences and adventures are generally beyond their control or understanding. But the "determinism" has ceased to be the vague and lurking doom that used to fall on everyone like a sudden fog. No longer tinged with metaphysical obscurity, it is concretely associated with the self-defensive tyranny of institutions under threat. The holocaust of world war provides a dominant image universal and powerful enough to objectify the ubiquitous properties of suffering, betrayal, and defeat. Dos Passos has risen to his subject with fresh reserves of clarity and control. Whereas in the Camera Eyes there resides the artist's shadowy



inner triumph over the ghastliness of life - "the mind's silent victory that integrity can acknowledge to itself"<sup>95</sup> - the narrative sections concentrate on the impotence and loneliness of the isolated individual under the conditions of total war: most notably in the story of Joe Williams.

Joe is a lumpen sailor who has forsworn patriotism but who, despite his earnest intermittent efforts to direct his own life, is pushed about and trampled on by the totalitarian machine. His fate (he derives from Whitey in Streets of Night) is never to have a good time. For him, even the coarse fugitive pleasures of the "submerged tenth" never quite live up to expectations. He copulates with stringy whores and aged negresses; "sees the world" as a succession of foreign rat-holes; starts a voyage on his wedding-night without having made love to his wife; and is nearly always broke. But Joe is not the victim of occult spiritual forces, demons or furies. After his desertion from the U.S. Navy at the very beginning of the novel he is a merchant seaman and the merchant service is viewed not (as Conrad sees it) under the aspect of eternity but with extreme critical attention both to the physical hardships of shipboard life and to its wartime role as the logistic arm of American financial and industrial interests. As the servant and scapegoat of forces outside himself, Joe is badly treated: imprisoned in England on suspicion of being a German spy (a result of America's equivocal position at that time) and mocked by the specious lure of self-improvement courses: "The ads about adding to your income with two hours' agreeable work at home evenings, the ads of Pelmanism and correspondence courses".<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless Joe, though inarticulate, is tough and far from stupid. He does manage to acquire a mate's certificate and he behaves as a rule with relative decency. Joe struggles - in his confused, instinctual way - but he can never shift the burden that presses him down. Just as in The Forty-Second Parallel the sympathetic Mac and the repulsive J. Ward Morehouse are represented in a dynamism of contrasts - the "vag" victim and the spiritually empty success - so Joe and Richard Savage move in a significant polarity throughout 1919. Joe is the "mucker" whose life is brutish and short,



Savage the intellectual without integrity or conviction.

This typology is made live and credible not only by the author's keener sense of society in 1919 but by the narrative viewpoint he has chosen. Often it informs the "hard and choppy"<sup>97</sup> style of the historical spectator:

Joe Williams put on the secondhand suit and dropped his uniform, with a cobblestone wrapped up in it, off the edge of the dock into the muddy water of the basin. It was noon. There was nobody around.<sup>98</sup>

But Dos Passos also explores a vein of closer identification with his characters - with Joe in particular. The method is not profoundly inward - it does not attempt to explore the most secret recesses of consciousness - but it allows an exchange of dramatic tensions between the narrator's omniscience and the solipsism of the character

Next morning they were in court and it was funny as hell except that Joe was scared; it was solemn as a Quakermeetin' and the magistrate wore a little wig and they were everyone of 'em fined three and six costs.<sup>99</sup>

They asked all kinds of questions about how he was getting on and he didn't know what the hell to tell 'em.<sup>100</sup>

Hell, he'd seen enough of B.A.<sup>101</sup>

In mimicking the unlettered and colloquial tone of Joe's speech, the narrative gives that effect of a qualified sympathy which Sartre has noted.

ce qu'il dit, le héros n'aurait pas tout à fait pu le dire, mais on sent entre eux une complicité discrète, le récitant raconte, du dehors, comme le héros eût aimé qu'on racontât... on dirait que c'est un choeur qui se souvient, un choeur sentencieux et complice.<sup>102</sup>

It is true that this curious kind of intimacy arises when Dos Passos makes use of this technique. Sartre, however, reviews 1919 as if it were all straightforward narrative (no distinction between the various modes) and as if all the life-histories were identical in their "ab ndance triste" (no distinction between the characters) - in other words, he reads too much through the magnifying glass of his own assumptions. Actually, the "chorus" can be adapted to the idiom of separate characters and to the author's own degrees of sympathy, so that it is capable of more variation than Sartre admits.



On the same page, for example, from which Sartre quotes the lines about Dick's teacher there is struck the note of petulant self-regard which so often characterises Dick.

Dick felt Mrs. Glen might have said something about his carrying out the ashes and shovelling snow and all that. Anyway he didn't think a highschool student ought to have to take time from his studies to do the chores.<sup>103</sup>

The little phrases of resentment both identify and judge Dick, and the college-boy slang recurs at other moments when the Savage temperament - weak, narcissistic, undeveloped - is highlighted.

Then he'd suddenly snap out of his argumentative mood and all the phrases about liberty and civilisation steaming up out of his head would seem damn silly too, and he'd light the gasoline burner and make a rum punch and cheer up chewing the rag with Steve about books or painting or architecture.<sup>104</sup>

"Absurdity"<sup>105</sup> indeed - but the absurdity of Dick's own absence of settled beliefs as well as the absurdity of external circumstances. If (like Frederic Henry) he finds the value-loaded words meaningless and embarrassing, he cannot summon the effort to restore, by his own self-sacrificing actions the meaning to any word. And thus his drift into the Morehouse limbo, where words simply have a pragmatic exchange-value like money, is plotted by these blind eruptions of self-pity, which display Dick's lack of moral resources, growing into cynicism, and the wider landscape of disintegration in which they occur. "It was just like Ed said, you couldn't do anything without making people miserable. A hell of a rotten world".<sup>106</sup> The method is that in which Joe's responses are conveyed. The world they inhabit is the same. But the implicit judgement varies: Dick's evasion of responsibility is contrasted with the social fraud that tries to palm off on Joe a false responsibility while denying his right to set its terms.

And this is true of other characters. Dos Passos' art is the art of the Stereopticon. Flat images are superimposed on one another until they acquire, at the common focal point, the depth and roundness of relief. In words which echo the natural voices of individual characters, he lifts out from the conjunctive sentences and the accumulation of dense physical detail their special traits or



tendencies. Eveline Hutchin's neurotic, brittle worldliness is caught in passages such as this - when she comes home to find that Eleanor has invited her pet poilu to tea:

She was glad to see him, because she was always complaining that she wasn't getting to know any French people, nothing but professional relievers and Red Cross women who were just too tiresome;<sup>107</sup>

While the reckless, volatile temperament of Anne Elizabeth Trent is mimicked by terse, fast rhythmical sentences.

It was crazy going up like this. She had to catch that boat. The plane had started. It was bouncing over the field, bouncing along the ground. They were still on the ground rumbling bouncing along. Maybe it wouldn't go up. she hoped it wouldn't go up.<sup>108</sup>

Benny Compton's inner life is a fiery blend of inspired dedication and the impersonal theorems of the totally committed revolutionary. His history is interlarded with phrases directly quoted from the Communist Manifesto, and it is not love or wealth that stimulates his hopes. It is certain words and phrases.

Phrases like protest, massaction united workingclass of this country and the world, revolution, would light up the eyes and faces under him like the glare of a bonfire.<sup>109</sup>

Throughout, the relief-effect of sudden switches of perspective gives to the characters a persuasively solid life. It is never the depth-life of a subtle-exploration of consciousness, but an intelligently managed reflex between the neural and motional impacts of the individual engrams and the social flux. As Sartre perceptively writes,

L'homme de Dos Passos est un être hybride, interne-externe. Nous sommes avec lui, en lui, nous vivons avec sa vacillante conscience individuelle et, tout à coup, elle flanche, elle faiblit, elle se dilue dans la conscience collective. Nous l'y suivons et nous voilà soudain dehors sans y avoir pris garde.<sup>50</sup>

Sartre's emphasis on suddenness is apt. But this intermittence of viewing angle, which does have the value of making lifelike and real figures whose minds are not deeply penetrated, is only one element of the entire composition. There must be added to the engrammatic punctuation of the Camera Eye and the refractions of the central narrative the more factually objective contributions of the Newsreels and the Biographies. 1919 is more than a clever illustration of



literary versatility by a mature novelist: it is a case.

Three Soldiers had suffered as a book from Dos Passos' attempt to counterweigh the cruelties of the machine, against which he felt a strong and genuine anger, by an aesthetic credo in which he could not sustain belief and which when harnessed to his literary purpose led to some false and over-precious writing. In comparison, the faith of The Enormous Room or A Farewell to Arms rings true: it is saved from appearing ridiculous in each case by the author's profound conviction and hence his urgent striving to embody it adequately in his art. Yet by the mid-1930s Hemingway could write a bad and silly novel with a collectivist moral - so untrue to the tenor of his life and work - which portrayed Dos Passos as a fake and a failure,<sup>111</sup> while Dos Passos had grown consistently as a fiction-writer. Their final political and personal quarrel did not reach a head until 1939, when they visited Spain together; but relations "began to cool"<sup>112</sup> at about the time 1919 appeared. Politically, Dos Passos had made plain his radical sympathies though he was never a "joiner", and remained one of the non-party committed intelligentsia. The "faith" which energises 1919, though, is not a faith of hope and belief in the socialist future. Yet despite its essentially negative character, it is more vital and authentic than his own earlier vapid aestheticism, or Hemingway's later flirtation with the Stalinists. 1919 demonstrates: it does not analyse. America is a hell of blighted lives; the sound-seeming precepts and institutions Dos Passos had grown up with "during the quiet afterglow of the nineteenth century"<sup>113</sup> are in decay; "faiths and empires gleam" - as Martin Howe slightly misquoted Shelley - "like wrecks in a dissolving dream".<sup>114</sup> Dos Passos has nerved himself to accept the death of the old absolutes, but he registers a naked, passionate indignation against the pain and misery of modern society, especially as it is represented in the humbug of liberal capitalism. In his literary formulation of his rage and his incorporation of political and historical referents there is, as Sartre suggests, an implicit protest: the protest of moral despair, not an ameliorative programme.



1919 contains a total of nine Biographies: the subjects include three radical publicists, two presidents, an investment banker, and two Wobblies. The final subject is "The Body of an American". The lives of John Reed, Paxton Hibben and Randolph Bourne have a special personal meaning for Dos Passos. They are the Sinbads, the men who got "in bad". All men of taste and intellect, they could have led secure, cultivated lives if they had not ignored the trimmer's rule, "don't monkey with the buzzsaw". In the case of each, a conversion supervenes to enlarge individual integrity into a pressing sense of social responsibility. Each declined to be satisfied with the easy comforts of privilege. "A man has to do many things in his life. Reed was a westerner words meant what they said".<sup>115</sup> "Bourne seized with feverish intensity on the ideas then going around at Columbia... the shining capitol of reformed democracy, Wilson's New Freedom; but he was too good a mathematician; he had to work the equations out;..."<sup>116</sup> "The talk of social justice petered out; T.R. was a windbag like the rest of 'em, the Bull Moose was stuffed with the same sawdust as the G.O.P."<sup>117</sup> These men are not frozen public statues, the recipients of official testimonials. Dos Passos knew Hibben in Moscow shortly after the war, and Reed had influenced - through Ten Days That Shook The World - the very style of the Biographies. As well as recapitulating the favourite "Sinbad was in bad" motif, they symbolise, in their personal distinction and their fearless, active defiance of authority, an ideal of principled rebellion that conducts a running commentary on the more populous ranks of those who are weak, timid, and corrupt. The Biographies in 1919 are less purely formal than those of The Forty-Second Parallel. They are generally longer, less deliberately poetic, more circumstantial and more heavily freighted with normative values. These three, plus those of Joe Hill and Wesley Everest, celebrate the major currents of opposition to the American establishment, both intellectual and activist. Fighters and martyrs, they are heroic: they commanded the rearguard fight against liberal shams as it was waged in the public life of the nation. They questioned the official slogans. They demystified conventional morality. Yet they are voices crying in the wilderness.



To underline the ethical discriminations of the Biographies, Dos Passos employs a very naked and heavy irony in reciting biographical data. Occasionally, this takes the form of juxtaposing with the author's words passages from Who's Who, or from the subjects own speeches or writings. In this manner, he is able to grasp some cliché of the ruling-class - say "disinterested learning"- and crack open its shell with a scornful phrase: "the rusty machinery creaked, the deans quivered under their mortarboards...",<sup>118</sup> "he picked rosy glasses out of the turgid jumble of John Dewey's teaching".<sup>119</sup> The words of approval stand out in forceful clarity - "husky greedy", "unscared", "cantankerous", "truculent". These connote the antinomian virtues of the non-conforming individualist, and Dos Passos plainly admires them as individuals. Yet like Debs they strove to banish the gulf between them and their fellows; to risk losing the good opinions of their peers and contemporaries; to refuse to indulge themselves in the taste for good living they all shared to the point at which it extinguished their sensitivity to the griefs of others. They are the men who "got in wrong".<sup>120</sup>

The fact remains that the mainstream of American thought and culture has not been dominated by such men, but by the cautious, the deceitful and the self-interested. Roosevelt and Wilson are examples of the latter type; despite the contrasts of their personalities they are treated with comparable antipathy. It is hard to quote selectively from their Biographies - they are all of a piece, complete and conclusive in the withering contempt of their rhythms and phraseology. They deploy even more brutally an almost sarcastic inversion of the normal evaluative content of American idioms. "Bully" and "righteous" are repeated throughout "The Happy Warrior" to evoke the priggish pretensions of the man and the boy-scout vulgarity of his public persona. Dos Passos, though, is never simply abusive. His case is made with a conscientious respect for the historical facts, and he lists with evidential precision the significant parameters of Roosevelt's career: the shop-window reforms, the megalomania, the imperialist adventures. Nor is he blind to slighter comic ironies - "his life was saved only by the thick bundle of manuscript of the speech he was going to



deliver"<sup>121</sup> - or to a certain scornful pity for the later, out-of-power Roosevelt. The most complete denunciation is reserved for Woodrow Wilson. Even more than J.P. Morgan (an out-and-out reactionary plutocrat for whom Dos Passos feels an almost respectful horror) Wilson is the novel's major embodiment of duplicity in power - the oratorical mystifying front for "the elderly swag bellied gentlemen who control all destinies".<sup>122</sup> Dos Passos' Wilson is basically the Wilson of Versailles, the Wilson of the Espionage Acts, the sanctimonious, vindictive, dogmatic war president. 1919 is the novel of the war and the Peace, but Dos Passos traces throughout Wilson's life the strain of demagogic cant, the bigotry, the devious motives that made Wilson into

the greatest prophet (of) the current American theory that political heresy should be put down by force, that a man who disputes whatever is official has no rights in law or equity, that he is lucky if he fares no worse than to lose his constitutional benefits of free speech, free assemblage, and the use of the mails.<sup>123</sup>

"The Wilsons lived in a universe of words linked into an incontrovertible firmament by two centuries of Calvinist divines, God was the Word and the Word was God".<sup>124</sup> In the biblical allusiveness of the language Dos Passos parodies the Wilsonian style of public speaking. He parodies it to express his dislike for the hypocrisy it symbolises and he relates, as a means of enforcing the disparity between its lofty, pious sentiments and the squalid realities of American political life, the crucial moment of Wilson's entry into politics.

the sun meant to regenerate men, the sun meant to liberate them from their passion and despair and lift us to those uplands which are the promised land of every man who desires liberty and achievement.

The smalltown bosses and the wardheelers looked at each other and scratched their heads; then they cheered; Wilson fooled the wiseacres and double-crossed the bosses, was elected by a huge plurality;<sup>125</sup>

The slogans and promises of Woodrow Wilson are printed, each with a short postscript to indicate its hollowness or dishonesty, rather in the manner of a partisan press campaign against the record in office of an unpopular minister. Dos Passos "turns the moral values inside out to question the worth of a deed by looking not at its actual outcome but at its tone and style".<sup>126</sup> 1919 is by



no means exclusively concerned with questions of private or public morality, but it is true that Dos Passos, as an artist, does not evaluate men and acts solely in terms of their practical consequences. The tone and style of President Wilson are portrayed in a fashion that makes them just as objectionable as his policies; in particular, the tone and style are used to provide a metaphor for everything that Wilson represents. For the creation of a rhetoric of despairing protest, they are brilliantly drawn on. Wilson's moralistic gestures and woolly, elevated speechmaking are set among the "rows of potted palms, silk hats, legions of honour, decorated busts of uniforms, frock-coats, boutonnieres,"<sup>127</sup> all the ostentation of privilege and power which divides the "Old men shuffling the pack"<sup>128</sup> from the "women in black, the cripples in their little carts, the pale anxious faces along the streets".<sup>129</sup> In 1919 the Biographies are more than "mythic poetry" of the national culture. Bitter and tendentious, they foreshadow the "two nations" theme of The Big Money, and they integrate with the stories of the fictional characters by making familiar some of the leaders and apostles of the global forces which apocalyptically clash around the heads of Joe, Eveline, Richard Savage, "Daughter", Ben Compton. In the later parts of the novel, the Biographies turn into threnodies for the men who have paid the ultimate price for their resistance to repression and war-hate.

Joe Hill's short Biography - it immediately precedes the first section of Ben Compton's life-history - is recounted in simple, thumping rhythms that follow the pace and jauntiness of his songs: "walked out many a mile when the grub was too bum or the boss too tough or too many bugs in the bunkhouse".<sup>130</sup> It is a piece of conscious mythologising, as is the sketch of Wesley Everest, whom Dos Passos associates with the legendary logger Paul Bunyan. These deaths, for which Wilson's Biography has prepared the reader, recall the death of another Joe - Joe Williams. Wesley Everest was lynched on Armistice Day, 1919 (Red November, Black November. Bleak November, black and red;"<sup>131</sup>), exactly one year after the sudden, senseless death of Joe Williams in St. Nazaire. Joe's death came in a sudden crash of oblivion, like the apparently arbitrary accidents of



Manhattan Transfer. Even so, it may be said that everything in his life was a preparation for it. Joe is a born loser: the type of man who does the work, takes the risks, and receives precious little in return, while the soft hotel beds, the chauffeur-driven automobiles, the smart clothes and expensive restaurants go to the Morehouses and their retinues. The particular manner and occasion of Joe's death are random, but such a manner of dying is the natural outcome of such an existence. The unequal relation of the haves and have-nots, which Dos Passos has kept alive through the intermittent narrative chapters and the "mood-music"<sup>132</sup> of the Newsreel montages, is brought to an exceptionally powerful climax with "The Body of an American". In these closing cadences the author has concentrated the moral essence of his book. It is simultaneously a Biography, Newsreel, Camera Eye and life-history, and, it amply justifies the choice of Dos Passos' synthetic literary method. Unlike the slack and sentimental preface to USA, it does capture the typical; not just the eternal typicality of death, but the essential idioms and values of a variegated culture.

- busboy harveststiff hogcaller boyscout champeen  
cornshucker of Western Kansas bellhop at the United  
StatesHotel at Saratoga Springs officeboy callboy  
fruiter telephonelineman longshoreman lumberjack  
plumber's helper...

Thou shalt not the multiplication table long  
division, Now is the time for all good men  
Knocks but once at a man's door, It's a great  
life if Ish gebibbel, The first five  
years'll be Safety First, Suppose a Hun tried to  
rape your my country right or wrong, Catch  
'em rough, Tell 'em nothing... <sup>133</sup>

"John Doe" is the universal anonymous victim. In listing the standard imperatives and clichés that have been fed to him, that have taken the place of a free interpretation of his own life-experience, Dos Passos celebrates his poor body with an ironic and dignified compassion. There is a juster and more sincere tribute in this final biography than in all the official pseudo-reverence - the more so because the ghastliness of the physical facts of death and decomposition is not shirked.



The blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies.<sup>134</sup>

And a coda adopts the supremely bitter viewpoint of the hostile Biographies, with the goodthinking people who had sat in safe billets and howled for blood, "the generals and the admirals and the brasshats and the handsomely dressed ladies out of the society column",<sup>135</sup> queuing up as at a select social function for the indecent pomp of the interment ceremony.

There is hardly a line in USA that does not grow out of a considered concept of society, a concept, moreover, carrying with it certain implications as to where the root of evil lies... there is hardly one of his fictive or historical characters that does not in some way underscore the view of our society as one in which the profit system corrupts or crushes, leaving those who climb to the top ruthless and unhappy, the intellectuals decadent, venal or escapist, and the lower classes wretched and abused.<sup>136</sup>

At each end of 1919 there is recorded an aspect of the war as experienced by those at the bottom of society's pyramid - Joe Williams slaving on board the vessels carrying matériel through the Atlantic submarine zone, Ben Compton caught up in the domestic war-scare and repression. Most of the fictional sections between these two concentrate on the "Cook's tour" war enjoyed by the middle-class characters in Paris and Italy. The bureaucratic wheeling and dealing of the Morehouse set and the raffish adventures of the "grenadine guards" are the two related streams of narrative which flow together at the end of the war. Dos Passos is here handling material familiar to him at firsthand from his war and postwar experiences and from his own subsequent reflections. Events that formed the basis for his early fiction, and which was there incompletely and rather subjectively treated, finds a more mature expression in the satirical portrait of Richard Savage, the Harvard aesthete and intellectual who at each opportunity for a courageous assertion of responsibility weakens and surrenders, and in the life-history of Eveline Hutchins - snobbish, second-rate, parasitic. In many ways they are the same figures who dominated Three Soldiers and Manhattan Transfer, but reworked and adapted for a novel of greater scope and intensity.

Unlike John Andrews, Richard Savage, as Stanley Cooperman writes,



eliminates both assertion and act and ultimately becomes what he most despises... If Andrews maintains his individuality through failure and futility, Richard gives up his identity to indifference and success.<sup>137</sup>

Cooperman puts it well. Savage does "give up" the chance of saving his integrity, and he does so in a manner that makes each stage of his capitulation an authentic crisis which he declines to face. Unlike Mac - who otherwise shares much of his failure to connect words and deeds - Savage is not under the congenital disadvantage of the poor and ill-educated. His destiny is not inflexibly determined by circumstances for although he inhabits, like all the others a world in which freedom has to be struggled for and positive choices are never easy, he invariably chooses the soft option. He collaborates with "things as they are" and thus acts as the representative figure of those educated young men of his generation who, unlike Ben Compton, preferred silence and compromise to defiance. Dick has the impulse of defiance: he is constantly in peril of "getting in bad" - by voicing his cynical opinion of the war or by marrying, at a high cost to his intended career, the girl he has made pregnant. Yet he sneaks out of every difficulty, performing his "déclarations rituelles et... gestes sacrées".<sup>138</sup> Through the cowardly ritualistic formula of asking to be allowed to "explain his position" he ensures that the matter of his "seditious" correspondence is dropped; and by his nervously dishonest disavowals he drives Anne Elizabeth away - to her death.

Dick's revolt of the imagination is presented in terms strongly reminiscent of those in which John Andrews' mutinous thoughts were described. In its fresh context, though, and with a sharply satirical edge, it gains distance - reveals the unreal and onanistic nature of Dick's spasms of opposition:

By gum, he must write some verse: what people needed was stirring poems to nerve them for revolt against their cannibal governments. Sitting in the secondclass compartment he was... busy building a daydream of himself living in a sunscorched Spanish town, sending out flaming poems and manifestoes, calling young men to revolt against their butchers...<sup>139</sup>

This is the man who revised his sonnets to include the "note of hope" requested by the editors of The Literary Digest, and whose romantic self-image contrasts



with his actual flexibility in accommodating himself to the world's ways. Already, he is in the Wilsonian sphere of self-mystification; but he has much farther to go in his decline, past cowardice and hypocrisy to active, conscious membership of Morehouse's set - a public relations courtier. It is an ironic self-realisation, though not of a kind that brings him happiness. Dick remains half a man, in his arrested development, his sexual proclivities, the residual knowledge that he has failed to live up to his best conception of himself. In his alternations between self-pity and enjoyment of the febrile glamour of the "glittering world" into which he has led himself he resembles Jimmy Herf. But in the "récul esthétique", through the technical variety of his medium, and by the amplitude of his imaginative conception Dos Passos extends the meaning of Dick's failure, revealing both the wantonness of the self-enclosed soul and the social infamy of his "trahison des clercs". "We're the Romans of the Twentieth Century", Dick complains, "and I always wanted to be a Greek".<sup>140</sup> By such glib formulas does he shrug away the real choices, and his failure to choose with integrity and love.

