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Visions of Chaos and Visions of Order: Dos Passos as Historian

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History begins in novel and ends in essay.

—Macaulay

THROUGHOUT HIS ACTIVE LITERARY LIFE John Dos Passos was intrigued by the pull of history on the mind of modern man. As a youth at Harvard he felt the fascination of Froude, Gibbon, and Pater; and in student essays he held up Renaissance culture and agrarian Spain as norms against which America's worship of industrial progress might be questioned. During the first decade of his literary career, however, the demands of historical understanding did not figure in his major creative work. His two antiwar novels, *One Man's Initiation—1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921), portray in the romantic vein the artist's alienation from society; *Streets of Night* (1923), begun while he was still an undergraduate, reflects the emotional consequences of his own childhood; and *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), written after he had heard the antihistoricist groan in Joyce's *Ulysses,* dramatizes urban estrangement through its esthetically discontinuous presentation of characters without personal histories.

In *USA* the historical dimension first emerges in Dos Passos's work, both as a structural device and as a mode of comprehension. In this trilogy, which spans the years between the turn of the century and the economic crash of 1929, Dos Passos develops from youth to adulthood the lives of a series of interrelated characters, allowing the stream of events headlined in the "Newsreel" section to sweep them along. History as well as society becomes a protagonist. In the biographical sketches, history often speaks as the ironic chorus of conscience, in the voices of Debs, LaFollette, Veblen, and John Reed. In the biographies, however, history is all memory, studies of moral heroes who are actually noble losers, "masterless" men who, though not deceived by society, have nevertheless been defeated by the crushing might of historical events. Their lives sug-

gest that the locus of historical force and energy does not lie in men; for men have only "words against power / SUPER POWER." That Dos Passos portrays the human mind and will in *USA* as subordinate to external forces is obvious, but it is necessary to establish the point in order to register the emphatic change in Dos Passos's attitude toward history: as a naturalistic novelist, he reifies the power of history over man; subsequently, as a nationalistic historian, he all but deifies man as the dominant force in history.

This paper, accordingly, has several purposes. One is to describe the changes in Dos Passos's vision of historical reality and human character as he moved from writing novels to writing history. Another is to explain, from the perspective of a student of history, the ideological difficulties Dos Passos encountered in trying, as a conservative libertarian, to invoke his conception of the American past. A last, and perhaps major, purpose is to confront the theoretical and interdisciplinary problems a historian encounters in analyzing the work of a novelist who "does" history, whether in the imaginative forms of fiction as in *USA* or in the more traditional structure of historical narrative as in *The Ground We Stand On* and *The Men Who Made The Nation.*

I

In 1928, about the time he began work on the first volume of *USA,* Dos Passos was formulating his literary credo. The true function of the novelist, he maintained, was that of a "sort of second-class historian of the age he lives in," because he is "able to build reality more clearly out of his factual experience than a plain historian or biographer can."[1] A few years later Dos Passos might have been inclined to delete the reference to "second-class historian." For there emerged a contemporary, Leon Trotsky, who confirmed his conviction that the best history comes from one who has participated in the events about which he writes. When Trotsky's magisterial three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution* appeared in 1932, Dos Passos asserted that one would have to go back to Thucydides "to find anything like the sort of narrative whose facts, explanations and political convictions are welded into granite by the hot and clear intelligence of a man who's accustomed to being an actor as well

[1] John Dos Passos, "A Statement of Belief," *Bookman,* LXVIII (Sept., 1929), 26.

as an observer of events. That's what history ought to be. Classical in the best sense."[2] Could Dos Passos do for 1919 what Trotsky had done for 1917? At about the time he praised Trotsky's feat in a private letter, he was asked to state publicly his conception of the role of the literary artist. "The writer's business," Dos Passos declared in response to a *Modern Quarterly* questionnaire, "is to justify God's way to man as Milton said. For God read society, or history."[3]

This remark was made after Dos Passos had completed *1919* and was starting the third volume of *USA, The Big Money*. Despite the exhortation, Dos Passos could neither explain nor justify the ways of history to his fellow man. Contemporary Left critics were concerned about the absence of a proletarian *élan* in *USA*. Yet not only does the novel defy a class analysis, it defies a meaningful interpretation of history. Marx advised radical man to draw his "poetry" from the future and not from the past, but Dos Passos's moral orientation is clearly retrospective. The novelist confounded liberals as well as radicals by implying an ideological connection between the immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and the immigrant "founders of Massachusetts" who landed at Plymouth Rock. To locate freedom in the American past, to suggest that at one time Americans were truly free, made no sense to those who accepted either the progressive or the Marxist interpretation of history. Underlying the eloquent rage and protest of *USA* is a conservative desire to restore what contemporary radicals wanted to transcend. "We stand on quicksand," the "Camera Eye" speculates, until modern man is able to "ponder the course of history and what leverage might pry the owners loose from power and bring back (I too Walt Whitman) our storybook democracy." Unable to see the fulfillment of a historical mission in the working class or even in Veblen's technological intelligentsia, Dos Passos could only see history as a secular Jeremiah and a modern Catonist. The country has been conquered by "strangers" who have infiltrated the American Garden and "cut down the woods for pulp and turned our

