THE LOSS OF INDIVIDUALISM

If it were only that *Three Soldiers* is the first complete and competent novel of the American Army, it would deserve great praise, but it is more than that, for in Dos Passos’s hands, the Army becomes a symbol of all the systems by which men attempt to crush their fellows and add to the already unbearable agony of life. Here is more than an honest record of young men’s lives: here are the tears of things, the shadows of the old, strong, unpitying gods lying across the paths of men, anger, hate, lust are here and laughter and manly love of comrades, and at the end, resignation and despair, the return of a bloody and hateful thing done in an autumn wood, the beautiful proud gesture of a man going down in defeat before life.

The men depicted in *Three Soldiers* got out of the war what they brought to it, low ideals and bitterness. They would have got the same out of life if there had been no war. They were spineless, self-centered weaklings, with a perpetual chip on their shoulders, deserters in spirit from whatever duty beckoned. In the battle of ordinary civilian life their record would have been equally disastrous. They knew nothing about playing the game. They were born trouble-makers, who would always have refused to pull their weight and would always have recognized in a superior a tyrant.

The novel fails because of its unmanly intemperance both in language and in plot. The voice of righteousness is never once sounded; the only voice heard is the voice of complaint and petty recrimination. There are scenes which are tragic and powerful as a storm, but the intention of all this wealth of energy is dismal vituperation in the novel. If the purpose of Dos Passos in writing *Three Soldiers* was
to expose what he considered to be a nation-wide injustice, he seems to this reviewer
to have achieved a nation-wide insult.

The America of Dos Passos

Socially it is extremely difficult to determine. It cannot be determined, for
instance, by asking individuals to what class they belong, nor is it easy to convince
them that they belong to one class or another. One may, to be sure, demonstrate the
idea of class at income-extremes or function-extremes, but when one can leave these
one must fall back upon the criterion of “interest.” Even the criterion of action will
not determine completely the class to which people belong. Then, it is a useful but
often undetermined category of political and social thought.

The political leader and the political theorist will make use of it in ways
different from those of the novelist. For the former the important thing is people’s
perception that they are of one class or another and their resultant action. For the
later the interesting and suggestive things are likely to be the moral paradoxes that
result from the conflict between real and apparent interest. And the “midway people”
(Trilling 30) of Dos Passos represent this moral-paradoxical aspect of class. They are
a great fact in American life. It is they who show the symptoms of cultural change.
Their movement from social group to social group from class to class, if you will
make for the uncertainty of their moral codes, their confusion and indecision. Almost
more than the people of fixed class, they are at the mercy of the social stream
because their interests cannot be clear to them and give them direction.

Perhaps, this is another way of saying that Dos Passos is primarily concerned
with morality, with personal morality. The national, collective, social elements of his
trilogy should be seen not as a bid for completeness but rather as a great setting, brilliantly delineated, for his moral interest. In his novels, as in actual life, “conditions” (32) supply the opportunity for personal moral action. But if he is a social historian, as he is so frequently said to be, he is that in order to be more complete moralist. It is of the greatest significance that for him the barometer of social breakdown is not suffering through economic deprivation but always moral degeneration through moral choice.

**Politics and *U.S.A***

It is due to Dos Passos’s novelistic skills that within the satiric form he was able to make his characters have a roundedness and complexity in a word, lifelikeness. Their fullness resulted from his ambivalence about political system when he was writing the three volumes of *U.S.A.* in particular *The Big Money*. If the truth of life is its complexity, its paradoxes, and its grays, rather than blacks or whites, then an author must render that complexity in order for his figures to be judged as characters, not caricatures, and his world as more than a hyperbolic vision.

*U.S.A.* is a satire, transcends that genre. Despair is everywhere apparent particularly in *The Big Money*, where only the narrative figures Margo Dowling and Eleanor Stoddard end well, on pain of having sacrificed human warmth to survive. J. Ward Moorehouse, if anyone the central figure of the trilogy, suffers a heart attack after collaborating with his protégé, Richard Ellsworth Savage to bribe a United States Senator to protect an important advertising account. Savage, a key figure in *1919*, at the end of *The Big Money* is about to head Moorehouse’s firm. He celebrates too much, gets drunk, and ends the night being knocked unconscious and
robbed by two male prostitutes, who fears will blackmail him. Charley Anderson, the central figure of *The Big Money*, has died after failing to beat a train through a railroad crossing. Eveline Hutchins Johnson has committed suicide, while Mary French and Ben Compton, dedicated radicals who try to be loyal to the communists, have been manipulated and become disillusioned. Mary French remains working for the party as the narrative about her concludes. Ben Compton has been expelled.

