

## TEACHING AND LEARNING FROM STUDENTS

by

Melvin Landsberg

At the University of Kansas I have usually taught *The Forty-Second Parallel* as one of eight books in an undergraduate course American Literature Since 1870. When the English Department had an undergraduate course called Major American Writers, I taught the book in that course also. Yet though I enjoy *The Forty-Second Parallel* enormously, I do not consider it the best volume in *U.S.A.*, and have used it in these courses primarily because it comes first in the trilogy. As for the entire *U.S.A.*, I have taught that in a graduate course on Walt Whitman and Dos Passos, where the students read *Manhattan Transfer* as well, and in directed readings with undergraduate honors students. Once when I assigned all of *U.S.A.* in the major American writers course, a student wrote in his course evaluation: "It's a good book, but not *that* good." Still, in virtually every undergraduate course some of the best students have told me after the semester was over that they planned to go on and read *Nineteen-Nineteen* and *The Big Money* on their own.

Student comments on *U.S.A.* have ranged from the most benighted to the memorably critical. One sophomore in the major American writers course disagreed with Dos Passos' opposition to our entering World War I. "Hitler," he wrote, "had to be stopped." When I told him that he was confusing World Wars I and II, he replied: "I never was much interested in history"—in a manner as nonchalant as if he were saying, "I've never cared much for okra."

This is an extreme case, but one of the recurring problems in teaching *U.S.A.* is how little background in history the great majority of American college students have. A few are majoring in history, and they are likely to know about the progressive era in American politics. But I have always found it necessary to explain and describe the populist and progressive movements to my classes when considering the biographies of William Jennings Bryan and Robert M. La Follette. Similarly I have had to tell them about American overseas imperialism, about the reasons for the repression of free speech during World War I, and about the causes of the Red Scare after the war.

Much more disconcerting than the lack of historical knowledge is some students' disinclination or inability to read a book reflectively. One student wrote with admiration about Janey Williams, J. Ward Moorehouse's private secretary, saying that she would not mind a career like Janey's. Fair enough, perhaps, but she seemed unaware that her favorable view of Janey's career was at variance with the author's. I believe that quite a few unreflective students would initially admire characters whom Dos Passos didn't want admired if it were not for my introductory lecture on Dos Passos' life and my often calling attention to cues as to his attitudes.

But most of my experiences have been far more positive than the two I have described. A number of students have chosen to do creative work in the manner of Dos Passos. I recall three pieces modeled on sections of "The Camera Eye," in which a white Kansas undergraduate described her family's reaction to her decision to marry a Japanese student. Her impressionistic sections were quite up to those of the novelist. I have also received from students several "biographies" of contemporary political and cultural figures, though none with the edge of Dos Passos' own.

Not surprisingly, I have learned from students, both through the questions they ask and the knowledge they bring. What I have delighted in most are insights that I have not encountered before and on which I can help them build. A student from Venezuela saw appropriateness in the names of the two cats, Porfirio and Venustiano, that Concha, Mac's mistress in Mexico City, caresses. These refer to the Mexican presidents Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) and Venustiano Carranza (1859-1920). The cats' names not only add a touch to Dos Passos' portrayal of Concha, but also help display his skill in establishing locales.

One student wrote, citing much detail, that in *U.S.A.* we see history in the making. "Just as we see each major character in the making," I added in the margin. Another student wrote of parental conditioning in the passage in which "Popper" is beating young Joe Williams with a razor strop. Janey, his eleven-year-old sister, pounds on the bathroom door, shouting, "Stop it, stop it." Her father opens the door and says: "You go straight up to bed without any supper and remember that you have enough to do to fight your own battles, Janey." This led me to suggest that the student relate it to a much later incident in which Janey does not invite Joe, now a merchant seaman, up to her apartment when he comes to New York after an ocean voyage; she does not want her middle class friends to know that this rough-talking man is her brother.

The first paragraph introducing Eleanor Stoddard in *The Forty-Second Parallel* memorably describes her horror at the sight of blood. One undergraduate woman, remarking on the final Stoddard section, where she is elated at the prospect of the United States entering World War I, wrote: "Considering that she can't stand the sight of blood, she's awfully anxious for us to get into the war."

The United States that Dos Passos portrays is in many respects like our nation today. Consequently, the book may produce a great variety of responses, rooted in the students' own varied experiences. Students listening to one another's comments have often disagreed with each other, but they usually have not had enough experience, education, or maturity to discuss their disagreements in depth. I have often wished that I were teaching *U.S.A.* to students over forty. On the other hand, I know that many of the young students have been impressed by the work, and will consider some of their subsequent experiences in the light of Dos Passos' representations and critiques. This is one important reason why