[2] John Dos Passos to Simon and Schuster (n.d.), 1932, letter in Max Eastman papers, The Lilly Library, Indiana University. For permission to quote from unpublished letters and manuscripts of John Dos Passos (see also footnotes 5 and 6, below) the author thanks Elizabeth H. Dos Passos, the Lilly Library of Indiana University, and the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia.

[3] "Whither the American Writer? A Questionnaire," *Modern Quarterly*, VI (Summer, 1932), 11–12.

pleasant cities into slums and sweated the wealth out of our people." History itself has been captured by alien elements. It is an insidious power without justification or vengeance, an inscrutable force unleashed by a mysterious "they" against an unidentified "we." Dos Passos's vague but passionate conspiratorial view of history denied human events a moral teleology. The metaphysical dread lies in his honest inability to locate the real source of evil. Hence the almost paranoiac response to the Sacco and Vanzetti execution:[4]

> they have clubbed us off the streets. . . .
> we are beaten. . . .
> America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul. . . .
> all right we are two nations.

Despite the polar imagery of the "two nations," *USA* is more naturalistic than Marxist, more disposed to record the social history of alienation than to conceive the drama of history as following an upward movement of consciousness. The denial of a redemptive *telos,* of an unfolding unity behind the diversity of events, was one purpose of Dos Passos's brilliant stylistic innovations. The novelist had been influenced by the montage experiments of film directors like David Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, and by the Italian Futurists and French poets who adopted from Cubist painters the idea of "simultaneity"—the effort to "produce something that stood off the page."[5] Borrowing the techniques of the film maker and painter, Dos Passos strove not only to represent his vision of reality but to have the reader encounter it as an immediate personal experience. Four interrelated devices were used to produce this phe-

[4] The "paranoiac quality" that Robert Gorham Davis perceives in this "Camera Eye," where the crimes of capitalism are attributed to "mysterious strangers" and presumably alien foreigners (*John Dos Passos,* Minneapolis, 1962, pp. 28–30), may spring from Dos Passos's ambivalence about his illegitimate birth to a father, the immigrant son of a Portuguese shoemaker, who did not openly acknowledge his son until the young Dos Passos was sixteen. Dos Passos's father rose to become one of America's leading corporation lawyers and used his writing talents to identify all political virtue with the Anglo-Saxon world. His son followed the same course when he turned to historical writing. In his early novels there is a great deal of filial bitterness, which may account for Dos Passos's radical protest against the capitalist world of his father in the ironic name of "our fathers" of American colonial history. Significantly, Dos Passos's reconciliation to capitalism accompanies his reembracement of his father. See Dos Passos's *The Best Times* (New York, 1966); and see also the thinly veiled portrait of Dos Passos and his family relationships in Edmund Wilson's *I Thought of Daisy* (New York, 1929).

[5] John Dos Passos, "Contemporary Chronicles," MS (n.d.), p. 2, Dos Passos papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

nomenological effect: "Newsreel" sections that chronicled the irrationalities of world events; biographies of contemporary historical figures, mostly studies in political defeat or economic and technical success at the cost of moral failure or loss of independence; personal lyrical impressions of the "Camera Eye," the broken consciousness of the author himself; and segmented narratives of twelve representative characters from almost all social levels whose lives overlap and tie together a collective portrait of American society that spanned three decades of American social history. Together these four techniques achieve the desired effect. The biographies are commentaries upon the impersonal forces of social organization that have rendered all Dos Passos's heroes victims of history; the fleeting, disjointed impressions of the "Newsreels" convey the discontinuity of historical experience; the narratives treat individual characters as fragments of a collective consciousness so alienated it cannot experience its own alienation; and the "Camera Eye," the one vehicle through which consciousness rises to social knowledge, expresses a growing realization of the incoherence and estrangement of the self, the loss of identity that renders man faceless—"an unidentified stranger / destination unknown / hat pulled down over the has he any face?"

