

John Dos Passos And His Invention of America

Asked to name The Great American Novel, most critics would pick from the trio of national classics—*Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*. A few others would claim that the great book has not yet been written. But if there were a prize for The Great Novel of America, it would go, with far less debate, to John Dos Passos's three-part movie-in-prose, *U.S.A.* (completed 1936). Capturing the voices and faces of Americans from virtually all walks of life, Dos Passos presented an ironic, kaleidoscopic portrait of the nation's experience during the tumultuous first three decades of the 20th century. Here, Alfred Kazin looks at the man and at his remarkable book.

by Alfred Kazin

In June 1932, a discouraged month and year in the history of the United States, John Roderigo Dos Passos sat down in his Provincetown, Massachusetts, house at the end of Commercial Street to write a new preface to his antiwar novel of 1921, *Three Soldiers*, published when he was 25.

Three Soldiers was being reissued by the Modern Library, a reprint series so inclusively "modern" in its taste that Petronius's *Satyricon* was in it along with Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* and John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The reissue of *Three Soldiers* was a tribute to Dos Passos's emerging reputation in the 1930s as a solidly "social" novelist with distinctly radical views. His trilogy *U.S.A.*, which was to be completed in 1936 with *The Big Money*, had already taken shape with *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and *1919* (1932). In his preface, Dos Passos responded to the honor with heartfelt memories of the hopes with which he had written *Three Soldiers*:

The memory of the spring of 1919 has not faded enough. Any spring is a time of overturn, but then Lenin was alive, the Seattle general strike had seemed the beginning of the flood instead of the beginning of the ebb, Americans in Paris were groggy with theatre and painting and music; Picasso was to rebuild the eye, Stravinski was cramming the Russian steppes into our ears, currents of energy seemed to be breaking out everywhere as young guys climbed out of their uniforms, imperial America was all shiny with the idea of Ritz, in every direction the countries of the world stretched out starving and angry, ready for anything turbulent and new, whenever you went to the movies you saw Charlie Chaplin. The memory of the spring of 1919 has not faded enough to make the spring of 1932 any easier.

But it *was* 1932, and American radicals were countering the national breakdown with militant new hopes of their own. Dos Passos, in the spirit of the '30s, dutifully went on:

Today, though the future may not seem so gaily colored or full of clanging hopes as it was thirteen years ago . . . we can at least meet events with our minds cleared of some of the romantic garbage that kept us from doing clear work then. Those of us who have lived through have seen these years strip the bunting off the great illusions of our time, we must deal with the raw structure of history now, we must deal with it quick, before it stamps us out.

The left-wing novelists of the '30s never matched Dos Passos's springy style and inner gaiety. But his contempt for the "romantic garbage that kept us from doing clear work then" was right in style and dominated left-wing literary thinking about the decade just past. By 1933, the great United States, with a quarter of its work force unemployed, thousands of people wandering the roads looking for jobs, food, shelter, and with a desperately pragmatic FDR trying any stratagem to keep America together, was a country of punctured illusions and was virtually bankrupt. Roosevelt, who had not been superior to the speculative madness of the '20s, now decried the period as an "age of mammon, full of self-seekers."

If you traveled about the country as frantically as Dos Passos always traveled and were sensitive to common, unliterary persons (unlike his friends E. Hemingway and e. e. cummings), you put them into your books. Dos Passos was not contrite about the "jazz age" like his friend Scott Fitzgerald, who by 1936 was regaling the readers of *Esquire* with the news of his "crack-up." Nor was he so heavy-footed in the direction of Communism as Theodore Dreiser, whose *Tragic America* (1931), the usual writer's journey through depression America, would not replace *An American Tragedy* (1926) in the affections of those who obstinately respected Dreiser as a storyteller despite the great man's untrustworthy mind and derivative opinions. On the other hand,

Dos Passos was not so smug as that great satirist of the American scene, H. L. Mencken, who never seemed to know that there *was* a depression, and who made light of Hitler as if he were just another redneck demagogue from the Deep South.