Despite the grimness of such conclusions and of the “power superpower” (Ludington, *Twentieth 356*) symbolized by the escapades of the financier Samuel Insull, which Dos Passos decried in the final sketch of an actual American personality, there is a measure of hope at the end because the autobiographical figure of the author in the Camera Eye has gained a sense of identity. Throughout *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919* he had been moving slowly beyond his own private world of childhood, adolescence and young manhood. In *The Big Money* he struggles further for a personal identity, a struggle which gives vitality and depth to the Camera Eyes and translates into ambivalence toward life expressed in the other part of the novel.

In Camera Eye-46 the narrator tells of walking the streets, searching “for a set of figures a formula of action an address you don’t quite know” (Ludington 456), as he tries “to do to make there are more lives than walking desperate the streets hurry underdog to make” (456). The next word in the stream of consciousness passage is “money.” He begins to understand the forces at work in a capitalist society, but still he cannot be satisfied that he has found the necessary answers. Financiers are the oppressors and yet, he reminds himself, the radicals, while being right, “are in their private lives such shits” (456).
Dos Passos’s Mass Culture in *U.S.A*

Melvin Landsberg provides an exactly analogous situation from a wholly different perspective. For Landsberg, the Newsreel sections are “excellent satire” (Strychacz 134). Usually, he continues, “Dos Passos permits society, with its perverse values and practices, to condemn itself” (134). Foley associates this fragment with Dos Passos’s vision of “historical doom.” Because Landsberg offers no context or interpretation, however one has no way of establishing whether he perceives the same irony. This should be a moot point if Landsberg is correct in asserting that Dos Passos’s satire should be self-evident.

Dos Passos counts on two major factors. First he argues, because professionals are not directly involved in the regulation of capital, they play a relatively neutral role in the class war. Second, they play a vital and irreplaceable role in the functioning of a complex, technological society; they are perfectly placed to direct the fashioning of ideas and opinion in that war. Professionals then are to be both in and out of the game; they are in possession of a symbolic capital that should not be confused with finance capitalism and thus somehow suited to direct a society that is organized and dominated by the formalities of capital. There seems a grave split in Dos Passos’s theory of social change in so far as the very neutrality that he makes professionals so useful a counter in the class war would have to be sacrificed in order to grasp an active role in leadership.

The Structure of the *Three Soldiers*

Fuselli is the first of a series of characters created by Dos Passos. He tries to live with or to join the “machine” (Brantley, *Fiction* 24) and who are nevertheless
destroyed. Such characters are ingratiating but like able and are eager to gain advancement and security. The broad outlines of Fuselli’s character are sketched by Dos Passos in the following passage:

Fuselli wrapped the blanket round his head and prepared to sleep. Snuggled down into the blankets on the narrow cot, he felt sheltered from the Sergeant’s thundering voice and from the cold glare of officer’s eyes. He felt cozy and happy like he had felt in bed at home, when he had been a little kid.

. . . He must remember to smile at the Sergeant when he passed him off duty. Somebody had said there had be promotions soon. Oh he wanted so hard to be promoted . . . He must be careful not to do anything that would get him in wrong with anybody. He must never miss an opportunity to show them. When we are ordered overseas, I’ll show them he thought ardently, and picturing to himself long movie reels of heroism he went off to sleep. (TS 11)

The same image of Fuselli is shown over and over again. For example, when he sees the non-commissioned officers eating better food than the other enlisted men, he reacts in the same way:

“I got to get busy”, he said to himself earnestly. Overseas, under fire, he’d have a chance to show what he was worth; and he pictured himself heroically carrying a wounded captain back to a dressing tent, pursued by fierce whiskered men with spiked helmets like firemen’s helmets. (38)

However, the possibilities for glorious heroism begin to take on a fearful aspect for Fuselli. He sees a man who has returned from the front suffering from an emotional breakdown, and he feels terror for the first time because the man doesn’t match his Hollywood inspired picture of the “jolly soldiers in khaki marching into
towns, pursuing terrified Huns across potato fields, saving Belgian milk-maids against picturesque backgrounds” (38). Fuselli’s fear is multiplied when the combat veteran remarks that medical corpsmen “didn’t last long at the Chateau.”

Fuselli’s first real temptation to rebellion against the machine comes when he is assigned to be an orderly one day for an officer. He rebels at the thought of doing “servants” work and being “slavery” for an officer, yet when he notices that the corporal looks sick, he doesn’t say anything. The climax of his narrative occurs when he goes to the place where he regularly meets his girl only to find the Sergeant there ahead of him. It is the kind of situation into which Dos Passos frequently thrusts his characters. Fuselli must choose between standing up for his rights against the representative of the “machine” and submitting to the dictates of the machine in hopes of receiving a reward. In either case, the man faced with such a choice is, in the mind of Dos Passos, doomed. It is a matter of choosing how one will be defeated. Fuselli’s defeat is recorded as follows: “Fuselli stood still which fists clenched. The blood flamed through his head making his scalp tingle. Still the top Sergeant was the top Sergeant, come the thought. It would never do to get in wrong with him” (TS 114-115).

