

French's story. Vorse's psychological and practical problems in being a mother of three and yet pursuing a public career give her a far different identity.

One event in French's life, her abortion at Ben Compton's urging, when he is about to organize strikes in the Passaic area, may be based on the experience of a second historical figure. Compton's role in the strikes resembles that of the Communist labor organizer Albert Weisbord, who was living with his Communist companion Vera Buch. When Weisbord proposed their union, during the Passaic strike, he clearly said that they should have no children, and she tacitly agreed. Afterwards, Bush became pregnant, and hesitated, as she wanted a child; but Weisbord was insistent. Vorse and Buch roomed together and became friends during the Gastonia strike, while Buch was still suffering psychological, and perhaps physical, pain from her operation. We cannot say that Dos Passos heard about the abortion from Vorse, but it is conceivable that she told him or a mutual friend. Like French, Buch was in Boston during the final appeal for Sacco and Vanzetti; with co-workers she went door to door giving out bills and talking to people.<sup>11</sup>

There were likely other people whose stories Dos Passos drew upon. But biographical sources were not all that prompted his creative imagination. We note that French lives a far narrower life than Vorse. Besides lacking her rich European background, French has no circle of stimulating friends, no thoughts for painting and sculpture, and never goes sailing, or even row-boating in New York's Central Park. She has become obsessed with the class struggle—and large parts of the explanation are the example of her father's selflessness in Colorado and her experiences later in an era of defeat for organized labor.

## NOTES

1. Letter from John Dos Passos, July 12, 1966.

2. Alfred Kazin, Introduction to John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (New York: Signet Classics, New American Library, 1969), xvii.

3. Donald Pizer, *Dos Passos' "U.S.A."* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 164.

4. Dee Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 159, 368–69 n. 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 186.

6. In telling about Vorse's life, I rely entirely, except for the material documented in footnotes 7 and 10 below, on Garrison's biography, following her book chronologically and closely paraphrasing her presentations of important matters.

7. On her attendance at art galleries, concert halls, and opera houses, see Mary Heaton Vorse, *A Footnote to Folly* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), 26–27.

8. Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. On Dos Passos' journey to Passaic, see Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972). For the quotation by Garri-

son, see her *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 222. Edmund Wilson, who was on the *New Republic's* editorial staff when the mob destroyed the workers' tent colony, later wrote: "John Dos Passos and Mary Heaton Vorse both asked the *New Republic* to send them to report on Gastonia, but both were thought to be too far to the Left to be reliable from our point of view." Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952), 497–98.

11. On Compton's resemblances to Weisbord, see Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."*, 131. On Buch's activity for Sacco and Vanzetti and on her abortion, see Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 145, 165–69.

## 2. Ada Cohn: A Secondary Character in U.S.A.

Criticism of *U.S.A.* has done little with the secondary, minor, and "bit" fictional characters, present in sections devoted to the twelve major ones. More than twenty-five such characters appear in the Mary French episodes, as do three additional major characters, and we could examine the roles of many of these lesser one with profit. Thus Ada Cohn, Mary's friend from high school, helps us understand both Mary and the general society.

Ada is Jewish, the daughter of a prominent Chicago attorney, whose failing health forced him to move to Colorado Springs. Mary's mother does everything she can to prevent her from going to the Cohns' house, where Ada's parents often invite their daughter's friends to stay for dinner, and Mary does not dare to bring her friend home; however, Mary's father, who refuses to participate in his wife's social climbing, supports her friendship with Ada. We need hardly point out that we are getting commentary on the social position of Jews in Colorado Springs.

At Vassar College, Mary is popular during her first year. But in the second, when Mary's friend arrives, Ada lacks the prevalent restrained style and manner, and Mary is "horrified to catch herself wishing Ada hadn't come." Dos Passos' words, which allow a glimpse of Mary's conscience before she becomes political, again point to Ada's usefulness in the Mary French narrative. The two young women room together, and Vassar students who are socially successful shy away from Mary. As Mary's allowance is minuscule, Ada buys her most of her clothes and books. When Mary is a junior an anonymous person sends her a newspaper clipping, with marks in red pencil, about her mother's Reno divorce on grounds of Dr. French's intemperance and mental cruelty. Upon reading it, Mary has a long cry and when Ada asks her why her eyes are red, says that she cries when she reads "about those poor soldiers being killed in the war in Europe." Ada is an appropriate recipient of this fib, as she has fragile nerves, and might herself cry over the soldiers. Dos Passos, in another

display of Mary's conscience, adds: "It made her feel awful having told Ada a lie and she lay awake all night worrying about it."<sup>1</sup>

