

John Dos Passos

NEWSLETTER

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Special Issue on

STUDENT RESPONSE TO DOS PASSOS

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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)¹ 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.²

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 department 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 blackmailed.

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.

Dick through the influences of a family friend and of his family background is helped to a lieutenantcy in Or-

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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dinance. 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 *Moritur 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.

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

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**GRADUATE STUDENT RESPONSES
TO *THE 42ND PARALLEL***

by

Seth Moglen

I recently taught Dos Passos' *The 42nd Parallel* in a graduate seminar devoted to American modernist fiction. By the time we arrived at Dos Passos in late October, we had explored a series of earlier and, on the whole, more immediately accessible, texts—including works by Sherwood Anderson, Jean Toomer, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Students were by this stage in the semester actively engaged in trying to formulate their impressions about the social, psychological and formal concerns that bind our disparate modernist writers together, and divide them from one another. As I am in the midst of writing a book devoted to Dos Passos' place in American modernism, I felt both a special curiosity and a certain partisan anxiety about how they would respond to the first volume of the *U.S.A.* trilogy.

The first impression offered by most of my students was that they were exhilarated, if also somewhat intimidated, by the historical ambition of *The 42nd Parallel*. Many of my students had been charting the social and political concerns of each of the writers we read. They seemed to be startled by the scale of Dos Passos' attempt to represent large historical transformations, and also by the directness of his engagement with economic issues and questions of political ideology. Some were struck by the contrast between the relatively intimate and often allegorical strategies for representing social change employed by other modernists and Dos Passos' more panoramic and documentary impulses. Some students were particularly interested—as so many earlier critics have been—in trying to determine whether Dos Passos seemed to be explicitly endorsing socialism or whether he was implying that the socialist movement had been compromised by many of the same forces that had led to a toxic capitalist social order in the U.S. Students also wanted to devote special attention to the gender politics of *The 42nd Parallel*. Some felt that Dos Passos seemed to rely on forms of misogyny that were also present in Hemingway, Cather, and Fitzgerald—especially the equation of female characters with a corrupt, destructive new commercial society. Others were struck by what they saw as Dos Passos' greater interest in, and more sympathetic treatment of, the contradictions facing American women. The issue, however, that most fascinated my students was Dos Passos' representational insistence upon the way in which ideological clichés—promoted by an ever-more vigorous mass media—seemed utterly to dominate and deform the consciousness of all of the novel's fictional characters. This has, ironically enough, been an aspect of Dos Passos' work that has often most irritated me as a reader; and I was impressed by the fact

that many of my students felt that this representation of a society in which people are no longer capable of thinking critically about themselves was not only convincing, but in certain respects moving. Students told anecdotes about their experiences with peers, colleagues, co-workers and parents who seemed unable to express any authentic attitudes about their own lives, and a number of my students seemed to experience a kind of catharsis in reading Dos Passos' angry fictional representation of such a world.

My graduate students seemed equally impressed, and slightly daunted, by the technical virtuosity and formal complexity of Dos Passos' work. They were initially bewildered about how the four modes of this single work interacted with one another. But they became excited as they began to grasp that Dos Passos was not simply offering four different individual *perspectives* on a social moment (as, for example, Faulkner does), but that he was shuttling back and forth among entirely different representational *modes*. They were intrigued by the combination of first-person stream-of-consciousness representation, fragmented documentary technique, personalized biography and fictional narrative. A number of the students focused on what the class decided to call (following Brecht) the “alienation effects” employed by Dos Passos—especially his running together of separate words and his persistent interruption of fictional narrative by other representational modes. One of the high points of the seminar came when several students proposed that these formal techniques of interruption and alienation might be intended by Dos Passos to shatter the reader's complacency about narrative and to shock us out of the state of intellectual and ideological passivity which the novel is so concerned to expose. This led to a rich and excited conversation about how modernist formal experimentation seems to have been used by some writers as part of a political project of resisting ideological pressures that were growing ever more pervasive in modern societies.

It seems worth adding that while my students were strongly drawn to Dos Passos, and were clearly excited by the formal and historical ambition of his work, the range of historical reference posed special difficulties even for graduate students in American literature. My experience teaching *The 42nd Parallel* left me with the clear sense that Dos Passos can speak very powerfully to students today, perhaps more powerfully than he has in several decades. But I also suspect that, particularly for undergraduates, we need editions with systematic and effective apparatuses to explain the wide array of historical, especially political, allusions. As Dos Passos becomes more relevant again, we will need to help our students find their way to him.