"There are women of many descriptions / In this queer world, as everyone knows".<sup>141</sup> In 1919, however, there are essentially two women, Eveline Hutchins and "Daughter". Though they are distinct and relevant figures in the story, they represent the author's failure to make his novel as unified and consistent as a lesser book like Manhattan Transfer, in which the figure of Ellen Thatcher serves as a cohesive presence. One woman critic, in identifying the discrepancy, has written that

His women... often do come to life; in these cases they transcend the pattern; but by this very fact they show his real power of characterisation once it works free of an imposed design.<sup>142</sup>

But an "imposed design", in the sense of an overall artistic plan and worldview, is essential to 1919. In the terms of this plan, the two principal female characters are at two opposite poles: one belongs to the Morehouse world of selfishness, deceit, vanity; the other acts as a centre of spontaneous life brutally crushed out of existence through the circumstances of war - the corrupted survivor and



and the victim. Yet there is a little too much of Eveline's story, an "over-determination of the Paris circle of lies - and "Daughter" is under-realised in the sense that she is too little alive in her own right, she exists, fictively, more through her relations with others, especially Dick Savage. Although Eveline differs from Eleanor (some of the internecine conflicts of the group arise from this fact, especially where the favour of Morehouse himself is concerned) it is not always simple for the reader, without carefully reconsulting the text, to bear this in mind. The two are rather like Siamese twins, more so than in The Forty-Second Parallel, and it is not until The Big Money that the separate relevance of Eveline's story fully emerges. Eleanor is virginal<sup>143</sup> and pietistic, Eveline worldly and shrewd, but in the last analysis the values they represent overlap so considerably that their identities merge. The picture of intrigue among the ancillary agencies of war would not be greatly altered if Eleanor, instead of Eveline, had been the reflecting consciousness through which it is viewed - or even if the life-history of Morehouse himself had been continued. In one sense this is what does happen, especially during the general dissolution of the agencies into lobbying and partisan cliques at the end of the war, since the people around Morehouse tend to become Moorhouse-surrogates. In the brilliantly written sections on the post-armistice restoration of the "good times", Eveline melts more and more into the "conscience collective" until everything is observed not from her viewpoint but from the angle of a detached spectator.

They went in a taxicab up to Montmartre to L'Abbaye where there was dancing and singing and uniforms everywhere and everything was hung with the flags of the Allies... Eveline and J.W. talked about the music of Rameau... They agreed that the orchestra was too bad to dance to.<sup>144</sup>

This is the famous Dos Passos style of which Sartre writes "tout est raconté par quelqu'un qui se souvient". But exactly who is recalling the past? When the Paris scenes become crowded and accelerated, the sudden flickering between internal sensations and external facts relapses into a quasi-omniscient account, as of someone reporting what he glimpsed or overheard. Dos Passos, instead of being "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by



the inexhaustible variety of life", <sup>145</sup> instead of achieving the depth and vividness of observation he so much admired in Fitzgerald, reports journalistic-ly (again as Sartre says) and with an ebbing of fictive tension. The Paris scenes are very well reported, but they are overburdened rather than significantly augmented by the particulars of Eleanor's story that are relevant without attaining the striking relevance of selected detail. Sartre, though easily the critic with most to say about 1919, too often reaches his conclusions by ignoring the totality of the work; he isolates the elements which appeal to his own taste and conviction and, in isolation, judges them acutely. But by ignoring their interdependence he overlooks the comparatively small failures entailed by Dos Passos' occasional inability to integrate his material.

Daughter's case is precisely opposite. She does not fall irrecoverably into her context, she violates the context. She is the comic-strip heroine, the drum-majorette of a faintly crude and sentimental streak in 1919. The character of Anne Elizabeth Trent, though it relates both to Eveline and to Joe Williams, is an artistic faux pas. Dos Passos, despite his Latin ancestry, is not gifted at portraying images of natural human vitality - in particular he lacks the gift of evincing the intense energy of sexual passion, a value relatively independent of social conditioning. Daughter's "crazy streak", the rash and combative urge of her defining "humour", is a relieving quality which the novel could make good use of.

Not to have fire is to be a skin that shrills;  
The complete fire is death; from partial fires  
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.<sup>146</sup>

Dos Passos is a specialist in shrilling skins and partial fires. But Daughter's "complete fire" never really catches, because the equation - the human-artistic equation - is unbalanced. The character intended as a paragon of restless searching energy falls dead in its secret inner rhythms. Daughter ends her life in a violently dramatic fashion, pressed on by her own audacity and by her recoil from the treachery of Richard Savage; even so, it is the image of mechanical disaster which persists as the aeroplane is torn apart.



A little wire waving loose and glistening against the blue began to whine... They were climbing again. Daughter saw the shine of a wing gliding by itself a little way from the plane. The spinning sun blinded her as they dropped.<sup>147</sup>

Both these failures can be partially traced to the always contentious problem for a male novelist of characterising women, endowing them with the proper kind of consistency and mystery. Though they distort the form of the novel, however, they do not diminish its meaning. Indeed, they are strictly minor blemishes in view of the technical, personal and ideational difficulties Dos Passos faced in creating 1919. He had to re-assimilate some of his own life-experiences which had already been used, less satisfactorily, in the work of his novitiate; to write, in the trough of the depression, a novel not quite contemporaneous in its action that would be faithful to the recent data of American history and to the canons of his own judgement; to establish a continuity with The Forty-Second Parallel; and to express in a method both fluent and cohesive the reflexive indices of a world-scale holocaust and a number of individual lives. Despite the superficial monotony of the procedure he chose, with its stress on the commonplace and familiar and its relentless accumulation of contingent detail, he has realised a world that is not simply tangible, concrete, recognisably real. He has succeeded in registering a vital concern about the conditions of life, for which twentieth-century America stands as a universal symbol - the horror of being manipulated by an impersonal and irresistible fate, the temptations of compromise, the awesome corruptive possibilities of power and influence. Above all, he communicates a frozen pity for the lost, helpless, acted-upon individual. 1919 is not a tract. It offers no solutions. Only in the engrammatic summaries of "lacrimae rerum" is there latent a shocking and stimulating cry of protest. Sartre, for all his eccentric limitations, phrases this truth with eloquent understanding:

Nous reconnaissons tout de suite l'abondance triste de ces vies sans tragique; ce sont les nôtres, ces mille aventures ébauchées, manquées, aussitôt oubliées, toujours recommencées, qui glissent sans marquer, sans jamais engager, jusqu'au jour où l'une d'elles, toute pareille aux autres, tout à coup, comme par maladresse et en



trichant, écoeure un homme pour toujours, négligemment détraque un mécanisme. Or c'est en peignant comme nous pourrions les peindre, ces apparences trop connues, dont chacun s'accommode, que Dos Passos les rend insupportables. Il indigne ceux qui ne sont jamais indignés, il effraie ceux qui ne s'effraient de rien.<sup>148</sup>

But for all that, Dos Passos has substituted for his formerly rather abstract and metaphysical version of human fate a vision that assigns to men and movements a responsible role in the prevalence of suffering, death and the lost chances of salvation. The primary images of 1919 are Wilson "talking to save his faith in words," and "scraps of dried viscera and skin bundled in khaki" of the culminating Biography, and the omnipresent raging forces of destruction which connect the two: "machinegun fire and arson starvation, lice, cholera, typhus. "Writing of an age in which "mendacity, slander, bribery, venality, coercion, murder, grew to unprecedented dimensions",<sup>149</sup> Dos Passos creates his petition of anguished protest with a Voltairean ferocity, and via literary modes that permit his reality to be appreciated entire: the spectacle of monstrous injustice, the impact of the component engrams, and the moral climate of the universe in which they interact.

### 3. "We could Stand The War. But The Peace Has Done Us In".

Charley Anderson's war was omitted from 1919, but Dos Passos opens The Big Money - as he had ended The Forty-Second Parallel - with a view of Charley on board ship, hungover, edgy with carnal desire, and hoping (as Joe Askew phrases it) to "get some of it away from 'em"<sup>150</sup> - the big-money boys, the established rich. Charley's experience, as the reader pieces it gradually together, has been less disillusioning than that either of the "grenadine guards", who perceived most of the political chicanery involved, or the doughboys who bled in the trenches. He is not simply intact; not simply a decorated hero; he is able to return to the U.S., thanks to his knowledge of aviation acquired during his service, with a practical proposition for peacetime commercial success.



And such a plan seems on the cards: Charley, on the face of things a modest and decent young man with the informal manners of the American west, has no painful engrammatic history to overshadow his hopes - as, for example, Jimmy Herf had when he stepped off the boat with a new baby and his hot-water bottles filled with smuggled liquor. Charley's life may not be absolutely tabula rasa - some of his family complications have already appeared in the first book of the trilogy - but it almost seems, as the warm sensations of his homeland synaesthetically recur, that there will be waiting, if he has the force and spirit to grasp it, a future as buoyantly complete as his imagination has forecast for him.

He sat there listening to the dance tunes, looking at the silk stockings, and the high heels and the fur coats and the pretty girls' faces pinched a little by the wind as they came in off the street. There was an expensive jingle and crinkle to everything. Gosh, it was great. The girls left little trails of perfume and a warm smell of furs as they passed him.<sup>151</sup>

So American, this equation of erotic and financial accomplishment. And yet: there lingers, in this passage and throughout the whole of the short chapter on Charley's first stay in New York, a cruel and tantalising air about these images of the good life as Charley visualises it. His senses rebound from the costly flesh-coverings that allure and conceal; in the trinket-words "jingle" and "crinkle" lurks the superficiality of these promised attractions, as of banknotes passed over a bar-counter. Charley is left to intoxicate himself with the token invitations of odours that linger after the bodies from which they are emitted have passed him by. It is "great" to be there as a privileged spectator; "great" to picture to oneself how, through luck and enterprise, one may become an active participant in the glamour of it all. Yet poor Charley cannot fathom the unwitting sacrifices it may involve, even when, as in the excitement of his encounter with Doris Humphries, he is treated not as a man with full human attributes but as a legendary hero, a walking medal. Even her distant, perfunctory farewell, which ought to be a warning to him, has the effect, in the circumstances, of making more urgent and compelling his own fascination.



It was just 'Goodnight, Ollie dear, goodnight, Lieutenant Anderson', and the doorman slamming the taxi door. He hardly knew which of the hands he had shaken had been hers.<sup>152</sup>

This scene, reinforced by the directly relevant and prophetic paragraphs of Newsreel 45, economically sketches the approaching lines of conflict which eventually ruin Anderson. For it is the recollection of this Aladdin's cave of delight, deeply beguiling and greatly to be striven for, that he carries with him back to Minnesota, where there lie in wait for him the irksomely dull entanglements of his past. Only one heartfelt commitment draws him there - his native concern for his ailing mother. Otherwise, Jim and Hedwig, now more affluent but indefatigably narrow and self-seeking, look to him to settle down as a compliant drudge in their little grid of the system. The irony of this situation is that the displacement of values has affected even his ordinary working life since his brother also views Charley with a cynical eye to the advantages of adding a good war record to the assets of his business. Jim wants a bachelor mechanic who will give plenty and take little, but for Charley - a travelled man, who feels he has broadened his outlook - the drawbacks of this proposition are twofold. It is too consciously small-scale and niggling, and it lacks the thick gloss of charm that wipes money clean and surrounds the head of the successful entrepreneur with a halo of romantic enchantment. So Charley Anderson - of all people - finds himself in a situation comparable to that of Krebs in Soldier's Home, who "had acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration"<sup>153</sup> and who could not relate, after the war, to his family and friends in Kansas. Krebs "mal de vivre" springs from within, Charley's from outside himself, but each is sickened by the vividness of a disparity he always senses in his mind, and neither can respond to emotional demands by people who have not shared his experience and who assume that nothing has changed.

She felt limp in his arms. They danced awhile without saying anything. She had too much rouge on her cheeks and he didn't like the perfume she had on... Emiscah's voice had gotten screechy and she



she had a way he didn't like of putting her hand on his knee.... As soon as he could Charley said he had a headache and had to go home.<sup>154</sup>

His re-encounter with Emiscah, and Charley's prompt realisation that she now means very little to him, is a more potent factor in Charley's determination to get away than his mother's death or the importunities of Jim and Hedwig. In his rejection of her - cold, cruel, yet not inspired by the chronic spiritual malaise that makes Krebs appear cold and cruel - are evident the incipient signs that Charley in his turn has begun to adopt the coarsely materialist doctrines of the twenties' boom climate. The vulgarity he repudiates in Emiscah is an outward vulgarity of manners only: her cheap perfume, her unmusical voice, her familiarity of gesture and her unsophisticated view of love and courtship may be unattractive, but the girl is not reducible to these properties any more than Charley is reducible to his service record and medal ribbons. But for all practical purposes, men and women in The Big Money are reduced, by the ruling criteria of profit and success, to such bare indices:

It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one's good name. When accumulated goods have in this way become the accepted badge of efficiency, the possession of wealth presently assumes the character of an independent and definitive basis of esteem. The possession of goods whether acquired aggressively by one's own exertion or passively through transmission by inheritance from others, becomes a conventional basis of reputability. The possession of wealth, which was at the outset valued simply as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. Wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor".<sup>155</sup>

Wealth is the central value to which all subsidiary values of manner, taste and style accrue. It is no accident that The Big Money includes a Biography of Veblen, or that Charley's downfall is, in part, the destruction of a man who forsakes "efficiency" for the prospect of sheer wealth.

It is Charley's misfortune (though at the same time psychologically in accord with his active, impatient nature) to make his Eastward move too soon. As a result, he finds himself playing the part of Tantalus in New York much longer than he bargained for. At every stage of his career, the future is



recessive: each advance he makes breeds a fresh crop of frustration. Charley's spell as a beggar in the court of Mammon, which allows Dos Passos also to cast a satirical light on the Greenwich Village bohemia into which Paul and Eveline Johnson have settled, speeds up the dissolution of his serious, diligent, self-improving traits. At the same time, it increases the hunger for success which such qualities had been expected to help satisfy: in Veblenian phraseology, the aim of Charley's efforts switches from "industry" to "exploit". He becomes alert for the quick speculative deal and the promising gamble rather than Poor-Richard prospect of gradual, deserving, honest endeavour. He takes a manual job by necessity, for the basic means of life, but most of his income is won at the poker-game, and he dissipates it in bars and brothels. Here he is not exceptional, for this is a normal way of life in the metropolis - fast, noisy, full of slick tricks and sudden surprises. Dos Passos has chosen to capture this atmosphere, more succinctly than in Manhattan Transfer, a style that relates the hectic flow in fast, simple sentences.

They danced until the place closed up. They were staggering when they got out on the black empty streets. They stumbled past garbagepails. Cats ran out from under their feet. They stopped and talked about free love with a cop. At every corner they stopped and kissed. As she was looking for her latchkey in her purse, she said thoughtfully: 'People who really do things make the most beautiful lovers, don't you think so?'<sup>156</sup>

The joke here is that the girl imagines she is about to sleep with a famous theatrical journalist. Charley is now taken up, not for the military kudos with which he does have some personal connection, but in the identity of a stranger, by a girl who treats his innocent straightfaced remarks as the wit of a celebrity. Charley at first enjoys the "great bright unexplored barn" of New York, but he will later be "compelled to live in its disordered mind". He cannot for ever plausibly wear a mask of impersonation - nor does he want to, since he hopes that his invention will provide him with the charismatic identity of the rich, successful man. As he awaits this apotheosis, Dos Passos finely builds up around him the loose and scattered impressions of an aspirant in the



big town - its stretches of inanition, its sporadic high moments, and its multiplicity of compromised gratifications. The extreme social and emotional discrepancies of his position start to wear Charley down - the afterglow of a date with Doris followed by the bathos and niggling frustrations of his enforced return to poverty.

He sat on the bed with his eyes full of peeved tears. It was too goddamned hellish to have everything close in on him like this after getting his commission and the ambulance service and the Lafayette Escadrille and having a mechanic attend to his plane and do all the dirty work. Of all the lousy stinking luck.<sup>157</sup>

Mild persistent dissipation - a typical vice of the bored or lonely in large cities - overtakes him: "It got so he didn't do anything all day but wait for Eveline and drink lousy gin he bought in an Italian restaurant".<sup>158</sup> By the time Joe Askew is fit and ready to begin negotiations for the commercial manufacture of their aeroplane starter, the pattern is definite. Disappointment and tedium have sharpened Charley's crying need to get on; the sauve-qui-peut morality of urban living has washed away the vestiges of midwestern ethical restraints. Charley's mind, never subtle or self-analytical, has become obsessively concentrated on the promised rewards of large-scale material success.

At the end of the chapter this success is in view, and Charley has been associating with - instead of anyone who will agree to share his casual pleasures - the educated, smooth-talking men whose business is business. The narrative of his life story - a narrative carefully attuned to the "intolerable neural itch"<sup>159</sup> of Charley's period of "dangling" - has stressed the sordid and colourless routine of work and idle pleasures, a routine interrupted only for tantalising glimpses of a magic kingdom he cannot enter. But another voice has served to counterpoint this story, the voice of the Camera Eyes. Camera Eye 43 opens with a lyrical impression of the author's return to the U.S.A. after his discharge, and the surge of memories and meanings that drift from his native shore as the ship nears the harbour. But the beginning is deceptive. The carefully chosen images of home and childhood - fresh, plangent - never



become a panegyric. They give way to the sober testimony of the labour correspondent.

and the crunch of Whitecorn muffins and coffee with cream gulped in a hurry before traintime and apartment house mornings stifling with newspapers and the smooth powdery feel of new greenbacks and the whack of a cop's billy cracking a citizen's skull and the faces blurred with newsprint of men in jail the whine and shriek of the buzzsaw and the tipsy smell of raw lumber and straggling through slagheaps through fireweed through wasted woodlands the shantytowns the shantytowns.<sup>160</sup>

and in the poetic humour of the conclusion (at this moment so close to E.E. Cummings' askance views of his native culture) to an amused awareness of absurd discrepancies:

What good burying those hated years in the latrine-stench at Broncourt under the starshells if today the crooked-faced customsinspector with the soft tough talk the blurring speech the funnypaper antics of thick hands jerking thumb (so you brought home French books didjer?) is my uncle.<sup>161</sup>

And a few pages later the next Camera Eye sardonically stresses the surrealistic, out-of-place feeling Dos Passos had on his return from a tour to the Near East, where he had witnessed "starvation, lice, cholera, typhus", when he found "waiting again the forsomebodyelsetailored dress suit" in an America on the upswing of Harding-Coolidge prosperity.

Gentlemen I apologize it was the wrong bell it was due to a misapprehension that I found myself on the stage when the curtain rose the poem I recited in a foreign language was not mine in fact it was somebody else who was speaking it's not me in uniform in the snapshot it's a lamentable error mistaken identity the service-record was lost the gentleman occupying the swivel chair wearing the red carnation is somebody else than...<sup>162</sup>

The Camera Eye's distinctive rhetoric, still counterpointing the narrative, has been developed to a point where its clarity and force are irremitably adult. Childhood has been left behind, and the writer is both a man who has suffered personally and an observer-participant who relates with critical passion the contortions of a society hysterically and drunkenly dancing on the edge of a chasm. The stringing together of related idioms or clichés, used in "The Body of an American" to communicate an indignant pity, adapts itself to the task of



seismographically recording the rift of America into "two nations". It is lyrical, satirical, and accusatory in turn: it points a finger at the well-fed businessmen who expect, from an artist-witness of the great catastrophe, the traditional received ideas and opinions of a young man on the make. The jolly uncle of childhood turns up as a prurient snooper in uniform. The America of lyrical memory - the lyricism now more controlled and sensitive than ever - has itself become, like Europe, a gigantic battleground - the land of violence and decadence. The Camera Eyes convey in a highly concentrated form the author's emotions of outrage, bemusement, and alienation; not rawly imposed on the fictive material, but relevantly accompanying or interpenetrating the narrative. In The Big Money they are both more truly poetic and more intellectually abrasive than in the first two books. Their intensely personal attitudes suffuse the flat, dry, realistic fictional chapters. Despite the formal separation of the two, each is a necessary element in Dos Passos' "double focus".<sup>163</sup> Charley Anderson's pilgrimage in search of the big money synoptically includes a view of U.S. society in which "the pioneer virtues still survive in general parlance, but only as Musical Bank currency".<sup>164</sup> On this huge canvas, a picture of universal corruption is painted, in which such early Biographies as those of Taylor and Ford furnish paradigmatic exemplars. The more stringent irony of the spontaneous engram, refracted through the hyperaesthetic optic nerve of the Camera Eyes, helps to stir the conscience of the reader who might otherwise fall into the moral sleepiness of the Colosseum spectator. And throughout the narrative sections there are other forces at work. The Big Money sets out to examine, with greater explicit attention than The Forty-Second Parallel or 1919, the interaction of American social forces in the eight years following the Armistice and the particular roles of individual characters who consciously, instinctively or blindly choose the parts they will play in the struggle. The story of Mary French is the first of the life-histories to feature the process of political radicalisation, a wholehearted and self-denying commitment to the cause of the working class, as opposed (for example) to the fluctuations of Fenian McCreary or the strangely guileless opportunism of the "labour-faker"



G. H. Barrow.

At its inception, it is a story familiar elsewhere in American fiction. Both Hemingway and John O'Hara took their own doctor-fathers as the models of the "good doctor" in the Nick Adams tales and the Jim Malloy stories. The good doctor is the humane physician who gives his professional services to the poor and pauperises himself through his dedication and unworldliness. Also familiar is the nagging doctor's wife<sup>165</sup> who resents his preparedness to forego money or Status. But Dr. French is more than a "good doctor": he has a practice in the Wobbly mining country of Colorado, he votes the socialist ticket, and he implants in Mary - much to her mother's disgust - his own values. For the young Mary French, as yet personally unacquainted with the actual conditions of exploitation, these values have the radiance of religious beliefs. They are ideals in the tradition of Jane Adams and Hull House.

