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Dos Passos and His *U. S. A.*

Arnold Goldman

THOMAS WOLFE, William Faulkner told Malcolm Cowley, "took the most chances... I come next and then Dos Passos." An earlier remark can be used to gloss the judgment: Wolfe was "trying to say everything, the world plus 'I' or filtered through 'I' or the effort of 'I' to embrace the world in which he was born and walked a little while and then lay down again, into [sic] one volume."¹ Third-place John Dos Passos' attempt to say "everything... in one volume" is the epic trilogy *U.S.A.* "The world in which he was born and walked a little while" is the American nation, and his fiction one of those books which Richard Poirier has recently called "scale models" of America, structures for "housing" images "of the creation of America itself."²

Such works constitute a significant near-genre of American writing.³ Howard Mumford Jones, in *O Strange New World*, has interesting reflections on Captain John Smith's *The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia* (1612) as a "prose Aeneid," where "Aeneas-Smith transplants to unknown shores a divinely guided people and is opposed by Powhatan, like Turnus, a hero of equal eminence."⁴ It is notable that in this "first" of American epics, it is the epic as a national allegory which is in the foreground, Virgil's *Aeneid* being a paradigm for epics whose tradition of interpretation involves the allegorization of the origins, transmission, present state and future condition of a chosen people. Leo Marx, in the first issue of this journal, speaks of works embodying "ideas of the genesis and meaning of the new nation."⁵

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4 Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World* (New York, 1964), p. 238. *The Proceedings*, "though coming from several hands... was put together, whether by Smith or under his supervision, in twelve books" (ibid.).
The American historical epic recapitulates in fairly short order the Old World’s more leisurely progress. Colonial American epic includes Smith, Bradford’s *Journal* and Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), whose Virgilian intentions are announced in the opening paragraph of his General Introduction:

1. I write the Wonders of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the American Strand: And, assisted by The Hole Author of that Religion, I do, with all Conscience of Truth itself, Report the Wonderful Displays of His infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath *Irradiated* an Indian Wilderness.

Mather, like Edmund Spenser a century before, justifies a polity by tracing and asserting the legitimacy of its tradition. The very existence of the epic then constitutes evidence that the polity is sound, in that it is capable of producing such a capstone of literary culture. Further, the poet speaks as the voice not merely of a creative individual but indistinguishably from the national ethos itself.

Peter Gay, in *A Loss of Mastery*, well notes, however, the gradual disenchantment which crept over Puritan historians, even from the first. Thus, a mixed note was present from the beginning, although a revivification of exuberance owes itself to the Second Beginning of 1776-83, providing an impetus that lasts clearly into work of Bancroft and Parkman.⁶

A mixed dubiety is present in Hawthorne, who early prepared himself in a series of short fictions⁷ and a child’s history of America to 1776 (*The Whole History of Grandfather’s Chair*) for a historical novel he never wrote and to which he bade farewell in the long preface to *The Scarlet Letter*. Each of these early stories encapsulates a vision of the transition from foreign (British) to native (American) rule in America. Superficially celebrating the establishment of a characteristic American ethos, the stories covertly expose the high cost of that Foundation, liabilities which lurk in the national heart like his

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⁶ W. K. Wimsatt has suggested that the energies which for centuries went into the conception of poetic epics flowed in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries into the channel of history-writing. The appearance of the historical novel, so called, bears a relation to such a process, in its “classic” form portraying the transition from one form of society to another via the mixed sympathies of a central fictional character (e.g. Scott’s Waverley, Thackeray’s Henry Esmond). See Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, ch. 1.

⁷ Including “The Gray Champion,” “Tales of the Province House,” “Endicott and the Red Cross,” “The May-pole of Merry Mount” and “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux.”
bosom serpent. Hawthorne's overtly bland child's history has a stark three-part dialectic: the American Puritans were principled but without a sense of civilization; their successors, the English governors of America, had a sense of civilization but lacked principle. With the Revolution, the new, true Americans would hopefully embody a synthesis of positive qualities. But Hawthorne's "grandfather" breaks off with the War itself.

