A SATIRICAL PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

Caricature of America

As a realist Dos Passos reveals his characters in the historical framework of time, place and social milieu which help to form them. These backgrounds, usually presented through the memories of the characters themselves, are various enough to provide a representative cross-section, geographically and socially of American Society. 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” (Wrenn 149) and give effect to his criticism.

Although Dos Passos may be held to have failed to provide any adequate intellectual insight or emotion for the vast landscape of his trilogy. His themes and attitudes are always interesting, especially in the numerous biographies of such folk heroes as Edison, Debs, Follette, Steinmetz, Isadora Duncan and Ford. These sections are often masterly in their economy and point. The frustration of hopes and intentions in these public figures provides the main clue to the social criticism which underlies the presentation of dozens of nonentities. For it is usually pointed up that the great are as helplessly ensnared in merely behaviouristic patterns irrelevant to their own welfare, as the crowd of nobodies who admire them.

The narratives starkly reveal the degenerative effect of war on the ordinary merchant seaman, the doughboy, the pacifist, the neurotic and sex-starved woman, the young girl eager to go to France for war work and the revolutionary. Their
reactions are laid naked by callous dissecting skill. This is no portrayal of the war of the trenches, of physical wounds and bloodshed. It is an acute reflection of the struggle of the mind, and a story of the chaotic influences of war, that dangerous, organic growth from which flows license, greed and a macabre, careless fun.

Like Dickens, Dos Passos recreates the force and tragedy of his time. Always he appraises the forces that make life a stage for the setting of comedy and drama and tragedy: love and passion, jealously and ambition, hate and despair.

There is a certain insistence on sex in Dos Passos’s work. But this only reveals that he is vitally concerned with the emotions of life. Sex is the most important instinct of life. The impulse is spontaneous and cannot lie, and is therefore a state of naked sincerity. It is essential that matters of the flesh be treated with vital warmth and not with the snobbish coldness of the intellect. Dos Passos details love or lust episodes with an unflinching physical force.

Undoubtedly Dos Passos has lived. His work throbs in every line with an all dominating intensity of feeling for life. He has been triumphantly sensitive. He has felt insults and splendidly avenged them. Looking at life, he finds it mysterious and terrible. But he is also impressed by the wonder of it and the occasional beauty. He is mildly obsessed by the apparent helplessness of human beings to their predestined end, their futile struggles against inevitability. Endowed with that masculine creative fertility and brooding intuitive power, a powerful combination essential to the making of a great novelist. His view is not one of extraordinary detachment or serenity, but a hearty and ordinary dislike. He must dilute the somber with the expression of light, and his hearty, sharp extremely is thrown into bolder relief by the contrasting tones of bitter experience.
The trilogy develops, with 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. Disintegration and frustration are everywhere.

The final effect is one of banality that human beings and human life are banal. Perhaps this is the effect Dos Passos aimed at, but that it is needless and even false is proved by the biographical portraits, in which neither the men nor their lives are ever banal. The same objection holds, to his whole social picture as to his treatment of individuals, that he has minimized something vital and something, which ought to be made much of namely, forces in conflict. Society is hardly just decaying away and drifting apart, the destructive forces are tremendously powerful and well organized, and so are the creative ones.

The critics are saying that Dos Passos has not truly observed the political situation. Whether he has or not, whether his despair is objectively justifiable, cannot, with the best political will in the world, be settled on paper. It is hoped that he has seen incorrectly; he himself must hope so. But there is also an implicit meaning in the objections which, if the writers themselves did not intend it, many readers will derive, and if not from Whipple and Cowley then from the novel itself;
that the emotion in which trilogy issues is negative to the point of being politically harmful.

Dos Passos had always enlivened his narratives with newspaper quotations, political oratory, and popular songs. In the Newsreels, he brings this material together as in a college, juxtaposing verbal fragments in an artful pattern, that he has its own rhythms and recurrences. Not only does he evoke the events and moods of past years, but by mixing the common place and importance ironically with the crucial, he shows how fatuous and inconsistent America’s public image of itself.

The biographical portraits, vivid and compressed, describe as poetically but in expressionist style the lives of prominent Americans of the period. The inventor Steinmetz, for instance, “jotted a formula on his cuff and next morning a thousand new power-plants has sprung up and the dynamos sang dollars” (Davis 22). The Camera Eye sections are brief, impressionistic prose poems capturing poignant or decisive moments in the narrator’s life. They are brilliantly done, and remind us that *U.S.A.* does not give us social reality as such, but social reality is viewed by a particular man with a particular past, Dos Passos succeeds the ‘Walt Whitman’ of an equally formidable try at embracing the whole American experience of the century before.

In *U.S.A.*, just as in *The Great Gatsby*, the betrayal of the meaning of America, the corruption of words and values, is dramatized by the movement from “a world unfenced” (Ward 41) to the monotonous, ranked squares of the factory which shut one off from nature. One can be asked by Fitzgerald to identify Gatsby’s personal dream with the historical promise of a green new world. So Dos Passos asks us to feel the defeat of Sacco and Vanzetti as the defeat of America,
again linked to the violation of nature, the fencing of the meadows and the closing of the openness of the continent. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *U.S.A.* are sad novels, novels of defeat. *U.S.A.* is not only that, it is the coldest most mercilessly despairing book in literature. However both novels at climactic moments, project the sense of loss, of failure betrayal, through the violation of greenness, meadows, open, inviting, unravaged nature.