Dos Passos, though a distinctly upper-class product of Choate, Harvard, and the Norton-Harjes Volunteer Ambulance Service, and a diffident, elusive, elaborately hesitant character in public, was the grandson of a Portuguese shoemaker from the island of Madeira. The shoemaker's son, John Randolph Dos Passos, was born early enough in the 19th century to be a drummer boy in the Civil War, a dominating corporation lawyer in the palmiest days of the age of enterprise, and counsel to the American Sugar Refining Company when the Have-meyers controlled virtually all the sugar refined in the United States. He was a Republican stalwart, an authority on the law of the stock exchange, and the author of *Commercial Trusts: The Growth and Rights of Aggregated Capital*. "It is a primary object of every well-founded government to encourage the acquisition of individual fortunes."

His son, with his sardonic view of American capitalism and American character, had good reason to scorn official pieties. Born in a Chicago hotel room in 1896, Dos Passos was the illegitimate son of a 42-year-old Southern gentlewoman, Lucy Sprigg Madison, and the 51-year-old John Randolph Dos Passos, who was a married man unable to divorce his Catholic wife. Lucy was a widow, and until her son was 16—his birth was never registered—he was known as John Roderigo Madison. The father, a great figure in respectable business and political circles of the time, tried to hide his son's existence. Mother and son were forced to live abroad, and the son remained John Roderigo Madison for two years after his parents finally were married.

Mr. Wilson's War

John Randolph Dos Passos, the self-made son of the Portuguese shoemaker, was an extraordinary character; whatever pains he inflicted on his isolated, sensitive son, he was a godsend to a future novelist. It is easy to see why the novelist derided authority figures who resembled his innocently pompous father, why he was obsessed by American history, which immigrants' children used to consider the great romance. Lucy and little John Madison had to be kept out of the way. Dos Passos had even more of a "hotel childhood" than Henry and William James: mostly in Brussels and London, with furtive visits to the father in Washington and Virginia. It was from growing up among

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Dos Passos being arrested in Boston, Massachusetts, for protesting against the Sacco-Vanzetti death sentence in 1927.

foreign languages that Dos Passos became convinced that ordinary speech is the index to a society; he was to say in his most famous book, "But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people."

With his earliest feeling that "the voyages never stopped," he was to register in his prose not just the speedup of history but his Victorian mother's attempts to escape the "shame" of her son's illegitimacy. For the rest of his life, Dos Passos was to think that the way out of any problem was to keep moving. The constant movement of his characters was to be more memorable than their personalities. The rapidly flashing, image-crackling style of physical sensation he developed not only came out of the painful but exciting unsettlement of his early years; it became his way, in the early "Camera Eye" sections of *U.S.A.* that relate the author's personal experiences, of blurring everything he still needed to conceal. Dos Passos clearly felt himself to be a special case, thrown into a succession of contradictory situations and scenes, to which a highly stylized literary response was sufficient. Even the "Jeffersonian" tracts he wrote after his disillusionment with the Left, books that were politically simple-minded, were invigorated by the physical images that dizzyingly moved his style.

Dos Passos was a naturally impressionistic talent deeply influenced by painting and poetry; *U.S.A.* was to interpolate biographical

and historical pictures of American life in free verse. Dos Passos would always depend on some fast-running mixture of prose and verse to project the many "pictures" of travel he carried in his head. At Harvard, he offered his famous teacher of composition, Charles T. Copeland, an exercise called "Trains: Fragments of Mémoires" (collage and the use of French words were lifelong habits), in which he described endless travel as "the trembling joy that is akin to terror."

Dos Passos was later to write that his "continuously scuttling about the world was ridiculous—like a cockroach running away from the light." He had difficulty in talking to strangers but a gift for friendship with Europeans (and his literary peers in America) that somehow put him in the most eventful places at the most interesting times. The "cult of experience" so important to writers in America had no more anxious devotee than Dos Passos. Just out of Harvard in 1916, he roamed Spain, studying architecture. As a volunteer ambulance driver, he saw French soldiers drugged with *agnol*, a combination of rum and ether, go into the most terrible battles.