If Hawthorne set a story in the past so that the real historical past could contain the potentiality of a future, Whitman moved unerringly to convert all time to future time. In his treatment the epic validation of America was to be found not so much in her past as her present and not so much in the present as the future. His key term is, of course, "democratic vistas," a neat intersection of space (the vastness of the national territory) and time (the promise of the future). It is an immense and "American" epic reversal: justification by potential. But Whitman's "storybook democracy," in Dos Passos' phrase for it, appears in retrospect to suffer progressively from what Wittgenstein, speaking of the late works of philosophers, called "loss of problems." If Dos Passos in his recent incarnation as a narrative historian has settled almost precisely for a storybook democracy, the guttering flame of hope that something of it might exist and survive in an actual historical present ("the world into which he was born") underlies the agonised achievement of U.S.A.

Dos Passos' trilogy forms part of this epic tradition but as a reversal of the moral "foundation" of nation: we are shown the "origins" of modern industrial and business America and their growth to preponderance at the precise expense of that vital flame of civilization whose presumptive triumph earlier epics herald. In U.S.A. foundations are discovered to be built on sand. What is transmitted is the parody of a civilized ethos. The villains triumph, undergo apocalyptic catastrophe and yet triumph. As in Pope's Dunciad, the final vision is hardly mock-epic.

Dos Passos' novels before U.S.A. provide clues to his developing epic intentions. One Man's Initiation — 1917 (1920) contains a strikingly depersonalized narrative voice. The depersonalization appears to grow with the effects of the shock of war upon the principals. Characters become passive in the face of a reality for which their culture has given them neither preparation nor resources to meet. Their personalities are squeezed out, leaving the field to the enormity of the external events themselves. A like registration continues into U.S.A. where it has at times been disparagingly termed Dos Passos' inability to create "living" characters. Something more important is involved, a sense of the environment as not merely hostile to individual effort but
overwhelming any character or characters' ability to establish their sphere of free choice within it. Dos Passos found this first in the War and he detailed its persistence into the 'Twenties, as a testimony to the limits of national spiritual recovery. The mode is a parody of epic impersonality, where the central consciousness is also less that of an individual than of a social circumstance.

A second element in Dos Passos' writing which eventually reached an epic formulation in *U.S.A.* lies in his sense of the balance and differentiation of fictional characters. The divided enchained hero and his freer mentor are an endemic grouping in American literature — see, e.g., Kerouac's *On the Road.* The fictional protagonists and the non-fictional subjects of *U.S.A.*'s "biographies" are versions of this. This tutelage is crossed in *Three Soldiers* (1921) with a stratification intended to encompass the national response to war, in terms of both social class and geography. There are three principals, immigrant's son, Eastern student and farmer: "That's goddam funny," says Chrisfield, "You're from the Coast, this feller's from New York, an' ah'm from old Indiana, right in the middle." The excess formalization of the demonstration, as the war confirms in each weaknesses which under other conditions might have been held in check, nevertheless underscores Dos Passos' determination to make an all-American canvass. The three "representative" soldiers end up diseased, broken or deserters in a pointed just-so story of the nation's blue-eyed pride, the weaknesses sectional or class liabilities.

The problem which dogs the main character, John Andrews, is a version of the major paradox of *U.S.A.* Andrews, a would-be composer, seeks a creative, musical expression of the humiliation he feels at having his freedom ground into regimented mechanicalness, its symbol an obsessive memory of monotonous window-washing at boot camp in America. How could he transform

the rhythm that had come to him, that expressed the dusty boredom, the harsh constriction of warm bodies full of gestures and attitudes and aspiration into moulds, like the moulds toy soldiers are cast in.

(Each of the sections of *Three Soldiers* has an image of mechanization as its title.) A broken deserter, he struggles unsuccessfully to complete his opera "The Body and Soul of John Brown." Brown, he reflects, is the one man who may have found "freedom by marching for it."

Dos Passos appears to have discovered Joyce's *Ulysses* in a rush in 1922, when "Coming through Paris I bought an early copy . . . [and] read the book at one gulp . . . . "8 After refurbishing a novel begun

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earlier at Harvard, Dos Passos proceeded to attempt to do New York City "at one gulp," and *Manhattan Transfer* owes much, including some of its rhetoric, to Joyce's Dublin. It spans much the same period as *U.S.A.* — twenty-odd years from the turn of the century — and hints at the notion of an historical epoch — a notion which will be brought to greater precision in *U.S.A.*, from the newspaper headline hopefulfulness of "NATION GREETS CENTURY'S DAWN" to the multiple disasters of "SACCO AND VANZETTI MUST DIE" and "WALL STREET STUNNED." In *Manhattan Transfer*, however, there is an inherent deflection from the civic or national towards the personal. In its equivocal final gesture Jimmy Herf, like *Ulysses'* Stephen Dedalus, half walks and is half spewed out of the New York juggernaut. A few years later, his successor, "Vag," last of *U.S.A.*'s capsule — and hitherto non-fictional — biographies, will have less to look forward to.