For the sake of security and the hope of a permanent corporalcy, Fuselli gives up the girl he wants to marry, thus becoming a victim of the destructive effects of the “machine.” The first person he meets when he returns to the barracks that night is the corporal who has returned from the Hospital and Fuselli knows that even his temporary promotion will be taken away from him.

When his company is ordered to the front, Fuselli, after all of his daydreams of heroism, secretly applies for a transfer; so that he won’t have to go, telling himself
the while that now he has a job “where he would show what he was good for” (Blum 606). Dos Passos then weaves in a sharp note of contrast by having Andrews and Chrisfield, on their way to the front, pass through the town where he is stationed. Soon after this episode, the main portion of Fuselli’s denouement is completed. A man in his company refuses to obey the orders of an officer and dies of a heart attack in the barracks. Fuselli betrays the extent of his own defeat as he walks away muttering, “he is crazy.”

Scattered through the section of the story which is seen through Chrisfield which has numerous remarks, usually made by him, kept to the fore the general theme of the novel. Typical of these remarks is the one Chrisfield makes while he is on the train headed for the front. “Hell: They keep you in this god-dam car likeyou was a convict . . .” (135). And on another occasion, he expresses his attitude toward the infantry: “This ain’t no sort o’ life for a man to be treated lahk he was a nigger.” But these comments merely form a backdrop of resentment against which the highly localized hatred of Chrisfield is etched. Chrisfield brings to the conflict his tragic flaw of “a bit of the devil,” and when resentment of the “machine” boils up within him, he directs, it as unreasoning hatred against one unoffending man. The first important event is related by Chrisfield, who tells Andrews that he threatened Anderson with a knife because “He seems to think that just because ah’m littler than him he can do anything he likes with me” (24). On another occasion,

Chrisfield felt powerless as on ox under the yoke. All he could do was work and strain and stand at attention, while that white-faced Anderson could lounge about as if he owned the earth and laugh importantly like that . . . He
looked peaceful, almost happy. Chrisfield clenched his fists and felt the hatred of the other man rising stingingly within him. (166)

The higher the rank of Anderson and the longer Chrisfield is in the army, the greater grows Chrisfield’s resentment and the more sharply it is directed against Anderson. The unreasoning quality of Chrisfield’s behavior is brought out in the scene where Anderson, now a Sergeant, finds Chrisfield in the barracks during duty hours. He sullenly explains that he is “barracks guard” (Brantley 27).

Anderson is innocent of any offense, but as representative of the “machine,” he has unwittingly become the focal point for all of Chrisfield’s frustrations. The one-sided conflict, then, rises swiftly through Chrisfield’s first plan to kill Anderson, to the actual murder which, for Chrisfield, he is the climax of his army career. Although he is promoted to corporal and plans to remain in the army indefinitely, his sense of security and well-being is of short duration, and he finally deserts because he feels sure that a Sergeant in the company knows he has killed Anderson.

Chrisfield, like Fuselli is highly reminiscent of a whole series of characters scattered through the novels of Dos Passos. The man is basically a victim of his own nature and of the “machine” of which he is a part. Chrisfield, like the others of his stamp in later novels they are often members of the Industrial Workers of the World he is a “direct actionist” who is destroyed because he attempts to fight the “machine” or its representative.

John Andrews is a character of a type frequently found in Dos Passos’s novels, fortunately, the character is generally more convincing in the later novels. This type often appears as the intellectual on the scene capable of interpreting the events that take place during the course of the narrative. In his capacity as
interpreter, Andrews, although he is not with Fuselli and cannot interpret for him, and although he simply does not understand the behavior of Chrisfield, nevertheless gives the most clear-cut expression of the central theme of the novel. In the section called “Making the Mold.” Dos Passos reveals Andrews first response to the army’s demand for conformity and uniformity. Shortly after he enlists, he is washing windows and a rhythm comes to him whom he promptly labels “Arbeit and Rhythmus”:

He tried to drive the phrase out of his mind, to bury his mind in the music of the rhythm that had come to him, that expressed the dusty boredom, the harsh constriction of warm bodies full of gestures and attitudes and aspirations into moulds, like the moulds toy soldiers are cast in. (18)

The “slavery” inherent in army discipline comes harder to Andrews than to other men, and he decides that it is because they are from the lower half of the social “pyramid” and know nothing of the “glittering other world” in which he has always lived.

