SUMMING UP

The Unity of impression which is achieved in Manhattan Transfer would have been impossible, had the novel been given a structural arrangement based on anything but theme. It is always theme which determines which characters and what episode is to be presented. This method is an adaptation of a device that Dos Passos uses in most of his novels. In Three Soldiers he had shifted his angle of narration, in Rosinante to the Road Again he had alternated essay with narrative. In Manhattan Transfer he juxtaposes many concurrent narrative fragments, each with its own continuing angle of narration. It is noteworthy that if all of the narratives related from the viewpoint of any one character were put together in sequence, the result would still not constitute an adequately developed plot.

Each part is nothing without the whole and is necessary to the complete picture of the whole. The chance of mingling of the lives of the characters, an increasingly common device in the works of Dos Passos from Three Soldier, forward, is not outside the realm of possibility and is necessary if he is to approach his theme from multiple viewpoints and yet maintain coherence.

Dos Passos’s attention to unity is emphasized in that in 1924 he published a short story called “July” which concerns Jimmy Herf and his Merivale relatives. For two important reasons Dos Passos, a man never hesitated to publish anything in three or four different places, it did not include the story in Manhattan Transfer. In the first place, the setting of the story is in Virginia, which would have violated the unity of place, the story, while it adds emphasis to the contrast between the characters of
Jimmy Herf and James Merivale, really adds nothing essentially new to the character of either.

Among the more important devices are the lyric and lyric prose passages at the beginning of each chapter. These passages composed of poetry, extended images, episodes, advertisements, headlines, titles and lines of popular songs, catch phrases and serve a number of purposes. They are invariably tied to the text of the novel itself, either in the chapter to which they are appended or to another chapter, usually the proceeding or succeeding one. They sometimes serve as an expansion of the idea suggested by a chapter title. And they, together with dozens of incidental references in the text, serve to link the narrative to specific moments in time. The similarity of these passages to the Camera Eye and Newsreel sections of *U.S.A.* is obvious.

Characterization in a novel such as *Manhattan Transfer* is a special problem. Since there is a little space for extensive analysis, motivation must be compressed. Ellen’s insecurity is implicit in her desire not to grow up and in her sleeping with her knees drawn up to her chin in the before birth position, whenever she is afraid of undergoing emotional stress. The Joyce touch noted by some critics is perhaps most evident in the stream of consciousness passages such as Stan’s as he commits suicide and James Merivale’s final musings on his successful career. The use of Jimmy Herf as the idealistic individual who acts both as a central character and ordinary character. As a spokesman for the author is indicative that Dos Passos had not entirely freed himself in *Manhattan Transfer* from association with character and theme. A comparison of Herf with Martin Howe and John Andrews, however, is sufficient to reveal a strong movement toward objectivity in which the idealist is still
present but in which the characters behaviour constitutes his comment on society, and perception is left to the reader.

When Dos Passos completed *Manhattan Transfer*, he was showing more and more interest in the relation of the individual to the “machine.” He had developed three basic patterns of reaction to it. First, there is the pattern set by James Merivale who never merges his consciousness with reality and who thus never recognizes the manner in which he prostitutes himself to the dictates of the “machine.” Second, there is the pattern of Jimmy Herf who apprehends reality and who takes steps to escape from the “machine.” Third, there is the pattern of John Andrews who perceives the reality of the “machine,” who rejects existence in a world containing it, and who thus seeks escape by oblivion as a martyred idealist. Dos Passos had also learned to experiment successfully with structure. He had learned to produce symbols that were pointed and useful without being ornate or “arty” and he had increased his skill in producing images of sharp impressions with the greatest economy of words. He had, in short, established most of the techniques which he would use later.

Like many twentieth century fictional masterpieces, *Ulysses*, Faulkner’s *Yokna Patawpha Saga*, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest the history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules, but by the author’s individual adaptation of the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society. The success of works in this
convention derives not only from the depth of the author’s insight into his culture but also from the appropriateness and effectiveness of the modernistic fictional forms that he has chosen to render his vision.

