

Dos Passos' U.S.A**Majed Allehaibi, Ph.D.**

American Literature and International History

Many writers of the 1930s made conscious moves toward the political left. "The nation became less materialistic and more community-minded" (Bercovitch, 189). They followed the advice given by Mike Gold in New Masses in 1929: "Go left, Young Writers." The political left was more attractive to writers since it preached "an old morality of self-denial and sacrifice in service to a noble cause" (Bercovitch, 194). It led to a "literary revolution," which produced a great deal of "Proletarian" fiction. It documented, recorded and dramatized the crippling effects of poverty while it also examined the human cost.

U.S.A. reflects the nation's "rapid transformation of itself into a mass society... [by reflecting] the processes of the external world as people were coming to know it" (Bercovitch, 168). The author innovation was to incorporate the new media to make "scattered particulars of social life and the patchwork culture of the United States visible" (Bercovitch, 206). The collage allows him to make "historical figures interact with fictional characters, blurring the line between history and fiction ...and the line between documentary reports and imaginative stories" (Bercovitch, 206).

U.S.A. reflects a class conflict in the form of political tension. Early in the trilogy, in Camera Eye (3), the speaker becomes aware of class:

But you're peeking out of the window into the black rumbling dark suddenly ranked with squat chimneys and you're scared of black smoke and the puffs of flame that flare and fade out of the squat chimneys potteries dearie they work there all night Who works there all night? Workingmen and people like that laborers travelers greasers. (42P, p. 25).

There is a sense of inferiority attached to the workers. And their lives are unimportant as suggested in Newsreel (6) where Dos Passos juxtaposes his story of an explosion in a steel mill caused "the hot metal [to run] over the poor men in a moment" (42P, p. 80) with the headline: "PRAISE MONOPOLY AS BOON TO ALL." He, also, rebukes the industrial efficiency of Taylor and Henry Ford's dehumanizing system of production. Dos Passos considers their design as "un-American plan" since their ideal is the unthinking workman, "a plain handyman who'd do what he was told" (BM, P. 23). Their system produced a race of American people who can neither "read nor write" (BM, P. 51). The depression's "new American of starving children and hollow bellies and cracked shoes stamping on soup lines" (BM, P. 56) was the result of their design when it stopped functioning. Comparable to that the oppression and dehumanization of the army. Camera Eye (37) describes how soldiers are arranged "*alphabetically according to*

rank tapped out with two cold index fingers on the company *Corona Alott Class A&B INS prem C&D*” (1919),p.252). A human being is reduced to no more than a card, a “spare parts” (1919, p. 454) for the war machine.

Mike Gold placed the stories of Sacco and Vanzetti “at the center of a larger class struggle...to become martyrs in that struggle” (127). Their stories find their way through In John Dos Passos’ U.S.A. He brings the Sacco -Vanzetti case through “a character named Mary French, who joins in the vigil at the prison where the two martyrs are executed” (128). In one of the “Camera Eye” sections of Big Money, Dos Passos suggests that this conflict led to the nation being divided into two camps:

they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspaper editors the old judges the small men with reputations the college presidents the ward heelers (Listen businessmen college presidents judges America will not forget her betrayers)...
all right you have won you will kill the brave men our friends tonight...

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...
All right we are two nations.

Dos Passos U.S.A. measures America’s decline through “the speeches of people.” He affirms the “old American speech of the haters of oppression” (B.M, p. 463), and emphasizes the misuse of this “old speech,” the language of the American common heritage that identifies the uniqueness of the American people at the birth of the nation that. The kind of language that embodies the promise and the idea of America : “all men are created equal,” all men have the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Now, all of the old values seem to be disappearing. U.S.A. suggests the conflict between “an era in which the American [promise] remained an enabling myth and one in which it often functions as a cultural lie” (148). In the past, America’s underlying concept was that poor people were inspired to dream, which gave them the opportunity ultimately to live out those dreams. At present, however, “it manipulates the hope driven energies of the poor while offering them little or no chance of sharing its rewards” (148). By juxtaposing the status quo with the ideal, Dos Passos shows the corruption in and the fraudulent use the language and the betrayal of “the old words the immigrants haters of oppression brought with them to Plymouth....” (BM, P.437). “Thus Dos Passos saw in the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti a special symbol of the “two nations”--not [only] a conflict of classes but a struggle between men and institutions, innocence and decadence, the heritage of the pilgrim and pioneer against the ‘strangers who have turned our language inside out, who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul’” (Pells, p. 237). In *Camera Eye* (49), Dos Passos points out the implications of Sacco and Vanzetti’s story by placing them in the context

