

THE PESSIMISTIC AMERICAN SOCIETY- DOS PASSOS

Dr. K. Karthikeyan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan Engineering College,
Perambalur-621212

In English social novels, almost without exception, society is presented in terms of human relationships, not patterned by an abstract concept. In the nineteenth and twentieth century's, at least, there have been a few examples of the "moral fable" in English fiction, and English novelists, broadly speaking, have approached society in the three principal ways. Some of them have undertaken a close and comprehensive examination of society, acting on the unspoken assumption that society is interesting for its own sake, as the way man lives: Dickens and Thackeray did this in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Vanity Fair*. Other English novelists have presented society mainly as a background or setting for the action of their novels. Often a careful and lengthy description of the social scene in the opening pages serves to establish it for the whole book, in subsequent chapters "society" is something that can be assumed, taken as read. George Eliot uses this method in *The Mill on the Floss*, and D.H. Lawrence in *The Rainbow*. Finally, there are those novelists whose sense of society and its sanctions is so integral a part of their whole conception that it is almost impossible in their work to separate out any presentation of society.

In addition to these narrowly political writers there have been many novelists of social protest. Early in the century there were the "muckrakers" such as Winston Churchill, Allen White, and Robert Herrick. Later came Anderson, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, the "proletarians," and Norman Mailer. For all the differences between them, such novelists of social protest have at least one thing in common: they approach society not in a responsive or sensitive way but with their minds already made up; they come armed not only with their talents but with a theory. It is of the essence of the novelist's job that he should impose a pattern upon his material, but these novelists impose a pattern not of art, in the broadest sense, of politics.

Most American social novelists have lacked a sense of proportion in their treatment of society, and, one may relate this to the extraordinary importance in the history of the American novel of "realism" and in the non-philosophical, literary sense of the term, of "naturalism." In America the novelist's use of "realistic" techniques has often represented a self-conscious attitude towards society rather than a genuine understanding; their preoccupation with a realistic presentation of the social surface, in which everything tends to become equal importance, may often disguise an essential ignorance of deeper social realities. Such is undoubtedly the case with many "muckraking" novels, with most of the "proletarian" novels of the 1930s and with a large proportion of contemporary "tough" or expose novels about such subjects as politics, business, the entertainment industries, and advertising.

A few American writers, who have seen man and society in proper proportion, and who

have had the power to realize their vision in terms of the novel, seem to have chosen two principal methods of coping with the peculiar difficulties presented by the vastness, newness, shapelessness and instability of American society and by their own inescapable self-consciousness about it. Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* might be said to have attempted a development of this second method by putting down a series of sample borings all over the surface of America.

In the art novel, the emphasis is on the individual, in the collective novel it is on society as a whole; but in both we get the impression that society is stupid and all powerful and fundamentally evil. Individuals ought to oppose it, but if they do so they are doomed. If, on the other hand, they reconcile themselves with society and try to get ahead in it, then they are damned forever, damned to be empty, sharp and destructive insects like Dick Savage and Moorehouse. “Dos Passos has revealed the falsity of the unity of action. He has shown that one might describe a collective event by juxtaposing twenty individual and unrelated stories.”

In *U.S.A.* technique is wholly integrated with and at the service of a forceful expression about society. It is “mostly the speech of the people” despite Dos Passos’s avoidance in his broadcast of the ideological content of his novel; *U.S.A.* is more than just “a highly energized sort of novel.” It is jangling headlines; public and private banalities; corruption in speech, thought, action; histories of lives of tragic desperation, betrayal, martyrdom, futility and bitterness.

Dos Passos’s expression of his life-long fascination with the alienated, outsider, beaten and dissenter: the lost and forgotten in American history. Mac, the American Wobbly and drifter at the beginning of trilogy, is as much an expression of what has been sacrificed to American progress as Mary French, the middle class communist, is at the end of the novel. These solitaires, along with the young man endlessly walking America, frame this enormous chronicle of disillusionment with the American promise much as the saints in a medieval painting frame the agony on the cross. The loner in America interested Dos Passos long before he became interested in the American as protester.

The novel *U.S.A.* goes deeper than this and illustrates the kind of systemic evils of American Society that Dos Passos wrote about in his nonfiction: poverty, unemployment, political, repression, imperialism and the degrading mechanization of work. One can see the destructive effects of “dawg eat dawg” values and the psychological damage done to both the rich and the poor by great disparities of wealth. Between 1927 and 1936, Dos Passos experienced an intensification of his radicalism with the one set of the depression, and later, a growing pessimism and disillusionment with the Communist party that led him to search America’s past for a viable radical tradition.