*U.S.A.* can be discussed meaningfully in a number of ways. But that the final test of its value and centrality in twentieth century art lies in its nature and quality as modernistic epic American novel. Dos Passos’s model for the epic was principally Whitman as *U.S.A.* seeks to depict in full detail the “varied strains” (Pizer 184) that is the American experience. To Whitman too, can be attributed to Dos Passos’s belief in a semi mystical oneness in the multiplicity of America. He was above all the nation’s history of democratic idealism. There is also of course Whitmanesque element in the deep exploration of self in the Camera Eye, an exploration that in the end. It is an exploration of what America should be isn’t. Thus, one of the most pervasive and central sources of relatedness of unity, in *U.S.A.* is in its character as a self reflexive novel in which the Camera Eyepersona’s search for identity and his role results simultaneously in a vision of self and a vision of America that is the remainder of the trilogy.

As an epic novel, *U.S.A.* is also a historical work, with history, like autobiography, simultaneously both a subject matter and a source of experimental form. In the pseudo chronicle modes of the Newsreels and biographies Dos Passos consciously shapes a documentary base, through impressionistic selection and surreal juxtaposition, into an indictment of twentieth century American life. The underlying motive for this distortion of the ‘factual’ lies in his powerful ironic and thus satiric vision of the immense distance between verbal construct and actuality in twentieth century America. *U.S.A.* is thus throughout, and not merely in the
Newsreels and biographies, the work of a satiric moralist. His caricature of American types, beliefs, and language in the narratives through free indirect discourse, and his portrayal of journeys of the self toward self betrayal and self destruction are above all a reflection of his condemnation of the failure of America to accept the heritage of its “old words.”

Each of the four modes of the trilogy is therefore both a modernistic fictional form and a contribution toward an epic rendering of twentieth century American life. One of Dos Passos’s major achievements in the trilogy arises from his recognition that the four modes could be linked not only by their common reference to an overarching epic intent but also by constant juxtapositional allusiveness of epic matter, event, theme and symbol. *U.S.A.* is a kind of cubistic portrait of America, one in which the effect is of a multiplicity of visions rendering a single object, with every angle of vision related both to the object and to every other angle of vision. It is Dos Passos’s relentless pursuit of juxtapositional relationships in the seemingly disparate and fractured modal ordering of the trilogy that is largely responsible for the integral vision of American life in *U.S.A.*

The extraordinary holding power of *U.S.A.* for most readers is the ability of the work to compel attention throughout its extreme length and its complex variety of modes. Thus it has its origin both in the single minded intensity of Dos Passos’s vision of American life as whole and in his ability to engage us, as in the death of the self motif that runs through the narratives and the counter rebirth theme in the Camera Eye, in the deepest level of meaning of the relationship of self to community. *U.S.A.* is about a nation of individuals, and in that Dos Passos found his form and theme.
Of course, liberty is not the only idea that can not be found in Dos Passos’s works, nor are childhood and adolescent frustrations the only determining factors in his life. But the three types of libertarian anarchism, individualist, socialist, and conservative. These are fundamental to a consideration of Dos Passos’s social thought. Such libertarianism is the chief message of his life and work and it is unmistakably accompanied, and conditioned by an Oedipus Complex.

Dos Passos’s criticisms of American society though rooted in his own observations of his own era are remarkably similar to Whitman’s criticism. The political and economic history of the United States during the twenties led Dos Passos to believe that the moral state of the middle class was most unhappy. But he was too perceptive to neglect examination of radical as well as conservative society and private as well as public life.

As a result, U.S.A. offers, in addition to much vivid history, a provocative moral vision. It portrays, among other human experiences, the evil of abusing men for private or political ends, the vanity of separating art or meaningful life from the needs of fellow men, and the costs and consolations of individual integrity.

Evaluating U.S.A. some critics have complained that more Americans were morally solvent than the trilogy indicates. But artist’s visions are not socialist’s samplings. Dos Passos’s trilogy by no means depicts utter moral bankruptcy, the critics might seriously reflect upon the question of how many men are, even in the best eras, morally solvent. The critics should remember too that U.S.A. while sometimes broadly it is comical and often tragic and frequently satirical. Satire has traditionally emphasized its objects’s shortcomings in order to present a righteous ideal.
Believing above all in the responsible and purposeful action of the free individual, Dos Passos was not a man to waste in inaction the freedom, he had taken forty years to acquire, or to take lightly the duties of citizenship. However, having achieved the form he sought in his life and in his art, his energies could not take a slightly different direction. History in the service of art had completed the pattern. Henceforth Dos Passos’s efforts would be more nearly historical than artistic. Art in the service of history should confirm the pattern and maintain the flexibility of the form.