Edmund Wilson was in these years keenly aware of the direction in which Dos Passos was moving. Of *Airways, Inc.*, the play which immediately preceded *The 42nd Parallel*, Wilson wrote:

With great ingenuity, Dos Passos had assembled on a single suburban street corner representatives of most of the classes and groups that go to make up our society. We concentrate upon the life of a single middle-class household, but this is submerged in a larger world: its fate is inextricably bound up with a current real-estate boom; a strike that eventually gives rise to a Sacco-Vanzetti incident; and the promotion of a commercial aviation company . . . Dos Passos has succeeded in producing the illusion that behind the little suburban street-corner . . . lies all the life of a great American city — all the confusion of America itself . . . Dos Passos has also given the household . . . an extension in time as well as in space: he has provided a chorus of two old men, an American inventor and a Hungarian revolutionist, whose role is to relate what we see to what has gone before in history and to what may be expected to come after. [Shores of Light, Vintage ed., pp. 429-30]

That *Airways, Inc.* contains many of the basic elements of *U.S.A.* is thus obvious, and many of its methods as well. Only the centrality of that one middle-class family is broken, and the dozen-odd principals of *U.S.A.* exist in a relationship to one another and to the authentic heroes, dupes and villains who construct Twentieth-century America (the biographies) which is more complexly organized and more sophisticated than in his previous work.

The principal characters in *U.S.A.* are for the most part — with one interesting exception — subordinate figures in the larger story of America to the "portraits of . . . real people," and it is importantly true that to a greater degree than most novelists Dos Passos allows
historical events — the outbreak of War, the Peace Conference — to be responsible for the movements of his characters, the basic shapes of their lives and in turn of his fiction. The “portraits” are strategically chosen as part of a historical progress and the fictional characters are a constant echo of them at one remove. A character is often the mundane representative of more than one portrait — Isadora Duncan and Rudolph Valentino “sponsor” Margo Dowling, pilot Charley Anderson is a kind of test-case as to how well the talents and interests of Edison, Steinmetz, F. W. Taylor, Ford, the Wrights and even Veblen can find a place in the lower texture of American business life.

No biographical figure of a “public relations counsel,” however, is fitted into the pantheon over J. Ward Moorehouse’s head. Moorehouse is one of those giants, and gradually he ascends to that level, leaving behind Dick Savage in the same relation to him as, for instance, fictional actress Margo Dowling to Isadora Duncan. Dos Passos met the Rockefellers’ publicity chief Ivy Lee in Moscow in 1928, and, as he recently told his Paris Review interviewer, based Moorehouse on Lee.9

In a 1930 letter to The New Republic, Dos Passos suggested that only an “Eddie Bernays or Ivy Lee” could head off a national repression of Communists, “in the inconceivable possibility that enough money could be collected to hire one of these super-public-relations counsels and put him on the job.”10

“The public relations counsel” is very nearly the presiding genius over the whole trilogy, and in any case The 42nd Parallel is decidedly his novel. The bulk of it concerns himself, his mistress, and his secretary — and their pasts. (The two flanking panels concern the workingman Mac and the technician Anderson). Moorehouse represents the interposition of advertising between worker and boss as a means of selling capitalism to the American people. The “plot” of U.S.A. is, then, in broadest terms, the struggle between the Party and the Bosses for control of America, in which the public relations counsel steps in — quite sincerely believing himself to be without ideology — and hands Labor over to Capital:

a strike came on at Homestead and there were strikers killed by the mine guards and certain writers from New York and Chicago who were sentimentals began to take a good deal of space in the press with articles flaying

9 In The Best Times, Dos Passos says that Lee plied him with “tales of his early life” and used to “waylay me in the lobby” of the Hotel Moscow for the purpose (p. 178). See Paris Review, No. 46 (Spring, 1969), pp. 157-58.
the steel industry. . . . Ward said that what was necessary was an entirely new line in the publicity industry. It was the business of the industry to educate the public by carefully planned publicity extending over a term of years. [I, 229]\(^\text{11}\)

Ward works with a new “joint information bureau for the entire [steel] industry,” until he begins to covet his own agency,” sure that he could make it the biggest in the country, especially with this new unexploited angle of the relations between capital and labor” (I, 231). In his new capacity he approaches representatives — like himself, self-appointed — of Capital and Labor, already sold on his own rhetoric:

“Capital and labor,” he began in a slow and careful voice as if dictating, “. . . those two great forces of our national life neither of which can exist without the other one growing further and further apart . . . one reason for this unfortunate state of affairs has been the lack of any private agency that might fairly present the situation to the public. [I, 244]

As we watch Ward Moorehouse going from success to success in The 42nd Parallel we may be as close as we ever get in U.S.A. to seeing the forces behind an actual shift in American life. Generally, the fictional characters are always acting in a medium which is beyond them: in the end they cannot even embody the categories of American life they may aspire to. (Fenian McCrery, the “Mac” of the opening section, may be Wobbly by nature, but his domestic entanglements are too much for him to live those natural principles out). The irony of them is precisely an inability to bring into being the more complete life-styles of the biographical figures. Even these latter, the actual “moulders” of America, are by-and-large enfolded in a process they do not understand, embodying only a naivete which makes them — Steinmetz is perhaps a clear example — puppets in the hands of still more nameless forces.

In any case, if there is no Ivy Lee in the biographical portraits, there are a number of figures with what John H. Wrenn calls “a special facility with the tools of language,” some “misusers of their gift” — Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, Hearst — some who made the “effort to restore the meanings, rather than to exploit the phraseology of American democracy”\(^\text{12}\) — Debs, Bill Haywood, La Follette, John Reed, Randolph Bourne, Paxton Hibben, Joe Hill, Thorstein Veblen. This concern with the use and misuse of language and rhetoric, and

\(^{11}\) Volume and page references to U.S.A. are to the 1963 Houghton, Mifflin edition. All italics are mine.

with their essential connections with the life of democratic principles, is written all over U.S.A. It comes to a climax in the 50th autobiographical “Camera Eye” section, when autobiography and the fiction merge and —

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul. [III, 413]

Dos Passos told the first Congress of American Writers that we live in a time “when terms are continually turning inside out and the names of things hardly keep their meaning from day to day,” — when “it’s not possible to write two honest paragraphs without stopping to take crossbearings on every one of the abstractions that were so well ranged in ornate marble niches in the minds of our fathers.” “The words,” he said, “are old and dusty and hung with the dirty bunting of a thousand crooked orations, but underneath they are still sound.”

There is a further problem involved when the chronicler of present times must himself fashion honest paragraphs out of “a thousand crooked orations,” but Dos Passos' investment in the “public relations counsel” as a potential (and actual) force in American society is clear. Moorehouse's ascension to the status of the biographical figures, however, is not without its dark moment. The Declaration of War is necessary, in The 42nd Parallel, to rescue him from a shaky financial situation. The Armistice then presents him with an even larger opportunity to “sell” the American public.

Dos Passos' grip on Moorehouse, on his use as an “explanation” for America, rather wanes from henceforth. For all his entourage at the Crillon it is not quite clear what the nature of his commitment to Wilson's aims is. Wilson's failure to secure American participation in the League of Nations plays a negligible role, and we are given no picture of any subsequent adaptation by Moorehouse to the politics of isolation. From the moment, then, that he ceases to reflect any hope for an altered America however capable of perversion, Dos Passos appears to lose interest in his dealings. This may be an indication of the trilogy's real energy for dealing with hope, however mishapen or betrayed. Moorehouse is replaced by Dick Savage, deflected from commitment to literature into a career in “publications.”

As the sensitive young man of 1919, Dos Passos' third novel of the Great War, Savage undergoes many of the stresses of the protagonists of the earlier novels. He toys with the notion of making his separate

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peace, of bolting the army to Spain, but finds he can't stand out against the mass pressure, which leads him and all the other main characters to Paris at the time of the Peace Conference. It is not so much the Armistice or the Versailles Treaty which forms the focal point of 1919, though, as the projected events of May 1, 1919, the climax — anti-climax as it turns out — of much earlier preparation.

In One Man's Initiation — 1917 Dos Passos was already showing interest in the rumor / fantasy that ordinary soldiers had or would throw down their arms, turn their backs on the front and march homewards to Paris and Berlin and Moscow, compelling the politicians to end the hostilities. That novel culminates with speculation on the Bolshevik uprising of 1917, about which Dos Passos later wrote:

Having no knowledge of the society we had grown up in, or of the traditional attitudes that had produced in us the very ethical bent which made war and tyranny abhorrent to us, we easily fell prey to the notion that by a series of revolutions like the Russian the working people of the world could invent out of their own heads a reign of peace and justice. It was an illusion like the quaint illusion the early Christians had that the world would come to an end in the Year One Thousand.