As a Red Cross driver in Italy, he met another driver, Ernest Hemingway, who during the Spanish civil war was to irritate Dos Passos into conservatism. Dos Passos was even in Russia just when certain days shook the world. He got into the army medical corps by persuading an examiner to let him memorize the eye chart, traveled back and forth between America and Europe during the most restrictive war conditions, got to the Near East with handy advice on where to go and whom to see from the famous explorer Gertrude Bell.

Dos Passos's career would have been nothing without what one of his last books called "Mr. Wilson's War." When Woodrow Wilson saved an exhausted England and France by taking America into the war, he certainly saved Dos Passos and his friends Cummings and Edmund Wilson from being safe and bored at home. Dos Passos, even in his last years among the Virginia gentry in Woodrow Wilson's native state, kept a grudge against the great war leader who separated America forever from its supposed age of innocence.

It was natural for Hemingway, Dos Passos, Cummings, and Wilson to deride the rhetoric with which the President of the United States told Congress that

it is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts . . . to make the world itself at last free.

But if "Professor Woodrow Wilson" (as Ivy League rebels regularly called him) had not thought and written in that imposing style, Hemingway and his friends would not have formed *their* style in opposition to such public rhetoric.

In "The Body of an American," a section of *1919* that sums up his

outrage at "Mr. Wilson's War" by constructing the life and death of the Unknown Soldier who was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Dos Passos concludes his description of the funeral rites by dryly adding, "Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies."

"Dos" was looking forward to a revolution in Europe. Although "the" revolution never came to Western Europe, the sense of new things opening up everywhere as "guys climbed out of their uniforms" helped to promote the irretrievable memory of the 1920s as a golden age for modern art, free expression, and American individualism. The century was new, Americans were still such a new factor in the world that they seemed new even to themselves. The buoyancy and openness of Americans (especially in Europe) had led the painter Georgia O'Keeffe to situate the new century perfectly as the time of "the great American thing."

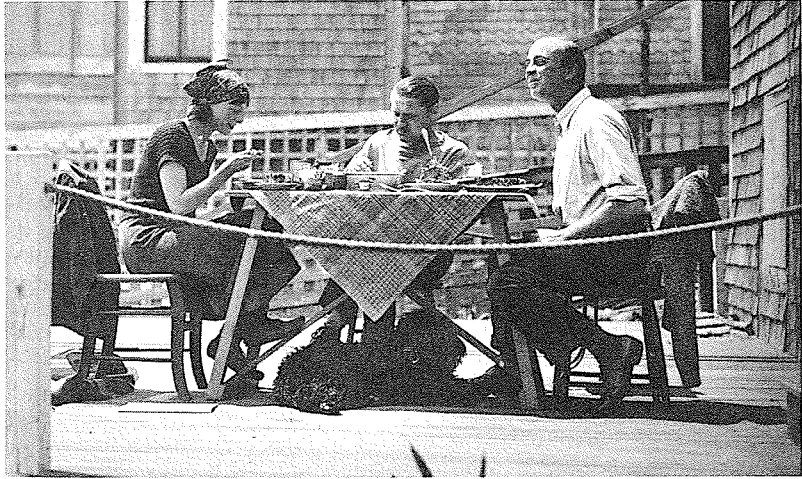
No Love for the Masses

There was a gaiety on the part of writers and intellectuals that every woebegone later generation reads about with envy. The young Edmund Wilson, meeting Dos Passos at the offices of *Vanity Fair*, turned a somersault as they were waiting for the elevator. Dos Passos plunged into Greenwich Village with a special excitement about New York's brilliance and turmoil that led to his first notable novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). He joined the radical playwright John Howard Lawson in the New Playwrights Group and somehow wrote *The 42nd Parallel* between travels to Latin America and repeated forays into France and Spain.