*U.S.A.* is generally placed in the tradition of naturalism in American literature, but naturalism is one of those large abstractions which threaten to conceal reality rather than disclose it or define it. So the researcher says that, literary naturalism is not a technique or a style, it is a point of view, a definition of the author’s perspective on his subject matter. It implies some species of determinism, the human beings in the action are determined by some force outside their own personalities, whether that force be God, or biology, the instincts of sex, or class in the Marxist version. In the United States, industrialism and the sudden passage into an urban world led in American literature to the stress on the overpowering and mastering force of the environment which it reduces the individual to a function of a power, the dynamics of which lie outside the determination of human personality.

The researcher would like to emphasize a literary problem in naturalism. The subject of a work of fiction written from a naturalistic premise is that the individual does not count. You cannot have a hero in the traditional sense. You cannot have a hero who dominates the action because the whole point of naturalistic fiction is that the environment, or force, however defined, transcends and dominates the individual. The environment, in other words, is your subject, individual human beings, your characters, become simply shadows of environmental force. The point is simple and
obvious enough, but the American writer, responding to a sense of the fatality of society, wanted to write about society itself, the whole complex structure of relationships rather than about a single human being, a hero had no developed tradition at hand to assist him in the technical problem of organizing his fiction.

Although there are strikes and violence in the novel, Basil March takes walks through the ghastly slums of New York, all this is rather off-stage. A literary magazine was closer to Howell’s personal experience, but the device does not fit his purpose. Howells imagination did not reach beyond the sentimental, middle-class love story, a way of organizing his fiction and a number of these provide the dynamics of his plot rather than the apparent subject-matter, the way in which a number of individuals are functionally related to the anonymous and controlling forces of society.

Dos Passos’s attack on the power and corruption of business is essentially based on moral indignation. It is his whole presentation of American society in _U.S.A_. His rationale may have been economic and political. His impetus, however closely identified with the rationale, was moral and emotional.

Dos Passos himself suggested as much in his explanation of the dismal quality of the writing about American business: “You have to read these books to believe how muddle-headed, ill-written, and flatly meaningless they can be.” One reason, Dos Passos suggested, is that “the writing was usually left to hired-hacks and publicity men. The people actually who is doing the work had no time and no inclination to put themselves down on paper.” But this is not all, he continued:

Good writing is the reflection of an intense and organized viewpoint towards something usually towards the values and process of human life. The fact that
the writing that emanates ever from such a powerful institution as general electric is so childish is a measure of proof that the men directing it are muddled and unclear about their human aims. (Rideout 179)

American culture and the Imagination

_U.S.A._ is a despairing book and it has been criticized, because it presents no character with which one can identify. The observation is a valid one but used for a mistaken conclusion. There are no people in the novel, only automatic walking stiffly to the beat of Dos Passos’s despair. But the point of the novel is that there are no individuals in American society. Dos Passos’s “hero” is _U.S.A._ that monstrous abstraction, society itself. Society is the hero or the villain of the piece. In Dos Passos’s vision, society has become depersonalized and abstract and there are no human beings, no human relations in it. He is responding to his own sense of where power lies in American society.

Dos Passos achieved in _U.S.A._ was the creation of a form appropriate to the theme of the overwhelming, impersonal force of society, a structure which would carry the meaning of the primacy of society and make the anonymous, processes of society the very stuff of a fictional world. As an aside, I might say that if the student of American culture, or American civilization, assumes that there is a relationship between literature and history. Ward observes: “He must take that assumption as seriously as it deserves and examine the way in which history enters not just the overt subject matter of literature but is there in language, imagery and, to penetrate to the heart of the matter, the very ordering of the literary object, its very structure” (Ward 45).
Power Superpower finally overwhelms even the language which creates the identity of America and if Dos Passos could say “we stand defeated” (46). The defeat was particularly keen for the writer, the man who depends on words and his belief in the efficacy of language to sustain his personal identity. I would even speculate wildly and suggest that the vision of society Dos Passos presents in *U.S.A.* was a defeat for him personally and that is perhaps why he seems, less estimable a writer after *U.S.A.* than before it. He had ceased to believe in the power of words.

*U.S.A.* looked like a Marxist novel to many of its contemporaries, but it is not. It is an American novel in the agrarian tradition, which sees the defeat of America in the victory of a mechanized society worshipping power and money over a society of simplicity devoted to the needs of human beings and individual felicity. As in the story of Jay Gatsby, the pastoral motive is only ironic.

The other view, emphasizing the machine and the elaborate technology which made it possible, said that America represented a stage in historical evolution, “progress,” and that America’s fulfillment lay in the development of a powerful and complex society. For one, the meaning of America lay in the past, for the other in the future. The American ideal was an escape from institutions, from the forms of society, and from the limitations society imposes upon the self. For the other, the American ideal was the elaboration of the complex social institutions, which make modern society possible, an acceptance of the discipline of the machine and the enjoyment of its advantages, the achievement of the individual, not alone, but as a functioning part of society.

Society has certain values, some individual or some event captures attention; society projects its values onto the event and then sees the event as verification, as
proof, of the meaning imputed to it. Malinowski has a wonderful phrase in which he says that the myths and symbols of society provide “a dogmatic backbone” (58) to culture.

Dos Passos’s novels of recent years have been disappointing, as essentially political novels; however, often containing acute social insights, they do have some value. For example, a certain sociological interest attaches to the three attacks on radical attitudes in *Chosen Country*, despite the fact that they have been loosely linked to a story which is both sentimental and undistinguished. Among contemporary novelists the role of Dos Passos has been that of the rational social historian and his value has been great.

A novelist can be judged primarily by his social or political views. Dos Passos, as the historian of American society among the novelists, ought to have a specific responsibility to history, while his picture of the New Deal is at the same time distorted to the point of being obsessed. He is primarily a historical novelist; this question is not purely a matter of political opinion. Even critics who are sympathetic with his present beliefs, such as Granville Hicks, have felt the decline in his fiction.