She... lay in the Pullman berth that night too excited to sleep, listening to the rumble of the wheels over the rails, the clatter of crossings, the faraway spooky wails of the locomotive, remembering the overdressed women putting on airs in the ladies' dressing-room who'd elbowed her away from the mirror and the heavyfaced businessmen snoring in their berths, thinking of the work there was to be done to make the country what it ought to be..<sup>166</sup>

Her list of the social maladies to be cured is comprehensive and accurate; her training has seen to that. Her weakness at this time is that her understanding of them is purely intellectual, lacking the final touch of experience. When that experience arrives it makes so urgent and real the deprivation she has vowed to fight (as real as the vulgar men and women on the train) that she finds Hull House principles inadequate to combat it. Her principal preoccupation is the struggle to align cognitive principles with the facts of experience, and this struggle - a protracted and painful effort - characterises the life of each of the figures whose stories are told in The Big Money. They strain to act, but their actions increasingly bring results that seem to cast doubt on the premises from which they issued, and their life-goals fall apart into incompatible alternatives. Mary's affair with George Barrow - the least unsatisfactory sexual relationship in a trilogy distinguished by its



roll-call of erotic failure - becomes for her a political betrayal once she realises how remote his objectives are from the movement he ostensibly represents. Yet Mary does press on, working her way to the centre of resistance, undergoing the personal disappointments that course entails, just as Charley - in his less reflective fashion - shoulders his way upward to become an overweight, hard-drinking and woman-hungry financial speculator. While still the Camera Eye records the inward symptoms of unease beneath the desperate energy:

the personality must be kept carefully adjusted over  
the face  
to facilitate recognition she pins on each of us a badge  
today entails tomorrow  
Thank you but why me? Inhibited? Indeed goodbye  
the old brown hat flopped faithful on the chair beside  
the door successfully snatched.<sup>167</sup>

Dos Passos writes of a Greenwich Village party. (He was known, apparently, for his habit of keeping his hat within easy reach near the exit so that he could make a fast, inconspicuous escape.<sup>168</sup>) Such a retreat from the superficiality of "hobohemia" is easily understood - but where does it lead? To a confused passivity in the face of the fluid, protean stream of life, ubiquitous but uncapturable, and still more attractive than the civilised babble of cocktail parties. In Camera Eye 46 the terms of this self-division are made more overt. The author has made a radical commitment of a kind, but he is oppressed by doubts. The ruling class is strong and ruthless, the masses are weak and divided; he senses the falsity of his own position as a liberal intellectual who, in his speechmaking, is expected to arouse his audience with dramatic slogans when he would prefer to urge on them his own modest, sceptical outlook of patient inquiry:

you suddenly falter ashamed flush red break out in  
sweat why not tell these men stamping in the wind  
that we stand on a quicksand? that doubt is the  
whetstone of understanding is too hard hurts instead  
of urging picket blocks off it's all for the advancement  
of the human race while I go home after a drink and  
a hot meal and read (with some difficulty in the Leob  
Library trot) the epigrams of Martial and ponder the  
courses of history and what leverage might pry the  
owners loose from power and bring back ( I too Walt  
Whitman) our storybook democracy and all the time in  
my pocket that letter from that collegeboy asking me  
why being right which he admits the radicals are in their  
private lives suchshits<sup>169</sup>



"Peeling the speculative onion of doubt",<sup>170</sup> wearing "the old raincoat of incertitude",<sup>171</sup> which he cannot agree to trade in for a surer, more doctrinaire philosophy, Dos Passos looks upon himself as "an unidentified stranger hat pulled down over the has he any? face."<sup>172</sup> The Camera Eyes of The Big Money are technically alert for the need to express the dimensions of crisis which overwhelmed Dos Passos when he got back from Europe. The former simple delight in basic sensory experience - as of a child, or a soldier plucking a flower in the midst of war - is a quality out of reach of the concerned adult civilian, and the poetic form tautens. Lyricism shows up chiefly in contexts in which it is sharpened by irony, blown up into crazy farce, or associated with the angry rhodomontade of social protest. Farce occurs in the pivotal Camera Eye 48: returning to the United States after his Spanish trip in 1923, Dos Passos overhears an obscure quarrel between some Cuban passengers on the boat. It signifies his farewell to the "gesture of Castile" - natural, spontaneous private life, privileged to enjoy its quixotry out of the shadow of institutions. Taking up life in the U.S. again means reassuming the problems he had previously attempted to face, and which had the effect of making him doubt his own sincerity. These problems are not mentioned explicitly, but appear in outline through a new cast of metaphor in his writing, as though Dos Passos had absorbed the works of the English poets who had energised their verse by reference to the Marxist predictions of crisis: "the landscape corroded with literature" (Iberia); "the multitudinous flickering dazzle of light" (from machinery); "Venus's dangerous toe" (a venereal infection); cash difficulties "as inevitable as visas".<sup>173</sup> They suggest the galvanic shocks of a man poised between the actuality of his own consciousness and the hallucinatory whirl of the social reality he must focus on.

At this point - almost exactly half-way through the novel - each of the main fictional characters has reached a crisis point in his or her life. Charley Anderson, on the rebound from Doris Humphries, has signed up with Tern Aviation of Detroit. Mary French has broken off her relationship with



George Barrow and left for New York. Margo Dowling has eloped to Cuba. Both Charley and Mary have been used to an up-and-down existence, in which a series of unforeseen reversals has obliged them to modify in some way their assumptions and responses. But each reacts differently to the patterns of engrammatic shock. Charley clings more tightly to an illusory success-credo, inarticulately but with an increasing neurotic desperation that prevents him adjusting successfully to reality. Instead, he resorts to anodynes that postpone his rendezvous with ultimate disillusion and eventually grow into addictive vices:

He had four centuries and some chickenfeed. The bills were crisp and new, straight from the bank. He brought them up to his nose to sniff the new sweet sharp smell of the ink. Before he knew what he'd done he'd kissed them. He laughed out loud and put the bills back in his pocket. Jesus, he was feeling good.<sup>174</sup>

But things go wrong, and when they go wrong he doubles his bets. He is trapped in a spiral of drinking, whoring, enervating late nights. Like a front-line pilot whose every mission may prove to be his last. Charley celebrates his triumphs with a juvenile recklessness and unwinds his tensions and disappointments in repeated orgies of self-indulgence. In this behaviour-pattern lies the foundation of the change that he has tried to cash in on his war record, and has pushed his credit to its limit. Ironically, this is true: the individualistic striver has become what others have made of him. For though Charley never counts coup or consciously exploits his wartime reputation, he is unable to shake off the psychological habits of the active-serviceman and his associates are incapable of seeing him as anything but an ex-ace using his rank in civilian life. He is as trapped as a pendulum; whatever happens to him in Detroit and afterwards is additional proof that he has lost, and the rewards he has promised himself recede as fast as ever he stretches out to grasp them.

Mary French's story has an opposite significance: it is precisely by recognising a bitter reality, and by choosing to meet it head-on, that she forfeits her humanity. The humanitarian impulses she has learned from her father become narrowed and annealed, by a succession of inductive steps,



into the iron militancy of the communist convert. The steel strike in Pittsburgh is the first crucial encounter: Dos Passos paints - in the portrait of Ted Healey, the bigoted editor making a show of impartial news-reporting - a classic type of compromiser. Mary's political development is fully accounted for by such men and events: the concrete instances of cruelty or humbug which, in one's actual life-experience, may persuade one to change sides, or to adopt completely a previously hedged commitment. Mary's ironic fate is that she does finally align experience and belief - at a high cost. She had accepted long before, when she refused Joe Denny's stammered proposal, that she would have to renounce the consolations of personal happiness. But she discovers also that even such values as honesty, loyalty and comradeship are made victims of the exigencies of organised radicalism. With Benny Compton, and particularly with Don Stevens, there occasionally sputters the hope of a warmer personal relationship than that of fellow-workers in the cause - but the cause itself extinguishes such hopes. Mary voluntarily accepts misery and drudgery worse than that of the workers she is resolved to help - but at least she does so by intelligently facing the truth that one may be sentenced to choose between two incompatible objects of desire. Charley never realises this: as Arthur Mizener has pointed out, he shares the fallacy of Clyde Griffiths and Jay Gatsby.<sup>175</sup> He equates material prosperity with spiritual self-fulfilment, and especially with erotic and romantic images of the good life. Completely unable to recognise the real nature of the fast, aggressive world into which he has plunged, he "dies without ever understanding what has happened to him."<sup>176</sup>

These two modes of choosing - blindly risking all to win all, and losing, or subjecting the private self to a hard, demanding and often demoralising discipline of struggle - are mirrored in the anxious dialogue which the author conducts with himself in the Camera Eyes. But there is yet another way of striking out at the bleak walls of the solitary-confinement cell, a way at once hard-headed and fantastic, beset with vagaries, in which advantages are thrown away knowingly as a sentimental impulse, cruelties compounded, good fortune stumbled across by bluff or coincidence and just as casually revoked.



Several reviewers (not just the Comstocks among them) have tended to write of Margo Dowling as though she were no more than an amoral slut using pussy-power to drive her way to the top. Actually, the fact is that she is "a fundamentally decent human being... shrewd and brave and tough enough to succeed in the savage world that has destroyed Charley"<sup>177</sup> - and her story keeps alive the otherwise curiously absent (except in the Newsreels) mythic quality of the twenties as it has survived in the popular imagination. Margo is unique; a real hybrid of the life- and death-instincts in her native civilisation, and Dos Passos' master-stroke of behavioural characterisation. She is the fantasy-woman counterpart to the nightmare-women in Dos Passos' work who are thoroughly destructive. From the little girl feeling so "proudhappy"<sup>178</sup> when her father is sober and benign to the still young but obsolescent movie queen, she exhibits, along with the sexual fascination that operates almost independently of her own will both a pardonable shrewdness of egoism and a certain responsiveness to the qualified, threatened warmth of human relations. She is real enough for the reader to believe, as he reads that "Margo walked up and down the main stem of Jacksonville with an awful hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach",<sup>179</sup> that sheer hunger is responsible for her anxiety. While Charley Anderson and Mary French struggle through turbulent currents to disillusioning encounters with the unpleasant facts of the causes they had idealised, Margo floats on the wave-top like an errant, unsinkable cork. After a series of random adventures, she is washed up on the Barbary shore. It is ironic that she, the tough and independent waif who does what comes naturally, is transformed by the Hollywood grotesque Margolies into a glamorous dream-idol of the nation. She, too, is fated to lose by her immersion into a huge, artificial fantasy; for only in its particulars does her personal history differ from those of the other characters. Each portrays one aspect of the twenties: the feverish industrial boom based on new technology developed during the war; the growing movement of political opposition that was to culminate in the violent polarities of the Sacco-Vanzetti case; and the new "opium of the people" that reflected the dominant values of the age in the distorted images of commercial entertainment.



From the point of view of our own age, the twenties have taken on the colouring of camp: "incredible era", "the age of ballyhoo", and so forth. Actually, the twenties began to be mythologized as soon as they were over,<sup>180</sup> but Dos Passos, though occasionally satirising their absurdities, is little interested in contributing to this process. Writing a trilogy that covers more than a quarter of a century of American history, he is more concerned in The Big Money to develop and round off themes present in the work since the first pages of The Forty-Second Parallel, and his means of presenting these themes has grown surer and more economical as he has progressed. The Big Money, though the longest of the three novels, is a more fluently written and integrated book than the others. There is not in the narrative, as there is for example in the chapters on "Mac", the sense of an 'over-determined' situation, there are no detachable sketches as there are in 1919, and the tensions chosen to energise the themes (which partly mirror the author's own divided outlook) are lucidly and coherently employed. The most fundamental tension is a political one, between the hope that the radicals are right, and will win, and the fear that organised resistance to the power-forms of the status quo carries the seeds of its own failure. From 1925 onwards, Dos Passos had begun to move - never unreservedly, but with deliberation - from the position of a sympathetic observer to a closer, more active association with bodies and movements representing, or claiming to represent, the interests of the American proletariat. He had helped found the New Playwrights Theatre, where some of his own work was produced; had acted as "contributing editor" for the New Masses; had, with Dreiser and others, investigated conditions among the striking miners in Kentucky, where he had been indicted under criminal syndicalism laws. But even in this period, he never ceased to view himself as basically a writer and intellectual whose duty was principally to urge upon others of his kind the need to re-examine familiar assumptions and to seek reform through the pressure of ideas. In 1930 he wrote:

But there is a layer: engineers, scientists,  
independent manual craftsmen, writers, artists, actors,  
technicians of one sort or another who, insofar as they



are good at their jobs, are a necessary part of any industrial society... If you could once convince them of the fact that their jobs don't depend on capitalism they'd find that they could afford to be humane. The time to reach these people is now, when the series of stock market crashes must have proved to the more intelligent that their much talked of participation in capital through stockholdings was just about the sort of participation a man playing roulette has in the funds of the gambling house whether he's winning or losing. As a writer I belong to that class whether I like it or not, and I think most men who graduate from working with their hands into desk jobs eventually belong to it, no matter what their ideas are. You can call 'em intellectuals or liberals or petty bourgeoisie or any other dirty name but it won't change 'em any. What you've got to do is convince the technicians and white collar workers that they have nothing to lose.<sup>181</sup>

Beneath the confused terminology and the horrible affectations of a "popular" style, appear two ideas. One is the Orwellian preoccupation with an appeal to the classes who may be tempted to turn fascist in the slump, showing them the common ground they have with the working-class. Dos Passos is probably sincere here, though others used it as a conscious political gambit. The other is a distinct liking for these classes as "independent craftsmen" with a production ethic; it reveals the influence of Thorstein Veblen. In the passage quoted above, Dos Passos tends to lump together technicians and the intelligentsia with an omnium gatherum of the skilled and professional classes, but his fiction concentrates on the weakness and corruption of intellectuals (Herf, Savage, Morehouse) who throw away their souls. Not until The Big Money is there a recognisable portrait of the Veblenian hero - and even there the hero shares the fate of the intellectuals. Charley Anderson features in a squalid anti-tragedy largely because he remains unconvinced, even by the most gruesome of personal evidence, that he has nothing to lose by abandoning the quest for the big money. Charley is, in the words of his partner, "the bird who's got the feel for the motors".<sup>182</sup> He himself reiterates, in phrases that grow hollower as they grow more and more remote from the reality of his practical work-life, "I'm a mechanic. That's all".<sup>183</sup> "I belong with the mechanics... You and me, Bill, the mechanics against the world".<sup>184</sup> Yet apart from his early spells of



aero-engineering at Askew-Merritt, Charley's connection with the aviation industry is as a wheeling and dealing financier of the most unproductive kind. He has joined the leisure class. And no wonder: the status of the money-man is not only rewarded by large sums of money that often take no more than a telephone call to acquire, but is glorified by every current canon of social worthiness. Nothing illustrates this better than the echo of Charley's own words in Nat Benton's dismissive comment on the dead Bill Cermak. "'After all', said Nat, 'he was only a mechanic'."<sup>185</sup>

So in a negative way, Dos Passos is faithful to his position of 1930. The cult of the self-sufficient technician is never carried to vulgar excess, because, as usual, he demonstrates infallibly in his fiction all the dreaded situations which elsewhere he attempts to prescribe against. The technician lives in a critical age which will not leave him to his own devices: he must choose, or suffer the consequences of failing to choose, his allegiances. Anderson is essentially an apolitical figure - completely so in the beginning, when he good-naturedly shrugs off Don Stevens' blunt question, "Tell us what aviators think about. Are they for the exploiting class or the workingclass?"<sup>186</sup> However, events catch up with him, events of which he has never tried to cultivate any understanding. Thus when he faces a labour dispute at Tern Aviation his attitude is compounded of annoyance, self-justification, and bewilderment; putting the management's case to Bill Cermak, he blurts out a kind of illiterate self-history - and the defences of a potential bully:

"But damn it, Bill, why can't you tell those guys to have a little patience... we're workin' out a profitsharin' scheme. I've worked on a lathe myself... I've worked as mechanic all over this goddam country... We've got a responsibility toward our investors... If every department don't click like a machine we're rooked. If the boys want a union we'll give 'em a union. You get up a meeting and tell 'em how we feel about it, but tell 'em we've got to have some patriotism..."<sup>187</sup>

This is the speech of a man who throws fistfuls of money about in nightclubs and fires servants in a moment's snap of temper: "social existence determines consciousness", and Charley's consciousness has adapted itself to his role.



Moreover, Dos Passos has set his story in a triangular frame of Biographies of eminent Americans who, in their different ways, exemplify the aptitudes of Charley Anderson and the penalties or temptations to which they, in their special positions are subject. Frederick Winslow Taylor is chosen as the instance of the practical American engineer who, working at his craft with a selfless and impartial dedication, finds that his pioneer work is made to serve the interests of "a lot of greedy smalleyed Dutchmen".<sup>188</sup> His career is seen to stem, in a familiar way, from inherited values - "selfrespect, selfreliance, selfcontrol and a long cold head for figures"<sup>189</sup> - and from his austere rejection of "finer things", i.e. European art and culture, vulgarly worshipped and ransacked by American plutocrats. Dos Passos rightly stressed the actual neutrality of the techniques developed by Taylor (they were used by the young Soviet republic to train workers in its new industries) but his chief aim is to display how these techniques are adopted by a social system based on the profit motive:

production would make every firstclass American rich who was willing to work at piecework and not drink or raise cain or think or stand mooning at his lathe. Thrifty Schmidt the pigiron handler can invest his money and get to be an owner like Schwab and the rest of the greedy smalleyed Dutchmen and cultivate a taste for Bach and have hundredyearold boxtrees in his garden at Bethlehem or Germantown or Chestnut Hill.<sup>190</sup>

And this critique is echoed by the cadences in "Tin Lizzie" that point at the central meaning of Ford's mass-production efficiency and paternalism:

The American Plan; automotive prosperity seeping down from above; it turned out there were strings to it.

But that five dollars a day  
paid to good, clean American workmen  
who didn't drink or smoke cigarettes or read or think,  
and who didn't commit adultery  
and whose wives didn't take in boarders,  
made America once more the Yukon of the sweated  
workers of the world <sup>191</sup>

Here are the signs of an old dichotomy in the author's mind. He wants hard work to be fairly rewarded, hence his use of anti-employer rhetoric, but he is unprotestant and unAmerican enough to nurse a Latin fondness for the indulgence of personal pleasures - "raising cain". He can write with regret



of the 'old thrifty farmlands'<sup>192</sup> that have vanished to make way for Ford's plant, but he accepts the reality of scientific management and mass-production. Even in his attitude towards the "finer things" there is ambivalence. Ford the "passionate antiquarian" makes nonsense of the past by tearing its treasures out of their context and re-erecting them as a monument to his wealth, but it is hard to imagine the author sharing Taylor's sincere indifference to the European heritage. In the Biography of Thorstein Veblen, it is counted in his favour that he has not only read and translated the Norse sagas of his own cultural tradition but has acquainted himself with philosophy and the classics. Indeed, the Veblen piece is the most unreservedly favourable of all the Biographies in The Big Money. Veblen was not only an eccentric who "got in wrong" by refusing to pay his ritual homage to Mammon, but a thinker who

pointed out the alternatives; a warlike society strangled by the bureaucracies of the monopolies forced by the law of diminishing returns to grind down more and more the common man for profits, or a new matter-of-fact commonsense society dominated by the needs of the men and women who did the work and the incredibly vast opportunities for peace and plenty offered by the progress of technology.<sup>193</sup>

These are naïve and banal propositions. If the author subscribes to them, as the freighting of the language strongly suggests, he reveals all too plainly his defects as a polemicist. When he forsakes a satirical or destructive irony to praise his subject, he only succeeds in diminishing him and in reproducing the vague and windy formulations that are the mainstay of his straight political journalism. Yet the Biographies are not to be read in isolation, and Dos Passos' strength as a novelist lies in the manner in which he distributes stress and significance between the juxtaposed sections. The doubts and inconsistencies which he is unable to resolve in his own mind but which he is prepared to avow are refracted through his literary media as values existing in a dynamically proportioned conflict. Patterns established by the biographical sketches of real Americans - concise mixtures of fact and commentary - illuminate and deepen the stories of the fictitious characters, who are shown simply as they undergo their experience, fact and commentary



inseparably fused. Charley may partake of Taylor's innocent pragmatism, Ford's egoistic ambition and Veblen's imprudent sensuality, but he is not a simple residue of these qualities. They are forces at work within and without, and the parallels of history are apt, but as a figure in the narrative he is entirely under the imaginative control of the author. The detailed concrete information about Charlie - the succession of engrams - that accumulates from moment to moment is specific and sequential: it gathers up his experience in a flow of sense-data that is neither completely symbolic nor unselective. In its full weight and worth, it records what Charlie is. The epic Americans of the Biographies are classic and monumental, each fact - Taylor's leather sleeping harness, Ford's squirrels - picked to assume its place in a definitive summation. Charley's identity is thrown together piecemeal, compounded of innumerable stimuli, constantly built up like a coral reef until his death obliterates it. Often, the fairly complete survey provided of his actions and sensations at particular times concentrates on the passive and impressionable side of his awareness:

Charley was following Doris's slender back, the hollow between the shoulderblades where his hand would like to be, across the red carpet, between the white tables, the men's starched shirts, the women's shoulders, through the sizzly smell of champagne and welshrabbit and hot chafingdishes, across a corner of the dancefloor among the swaying couples to where the rest of them were already settled. The knives and forks shone among the stiff creases of the fresh tablecloth.<sup>194</sup>

At such moments, when Charley is pathetically intoxicated with the rare and pristine appeal of things - the things he somehow imagines to stand for whatever he most desires - Charley Anderson the driven climber dissolves into the furniture. The pressure of social typology slackens; the Lardnerian situation of the dupe and his bauble melts in a pang. If Dos Passos were an author given to dramatic crises, it is at such moments that the crucial battles would be lost. All the motion and drama of the Biographies recedes, and in the syntactical progression is merely the ghost of an epiphany. The picture is rendered in detail, but the meaning emerges as a cluster of engrams: it stands



for nothing else. Above all, such passages underscore the truth that "his characters are primarily victims; they do not act as much as undergo things".<sup>195</sup> In Charley's case, it is a fact that the one creative and purposeful achievement of his life - his invention of the new aeroplane starter - has occurred outside the action of the novel; everything thereafter arises by way of his reactions to the initiatives of others or through the effect of impersonal circumstances. One major illustration of this is his behaviour on board the Farrell's yacht. After proposing on impulse to Anne Bledsoe, who politely refuses him, he runs into Gladys Farrell on deck and instantly responds to the stimulation of her unhappiness.

He walked up and down alone. He didn't know what to do.  
He was crazy for Gladys now. He couldn't go back and  
talk to the others. He couldn't go to bed.<sup>196</sup>

Charley's false and ignorant view of marriage - "I want to get married, and to get married like I want I got to have beaucoup kale"<sup>197</sup> - is on a par with the foggy but obsessive mythology that clouds his brain. Whenever an example of one of his dream objectives wanders near (a rich, attractive woman - any rich, attractive woman) he reacts like a thermal fire-sprinkler that automatically shoots water towards any spot where the temperature has risen to a critical point.

It cannot be said of Margo, however, that she simply "undergoes things". It is more that she manages to be in tune with things, infinitely adaptable and with the saving grace of resilience - though lacking the hollow hardness of Elaine Thatcher. In contrast with Charley's unthinking assumptions about the future (and his subsequent pained bafflement when that future fails to materialise) Margo is drawn as an active, planning creature who derives some wisdom from hurtful experiences. "A career was something everybody had in New York and Margo decided she had one too".<sup>198</sup> "She'd get more for the ring at a hock-shop if she didn't barge in on an empty stomach, was what she was thinking".<sup>199</sup> "She tipped Agnes off on just what to buy..."<sup>200</sup> Almost every reversal, even the Cuban ordeal, she can turn to her advantage - and as a matter of survival,



since no-one is harmed by her efforts at self-protection. Margo can even ask Charley for a cheque as he lies on his deathbed without appearing (as his brother does) callously self-seeking. And she relates naturally to the two "show-business" Biographies in the first half of the novel. Both celebrate the charisma of individual American performers: Isadora Duncan, who gave to her wild, romantic view of Art a dedication quite in excess of her gift for dancing, and Valentino the ghost-faced immigrant who, at his death, caused a shock-wave of vicarious grief. They are the only biographical subjects in the trilogy to lay any claim to "art", but actually many more serious candidates could have been chosen. What Dos Passos sees in their lives are firstly the dithyrambic urges of the free spirit, identified with the ordinary people and the frontier tradition of American democracy:

She was an American like Walt Whitman; the murdering rulers of the world were not her people; artists were were not on the side of the machineguns; she was an American in a Greek tunic; she was for the people.<sup>201</sup>

and the mass neuroses of the manipulated herd, who crave to fill the emptiness of their lives with images of the cinematic dream-lover:

While he lay in state covered with a cloth of gold, tens of thousands of men, women, and children packed the streets outside... All the ambulances in that part of the city were busy carting off women who'd fainted, girls who'd been stepped on. Epileptics threw fits. Cops collected little groups of abandoned children.<sup>202</sup>

and what he has created in Margo is an odd mixture of these two tendencies, inductively pursued through a bizarre and complicated private life until she surrenders to the Hollywood process which will institutionalise her forever.