The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, the Great Crash, the powerful example of Edmund Wilson were radicalizing influences on Dos Passos. (Wilson was undergoing the trial by Marxism that resulted in *To the Finland Station* but that would not last out Stalin's bloody career.) Dos Passos was never a Marxist, was never so interested in Marxism as Wilson became in the 1930s; he was always more "agin the system" than *for* anything in particular except personal freedom and the "working-class stiffs" whom he tended to romanticize. He clearly put himself into the homeless boy Vag—like himself, forever on the road—who opens and closes the *U.S.A.* trilogy.

Dos Passos's scorn for the ruthless methods of American business, his growing regard for Jefferson and agrarian democracy, had less to do with political thinking than with his personal myths; he was always an upper-class man who had been deeply humiliated in childhood. Among the *typical* Americans with whom he peopled *U.S.A.*, he remained a loner, ruthlessly dramatizing a mass society that was without the slightest tinge of love.

Dos Passos's digs at the Communist faithful at the end of *The Big Money* show that he was fast losing whatever sympathies he may have felt for Communist friends such as John Howard Lawson. In the Spain of 1937, such sympathies were dashed forever by the secret murder of his friend José Robles, a Spaniard teaching at Johns Hopkins who had



A 1932 photograph of Dos Passos's wife, Katy, her brother Bill Smith, and Dos Passos lunching in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Katy was killed in a car accident in 1947.

gone home to serve in the Loyalist Ministry of War during the Spanish civil war. Like Dos Passos, Robles was averse to authoritarian methods; he was shot, apparently by Communist militia. Dos Passos suspected that Robles had protested political intervention by the Russians. Dos Passos was horrified by the conspiracy of silence surrounding Robles's fate; he came to hate the Communists everywhere and the nefarious statist philosophy he saw behind the New Deal.

Dos Passos soon turned sharp right and wrote tracts, novels, biographies in an increasingly somber attempt to offer for the political salvation of a mass society the example of Thomas Jefferson and the aristocratic republicanism of the 18th-century Virginia planters. His one lasting book, *U.S.A.*, continued to dazzle readers as *the* American experimental novel of the 1920s. Dos Passos's originality as a stylist, his ability to bring the whole new century into his trilogy, made it not at all ludicrous for Jean Paul Sartre, a demanding critic, to say in 1938: "Dos Passos has invented only one thing, an art of storytelling, and that is enough. I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time."

Whatever that meant in 1938—Hemingway in Toots Shors's talked about knocking Tolstoy out of the ring, but no one cared any longer about being "the greatest writer"—*U.S.A.* brilliantly succeeded as a novel because it reflected the inventiveness of the '20s and "the religion of the word." Dos Passos had written a "collective" novel about the "march of history" with mass society as his protagonist. But with his gift for putting on display all the social events and stylistic novelties of his time, he made his trilogy seem the work of many American minds.

In the gray and anxious 1930s, U.S.A. reflected the buoyant '20s as freshness and irreverence. It offered no bright hopes for the future, and the Communists were right to complain that it lacked a political direction—theirs. But like certain Elizabethan playwrights and Italian painters of the Renaissance, Dos Passos was less a great artist than one of several hinges operating the same great door. That door did open to “the great American thing.”

There would yet be an American literature and art equal to the promise of American life. Without Dos Passos's invention of his cinematic machine to record the momentum carrying an industrial mass society headlong into moral chaos, a good deal of our present sophistication in fiction, in the classy new journalism, even in the formal writing of American history, would not exist. Dos Passos was a writer whom other writers will always imitate without knowing it. He created a tight-lipped national style that was above all a way of capturing the million alternatives of experience in America.

History As Structure

The “big money” all around them certainly stimulated writers in the '20s. John O'Hara, who came in just at the end of his favorite decade and was never really a part of it—except in his envy—said that the development of the United States in the first half of the 20th century was the greatest possible subject for a novelist. Scott Fitzgerald, O'Hara's icon, was fascinated by the rich but thought them as tragic as everyone else in this society of excess. Dos Passos, though he was swept along by American history, thought that the function of art was to resist.