Dos Passos’s decline was a result of his political objection to put it crudely, his move to the radical right lost him his left-wing admirers, while the undisputed sense that his early works are his finest has made him a difficult icon for the right. Moreover, despite the reversal in his political affiliations, the political never left the foreground of his novel. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not move from a radical political art to a political formalism, and thus never won the allegiance of formalist or aesthetic critics. As a result, the history of Dos Passos’s political
opinions has tended to overshadow his fiction. There are far more biographical accounts of Dos Passos than critical accounts and one of the few critical controversies about *U.S.A.* revolves around its political complexion: whether the work is informed by his “Marxism” or his “Veblenism” (Anson 7).

Dos Passos’s writing for the *Harvard Monthly* reflects even more consciously political nature of his alienation. His divergence from the aesthetes, who ultimately felt more at one with the society they scorned than the illegitimate Dos Passos, with his “foreign accent” and “swarthy appearance,” (Rosen 4) ever could. His generally lyrical and early short stories gave way to more satirical ones, and he soon began writing polemical essays. The socialists, though theoretically anti-capitalist, were doing nothing to build a movement for change, the communists alone were educating the dispossessed class and organizing them into “an efficient instrument for establishing a new society” (7).

Dos Passos’s political activity increased during the late twenties and early thirties. He wrote up for the *New Masses* an eyewitness account of a textile strike in Passaic, New Jersey during the spring of 1926. He expressed his discomfort and embarrassment in that piece over being a privileged outsider, a middle-class spectator. Nevertheless, his association with the New Masses deepened his commitment to radical politics and strengthening the political side of his writing. If one could point to a single event that action his disillusionment over the prospects of legal and economic justice in a capitalist society, “it would be the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts” (Maine, *Critical* 8).

Dos Passos himself did not know how to bring the exploited and their exploiters together into one nation, but he did yearn to reject his class background
and assert his immigrant heritage. He had begun work on “a very long and difficult novel,” *U.S.A.* that would show America what had gone wrong with his experiment in democracy (Ludington, “The ordering of The Camera Eye in U.S.A.” 481).

The most concerned he was the individual’s role in shaping his society, a role which could be superseded by society’s power to shape him. For that reason all his novels have a rhetorical dimension aimed at educating the reader about the forces in society that shape him, and inciting him to resistance and action in his own and in his society’s behalf. The role that the individual plays in history was to become the central focus of *U.S.A.*

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 leaves these one’s must fall back upon the criterion of “interest,” by which one must mean real interest and not what people say or think they want. Even the criterion of action will not determine completely the class to which people belong. Class 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.

And the “midway people” (Hook 97) of Dos Passos represent this moral paradoxical aspect of class. They are a great fact in American life. It is he who shows 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, 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.

Undoubtedly, the reason was Dos Passos’s radical analysis of American society. Contemporary critics matched the author’s radical engagement with their own. What this meant was that the socio-political dimension of Dos Passos’s work became a major focus of intellectual and critical concern. It was precisely this dimension which, in the later forties, the fifties, and sixties, may have produced considerable disquiet. Of course, that disquiet was, in part, a question of the dominance of formalist values in novel criticism. But, however regretfully, one suspects the presence of other than aesthetic considerations. Literary criticism is no more immune to the broader forces: economic, religious, political, or whatever, at work within a society than any other form of cultural endeavour.

In that last brilliant phrase, however, lies a suggestion of the origins of commitment as an ideal for the writer. Commitment, which may be broadly defined as the acceptance by a writer of an extra-artistic, usually political, programme of action and belief directing his creative endeavours depends essentially on a romantic view of society and what society represents. One might argue that Pope and Swift, for example, in the eighteenth-century England, were just as committed to a vision of the ideal society as any of the writers of the 1930.

Pope and Swift could write in the belief that theirs was a collective ideal, one to which all reasonable men would give their assent. No such consonance between individual and social values survived into the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. Indeed one of the recurring meanings of romanticism was precisely a new concern for the individual as individual, outside and independent of society. The romantic
ideology involved a conscious turning away from society to the individual, both as 
moral touchstone and as the proper focus of esthetic attention. The consequence was 
that social and individual values tended to diverge. And rather than seeing society as, 
at least ideally, the institutionalized defender of civilized human values, artists came 
instead to regard the external social world as a vast, unregenerate mass, on the whole 
hostile to such values.

This was precisely the problem that Dos Passos found himself facing the 
problem. As he contemplated the fate of the individual in the modern world, and in 
American society in particular, he came to believe that reality was not simply what 
the individual consciousness registered or responded to in its surroundings. Reality 
was rather the summation of impossible and impersonal forces, manifest in terms of 
history and society, but alien to the experience of the individual consciousness.

**Newsreel Sections**

The topics featured in the newsreel are not chosen at random. They are an 
exact reproduction of what one reads in the most widely circulated news sheets, 
disaster, scandal, politics, society, finance, and labor. These items are placed more or 
less in confusion and haste in the Newsreels as they appear in the newspaper. In the 
newsreels they are often given in fragments, running into one another and multi 
colored. They are different in the consciousness of the subway reader, thus making a 
perfect symbol of the average mentality as it is concerned with public affairs. But 
gradually the discerning reader will become aware that the choice and arrangement 
of topics and their very confusion are not so planless and random as one might 
suppose. Disasters scandal and society are the screen behind which the serious
The business of the world is carried on, the dope with which the public mind is put to sleep. And seldom is political news unaccompanied by news of industry and finance and of the organization or suppression of labour.