They were all so alike; 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 . . . 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. He was still tingling with sudden anger from the officer’s voice that morning: Sergeant, who is this man? The officer had starred in his face as a man might stare at a piece of furniture. (22)
When he is wounded, Andrews’s hopes he may be discharged from the army, he remembers his life as it was “before he had become a slave among slaves,” and he thinks of him and the other wounded men as “discharged automatons broken toys laid away in rows” (Brantley 29). But while he has felt resentment and humiliation from the “slavery” he so detests, Andrews has not yet begun his conflict with the vast “machine” of which he is a part and to which he has come with a feeling of depression because of his disgust with a world in which such a war could happen. The emotional basis for the conflict is established in an interior monologue which closely resembles Martin Howe’s long speech to the French radicals:

The phrase came to Andrews mind amid an avalanche of popular tunes, of vision of patriotic numbers on the vaudeville stage. He remembered the great flags waving triumphantly over Fifth Avenue, and the crowd dutifully cheering . . . he had not been driven into the army by the force of public opinion, he had not been carried away by any wave of blind confidence in the phrases of bought propagandists. He had not had the strength to live. The thought came to him of all those who, down the long tragedy of history, had given themselves smilingly for the integrity of their thoughts. He had not the courage to move a muscle for his freedom, but he had been fairly cheerful about risking his life as a soldier, in a cause he believed useless. (221)

Andrews reaches the state of mind and emotion which, under the proper circumstances, will result in his desertion, and when he does decide to desert, he thinks of the act in terms of joining the “defeated ones” who stood for the integrity of the individual. Most of the remaining rising action of his story deals with the intensification of his feeling and the gradual arrangement of circumstances which
cause him to desert. The emotional intensification continues as he thinks, “What was the good of stopping the war if the armies continued?” His humiliation is continued in such incidents as the following: “A narrow board walk led from the main road to the door. In the middle of this walk Andrews meta captain and automatically got off into the mud and saluted” (270).

Eventually the real indignities have raised his feelings to the pitch that even the most ordinary events produce an emotional outburst in him. For example, in order to get transferred to the school Detachment at the University of Paris. Andrews has to cajole, flatter, and intrigue to get his name added to the list. No one offers him a special affront, but because he has to so lower himself, he reacts violently:

The fury of his humiliation made tears start in his eyes. He walked away from the village down the main road, splashing carelessly through the puddles, slipping in the wet clay of ditches. Something within him, like the voice of a wounded man swearing, was whining in his head long strings of filthy names. (284)

When a Member of Parliament tells him to button his coat and then won’t allow him to loiter in front of a government office, there is a similar reaction: “Andrew flushed and walked away without turning his head. He was stinging with humiliation. An angry voice inside him kept telling him that he was a coward, that he should make some futile gesture of protest . . .” (370).

It is noteworthy that Andrews assumes that any gesture he might make is doomed to be futile, his ultimate destruction, then, is to some extent self-sought. There is irony in that this emotionally wrought young man who elects to rebel against the strictures of the “machine,” has an assignment which provides the greatest
opportunity for personal liberty consistent with being in the army. He does not live in a barracks on an army post, he has a privately rented room in Paris, instead of military duties, he attends classes at the University. It is from this enviable assignment that he goes leaving his dog-tags, the symbols of “slavery” in his room.

Andrews is apprehended, he is sent to a labour battalion without benefit of trial or investigation. This treatment is the ultimate cruelty that the army can impose on him, and it provides the proper circumstances for desertion, but Andrews remains strangely docile. Indeed, his desertion is barely a matter of volition: he merely accompanies another man who deserts, and thus he still has not made a conscious choice between serving the machine and making his “gesture.”

It is for the anticlimactic purpose of his making the conscious choice that Dos Passos takes Andrews back to Paris where he learns that he could easily slip back into his detachment because he has not been reported absent. His friends plead with him, but Andrews refuses to go back, deliberately choosing desertion. The self-destruction implicit in his choice is made clear when, instead of using the money given to him by his friends to get across the border into a neutral or unoccupied country, Andrews goes to see Genevieve Rod for whom he has never demonstrated a consuming passion.

Andrews’s personal relation to his act of desertion is symbolized, perhaps too obviously, in his registering with his landlady as John Brown, in memory of the would-be liberator of slaves and writing his army serial number for the passport number. The symbolism is reinforced by his stopping work on the symphony, “Queen of Sheba,” and going back to the theme he had called “Arbeit and Rhythmus” but which he now calls the “The Body and soul of John Brown.”
Genevieve Rod, he has the wild desire to jump up and shout, “Look at me; I’m a deserter. I’m under the wheels of your system. If your system doesn’t succeed in killing me, it will be that much weaker; it will have less strength to kill others” (455).

This passage serves both as exposition of Andrew’s feelings toward the society from which he is now cut off.

Genevieve Rod, who is sympathetic toward Andrews as an artist and who represents the attitude of society toward him, cannot understand his desertion. The last time she sees him, she indicates that she has already dismissed him from the world of the living. She says, “. . . oh, this is so frightful. You would have been a great composer. It feels sure of it.” After this, the only thing left is for the Member of Parliament’s to come to get him, leaving “The Body and Soul of John Brown” to be scattered by the wind.