With these stylistic devices Dos Passos found a framework to hold together a subject too vast for the traditional forms of the novel. Significantly, the creation of a new genre that held the artistic possibility of both representing the reality of society and the power of history presented Dos Passos with a problem of definition. After completing the final volume of the trilogy he attempted to discover a category that would best describe the potent literary object he had wrought. He came up with the definition of "chronicle":

> A chronicler has to use the stories people tell him about themselves, all the little dramas in other people's lives he gets glimpses of without knowing just what went before or just what will come after, the fragments of talk he overhears in the subway or on a streetcar, the letter he picks up on the street addressed by one unknown character to another, the words on a scrap of paper found in a trash-basket, the occasional vistas of reality he can pick out of the mechanical diction of a newspaper report.[6]

The essential disconnectedness of Dos Passos's subject suggests

[6] Ibid., pp. 4–5.

the possibilities of *USA* as a work of art and its limitations as a work of history. Croce's familiar distinction between history and chronicle may be useful here: the historian attempts to penetrate the core of events by entering into history and reliving in his own mind the experiences of the past; the chronicler, on the other hand, treats his materials as inert, empty of determinate content and thus devoid of self-actualizing potential, like Dos Passos's "scrap of paper found in a trash-basket." History, observed Croce, "is principally an act of thought, chronicle an act of will." *USA* may be regarded as more willed than understood, for Dos Passos intended to arrange a panorama of utterances and gestures the total meaning of which he did not pretend to comprehend. In this audacious literary experiment the choice of chronicle was proper and perhaps inevitable. No other method could have so deadened the human dimension of history while animating its naturalistic forces. The antinaturalist Croce believed that two different "spiritual attitudes" distinguished the historian and the chronicler: the former regards characters and events as alive because their meanings "vibrate in the historian's mind"; the latter regards characters and events as relics because he makes no attempt to understand their ultimate significance. Hence, "History is living chronicle, chronicle is dead history."[7] History becomes chronicle in *USA* because Dos Passos dissociates himself from the very characters he has created. He cannot enter their lives and experience their thoughts in the Crocean sense because they themselves are hardly conscious of the meaning of historical events. Writing about a society that was spiritually dying, Dos Passos was thus forced, as Croce might have expected, to record and describe rather than analyze and explain. Indeed *USA* is neither guided by a principle of historical explanation nor inspired by a vision of historical meaning. The pattern of causality is never revealed in the random sequence of the story. History unfolds as a kind of indeterminate determinism, a series of happenings that can be told without explicit interpretation, told only through the disjointed flashes of newspaper headlines. There is no causal order of understanding behind the disorder of events. What happens, happens.

It was Jean-Paul Sartre, I believe, who first discerned the epistemological implications of Dos Passos's work. Reviewing *1919* in the

[7] Benedetto Croce, "History and Chronicle," in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), pp. 44–57.

Nouvelle Revue Française in 1938, the French philosopher concluded his metaphysical essay with the highest compliment: "I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time." Sartre regarded Dos Passos as superior to even Faulkner or Kafka because the author of *1919* was bold enough to relate the problem of historical time to the problem of collective consciousness. Dos Passos's idea of "narrating means adding," Sartre observed, the compilation of each irreducible, isolated event, "a gleaming solitary thing that does not flow from anything else, but suddenly arises to join other things." Our bewildering impression of an inchoate present, where everything develops and nothing relates, also affects our memory of the past. By imposing upon the reader an unsettling impression of the "indeterminacy of detail," Dos Passos succeeds in expressing what he himself cannot explain—the lawless nature of historical events. And since the present is the continuation of an "irremedial" past, history is not hope but fate. Sartre found Dos Passos's vision esthetically exciting but psychologically almost unbearable. "Close your eyes and try to remember your own life, try to remember it *that way,*" he stated in reference to the inanimate, petrified lives of Dos Passos's characters. "You will stifle. It is this unrelieved stifling that Dos Passos wanted to express. In capitalist society, men do not have lives, they have only destinies."[8]

In *USA* Dos Passos's historical perspective is the totality of chaos, a vision that enabled him, in Charles Beard's formulation, to "comment on" history but not necessarily to write it.[9] As a novelist Dos Passos avoided narrating historically and allowed his great work to unfold without an organizing principle based upon the assumption of causality. The juxtaposition of the Joycean "Camera Eye" amid the "Newsreels," biographies and narratives suggests that the inner eye of the author cannot perceive the meaning of history because it sees only the effects of causeless events ("if not why not? walking the streets rolling on your bed eyes sting from peeling the speculative onion of doubt . . . ."). It is the surrealistic quality of *USA,* as in Kafka's novels, that nothing occurring in history may be seen to have a discernible cause. In human terms, without some feeling that events have an explanation we have no capacity to

[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (New York, 1962), pp. 94–103.

[9] Charles Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time,* pp. 140–151.

comprehend experience. The historian scratches his head when he puts down *USA*. For if the problem of history is the problem of consciousness, the problem of consciousness for the historian is the problem of causal understanding. Dos Passos was too honest a writer to resort to an act of faith to overcome either of these problems. The Joycean nightmare quality in Dos Passos's sense of history also lies in his unwillingness to accept completely either a Marxist view of causality without consciousness or an existentialist view of consciousness without causality. One violated freedom, the other denied meaning. In *USA* Dos Passos does allow denial of both of these values to prevail; and, by artfully avoiding the necessity of causality, he offers us a history that can be experienced but not comprehended. But this vision of chaos could not endure. Behind it stood a quest for order and meaning, a deeply sensitive author who desired above all to believe and affirm, to get "his mouth," as he said of Veblen, "around the essential yes."