_U.S.A._ is a book at war with itself. It breathes American confidence and is always as distinct in its effect as to seem simple. But its sense of America is complex, dark and troubled. Perhaps this gives it the energy of disenchantment. Always interested in the loner, the dissenter, and the alienated. Dos Passos concludes the work with a portrait of a nameless young vagrant aimless in an American culture.

Dos Passos wanted to remain independent, something of the anarchist, in his works supporting individual freedoms against bureaucracies. Wherever he saw them, he started portraying the swirl of life in his _Chosen Country_. Granting Dos Passos his political perspectives, the reader can get from his works a remarkably broad chronicle of the twentieth-century United States.

Dos Passos has been writing over a long period, and the shifts in his political attitudes are partly the reflection of profound changes in the whole political situation, both at home and abroad. Moreover, it is the very generosity and acting of his protests against injustice and inhumanity. Whenever and wherever they may occur, have sometimes led him into intellectual inconsistencies. All of his work, however, is informed by a deep attachment to a conception of America which it seems fair to call
both Agrarian and Jeffersonian. In all his books the institution or the aggregation is
the enemy, bigness is evil. The destruction or erosion of individual integrity and
dignity are tragic and not less. Because this is seen to be the fate of everyman in a
modern urban industrial society.

_182_ 

_U.S.A._ nonetheless remains the crucial text for any attempt at penetrating the
deep center of Dos Passos’s artistic life. The distinctive formal devices of the three
novels contribute decisively to their meaning. The Camera Eye, which, despite the
ambiguous suggestion of its title, represents the survival within the total fictional
world of the individual subjective consciousness, remains formally isolated. The
various fictional structures of _U.S.A._ Newsreels, Biographies, Camera Eye, and
Narrative sections are discontinuous. Such a form enacts Dos Passos’s sense of the
fragmented nature of the individual social and political experience of modern
America. The Camera Eye may allow the individual sensibility a continued
existence. But it is an ineffectual existence, cut off from the collective reality that
encompasses it. It is as though Dos Passos had been forced to agree that the gap
between public and private experience is now unbridgeable.

Only the tension between the two survivors, in different forms, to provide
one of the trilogy’s major sources of imaginative power. Perhaps what is wrong with
Dos Passos’s later fiction is simply, that tension finally disappears. The individual
sensibility is subsumed at last within an asserted collective historical experience
however different in its nature from that postulated by the earlier fiction.

Dos Passos had been never a participant but always a mere onlooker hungry
for participation, so that he had to depend only on observation from outside, it would
explain much. But such is not the fact; he took part in the World War and in the
Sacco-Vanzetti case and other activities. He has been no mere spectator of the world. Moreover, he must have powerful and lasting purposes and emotions to have written his books. It is hardly credible that he has done so little thinking as he makes out.

Dos Passos’s self-portrait must be playfully incomplete, if only because he is a real man. But it is possible that he may have chosen to suppress something in himself and in his writing. He may have acquired a distrust of thought and feeling and will which has forced him back upon sensations as the only reliable part of experience. Some such process seems to have taken place in many writers contemporary with him, resulting in a kind of spiritual drought, and in a fear lest they betray themselves or be betrayed by life. Perhaps the disillusionment of the war had something to do with it, but more probably a partial view and experience of their present society are responsible.

Dos Passos on the whole I am all for the trend towards American self-consciousness in current writing. Of course any good thing gets run into the ground. I think there is enough real democracy in the very mixed American tradition to enable us, with courage and luck, to weather the social transformations that are now going on without losing all our liberties or the humane outlook that is the medium in which civilizations grow. The reaction to family ways of thinking is a healthy defense against the total bankruptcy of Europe.

Briefly and crudely, this cultural tradition may be said to consist of the following beliefs, which are not so much formulations of theory or principles of action as they are emotional tendencies. The collective aspects of life may be distinguished from the individual aspects, that the collective aspects are basically important and are good. The individual aspects are, or should be, of small interest
and that they contain a destructive principle. The fate of the individual is determined by social forces, that the social forces now dominant are evil. There is a conflict between the dominant social and political forces and other, better, rising forces, that it is certain or very likely that the rising forces will overcome the now dominant ones.