The world in which Joe Williams and Moorehouse represent the opposite poles. It is a world in which war is closely bound up with the price of steel and sugar. In which the Treaty of Versailles is followed by the violent putting down of the Industrial Workers of the World. The connections are not made in the Newsreel any more than they are made by the thoughtless reader. But for the discerning reader they become more and more obvious as the story proceeds. This is one of the principal means by which Dos Passos gives shape and direction to his novel.

Dos Passos meets the problem by an invention that he calls the “Newsreel.” There are sixty-eight such sections evenly distributed among the three novels of the trilogy. These sections are a mixture of newspaper headlines, fragments of news stories, and bits and pieces of popular songs. They rarely run over two pages, a few are very short. They are typographically arresting with their headline type and their inset lines of verse. Their function is threefold: they precisely date the narrative action; they arouse a feeling for the time in question, and they frequently have a thematic or ironic impact.

In each volume of the trilogy the first and last Newsreels are of particular importance for all of the reasons just stated. The 42nd Parallel opens with a proclamation by way of headlines that the new century has begun. The repetitive banality of these statements becomes ludicrous, a tone that carries over to senator Albert claim that “The twentieth century will be Americans’. American thought will dominate it. American progress will give it colour and direction. American deeds
will make it illustrious” (Maine 60). “In counterpoint there is obvious triviality: “Society Girls Shocked: Danced with Detectives,” and venality: “Officials Know Nothing of Vice.” Then follows an ominous note of prophecy with mention of the disastrous Boer War and the existence American empire: a jingle from the Cuban campaign; a headline: “Claims Islands for All Time,” and finally a song from the Philippine campaign, bits of which appear throughout the section, culminating with a warning of the cost of empire:

There’s been many a good man murdered in the Philippines;

Lies sleeping in some lonesome grave. (60)

The final Newsreel of the volume is shorter and less complex. The declaration of war in April 1917 is announced in headlines, there are lines from the popular song “Over There,” reference to the fact that the Colt Firearms Company has increased profits by 259 percent, and two headlines: “Plan Legislation to Keep Colored People from White Areas” and “Abusing Flag to Be Punished” (60). The long-range implications of war are set down without comment.

The opening theme of 1919 is one of a capitalistic system both intoxicated by opportunity and frightened by lurking dangers: The New York Stock Exchange is now the only free market in the world, vast quantities of money are pouring in from abroad. But “Europe is reeking with murder and the lust of rapine, aflame with the fires of revolution.” The concluding Newsreel is savage: “the placards borne by the radicals were taken away from them, their clothing torn and eyes blackened before the service and ex-service men had finished with them.”

Machineguns Mow Down Mobs in Knoxville.”

Juxtaposed to this violence is the phrase “America I love you” (61).
The war is over. Its fruits are becoming known. In *The Big Money* the first Newsreel comes after a narrative section. It contains much less detonative material than the foregoing: a line from “The St. Louis Blues,” headlines about a daylight robbery, observations about automobiles and social status. Though the word is not used, this is President Harding’s “normalcy.” The contrast provided by the final Newsreel is dramatic: “Wall Street Stunned,” “Police Turn Machine Guns on Colorado Mine Strikers Kill 5 Wound 40,” “Rescue Crews Try to Upend Ill-fated Craft While Waiting for Pontoons.” All this is interspersed with lines from the saga of the ill-fated Casey Jones, whose locomotive is hell-bent for destruction. Finally there are the hollow soothing words of the President at the dedication of the Bok carillon in Florida, a scene of peace and promise already denied by the headlines: “Steamroller in Action against Militants,” “Miners Battle Scabs” (Arden 158).

Some of the content of the Newsreels is just plain fun. Advertising slogans such as “Itching Gone in One Night” (155), the whole fulsome sequence of headlines about Queen Marie of Romania’s visit, Saccharine songs juxtaposed with serious events, all of these give a sense of the human comedy and also bring a powerful evocation of the past to the reader who has lived through it. Intellectually he may be aware of triviality and folly, of stultifying forces that controlled his life, but his emotions discount all that, it is his past, a poor thing but his own.

In general, popular songs wear themselves out by repetition, they rarely reappear to stir the emotions of another generation, though certain ballads like “Casey Jones,” certain fighting chants of the Industrial Workers of the World and other leftist groups, and hardcore revolutionary anthems like “The Marseillaise” and “The International” do have long-term currency. The problem is even more evident
when it comes to headlines and excerpts of news stories, many of which are extremely hard to pin down with the passage of time. It takes an effort of will, and some luck, to be able to recall that "Peaches" (158) was Peaches Browning, that "The Sheik" was Rudolph Valentino, or to be able to piece together the details of the Hall-Mills murder case. Perhaps the relative inaccessibility of these materials does not matter. The author operates on the various shot principle: some of the shots are sure to hit.

**Biographies**

Along with the Newsreels, and interspersed like them among the records of private lives, are the brief biographies of actual public figures of the time. These are the representative men of the American country and a day, they more or less sum up national achievement, official contribution to modern culture. There are twenty-five of these figures: seven from the business world, five from politics, four from applied science and invention, three from the leaders of labour, three from the arts, two from journalism, and one from social science.

The proportion from the several categories indicates the author’s general estimate of our cultural effort. Literature does not appear except in the form of journalism, nor pure science at all, unless in the case of Steinmetz. These sketches are for the most part masterpieces of incisive and tendentious writing. They give the author his best chance to show his hand, to indicate his attitudes and bias. The businessmen are most uniformly the object of his irony Carnegie, the Prince of Peace; Hearst, Poor Little Rich Boy; Insull, Power Super power.
Frederick Winslow Taylor gives him his chance to suggest the social wastefulness of American efficiency and the speed-up. Minor C. Keith, Emperor of the Caribbean, gives him his text on American imperialism.