For Margo can never be a totally free agent. Fenian McCreary, leading an equally peripatetic life, found scope in the pre-1917 world for a series of rough-and-ready adventures. It was part of his failure that they led to the no positive end. The chief characters of The Big Money are all eventually swallowed by one or other of the dominant collective organisms of their time. Margo is no exception. Under the tutelage of Margolies, she is destined to be "the nation's newest sweetheart" - a commodity for public consumption until



a newer sweetheart makes her appearance. In fact, her reign is even shorter: a fast-changing technology obviates her usefulness as the "talkies" are developed. In The Big Money there is a validly maintained tension between the struggle of the human will and the incessant influences of society and its institutions. It parallels the central image of a conflict between the common people and the power of the "interests". This conflict, which provokes in Dos Passos a hope for the victory of the just cause and a counterbalancing fear that all will prove in vain, is openly treated in the final sections of the book: the continuing history of Mary French and the later Camera Eyes and Biographies. "Towards Margo Dowling... he maintains and communicates that attitude of wonder never quite dispelled"<sup>203</sup> - but what of Mary French? She is not exactly unsympathetic, but her portrayal is infused with an air of detached pity, corresponding to the author's announcement that "true to my conviction that I should stick to the position of observer I did not think it was my business to picket or march". Mary French lives in the thick of the struggle;<sup>204</sup> she does picket and march, sacrificing for her beliefs the affluence and comfort of the bourgeois existence that might so easily be hers. Yet in comparison with the impassioned denunciations of the last three Camera Eyes, Dos Passos' treatment of her situation is muted and cool. At times it is virtually satirical:

Then warm reassuring voices like Ben Compton's when he was feeling well were telling her that Public Opinion wouldn't allow it, that after all Americans had a sense of Justice and Fair Play, that the Working Class would rise; she'd see crowded meetings, slogans banners, glary billboards with letters pitching into perspective saying: Workers of the World Unite, she'd be marching in the middle of crowds in parades of protest. They Shall Not Die.<sup>205</sup>

This, of course, is material very similar to the slogans used to identify Ben Compton in 1919, and Mary is having a dream under the strain of overwork, but it is generally true that she appears as a woman whose prime loyalty is to an abstract political creed rather than to individuals. She develops this allegiance in the course of very particularised and firsthand experiences, but it becomes an all-consuming purpose: it allows her to ignore personal disappointments, makes personal matters in general less important. Yet



for Dos Passos the prevalence of a disinterested passion that does not feed off familiar love-objects and people is suspect; and he is not naturally gifted at portraying its manifestations. While the descriptions of strikes and demonstrations are able and perceptive, the few lines of ideological discussion he gives to his creations are lifelessly thin:

"I hadn't wanted to tell you, but they want me to lead a strike over in Bayonne... rayonworkers... you know the old munition-plants made over to make artificial silk... It's a tough town and the workers are so poor they can't pay their union dues... but they've got a fine radical union over there. It's important to get a foothold in the new industries... that's where the old sellout organizations of the A.F. of L. are failing".<sup>206</sup>

The dots are the author's, and one feels they would be unnecessary if Dos Passos were able to depict with the accuracy of much of his dialogue how a strike leader would talk of his strategy. Much more convincing are the cynical interpolations of Jerry Burnham. Fortunately and wisely, the transliteration of radical debate is kept to a minimum. As a rule, in telling Mary's story Dos Passos allows his reservations to be felt without falsifying nature. And there is respect for Mary: in her final scene, after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, after her betrayal by Stevens, after the sickening party with Eveline Johnson and her crowd of parlour-pinks and bohemian plush-horses, she reapplies herself to the exigent problems of organisation. In the last sentence of the narrative, she is seen preparing herself for yet another protest campaign, ready to wear herself out or live life in the shadows for a cause she believes to be necessary and heroic.

But if Dos Passos is relatively aloof and cautious in his portrayal of organised forms of radical dissent, he raises his voice in the Camera Eyes. Here he can identify the victims of oppression with the evidence of his own senses, and establish his indignation on the empirical grounds of American history rather than on philosophical precepts.

Walking from Plymouth to North Plymouth through the raw air of Massachusetts Bay at each step a small cold squidge through the sole of one shoe... this is where the immigrants landed the roundheads the sackers of castles the kingkillers haters of oppression...<sup>207</sup>



In the undeniable facts of personal experience and the almost equally vivid race-memories of what America has symbolised for the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" are the clues and images of his own protest. Dos Passos can be penguin-like with words. When he tries to argue polemically he waddles and flaps, but in the fresher water of poetic statement he achieves emotional power and lucidity:

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..

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who  
have bought the laws and fenced off the meadows and  
cut down the woods for pulp and turned our pleasant  
cities into slums and sweated the wealth out of our  
people and when they want to they hire the executioner  
to throw the switch.<sup>208</sup>

Such passages do have the air of a "furious and sombre poem"<sup>209</sup>: but they are not informed by any intellectual commitment to Marxism, or to any form of socialism. The note is essentially patriotic, and the deep, angry alienation which they convey is accompanied by an almost dismayingly reckless acknowledgment that the cause is lost. "We stand defeated America".<sup>210</sup> "We have only words against / Power Superpower".<sup>211</sup> The Big Money is not specifically Dos Passos' renunciation of his leftist sympathies - that is deferred until Adventures of a Young Man - but it is far from normatively radical in content. Dos Passos' sensibility is that of the artist, not of the conceptual political thinker; his attitudes are empirical, just as his primary tendency in literature is realistic. As a result, the imagery of political struggle in post-war America is harnessed to a view of life that stresses the immediate and specific - even if these are viewed along a lengthy historical time-scale. Reading immediate symbols, such a consciousness may be so impressed by the locally impinging evidence of injustice, inequality, exploitation, betrayal, that it may conclude that the battle is over, and all chances of victory are gone. Without a deeper, longer-term method of evaluating the course of the struggle, despair comes easily. It is undeniable that Dos Passos' writing is marked by a "relative neglect of



ideas and emotions"; in particular, a neglect of any discursive approach to political ideology. The supreme quality of the Camera Eyes is their seismographic closeness to areas of personal disturbance that are amplified in the main text. Thus the solipsisms of the hypersensitive artist-observer are reinforced by broader, more objective data. All the same, The Big Money is no more optimistic in essence than The Forty-Second Parallel. The impression is left that the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti mark the end of a chapter, not the beginning of one. The concluding Biographies deal with two "rogue" millionaires who used the power of wealth to subvert the democratic process. Both Hearst and Insull were alive in 1936 (though Insull had been "rumbled") and in the ad hominem reproaches Dos Passos addresses to each there is a tenor of wistful despair, as though they are the contemptible victors left on a battlefield of noble corpses. This, and the last, famous picture of "Vag" trudging along the highway while above him soars an aeroplane carrying "big men with bank accounts, highly paid jobs, who are saluted by doormen",<sup>212</sup> round off the work with an image of universal hopelessness. "Vag" is walking from nowhere to nowhere; the executive vomiting his lunch in mid-air is no happier or more purposeful. The striving for faith has been cancelled out by the persistence of doubt and pessimism.

The co-existence of political imagery and a fundamental scepticism in USA made it a complicated puzzle for critics: more complicated than its actual literary status warrants. In attempting to face this problem frankly, Lionel Trilling wrote:

to discover a political negativism in the despair of U.S.A. is to subscribe to a naive conception of human emotion and human experience. It is to assert that the despair of a literary work must inevitably engender despair in the reader... the word "despair" all by itself (or any other such general word or phrase) can never characterize the emotion the artist is dealing with. There are many kinds of despair and what is really important is what goes along with the general emotion denoted by the word. Despair with its wits about it is very different from the despair that is stupid; despair that is an abandonment of illusion is very different from despair which generates tender new cynicisms.<sup>213</sup>



Yet any number of liberal categories of despair will not erase the fact that the overwhelming central feeling of USA is of entropic despair: a feeling in keeping with the previous tendency of Dos Passos' writing. True enough, the man who felt despair-in-the-bone might never write at all, but the quality of the author's energising impulse is precisely the artist's commitment to record experience in a manner that honestly registers its significance. And Dos Passos' conception of this duty is highly traditional - the self-same conception that has underlain his work since the story of Martin Howe:

pencil scrawls in my notebook the scraps of recollection  
the broken halfphrases the effort to intersect word with  
word to dovetail clause with clause to rebuild out of  
mangled memories unshakably (Oh Pontius Pilate) the  
truth<sup>214</sup>

Yes, what is truth? Reflections along these lines frequently entail an unwillingness to prescribe any final, dogmatic or universal truth that might be construed as infringing one's next-door neighbour's truth. Dos Passos' art springs from the patent, empirical (and partial) truth of what he can observe. This is not, though, simply the "inner truth" of the introspective writer seeking spiritual verities: it is cinematically alert for all the detritus of experience, personal, material, historical. America of the post-depression years, with its time-honoured myths exploded, offered to artists like Dos Passos the perfect landscape of devastation. As his fellow-author on the Harlan County investigations observed.

Faster cars, more efficient machinery, more and more towering skyscrapers erected in record time, subway trains screeching the extreme necessity of speed, more and larger cities, more business, more cares and duties - as though we, of all people, were ordered not only to mechanize but to populate the world! But just why? For any known event or spiritual reason? Rather, it seems to me that in this atmosphere, the mental and physical condition of millions of people have already "blown up" or are about to. They live and die without tasting anything really worth while. The average individual today is really tortured; he is so numerous, so meaningless, so wholly confused and defeated.<sup>215</sup>



But to pass from the certainty of observation to the exhausting and contentious path of active participation is no easy matter - and there is no reason to blame an artist who, while keeping his eyes open, does not infuse his work with an overt didacticism. The strength of USA lies in its honest, unflagging exegesis of the particular in a form that presents life with the brilliant yet limited accuracy of the novel; Dos Passos has dug into his native culture for the words and symbols to realise it in all its variety - and in its essential entropy. That USA is not informed by the global philosophy of Marxism but by a view of human existence as ultimately planless has led to two opposed kinds of complaint. On the one hand, he is accused of showing no interest in divining motives or in depicting complicated and fugitive states of mind; on the other, it is charged that his art is vulgarly propagandist or schematic. The reception he got from critics on the left, at first effusive and then (after the publication of Adventures of a Young Man) hypocritically savage and abusive, illustrates both the relevance of his chosen subject-matter and the necessary risks of being misunderstood run by an author who attempts to adapt the novel to the kind of reality so powerfully conveyed by the cinema - a graphically mimetic persuasive-ness, a versatility of scope and angle, an ability to blend poetic and realistic modes. Whatever Dos Passos' extra-literary associations with the platforms of the left may have meant to him personally, they cannot be adduced as evidence in judging his trilogy, which is sui generis. The resonance of its protest, expressed in a chosen and practised medium, is not reducible to any kind of programmatic political argument, for Dos Passos cannot say with Ruskin that

I feel the force of mechanism and the fury of avaricious commerce to be at present so irresistible, that I have seceded from the study not only of architecture, but nearly of all art; and have given myself, as I would in a besieged city, to seek the best modes of getting bread and water for its multitudes.<sup>216</sup>

Even so, it is not possible to dismiss the question of politics. The rhetoric of radical dissent is an inseparable part of the content of USA. It is relevantly there as a fact of the total reality surveyed, but additionally as a major element of structure and meaning. The most prominent of the fictional



characters - Mac, Morehouse, Eveline, Richard Savage, Joe Williams, Charley Anderson, Mary French - lead lives that are heavily touched by defeat. They are not all losers of the same kind: some, in their own terms, succeed, but only at the cost of denying every worthwhile human impulse. Others - Joe, particularly - experience nothing but misery and injustice. Losing is so universal that it overlays the "two nations" theme. Yet one of the means of dramatising that boundless gulf between the legendary promise of what life in America ought to be and the hideous facts is to show the two in suspenseful interaction. As the trilogy progresses through its three stages the reader is enabled to contrast engrammatic defeat and disappointment with the national dream of individual opportunity; the liberal dream of inspirational war-aims; and the supranational dream of the libertarian future. In this fashion, the lesson that life can never live up to the expectations men place in it, that men themselves cannot live up to their own aspirations and that the world cannot be meaningfully interpreted for our comfort emerges graphically from the aesthetic data of the work. As one element of the rhetoric of USA, radical dissent contributes - especially in The Big Money - a provision for judging and placing the efforts of the various characters in their blind and futile struggles to redeem the absurdity of the world they inhabit. It also helps to substitute for the bleak neutrality of Manhattan Transfer the writer's protest against the entropy he must accept - a protest self-contained in the pages of the trilogy itself. For this reason, among others, USA must stand as a major work of defiant pessimism.



## CHAPTER V

### "REJOINING THE UNITED STATES"

#### DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AND THE LATER FICTION.

"It was somewhere during the years of the early New Deal that I rejoined the United States".<sup>1</sup> Dos Passos' private secession, at the time of the Sacco-Vanzetti executions, had not led him to join any organised movement of dissent: he retreated, as he wrote, into his "private conscience". Yet he was still politically active, and his activities led him naturally into contact with the Communists, necessarily the most energetic and influential of opposition groups. As for so many of the well-intentioned liberals who were drawn into association with Stalinism in the thirties, his experiences were disillusioning. Among the Harlan County miners and in Spain, Dos Passos was shocked by the ruthlessness and cynicism of those who professed to be marshalling the forces of the disinherited to create a new and just society. Even in USA, one had sensed the repercussions of this in the harsh discipline of the party tacticians, the treatment of Mary French by Don Stevens, the air of conspiracy and deceit. Yet there it had been rendered as part of an objective totality, with a profusion of crisp realistic detail. It had formed, in the total context of the work, a mid-point of reflecting ironies between the terrible tragedy of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair and the entropic lives of the characters enmeshed in a sordid struggle for wealth and power. There was no direct assault upon the Communist faith.

However, Dos Passos' next book - and the first of a succeeding trilogy - begins to show a new line of development. It is not immediately apparent - indeed, both technically and thematically Adventures of a Young Man initially reminds one of the pre-Manhattan Transfer fiction - but it ultimately emerges as a crucial change of direction. The individual hero of the novel is Glenn Spotswood, son of a Columbia professor and the heir to a family tradition of moral idealism. This idealism is predominantly Christian - Glenn's grand-



father, Old Soul, speaks of Andrew Jackson as a "great heart and a Christian Gentleman";<sup>2</sup> to Mrs. Spotswood, his daughter-in-law, Old Soul himself is a Christian Gentleman and the model for Glenn's own future conduct. Herbert Spotswood, the father, loses his academic post through his opposition to American involvement in World War I. The unpopularity of his stand is mirrored in the teasing of Glenn by his schoolmates and in the family quarrel at Thanksgiving dinner, in which Uncle Mat provokes Herbert by his outspoken denunciation of "conscientious objectors and disloyal elements".<sup>3</sup> Herbert's reply indicates the Christian principles upon which he bases his dissent:

Dad looked very pale and stern and was spacing his words slowly and saying that he realized that a great deal of dogma was out of date and rather obscured the gospels than clarified them but that he could find no justification for a Christian to take part in war and that he thought the application of Christianity to war was not only spiritual but practical.<sup>4</sup>

Herbert's religious tendency is not purely contemplative, but active, and entails the application of Christian precepts to social and secular matters. For this reason, he "gets in bad" and the family is divided (rather along Herf-Merivale lines) between the Spotswoods and their conforming cousins. Tyler, however - Glenn's elder brother - accepts the draft.

Herbert Spotswood's ethical rigour is presented as a noble and sincere quality: yet it limits his practicality and his ability to understand those who do compromise or adapt. The contrast between his high-minded beliefs and his failure to cope with the world as it is <sup>becomes</sup> subtly established in Chapter 6, when the family is left to fend for itself after the death of Mrs. Spotswood.

...Glenn got to his feet.  
 "Suppose I scramble some eggs," he said.  
 His voice broke. "We'll have to eat".  
 "You can't cook", said Tyler sourly.  
 "You tell him, Dad".  
 "You can do anything you put your mind  
 to, never forget that, boys", said Dad without  
 turning around from his desk. Something about  
 the way he said it set Glenn's teeth on edge.<sup>5</sup>

It is Glenn, nevertheless, who is destined to follow the path of idealism laid down by his father. But it is not a route he at first chooses for himself. "The



parental bent" is a source of irritation to him, and as he listens to his father's complacent reminiscences over the tea-table he feels "his mouth hardening with dislike" at the basic egotism of Herbert's conversation. Glenn, like Jimmy Herf, has been closer to "Muddy" - and her death has both emotional and practical consequences for him. It means that her annuity ceases, and together with the loss of Herbert's income, imposes upon the boy a measure of responsibility for his own livelihood - to "go out and scratch", as he puts it.

Adventures of a Young Man is therefore Glenn Spotswood's personal odyssey, and to relate the story Dos Passos has jettisoned the multifocal techniques that he employed in the creation of USA. "The result is a book that reads more like other people's novels than anything Dos Passos has written".<sup>6</sup> Glenn Spotswood, though, is not drawn to the life of art, as the heroes of the early work were. His "adventures" have the effect of drawing him into the cause of political radicalism, and it is the successive stages of this process which supply the core of the book, which otherwise has the distinctive Dos Passos attribute of an episodic and plotless narrative.

Glenn's first job is as camp counsellor at Camp Winnesquam under the tutelage of Dr. Talcott. Glenn is sixteen - young enough to be mistaken for one of the boy campers - and his adolescent self-consciousness is pictured in the flat, concise sentences that have become Dos Passos' particular means of building his character typology:

He fell into a kind of daze looking at half his face in the narrow strip of mirror that edged the dial of the scales. He hated how he looked. His nose had a knobbly pasty look. His reddish hair had a silly-looking wave in it. One gray eye looked back at him dolefully.<sup>7</sup>

Glenn is never quite to lose this uncertainty and self-doubt. Unlike his father, who never questions the rightness of his own imperatives, and even manages to use them to block out the need for self-questioning, Glenn has a divided nature that fatally impairs his functional effectiveness. One aspect of his sensibility responds to Paul Graves, the Southerner only "a couple of years older than



Glenn"<sup>8</sup> who has immense self-possession without taking refuge in dogmatism or blind inflexibility. Paul is a sympathetic character who sets off the hesitations and false steps of Glenn's career with his clear-sighted, adaptive practicality. "Paul has the pragmatic experimental, and inductive qualities of mind that mark the scientist and the democratic American".<sup>9</sup> Instinctively, Glenn follows Paul's leadership - follows it into hot water when Paul is fired from the camp for having invented a game for the boys based on the civil war raging in Russia. Glenn "gets in bad" with the hideous Talcotts for supporting his friend. As a result, he is more or less disowned by Herbert Spotswood, whose pompous letter of reproach echoes the accents of Wenny's clergyman father.

The developments of the first section have therefore concentrated on placing Glenn in a familiar position - that of a virtual orphan, without a family or material resources, who must seek his own way in the world. Glenn's manner of facing the "temptations and brutalities"<sup>10</sup> that lie ahead of him is classically predictable. He becomes a "vag". At the end of his first year in a "cow college", Glenn takes off West, in the company first of a fellow student who accepts the doctrines of Henry George, then of a Wobbly "working stiff", Ben Doe. Ben preaches working-class direct action, but his taste for liquor, gambling and whores proves him to be as inadequate a guide to practical living as the pious single-taxer. Glenn's vacation adventures, though, have introduced him to "real life" among people he would never have met at his Washington home or in college. He has been prepared to accept the influence of his next mentors, Mike and Marice Gulick. In the company of this bohemian-academic pair, he moves to New York.

It is at this point that the sequence of events begins which culminates in Glenn's destruction. The Gulicks are essentially shallow, frivolous people who flirt with ideas: Dos Passos brings to his satirical portrayal of them much of the contempt he has shown previously for hobohemia. But through their milieu swim types who are less foolishly inconsequential and whose portraits



are drawn not simply with malicious humour but with a thoroughly vindictive animus. Boris Spingarn and Gladys Funaroff practically compete with each other in their dry and abstract fanaticism. There is much talk of "bourgeois liberalism" and "social fascists", and the thickening atmosphere of political intrigue is accompanied by a depiction of the radical intellectuals' private lives which suggests low standards of personal morality. All this is at the centre of a novel not conceived in "collective" or "synoptic" terms. The prevailing influences of Glenn's college career at Columbia - the years of his most pronounced intellectual development - is of well-heeled, fashionable radicalism. Glenn himself is rather the poor relation of the scene, but one result of this appears to be that his growing commitment to the revolutionary cause is especially serious. Hard on the heels of his sexual disillusion with Gladys comes a vision - reported in a style familiar from Manhattan Transfer - of a future in which his life will acquire meaning from its service to a greater, impersonal end:

Inside his head he was standing on a platform in a great crowded hall hung with red bunting, making himself a speech: Wasn't it about time Glenn Spotswood stopped working himself up about his own private life, his own messy little five-and-ten-cent store pulpmagazine libido... The new Glenn Spotswood... was going on, without any private life, renouncing the capitalist world and its pomps, the new Glenn Spotswood had come there tonight to offer himself... to the revolutionary working class.<sup>11</sup>

The tone of solemn mockery is patent: it is almost Jimmy Herf to the life. Yet Glenn is not to remain a half-baked, hypersensitive young man picking at the scabs on his soul. His faith will grow more intense - despite the villainous factional disputes he observes at first hand, and despite the author's clumsy and mystifying handling of the story. For the very next chapter opens with an episode repeated almost entire from Manhattan Transfer, even to the "lamb chops and baked potatoes". Just as Herf's Uncle Jeff had urged him to enter the revolving doors of conventional opportunity, so Herbert Spotswood proposes to his son that he should accept a position in Uncle Matthew's bank. Herbert, though still avowing his pacifism, claims that he has come to recognise



that "there's a certain selfindulgence in extremism".<sup>12</sup> Glenn, on the other hand, answers in a series of stereotypical Marxist slogans. But the ironic conflict inherent in the scene is curiously dissipated. Glenn agrees to try the job - for what reason is never made clear, though his father has suggested it will give him "an unexampled opportunity to see what things were like on the capitalist side of the fence".<sup>13</sup> Herbert at one point shows anger in the face of Glenn's attraction to revolutionary violence, but the scene ends with Glenn leaving for a visit to Paul Graves. Graves, now a husband and father, has found his vocation as a plant geneticist, supervising research at a state experimental station. Glenn's enthusiasm for the radical cause and his disdain for the private life are not to Paul's taste. His cultivation of the dispassionate methods of the scientist have begun to supercede his former political sympathies, and his attitude to the Soviet republic is modified by caution.

The only thing, Paul said, yawning and shaking the sand off his feet on the porch, was not to make up your mind before you began the experiment. If you really wanted to find out facts you had to take your preconceived notions and put them in a tin box and lock them up in the safe.<sup>14</sup>

The warning against Utopian doctrinaire schemes could not be much clearer. It will be Paul Graves' function throughout the novel to act as a kind of "control", illuminating by contrast the errors and misconceptions of Glenn Spotswood, and he is revived in the final volume of the Spotswood trilogy in much the same rôle. Glenn, meanwhile, is headed for Horton, where the East Coast National Bank is awaiting its college-educated recruit. But even here, under the aegis of his Uncle Mat and Aunt Harriet (stuffy hypocrites à la Merivale), Glenn feels the pull of leftist politics. And this time it is not just theory he imbibes. He finds the opportunity to meet workers actively involved in class struggle - the striking Mexican pecan-shellors - and he encounters another life-guide in the person of Jed Farrington. Jed has "got in wrong" by his blend of dissipation and unpopular opinions; he is sympathetically portrayed, as are the Mexicans, one of whom - Frankie Perez - seems almost to represent the author's political ideal: "he... had read all of Kropotkin, Tolstoy,



Henry George, Dickens, everything you could think of; called himself an anarchist, but he talked like an oldfashioned Jeffersonian democrat".<sup>15</sup> The Mexicans are genuinely exploited, and their efforts to improve their lot through the only method they have are admirable; but the central theme of conflict between the concrete, familiar and practical and the formulations of political dogmatists is repeated with the arrival of a party agitator from New York.