The other view, emphasizing the machine and the elaborate technology which made it possible, he said that America represented a stage in historical evolution, “progress” and that America’s fulfillment lay in the development of a powerful and complex society. The meaning of America lay in the past, for the other in the future. The American ideal was an escape from institutions, from the forms of society and from the limitations society imposes upon the self. The American ideal was the elaboration of the complex social institutions which make modern society possible, an acceptance of the discipline of the machine and the enjoyment of its advantages, the achievement of the individual, not alone, but as a functioning part of society.

The trilogy *U.S.A.* comes close to being the great American novel which had been the aspiration of writers since the turn of the century. It is one of the ironies of our times that when the great American novel did arrive, it turned out to be condemnatory and pessimistic rather than a celebration of the American way. Yet there is an underlying affirmation in Dos Passos’s

denial. The American dream, battered and corrupted by men of ill will, or little will, still manifests itself, though in anguish, not completely stifled by the trappings of empire and the machinations of self-interest that the author describes.

Most important, it brings down the curtain on Dos Passos's remarkable effort throughout his literary career to convey the panorama of twentieth-century society. His later novels are partly right wing polemics, but anyone wanting to dismiss Dos Passos should remember that he was not a crank, but an intelligent, thoughtful man of letters who agonized about his politics.

Like many twentieth-century fictional masterpieces, *Ulysses*, for example, *U.S.A.* seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest, the history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules, by the author's individual adaptation of the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth-century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society.

Although Dos Passos's nature and the conditions of his personal life alone could have been responsible for his artistic temperament; he was certainly subject to the external forces which affected so many of his generation. Those influences emphasized in two ways the relation between his social needs and his need for form. The want of harmony in the lives of others became a part of his life, and a satisfactory order for him became dependent on a larger social order. Also, the external forces of his time created a community of men similarly engaged in the pursuit of form, so that an artistic career became in a limited way a step away from loneliness.

Society, however, if differentiated from humanity, became a particular entity with certain distinguishing patterns and forms. These might become obscured, or they might break down almost entirely, but they would have to be reorganized into similar or new patterns if the society were to survive as such. Born on the edge of American society, though geographically almost in its centre, Chicago Dos Passos had at first no chance even to become aware of the social entity.

A novel in the moral history of modern American writing coming to an end with Hemingway and the lost generation, and nowhere can this be more clearly seen than in the work of Dos Passos, who rounds out the story of that generation and carries its values into the social novel of the thirties. For what is so significant about Dos Passos is that though he is a direct link between the postwar decade and the crisis novel of the Depression period, the defeatism of the lost generation has been slowly and subtly transferred by him from persons to society itself.

It is society that becomes the hero of his work, society that suffers the anguish and impending sense of damnation that the lost-generation individualists had suffered alone before. For him the lost generation becomes all the lost generations from the beginning of modern time in America, all who have known them to be lost in the fires of war or struggling up the icy slopes of modern capitalism. The tragic "I" has become the tragic inclusive "we" of modern society.

Dos Passos was accused of having deserted the liberal positions of his youth. He maintained that his views had not shifted from those he argued in *U.S.A.* The evidence of the novel would seem to bear him out. The *U.S.A.* trilogy is a more nostalgic than revolution of any work. It looks back to that point in American history before the options were lost rather than forward to a socialist revolution. His finest work shows Dos Passos as a democratic idealist rather than as a socialist revolutionary.

Considered Dos Passos's masterpiece, *U.S.A.* presents a fiercely critical and pessimistic portrait of American society during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The trilogy stands as his most forceful presentation of his central concerns: the failure of the American

Dream, the exploitation of the working class, the loss of individual freedom, and America's emphasis on materialism. The novels also represent Dos Passos's most successful experiments in narrative form. Building on the innovative techniques of his earlier works, he interspersed the narrative with prose poem passages, excerpts from newspapers and popular songs, and biographical portraits of famous Americans, thus evoking multiple layers of detail and realism. Described as an epic novel as well as a study of history, *U.S.A.* established Dos Passos's reputation as an important literary innovator and as a major chronicler of twentieth-century American life.

References:

- Aaron, Daniel. "The Riddle of Dos Passos." *Harpers* 224 (Mar. 1962): 55-60.
- . *The Adventure of John Dos Passos: The Writers on the Left*. New York: Harcourt, 1961.
- Belkind, Allen. *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*. New York: Illinois UP, 1971.
- Brantley, John D. *U.S.A.: The Natural History of a Society*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1968.
- Hook, Andrew. *John Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974.
- Millgate, Michael. "John Dos Passos." *American Social Fiction*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964.
- Passos, Dos. *The 42nd Parallel*. New York: Harper, 1930.
- . *1919*. New York: Harcourt, 1932.
- . *The Big Money*. New York: Harcourt, 1936.
- Wrenn, John. *John Dos Passos*. New Haven: Twayne, 1961.