His political figures are all liberals spurious and stupid, playboy, doctrinaire and misguided, sincere and forceful but relatively ineffectual, and simply heroic. The one serious thinker in the outfit is Thorstein Veblen, whose analysis of bourgeois mentality and bourgeois economics is the greatest single influence on the work of Dos Passos of anything in print, and whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* offers the most promising clues for the interpretation of *U.S.A.*

The second of Dos Passos’s conveyor belts, the short biographies of actual persons, is also highly original. Living people have been used before as touchstones in novels, as objects of glorification or as objects of scorn. What is unusual here is the number and variety of the biographies and the encapsulated way in which they are presented. There are twenty-seven of them equally distributed among the three novels. They direct attention to both success and failure in the first third of the century and to major social currents of that period. By the selectivity evident in their choice it is clear that the author has here cast aside his role of objective observer and has actively intervened to influence the reader’s judgement. A completely different statement would emerge if the cast of living persons were different.

Here is no easy formula for classifying these figures, though, as has been indicated, they fall broadly into groupings of good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains, constructive and destructive human beings. But the sketches are so quality with irony that the reader does not know what to expect in advance. He is obliged to examine each sketch in its context and to be ready for an ironic twist which will
upset his expectation.

The initial biography, “Lover of Mankind,” (Becker, *Visions* 63) is about Eugene V. Debs, the first nationally celebrated labour leader. This choice, and the tone in which the biography is written, constitutes an unambiguous manifesto. Debs’s aspiration is for “a world brothers might own where everybody would split even.” The section ends with the ringing quotation: “While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal class I am of it, while there is a soul in prison I am not free” (63).

The authorial voice betrays partisanship when it asks where were Debs’s brothers in 1918 when “Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta for speaking against war.” The central issue which is gradually to become clear in the course of the novel is implicit in this biography: there are two nations, men with a sense of brotherhood like Debs and “the frockcoats and the top hats and diamonded hostesses,” the wielders of power who “were afraid of him as if he had contracted a social disease, syphilis or leprosy.”

Two other biographies in the first volume reinforce this statement. “Big Bill,” Haywood the Industrial Workers of the World leader, dreamed of “building a new society in the shell of the old.” He was the victim of the mentality of the men who “went over to save the Morgan loans” and “lynched the pacifists and the pro-Germans and the Wobblies and the reds and the Bolsheviks.” Another idealist and victim is “Fighting Bob” La Follette, the reformer who made Wisconsin a model state, who fought corruption and big business and “the unpleasant lethargy of Washington.” He was “an orator criticizing from the capital of a lost republic” (64).

The Luther Burbank sketch raises important questions. America is a
different combination, promising a brave new social organism. But it is threatened by intolerance of ideas, something that did not destroy Burbank but left him “puzzled.” Edison’s fame is undercut by the fact that he worked with men like Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, “who never worried about mathematics or the social system or generalized philosophical concepts,” and put his inventions at the service of these an alphabetic masters of the capitalist system. Likewise Steinmetz, a hunchback and a genius and a socialist whose mathematical discoveries are the basis of all electrical transformers everywhere, was merely “a piece of purpose belonging to General Electric,” which indulged him in his socialist dreams, but did not allow him to interfere with the stockholder’s money or the director’s salaries.

Alongside these men manipulated by the system three of the manipulators are seen. The most openly attacked is Minor C. Keith, builder of railroads in Central America and creator of the United Fruit Company. Andrew Carnegie, like Steinmetz an immigrant, worked hard, saved his money, and “whenever he had a million dollars he invested it . . . whenever he made a billion dollars he endowed an institution to promote universal peace always except in time of war” (Kenneth 13). The most ironic sketch of all is that of William Jennings Bryan, “the boy orator of the Platte,” whose silver tongue chanted indiscriminately of pacifism, prohibition, and fundamentalism. The leader of the people’s crusade who became the clown in the courtroom at the monkey trial in Dayton, Tennessee, who became a Barker selling real estate in Coral Gables, Florida.

In The Big Money the biographies have a different orientation. They are illustrative of the anti-human, anti-cultural wasteland of the twenties. There is Frederick W. Taylor, the inventor of the system of industrial management that
reduces workmen to the status of machines. There is Henry Ford, chief architect of
the new society produced by the automobile, who social outlook belonged to the age
and there is William Randolph Hearst, a manipulator of men’s minds and a
vulgarizer of ideas. In Isadora Duncan and Rudolph Valentino are summed up both
the sense of pseudo-art and the intelligence enthusiasms of a vulgar public.

Three biographies only are touchstones of what is useful and admirable. They
are Thorstein Veblen, who saw through the glittering of prominent consumption and
became an academic front outcast for his pains, the Wright Brothers, who with
single-minded devotion pioneered man’s entry into the space age and Frank Lloyd
Wright, whose vision of a human functional architecture was one of the few creative
achievements of the age.

These twenty-seven portraits are in general a cruel and unsparing debunking.
They demand a reassessment of reputations in terms of a constant vision of a good
society. They strip away the window-dressing of factitious public image. Dos Passos
leads us to those criteria in a negative manner for the most part. The reader is
brought to see the hollowness, the sterility of many men of popular reputation and is
forced, often painfully, to reassess unpopular personalities whom he had assumed to
be beyond the face.