As soon as Jed opened the door of the back office he could hear a loud Brooklyn voice saying, "We must turn every courtroom into a school for the workers". A thin young man with closecropped hair and goldrimmed tortoiseshell spectacles was walking up and down with his necktie flying. "It doesn't matter if we lose one case or a hundred cases as long as the workers are made to realize the significance of revolutionary Marxism". Frankie Perez was shaking his head gloomily as he leant back against the wall.<sup>16</sup>

This is Irving Silverstone, the party gramophone whose field is the ideology of class struggle and who is quite impervious to the ordinary human needs of the workers. Silverstone is calm and rationalistic, seemingly in contradistinction to Mr. Punjabi, the bogus mystic handling Aunt Harriet's financial affairs. But in the last half of the novel, as the discrepancy between honest workers and sinister ideologues is pressed, it becomes plain that characters like Silverstone, Jane Sparling and ultimately Jed Farrington are frauds and parasites on the working-class movement, deceiving themselves as much as they deceive others. Glenn's next step is to take the part of organiser with the Kentucky miners: he has been fired from his job with the bank, and once more been made the victim of Gladys Funaroff's fickle impulses. The section on the miners' strike and its aftermath occupies two long chapters, and represents a deplorable weakening of the author's power to create vivid and memorable narratives. When one recalls the "Mac" chapters of The Forty-Second Parallel, in which Dos Passos' imagination produced and rendered his character's adventures with clarity, tension and versatile sympathy, the Slade County episodes seem almost inexplicably dull and awkwardly handled.



The failure is not inexplicable, though: for Dos Passos has begun to write fiction in which the hero's defeat is not shown, engrammatically, in a series of realistically devised frames, but ascribed to one principal cause or defect. The supercession of the agnostic desire to exhibit the nature of defeat by a tendentious urge to account for it simply and reductively strikes at the living core of Dos Passos' art. Situations previously dramatised with a resourceful skill are now manipulated to serve a hypothesis - or even a prejudice. In Adventures of a Young Man this condition has not become absolute. Much of the confusion which disfigures the latter part arises from this uneasy mixture of two incompatible attitudes. The old Dos Passos - the writer who, unconcerned with profound and subtle exploration of inner psychology, could evoke with cinematic completeness all the immediate sense-data of a situation, is not dead; but he co-exists with a sour, cantankerous and crudely didactic journalist whose aim is to discredit certain political tendencies through lifeless caricatures of their adherents. Within a few pages of each other, for example, one can find passages like this:

He couldn't sleep. He lay on his back staring at the flicker of the firelight among the cobwebs that hung looped from the rafters overhead. Cold spurts of wind came in through the chinks in the boards under his back. Excitement made his heart thump and made the skin round his eyes feel tight; his face had a scalded feeling from the long drive through the winddriven rain.<sup>17</sup>

And this:

"Here we have a chance to organize a group of absolutely untouched militant American workers. It's the start of a series of real revolutionary industrial unions. These miners drink the class struggle with their mother's milk."<sup>18</sup>

Or this:

It was a funny feeling for Glenn, after the rough life he'd been leading, to sleep between fine linen sheets and on boxsprings, and to have a bath of his own with plenty of hot water and soap that smelt of almonds and big thick monogrammed towels, and to feel the rumble of the city coming in to him through the heavy silk draperies of the old brownstone house....<sup>19</sup>

And this:

"In the first place... private morals are no affair of the Party's... We're only interested in social morals. In



the second place, there is always the danger of being contaminated by the decadence of the liberal bourgeoisie... after all, that's probably your sphere. Your class origins..."<sup>20</sup>

No one would deny that Marxist bureaucrats tend to speak in clichés: but Silverstone and his ilk are reduced to clichés. They do not even share the reality of their liberal dupes like the Gulicks, who are satirically conceived. The fact that Dos Passos is working a familiar vein of realist prose at the same time as he produces monsters of one-dimensional characterisation seems to me to weigh against Arthur Mizener's argument that Dos Passos is a satirist tout court writing in the tradition of Jonson and Swift. Mizener argues that

Each subordinate character fits his part in the whole by being what Jonson would have called a "humor". You cannot easily forget Marice Gulick or Comrade Irving Silverstone or Chuck Crawford or Herbert Spotswood, you remember them not because they seem "real" to you but because, like Sir Epicure Mammon, they are classic representations of their types, warmed to the kind of life all great satirists can create by the anger and grief of their author at finding them what they are.<sup>21</sup>

Yet this is to ignore the imbalance imposed by the disjunction of sympathies over the whole novel; and in praising Dos Passos' minor gift for satirical portraiture it ignores the direction in which the novel's rhetoric of disapproval is applied.

For Adventures of a Young Man is a philistine work, in the last analysis. The writer's targets are all people with intellectual pretensions, thinkers, reformers. The Slade County chapters have some success in depicting ordinary people, but the ordinary people seem to be admired not only for their courage and honesty but for their lack of education. And the entire drama is spoilt by a narrative obscurity and the introduction of supernumary characters who never spring to life like the cameo sketches of USA. The background to the episode is the Comintern's change of line in the mid-thirties: war against the "social-fascists" was replaced by the policy of the Popular Front and a new strategy of co-operation with social democracy and other reformist groups. Dos Passos readers at the time would probably have been familiar with this development, but it is poorly dramatised in the book. The impression is left



that the big-city schemers have cheated the miners, deceived Glenn and reversed all their former positions all for the satisfaction of their own cleverness. With the conviction of the accused miners, and their subsequent deaths "while attempting to escape", Glenn suffers yet another major blow of disillusion. He, who has attempted to share the life-experience of the workers - and has adopted the name "Crockett" to do so - finds himself classed with the turncoat "leaders" and theoreticians.

Glenn's disillusion, however, does not lead him to cynicism - only into a desperate, lonely existence as a fringe radical, persecuted by employers and snubbed by those who had previously been his friends but who now follow the Communist line in outlawing anyone who stands for "anti-party" tendencies. His isolation from the mass movement, and therefore his ineffectiveness as a political activist, is fairly complete. Only Paul Graves, returned from the Soviet Union, where he had been a visiting American expert, remains loyal. Paul's experience has convinced him of the wrongheadedness of applying Marxist political imperatives to the practical, scientific business of social engineering and he has rediscovered patriotism:

"They gave me everything in the world, but as soon as I'd got a station started the goddam party line would cave in and they'd shoot my best guys or put 'em on forced labour and send me off somewhere else... I could have stayed on but I got sick of it and came home... damn good thing too... the New Deal's got the fiveyear plan knocked for a row of red squares as a social experiment... I began to hear the eagle screaming".<sup>22</sup>

But Paul and Glenn are unable to communicate. Despite their common mistrust of the party, each has sought a path of his own - Paul reconciled to American capitalist civilisation, Glenn conducting a hopeless fight in an ultra-left splinter group. Glenn's urgent desire to serve the working class by personal effort is undermined by his intellectual self, i.e. by his criticisms of party strategy. As Less Minot tells him, "you got too much eddication for an organizer".<sup>23</sup> The final repudiation persuades Glenn to enlist in the International Brigade: an act of despair and self-sacrifice, since it effectively places him in the hands of his Communist enemies. Glenn is arrested almost



immediately on his arrival in Spain, and released only to perform a suicide mission. He dies a soldier of the republic, but the circumstances of his death make it useless and unheroic. He has fulfilled some kind of personal destiny, but the cause of socialism is not enhanced by his sacrifice.

While Glenn has misspent his legacy of political idealism, his brother Tyler, in Adventures of a Young Man, has appeared as a "normal", safe, materialistic figure. It is he who, during Glenn's involvement with the pecan-shellshellers' strike, issues the judgement of conformity. Yet in the succeeding volume, Number One, Tyler himself is politically committed. He has become the secretary of a Southern congressman - a character obviously based on Huey Long - who is pathologically ambitious for national office, and who conducts his personal variant of demagogic populism with the aid of a modern public-relations machine. Number One is a shorter and more cleanly constructed novel than Adventures of a Young Man, but it has reverted to "Camera Eye" techniques in five forechapters and an epilogue. These passages are written in a familiar poetic manner, and each begins "When you try to find the people, always in the end it comes down to..." an individual, a single person. The aim of these forechapters is to supplement the fictional narrative with a series of thematic instances. Chuck Crawford talks constantly of "the people" (rather, like Charles Foster Kane, as if he owned them) but despite the folksy oratory with which he decorates his public speeches, the people to him are an abstraction, only real insofar as their votes will lift him to power. The forechapters deal in turn with a subsistence farmer; a radically minded garage mechanic; a young store-clerk and radio "ham"; a miner; a businessman. The terminal postlude pronounces that "the people are you". The narrative consists of five discontinuous episodes. The action consists of the ruthless rise of Chuck Crawford and the disillusion, disgrace and ruin of Tyler Spotswood.

After the initial forechapter, which contrasts the misery of a poor farmer with the voice of financial opulence shrieking from the wireless, the book begins in a promisingly realistic manner.



Tyler Spotswood was racking his brains. A trickle of sweat ran down between his shoulderblades to the wet place where the shirt stuck to his spine. Letting the yellow scratchpad drop from his hand, he leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. The drone of the electric fan in the hotel room made him drowsy. It was a hot night all right.<sup>24</sup>

And in fact the story of Chuck and Tyler is often related with credibility and concision: Dos Passos' facility for rendering the tangible impedimenta of experience - in this case the hotel bedroom, the campaign office, the political rally, the nightclub - has not deserted him. Yet the homilectic ends which this talent is made to wait on are now even more openly obtrusive than in the previous novel. Tyler Spotswood's motivations for assisting Crawford's rise are insisted upon. One is his love for Sue Ann Crawford, but this is a minor element, and leads only to a scene of doggish self-abasement. Principally, Tyler has caught the Spotswood disease - a dedication to political abstractions that is essentially un-American, Utopian and dangerous. Tyler's idealism and his ability to shut out unpleasant facts when they disagree with his image of Crawford's mission is apparent from the start. Accepting Number One more or less at his own evaluation, Tyler rebukes Ed James for his inopportune references to the base facts of political advantage. "Ed the trouble with you is you've been in the East too long... You've gotten cynical... You've forgotten how the folks feel back home".<sup>25</sup>

Tyler is prone to drink and venery, and in this respect resembles the traditional Dos Passos failure-hero; but these vices are either immaterial set beside his prime intellectual fallacy, or contingently related to it. Crawford himself is an energetically drawn character-type, who does "everythin' in the first person". He is actually not the kind of man one would expect to take in the Tyler Spotswood of Adventures of a Young Man, and Tyler does, in his moments of self-disgust, find himself thinking of Number One as a "bigmouthed bastard... that son of a bitch..."<sup>26</sup> Tyler is - as the author over-explicitly phrases it - "a man reconciled by a few drinks to the deceptions and disappointments of life",<sup>27</sup> yet his loyalty to Crawford, or the Crawford ideology, is prodigious. Crawford



is plainly a crooked opportunist; Tyler, however, tends to resent only personal mistreatment, and his faith in Crawford's political sincerity is unshaken by his close association. "A man's got to have a crazy streak to appeal to the American people"<sup>28</sup> is his rationalisation. Chuck's "crazy streak", his personal charisma, is matched by his calculating wiliness. Crawford, beneath his public persona of the country-boy people's friend, is a political wrangler of extreme cleverness, while Tyler - superficially the sophisticated Washingtonian - is as innocent of the true nature of politics as was his brother. But equally this innocence is a potentially harmful quality. While Chuck Crawford is clever enough to stick fairly closely to the received rhetoric of what Dos Passos called "the illogical law-abiding, law-twisting procedures of our peculiar type of political evolution"<sup>29</sup> while subverting its essential being, Tyler lives politically in an unreality as complete as his hopeless love for Sue Ann. He cannot recognise this consciously, but it is baldly stated by Ed James, himself no innocent.

Ed went right on: "Toby, I meant what I said. In my line of duty I run into plenty people who think the world of you and they wonder why the hell you run with this Every Man a... shoot, I can't even say it... Chuck'll go pop like the weasel one of these days".

"You put in some time on him yourself, don't forget that, Ed".

"You win... But I'd like to see you on your own... Honestly, Toby, you're as bad as your kid brother, only he wore himself out to save the world for the reds... What ever happened to him?"

Tyler reddened. "Let's get a move on", he said sharply.<sup>30</sup>

And he denies with a signal lack of conviction to Sue Ann that he is "one of those starryeyed idealists like my kid brother".<sup>31</sup>

The combination of impractical idealism and devious self-seeking is a formula often chosen by conservatives to stigmatise the error of revolutionists. Chuck Crawford is no revolutionist, but he is the would-be dictator who exploits the procedures of democracy, and Tyler in following his star becomes, like Glenn, an exemplar of the trahison des clercs. But hand in hand with his naïve faith in Chuck's mission goes the personal morality preached by his father, and which he has never - despite his dissipated habits - quite shaken off. It is the



puritan American morality of justification by works, which he has briefly articulated to his confidante Sue Ann.

"...if you do things too often that make you feel like a skunk, then after a while you get to be a skunk, ever thought of that?"<sup>32</sup>

At the crucial moment of his career, when he is about to be called to testify at the inquiry with the State Park Bottoms oil leases, Tyler finds this ethic reinforced for him in his brother's posthumously delivered letter.

After all it's what you do that counts, now what you say. One thing I've learned in my life is that everything every one of us does counts.<sup>33</sup>

Though Tyler has been swallowing martinis, this letter has the effect of filling his mind with "bright clear sorrowful light". The letter has stressed the primacy of honest experience over "the "ism" talk", and it concludes with an injunction to believe in America and "make more and more of the promises come true". So Glenn Spotswood, whom one had seen inscribing a "mock-heroic" testament on his cell wall, bequeathing his hope of a better world to the international working class, becomes the persuasive ghost who beckons Tyler back to decent behaviour and the Stars and Stripes. The effect is meant to be dramatically serious, and Glenn's injunction is plainly freighted by the author's approval, but it gives to Number One an ending of contrived sentimentality. Tyler Spotswood "takes the rap", and while Chuck Connors harangues a radio audience with the verses of Henley, he editorializes on the lesson he has learned.

"...We can't sell out on the people, but the trouble is that me, I'm just as much the people as you are or anyother son of a bitch. If we want to straighten the people out we've got to start with number one, not that big wind... You know what I mean. I got to straighten myself out first, see..."<sup>34</sup>

One reads with horror and disappointment the platitudes that Dos Passos evidently means to be accepted as the moral conclusion of his book. That Tyler should be a confused, unhappy, alcoholic yes-man for a dishonest politician seems credible, and in so far as he is engrammatically portrayed, Tyler has the same measure of reality as Jimmy Herf, Mac, or Charley Anderson.



But to present Tyler as an idealist who repudiates his commitment to a sullied cause in order to identify himself with General Custer and Old Glory mocks the purpose of fiction-writing and grotesquely falsifies human psychology and the nature of political belief. The coda of the novel, a passage otherwise comparable to the prologue of USA, climaxes in what is, frankly, flag-waving guff:

weak as the weakest, strong as the strongest,  
the people are the republic,  
the people are you.<sup>35</sup>

The fault of Number One is not that it attempts to embody the intellectual consequences of its author's conversion to a conservative political outlook, but that it attempts to deal directly with political ideas at all. The relative weakness of Dos Passos' handling of ideas is dismayingly exposed in Number One, and his efforts to make a roman à these out of contemporary events spoils the modest but real success of his portraiture. The comparison is easily made with All The King's Men: Robert Penn Warren's much more sophisticated treatment of a like subject, his literary excellence in working out the conflict of Jack Burden's philosophical idealism with an evil reality which he ultimately brings himself to confront, fully explores the thematic potential of the Long story. But Dos Passos, himself preaching against the abstractions that blind people to the living reality, is insufficiently practised at handling ideas to convey them with any depth. The result is that his situations never dramatise the novel's underlying concepts. They render only the surface realism, much diluted and technically unremarkable, and the philosophical or ideological conflict is expressed in a stale and clumsy manner through dialogue or auctorial comment. Dos Passos views political arguments with the awful, childish clarity of the convert and he knows no other way of making his prescriptions than through Manichean melodrama.

The paradox of his method, therefore, and the root of his artistic failure lies precisely in the vagueness of his political formulations, which constantly undermines his efforts to locate "the people" as concretised presences. Writing of the opening forechapter, Louis D. Rubin acutely notes that



The passage is filled with details, and yet paradoxically it is a completely abstract piece of writing. It is not a particular place or individual being described, but merely a farmer - any farmer: "the people". Something of the same effect might have been achieved had Mr. Dos Passos chosen to include a painting as a prelude, instead of the prose passage.<sup>36</sup>

The effect of this contradiction is to diminish Dos Passos' "mystical Transcendental faith in the people"<sup>37</sup> as the countervailing value he intends it to be. Chuck Crawford is unscrupulous in his use of the people and their needs, and the problem of the unscrupulous seeker of power in a democracy is a reasonable one to raise; Dos Passos, however, never manages to explore its complexity. The literary habits he has acquired are unsuitable to such a taste, and he cannot evolve the techniques to tackle it:

Dos Passos' effects have always depended on a violence of pace, on the quick flickerings of the reel, the sudden climaxes where every fresh word drives the wedge in. No scene can be held too long; no voice may be heard too clearly. Everything must come at us from a distance and bear its short ironic wail; the machine must get going again; nothing can wait.<sup>38</sup>

Such a method disqualifies itself from the creation of discursive, dialectical novels, or even from the particular objectification of abstract political forces. Number One is crudely resolved in Tyler's regenerate impulse to take moral responsibility for what he might legally evade, and the crudity arises from Dos Passos' insistence on pressing home a political moral.

For Tyler's failure - the general failure to understand the corruption he has associated himself with and the conventional failure of his disgrace - is explained in terms which rob it of the truth one has recognised in the failures of Manhattan Transfer and USA. The novelist who had solidly refused to explain his characters' lost souls, but who could show them, in graphic and and credible detail, has descended to accounting for his ruined protagonist in terms of his intellectual apostasy to a native political tradition. Moreover, he allows his hero to verbalise this explanation in a fashion unworthy of serious fiction: the people is us, we must put ourselves straight. Such a journalistic plea for an undefined image of democracy convicts Dos Passos of an



unmistakable error of craft. "Don't say it - prove it" is the rule criticism has established, and in violating it he has shown evidence of a faltering talent - evidence undeniable in the fabric of his work, and out of range of disputes over his political allegiances. That this wrong turning is not accidental and temporary is demonstrated by the final volume of the trilogy, of which a full-scale and highly tendentious examination of politics at the national level is the total subject.

The Grand Design is punctuated by snatches of a Mother Goose rhyme beginning "A man of words and not of deeds / Is like a garden full of weeds". The aim of the book is to show the weed-ridden garden of federal politics and to anchor the blame for it in the Rooseveltian policies that have - according to the viewpoint of the conservative imagination - replaced true American know-how with intellectualized schemes and have sapped resourcefulness and initiative. I think it should be said that there is no a priori reason why a novel conceived in such terms should not be successful: most omnivorous and flexible of literary forms, it can properly claim as its subject-territory the whole of human experience and its purposes may be unashamedly didactic or partisan. Yet in Dos Passos' case, a special fictive sensibility is applied to ends which can only frustrate it. The result is a vulgar, embarrassing, hypostasized product - a novel which expresses its author's discontent only in unassimilated outbursts and inartistic contrivance instead of as a settled and integrated reality.

The method of evocative forechapters has been retained, though as the story progresses they are increasingly invaded by auctorial comment. The narrative starts with the departure for Washington of Millard Carroll - a successful businessman who has accepted a lower-paid federal appointment as his patriotic duty. The opening chapter identifies Carroll's idealism with the frontier tradition. In the territory between Texarcola and Washington are the historic survivals of a bygone America - the zig-zag fences, the smokey cabins, the old woman in a poke bonnet of whom Lucile Carroll remarks that "It was like talking to Dan'l Boone's mommer".<sup>39</sup> The sense of an America of potential



plenty that only needs a little pump-priming to restore its cultural vitality is established as a contrast to the atmosphere of Washington's political salons, which are populated by undesirables. The Carrolls meet Mike and Marice Gulick - last seen as fellow-travelling stooges in Adventures of a Young Man - and with them George Dilling - "a tall too youthful-looking sallow man with a certain pomp in his manner"<sup>40</sup> - and Mack McConnell, who speaks with "a flutelike note of selfsatisfaction in his voice".<sup>41</sup> These two, however, are minor characters, and like most of The Grand Design's proliferating minor characters, they appear only at intervals and only to utter their two cents' worth of moribund dialogue. Dos Passos' growing incapacity to dignify his minor characters with memorable attributes is only one sign of his devitalisation.

The central villain - and "villain" is by now not an inappropriate term for a Dos Passos character - is Walker Watson, a kind of fictional amalgam of Harry Hopkins and Henry Wallace. Watson is head of the New Deal agency for which Millard Carroll is to work, and he is made to exemplify all the crimes and fallacies of the Roosevelt administration. For this reason he becomes a character of such multifarious vices that he scarcely exists at all. He is naïve and calculating, superstitious, pathetically loyal, egoistic - in short, not "only unreal but grotesque",<sup>42</sup> a turnip-ghost conjured up by the author's fear and hatred. And like the other characters in a novel which relies on sustaining its momentum through dialogue rather than action, he is rendered implausible by being made to talk in an idiom hopelessly removed from ordinary speech. Walker's vulnerability to the hypnotic charm of the President is suggested thus:

"He told me things I'd never dreamed of, quoted whole passages from Senator Benton. He especially admires Jackson for not trying to serve a third term. He doesn't believe in breaking with the two-term tradition. He's got good reasons for everything he's doing and not doing. He explained the whole situation and asked my advice and I agreed with him he was doing the right thing.. You ought to have been there to hear him talk about Farm Economy..."<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, one hears the voice of the lesbian Communist Jane Sparling reciting - in private conversation - such clumsy formulations as:



"Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union is the best thing that ever happened to the movement in this country. For the first time we are marching shoulder to shoulder with the great masses of the American people. In the common war against the Nazi aggressor we have direct access to congress and the Administration."<sup>44</sup>

And Judge Oppenheim, who has abandoned judicial impartiality for a bigoted support of the Democratic administration, speaks with the same type of robot-like journalistic portentousness:

"Perhaps...if we had more of their devotion to the public interest and were less blinded by the self-seeking incidental to the profit system by which we were all conditioned from the cradle we should be able better to understand their problems".<sup>45</sup>

If this were merely satire, it would be an artless and over-stated satirical method. But even the "good" characters - those whose attitudes are tacitly underwritten by the weight of the novel's rhetoric - "don't talk, in the usual sense of the word; they recite fragments of editorials".<sup>46</sup> Paul Graves, for example, the "hero" of The Grand Design, is portrayed as a thoroughly American figure, whose ideals lead him to support the New Deal but whose practical sense eventually conflicts with the imposed "design" that is threatening to choke American agriculture. One of the principal themes is the triumph of his native good sense over the alien doctrines that are using the New Deal to further un-American interests. Paul's wisdom and clarity of vision derives from his field trips, which enable him to contact and speak to "the people" who to other Washingtonians - closeted with their intrigues and their generalised political plans - are a remote abstraction. Yet Paul Graves too pronounces his views in the stale, mechanical phraseology of a popular newspaper column:

"Your relationship with people changes when you try to organize them into doing things. You have to kind of lower their consequence. First thing you know it's your career instead of the work gets to be the important thing. I suppose that's how politicians are made. Oh God, don't let me turn into a politician..."<sup>47</sup>

Like Millard Carroll the successful businessman who has proved himself in action, Paul Graves the empirical scientist becomes disillusioned with a government that



is full "of words and not of deeds"; additionally, he is made the spokesman for the author's anti-communist persuasion, which includes the belief that state interventionism has made it easy for foreign agents and catspaws to infiltrate the highest circles of government.