Seth Moglen is Assistant Professor of English at Lehigh University.

DOS PASSOS IN THE CLASSROOM

by

Lisa Nanney

Whatever the kind of course in which students today read the work of John Dos Passos, the teacher of the course has two guarantees: that the readings assigned will almost always be the student's first encounter with the writer's work; and that the student will almost invariably find the work intriguing for its stylistic challenges and for its controversial portrait of America. *Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* trilogy, the Dos Passos works most frequently used in undergraduate courses, present American culture and history of the early twentieth century in a voice that students find compellingly contemporary despite its distance from them in time. In the narrative forms and rhythms that Dos Passos pioneered, students recognize the forerunners of the kinds of texts of which they are already experienced readers—the sound byte; sophisticated montage; multimedia collage. Yet in the complexity of Dos Passos' forms and the richness of their interaction, students see the vast potential of narrative—so often unrealized in the verbal and visual texts they know best—to create meaning and to make the reader an agent in that act of creation.

Adaptable as the texts are to a variety of curricula and methods, Dos Passos' work offers teachers of American literature and history, American Studies and even American visual arts exciting ways to involve students. In my teaching I have introduced lower-level undergraduate and advanced high-school students in American literature classes to Dos Passos through the excerpts from *U.S.A.* included in commonly-used anthologies. For those students, whose preconceptions of American modernist literature or literature of the 1920s and 1930s are usually limited to the elegant sophistication of Fitzgerald's prose or the vernacular flatness of Steinbeck's, Dos Passos' innovative but approachable style is a revelation. Its very departure from their preconceptions draws them in even as it challenges them to become active readers. Students respond emotionally to the righteous bitterness of "The Body of an American," the final biography in *Nineteen-Nineteen*; then, when coached to identify each of the narrative elements at work in the biography, the throng of voices reporting on the anonymous life and death of the Unknown Soldier, students became aware of the careful modulation of the tone. They marvel at the way Dos Passos creates such a powerful critique without ever making an overtly damning statement. Using as a model this biography, or the scathing portrait of J.P. Morgan, also in *Nineteen-Nineteen*, students enjoy writing their own biographies of contemporary figures. Students can discover for themselves how one of the narrative modes of the trilogy was constructed when they create their own Newsreels about events or phenomena in their own lives,

using newspaper and magazine clippings, contemporary music, and quotations from other media.

In introductory American Studies curricula, I have used *Manhattan Transfer* or parts of *U.S.A.* to introduce students to the forms and concepts of modernism. Already good readers of visual texts, students can quickly perceive relationships among the Newsreels, biographies, Camera Eye segments, and fictional narratives. Then, using that insight, they can readily see how forms of visual modernism such as cubism work, and how art and culture affect each other. After reading *Manhattan Transfer* and catching the nervous urban rhythms of its prose, students recognize the visual manifestations of city noise and motion in works such as Charles Demuth's poster portrait of William Carlos Williams, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928) or Stuart Davis' *House and Street* (1931). Besides demonstrating the various "-isms" that are manifestations of modernism and the primary structural concepts behind much of visual modernism, *Manhattan Transfer*, *U.S.A.*, or excerpts from these novels illustrate to students the historical bases as well as the artistic characteristics of realism, naturalism, and modernism. In Bud Korpenning and Vag they see that the "forgotten man" and the economic disparities that created him existed before the stock market crash or the Great Depression. In the struggle to save Sacco and Vanzetti that involves both the Camera Eye persona and Mary French, students understand how common people united to defend the rights of individuals against overwhelming systems of government or law. They learn that, like the ordinary workers who defended the anarchists, artists too used their skills to awaken the public conscience against injustices—Ben Shahn with the social realism of his series of paintings *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931-32), and Dos Passos himself in essays as well as novels.

Equally as important as realizing that a nation's history and arts grow from the same source, students come to critical personal revelations through reading Dos Passos' work. In the way that the historical and political implications of novels shape their forms, students see an enactment of the very awareness dawning in the Camera Eye segments of *U.S.A.*: the realization that writing—art—offers the individual power in a world full of forces that today seem even more monolithic than in Dos Passos' lifetime. Students move to the next item on the syllabus reluctant to leave Dos Passos, I have found. Having finally discovered his work and the distinctive blend of deterministic pessimism and exhilarating hope for the individual that it creates in the reader, they wonder why they had not heard of Dos Passos sooner.

Lisa Nanney has taught the work of Dos Passos in American literature and American Studies courses at Georgetown University, and currently at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, an affiliate school of the University of North Carolina. Her book John Dos Passos Revisited was published by Twayne/Macmillan in 1998.