It is a fact that the secret strength of the 1920s was the reliance on American power as the greatest of social facts. There was a respect for status, an innate sense of social class, that would distinguish Dos Passos and friends from those writers after another war—Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Carson McCullers, Norman Mailer, Flannery O'Connor—who grew up in depression and war, who would never think the United States to be so unusual in history as Hemingway and friends used to think it was.

Writers emerging in the 1940s, too late to take in the legends of America's special destiny, were quickly persuaded that histories sooner or later become the same. And all history is essentially obscure and problematical, in some ways too “cunning” ever to be fully understood by the individual novelist, who can no longer feel that history is on his side—that *he* can depend on history to hold him up, to supply him effortlessly with material, to imbue him with the vitality that only confidence in one's subject can.

Dos Passos was still in the groove of Henry James's firm belief that “the novelist succeeds to the sacred office of the historian.” The old faith that History exists objectively, that it has an ascertainable order (if no longer a purpose), that it is what the novelist most depends on and appeals to, that History even supplies the *structure* of the novel—this is what distinguishes the extraordinary invention that is U.S.A.

from most novels published after 1940. And it is surely because History as order—to say nothing of History as something to “believe” in—comes so hard to later writers that Dos Passos sometimes resembles one of those early movie directors resurrected for his “technique” at the Museum of Modern Art.

Most oddly for someone with his “aesthetic” concerns, Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* was sympathetic to the long tradition of radical dissent in America. *The 42nd Parallel* opens on the story of Mac, a typically rootless wobbly and “working-class stiff” of the golden age of American socialism before 1917. *The Big Money* ends on the struggles of Mary French (and John Dos Passos) to save Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. To round out his trilogy when it was finally published in a single volume, Dos Passos added, as preface and epilogue, his sketches of the young man, hungry and alone, walking the highways.

A Cheer for the Wright Brothers

Vag, the American vagrant, expresses Dos Passos’s fascination with the alienated, the outsider, the beaten, the dissenter: the forgotten in American history (with whom he would finally include Thomas Jefferson). Mac, the American wobbly and drifter at the beginning of *U.S.A.*, is as much an expression of what has been sacrificed to American progress as Mary French, the middle-class Communist, is at the end of the last book. These solitaries, along with the young man endlessly walking America, frame this chronicle of disillusionment with the American promise. The loner in America, the homeless like himself when young, interested Dos Passos as examples (not as fully exposed, interesting individual souls) long before he became interested in the American as protester. And despite his revulsion from the radical-as-ideologist, the Communist-as-policeman (at the end of *The Big Money*, the lonely Mary French identifies with a Stalin orthodoxy to which she will fall victim), Dos Passos remained fascinated by the true dissenter, whether on the highway or, like Thomas Jefferson, alone in the White House.

Although Dos Passos’s sympathies, at least in *The 42nd Parallel*, were clearly with the radicals who were off the main track, he did not particularly like them. It was inventors such as the Wright brothers, scientists such as Charles Steinmetz, intellectuals of the highest creative ability such as Thorstein Veblen, politicians with rare moral courage such as Robert La Follette, who became the heroes of his “biographies” in *U.S.A.* And rousing as Dos Passos’s prose stanzas were in style, even these heroes remained *careers*.

There are no such heroes and heroines among the fictional characters of his novel; they are mediocre, futile, forgettable. The tonic edge of *U.S.A.*, its stylistic dash and irony, its gay inventiveness, finally reflect Dos Passos’s own practicality in getting down the sweep of national existence in our century. The people are just case histories—as more and more Americans are to themselves. But Dos Passos’s own sense of his art as something new is one of the great themes of the books—a tribute to the original structure of the novel.