For the entire cool, precise conciseness of these biographies there is nothing
impersonal about them. They constitute the most brilliant writing Dos Passos ever
did, but that brilliance is one of polemic thrust under the cloak of objectivity. Not
only do they set up a general value system for the novel, they act as reflectors for the
fictional personages, as in the case where the narrative of Margo Dowling is
interrupted by a biography of Valentino.
Through the Newsreels, Dos Passos is able to touch on all phases of his theme. Almost half of the Newsreels in *The 42nd Parallel* contain at least one item relevant to the class struggle, about one third of them contain items, which serve to point up the overwhelming separation of the two extremes of the social and economic ladder, about one-fifth of them contain indices of the accumulation of political power by the upper classes illustrated by an economic interest in wars, revolutions, and internal troubles of foreign countries. The “Newsreels” (Clark 77) follow approximately the same pattern but reveal more emotion over Bolshevism and contain references to the economics of war and peace.

The Newsreels and the ordering of the sequence of the various sections within the individual novels give Dos Passos’s fine sense of juxtaposition excellent opportunities for irony, humour and emphasis. Among the run together headlines, for example, such items as the following:

GEORGE SMITH HANGED WITH HIS BROTHER BY MOB IN KANSAS MORQUIES OF QUEENSBERRY DEAD. (BM 54)

And the following:

BENEATH A DREAMY CHINESE MOON
WHERE LOVE IS LIKE A HAUNTING TUNE.

PROFESSOR TORTURES RIVAL. (256)

The Newsreels most obviously give the impression of everything having gone in although there has been, of course, painstaking selection. Composed of newspaper headlines, stanzas of popular songs, fragments of articles, editorials, and advertisements, they reveal what historical events were taking place at the time of the action in nearby narrative and Camera Eye sections. As the Newsreel presents
the storms, tides, currents, eddy and vagaries in human existence, they contribute to the tragic and comic dimensions of the trilogy. They also help to describe the mass media of information, which determine most Americans view of their civilization.

The period that Dos Passos describes in *U.S.A.* coincided with the rapid development of radio and the motion picture and with the emergence of propaganda as a science. Many radicals were inclined to attribute to the power of the mass media the indifference or hostility with which the great majority of the population regarded leftist programmes. The trilogy explains contemporary society partly by the fact that many men lack moral perception and moral integrity, Dos Passos’s trilogy stresses the insidious and debilitating influence of the mass media.

The Newsreel is excellent satire. Usually Dos Passos permits society, with its perverse values and practices, to condemn itself:

**RADICALS FIGHT WITH CHAIRS AT UNITY MEETING**

(Landsberg 190).

Sometimes the ‘Newsreel’ is roguishly contrived. Sometimes headlines are ironical merely in the context of the trilogy:

**MARQUIS OF QUEENSBERRY DEAD (192).**

From time to time public attention is shown to be concentrated upon particular events, such as America’s entrance into World War I. But only those members of the public who were sophisticated enough to recognize significant items amid the preceding confusion could have understood such climactic occurrences.

The Biographies recount the lives and works of such benefactors of mankind as Burbank, Edison, and Steinmetz. Steinmetz is reported to have been purchased by General Electric in 1892 along with other “valuable apparatus” from Rudolph
Eichemeyer. Andrew Carnegie, introduced under the title ‘Prince of Peace,’ is a sample of those who profited by the advance in technology and who “except in the time of war,” liked to endow institutions “to promote universal peace” (Goldman 475).

Minor C. Keith typifies the economic imperialism rampant at the turn of the century that led to the necessity of protecting American investments abroad and made war an instrument of foreign policy. Debs, Haywood, Bryan and La Follette are presented as individuals who struggled with varying degrees of insight and effectiveness to change the course of American economic, social and political growth.

Among the biographies are those of Theodore Roosevelt, the imperialist for whom Dos Passos shows a grudging admiration, J.P. Morgan, whom Dos Passos would list as one of the major causes for America’s entry into the war, and Woodrow Wilson, who began by promising “neutrality in thought and deed” and who ended by pursuing the policy of “force without stint or limit, force to the utmost.” Opposed to these three are Randolph Bourne, one of the first to see through Wilson’s “betrayal.”

Paxton Hibbin, a man who really tried to make it a “war to end war” because he believed in the new world, and Jack Reed, the tireless worker who virtually killed himself trying to make the declaration of independence come true. There are Joe Hill and Wesley Everest, to Industrial Workers of the World men whose martyrdom symbolises the loss of liberty in the United States as well as in Europe. And finally, there is the unknown soldier who, Dos Passos suggests, gave his life and his identity for the protection of Morgan investments and for a peace that could not endure because it was based upon nationalism and greed rather than upon the fourteen points
and to whom “Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquets of poppies” (Vidal. *Demotic* 73).

As in the first two volumes, the biographies are those of men whose lives or work shaped the age by their contributions to it and who helped to initiate industries that resulted in the amassing of great fortunes. There are Hearst and Insull, whose wealth and power were derived at second hand. There is the picture of Veblen whose books went so far toward explaining the social and economic jungle around him, and there are Rudolph Valentino and Isadora Duncan who contributed nothing of value and who so ably, personified the cultural absurdity of the age.

The biographies contain some of the most effective writing in the trilogy. Actually partisan essays in history, are more vigorous, less subtle, than the narrative proper. In them Dos Passos’s combatants passion is given further range. One can recall his quoting from “Ode to the West Wind” (Footman 365) in 1916 and his demanding new Shelleys; amidst thunder and lightning, a voice now reaffirms that good is white and bad is black. The biographies aim, not to depict human life in its manifold complexities, but to impose single impressions. Thuswhile they are very successful as a group, they are in fact as well as intention ancillary to the narrative. One of their purposes is to allow Dos Passos to portray important members of the owning class, virtually absent from the fiction, and a more inclusive end is to furnish extensive historical background for the narrative.