"We've been having leaks in the office. The investigators have pretty well caught up with the Nazis but they are babes in arms when it comes to Reds. The leaks can in my opinion only come from the communistic brethren... I know a good deal about the Russkis but I don't know much about the brethren in this country at least not since way back when one of my best friends went that way. But from what I do know about the Russkis I know they can no more get out of the conspiratorial habit than fly to the moon".<sup>48</sup>

Paul's conversion, and the minatory nature of this analysis, are meant to be taken seriously, and the evil properties he has detected in the communists are heavily reinforced by the portrayal of the communists themselves. Joe Weekes is a repeat-performance of Don Stevens. Jed Farrington reappears, now a sinister cartoon-Red far removed from the Southern rake of Adventures of a Young Man, who had seemed like a prototype for the civil-rights lawyer in Easy Rider. Jane Sparling and Winthrop Strang are sexual deviants, personally repellent in a way latently associated with the creed they profess - and they are shown (the last resort of the embittered polemicist) to be hypocritical in their enjoyment of private luxuries. Dos Passos is nothing if not consistent, and there is little in the fictive data of The Grand Design to disprove Paul Grave's accusations. What is lacking is a governing sense of reality - not simply about politics, but about the need for art to speak to its audience with a voice that acknowledges the actuality they meet in their own lives and yet concentrates it through an imaginative effort that springs from real human understanding, a real willingness to face what is complex, discomforting, or obscure. In his novels of the twenties and thirties - and especially in USA - Dos Passos had appeared to possess such a voice. The engrammatic vision and method had provided him - a synthetic writer - with an instrument for recording the fragmented structure of human experience with irony, sympathy and graphically realistic conviction. The strength of this instrument lay in the writer's refusal to seek generalised explanations or draw reductive conclusions. He had



unremittingly sacrificed for this special purpose the deep and subtle exploration of motives and states of consciousness. In District of Columbia he sacrifices the gains his former attitude had allowed him, with no corresponding advantages.

This is especially clear in the case of Herbert Spotswood, who completes the family history through his role in The Grand Design. Herbert returns from Switzerland (where he had been employed by that supreme agency of futile idealism, the League of Nations) to propagandize for collective security. The symbol of Herbert's function is the recording machine which he carries with him and which he uses to rehearse his radio speeches: a vain, concupiscent old man whose religious zealotry, which once made him a pacifist, now has turned him into a proponent of an anti-fascist war:

"If there is a murderer at large on the streets..  
you have to call the police and have him apprehended  
before he shoots someone else, apprehended or shot...  
There can be no compromise between civilisation and  
barbarism".<sup>49</sup>

Herbert's moral fanaticism is seen as especially dangerous since he is a radio orator with an audience of millions. For this reason, the oil lobbyists Ed James and Jerry Evans approach him. Herbert resists their special pleading, but his conceit is so swollen that he will become vulnerable to others who wish to exploit his relative innocence:

Herb couldn't help noticing the stir as people recognized him, the whispering of his name. Men and women were introduced to him on this side and that. He listened with his head on one side and a little indulgent smile playing under his moustache to compliments on his broadcasts. A woman asked him to autograph her fan.<sup>50</sup>

And Herbert finally is used. Persuaded to address a "memorial meeting" for Americans who had fallen in the Spanish war, he finds himself speaking to a "party rally" in the approved slogans of pro-Soviet agitprop. "The Red Army has done what the broken remnants of the forces of the decadent capitalist democracies of Western Europe were not able to do. It has stopped the Wermacht dead in its tracks".<sup>51</sup> The fantastic naïveté of Herbert Spotswood is matched by the diabolism of the communists: helped by the easily penetrable, cranky and dogmatic federal administration they are summoning American energy and



and faith in support of an anti-American cause.

And "rejoining the United States" seems exactly to mean this to Dos Passos - producing a trilogy from which the multifaceted vitality of USA is dismally absent, a kind of fictional equivalent of John T. Flynn's The Roosevelt Myth. Even as satire it fails, though there was a subject here. H.L. Mencken had urged Sinclair Lewis to ridicule "the vermin... of the Roosevelt and post-Roosevelt years... the rich radical, the bogus expert, the numbskull newspaper proprietor (or editor), the career-jobholder, the lady publicist, the crooked (or, more usually, idiotic) labor leader, the press-agent and so on".<sup>52</sup> District of Columbia has nothing like the kinetic unity of USA, and the family who provide the common character element are conceived as failures in terms very different from the figures in earlier novels. It is true that "all three members of the family arrive at exactly the same frustrated and empty philosophical position",<sup>53</sup> but that failure should entail the adoption of a "philosophical position" at all indicates the distance which the author has strayed from his familiar material and attitudes. The ideological errors of all three stem from a political idealism that places "the grand design" of a misconceived programme of betterment above the particularities of actual situations and individual people. Glenn is led to a pointless death on a remote battlefield; Tyler undergoes legal ruin; Herbert is made a puppet of the "reds". The exemplary and tractarian use of these characters to underwrite a political argument - an argument itself as monstrously simple and one-eyed as the error it professes to counter - distorts and reduces their effective reality. The attributes each has as a separate identity - Glenn's troubled yearning for experience, Tyler's alcoholism and hopeless adoration of Crawford's wife, Herbert's conceit and carnality - are insufficiently related to the basic courses and purposes of their lives. They are tacked on, almost automatically, as the traditional vices of the Dos Passos victim, but pale and dilute beside the unwieldy construction of a patriotic "case" to which the Spotswoods as persons are subsidiary. One critic has written that



Perhaps what is wrong with Dos Passos' later fiction is simply that the tension finally disappears: the individual sensibility is subsumed at last within an asserted collective historical experience - however different in its nature from that postulated by the earlier fiction.<sup>54</sup>

And while failure is expressed as the result of political misconceptions, the antidote is summarised in action - most particularly in the action of Paul Graves, who concludes the trilogy by enlisting in the U.S. Navy, as Tyler Spotswood had earlier done. Graves signals the appearance of the new Dos Passos hero, who repents his mistakes and prepares to rectify them. The failure to find a dynamism for their lives in real American roots is shared by all members of the Spotswood family, the Washingtonian "cliff-dwellers" who have little contact with the ordinary life of the nation. This is the one consistent theme of the trilogy. It is otherwise inconsistent, in several ways. The first novel uses typical Dos Passos material - some of it over-used and stale - but fails to anchor it in the observation of a group of interwoven lives; the second is short enough not to stretch its subject-matter thin, but is relatively cheap and shallow - "popular" in the worst sense; The Grand Design uses a broader canvas and an even broader satirical brush, but it is infected with a hatred that chokes its fluency, and the colour and life associated with Dos Passos' synoptic method have faded. In the two latter books, the forechapters are loosely created. The tautness and controlled relevance of the contextual stylistic devices in USA have slackened to unselective cadences, and to a weary rhythm that aims more at hectoring the reader with received ideas than realising a particularity that he may observe and judge for himself:

a man in his twenties, maybe, scrawny neck red and creased from the weather sticking out of the ravelled sweater, brows bent under the bluevisored cap, riding the jangle of castiron and steel over the caked clods (it's clayey land an' a rainy spell came on before he he got shet of his winder plowing.)<sup>55</sup>

Efforts to picture the reality of individual people who comprise Chuck Crawford's audience are made in just this fashion; like cheap pottery figures they have neither individuality nor a true representative quality, and the tricks of style



are exposed by the feeble pressure of significance. Dos Passos' personal mannerisms - the running-together of separate words to form compounds, the vernacular mimicry, the wistful clang-tint - become positive annoyances, like the increasing negligence of the comma in his narrative sections. And as the sharpness of studied detail ebbs from his writing, it is superseded by a barren and neurotic hortatory note, more ponderous in its phrasing than responsible in its implications:

In ruin History stands  
a roadblock armed with machine guns, flame-throwers;  
the footpaths are mined. Geography's a concentration  
camp where in barbedwire pens the sick survivors starve.

When we turn on the radio the air is  
full of scolding voices cursing America  
because we tried to build a refuge  
on a new continent  
in peace.<sup>56</sup>

'After the war one of the preconditions of a  
lasting peace will be the greatest possible freedom  
of trade,' said our President. It was a time  
of Caesars: the Heads of State declared a  
few new freedoms to order the tortured world;  
the battlefield was the whole blue globe.<sup>57</sup>

The unrefined gossip abuse of the locker room, the Liberty League and the Union Club is not excused by the stridency of the flag-waving oraculism with which it is blended. Coarseness - sheer intellectual coarseness, artistic coarseness, and an unfeeling and bigoted treatment of the human qualities he caricatures in the sympathetic and unsympathetic characters alike - has invaded the work of Dos Passos. When one compares the ending of Adventures of a Young Man with the final pages of For Whom The Bell Tolls one realises that Robert Jordan's terminal dialogue with Maria and with himself, though it occurs at the end of a very peculiar novel, is of a piece with the ambiguous motivations and beliefs that have propelled him all along. The irony emerges from a set of objectively realized facts. Glenn Spotswood's death, though equally sacrificial, is a kind of Awful Warning against choosing to believe in a political philosophy that (in the author's view) is wrong-headed, evil, and self-betraying. In one case the last image is of palpitating life, in the other of blank extinction; and the reader, though he feels pity for Robert Jordan,



has no way of involving himself in Glenn's death, since Glenn has never existed with engrammatic positiveness: he is a source of error, a victim of ideological mischance, a mistake to be rubbed out.

At the time of completing his second trilogy, Dos Passos had come to believe that "its political methods and not political aims that count"<sup>58</sup> This dangerously simple creed has found its way into the novels as an onslaught on preconceived plans, systematic control, centralised direction - the methods which he sees at work in such diverse agencies as the New Deal and the Communist Party, and which he feels to be antagonistic to the ideal of a freedom-loving Jeffersonian rural republic. This formulation, vague and inclusive as it is, represents a settled conviction. As such, it concludes Dos Passos' period as a sceptical enquirer - a role directly suitable to the writer of fiction. The consequences to his literary productions are almost lethal: his technique is scarcely adaptable to the table of ideological persuasion, and the books suffer not only in terms of drama and fictive tension but from a deficiency of basic craftsmanship. His usual disdain of plot gives way to a reliance on coincidence; the narrative is clogged with redundant passages; episodes are too casually juxtaposed or related; dialogue based on a sound ear for the rhythms and idioms of ordinary speech vanishes, and a monstrous, barbaric alien language issues from every mouth. Where the novelist's art floats free from his political obsessions, an occasional episode comes alive - Chuck Crawford protean and histrionic to bend others to his will, the silly private life of the Gulicks, the astrologer's part in The Grand Design - but these serve to illuminate the impoverishment of so much else. District of Columbia resumes the theme of failure, but its parti pris attitude prevents it from demonstrating failure as a fully conceived actuality; instead, it is reduced to the level of an imputed historical fallacy, and the talent which had concentrated on virulent nodes of despair dissipates itself in ill-natured rhetorical squabbling. Moreover, the new positives which the author has acquired have led him to need a visible prototype of success; if the values are right, they must promote tangible



instances of fulfilment. Paul Graves in uniform foreshadows the arrival of the Dos Passos self-realising hero - an ominous image, which would not disgrace the Women's Home Companion.<sup>59</sup>

The fact has to be faced that in his later fiction John Dos Passos is a failing novelist rather than a novelist of failure: he is a failing novelist largely because he has ceased to be an effective novelist of failure. It is scarcely possible to believe that the author of USA is producing books of which none is a vitalising pleasure to understand and evaluate, but it is true. Worse still, he is a writer whose deficiencies are no longer enlightening objects of critical attention, but one whose art is radically weak even in its most elementary aspects. For this reason, I shall contribute relatively little space to a discussion of the final<sup>60</sup> four contemporary chronicles. The political and aesthetic errors of Dos Passos have already commanded more willing typewriters - some of them distinctly ill-natured - than his accomplishments; while those who have over-valued him have generally understood him better than the multitude of disapproving doubters. The decline of his literary capability appears to be part of a general decline - perhaps the premature ageing of a hard-living man - which is reflected in his correspondence, where letters of his last twenty years indicate some kind of sclerotic malfunction of the intellect and imagination. The novels suffer from this process not simply in their incapacity to develop fresh thematic energies, but in the restless juggling of technical approaches, in the repetition of over-used and faded material, and in a slackening of the craftsman's hand that used to deal so readily with such fundamentals as the establishment of time, place and mood.

Chosen Country is notably autobiographical: especially in the sense that Dos Passos has included in it a fictional portrait of his own family situation. As the title implies, the book is a tribute to U.S. civilisation and an announcement that the author has decided to place himself in the line of what he considers to be the most authentic tradition of American cultural identity. This is meant to be the Jeffersonian tradition; unfortunately it



savours more of the elderly, comfort-loving, Time-reading, Republican-voting, stock-market belt - the thinnest crust of any tradition. The author of Facing The Chair creates a hero of Italian descent who, after an early life of waywardness, "comes home" to the United States. The story is written with a complete disregard for the nature of conviction and personal development and culminates in a section entitled, with supreme vulgarity and despite the fact that much of it is set in Canada, "O My America My New Found Land". Jay Pignatelli's rediscovery of his native land is accompanied (needless to say) by his marriage to a girl from an "old family". There seems little doubt that the writer considers this arrangement to have put everything right, and this belief alone measures the distance he has travelled.

Immediately before the start of the concluding section of Chosen Country there occurs a crucial passage. After his involvement in the Sabatini case, Jay's thinking of his messed-up life and Communist perfidy:

Sitting stooped in the chair in the dead air  
of Mulvaney's empty office he could hear Dandy's  
voice dim out of the past: "Failure is a word  
I don't admit in my vocabulary".

"But if you do fail..." he said aloud  
and jumped to his feet and grabbed his hat  
and slammed the door on that stale remnant.  
"Then admit failure", he shouted into the  
empty hall, and waiting for the elevator began to  
think that henceforward...<sup>61</sup>

This is the point, one is encouraged to infer, at which Jay Pignatelli - spurred on by the recollection of one of his father's favourite maxims - resolves to create a golden future for himself. It is not new for Dos Passos' characters to form such resolutions, but it is unprecedented for them to be carried out. In Jay Pignatelli's case, the following sentences are offered as the novel's affirmative denouement:

They stood side by side on the granite step  
in the soaring brightness. In front of them were the  
seaweeded rocks of the cove and the spruces and  
the pointed firs and the dark bay and islands and  
the line of the ocean heaving with light. The waves  
breathed in the cove. "Husband", she said. "Wife,"  
he said. The words made them bashful. They clung  
together against their bashfulness. "Today we begin,"  
he said, "to make..." "This wilderness our home",



she said. The risen sun over the ocean shone in their faces.<sup>62</sup>

For the first time, Dos Passos offers himself as a novelist of the happy ending, and by doing so relegates his art to the level of the sentimental film or the Norman Rockwell illustration. Moreover, the two quoted passages are not exceptionally disgraceful examples of the style and content of Chosen Country. The tone and tendency are set at the very beginning, in the story of Jay Pignatelli's father, the son of a Garibaldino who, unlike his brother Joe, adopts the U.S. as his fatherland. James Polk Knox Pignatelli is patently John Randolph Dos Passos<sup>63</sup> in a thin disguise, and he is introduced in the first of the sections titled "Prolegomena", "biography"-like interludes in the narrative that tell the story of Jay's parents and Lulie's father. These initial life-histories will eventually merge in the long-postponed relationship of the hero and his wife. Other similar portraits deal with Eliot Story Bradford (a fictional counterpart of Richard Norton), Anne Comfort Welsh, one of Dos Passos' destructive women, who loses her personal identity in the internecine relations of radical politics, and a lawyer named Elisha Croft who is evidently modelled on Clarence Darrow. The practice of basing characters overtly on actual people is repeated in the figure of George Elbert Warner, an egoistic and accident-prone young man based on the author's friend - or, after their differences during the Spanish war, erstwhile friend - and fellow-writer Ernest Hemingway.

Chosen Country is a novel of almost five hundred pages, and because of its length it painfully demonstrates how thin Dos Passos has stretched his material. The absence of dramatic pressure and positively relevant incident, often amounting to even plain tedium, is highlighted by the reduction of the narrative style, for the most part, to a bare sequential recitation. In his effort to restore a measure of vitality to his fiction, Dos Passos makes use of his family history in a manner that has contingent interest (as shedding light on the author's personal history) but is never fruitfully integrated as a necessary element of a novel. The whole of his artistic logic has been inverted



to create a fairy tale of error, reform and conversion and the characters who achieved reality by their engrammatic interaction with their environment are no longer present. Instead, the people of Chosen Country are made to point a moral or adorn a tale, and to do so simply by virtue of their respective attitudes to Dos Passos' own species of ultra-American individualism.

Accompanying the ebbing of fictive tension there is, fairly naturally, a proneness to absurd and distorted self-parody. Chapter I introduces Jay Pignatelli as a passenger on a train (he is a habitual and dedicated train-traveller) dreaming, or recalling, Herf-like detailed memories of his childhood. Suddenly he is tugged back to the present:

He shook himself to loosen the drawers that were binding his crotch. Of course it would come back to that, he spoke to himself so clearly he almost felt the other people in the car must hear his voice. It always comes back to that.<sup>64</sup>

And a few pages later, asleep, he experiences an unconscious fantasy that results in involuntary sexual emission:

He woke up all wet, saying to himself disgustedly; damn and double damn there ought to be something a man could do to help it... In the narrow toilet that stank of puke and was full of gut and filthy papers underfoot, he scrubbed himself off with scrunchedup paper.<sup>65</sup>

Sexuality, though never precisely a sin, has always been a value associated with the ethical lassitude of Dos Passos' heroes. Here it is also associated with Jay's ambivalent feelings toward his parents, but it is presented in such a fashion as to rob it of expressiveness. The wet dream, the humiliation, the stinking lavatory are staples; but they echo only the special note of Dos Passos' most popular effects, they do not significantly contribute. In a chapter entitled "The Little River Rubicon" a spasmodic orgasm is a nearly ludicrous event, and it is made doubly absurd by the roseate picture of an ideal marriage in the terminal pages of the novel.

One can perceive the inadequacy of this method, too, in the parallel chapters on Lulie Harrington and her relations and friends. The contrast with Jay's background is striking - the Harrington clan are secure, confident, outdoor



people with a touch of noblesse oblige - but the narrative and descriptive voice fails to establish them as real. It is not so much a lack of specifics as a reliance on accumulative exposition without the selective reference points supplied in USA by interdependent viewing angles. Dos Passos is never as ponderous as Dreiser, but he falls into the same trap of catalogue realism. Joe Newcomer, Zeke, George Elbert Warner, Jasper Milliron, all flock around Lulie and in some way or other illuminate her personality by the exhibition of their broadly sketched character traits, but for the most part they are like remote strangers in the pages of a compulsive diarist. It would be both unprofitable and unfair to cite instances of the prose from these sections: entire paragraphs run on randomly, carelessly garnering names and objects and piling them into an aggregate of more or less undifferentiated sense-data. Lulie herself is reverentially treated, and therefore deprived even of the colour and life that Dos Passos' malicious caricature bestows on Anne Comfort Welsh. Even George Elbert Warner is pale and indistinct; in both execution and conception, here are the very weakest chapters Dos Passos has ever written.

Jay Pignatelli's history is offered as a success-story, and his marriage to an old-stock American implies that the Union has fulfilled its paper promises and discovered a unique strength through such an integration of native and immigrant traditions. Whatever the ultimate merits of this point of view, it is not validated by the fictive data John Dos Passos has supplied. Jay's choice - a renunciation of his past, a wiping of the slate, a rededication to noble imperatives - is unacceptable as the product of profound instinctive persuasion or mature reasoning. The articulated skeleton of the novelist's former self maintains Jay as a recognisable, though fragmented, person - largely the residual legatee of other, more memorable incarnations; it is incapable of realising him as a man making deliberately, out of experience and self-correction, a valuable and significant decision.

Failure continues to be treated as the enslavement to foreign and iniquitous political doctrines in the next novel, Most Likely to Succeed. The



setting this time is varied - the New York Theatre and Hollywood, both of which Dos Passos had experienced professionally - but the protagonist is Jay Pignatelli's evil twin and his function is to discredit Communism as an exemplar of its power to ruin decent human values. The purpose itself is crudely didactic, and its putative objectifications are little more than slovenly rags in which the crusading spirit is thinly dressed. Once again sex and travel are the immediate correlatives of the opening situation. The seduction on the liner, which entails the rusty symbolism of Jed Morris's transfer from steerage to first class accommodation, raises the demon of "bad sex" again, and the entire first section, "Morocco", (it does precisely not take place in Morocco) exhibits a central character who is tirelessly unpleasant. From his very first remark - "Ain't is perfectly good grammar. Shakespeare said ain't".<sup>66</sup> - to his parting from Jane Marlow ("Just a rich bitch, he said almost aloud"<sup>67</sup>) Jed Morris is designated a monster heel. His crime is worse than the common Dos Passos vice of almost voicing intimate or tactless ideas in public: he is a believer in dialectical materialism. Besides, he is an artist - in the sense that he is a professional dramatist - and the reader is prompted to wonder if he is confronted with the volte-face of Dos Passos' appearing as the spokesman of ultra-conservative philistinism. But while Jed is not intended to be a good artist, he is certainly meant to be a failure - and not just because he becomes a rich and successful screenwriter. In fact, he does not develop into a failure, he is one from the beginning, and most of the novel consists of supplementary proofs that Jed Morris is irredeemably vicious.

Purely conventional - even old-fashioned - in form, Most Likely To Succeed aims for the most obvious of the ironies suggested by the title. Not only does it miss electrifying the platitude that a man may be a success by all worldly canons yet fail humanly - compare J. Ward Morehouse - but it sets a positive puzzle for the reader by its inattention to certain prime requisites of the novel. The failing novelist himself execrated by the critics and with the fear of professional perdition haunting him, has lost the "r  cul esthetique".



He is no longer an intelligible writer in the basic idioms of his craft. For instance the action of "Morocco" takes place in 1926, as the hero explicitly announces on the first page; prolific allusions to Paris, the Ballet Russe and Dada certainly date it in the twenties. But there is a bewildering lack of temporal actuality - and this is a cardinal point one always feels the need of in an author with the "historical" approach. One imagines that the first readers of this book, which appeared in the year of Senator McCarthy's downfall, may have been surprised to find characters talking in the general accents of the fifties about faint, remote events. In erasing the landmarks of his own past - here Dos Passos aims at wiping out the Playwrights' Theatre, as he had earlier wiped out Harvard, Roosevelt, Sacco and Vanzetti - the author has left obscure necessary delineations of circumstance.

"Morocco" establishes Jed as emotionally dishonest and self-deceiving; a "social revolutionary of the left";<sup>68</sup>; a believer that the writer must immerse himself in the "mainstream of history".<sup>69</sup> It also introduces - during his account of his Moroccan adventure - the image of the Soviet freighter "with her tiny speck of red in the stern"<sup>70</sup> - that will become a sinister recurrent signal of the American machinations of the Comintern. "Theatre" concentrates on the metropolitan milieu of committed, experimental theatre and reveals Jed as a despicable mirror-image of Jay Pignatelli. Like Jay, he has a father whose philosophy has dominated his life, though J.E. is an elderly Jewish semi-paranoid who has spent his life conducting a futile struggle against J.P. Morgan and the "interests". Felicia Hardestie, like Lulie in Chosen Country, is a member of an eccentric upstate family. Her father is an opinionated veteran goat whose conversation turns to pronouncements like "Without the intense purification of the sensual... a man cannot free himself from his own libido". Scho is portrayed with a degree of satirical intention, but his attitude to radical politics is distinctly in line with the development of Dos Passos' own views:

"The trouble with the revolutionary movement is that it's as materialistic as capitalism. He would have us all be paid full wages for marching in



columns of four... Onward, Christian Soldiers, and nobody must walk on the grass.<sup>71</sup>

Thus Scho denounces the idealist. Jed is the idealist, or at least the victim of idealist illusions. In practice, this means he is saturated with the maximum of personal corruption. "Throughout his climb to success and fame" runs the publisher's endpaper blurb, "he clung to a destructive philosophy of life that cut humanity out of his soul". This, alas, is a reasonable summary of the content. The Craftsman's Theatre is a squalid arena of competing egos and interpretations of the party line. It aims to bring theatre to the people, but actually mounts productions chosen more or less for their political orthodoxy and achieves neither popular success nor mass political influence. Its conflicting goals and the disputes among those who run and associate with the theatre make it a hopeless proposition: it reflects the self-contradictory instincts of Jed's nature, which he desperately articulates to Felicia:

"We've got to put it over. It's our one big chance... The Human Race is a sure thing, feller. It's revolutionary. That'll bring in Lew's theatre parties, see? On top of that it's box office, see?"<sup>72</sup>

But the tension is only stated; never does Jed fully exist as an individual whose essential inner conflicts, tellingly dramatised, impede the mature development of his character. He is a rat on all counts: for espousing the Communist faith, for simultaneously desiring conventional rewards, for his animalistic sex life, for attempting to incorporate Marxist doctrines in his plays and for failing to capture a popular audience for them. The engrammatic sense of a human organism encountering the multitudinous, varied stimuli of its life-experience has vanished. Jed is an Aunt Sally, and for this reason few instances of the earlier Dos Passos style occur:

He leaned back in his chair, looking at the golden girl with the little hat like an apricot tart so jaunty on her camomile gold curls and the restaurant with its starched cloths and glinting silver and the rolling tables ranked with the hors d'œuvre waiters were pushing towards them; and outside the broad plate-glass windows the blue oceanic sky and the great piled, puffed, cumulous clouds casting purple shadows on green-blue foam-streamed seas.<sup>73</sup>



And when they do occur - as with this paragraph from the opening section - they lack the context of relevance. They are washed around by pages of fictive special pleading, vague and complicated intrigues, lifeless dialogue. And the characters, especially Sam Faust, George Pastor, Eli Soltair, V.F. Calvert and others surrounding the theatre project, are dim, pasteboard figures.

