

**RICHARD ELLSWORTH SAVAGE:**

**A CHARACTER WITH A PRONOUNCED LACK OF CHARACTER**

by

Melvin Landsberg

The final Richard Ellsworth Savage section (*The Big Money*, pp. 477–519)<sup>1</sup> gives us our last glimpse of the trio of major characters in *U.S.A.*—J. Ward Moorehouse, Eleanor Stoddard, and Savage—who become and remain genuine business “successes” in a capitalist society that John Dos Passos scorned in the 1930s. Moorehouse, with all his fortune, is a lonely man; he married merely for money, and then by his callous behavior helped drive his wife insane. Eleanor has ended her close companionship with him to marry a Russian prince and acquire a title, an empty one, as the Russian aristocracy no longer exists in its homeland. But for Eleanor the marriage will be one more step away from the stinking Chicago stockyards, where her father worked. Neither Moorehouse nor Savage will lift a finger to help Eveline Hutchins, a mutual friend, who is frantically seeking to back the production of a play by an author she hopes to marry. In the next narrative section, she will commit suicide, after the author abandons her for another woman.

All three successes are without altruism or compassion, though Savage may have glimmerings of them. Unlike Moorehouse and Stoddard, he possesses all the elements for genuine distinction: intelligence, good looks, polite manners, easy sociability, a prestigious private school and Harvard education, literary and linguistic talent—all the elements, that is, except character. It is Dos

Passos’ unfolding of Savage’s lack of character that makes Savage a memorable figure in *U.S.A.* And a significant one too, for Dos Passos, like Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, saw a widespread lack of character among the American middle class of his time, and blamed it for many public and private evils.<sup>2</sup>

We follow Savage through a week in New York and Washington, D.C. Now probably in his early thirties, he is earning \$15,000 a year (quite a sum in the 1920s) as one of two chief assistants to the public relations tycoon Moorehouse. He and the other assistant, Ed Griscolm, are competing in working up a campaign to get Moorehouse’s firm the lucrative account for E.R. Bingham’s patent medicine empire. By the end of the section, Savage has triumphed over Griscolm, Moorehouse has become ill with heart disease, and Savage—now earning \$25,000—is taking charge of the New York office. From a business standpoint, his is an exemplary success story.

But psychologically his life, already wretched, is careening towards disaster. He has become a compulsive drinker, who drinks continually and heavily. His deportment in the Moorehouse firm is all strategy. On Moorehouse’s broaching the topic of self-medication, we read: “Dick twisted his face into a look of lively interest.” During the ensuing business conference, “when J.W. smiled Dick smiled too.” Off the job, Dick tells Eveline Hutchins: “I’ve been working for him for years now and I don’t know whether he’s a genius or a stuffed shirt.” But to Reggie Talbot, a young friend working in the firm, he says: “He’s the most brilliant figure in the publicrelations field” (*BM*: 479, 480, 487, 482). Then he feels ashamed of the oily note in his voice and shuts up.

When he lets himself go psychologically, the result is disastrous. Towards the end of the section he is dancing cheek to cheek “with a soft-handed brown boy in a tight-fitting suit the color of his skin” in a basement dive in Harlem (*BM*: 516-17). After being brought home by two people from that place, he wakes to find his head bleeding and his money gone, and he worries that he may be black-mailed.

Moorehouse is simple and opportunistic in his view of the world, but Savage is sophisticated and cynical, and hence far more reprehensible if one shares the novelist’s values. An English major at Harvard College, Savage is on the staffs of the *Monthly* and the *Advocate*, and he is a pacifist at the start of the war. At almost every turn in his story, he is aware that he is betraying religious, social, or personal values. When as a teen-ager, he engages in an adulterous affair with the wife of an Episcopalian minister who is his friend, he is afraid that he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. From Italy he writes the two that the war is corrupt and insane, and later in Paris he buys a pocket compass and plans to go across the French border into Spain. Once there he will send out “flaming poems and manifestoes, calling young men to revolt against their butchers” (*NN*: 211). Instead, on the ship back to the United States, he guiltily drops the compass overboard.

**THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER**

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos’ writings and biography, and will publish short articles on these subjects. It will also publish news items, notes, letters, and queries on these and other relevant matters. Among these matters are work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship.

For return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.

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Dick through the influences of a family friend and of his family background is helped to a lieutenancy in Ordinance. On the ship going to France the second time he ingratiates himself with a West Point major, and tears up a joking letter, in doggerel, about his good fortune in the Army, dropping the scraps down a toilet. His discarding of the letter and the compass are both symbolic of his surrender of integrity. Soon he is a captain in the Army Post Dispatch Service.

True, he still retains his political views, and tells Anne Elizabeth Trent ("Daughter") that the people of Europe are being betrayed, and that President Woodrow Wilson's face is like a reptile's. But after he hears that many people got sentenced to twenty years in prison for refusing to register for the draft, he tells a former companion in the ambulance service: "Well, that comes of monkeying with the buzzsaw"—echoing a caution that an official in Paris had given Savage when he was expelled from the Red Cross (NN: 383).

Savage's betrayal of Daughter, whom he gets pregnant and then abandons, once again proclaims his lack of integrity. But it is also related to his bisexuality; he clearly does not want an enduring sexual attachment to a woman, though he all the more seeks challenges in heterosexual escapades.

At the start of Savage's story his mother, the daughter of a deceased general, works in a genteel boarding house owned by her sister. She and her children formerly lived in the Chicago suburb Oak Park and had servants, but then Richard's father was convicted of a crime and sent to Atlanta Penitentiary. The mother never forgives her husband, and probably gives Richard and his elder brother the idea that they must restore her to easy circumstances. Her selfishness and self-pity are a model for Richard's, and her situation a recurrent excuse for his defaults. When a colonel laughingly asks him: "Can you see yourself as a public relations counsel," he answers: "Well, I've got my mother to think of." Later he tells Daughter: "I can't support a child until I have some definite career, and I've got my mother to support" (NN: 379, 389). While working for Moorehouse, he lives in a New York apartment on 56th Street with his mother, whom he sends to vacation resorts. Refusing to help Eveline Hutchins with a couple of thousand dollars, he says: "I'm flat broke . . . and Mother has to be supported in the style to which she is accustomed" (BM: 485).

What are we to make of his name? First, as to "Richard," Dos Passos might perhaps be playing with the "way to wealth" theme in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Just as Savage is getting a job with Moorehouse, Eleanor counsels him about Anne Elizabeth: "She's a cute little thing...but you oughtn't to marry just yet, of course it's none of my business...an unsuitable marriage has been the ruination of many a promising young fellow." Later, while Savage is falling asleep in bed after he has turned Daughter away, Dos Passos writes about him thus: "Poor Dick got to go to work after the signing of the peace.

Poor Tom's cold. Poor Dickyboy...Richard...He brought his feet up to where he could rub them. Poor Richard's feet" (NN: 393, 397).

As for the name "Ellsworth," Dick is the grandson of a General Ellsworth, who campaigned against the Apache chief Geronimo. And what of the name "Savage"? With Dick's polite background, he would seem to merit a more genteel name. Of course, "savages" was white Americans' common designation for the warriors led by Geronimo. As we evaluate Richard Ellsworth Savage's behavior, we may infer an irony in the name, reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's in describing much of contemporary "civilized" culture as barbarian.

Dick certainly savages Daughter, as well as Reggie Talbot, whom he allows to be fired without warning after he is irritated by Reggie's irreverent banter about Moorehouse, and Reggie's fiancée's rejecting Savage's drunken advances. And he savages society in a career devoted to such campaigns as defeating pure food and drug legislation. What should not escape notice is that he also savages literature itself and his entire humanistic education by some of his daily remarks. Explaining to his brother why he left a French whorehouse to which he had brought him, he quotes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, saying: "I haven't got any morals but I'm finnick... Epicurus' owne sonne." And commenting to Eleanor about Daughter's death, he says: "What did you expect me to do, jump into the grave like Hamlet?" (NN: 354, 462).