A biography of Henry Ford, for example, follows a narrative section in which Charley Anderson’s brother faces ruin as Ford victimizes his dealers. A biography of Isadora Duncan precedes and a biography of Rudolph Valentino follows the introduction of the show girl and actress Margo Dowling into the narrative. The
biography of Thorstein Veblen helps the reader to understand the society depicted in
the entire trilogy.

Dos Passos’s theories of an equitable culture appear throughout the trilogy to be those of Veblen; his summary of the economist’s views is of special interest:

He established a new diagram of a society dominated by
monopoly capital,
etched in irony
the sabotage of production by business,
the shortage of life by blind need for money profits,
. . . progress of technology. (Wagner 89)

In *The 42nd Parallel* appear biographies of four leaders of political and
economic dissent during the quarter century preceding World War I: Hay Wood, Debs, La Follette, and Bryan. Dos Passos presents the first three as heroes, the fourth as an opportunist. The biographies of Haywood, Debs, and Follette display a lack of concern over doctrinal details and a general approval of the prewarradical “movement.” La Follette was more reactionary by Marxian logic than were the representatives of the major parties, since he was attempting to preserve small business. But Dos Passos never accepted the Marxian theory of history for the United States, much less translated the theory into morals. He praises La Follette for his integrity and his combativeness. The senator is battered when he resists the oncoming of the war, in the course of which Haywood and Debs are broken and the movements which they champion destroyed. After the war La Follette is “an orator haranguing from the capitol of a lost republic” (Dekie 155). Nevertheless, the tribute to him at the conclusion of the biography is one of the most striking passages in the
trilogy.

In the case of Deb’s portrait, the continuing imagery is that of the plainspoken mid-westerner and the brotherhood of like men. The biography opens with the recitation of facts:

Debs was a railroad man, born in a weather boarded shack at Terre Haute.

He was one of ten children.

His father had come to America in a sailing ship in 49, an Alastian from Colmar; not much of a moneymaker, fond of music and needing . . . all he could do. (Bloom 104)

and moves to longer units of description as Debs becomes the important labour leader, rising to the inclusion of his own words.

The remaining biographies of The 42nd Parallel are of businessmen, industrialists, and scientists: Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Minor C. Keith, Luther Burbank and Charles Proteus Steinmetz. Dos Passos describes Keith as a Buccaneer and Blackguard. The others, with the exception of Steinmetz, are men who invent and create without realizing that as inventions to alter society, political and economic institutions change. Edison, who did at least as much to alter communications as anyone else during the era, “never worried about mathematics or the social system or generalized philosophical concepts” (Core 5).

Andrew Carnegie, exemplary giant of American enterprise, is also satirized because his great wealth grew from industries that profited from war, even his “charity” was finally, suspect:
Andrew Carnegie gave millions for peace and libraries and scientific institutes and endowments and thrift. Whenever he made a billion dollars he endowed an institution to promote universal peace always except in time of war. (42-P 278)

Censure also falls on J. Pierpont Morgan, as Dos Passos objects to the family dynasty’s accumulation of wealth and control through interlocking directorates.

At times, changes from early versions to published ones suggest that the final tone or form of a biography was unexpected. The profile of Andrew Carnegie, for example seems to have been much less satiric in its early version, or at least less effectively. As published in the novel, the piece is titled “Prince of Peace” (Foley 92) and its central irony works because Carnegie is shown investing in philanthropic enterprises only in peacetime. The heavy irony of the ending is however, absent in the early draft, which closes “whenever he had a billion dollars he invested it.” As published, the ending reads “whenever he made a billion dollars he endowed an institution to promote universal peace except in time of war” (42-P 278).

In a novel review condemning American industrialists for obtuseness rather than for villainy, Dos Passos had in 1929 stated explicitly why he honored Steinmetz. “Steinmetz felt every moment what his work meant in the terms of the ordinary human being,” he had written. “Steinmetz was not of the temperament to cash in on anything.”

Another consistent target for Dos Passos’s criticism is the agency that refuses to understand human limitation. Steinmetz’s exhaustion in the employ of a company is contrasted implicitly with Edison’s long lived productivity:
General Electric humored him, let him be a socialist,
let him keep a greenhouseful of a coctusses lit up by mercury
lights . . .

Steinmetz was the most valuable piece of apparatus General Electric had
until he wore out and died. (42-P 355)

Almost all the biographies in 1919 provide important comments on World
War I. Three are devoted to men who helped bring America into the war: Roosevelt,
Morgans and Wilson, Dos Passos portrays Roosevelt, so vivid a figure both to the
novelist and his father, as very much a charlatan. Roosevelt stands for a dangerous
triad: “righteousness readily revealed, easily recognized, and heroically pursued”
(Vidal, Demotic 79). The biography appears to assign to his foreign policy a role in
preparing the United States for war.

In one of the most masterfully written of the biographies, Dos Passos
describes the House of Morgan as thriving best in war and financial panic. The
House of Morgan was a thoroughly conventional villain for he had left in the early
1930s and without any action on its part. It is could be an ironically influential one.
J.P. Morgan had lent money to aid a reorganization of Harper and Brothers, which
published The 42nd Parallel.

Although the loan had been retired, Harper felt that it ought not to be a party
to an attack on Morgan. To Dos Passos the biography must have seemed too central
a comment on the war to forgo. Though unhappy about leaving his editor and close
friend Eugene Saxton, he changed his publisher to Harcourt, Brace and Company.

