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The Ordering of the Camera Eye in U.S.A.

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS in the Camera Eye sections of John Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* are the subject of a well-researched essay by James N. Westerhoven. His discussion is valuable because "once an autobiographical framework has been established, the Camera Eye gains in credibility as the impression not of an invented persona, but of the author himself."¹ Understanding that the Camera Eye is impressionistic autobiography, we can accept more readily Dos Passos' assertion that it is his attempt at "draining off the subjective"² so as to make the other three devices in the trilogy—the twelve narratives about fictionalized characters, the twenty-seven clipped biographies, and the sixty-eight Newsreels—appear to be objective.

But having demonstrated the autobiographical nature of the Camera Eye, Westerhoven finds no particular reason for Dos Passos having ordered it as he did. Westerhoven points out that in *U.S.A.* there are fifty-one Camera Eye sections but that they are not evenly divided among the three volumes of the trilogy. *The 42nd Parallel* has twenty seven; *Nineteen Nineteen*, fifteen; and *The Big Money*, nine—a reduction by almost half in each successive volume. He remarks only that:

For some reason, Dos Passos used the Camera Eye less as his trilogy progressed. *The Big Money* contains only nine Camera Eyes, most of them very general in character, as if the author had decided that his personal memories are not really as important as he had thought originally. Whatever his motives, the authorial presence in the Camera Eye is diminished dramatically. . . .

And in his concluding paragraph, Westerhoven asserts that "What stands out in the last Camera Eye is the despair" (pp. 362, 364).

His failure to attach significance to Dos Passos' grouping of the

¹ "Autobiographical Elements in the Camera Eye," *American Literature*, XLIII (Nov., 1976), 341.

² Frank Gado, ed., "An Interview with John Dos Passos," *Idol: The Literary Quarterly of Union College*, XLV (1969), 23.

Camera Eye is not unusual. Critics have seldom noted the twenty-seven-fifteen-nine order and to my knowledge have never discussed its significance. Further, they have generally agreed with Westerhoven's assessment that the mood at the end of the work is one of despair. Alfred Kazin, for example, has labeled *U.S.A.* "one of the saddest books ever written by an American" and "a history of failure that is irrevocable, and of final despair." It is, he concluded, "a brilliant hecatomb, and one of the coldest and most mechanical of tragic novels."³

I do not disagree with assessments like those of Westerhoven and Kazin. Far from it, because Dos Passos' intention in *U.S.A.*, as he told Malcolm Cowley after completing *Nineteen Nineteen*, was to trace "a certain crystalization (call it monopoly capitalism?) of society that didn't exist in the early part of 42nd Parallel (call it competitive capitalism?)." He could only add, "but as for the note of hope—gosh who knows?"⁴ Anything that smacked of monopoly was anathema to his individualistic, even anarchistic, instincts.

In the total organization of the Camera Eye, however, I think there is a note of personal hope even as Dos Passos decries the growth of "Power Superpower," symbolized by the escapades of the financier Samuel Insull, which menaces the narrator and the coal miners portrayed in the final Camera Eye as they struggle together in 1931 to improve the working conditions in Harlan County, Kentucky. What Dos Passos attempted to show through the entire group of Camera Eyes was his gradual assimilation into a world beyond the shelter of his self-conscious imagination. The more he could find his place in that world, the less of a separate, subjective life was there to portray. Thus in the twenty-seven Camera Eyes of *The 42nd Parallel* we read the impressions of a child, then of an adolescent, and finally of a young man sailing to France in 1917 for his first encounter with war. Throughout he is still for the most part uninitiated and in his own private world. In the fifteen Camera Eyes of *Nineteen Nineteen*, he has moved partway beyond his earlier shelter as he experiences the war, army life, and Paris immediately after the armistice of November, 1918. Then in *The Big Money* he has gone even farther beyond

³ *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Garden City, N.Y., 1956), pp. 276, 282.