The motif suggested by the music Andrews is writing about the “Queen of Sheba” as she is pictured in Flaubert’s La Tentation de Saint Antoine is symbolic of several passions that counterpoint the restrictions imposed by the “machine.” Thus, the “Queen of Sheba” represents not merely the freedom of the artist, but also an unrestricted, Byronic romanticism that includes everything from personal liberty to pure sex:

The “Queen of Sheba” grotesque as a satyr, white flaming with worlds of desire, as the great implacable Aphrodite, stood with her hand on his shoulder sending shivers of warm sweetness rippling through his body, while her voice intoned in his ears all the inexhaustible voluptuousness of life. (TS 240)
Contrasting with the recurring image of the “Queen of Sheba” is a phrase which to Andrews represents all that is cruel and brutal in the army. The first time he is apprehended by Member of Parliament’s, an officer says “One of you men teaches him to salute” (240) and a Member of Parliament beats him unmercifully. These two images evoke emotions and responses from Andrews that are the expression of the two conflicting forces in his life.

Similarly another recurring theme in Three Soldiers is developed through the ‘Y’ man, who contrary to what they affirm, invariably hates mongers of the first order. Dos Passos uses them as an example of the contrast between ideal and application, in which an institution works against the very principles on which it is founded. In the debates between Andrews and the ‘Y’ man, he invariably makes them reveal their bigotry and stupidity. They are, in fact, so generally despicable that one suspects the author’s objectivity.

The first appearance of the theme is a ‘Y’ man telling a group of singing soldiers to put “lots more guts in the get and lots of kill in the Kaiser” (TS p.22). Beginning with this repelling introduction the theme culminates in the visit of ‘Y’ man, obviously a minister, to Andrews in the hospital. The ‘Y’ man begins a discussion of which the burden is hate for Germans. When Andrews interrupts him to suggest that if he hates the Germans so much, he should borrow a revolver from an officer and kill some prisoners of war who work around the hospital, the man indignantly replies that Andrews can’t be much of a Christian. Andrews sarcastically answers, “I make no pretensions to Christianity” (224).

The only other significant theme in the novel is of revolution, of which Dos Passos has said,
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… in every direction the countries of the world stretched out starving and angry, ready for anything turbulent and new. It wasn’t that today was any finer than it is now, it’s perhaps that tomorrow seemed vaster . . . (v)

It has also been pointed out that Dos Passos was already becoming attracted to revolutionary doctrine when he wrote *Three Soldiers* and that he was writing it while traveling in the Spain of Pio Baroja, of whom he had written a glowing account as a “novelist of the revolution” (Rideout 157) in *Rosinante to the Road Again*. It is doubtful, however that temporary environment could make so much difference, at best the evidence is purely circumstantial.

In the first part of the novel, the revolutionary theme is carried by Eisenstein, a man in Fusellis’s company who has long, dreary conversations with a French revolutionist. Fuselli is sometimes drawn into their conversations to show, by his ardent conformity to the system as it is the hopelessness of their dreams. The theme is picked up again after Andrews has deserted. He then becomes the spokesman for the revolution, but even at the last, revolution is presented merely as an indefinite hope.

The improvement of Dos Passos’s skills as a novelist in *Three Soldiers* has already been largely demonstrated in his greater attention to structure and continuity of his narrative, realistic conservations, use of symbols, more definite presentation of themes, and his use of irony and contrast. Another area where Dos Passos reveals marked improvement is in the skill of rendering emotions, although he does a better job with Chrisfield than with the more articulate Andrews. For example, when the
regiment has been marching all day, Chrisfield has a sprained ankle, and his woolen tunic is too hot and too light.

Another device which is more frequently used in some of the later novels is the telescoped dream in which Dos Passos gathers the basic conflicts within the individual, his emotional responses, and the trivial incidents of daily life into a nightmare. Dos Passos’s use of imagery also shows improvement in this novel. The images, usually involving or ending with a smile, show an increasing attention to mass and colour. In the following image, he blocks out the large masses of form and color and then adds the details:

At the head of an alley he came out on a terrace. Beyond the strong curves of the pattern of the iron balustrade was an expanse of country, pale green, falling to blue towards the horizon, patched with pink and slate colored houses and carved with railway tracks. At his feet the Seine shone like a curved sword blade. (TS 373)

Another type of image which Dos Passos develops in this novel is the sudden “still” image which momentarily freezes men in motion.

When he finished Three Soldiers, Dos Passos had already found some of his major themes, he had begun his experiments with structure, and he was thoroughly familiar with most of the narrative skills that he would continue to employ with increasing dexterity. There remained only one false start in Streets of Night. As he shifted from the backdrop of the army and war to that of metropolitan city life before he would write his first significant novel, Manhattan Transfer.

In The 42nd Parallel, one can see him as a child in Virginia, traveling in Europe, at school in England, his “four years under the ether cone” (Beach, American
61) at Harvard. His presence at protest meetings and cafes is in New York on the night of our entrance into the war. In 1919, one has glimpses of him in the ambulance service in France and Italy, emptying liquid in the medical corps, and finally in Paris. A civilian is going to concerts and witnessing riots of working men in protest against the Versailles Treaty. In The Big Money, he is seen making a precarious living as a newspaperman, protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and raging against the unjust sentence imposed on striking miners in the south.