THE CAMERA EYE (49)

Townsend Ludington, a Dos Passos biographer, described the function of the "Camera Eye" sections of U.S.A.: "by rendering impressionistic autobiography in the Camera Eye he would chart the growth of the narrator during the era chronicled. . . ." In number 49, the narrator reflects upon the meaning of Bartolomeo Vanzetti's prosecution.

walking from Plymouth to North Plymouth suddenly round a bend in the road beyond a little pond and yellowtwigged willows hazy with green you see the Cordage huge sheds and buildings companyhouses all the same size all grimed the same color a great square chimney long roofs sharp ranked squares and oblongs cutting off the sea the Plymouth Cordage this is where another immigrant worked hater of oppression who wanted a world unfenced when they fired him from the cordage he peddled fish the immigrants in the dark framehouses knew him bought his fish listened to his talk following his cart around from door to door you ask them What was he like? why are they scared to talk of Bart scared because they knew him scared eyes narrowing black with fright? a barber the man in the little grocery store the woman he boarded with in scared voices they ask Why won't they believe? We knew him We seen him every day Why won't they believe that day we buy the eels?

only the boy isn't scared

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

the boy walks shyly browneyed beside me to the station talks about how Bart helped him with his homework wants to get ahead why should it hurt him to have known Bart? wants to go to Boston University we shake hands don't let them scare you accustomed to smokingcar accustomed the jumble of faces rumble cozily homelike towards Boston through the gathering dark how can I make them feel how our fathers our uncles haters of oppression came to this coast how say Don't let them scare you how make them feel who are your oppressors America

rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges without the old words the immigrants haters of oppression brought to Plymouth how can you know who are your betrayers America

or that this fishpeddler you have in Charlestown Jail is one of your founders Massachusetts?

Reprinted with permission of Mrs. Elizabeth H. Dos Passos.

What Dos Passos created with *U.S.A.* was in fact another invention—another American *thing* peculiar to the openness and stress of American life, like the Wright brothers' airplane, Edison's phonograph, Luther Burbank's hybrids, Frank Lloyd Wright's first office buildings. All these fellow inventors are celebrated in *U.S.A.* We soon recognize that Dos Passos's contraption, his new kind of novel, is in fact (reminding us of Frank Lloyd Wright's self-dramatizing Guggenheim Museum) the greatest character in the book itself. We find that our primary pleasure in the book is in its scheme.

A real ingenuity went into *U.S.A.* Dos Passos invented a remarkable tool for evoking the simultaneous frames of existence. History in the most tangible sense—what happened—is obviously more important to Dos Passos than the people to whom things happened. The matter of the book is always the representative happening and person, the historical moment illustrated in its catchwords, its songs, its influences, above all in its speech. What Dos Passos wanted to capture above anything else was the echo of what people were saying, exactly in the style in which *anyone* might have said it. The artistic aim of his novel was to catch the litany, the tone, the issue of the time in the voice of the time, the banality, the cliché that finally becomes the voice of mass opinion.

On to Jefferson

The voice that might be *anyone's* voice reduces human uniqueness to the vibrating resemblances of history "in our time." All becomes newsreel. In the flush of Wilson's New Freedom in 1913, Jerry Burnham, the professional cynic, says to Janey Williams, "I think there's a chance we may get back to being a democracy." Mac and his comrades talk about "forming the structure of a new society within the shell of the old." Janey Williams's "Popper" grumbles, "I don't trust girls nowadays with these here ankle-length skirts and all that." Eveline Hutchins, who will find life just too dreary, thinks early in the book, "Maybe she'd been wrong from the start to want everything so justright and beautiful." Charley Anderson, leaving the sticks, thinks, "To hell with all that, I want to see some country."

1919, the second volume of the trilogy, is sharper than *The 42nd Parallel*. The obscenity of "Mr. Wilson's War" is its theme, and since the war is the most important political event of the century, Dos Passos rises to it with a brilliance that does not conceal his fury behind it. His contraption is running better with practice. Apart from the book's unforgettable ironic vibrations as a picture of waste, hypocrisy, debauchery, *1919* shows History as a bloody farce, now unspeakably *wrong*, a mockery of the hopes associated with the beginning of the century.