In reporting a conversation we had with a congenial bunch of Frenchmen one night in a little town where the division was en repos, I tried to get some of this down on paper . . . Reading it over I find the chapter scrappy and unsatisfactory, but I am letting it stand because it still expresses, in the language of the time, some of the hopes of young men already marked for slaughter in that year of enthusiasm and hopes beyond other years, the year of the October Revolution.14

The penultimate episode of Three Soldiers also occurs on May Day, 1919, and ends with two American deserters waiting for the M.P.'s at the door. There is a symbolic relation between the failure of John Andrews — and Dick Savage in 1919 — to bolt and the failure of the French to strike for the Revolution.

In U.S.A. a general workingman's strike is broached momentarily in The 42nd Parallel in connection with the 1905 Russian uprising, first in Newsreels IV and V — GENERAL STRIKE NOW THREATENS. BLOODY SUNDAY IN MOSCOW, STRIKE MAY MEAN REVOLT IN RUSSIA, EMPEROR NICHOLAS II FACING REVOLT OF EMPIRE GRANTS SUBJECTS LIBERTY — and then by Gus Hall, who introduces Fenian McCreary to "socialism": "All you'd need would be a general strike and have the workers refuse

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to work for a boss any longer . . . God damn it, if people only realized how friggin’ easy it would be . . . ” (I, 49-51, 55). Nothing more is heard of this until 1919, however, when the references mount to a crescendo, and blend in the ultimate strike, a world “red” revolution.

Don Stevens, reporter and Party member, introduces to Eveline Hutchins and the narrative news of “the revolution in Russia” as the “beginning of the world-wide social revolution” (II, 116). From that point references to the laying down of arms, the Bolshevik rising in the West and a General Strike as its inception point to “the first test of strength . . . on the first of May” (II, 276, Stevens again). Ironically, the hopes of the “I” of the Camera Eye (No. 39), that the day will be “the first morning of the first day of the first year” — and here again “the world in which . . . he walked” and fiction merge — are undercut as we watch The Day over the shoulder of the marginal Eveline Hutchins (II, 278-84). She can absorb the sense of “tenseness in the air,” but her observations — that “everything seemed good-natured and jolly” (280) — trivialize what becomes in any case a pathetic letdown, and two old men playing chess mumble into their drinks about “the youngsters . . . what had they done? . . . nothing” (282). Dos Passos himself, the Camera Eye, “walked all over town general strike no buses no taxicabs,” and saw “Anatole France in a white beard placards MUTILES DE LA GUERRE” (346): Dos Passos, like Edmund Wilson in To the Finland Station (I quote Wilson), “followed the tradition of the bourgeois revolution to its disintegration in Anatole France.”

The dialectical relationship between the General Strike and the titular notion of “the big money” is set when the latter phrase makes its debut in the trilogy, halfway through 1919:

Joe [Williams, in Union Square.] got to talking with two guys from Chicago who were drinking whisky with beer chasers. They said this war-talk was a lot of bushwa propaganda and that if working stiffs stopped working in munitions factories making shells to knock other working stiffs’ blocks off with, there wouldn’t be no goddam war. Joe said they were goddam right but look at the big money you made. [II, 149]

Translated into the analytical poetry of the biographical essays this reappears in Thorstein Veblen’s interpretation of American history, perhaps the closest paradigm for the “history” in U.S.A. Veblen, says Dos Passos,

. . . established a new diagram of a society dominated by monopoly capital, etched in irony

15 Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station (London, 1960) p. 72.
the sabotage of production by business,
the sabotage of life by blind need for money profits,
pointed out the alternatives: a warlike society strangled by the
bureaucracies of the monopolies . . .
or a new matter-of-fact commonsense society dominated by the needs of the
men and women who did the work and the incredibly vast possibilities for
peace and plenty offered by the progress of technology.