The great sweep of this novel also includes “Camera Eye” sections that trace the development of Dos Passos’s own consciousness, from his early years in Europe to the advent of World War I and his intensifying political convictions. Indeed, it is the novelist’s own consciousness that draws the novel to a close and anticipates the next phases of American life, as well as of his own biography.

1919 goes well beyond Three Soldiers in dramatizing the impact and the consequences of World War I. Fictional characters such as Dick Savage, a Harvard graduate, express Dos Passos’s own literary sensibility and experience. Savage becomes enmeshed in the careers of J. Ward Moorehouse and Ben Compton, the son of a Jewish immigrant. Meanwhile, Eleanor Stoddard advances her career by having an affair with J. Ward Moorehouse. By contrast, John Reed, another Harvard man, is portrayed as keeping his faith that the world will be transformed by political revolution, not big business.

The Big Money proves again that the popularity of Dos Passos’s novels in Europe is well deserved, for here, as in his earlier novel, he has caught the reckless speed at which the big money is made, lost, wasted in America. He is much more than any other living American writers who have exposed to public satire those
peculiar contradictions of America’s poverty in the middle of plenty. And in each of
the narratives which carry the theme of this novel to its conclusion the reader shares
the sensations of speed and concentrated action. Only the most unresponsive reader
would fail to appreciate the humor which is the force behind “the keen stroke of Dos
Passos’s irony” (Gregory 2).

New Historism

Dos Passos’s quest for form in society ended when he could identify a group
that made the most of time in craftsmanship, and the search for political form also
ceased when he could discern an administration with a memory, under a president
with a talent for organization and “as richly informed in the history and traditions of
his own country as any President since Jefferson” (Wrenn 145). In U.S.A he made the
documentary novel of his own. A form committed to historical interpretation, he had
been working to perfect it since his college days. In the terms of his earliest mature
ambition to study architecture. It was that the novelist should aspire to be “the
architect of history” (148).

The term “architect of history,” then, defines the dual intention, artistic and
historical, of Dos Passos’s persistent criticism of people and events. All of his art is
criticism, and all of it is historically oriented. His first published writing after leaving
Harvard, although not intended as art itself, was one of a number of similar essays
Dos Passos has since written in criticism of art past and present.

In the America of 1927, Dos Passos saw “no trace of a scale of values.” But
such studies as Hibben’s of Beecher might help to provide one, for “Beecher was this
utter vacuum that is the American consciousness today, in human form
a preacher who could be trusted never to preach against the wind” (148). Such “standards to measure ourselves by” were nothing less than “forms to set the mind of tomorrow’s generation.” Both the biographer and the creative artist or craftsman, should provide the standards: that criticism.

The historian should provide them from “the daydream of a race” and the novelist should obtain his materials from his own experience “the daydream of a single man” (150). This task of the artist meant that he must consciously select those materials in his experience from which valid standards might be constructed. That is criticism, not only in the selection of materials, but in the implications of the need for standards, and the creation of the work of art becomes the highest critical function.

Dos Passos hoped in his “Humble Protest” of 1916, would force men, “at least those whose lives and souls are not sucked into the whirlpool . . . to bring their ideals before the bar of criticism, to sift them, to try them, to attempt to discover where they really lead” (Perkin 71). Since the war not only failed to have that effect, but appeared rather to produce one of the most notoriously uncritical eras in our history, Dos Passos felt obliged to undertake the task himself. This sense of obligation underlies his theory of art as criticism one which, although nowhere clearly formulated as his own, is everywhere implied in his writing.

The task of preaching self-criticism could best be accomplished if people could be made to see how petty and inadequate or distorted were their ideals, how uncritical in origin, and especially how comically and even harmfully their results. The artist should, therefore, be able to discern with the eye of a reporter the results of ideals in contemporary society. He should be able to trace them to their sources with
the understanding of an historian. He should express his findings with the acid of the satirist “to sear away the old complacency” and give effect to his criticism.

All of these requirements were implicit in Dos Passos’s criticism from the start, for he had started with the humanistic faith and the critical attitude. He found his audience in the novel, which he deliberately limited in style and content to the documentary satire, but with this form he also limited his audience to “the handlers of ideas” and to “men and women of imagination and humanity,” (Potter 51) who were most likely to profit from his preaching and in turn, to benefit others. He continually sought to trace the events he described to their sources, but until about the time when he began writing *U.S.A.* history seemed chiefly a contemporary force, like that which had taken him by the throat in the war years, and the sources he found were largely of contemporary.