⁴ Townsend Ludington, ed., *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston, 1973), p. 404.

his own small world. He struggles with his identity: in *Camera Eye* (46) he tells of walking the streets, searching “for a set of figures a formula of action an address you don’t quite know” as he tries “to do to make there are more lives than walking desperate the streets hurry underdog do make.” But that comes to naught, and he can only “lie abed underdog (peeling the onion of doubt) with the book unread in your hand and swing on the seesaw maybe after all maybe topdog make.” The next word in the stream-of-consciousness passage is “money.” He begins to understand the forces at work in a capitalist society, but still he cannot be satisfied that he has found the necessary answers. Financiers are the oppressors; and yet, he reminds himself, the radicals, while being right, “are in their private lives such shits.” In the next *Camera Eye*, he has progressed not at all, finding himself “(if self is the bellyaching malingerer so often the companion of aimless walks) . . .

an unidentified stranger
 destination unknown
 hat pulled down over the has he any? face”⁵

But by the final *Camera Eye*, after experiencing the trauma caused by the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, he has found an identity. No longer is he an “unidentified stranger”; he has become a part of the “we” who are the striking Harlan County miners and the labor organizers, the common men with whom his sympathies have always lain who stand against “Power Superpower.” Despite the individual American’s failure to defeat monopoly capitalism, Dos Passos has gained a measure of hope because he can identify with this group, and—at least for the moment—he has achieved a personal victory in the face of a larger defeat.⁶ Perhaps success is ever thus for the creative writer; certainly it was for Dos Passos. His greatest achievements occurred while he struggled to find himself and when he thought he was one of an outcast group standing defiantly against the Establishment. When later in his life he had at least partly reconciled himself with “the system,” he was less driven to write his chronicle novels

⁵ *U.S.A.: The Big Money* (Boston, 1963), pp. 133, 174–175.

⁶ I wish to acknowledge the insight of a class of French students preparing for the *agrégation* examination, with whom I discussed this and many other aspects of *U.S.A.* during the fall of 1971 at the University of Lyon.

of protest; and he came in time to write, instead, narrative histories about the roots of the system he had once opposed.

I am not suggesting that, contrary to what critics have asserted, *U.S.A.* is an affirmation of life as Dos Passos saw it to be in America. None of the figures in the twelve narrative sections ends well off, unless, like Margo Dowling and Eleanor Stoddard, he or she has become devoid of human warmth. J. Ward Morehouse, for instance, who more than anyone else is the central figure of the trilogy, suffers a heart attack after collaborating with his protégé, Richard Ellsworth Savage, to bribe a U. S. Senator to protect an important advertising account. Savage, one of the two key figures in *Nineteen Nineteen*, is at the end of *The Big Money* in line to take over Morehouse's firm. He celebrates too much, gets drunk, and ends the night being knocked unconscious and robbed by two male prostitutes, who he fears will attempt to blackmail him. Charley Anderson, the central figure of *The Big Money*, has died after failing to beat a train through a railroad crossing. Mary French and Ben Compton, dedicated radicals who try to be loyal to the Communists, are manipulated and become disillusioned. She remains working for the party as the narrative about her concludes; he, however, has been expelled.⁷ But in the Camera Eye sequence we see Dos Passos coming of age as a public man, committed to the cause of the average person, if not to the rigid doctrines of the Communist Party. Ultimately he offers at least a tentative note of hope in the subjective Camera Eye, which he consciously set apart from the other three narrative devices that he interwove to create a bleak panorama of American society drifting during the first three decades of the twentieth century toward the Great Depression.

⁷ The point about there being central characters in the three "collective" novels is interesting. While they seem to be novels without heroes, Dos Passos did intend one or two figures to typify each volume, and Morehouse, to represent the general drift of the trilogy. When during his interview Frank Gado asked Dos Passos if he had intended "to have one character or set of characters somehow typify each of the volumes," he replied, "Yes, that's about right" (p. 15).