They are also to be found in the third and last sections, observing or abetting the apotheosis of Jed Morris as a highly-paid servant of the motion-picture industry. Jed's facility with words (of which the reader otherwise has no evidence) makes him useful to producers of prolefeed; but there is the still darker suggestion that his political reliability and slavish loyalty to Comintern pronouncements ensures that his success is fast and ample. There is little organisation of dynamic incident in the latter half of the book. Jed's personal life disintegrates pari passu with his professional advancement. Like almost everyone else involved in party work - and few of Dos Passos' Hollywood people are not - he eventually comes under suspicion. Fear of party retribution compels him to betray a woman with whom he has evidently found true love. The Moroccan nightmare has come true, and the final page shows Jed in the throes of a heart attack after interrogation by Sam Faust and V.F. Calvert, empowered by the "Control Commission" to investigate him. The sheer melodramatic vulgarity of so many situations (even conceding communist activity in the movie industry during the thirties, a subject under investigation by Parnell Thomas's Committee in 1947) recoils against the author's urgent resolution to expose the red menace. Political talk is reduced to dead parroting - "Anybody with any knowledge of dialectical materialism can figure these things out ahead",<sup>74</sup> - and Jed's flickering awareness of the pit of horrors into which he has stepped is rendered by such banal formulas as "We believe in different Americas... but love makes us one"<sup>75</sup> or "Who am I, Mark? Sooner or later every man has to ask himself that question",<sup>76</sup> insensitivities not excused by Dos Passos' defective ironism.



The novel is ruined aesthetically by its concentration of a number of political obsessions into a hero-failure who never convinces in any dimension. It suffocates under a cold war blanket of hatred. Dos Passos has neither proved nor demonstrated anything about failure (except his own) and, as a partly extra-literary matter, he has falsified a critical period of history; any consciousness of the giant threat of fascism is absent from Most Likely To Succeed. So - and this is serious - is the sense of life among ordinary people. Like other anti-Communist revivalists of the fifties, Dos Passos equates Communism with wealthy, parasitic "elements", and by aiming at this barn-door irony he extinguishes deeper, subtler ironies - and truth. Jed Morris is a total failure. The author says so. But it is not a failure which can touch or persuade the reader, it is contrived. It rings with the infallible false note of the counterfeit.

The remaining two novels published during Dos Passos' lifetime both illustrate a further weakening of artistic control, and in each of them a man of about the author's age and with the author's own experience is shown to be at the end of his tether. Roland Lancaster, in The Great Days, comes alive only when he thinks of the past; his affair at the age of fifty-nine, with a much younger girl, is a series of humiliations and cross-purposes. To underscore the contrast, the narrative is divided into two alternating sections. In one, Lancaster gives a first-person account of the key episodes in his life. The other, impersonally narrated in the dramatic present, concentrates on the Cuban trip with Elsa. Lancaster has evidently grown world-weary and through the exhaustion of experience: "Hasn't he always entertained the dream of boxing up his old wornout life and sending it to dead storage?"<sup>77</sup> Elsa embodies his last hope of self-revitalization, and Cuba the opportunity to mend his professional fortunes as a journalist.

The Great Days partially returns to the use of engrammatic perceptions - Lancaster is used up as a result of a cumulative barrage of assaults on his energy and integrity - but it takes pains also to accommodate Dos Passos' ideological



grudges. Once again, the unity of the book is destroyed by an insistence on the primacy of political righteousness, and potentially the most interesting theme of the later works - reassessment and apologia pro sua vita by the ageing novelist - is dissipated. Dos Passos has worked in much of the material from which his later journalism derives, and the positive values are cemented in with egregious reliance on cliché.

Heroism: I had never understood the meaning of the word not even in France in the old war until I went to England. Those stodgy stubbly Britishers. Civil defense; their dogged selfeffacement as they went about their grim chores.<sup>78</sup>

In scraping around for subject matter, he has leaned heavily on his friendship with Hemingway (George Elbert Warner of Chosen Country, now grown up and very much "Papa") and his "tour of duty" as a war correspondent. The World War I - Greenwich Village - radical upsurge settings are abandoned, but what replaces them is tedious and flatulent, especially the long account of warfare in the Pacific. Dos Passos is a trained observer, but his observations are lacking in the tautness necessary to validate them as telling elements of fiction. The first-person narratives survey Lancaster's life from 1929 until the immediate post-war period, and include a wealth of unassimilated and unrelated matter: his friendship with Warner, with Roger Thurloe - who later enters government and resigns because his preaching of anti-Communist vigilance and preparedness is ignored - his marriage and the death of his wife, his professional assignments. The tenor of these episodes is Lancaster's failure to make himself into an influential prophet of the benefits of American democracy, in line with Roger Thurloe's exhortation:

"We've got to know what we want to do... It's up to fellows like you to spell it out for us... Not in detail, but in outline. There ought to be an American democratic theory like there is a Marxist theory".

I told him I had been beating my brains out on the project all winter. I wasn't the only one. Hundreds of other men were trying to put it into words.<sup>79</sup>

But Blueprint for the Future - Lancaster's attempt to "put it into words" -



drops dead in the face of public indifference. His image of the débâcle is that of sailing a boat against an ebbing tide.

In addition to his inability to arouse national opinion, Roland Lancaster learns that his relationship with Elsa is ultimately destructive and must be renounced. The discovery is a painful one, but bears the consolation that "the worst is over. Life just by itself has meaning".<sup>80</sup> Ro and Elsa are a curiously parallel couple to Colonel Cantwell and "Daughter" in Across The River And Into The Trees; however, though the portrait of their relations is not so disabblingly invaded by fantasy it has nevertheless far less depth and substance. Elsa is young (or youngish) but timeworn. She has made a disastrous marriage, drinks too much, and is frankly interested in a man who can afford to give her a good time; Ro has almost emptied his bank account to pay for the Cuban spree.

Elsa's personal history is recounted in familiar terms: working at a dancehall in her teens, runaway marriage to a bandleader, pregnancy, escape. Once the two are isolated in Havana, their relationship is subject to the pressures of mutual discovery that bring out its latent tensions. At one moment Lancaster senses harmony:

The river is the color of washing blue  
with a sheen of gold on it. The boats are golden  
white in the slanting sun. Terns fly overhead.  
They are looking at the same things, feeling  
the same things.<sup>81</sup>

The next, a discussion of H.G. Wells reveals the gulf between their conditioned attitudes. The conflicts increase as Lancaster, out of increasing desperation and the desire to impress, makes an absurd spectacle of himself while Elsa, acting from a position of strength, concentrates on her own gratifications. Elsa, street-canny but uneducated, insists "I believe in art. I don't believe in current events".<sup>82</sup> To Lancaster, the idea has a sinister ring of innocence. Her tainted innocence and his well-meaning corruption lead them to a blind alley. Ro, baulked of his scoop and robbed of his wallet, has nothing left to offer. Elsa thinks of her own comfort and security.



The reader is left to draw the conclusion that Roland Lancaster's personal and professional impasses have left him on the edge of nothing, where he can acquire the impetus for a fresh assault on life, repudiating the vanities that have plagued his career. Yet his failure is loosely and circumstantially described; it is never thoroughly established as a lifelike consequence of impelling circumstances. The depletion of a talent is apparent in nearly every line - not just in the extensive use of unintegrated reportage and the heavy-handed editorializing but in the limpness of characterization, dialogue and atmosphere. One sees faint echoes of the erstwhile Dos Passos everywhere:

The beauty of the dim crowded streets where  
you walked with all your senses sharpened  
by the knowledge that a ton of bricks  
might drop on your head any moment.  
The tiny blue crosses of the traffic lights.  
The way faces bloomed out at the striking  
of a match.<sup>83</sup>

Ro feels so lonesome he could howl like a dog.<sup>84</sup>

"Maybe something can be made out of  
failure". If he only had time he could  
explain. "That's what life's made up of,  
really".<sup>85</sup>

In each case, the exertion of typical effects is made as by an automatic reflex, the repetitive motion of an organism that has specialised in one function which it can no longer perform with spontaneous life, yet which it cannot adapt to fresh purposes. The wartime London streets, Lancaster's feeling of isolation, the facile conclusion of his story - all are expressed in weary and blunted language, all substitute acquired tricks of technique for a firsthand delineation of experienced reality. The great days are irrevocably past: Ro's hollow moralising reveals only the draining of the author's reservoir of creative vitality.

In Midcentury creative exhaustion is pitifully absolute: not even a fairly complete reversion to the manner of USA can disguise it. If The Great Days is Dos Passos' last attempt to get outside himself, Midcentury is his final effort to penetrate society. The penetration is not deep, though: the theme of the book is the extinction of the self-willed individual by the power of



large group interests and monopolies and the ubiquity of mid-twentieth century provisions for banishing initiative and risk, but the treatment centres on presenting it in a querulous and bigoted procession of disparate techniques. Organised labour, above all, is the villain: though labour "racketeering" is the ostensible target, coercion and corruption are seen as the dominant weapons of the movement. There is also a new and deplorable note in Dos Passos' valedictory disparagement of American youth.

In the opening section, "Your Place in the World", two principal characters appear: Terry Bryant, a returned soldier of the Pacific war, and Blackie Bowman, ex-Wobbly and now the aged and broken resident of a Veterans' Hospital. While Terry is shown attempting to find himself and his destiny as an American in the post-war society now so changed and forbidding, Blackie delivers an autobiographical monologue. The content of this monologue is classically time-honoured - hobo life, the IWW, Greenwich Village, promiscuity and dipsomania. One accepts that it is the novelist's farewell to his halcyon days, but the first-person narrative is wearisome and only contingently relevant to Terry's story. Punctuating these fictional chapters are three other types of statement: "Documentaries" (newsreel-like anthologies of press cuttings), biographical profiles, and "Investigator's Notes". The Documentaries stress the reification of life by the process of scientific discovery, the profiles eulogise General MacArthur and castigate Freudian psychoanalysis and John L. Lewis, while "Investigator's Notes" is based upon the reports of intimidated workers to the McClellan Committee. A Prologue in the author's prose-poetic style sets the infinitude of space beside the neural sensations of the individual being. This pattern is repeated for the second section "A Creature That Builds", at the end of which Blackie Bowman dies. The final part, "Systems of Enterprise" weaves together the story of Terry Bryant with that of Jasper Milliron, one of Lulie's suitors in Chosen Country who has become a major executive of a cereal products corporation.



For a long novel, Midcentury is loose, barren, and repetitious. Blackie Bowman is potentially the most interesting character, but his experiences are little more than yet another version of the essential John Dos Passos tale, and they lose scope and density by being recounted through the consciousness of a single person. Generals MacArthur and Dean are uncritically praised for their patriotism, a value now seen as unambivalently good. The Documentaries lacking the variety and ironic juxtaposition of the Newsreels in USA, become aggregations of dehumanising social ingenuity and exposés of labour union misdeeds. The seven abstracts of Investigator's Notes are seven separate pieces of evidence against labour corruption - for the purposes of a novel one would have done equally well, especially as in five of the profiles (Bridges, Harry Lewis, Reuther, Tobin/Beck/Hoffa, Senator McClellan) the focus is on the same subject. Moreover, Terry Bryant's career is chiefly a war against fraud and force on the part of union bosses. The lyrical intention of the three prefaces and the epilogue - to warn that "institutional man" must "sacrifice individual diversity"<sup>86</sup> - is rendered as a blunderbuss assault on Big Unionism (to a minor extent, on Big Business and Finance); the interplay and tension between social and individual forces, formerly so signal a factor in Dos Passos' literary scheme, is neglected. Midcentury is not so much pessimistic as grievance-ridden.

The outcome of the Duquesne taxicab war, in which Terry Bryant is martyred, illustrates the compromises imposed on personal initiative (Jasper Milliron's son-in-law, Will Jenks ) by the strength of the big combinations. The taxicab war is the most exciting portion of the narrative; but it does not end the book. For there follows an extraordinary attack upon youth, and by implication on the coming future. Dos Passos has already taken pains to assert - in "An Answer Simple Enough" - what he considers to be the moral deficiency of the young American conscript soldiers who, taken prisoner in Korea, had in some measure collaborated with their captors:

Idealism without ethics is no compass.

"One of the most difficult problems for a prisoner is maintaining his judgement," General Dean told Worden.



For judgment read sense of right and wrong.  
 No one had told those kids that right  
 and wrong was the inner compass that points  
 true north.<sup>87</sup>

Now he proceeds, from the viewpoint of an undefined but broadly perceptible moral absolutism to express his contempt for the adolescents of the nineteen-fifties.

Documentary 24 includes one item on a discotheque riot, another on the motorcycle invasion of a town in California. The ensuing profile of James Dean, "The Sinister Adolescents", with its gloating and scornful phrases, is aimed not only at the morbid cult of Dean (a fine actor, who won immense professional respect from many of his colleagues in the motion-picture industry) but at an entire postwar generation. The general accusation is that teenagers have been betrayed by affluence and security.

(Freedom what good is it? Let's have  
 social security  
 and welfare and tailfins on our cars  
 and packaging)<sup>88</sup>

and that while enjoying the benefits of affluence they seek the "glory of life" which has vanished, and which they attempt to restore by hero-worship, violence and rebellion. The treatment of Dean and his followers is in disagreeable contrast to the author's attitude towards another of his profile-subjects, Sam Goldwyn. However garnished with mockery, Dos Passos' apple-polishing view of Goldwyn tends to glorify a vulgar and tasteless financial despot - who, however, realised the Horatio Alger dream. That he should find adolescents more sinister than Goldwyn is shocking enough, but the solecism is compounded in the closing chapter. "Tomorrow the Moon" consists of the interior monologue of Milliron's nephew, Stan Goodspeed. Stan has run off with Jasper's credit cards, and his plan is to surround himself with luxury by fraudulent use of them. He is an old man's nightmare of a typical adolescent, as Holden Caulfield is the fond recreation of a man in his mid-thirties: the premature cynicism and the poorly hit-off jive talk betray this:

"Did I need a tranquilizer? Just  
 play it cool, Stan Goodspeed, I keep telling



myself. And I sat there in the bus telling myself that if I didn't do anything foolish and kept moving fast enough the bills would never catch up. Maybe they would blow the screwy world up before the bills came in at that."<sup>89</sup>

"Stan Goodspeed's throwing a ball. Yeah man" are the novel's final words: in "Sendoff" the conscience of the author speaks up for another voice - "the still small private voice that is God's spark in man".<sup>90</sup> It is a spark which has ceased to illumine his fiction. Midcentury, professing to defend the individual against the enveloping institutions that threaten to crush him, only reflects a jaundiced disappointment. Maladroit in its construction, rife with traces of the magazine origins of much of its material, it fails to endow its creatures with a valid human identity. Where there is no identity, there can be no agony in its loss. Difficult, complex and frightening as the modern world is, it cannot be understood or improved by the elderly curmudgeon who, from his club armchair, rails at its bureaucratic institutions and ascribes praise or blame by simple, unexamined criteria. The novel itself is a powerful instrument of moral and social criticism, and a means of demonstrating spiritual and social truths that need to be learned and possibly can be communicated in no other way. Working at his finest pitch, Dos Passos had developed means of questioning familiar assumptions, recounting the moment of weakness or disaster in the shock-wave of its occurrence, charting the continuous interaction of internal and external stimuli. In his latter-day crusade for the brand of ideological conservatism that was to become identified with Senator Goldwater he surrenders the sensibility and style of a serious writer for the easy prescriptions of the stump politician. Inevitable or not, it is a sorrowful deterioration.

Dos Passos ends as the fulminating enemy of youth, having begun as its spokesman. Romantic failure is turned into cheap, patriotic self-regeneration and scepticism hardens into dogmatic fetishes of belief and repudiation. Nevertheless, it is an injustice that he should now be widely out of print (at least in Britain), forgotten and despised. The wonder is not that he should have



ceased to be a widely respected literary figure, but that he should have left an oeuvre which, despite the relatively small proportion of first-grade work, contains so much that is admirable.

In Manhattan Transfer and especially in USA Dos Passos had faced up to a universe which bore no objective meaning and in which the existential struggle to create meaning in volitional life-activity was impeded by innumerable determinants, flowing from the perpetual interchange of personal and social influences, that barred both understanding and action. The "impassioned objectivity"<sup>91</sup> of his manner and the technical resourcefulness he employed to exemplify his vision in art helped to make him an author of genuine distinction. While Hemingway matured quickly as a writer, entering into a long and gradual decline after about 1932, and Fitzgerald worked in a series of ascending stages until sudden death ended his career, Dos Passos' career follows the graph of a normal life-cycle: progressive growth, a comparatively narrow summit of achievement, wasting-away thereafter. One wonders whether he ever precisely understood the nature of his fiction; in 1957, when he was awarded the Gold Medal for Fiction by the National Institute of Arts and Letters, he had this to say:

Maybe it is that the satirist is so full of the possibilities of humankind in general, that he tends to draw a dark and garish picture when he tries to depict people as they are at any particular moment... Satirical writing is by definition unpopular writing. Its aim is to prod people into thinking. Thinking hurts.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the fact that most of his novels include an element of satirical intent, it is not chiefly for their power to stimulate critical reflection that they should be valued. Dos Passos at his most accomplished communicates - more so than Kafka, it seems to me - that most frightening sense of a world in which the impedimenta of a human-created civilisation refuse to yield any human meaning for the individual who reaches out to their lethal or recessive profiles. Fitzgerald wrote, wisely, that he spoke "with the authority of failure"<sup>93</sup>; that he could use the phrase suggests how widespread the sensation or experience of



failure is, how it is a kind of qualification for making authentic judgements on life - and the significance of the remark is sharpened for Americans. When Dos Passos shows the sickly futility of a life - shows it in the accumulated detail of daily defeat, shows it transformed (to use Sartre's term) into a "destiny" - he overcomes the ignoble facts by the truth and courage of his portrayal. This task it is the duty and justification of art to perform. That he omits other truths - the transcendence of pervading misery by the intensity of man's perceptions and will to understand; the supremacy of love, however transient its realisation; the deep satisfactions that come out of struggle - no more invalidates his attitude than the existence of happy marriages disproves Hemingway's view of male-female relations. The reader who has shared in the life of our century turns the pages of Dos Passos with the shock of self-recognition.

When the fiction of John Dos Passos ceases to draw energy from a nexus of alienation and doubt it loses artistic cohesion. Probably the sense of cultural dislocation he felt, owing to his immigrant background and family circumstances, impelled him finally to seek a secure identity as a member of the nation he began by probing sceptically. The persona he chose, or grew into, was increasingly inimical not simply to his earlier purposes as a writer, but to the essential character of his literary ability. When Dos Passos "came home", when he published crude magazine polemics and volumes of sentimental popular history, he surrendered the insight which underlay his major trilogy and which is so well expressed by James T. Farrell:

Time slowly transfigures me just as it  
transfigures all of us. There is no security  
in an insecure world. There is no final  
home on a planet where we are homeless  
children.<sup>94</sup>

But Farrell has also paid tribute to the major works of the naturalist tradition, including USA:

They have been written in the spirit of  
truth. If they are part of a tradition, that  
tradition has had more force and more impact,



and has been able to nourish and give more energy to successive generations than any other tradition. This is especially so in America.<sup>95</sup>

For it remains the case that Dos Passos is an American writer; he had no need to resort to anti-Communist bluster, Barry Goldwater and the National Review to assure himself of this. The great American theme of success, from its most basic expression in popular self-help mythology, to the beautifully controlled resonances of The Great Gatsby, entails its own corollaries of failure, despair and disillusion. Fitzgerald recorded such emotions in typically personal terms:

...an over-extension of the flank,  
a burning of the candle at both ends;  
a call upon physical resources that I  
did not command, like a man over-drawing  
at his bank... a feeling that I was  
Standing at twilight on a deserted range,  
with an empty rifle in my hands and  
the targets down.<sup>96</sup>

Yet not for nothing is Fitzgerald associated with the zeitgeist of inter-war America. What distinguishes his self-analysis is its freedom from rancour or blame; his artist's objectivity served him well. Similarly, the best work of Dos Passos - even where it draws on personal and political sympathies - never identifies a single source of error, a single evil. "Impassioned objectivity" - more objective in Manhattan Transfer, more passionate in USA - allows him an exceptional freedom and versatility; antithetical properties (success/failure; radicalism/conservatism; mass institutions/the private consciousness) are deployed with extreme skill and tension, so that the profound exploration of interior states is not felt to be a missing value. When this tension is eclipsed by naked tendentious bias, the vital framework collapses. A primitive world-view is matched by severe technical regression. Where wrong is ascribed to a simple cause, there is no room for the inclusion of manifold interrelated forces or for the accurate, sensitive recording of the engrammatic moment. Dos Passos' disservice to himself arises not from craft-experiment, but by the sincere yet damaging change in his viewpoint that persuaded him to re-interpret failure, success, morality and history.



It seems especially deplorable that Dos Passos should have concluded his career as a novelist with a malevolent portrait of American youth. If there is any heroism in our time, any self-denying actions comparable to the heroism of the Spanish workers who fell on the barricades of their murdered republic, much of it has been contributed by a generation of young Americans who denied the limitless power of their government to coerce the individual and who displayed their conscientious opposition by concerted resistance, by exile, even by publicly throwing away the trashy medals awarded to them for service in a cause they had come to despise. But the great wave of contemporary organised outrage in the West is spent; despite the growth of an international youth counter-culture, one is more aware of fragmentation than of unity or harmony. Here are two themes perfectly in key with the interests of the novelist whose life ended in Baltimore on September 28th, 1970. Such a novelist might be the chronicler of a world grown even more complex, uncertain and bewildering in the fifty years since Manhattan Transfer: not to point at causes and solutions, but by mirroring our dilemmas and frustrations through the medium of art to amplify our awareness of our own situation, to provide us with an alternating focus on ourselves as social and individual beings. The time is due for Dos Passos to be re-read, as he wrote, with both sympathy and impartiality - and above all, with a seriousness equal to the most worthy of his aims and achievements.



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28. Ibid, 36.
29. Ibid, 37.
30. Ibid, 34.