Dos Passos was beginning work on *U.S.A.* and four years before his invention of the term “architect of history,” brought the historian and the novelist rather close together. Both were concerned with the interpretation of events. The novelist with the events “of the age he lives in” and the biographer or historian, like Hibben, with “accurate and imaginative studies of the . . . past” (Wrenn 153). Both, therefore, were critics, concerned with the interpretation of the recent or distant past as it affected the present and the future. The theory of history as criticism was simply the consequence of the theory of art as criticism.

In *U.S.A.* a form was committed to historical interpretation, and Dos Passos was working to perfect it since his college days. He was in more conscious than most of his contemporaries with respect to the impact of past and present events. His historical training was underway. To Dos Passos, “the most tragic part of modern
history lay in the suppression of humanism by the industrial revolution”. His hotel childhood, his odd vaguely European ascent, his illegitimacy and lack of home link all these made his conscious almost from the start of his lack of roots and his need to establish them. His interest in the roots led inevitably to a concern with the past. His reading in Gibben and his travels reinforced his concern.

In *U.S.A* this term serves to describe the events of United States. In the New Masses he observes, “History is continually being remade to suit the mood of the present and the immediate past”. History is more alive and more interesting than fiction because history is mass invention unlike fiction, which is a daydream of a single man. A valid work of history, “permanently enriches the national consciousness,” (150) by providing with a scale of values.

Dos Passos devotes an entire volume of his trilogy, *1919*, to the war. He suggests that the United States entered the war solely to fatten the armament industry’s profits and to “make the world safe” (Rosen 182) for powerful American bankers with loans in Europe. As significant as the causes of the war are its consequences, which Dos Passos knew quite well. His work consists of American sensibilities, the stifling of dissent and an explosion of propaganda and lies. “The war was a blast of that blew out all the Diognes lanterns” (NN 15). The bitterly ironic biography of the Unknown Soldier powerfully evokes the war’s cost in lives. Dos Passos presents American involvement in the war as the curious expression of twentieth-century American values, a logical and organic unfolding of the destructiveness inherent in the present organization of society.
The Novelist as Political Historian

Dos Passos is more the historian that Dreiser, closer to the documentary elements in contemporary fiction. He took to calling his works “contemporary chronicles,” and whiles the best of them, *U.S.A.* is less an explicit account of politics than of the economic drift of the nation from competitive to monopoly capitalism. We should remember that his later chronicles, written after he had decided that the United States political system was the best possible, were quite explicitly political histories: *Adventures of a Young Man, Number One*, and *TheGround Design*. The last three were also about Dos Passos considered the liberal politics of defeatism. Almost always, he was a political historian. *U.S.A.* is the best of his political fiction.

*U.S.A.* develops, with the precision of a vast and masterly photograph, into a picture of a business world in its final ripeness, ready to fall into decay. Though Dos Passos does not call himself a Marxist and would seem in fact not to be one, his point of view is unmistakably radical. The class struggle is present as a minor theme. The major theme is the vitiation and degradation of character in such a civilization. Those who prostitute themselves and succeed are most completely corrupted; the less hard and less self-centered are baffled and beaten. Those who might have made good workers are wasted; the radicals experience internal as well as external defeat. No one attains any real satisfaction, “Disintegrations and frustrations are everywhere” (Hook 88).

According to any view, that society, in all conscience, is grim enough, but not banal, not undramatic. Dos Passos has reduced what ought to be a tale of full-bodied conflicts to an epic of disintegration and frustration. That reduction is open to objection, because it is an imperfect account of human beings and human society that
does not present forces working in opposition. In that sense U.S.A. is one-sided, whereas life and good literature are two-sided or many-sided. In a word, what we want is a dialectic treatment of people and the world.

If he were more of one, he might have written a better novel. The biographical portraits are the best part of his novel because they are the most nearly Marxist, showing the dynamic contradictions of our time in the only way they can be shown namely, as they occur in the minds and lives of whole men. Nothing will do, in the end, but the whole man.

**Dos Passos: The Synoptic Novel**

In various essays, prefaces, and letters, Dos Passos expressed his views on the relationship between social history and literature, between the writer’s moral responsibility to his times and his search for a technique. Underlying these views was an urgent sense of the dynamics, of social change specifically, a feeling that America was standing at a historical crossroad. As he expressed it in one essay “This is a history of sudden and dangerous transition. Industrial life is turning a corner and is either going to make the curve or smash up in the ditch” (Gelfant 37).

The sense that he was living through a crucial period of deep reaching historical change was given theoretical validity by the dialectical formula of Marx. Marxian theory defined history as a dynamic process in which one social system and its forms gave way to another. But abstract theory stood confirmed for Dos Passos by his personal observations of social change in America and “in all countries.” It is a mistake to consider these books wistful expressions of Dos Passos’s early escapism, for they reveal him actually as a concerned and alerted social observer, sensitive to
symptoms of social evolution everywhere and particularly interested in the mechanisms of revolution.