It is noteworthy that the sketch of Woodrow Wilson is the fourteenth of the
twenty-seven biographies in U.S.A., and occurs midway through the trilogy “Meester
Veelson” is Satan in Dos Passos’s epic. Serpentine features are actually attributed to him, though only by a fictional character. In a narrative section of 1919, Richard Ellsworth Savage sees the President’s face thus: “it was a greystony cold face grooved like the columns, very long under the silk hat. The little smile around the mouth looked as if it had been painted on afterwards . . .” A terrifying face Savage says, “I swear it’s a reptile’s face, not warm-blooded” (Rohrkemper, “Criticism of John Dos Passos: A Selected Checklist 255).

The biography of Wilson stresses his Calvinist upbringing and describes him as at once ambitious, ruthless, and self-righteous. Dos Passos says that Wilson did not will the war, but yielded to the financiers and Anglophiles. He betrayed liberalism and neutrality, and then he betrayed his own fourteen points.

Three biographies deal with radical writers with whose careers Dos Passos was in sympathy: John Reed, Bourne, and Hibben. One can have already said something about their influences on Dos Passos’s own career. U.S.A. does not apportion admiration among the three according to their specific beliefs, just as it does not do so for Haywood, Debs and La Follette. Dos Passos’s reformers present Reed, Bourne, Hibben as rebels or reformers and as men of unusual integrity. Reed and Bourne he pictures as full of joy and vitality, qualities which often carry a moral connotation in his work.

All three suffer in the war or in the reaction that follows: “the war,” Dos Passos explains, “was a blast that blew out all the Diogenes lanterns” (Rohrkemper, Reference 300). Bourne’s biography contains a refrain from his anarchistic work “The Sate”: “War is the health of the state.” The aphorism impressed Dos Passos
greatly. He uses it in the biography of Wilson, and he was one day to use it in criticizing Franklin Roosevelt.

Dos Passos met John Reed only once and never met Randolph Bourne. But he became a good friend of Paxton Hibben. While Hibben was more enthusiastic than he about the new Russia, the two friends agreed on most issues. Like Dos Passos, Hibben was never a Communist. It was his misfortune to be misunderstood and distrusted alike by conservatives and radicals.

The three final biographies of 1919 discuss war victims. Two are devoted to men the Industrial Workers of the World considered martyrs of the “class war,” (Pizer, Major 101) Wesley Everest and Joe Hill. The last biography considers the career of the Unknown Soldier.

In The Big Money Dos Passos’s selection of subjects for biographies helps to indicate a collapse of political and economic reform movements. Each of the two prior volumes contains several biographies of political rebels, The Big Money devotes only one, Veblen’s to such a figure. He describes Veblen as an unhappy man who died feeling that his hopes for economic reorganization had been defeated. In a magnificent image, he declares Veblen’s memorial to be “the sharp clear prism of his mind” (Thorp 196).

Dos Passos felt in 1936, had there been an advance in freedom since the war. Perhaps it was for this reason that he included in The Big Money a sketch of the erratic life of Isadora Duncan. One must go beyond the biography to appreciate her importance as a symbol. Joseph Freeman writes that among radicals and liberals she was deemed both the greatest living dancer and the symbol of the body’s deliverance from mid-Victorian taboos: “Isadora Duncan was not a dancer merely, she was a
sublime cult. Her language of motion foretold the time when life would be ‘frank and free,’ when it would proceed under the sky with happy fearlessness of faith in the beauty of its own nature” (198).

Following this biography of a genuine artist comes “Adagio Dancer,” an account of Rudolph Valentino. Dos Passos treats the motion picture star almost sympathetically but describes with skillful satire the manner in which newspapers, popular celebrities, and would be celebrities cashed in on the hysteria attending Valentino’s death.

Half of the biography describes Valentino’s funeral an occasion for unbelievable physical injury and chicanery, but the hysteria settles quickly:

In Chicago a few more people were hurt trying to see the coffin, but only made the inside pages.

The funeral train arrived in Hollywood on page 23 of the New York Times. (209)

The biography of Frank Lloyd Wright is peculiarly related to Dos Passos’s own life. Dos Passos, who had planned to study architecture, became one of the leading structural innovators among modern novelists. Wright has sought to apply new materials, skills and inventions to human needs, Dos Passos says but man’s needs include social reform.

In the biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford, and the Wright brothers, Dos Passos again stresses how little insight manufacturers and technicians have had into the heeds of the society they have been creating. Taylor, who saw nothing undesirable about men becoming cogs, erred in believing that industrialists would let him increase wages as he made gears turn more rapidly. The Wright
brothers created a machine that the world was unprepared to use sanely. Ford’s biography offers a particularly ironic example of “cultural lag”: one of the creators of mass production and hence of the modern economy, Ford clings to his mother’s percepts and thinks that the Great Depression is due to people’s gambling and getting into debt.

In the biography of William Randolph Hearst, the penultimate biography, Dos Passos turns to the waxing threat of Fascism. Since the twenties he had been taking sporadic notice of Fascism, and was increasingly apprehensive about industrialists inflicting up on the United States. Through Hearst’s control of newspapers and through his power in Hollywood, Dos Passos says, he is poisoning the minds of the least responsible portion of the public. Like Hearsts’ empire “the lowest common denominator comes to power out of the rot of democracy.” Dos Passos might have added, is at the antipodes of Walt Whitman’s vision of America.

Commenting on Dos Passos’s method of composition for *U.S.A.* Donald Pizer has postulated that, he worked on each mode as a separate entity, beginning with the biographical and narrative sections, and then alternated segments of the different forms of ironic effect. Early critical reaction to the three novels was overwhelmingly positive. Although a few reviewers faulted them as excessively pessimistic and lacking in warmth and emotion, most commentators lauded the trilogy’s innovative style and wide-ranging, satirical portrait of American Society.

This chapter has exhaustively covered a Satirical Portrait of American Society. The next chapter deals with Fictional Narrative.