



SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE NOVELS OF DOS PASSOS

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Abstract:

Dos Passos wrote more than forty books during his lifetime, including poetry, plays, travel books, political tracts, histories, and biographies. He is better known, though, for his novels, and best of all for the documentary style fiction he wrote during the twenties and thirties. He is the best known for, and to those others which are representative of a period in his career or of a change in political or stylistic direction. Though it is certainly true that no American writer has been more subjected to political judgment than Dos Passos, has the history of the critical response shows that what made him the most promising American writer of the thirties and a much less respected writer. Later on, he had as much to do with his art as with his politics, if indeed the two can be separated. A critical reception never stops developing, and neither does historical consciousness ever fully reveal itself in openly stated principles or propositions.

Key Words: Dos Passos, Social, Political & Perspectives.

Social, Political and Historical Perspectives in the Novels of Dos Passos:

Dos Passos was a prolific writer. He produced impressionistic novels that bitterly attacked. He saw as the hypocrisy and materialism of the United States between the two World Wars. All the novels are landmarks in the nation's literary history. Dos Passos his political perspectives, the reader can get from his works a remarkably broad chronicle of the twentieth century United States.

Dos Passos has exhibited his personal outlook upon the world, furnishing us the context in which to consider his dramatic representations of life. Dos Passos characters are again representations of several American social orders and themes of the novel are typical of his work: alienation, loneliness, frustration, and loss of individuality. Dos Passos presents a fiercely critical and pessimistic portrait of American society during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is a monumental socialist text. Dos Passos was not a Marxist. Henrik Ibsen once complained that his play *A Doll's House* was not, as so many believed, a feminist play but a "humanist" one. The same logic might be applied to Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* and his early social philosophy in general. Jean-Paul Sartre once called Dos Passos "the best novelist of our time." The critical reputation Dos Passos achieved in the twenties and thirties still acts as a buffer against some of the stinging criticism he has lately received. Alfred Kazin wrote that Dos Passos's triumph of style, as *U.S.A.* trilogy, provided "a machine prose for a machine world." Society appeared as its hero, and the work became an epic, "a study in the history of modern society, of its social struggles and great masses, but it is a history of defeat."

Manhattan Transfer, a panoramic view of life in New York City between 1890 and 1925. Dos Passos shifts his attention from war to the city New York looms over the characters with a dynamic and terrifying materiality. Dos Passos employs a cubist technique fusing bits of dialogue, action, newspaper clippings, signs and fragmented glimpses of the scenes of city life. It is a careful focus on the irrationality and dehumanization involved in pursuing the American dream of success. *Manhattan Transfer* represents Dos Passos's innovative application to literature of the artistic theories and techniques that emerged during the decades before and after the turn of the century.

This chronicle of the city incorporates impressionism, expressionism, montage, simultaneity, reportage, and other techniques. The dehumanizing nature of the city is revealed through the hollowness of its victims. *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.

Three soldiers was widely praised for realistic exposure of army life or condemned as a desecration of the recent American war effort. Dos Passos portrays the disillusionment and dehumanization resulting from the war. *Three soldiers* was the first of the significant novels to come from an American writer's experiences during World War I. Dos Passos's reputation really was established with his novel of post-war disillusion. It describes the ordinary soldier trapped in the army machine, one of the instruments of the state grown healthy in war. We find the theme of bigness, bigness in which the individual is lost, developed as a cause of disillusion.

Still, the novel strongly expresses Dos Passos's hatred of the army, for the self-enclosed aspects of Andrews's rebellion do not undo the novels indictment of the military machine he opposes and, by implication, its indictment of all repressive institutions. *Three Soldiers* were the first important American novel, and one of

the first in any languages, to treat the war in the tone of realism and disillusion. It made a deep impression, and may be countered the beginning of strictly contemporary fiction in the United States.

The trilogy stands as his most forceful presentation of his central concerns: the failure of the American dream, the exploitation of the working class, the loss of individual freedom and America's emphasis on materialism. In all his works the institution or the aggregation is the enemy, bigness is evil, and the destruction or erosion of individual integrity and dignity is tragic, and not less, because this is seen to be the fate of everyman in a modern urban industrial society. Dos Passos acknowledges the nature of that audience and its discourse despite his outright hostility to what he saw as effeminate literary snobs. Given the cultural and historical makeup of his era, his efforts to become the man of the switchboard of American society could have no other issue.

The trilogy depicts the growth of American materialism from the 1890s to the Great Depression of the early 1930s. The last novel of the trilogy is certainly the most pessimistic in its portrayal of Americans caught in the cash nexus. The Camera Eye sections make the transition from the 1920 to the 1930. It is emphasizing the bankruptcy of capitalism and the onset of the depression. *U.S.A.* and Dos Passos's early novels branded him as a leftist. His concern was less with ideology than with the individual and the forces that hampered the development of individuality.

The trilogy is set in pre World War I America and explores the first stirrings of the social discontent which arose in the Midwest and eventually spread to all parts of the United States. The three volumes of *U.S.A.* are Dos Passos's attempt to employ his techniques of art to chronicle American civilization from 1900 to the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929. The trilogy is the panorama of the nation's life from his political perspective. It is deeply satiric about business and the materialistic society it had created.