The fictional and historic characters come together on the same plane. One character is both "fictional" and "historic": the Unknown Soldier. He is fictional because no one knows who he is; yet he was an actual soldier, picked at random from so many other dead soldiers. The symbolic corpse has become for Dos Passos the representative American. His interment in Arlington National Cemetery Dos Passos blaz-

ingly records in "The Body of an American," the prose poem that ends *1919* and is the most brilliant single piece of writing in the trilogy:

they took it to Châlons-sur-Marne
 and laid it out neat in a pine coffin
 and took it home to God's Country in a battleship
 and buried it in a sarcophagus in the Memorial Amphitheater
 in the Arlington National Cemetery
 and draped the Old Glory over it
 and the bugler played taps

What above all else invests *1919* is the contrast of the official and popular idealism with the hysterical hedonism of young gentlemen in the ambulance service. The echoes of popular speech are now our last ties with the doomed. This monument to a generation sacrificed is built up out of those mythic quotations and slogans that make up the book in its shattering mimicry. "In Paris they were still haggling over the price of blood, squabbling over toy flags, the river-frontiers on relief maps"; "tarpaper barracks that stank of carbolic"; "did Meester Veelson know that in the peasants' wargrined houses along the Brenta and the Piave they were burning candles in front of his picture cut out of the illustrated papers?"

The Versailles peace conference is reduced to the style of Dos Passos's generation—"Three old men shuffling the pack, dealing out the cards."

Woodrow Wilson is caught forever when he says in Rome, "It is the greatest pride of Americans to have demonstrated the immense love of humanity which they hear in their hearts." Dos Passos's mimicry is brought to a final pitch of indignation in the person of the Unknown Soldier: "Say feller tell me how I can get back to my outfit."

He is anybody—and (as Dos Passos thought in 1932) everybody. In "The Body of an American" we can see that this is not so much a novel of a few lives as it is an epic of the mass society that has replaced "our storybook democracy." In other famous American books about democracy—*Representative Men*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*—the subject is that dearest of all American myths, the self-made man as hero. Dos Passos's subject is the degradation of democracy, the emergence of mass society, and the transformation of politics into sociology. His conviction is that the force of circumstances—call it the State, and "war is the health of the state"—is too strong for the average man, who may never rise above mass culture, mass superstition, mass slogans.

Completing his trilogy in 1936 with *The Big Money*, an account of the boom, Dos Passos portrayed a society gone mad with greed. The only fictional character in *The Big Money* who gets our respect is Mary French, the doctor's daughter and earnest social reformer who becomes a fanatical Communist in her rage over Sacco and Vanzetti. The emotions arising from the Sacco-Vanzetti case provide Dos Passos with his clearest and most powerful memories—"all right we are two nations." But Mary French is giving her life to the Communist Party. The only defense against the ravages of our century is personal integrity.

U.S.A. was distinguished by its clarity, its strong-mindedness, the bold and sharp relief into which it put all moral issues, all characterizations—all human destiny in America. There were no shadows in the book, no approximations (except of individual character), no fuzzy outlines. Everything was focused, set off from what was not itself, with that special clarity of presentation that Americans valued above all else in the arts of communication. Yet by the end of his book, Dos Passos had made it clear that, although the subject of his book was democracy itself, democracy had meaning for him only through the superior man, the intellectual-elect, the poet who can never value what the crowd does. The philosophy behind *U.S.A.* was finally at variance with its natural interest, its subject matter, its greatest strength—the people and the people's speech.

U.S.A. turned out to be a book at war with itself. Its America was finally all external. Not a single character Dos Passos imagined mattered to him in the slightest. When he was through with the radical mood, he was ready for no other American mind and hero but Thomas Jefferson. Mass society now equaled America—and modern America was Dos Passos's adversary. What was begun with the high spirits of "Mr. Wilson's War" was concluded with the energy of disenchantment. Dos Passos wrote like a stranger in his own country.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers may wish to consult two recent biographies, John Dos Passos: *A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, by Townsend Ludington (Dutton, 1980), and *Dos Passos: A Life*, by Virginia Spencer Carr (Doubleday, 1984).