U.S.A. conforms to some but not to all of these assumptions. The lack of any protagonists in the trilogy and the equal attention given to many people, have generally been taken to represent Dos Passos’s recognition of the importance of the collective idea. The book’s historical purpose indicates the author’s belief in social determination.

Dos Passos is primarily concerned with morality, with personal morality. The national, collective and 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 supply the opportunity for personal moral action. But, if Dos Passos is a social historian, as he is so frequently said to be, he is that in order to be a more complete moralist. It is of the greatest significance that for him the atmosphere of social breakdown is not suffering through economic deprivation but always moral degeneration through moral choice.

The Big Money, published at the height of the nineteen thirties. The story of the twenties comes to a close, but even more does it bring the story of the lost generation to a close, that generation which has stood at the peak of modern time in America. Here in U.S.A. in the most ambitious of its entire works, it is a measure of the national life, its conception of history and it is a history of struggle that is vain, of failure that is unalterable, and of final despair. There is strength in U.S.A. Dos
Passos’s own strength, the strength of the craft that can weld so many lives together and make them live so intensely before us as they pass. But for the rest it is a brilliant tomb, and one of the coldest and most mechanical of tragic novels. By the time the researcher has come to the end of *U.S.A.* the researcher begins to feel what Edmund Wilson could detect in Dos Passos before it appeared, that “his disapproval of capitalistic society becomes distaste for all the human beings who compose it.”

The protest, the lost-generation the researcher has taken all of them into his vision, he has given us his truth. Yet if it intones anything affirmative in the end, it is the pronouncement of young Brownson, “There is no such thing as reforming the mass without reforming the individuals who compose it.” It is this conviction, rising to a bitter crescendo in *Adventures of a Young Man*. This is an unyielding protest against modern society on the part of a writer. He has now turned back to the roots of “our storybook democracy” in his works like *The Ground We Stand On*. His projected life of Thomas Jefferson that separates Dos Passos from so many of the social novelists who follow after him in the thirties.

Dos Passos speaks of sanctity, they speak of survival. Where he lives by the truth of the Camera Eye. They live in the whirling mass of that society which Dos Passos has always been able to measure, with hatred but not in panic, from the outside. Dos Passos is the first of the new naturalists; *U.S.A.* is the dominant social novel of the thirties. But it is not merely a vanished social period that it memorializes. It is individualism, Protestantism, a power of personal disassociation, which seems almost to speak from another world.

Dos Passos comes to the same conclusion as Fitzgerald. The meaning of America, its initial promise, has been lost as Americans have gone whoring after
false gods. The potentiality of America is the possibility of creating the good society. It has been lost as Americans have fastened their ambitions on some goal, The Big Money. Not only do both see a perversion of the ideal meaning of America. Both associate that ideal with greenness, meadows the vast fields of the republic and place the historical possibility of realizing. That ideal somewhere in the past, in some unalterable moment whose memory haunts the meaninglessness of a debased and immoral present. Both are sad books, one a mournful song, the other outraged despair.

The importance of the individual to Dos Passos is underlined by his use of the Biographies, of which there are eight in The 42nd Parallel. Only two are leaving hostile those of Minor C. Keith and Andrew Carnegie. Though if the last line were omitted from the piece on Carnegie it would be a bare collection of facts about a very rich man. Bryan is treated with a faintly compassionate satire in 1930. He was only five years dead, but he stood, quaintly, for a much older America. Debs and La Follette took the risk of speaking out against the “interests.” The men of practical genius forced to mortgage their talents to the financial system. Each of these men is revealed to have some secret flaw or failure what he has pointed out seems to possess some superhuman quality. They are all overshadowing the bare and tired lives of the fictional characters.

Dos Passos as he appears in the Camera Eye, they furnish a living reproach to the modern Americans who walk blindly through the novels of narrative portions. The lesson may be partly historical that the age gave free rein to the drives of the forceful individual and partly. Political that in a democracy only a few can expect to shine. But the principal effect is to suggest a contrast between those who dominated
circumstances and those who are pushed about by chance or social currents. Even Moorehouse, the shrewd, reasonable opportunist is a flattered doll beside Bryan or Carnegie.