When he takes a job with Moorehouse's firm, he writes his mother from Paris that he will be able "to continue my real work on the side" (NN: 394). He is adept at writing verse, but there is no reason to think that he was ever a poet pursuing truth. While Savage was at Harvard, we read: "He managed to find time to polish up a group of sonnets called Morituri Te Salutant that he sent to a prize competition run by *The Literary Digest*. It won the prize but the editors wrote back that they would prefer a note of hope in the last sestet. Dick put in the note of hope and sent the hundred dollars to Mother to go to Atlantic City with" (NN: 96).

When Moorehouse reminisces about his once having wanted to be a songwriter, Dick responds: "Shake hands, J.W., with the ruins of a minor poet" (BM: 492). If he had not met Moorehouse, I imagine, he would have become one of the debonair writers frequenting the dining room of the Algonquin Hotel in New York.

A biography of Randolph Bourne, shortly following the first section on Savage, provides a stark contrast to him. An impoverished hunchback who was constantly in physical pain, Bourne worked his way through Columbia University. By the spring of 1917, he had gained recognition as a social critic and author setting forth progressive reforms. But he wrecked his career by opposing the war, and died virtually silenced, leaving his uncompromising writings and his example of integrity as legacies.

Arresting as the portrait of Savage is, we note that it is but a small part of the overall subject of Dos Passos'

trilogy—the United States of America. In another essay I have called this overall, dominant subject of his trilogy “the thirteenth character,” contrasting it with the twelve major fictional characters. We must at some point shift our focus and ask how Savage is shaped by the society of which he is a part and the milieu in which he advances his career; and, in view of the many similarities between U.S. pecuniary culture of the 1920s and of our own time, we might well see the query as germane in our lives. But this is matter for another, and longer, essay.

### Notes

1. All citations are from John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* New York: The Modern Library, 1937. *NN* will refer to *Nineteen-Nineteen* and *BM* to *The Big Money*.

2. See Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), pp. 226, 256 n. 82.

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### Letter

### ALDERMAN LIBRARY GETS BERNARDIN-DOS PASSOS PAPERS

*Alderman Library, at the University of Virginia, has recently acquired the papers of the late Professor Charles W. Bernardin of Villanova University, who died in February 1996, at the age of seventy-eight. These papers will be described in some detail in the forthcoming catalog of John Dos Passos papers and materials in Alderman's Special Collections Department. Mrs. Ann Southwell, in reply to our questions, has kindly sent us the following letter.*

To the Editor:

The papers of Charles W. Bernardin concern his proposed biography of John Dos Passos. The first installment (temporarily labelled 5950-ck) contains Robert Hillyer's unpublished copy of *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho*, a photocopy of Bernardin's dissertation "The Development of Dos Passos"; the unpublished 2 volume biography of Dos Passos by Bernardin (Volume 1, which goes through the publication of *Three Soldiers*, is completed. Volume 2, through *Manhattan Transfer*, is not); an earlier version of Volume 2 titled *The Prime Years: John Dos Passos*; a typescript and notes for an unfinished study of Hemingway and Dos Passos by Bernardin; and photographs of Dos Passos and family members and associates.

The second installment (temporarily labelled 5950-cm) contains 87 letters between Dos Passos and Bernardin, 1942-1966. The very first letter, January 3, 1942, outlines Dos Passos' views on communism and liberalism. He compares Marxism with Mohammedanism and talks about the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Many of these letters contain checklists/questionnaires by Bernardin returned with written commentary by Dos Passos. For example in 1951 the questionnaire deals with various books that Dos Passos might have read which could have influenced his writing. Another of the same year talks about Dos Passos's war experiences on the Italian front.

The papers were a gift to the University of Virginia Library by Bernardin's children, in two installments received in May and December 1999.

I hope this material will be of some use to you . . . and we will send you a copy of the guide as soon as it is published.

ANN SOUTHWELL  
 Manuscripts Cataloger  
 Special Collections Department