JOHN WHO?

by

Claudia Matherly Stolz

A framed copy of the 1936 cover of *Time* magazine featuring a cigar-smoking Dos Passos adorns my office. Few students demonstrate an interest unless they happen to be in one of my classes where Dos Passos' name appears in the syllabus. In each of these classes the beginning has been the same. A student, after perusing the syllabus, raises her—or his—hand and asks: “Who is John Dos Passos?”

“Some critics,” I say, “claim that he has come the closest to writing the great American novel.”

“Well, why haven't I heard of him?” is the usual response, and so begins the lesson on the man and his contribution to American literature. Students are wary at first, especially because Dos Passos' novels contain more pages than they like to read. Once we get beyond the first obstacle, length, the real challenge begins. In my experience the greatest problems when a student comes to a Dos Passos novel for the first time are the language and the student's paucity of historical knowledge. Although I will focus on students' responses to *Three Soldiers*, I have found the reactions to *The Big Money* to be quite similar.

I first used *Three Soldiers* in a first-year college course on composition and literature. The edition did not contain explanatory notes, which I realized, though too late, would have decreased some student frustration; but after the outcome, I continued to use the edition sans notes because it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. *Three Soldiers* provides a means by which to have the students focus on the characters' language, something that Dos Passos depicts so well. Many students don't think much about language, let alone realize that it is constantly changing. They don't give much thought to what a listener or reader can discern about a person when she speaks. Students come to understand that seventy years from now a reader might become totally confused when reading “That's bad,” when the context clearly indicates the speaker is referring to something good. There are words and phrases throughout the novel that help to specify the era. Two phrases in particular precipitated class discussion, and laughter. One is “I've got the dope at last” and the other is “He got my goat.” The class liked making conjectures about the origins of such phrases and how words and phrases reflect a person's culture. Their struggles with words, phrases, and, yes, even French, helped them to understand the importance language plays in creating realism. When we finished the novel, they could voice an appreciation for the artist's ability to create characters who sounded real.

Students frequently say that they find the profanity in *Three Soldiers* offensive. I respond by asking someone to name the last movie she has seen. Why the two sets of rules? Why is it acceptable to hear profanity, but not

acceptable to read it in a novel assigned for a literature class?

In every class where I have used *Three Soldiers* students have asked me to explain many of the derogatory words used to describe racial and ethnic groups because they had not heard them before. They were baffled by *frogs* to describe the French and *huns* to describe the Germans and shocked to see the “n” word in print. In class discussion it became clear that the students understood that words are still used as these were in the novel. A number wrote in their reader response journals about how some of the so-called ethnic, religious, and racial slurs sounded silly to them, but they realized that words are still used to brand certain groups as alien, though the words and in most instances the target groups have changed. To me, this is an important realization for a college student to achieve. I did not plan a foray into language when we started *Three Soldiers*, but the students' responses in their journals and in class led us down this path.

In elementary school I can remember singing, “John Brown's body . . .” and I can remember the variations we developed to fit our needs. The point is, I knew of Brown and his history. To many of my students, John Brown is a name devoid of meaning, but without that piece of cultural literacy, the significance of John Andrews' musical composition is lost. The students' reader response journals informed me of how a widespread lack of experience and knowledge interfered with a reading and understanding of the novel. The “Y” men confused them; they commented on censorship (“not in America” was one comment); and the Sorbonne Detachment they thought to be a figment of Dos Passos' imagination. In an effort to help the students understand the time period, I required that each read a newspaper or magazine article written during our involvement in World War I and also read one review of the novel. Though they grumbled about the assignment, as it meant a trip to the library and often a journey into the world of microfilm, the students could hardly contain sharing their discoveries once they took the plunge. They presented a wide array of articles, almost all of which helped to validate *Three Soldiers* for them. From this point on, the class as a whole took more interest in the work that one student described as “the war novel without action.” Suddenly, students began thinking about the novel as a whole, the form, the message, and even Dos Passos' influence on movies such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon*.

One thing is certain. After reading *Three Soldiers*, none of the students will think “John who?” when encountering his name. Some in fact have offered comments like “Fuselli isn't developed as much as Andrews and Chrisfield.” And a few students have, in varying ways, said to me: “What a writer! Tell me more about his *U.S.A.* trilogy.”

Claudia Matherly Stolz received her Ph.D. degree in English from Miami University (Ohio). She has taught there and at Indiana University East.

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 I keep teaching *U.S.A.*