31. Ibid, 37.
32. Ibid, 47.
33. Ibid, 57.
34. Ibid, 63.
35. Maxwell Geismar's phrase (from Writers in Crisis)
36. Streets of Night, 65.
37. Ibid, 232.
38. Ibid, 170.
39. Ibid, 171.
40. Ibid, 135.
41. Ibid, 137.
42. Ibid, 132.
43. Ibid, 23.
44. Ibid, 74.
45. Ibid, 39.
46. Ibid, 65-66.
47. Hayden Carruth in The Reader's Encyclopaedia of American Literature (ed. M.J. Herzberg), Methuen 1963, 304.
48. Streets of Night, 48.
49. Ibid, 61.
50. Ibid, 54.
51. Ibid, 188.
52. Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Search For Identity in the Novels of John Dos Passos", PMLA LXXVI, March 1961, 138.
53. Streets of Night, 187.
54. Ibid, 190-191.
55. Ibid, 197.
56. Ibid, 215-216.
57. Townsend Ludington (Ed.), The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos, André Deutsch 1974, 39.
58. Bernardin, 16.
59. Streets of Night, 186.
60. Wrenn, 121.



II: GETTING IN BAD - ONE MAN'S INITIATION: ANDTHREE SOLDIERS

1. H.L. Mencken, Selected Prejudices (second series), Cape 1927, 38.
2. Ibid, 41.
3. One Man's Initiation: 1917, Ithaca, Cornell 1969, p.5.
4. Ibid, 45.
5. Ibid, 51.
6. Ibid, 54.
7. Ibid, 64.
8. I should make it clear that I am going to use the word "engram" - "the durable mark caused by a stimulus on a protoplasm" - and its variants to indicate what seems to me central in Dos Passos, i.e. the unheroic wearing-away of the human spirit by an accumulation of petty sufferings and defeats.
9. One Man's Initiation, 61.
10. Ibid, 47.
11. Ibid, 60.
12. Ibid, 71-72.
13. Ibid, 72.
14. Ibid, 148.
15. Ibid, 159.
16. Ibid, 160-161.
17. Ibid, 162.
18. Ibid, 165.
19. Ibid, 170.
20. Ibid, 108.
21. Ibid, 5.
22. Ibid, 160.
23. Stanley Cooperman, World War I and the American Novel, Johns Hopkins 1967, 175.
24. John Dos Passos, Three Soldiers, Modern Library, 1932, 22.
25. Ibid, 3.
26. Cooperman, 177.



- 27, 28. Three Soldiers, 17.
- 29, David Sanders, "'Lies' and the System: Enduring Themes from Dos Passos' Early Novels", South Atlantic Quarterly LXV, Spring 1966, 222.
30. Three Soldiers, 225-226.
31. Ibid, 373.
32. Ibid, 378.
33. Ibid, 427.
34. Ibid, 452.
35. Ibid, 469.
36. Cooperman, 177.
37. Ibid, 179.
- 38, 39. Three Soldiers, 145.
40. Ibid, 146.
41. Ibid, 147.
42. Ibid, 17.
43. Ibid, 32.
44. Ibid, 221.
45. Ibid, 209.
46. Ibid, 466-467.
47. Ibid, 458.
48. Sanders, 224.
49. James Steel Smith, "The Novelist of Discomfort: A Reconsideration of John Dos Passos", College English XIX, May 1958, 335.
50. Three Soldiers, 178.
51. Ibid, 11.
52. Ibid, 41.
53. Ibid, 65.
54. Ibid, 118-119.
55. Ibid, 133.
56. Ibid, 157.
57. Ibid, 201.
58. Ibid, 442



59. Ernest Hemingway, introduction to Men at War, New York, Crown, 1942, xvi.
60. W.M. Frohock, "John Dos Passos: of Time and Frustration, I" South-West Review, Winter-Spring 1948, 78.
61. Three Soldiers, 2.
62. Ibid, vi.



### III: MANHATTAN TRANSFER: BROWNIAN MOTION.

1. John Dos Passos, One Man's Initiation: 1917, Ithaca, Cornell, 1969, 36.
2. Ibid, 4.
3. Compare, for example, Coningsby Dawson's "Insulting the Army" (New York Times Book Review, October 2nd, 1921, pp. 1, 16-17) with Francis Hackett's review in The New Republic, October 5th, 1921, 162-3.
4. The epithet of Mason Wade in "Novelist of America: John Dos Passos", North American Review, December 1937, 354.
5. "Unanimisme", a term particularly associated with the fiction of Jules Romains, signified the use of a group or community in place of an individual protagonist. Dos Passos has denied that Romains influenced his technique: see "Manhattan Transfer and the Service of Things" in Themes and Directions in American Literature, ed. Browne and Pizer, Lafayette, Purdue 1969, 183. Perhaps "unanimisme" was "in the air", but the characters of Manhattan Transfer are carefully graded in the degrees of their realisation, and their separateness, not their unity is stressed.
6. "July", Transatlantic Review II, September 1924, 154-179.
7. Ibid, 155.
8. Ibid, 166.
9. Ibid, 179.
10. Ibid, 164.
11. Ibid, 166.
12. Ibid, 168.
13. Ibid, 169.
14. Ibid, 170.
15. Ibid, 171.
16. John Dos Passos, Manhattan Transfer, London, Constable 1927, 62.
17. Ibid, 67.
18. Ibid, 75.
19. Ibid, 78.
20. Ibid, 81.
21. Ibid, 93.
22. Ibid, 101.
23. Ibid, 106.
24. Ibid, 106.
25. Ibid, 110-111.



26. John Dos Passos, Manhattan Transfer, London, Constable 1927, 112.
27. Ibid, 113.
28. Ibid, 113.
29. Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940, New York, Macmillan 1941, 40.
30. Manhattan Transfer, 113.
31. Ibid, 114.
32. Ibid, 166.
33. Ibid, 131.
34. Ibid, 165.
35. Ibid, 165.
36. Ibid, 182.
37. Ibid, 184.
38. Ibid, 215.
39. Ibid, 218.
40. Ibid, 233.
41. Ibid, 232.
42. Ibid, 247.
43. Ibid, 248.
44. Ibid, 251.
45. Ibid, 283.
46. Ibid, 282.
47. Ibid, 15.
48. Ibid, 40.
49. Ibid, 284.
50. Ibid, 304.
51. Maxwell Geismer, Writers in Crisis - The American Novel 1925-1940, New York, Hill and Wang 1961, 124.
52. Manhattan Transfer, 309-310.
53. Ibid, 330.
54. Ibid, 331.
55. Ibid, 337.



56. Ibid, 337.
57. Ibid, 343.
58. Ibid, 374.
59. Ibid, 342.
60. Ibid, 375.
61. Ibid, 375.
62. Ibid, 377.
63. Ibid, 378.
64. Malcolm Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, Carbondale, Southern Illinois 1964, 137.
65. Blanche Houseman Gelfant, The American City Novel, Norman, Chicago 1954, 151.
66. Manhattan Transfer, 378.
67. Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, Pelican 1958, 272.
68. Cowley's distinction, and the title of his chapter on Dos Passos in After the Genteel Tradition.
69. Manhattan Transfer, 132.
70. Ibid, 22.
71. Ibid, 110.
72. Ibid, 146.
73. Ibid, 251.
74. Ibid, 131.
75. Ibid, 134.
76. Ibid, 131.
77. Ibid, 157.
78. Ibid, 171.
79. Ibid, 201.
80. Ibid, 231.
81. Ibid, 246.
82. Ibid, 250.
83. Ibid, 252.
84. Ibid, 349.



85. Ibid, 320.
86. Ibid, 322.
87. Ibid, 370.
88. Ibid, 374.
89. W.M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, London, Arthur Barker 1959, 37.
90. Manhattan Transfer, 3.
91. Gelfant, 149.
92. Manhattan Transfer, 3.
93. Ibid, 3.
94. Ibid, 4.
95. Ibid, 4.
96. Ibid, 3.
97. Ibid, 5.
98. Ibid, 10.
99. Ibid, 7.
100. Ibid, 26.
101. Gelfant, 149.
102. Manhattan Transfer, 12.
103. Ibid, 17.
104. Ibid, 23.
105. Geismar, 128.
106. "Manhattan at Last!", Saturday Review of Literature, December 5th, 1925, 361.
107. Wade, 356.
108. E.D. Lowry, "The Lively Art of Manhattan Transfer", PMLA 84, October 1969, 1628-38.
109. Manhattan Transfer, 190.
110. Ibid, 51.
111. Ibid, 238.
112. Ibid, 331.
113. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Penguin 1960, 162.



114. Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream, Minneapolis, Minnesota 1956, 281.
115. Manhattan Transfer, 245
116. Ibid, 137.
117. Sanders, 180.
118. Manhattan Transfer, 116-7.
119. Ibid, 25.
120. Ibid, 31.
121. John Dos Passos, "Grosz Comes to America", Esquire VI, September 1936, 105, 128, 131.
122. Manhattan Transfer, 282.
123. Ibid, 229.
124. Ibid, 352-3.
125. Edmund Wilson, "Dos Passos and the Social Revolution" in The Shores of Light, London, W.H. Allen 1952, 429-35.
126. Frohock, 41.
127. Auden, "Song".
128. Beach, 25.
129. Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, George H. Doran 1922, 93.
130. Walt Whitman, quoted in Lloyd Morris, Incredible New York, New York Random House, 1951, 362.



IV: USA: AMERICA CAN BREAK YOUR HEART.

1. Joseph Freeman, American Testament, London, Gollancz 1938, 254.
2. In American Social Fiction, London, Oliver and Boyd, 1964, 128-141.
3. John Dos Passos The Forty Second Parallel, London, Constable 1931, vii.  
All other references are to the Modern Library USA.
4. John Dos Passos, The Forty Second Parallel in USA, New York, Modern Library 1939, 23.
5. Ibid, 77.
6. Ibid, 80.
7. Ibid, 113.
8. Ibid, 125.
9. Ibid, 128.
10. Ibid, 138-139.
11. Ibid, 144.
12. Ibid, 150-151.
13. Ibid, 172.
14. Ibid, 174,
15. Ibid, 178.
16. Ibid, 193.
17. Ibid, 206.
- 18, 19. Ibid, 204.
20. Ibid, 207. (Halley's comet is due in 1985-6.)
21. Ibid, 209.
22. Ibid, 211.
23. Ibid, 222.
24. Ibid, 225.
25. Ibid, 231.
26. Ibid, 235.
27. Ibid, 236.
28. Ibid, 238.
29. Ibid, 243.
30. Ibid, 246-248.



31. Ibid, 262.
32. Ibid, 263.
33. Ibid, 266.
34. In the light of Dos Passos' major emphasis on those who use words to deceive and who devalue language (Morehouse, Wilson) it is interesting to note the judgement of Philander Chase Knox on Andrew Carnegie, the subject of "Prince of Peace": "Now, Mr. Taft, all that old Scotchman is investing this money for is to have a funeral oration preached over him once a year at the anniversary of everything he has put a nickel into. He has bought up most of the orators of the world to talk from now until eternity". Quoted in Mark Sullivan, Our Times (6 Vols., Scribners' 1932) Vol. IV, 158 f.
35. As "Mr. Dooley" put it: "... th' poetic lie, th' business lie, th' lie imaginative, th' brassy lie, th' timid lie, th' white lie, th' pathriotic or red-white-an'-blue lie, th' lovin' lie, th' over-th'-left, th' cross-me-heart, th' hope-to-die, histhry, political economy an' mathematics. They'll be a post gradyate coorse in perjury f'r th' more studyous an' whin th' hon'rary degrees is given out, we'll know what LL.D. manes".
36. The Forty Second Parallel, 282-283.
37. Ibid, 310.
38. Ibid, 318.
- 39, 40. Ibid, 325.
41. Ibid, 302
42. Ibid, 335.
43. Ibid, 338.
44. Ibid, 336.
45. Ibid, 340.
46. Ibid, 344.
- 47, 48. Ibid, 350.
49. Ibid, 351.
50. Ibid, 353.
51. Ibid, 354.
52. Ibid, 361.
53. Ibid, 368. In the first edition, "a lost republic that had never existed".
54. Ibid, 374.
55. Ibid, 381.
56. Ibid, 405.



57. The Forty Second Parallel, 412.
58. T.K. Whipple, "Dos Passos and the U.S.A." The Nation, February 19, 1938, 211.
59. Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1960, 218.
60. Luckas, in The Meaning of contemporary Realism argues the former case; Lionel Trilling, in "The America of John Dos Passos" (Partisan Review IV, April 1938, 26-32) the latter. Trilling at least has noticed that the characters in USA occupy a relatively narrow social spectrum.
61. A good deal of the Camera Eye material on John Dos Passos Sr. can be relocated in the form of straightforward reminiscence in the author's "informal memoir", The Best Times (London, André Deutsch, 1968).
62. John Dos Passos, One Man's Initiation: 1917, Cornell 1969, 88.
63. John Dos Passos, Three Soldiers, Modern Library 1932, 300.
64. John Dos Passos, 1919, in USA, Modern Library 1939, 97.
65. One Man's Initiation, 61.
66. Three Soldiers, 138.
67. 1919, 186.
68. One Man's Initiation, 71-72.
69. Three Soldiers, 157.
70. 1919, 210.
71. Jean-Paul Sartre, "A propos de John Dos Passos et de 1919", Nouvelle Revue Francaise August 1938, 294.
72. One Man's Initiation, 5. Dos Passos' use of the term does not carry the intensely bitter irony of Wilfred Owen.
- 73, 74. Three Soldiers, 28-29.
75. 1919, 96.
76. Sartre, 293.
77. One Man's Initiation, 2.
78. H.L. Mencken, Selected Prejudices, Cape Travellers' Library 1926, 205.
79. 1919, 246.
80. Ibid, 248.
81. Ibid, 249.
82. Stanley Cooperman, World War I and the American Novel, Johns Hopkins 1967, 143.
83. Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States, Pelican 1961, 282-283.



84. Sartre, 294.
85. One Man's Initiation, 18. (See also, 141-142.)
86. John Dos Passos, The Best Times, London, André Deutsch 1968, 42.
87. 1919, 102.
88. Ibid, 189.
89. The Best Times, 42-43.
90. 1919, 103.
91. Sartre, 296.
92. One Man's Initiation, 25.
93. 1919, 141.
94. Ibid, 190.
95. Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, London, Cape 1943, 352.
96. 1919, 53.
97. John Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, Noonday Press 1958, 65.
98. 1919, 4
99. Ibid, 45.
100. Ibid, 58.
101. Ibid, 9.
102. Sartre, 297.
103. 1919, 74.
104. Ibid, 201.
105. Cooperman, 143.
106. 1919, 396.
107. Ibid, 218.
108. Ibid, 416.
109. Ibid, 440.
110. Sartre, 300.
111. "Richard Gordon" in To Have and Have Not is scarcely a literal portrait of Dos Passos; but Hemingway certainly feared a libel suit. See Carlos Baker, Ernest Hemingway, London, Collins, 1969, 359-360. For an entertaining graph of their relative positions, see Herbert Solow's "Substitution at Left Tackle: Hemingway for Dos Passos", Partisan Review IV, April 1938, 62-64.



112. Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, Harcourt, Brace 1961, 348.
113. One Man's Initiation, 36.
114. Ibid, 154.
115. 1919, 17.
116. Ibid, 104.
117. Ibid, 181.
118. Ibid, 13.
119. Ibid, 104.
120. Ibid, 180.
121. Ibid, 147.
122. Aaron, 346.
123. Mencken, 223.
124. 1919, 241.
125. Ibid, 243-244.
126. Lionel Trilling, "The America of John Dos Passos", Partisan Review IV April 1938, 31.
127. 1919, 247.
128. Ibid, 248.
129. Ibid, 247.
130. Ibid, 422.
131. Songs of the Workers, Chicago, Industrial Workers of the World 1956, 20: from a song on the Centralia murders.
132. Clifton Fadiman, Reading I've Liked, Hamish Hamilton 1946, 138.
133. 1919, 471.
134. Ibid, 472.
135. Ibid, 473.
136. Milton Rugoff, "Dos Passos, Novelist of our Time", Sewanee Review Autumn 1941, 465-466.
137. Cooperman, 142.
138. Sartre, 299.
139. 1919, 211.
140. Ibid, 375.



141. Songs of the Workers, 7. ("The Rebel Girl", by Joe Hill)
142. Margaret Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness - II John Dos Passos", The Nation CL, January 6, 1940, 17.
143. Though both women share Morehouse's bed, details are carefully omitted; and much of the unpleasantness of the relationships between the three springs from the idea that they are not up to anything as straightforward and animalclean as sex.
144. 1919, 303
145. Quoted approvingly by Dos Passos in I wish I'd Written That (ed. Eugene Woods), McGraw-Hill 1946, 368. What Dos Passos wished he'd written was the episode in Myrtle Wilson's apartment from The Great Gatsby: the bad party to end bad parties.
146. William Empson, "Missing Dates".
147. 1919, 417-418.
148. Sartre 292-293.
149. Leon Trotsky, "Our Morals and Theirs" in The Basic Writings of Trotsky, ed. Irving Howe, Mercury Books 1964, 380.
150. The Big Money in USA, Modern Library 1939, 8.
151. Ibid, 12-13.
152. Ibid, 18.
153. Ernest Hemingway, The First 49 Stories, Cape 1939, 137.
154. The Big Money, 37.
155. Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class, Modern Library 1961, 23.
156. The Big Money, 70.
157. Ibid, 76.
158. Ibid, 81.
159. Auden, "Sir, No Man's Enemy".
160. The Big Money, 27.
161. Ibid, 28.
162. Ibid, 31.
163. Malcolm Cowley, "The End of a Trilogy" New Republic, August 12, 1936, 23.
- 164.1 Q.D. Leavis, "Mr. Dos Passos Ends His Trilogy", Scrutiny V, December 1936, 295.
165. A sidelight: Dos Passos reports that once while Hemingway was resting up with a leg wound (he had shot himself trying to kill a shark) a package arrived from his mother with "a chocolate cake, a roll of Mrs. Hemingway's



paintings of the Garden of the Gods which she suggested he might get hung at the Salon when he next went to Paris, and the gun with which his father had shot himself... Hem was the only man I ever knew who really hated his mother". The Best Times, 210.

166. The Big Money, 117.
167. Ibid, 126. Camera Eye (45) seems to be connected with the feelings ex-Serviceman Dos Passos had when he met, in 1922, people like the Fitzgeralds who had stayed in the U.S. and whose behaviour struck him as bizarre. "Their gambit was to put you in the wrong. You were backward in your ideas. You were inhibited about sex". The Best Times, 128.
168. Attested in Edmund Wilson's I Thought of Daisy (1929) and in "Private Historian", the Time cover-story for August 10, 1936.
169. The Big Money, 150. It seems in character for Dos Passos to have taken the student's essentially irrelevant question to heart.
170. Ibid, 151.
171. Ibid, 196.
172. Ibid, 197.
173. Ibid, 238-239.
174. Ibid, 223.
175. In Twelve Great American Novels, New American Library 1967, 87-103.
176. Ibid, 102.
177. Ibid, 102.
178. The Big Money, 164.
179. Ibid, 276.
180. Only Yesterday was published in 1931; "Echoes of the Jazz Age" in 1931; Our Times in 1932. No doubt after 1929 the gap looked wide.
181. John Dos Passos, "Whom Can We Appeal to?", New Masses VI, August 1930, 8.
182. The Big Money, 90.
183. Ibid, 293.
184. Ibid, 229.
185. Ibid, 323 - and the phrase is echoed in "Art and Isadora", p. 161.
186. Ibid, 66.
187. Ibid, 313.
188. Ibid, 25.
189. Ibid, 19.
190. Ibid, 25.



191. Ibid, 51.
192. Ibid, 56.
193. Ibid, 101-102.
194. Ibid, 17.
195. W.M. Frohock, "John Dos Passos: Of Time and Frustration", South-West Review, Winter-Spring 1948, 75. Hemingway's hero, one recalls, is "the man things are done to".
196. The Big Money, 299.
197. Ibid, 87.
198. Ibid, 177.
199. Ibid, 277.
200. Ibid, 330.
201. Ibid, 157.
202. Ibid, 192-193.
203. Marshall, 17.
204. The Best Times, 172.
205. The Big Money, 453.
206. Ibid, 446.
207. Ibid, 435.
208. Ibid, 462-463.
209. Cowley, "The End of a Trilogy", 24.
210. The Big Money, 464.
211. Ibid, 525.
212. Ibid, 560.
213. Trilling, "The America of Dos Passos", 28.
214. The Big Money, 436.
215. Theodore Dreiser, Tragic America, Constable 1932, 9.
216. John Ruskin, "Ad Valorem".



V: "REJOINING THE UNITED STATES"

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2. John Dos Passos, Adventures of a Young Man, London, Constable 1939, 4.
3. Ibid, 21.
4. Ibid, 22.
5. Ibid, 24.
6. Malcolm Cowley, "Disillusionment", New Republic XCIX, 14th June, 1939, 163.
7. Adventures of a Young Man, 38.
8. Ibid, 39.
9. Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties, University of Chicago Press 1963, 122.
10. Adventures of a Young Man, 74.
11. Ibid, 156.
12. Ibid, 160.
13. Ibid, 162.
14. Ibid, 172.
15. Ibid, 185.
16. Ibid, 190.
17. Ibid, 238.
18. Ibid, 249.
19. Ibid, 291.
20. Ibid, 294.
21. Arthur Mizener, "The Gullivers of Dos Passos" in Dos Passos, the Critics and the Writer's Intention, Southern Illinois U.P., 1971.
22. Adventures of a Young Man, 349-350.
23. Ibid, 355-356.
24. John Dos Passos, Number One, London, Constable 1944, 2.
25. Ibid, 3.
26. Ibid, 21.
27. Ibid, 27.
28. Ibid, 55.
29. John Dos Passos, "Carlo Tresca", The Nation, January 23, 1943, 124.



30. Number One, 127.
31. Ibid, 149.
32. Ibid, 105.
33. Ibid, 197.
34. Ibid, 208.
35. Ibid, 212.
36. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "All the King's Meanings", The Georgia Review VIII, Winter 1954, 428.
37. Eisinger, 120.
38. Alfred Kazin, "Where Now Voyager?" New Republic March 15, 1943, 353.
39. John Dos Passos, The Grand Design, London, John Lehmann, 23.
40. Ibid, 30.
41. Ibid, 33.
42. Malcolm Cowley, "Washington Wasn't Like That", New Republic CXX 17.1.49, 23.
43. The Grand Design, 206.
44. Ibid, 285.
45. Ibid, 69-70.
46. Cowley, 23.
47. The Grand Design, 234-5.
48. Ibid, 354.
49. Ibid, 86.
50. Ibid, 177.
51. Ibid, 337.
52. Cited in A. Walton Litz (ed.) Modern American Fiction, Galaxy Books 1963, 97 f.
53. Maxwell Geismar, "Dos Passos' New Novel of the New Deal Years" New York Times Book Review, 2.1.1949, 4.
54. Andrew Hook, editor's introduction to Dos Passos, Twentieth-Century Views, Prentice-Hall 1974, 11.
55. Number One, 1.
56. The Grand Design, 104
57. Ibid, 280.
58. John Dos Passos, The Fourteenth Chronicle (ed Townsend Ludington), London, Deutsch 1974, 583.



59. A periodical to which Dos Passos had contributed an article in April, 1942.
60. "Final" in the sense that they were the last four novels published while the author was alive. "Century's Ebb" is yet to appear.
61. John Dos Passos, Chosen Country, Houghton Mifflin 1951, 446.
62. Ibid, 485.
63. For biographical information and analyses of the Dos Passos father-son relationship, see Martin Kallich, "John Dos Passos: Liberty and the Father Image", Antioch Review X (Spring, 1950) 100-105, and Melvin Landsberg, "J.R. Dos Passos: His Influence on the Novelist's Early Political Development" American Quarterly XVI (Fall, 1964) 473-485.
64. Ibid, 23.
65. Ibid, 37.
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67. Ibid, 38.
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72. Ibid, 115.
73. Ibid, 21.
74. Ibid, 228.
75. Ibid, 280.
76. Ibid, 199-200.
77. John Dos Passos, The Great Days, London, Robert Hale, 1959, 3.
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79. Ibid, 280.
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87. John Dos Passos, Midcentury, 421-422.
88. Ibid, 481.
89. Ibid, 491.
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91. Brian Lee, "History and Dos Passos", in The American Novel and the 1920s (ed. Bradbury and Palmer) Edward Arnold 1971, 199.
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