The panoramic background is the "Newsreel" the selection from contemporary headlines, advertisements, popular songs, and newspaper articles. Among the narrative episodes are also interspersed brief biographies of prominent Americans of the period, whose lives form a counterpart, often ironic, of the lesser figures of the fiction. A third device is "The Camera Eye," presenting the author's point of view toward the subject matter, through impressionistic stream of consciousness passages. The wide panorama of American life is interpreted of being marked by corruption, futility, frustration, and defeat. The hidden art of *U.S.A.* thus lies not only in Dos Passos's ability to craft theme out of immediate juxtapositions but in his comparable ability to extend and deepen these themes in the course of a work that appears to be merely rendering the flux and diversity of American life.

Dos Passos has thus portrayed the beginning of the new century as in truth on ending. A native tradition of open and courageous struggle for freedom of belief and action is under attack, usually successful attack, by middle class American society. America's joining in the war to protect the ideals of American democracy disguises the self interest of those enthusiastically supporting the venture and also is a basis for the suppression of the expression of American ideals. The various departures for France are thus not true beginnings but rather confirm the major failings of American life that the novel as a whole has depicted.

They can also serve as a powerful weapon of the satiric ironist who is armed with a compelling vision of an America in which the old words are used truthfully to help create the fulfillment of the American dream of freedom and opportunity for all Americans. *U.S.A.* has its origin both in the single minded intensity of Dos Passos's vision of American life as a whole and in his ability to engage us.

Dos Passos has chronicled the social, political and economic history of this nation from the turn of the century to the present day. Dos Passos was looking back from the defeats of the twenties, to chart the falling line of those hopes, and the mood of his books, bitter, pessimistic, and disillusioned. It was to set the tone for much of the fiction of the thirties. Dos Passos was to believe that the moral state of the middle class was most unhappy. But he was too perceptive to neglect examination of radical as well as conservative society and private as well as public life.

U.S.A. offers, in addition to much vivid history, a provocative moral vision. It portrays, among other human experiences, the evil of abusing men for private or political ends, the vanity of separating, art or meaningful life from the needs of fellow men, and the costs and consolations of individual integrity. Probably this fiction deserves our attention, in any case, for the novel which deals with topical political matters has not had an illustrious history in the United States. Dos Passos is not simply an authentic member of the lost generation but a writer who has been as eloquent as any in our time in expressing what it means to lose and be lost.

The characteristics attributed to American idealism when it breaks away from its scientific discipline and control of unfocused idealism and uncontrolled protest become increasingly evident in the notions. That virtue is in the people, waste is the natural expression of the exploiters, and wealth is in a long term conspiracy to disruption labor and destroys our resources. It is perhaps not extravagant to identify the perfectly expressive form of this work with the final division of the great stream of American idealism.

The focus of the novel falls upon the histories of noted personalities and traits of characters except the Camera Eye and the Newsreel sections. Camera Eye sections are none other than the life history of Dos Passos's

life till his thirties. Newsreel sections are jumbles of newspaper items and headlines quotations from popular songs and other brief of the period all set down upon the page in the same kind of confusion in which they existed in contemporary minds. Biographies are, twenty five sketches of persons prominent in the American life of the time ranging all the way from Wilson to Valentino. These are influenced by the pattern of the struggle, labour leaders, politicians, artists, journalists, scientists and business leaders. The fictional characters represent average men and women molded by the complex forces about them.

The trilogy *U.S.A.* comes close to being the great American novel which had been the aspiration of writers since the turn of the century. It is one of the ironies of our times that when the great American novel did arrive, it turned out to be condemnatory and pessimistic rather than a celebration of the American way. Yet there is an underlying affirmation in Dos Passos's denial. The American dream, battered and corrupted by men of ill will, still manifests itself. Though in anguish not completely stifled by the trappings of empire and the machinations of self-interest that the author describes.

Most important, it brings down the curtain on Dos Passos's remarkable effort throughout his literary career to convey the panorama of twentieth-century society. His later novels are partly right wing polemics, but anyone wanting to dismiss Dos Passos should remember that he was not a crank, but an intelligent, thoughtful man of letters who agonized about his politics.

U.S.A. seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest. The history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules. The author has adapted the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society.

U.S.A. is a kind of cubistic portrait of America, one in which the effect is of a multiplicity of visions rendering a single object. The every angle of vision related both to the object and to every other angle of vision. It is Dos Passos's relentless pursuit of juxtaposition relationships in the seemingly disparate and fractured modal ordering of the trilogy. That is largely responsible for the integral vision of American life in *U.S.A.* There were two particular predilections of John Dos Passos that helped to direct his thought and to determine the way he would synthesize his experience. He was from an early age a nonstop traveler and was avid to report what he saw. Also controlling his observation of social structures and events was a political-philosophical bias that may most simply be identified.

Dos Passos's nature and the conditions of his personal life alone could have been responsible for his artistic temperament. He was certainly subject to the external forces which affected so many of his generation. Those influences emphasized in two ways the relation between his social needs and his need for form. The want of harmony in the lives of others became a part of his life. A satisfactory order for him became dependent on a larger, social order. Also, the external forces of his time created a community of men similarly engaged in the pursuit of form, so that an artistic career became in a limited way a step away from loneliness.

Conclusion:

Dos Passos's writings most often referred to actual people and events with so many varieties of American experience that they constituted when taken together, a comprehensive records of life in America since 1900. He wanted specifically to express the pain of the sensibility as it encountered that reality in the world of social relations, human actions and actual institutions. As a social writer, he wanted to depict his relation to any actual social group and to characterize the human activity which had been an adversary one.

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