The author’s not, however, proposing that historical progress depends on the activity of great men. Most of his biographical subjects were alive during the period covered by *The 42nd Parallel*. But their achievements generally belong to the century before. The artistic value of the Biographies is to suggest the importance in him especially of the individual and the variety of ways in which individuality can be expressed. There is little mention, for instance, of the advantages they drew from favorable circumstances or of how far each man represented a movement. La Follette is described as “a willful man expressing no opinion but his own,” whereas Wilson has called him one of a “group of willful men,” the Congressional rump of anti-war insurgents.

The contrast is deepened by this emphasis, and the society in which Mac, Moorehouse and the others exist is given the appearance of a great. Following his creative movements, Dos Passos adopts the point of views of the dismayed who, observing the disaster at first hand but unable to determine its cause, runs helplessly about. The crowded yet atomized world which he depicts a world excellently realized through many techniques of the novel is not a world explicable as the product of strict historical laws. In refusing to be a social theorist, while at the same time using the observable facts from which social theorists would draw their conclusions.

Dos Passos remains faithful to his vision. By throwing together the individual in all the patient and commonplace detail of his life-effort. The collective organism
examined through its dominant beliefs and representative figures, and the subjective awareness of memory. He creates a connection that refuses to explain or explicitly to judge, but which displays with energy and seriousness of the developing life of a civilisation.

Dos Passos set out to write, in the long of the depression. A novel is not quite existing in its action that would be faithful to the recent data of American history and to the rules of his own judgement. To establish a continuity with *The 42nd Parallel* to show fluently and boldly the reflexive indices of a world scale and a number of individual lives. Despite the superficial monotony of the procedure he chose, with its stress on the commonplace and relentless accumulation of detail. He has more than a world that is substantial, concrete, and recognizably real. He has succeeded in registering a vital concern about the conditions of life, for which twentieth-century America stands as a universal emblem the horror of being manipulated by an impersonal and powerful fate, the temptations of compromise, and the awesome venality of moneyed power.

The rhetoric of radical dissent is an inseparable part of the content of *U.S.A.*. It is relevantly there as a facet of the total reality surveyed, but additionally as a major element of structure and meaning. The most prominent of the fictional characters such as Mac, Moorehouse, Eveline, Savage, Joe Williams, Charley Anderson and Mary French lead lives that they are heavily touched by defeat. They are not all losers of the same kind in their own terms; succeed, but only at the cost of denying every worthwhile human impulse. Others, Joe particularly experience nothing but misery and injustice. Losing is so universal that it overlays the “two nations” theme. Yet one of the means of dramatizing that boundless gulf between the legendary
promise of what life in America ought to be and the ugly facts is to show the two in suspenseful interaction.

As the trilogy progresses through its three stages the reader is enabled to contrast anagrammatic defeat and disappointment with the national dream of individual opportunity: the liberal… dream of inspirational war aims: and the super national dream of the libertarian future. In this fashion, the lesson that life can never live up to the expectations men place in it. That men themselves cannot live up to their own aspirations. That the world cannot be meaningfully interpreted for our comfort emerges powerfully from the aesthetic data of the trilogy.

In the rhetoric of *U.S.A.* radical dissent contributes especially in *The Big Money*. A provision for judging and placing the efforts of the various characters in their blind and futile struggles to redeem the absurdity of the world they inhabit. It also helps to substitute for the lifeless of *Manhattan Transfer*. The writer’s protest against the transformation he must accept a protest self-contained in the pages of the trilogy itself. For this reason, among others, *U.S.A.* stands as a major work of defiant pessimism.

Particularly significant of this division and confusion is the fact that most of the central characters are sexually frigid, inhibited, deprived, or frustrated. Margo Dowling is unfeeling. Janey is terrified of sex. Eleanor Stoddard is apparently quite frigid. Daughter is confused and repressed, and her sudden passion for Dick Savage causes her destruction. Mary French is completely inhibited and neurotic. Where the sexual life is presumed to be satisfactory, Dos Passos ignores it, but with the others a substantial preoccupation of the author is to explore the fears, the desolation, and the guilty aimlessness, which he relates to the sense of being unloved.
The form of this trilogy is a perfect embodiment of this division between nature and spirit. The main blocks of the narrative portray characters groping in a hopeless jungle of sensation and instinct, whereas the Camera Eye cries its somewhat irresponsible protest against the retreat from the American Dream, denouncing the wrong culprit as often as the right one.