Both Mary and Ada major in sociology and say they are going to be social workers, and both go to Hull House the next summer to do settlement work. But Ada finds the poverty and squalor she encounters too hard to endure, and she leaves. Back at Vassar in the fall, Ada takes courses in music, studies the violin, and will not talk to Mary about the war, pacifism, or social work.

After Mary does publicity work in the Great Steel Strike of 1919, she takes a job as secretary to George Barrow, a self-serving, conservative labor figure, who claims to be able to help the steel workers, and she becomes pregnant with his child. But when she concludes that he is a "labor faker," she goes to New York to stay with Ada and get an abortion.

Although Ada is deeply agitated by her friend's decision, she lends Mary the necessary money and looks after her for a week after the abortion. When Ada goes to Michigan with her family, she lets Mary stay in her apartment for the summer. Of the relationship of the two women at this point, Dos Passos writes:

Mary was relieved to have her gone; she was still fond of her but their interests were so different and they had silly arguments about the relative importance of art and social justice that left them tired and cross at each other so that sometimes they wouldn't speak for several days; and then they hated each other's friends. Still Mary couldn't help being fond of Ada. They were such old friends and Ada forked out so generously for the strikers' defense committees, legalaid funds and everything that Mary suggested; she was a very openhanded girl, but her point of view was hopelessly rich., she had no social consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that Mary, from her vantage of ideological righteousness, is using Ada. The term "forked out" in Mary's stream of consciousness is not in her favor.

When Ben Compton is released from prison (having been sent there for opposing the "capitalist war") and fears being followed by U.S. government agents, Mary brings him to Ada's apartment, seemingly without asking her permission. Her values have changed since she stayed up all night worrying about having told Ada a fib, and her interactions with Ada allow Dos Passos to show that change.

While Mary is living with Donald Stevens and working with the miners' union, she never sees Ada. However, after Mary walks out on her mother during a lunch at the Plaza Hotel, she is so upset that she has to talk to someone, and she calls Ada. Her friend is sobbing, and asks Mary to come over. She has just broken up with a male friend, and Mary stays with her all afternoon. She also leaves with a hundred dollar check from Ada for the miners' milk fund.

Ada makes her promise to come to one of her concerts the next week. But when Stevens abandons Mary, she stays home instead. Ada, worried, comes over and finds Mary in so bad a state that she brings her to her apartment for a week. After Mary recovers, Ada induces her to go to one of Eveline Johnson's cocktail parties, which George Barrow attends and where the motion picture star Margo Dowling makes an appearance. So in part through Ada Cohn, Dos Passos brings together three major characters—each with her own path and destiny—and allows us to view Eveline and Margo through Mary's eyes..

At the office of the miners' relief committee the next morning, Mary hears that one of the truck drivers, a young friend of hers, has been shot and killed. Then the telephone rings, and Ada tells Mary that Eveline is dead, possibly from suicide. She is too upset to stay alone, Ada says. Won't Mary come over. The Communist Party has called, asking Mary to organize a protest meeting, however, and Mary tells Ada that she can't come. "Say, Rudy," she tells one of her associates at the relief office, "if Ada Cohn calls up again tell her I'm out of the office. . . . I have too much to do to spend my time taking care of hysterical women a day like this."<sup>3</sup>

As Ada twice spent time and emotion taking care of Mary when she was in distress, Mary's remark is at best unseemly. Ada's loyalties are personal, not political, and she is badly shaken by Eveline's death. Dos Passos' contrast of the embattled leftist Mary with the aesthete Ada is not in Mary's favor. But given Dos Passos' political and economic values in *The Big Money*, neither is it in Ada's. Pondering the relationship between the two women, we realize how Ada's presence adds psychological and ethical depth to *U.S.A.*

#### NOTES

1. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.: The Big Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 114.
2. *Ibid.*, 439-40.
3. *Ibid.*, 558.