When Doss Passos looked upon America of the twenties and thirties, he evoked an image of a Jeffersonian past in which democratic ideals had been instituted as a way of life. These ideals seemed to him under deliberate assault in twentieth-century America. They were attacked directly during and by World War I. He said himself that he had been unable to reconcile the “brutalities” and “oppressions” (Pearce 8) of the war with the ideals of progress he had been led to believe in.

The war seemed to him a “horrible monstrosity.” He shared the general disillusionment of his generation, which had come to regard the war as “a plot of the big interests” (42-P 412). The basis for the war was industrial greed and mass deception: it had been made possible only by “oceans of lies” that had deceived “honest, liberal, kindly people” (Gelfant 25). These people, the common people were deprived of their fundamental liberties not only in the army, but worse, in a “counter revolutionary” movement taking place in post-war America.

The Marxian dynamic view of history and the actual signs of evolution, revolution, and counter-revolution gave him the sense that these were critical times. For America, rejecting through violence and injustice its democratic ideals, it was indeed a “tragic moment.” Geltant quotes on Fitzgerald, “we are living in one of the damnedest tragic moments in history,” and he goes on to tell Fitzgerald that it is his moral obligation to write “a first rate novel” (39) about the social tragedy of the times. This was the writer’s responsibility to reveal, and exercise moral judgement upon, the social tendencies of his times.
In other words, a good novel objectified and interpreted contemporary life from a detached or non-personal perspective. That is, a historical point of view, and at the same time it passed moral judgement upon the social life it depicted. Underlying this concept of the novel was a conviction in the power of art to influence the pattern of social change. “Important and compelling” works of art, Dos Passos believed, could affect the course of social history, for they could “mold and influence ways of thinking to the point of changing and rebuilding... the mind of the group.” Thus, as the serious novelist helped shape contemporary opinion, he became in effect an “architect of history” (TS viii).

The technical problem inherent in Dos Passos’s subject was to find a formal framework to express an interpretation and a moral judgement of the times. His own concept of the novel as a work that detaches itself from the historical period and embodies it committed him to an art of implication. He could not state his judgement of the times explicitly: it had to be inherent in the picture of the times. Moreover, his technique for creating the essential characteristics of the present as a historical period had also to evoke a picture of the past, historical change could be assessed only if the past stood forward as an emotional and social point of reference.

*U.S.A.* charts the movement of history in American society in the early decades of this century with incomparable power. The ideals and illusions, the violence, hatreds, and brutalities, the ambitions and failures of a whole society are all depicted as they are swept along by the murderous forces of history. Thus it is Dos Passos’s historical sense that seems to determine the range of characters and events both in the book’s narrative sections and elsewhere. It is what’s new, changing, developing, pace-setting, or influential that preoccupies him. But despite Dos
Passos’s concern to identify the trends and forces, the tendencies and movements that are defining and shaping American society in the twentieth-century, the individual sensibility survives in the world of the trilogy. It survives directly in the Camera Eye sections, indirectly in the subtle organization and situation of the apparent objectivity of the other sections.

**His Critical Heritage**

Dos Passos’s characters in *U.S.A.* on the other hand, were always looking ahead, even as they showed us a capitalist society in which men and women did not have lives, but “only destinies” (Maine, *Critical* 3). In other words, Sartre placed a high premium on social realism. In America, readers and critics alike during the Great Depression looked for someone to explain the relationship between the present and the past, to explain what had gone wrong.

While it may seem at first that Dos Passos is saying the same thing in the fragmented narrative of *U.S.A.* this is clearly not so. He expected his readers to read between the lines and to make the connections, between past and present, individual and society which the characters themselves are unable to make. They are unable to make such connections because Dos Passos believed participation in a historical process to be, for most people, largely unconscious. That does not mean that a historical process is not at work or cannot be identified.

Marxist criticism of the sort that judged a novel by its revolutionary content was much more in the mainstream during the thirties, than it is now, and the Marxist critics saw no value in literature as literature, but only as a tool for revolution, rejected Faulkner out of hand and embraced Dos Passos. When it became clear later
on that his commitment to a specifically Marxist view of history had never been what the leftist critics had hoped for, they rejected him as well. Dos Passos answered the call for social realism in the thirties and answered it better than anyone else. He perfected his art in *U.S.A.* and defended his politics at the expense of his art in the novels thereafter, and to students of literature that may always seem a waste of talent.

Dos Passos has substituted for any metaphysical version of human fate an accusing vision. The primary images of *1919* are Wilson “talking to save his faith in words,” the “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” (Colley 101). Writing of an age in which “mendacity, slander, bribery, venality, coercion, murder, grew to unprecedented dimensions,” Dos Passos drafts his petition of anguished protest with a Voltairean ferocity. In *1919* the novelist’s reality can be entirely appreciated: the spectacle of monstrous injustice, the impact of the component engrams, and the moral climate of the universe in which they interact.

Thus this chapter has critically analysed how far the individualism is lost in the novel *Three Soldiers*. The subsequent chapter deals with how the American society is pessimistic.