of “the immigrants [who] landed the roundheads the sackers of castles the king killers haters of oppression this where they stood in a cluster after landing from the crowded ship that stank of bilge” (BM, P. 345). Sacco and Vanzetti are comparable to those early immigrants “who wanted a world unfenced.” By murdering Sacco and Vanzetti, “strangers,” who take the “clean words” and make them “slimy and foul,” murdered America. Consequently, Dos Passos declares “all right we are two nations.” One is composed of those who uttered “the clean words our fathers spoke” while betraying them with their actions. In *Camera Eye* (51), Dos Passos writes:

they have made us foreigners in the land where we were born they are the conquering army that has filtered into the country unnoticed they have taken the hilltops by stealth they levy toll they stand at the mine head...they stand by when the bailiffs carry the furniture of the family evicted from the city tenement out on the sidewalk they are there when the bankers foreclose on a farm they are ambushed and ready to shoot down the strikers marching behind the flag up the switchback road to the mine those that the guns spare they jail. (BM, P. 524) .

Dos Passos’ use of juxtaposition to show the infidelity of his subjects to ideal of America. The editor of one of the Pittsburgh papers asks Mary French to get him “both sides” of the story of the “red agitators” in the steel mills. When she gets him the other side argument that the workers are living in a bad conditions and that a girl labor organizer was killed by the detectives hired by the steel company, her editor refuse to publish her article and fires her for writing “a first rate propaganda sheet” (BM, P. 137). He chooses to publish his side of the argument and suppresses the truth that contradicts the public consensus.

This juxtaposition is obvious in the Newsreel sections. In *Newsreel* (18), Dos Passos juxtaposes Woodrow Wilson’s declaration of war speech that America is “ privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth” (42P, p. 351) with the headlines about jailing the “traitors” who oppose the war and the draft to show how Wilson this action denies the freedom of speech and contradicts his own words of following the “ principles that gave America birth.” Dos Passos Wilson the villains constituting the “strangers” in “ all right we are two nations.” In his action lies a serious contradiction. While America was saving democracy in Europe, it is “hunting” citizens at home accused of being “radicals proGermans” (1919, p. 128) “to club American workingclass dissenters into submission” (qtd, Wagner 99). On the other hand, the heroes, like Debs who is faithful to the American ideal, constitute the other nation. They try to realize for all “ a world [of free men] where brothers might own, where everybody would split even” (42P, p. 95). For that they are “beaten” and jailed.

This manipulation of the old language is obvious in the character of Doc Bingham who claims that his God is truth. And, his mission is to bring enlightenment to the benighted world. It turns out that he is an exploitative hypocrite hiding behind the knowledge he claims to sell, which turn

to be of the pornographic type. J. Ward Moorehouse manipulate language to sell the kind of patriotism that maintain fidelity to the business and industry. That is, to convince people that what is good for industry is good for America. For example, he is convinced that WWI is” America’s great opportunity” (42 P, p. 282) because it will make it a leading industrial power in the world. So, it is patriotic to support this action of exploiting the miseries in Europe. And it is unpatriotic to criticize that and ask that the focus be on helping the “discontented dirt farmers” live in the industrial age. “in all of these instances, speech becomes a means of concealing truth,” an indication “that the nation might be morally ill” (Pells, P. 235).

“Dos passos’ deepest criticism throughout the trilogy is directed toward people who misuse America’s institutions...for gain that is entirely personal” (Wagner, p. 90). That spells out Dos Passos’ suspicion “of anyone with rank and position, distrusting all those who held economic or political power...[his concern is] how to preserve the sanctity of the individual” (Pells, p. 237). To that effect, Dos Passos wrote in 1939: “My sympathies lie with the private in the front line against the brass hat; with the hodcarrier against the straw boss, or the walking delegate for that matter; with the laboratory worker against the stuffed shirt in a mortarboard; with the criminal against the cop” (qtd, Aaron, p.353).

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