These were the years of Debs's speeches, growing laborunions, the I.W.W.
talk about industrial democracy: these years Veblen still held to the hope
that the working class would take over the machine of production . . . . [III, 89]

This hope is also the hope of The 42nd Parallel. It is snuffed out by
the coming of the War, when Dos Passos, following Veblen, writes
that "American democracy was crushed" as a result. The 42nd
Parallel chronicles the hope and defeat of native American socialism —
Debs, Big Bill Heywood, and Bob La Follette in its pantheon,
Lawrence, Mass., and Paterson, N.J., stations of the cross. The hope
and defeat of an international revolutionary movement structures
1919; and The Big Money displays the hope and defeat of Veblen's
vestigial postwar dream:

He still had a hope that the engineers, the technicians, the nonproflteers
whose hands were on the switchboard might take up the fight where the
working class had failed. He helped form the Technical Alliance. His last
hope was the British general strike. [III, 90]

Charley Anderson plays an exemplary role in The Big Money,
deflected from "just a mechanic" to the "boy wizard of aviation
financing," from "the instinct of workmanship" to "the profit motive." Anderson
Carries the life and death of that technocratic hope and
ideal to which Dos Passos held as late as his address to the American
Writers' Congress in April, 1935. Writ large in The Big Money is the
final failure of the Veblenian technocratic dream, a prepotent hope
for a third force in American life. Charley Anderson's only decent
piece of work is significantly enough called the "Askew-Merrit
starter." His fatal auto accident occurs when the "starter" of his auto-
mobile fails (III, 330).

The last massing of the forces of the Left occurs over the "death-
watch" of Sacco and Vanzetti. Mary French, a social worker turned
strike organizer, finds "Stevens . . . still trying to line up a general
strike [for Sacco and Vanzetti] . . . . 'Failed again,' she said bitterly"
(III, 409). When the protesters are "clapped off the streets" on the
night of the execution, "history" is repeating itself in an outcome
which parallels 1919's May Day in Paris.
The finale of *The Big Money* pulls in two directions. With the failure of the Left, its total alienation matched by its total powerlessness; and with "Power Superpower," the story of how a jury wouldn't convict Samuel Insull (the only event in *U.S.A.* which refers to "the Roosevelt administration"), we seem to be witnessing the triumph of "the big money." On the other hand, the Market Crash itself, and the "crack-ups" of many of the major fictional characters — Charley Anderson, Ward Moorehouse, Eveline Hutchins; even screen star Margo Dowling is rumored to be on the way out — imply an inherent self-destructiveness in the money society. Dos Passos showed himself aware of the paradox, which keeps *U.S.A.* from having any very clear outcome, when in answer to V. F. Calverton's question, "Do you believe that American capitalism is doomed to inevitable failure and collapse?" he wrote, "Sure, but the question is when. We've got the failure, at least from my point of view. What I don't see is the collapse."16

Some sign of the strain can be perceived in the portrait of Frank Lloyd Wright, in Wright's projection of "Usonia . . . the broad teeming band of this new nation across the enormous continent between Atlantic and Pacific" (III, 386). The inflation of the rhetoric is telling: "to imagine the new city you must blot out every ingrained habit of the past, build a nation from the ground up with the new tools" (387). How then use the materials of the old? How, to alter the metaphor, construct the positive epic out of the contemporary "history" in "the speech of the people" — a speech where "terms are continually turning inside out"? The paradox involved is John Andrews' in *Three Soldiers*, who thought that if he "could once manage to express all that misery in music, and could shove it far down into my memory, I should be free to live my own existence."17

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As an epic history, *U.S.A.* chronicles progressive disenfranchisement from Twentieth Century America, the reverse of an epic justification of a country through its hero and its history. As an historical novel it faces a transition which inhibits value from any field of action. Its overall strategy is similar to those great once-only romantic poems


17 See also Dos Passos' statement of hope and faith — in the 1937 Preface to *The 42nd Parallel* — that something true could come from the clash of "stereotypes." (Modern Library one-volume edition.)
written to commemorate the failing of the poetic power. Dos Passos has written himself out of the Twentieth Century in *U.S.A.*, and subsequent enfranchisement — "the ground we stand on" — reflects mere nostalgia for pre-monopolistic, pre-bureaucratic America. *U.S.A.* commemorates the death of hope *in the actual processes* in American history. Subsequently all one can hope for is the magical contagion of past examples. Henry Adams said that he was an Eighteenth Century man born out of his time; he worked hard, and against the grain, to gain sympathy with the Twentieth; John Dos Passos appears to have been a Twentieth Century man by instinct and to have found the burden intolerable. *U.S.A.* is the epic of his discovery.

**University of Sussex**

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18 But Wrenn says of *U.S.A.* (p. 166) that "By the effort of his imagination [Dos Passos] constructed from these materials an organic unity which reveals the nation which he had made his own. By his own efforts he had carved out his niche and made himself a citizen."