II

Literary scholars have rightly stressed the tenacious consistency and integrity that runs through Dos Passos's ideological career, Right as well as Left. An examination of his historical writings, however, reveals several significant changes of attitudes and values. One change occurs in his perception of reality. The stylistic devices of *USA,* which he dropped in subsequent novels and then took up again in *Midcentury* (1960), are missing from his historical works. Their absence signifies the absence of that perspective of chaos which gave *USA* such unfocused power and passion. The historical reality that Dos Passos discovered in the eighteenth century—or willed into vision—appeared pregnant with meaning and value, an orderly, intelligible society capable of being reconstructed through the traditional story-telling function of the narrative historian. The scope of historical reality also contracted as Dos Passos abandoned the multi-class montage of *USA* and focused solely upon the political culture of a ruling elite. No longer were his heroes the beautiful losers, the eighteenth-century counterparts to the Wobblies: the Shaysites, the Regulators, perhaps even the Quakers and Indians. He now became fascinated by the stately activities of men of property, status, and power. And writing his-

tory from the "top down," as it were, he found a remarkable climate of opinion free from the milieu of conflict that reverberated through *USA*. The portrait of late eighteenth-century America is characterized by consensus, continuity, harmony. Reading Dos Passos's narratives, one is hardly aware that the Founding Fathers were profoundly troubled by the problem of change, instability, factions, class aggrandizement (though not class conflict), ambition, "passion," power without virtue, democracy without deference, and the eternal and universal "propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities."[10]

Dos Passos's vision of character changed along with his vision of reality. In his novels on contemporary America, humanity generally "came off badly,"[11] as Edmund Wilson remarked of *Manhattan Transfer;* and his flat, one-dimensional characters, lacking emotional depth and psychological density, repel us as they choke on their own clichés. In colonial history, however, the novelist found the nobility and excellence lacking in modern man. He could even find exceptional qualities of character and will in Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, two statesmen whose respective financial and judicial policies went far toward creating the corporate economy and centralized state so inimical to Dos Passos's social philosophy. Hamilton possessed "a simple honesty" and Marshall "the weight of character" (John Adams's description). Although vain and ambitious, neither man succumbed to the corruptions of power. The Treasury Secretary displayed deep resources of restraint when he changed his mind about the innocent Hugh Henry Brackinridge during the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Chief Justice rose above politics when he handled the Aaron Burr affair with scrupulous fairness.[12]

Implicit in Dos Passos's new-found respect for the potential of character is also a new attitude toward history. With Carlyle he now believed that history is the study of great men, and with Emerson he apparently assumed that historical heroes represent the splendor of their age. This attitude indicates an obvious shift from the deterministic pessimism that pervaded *USA* and rendered characters

[10] James Madison, *Federalist,* no. 10.

[11] Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York, 1952), p. 431.

[12] John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On* (London, 1942), pp. 381–401; *The Shackles of Power: Three Jeffersonian Decades* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), p. 283.

into creatures, none of whom had the power or will to command events. Yet Dos Passos's historical works retain what Edmund Wilson called, in reference to his fiction, "the old naturalistic method."[13] For the novelist still displayed the same tendency to refrain from analyzing the interior realm of the mind in order to penetrate the source of emotion, thought, and action. His aim was still, as he earlier told Wilson when speaking of his novels, to "generate the insides . . . of characters by external description."[14] Thus he presents his great historical figures from the outside, so that we know them as they are behaving and responding, acting and being acted upon. We know Jefferson, for example, as the doer rather than the thinker: not Jefferson the moral philosopher and political theorist, but Jefferson the farmer, surveyor, inventor, architect, and craftsman. Dos Passos wants us to believe in the moral excellence of the Founding Fathers, but he tries to convey the nature of their characters through their deeds rather than their thoughts, as though moral man were what he does, not what he thinks.

Focusing on the mundane activities of the Founding Fathers, Dos Passos's historical universe is the world of Daniel J. Boorstin rather than the world of Perry Miller, the world of historicism rather than idealism. The late novelist would probably have gagged on the label "historicist," but the term applies to Dos Passos in two respects: first, as a literary artist he romanticizes a classical period, the American Enlightenment, through the historical imagination; second, as a political moralist he assumes that the nation had been conceived once and for all during the age of the Founding Fathers, and that their thoughts and deeds defined the possibility of America's future development. Dos Passos's historicist conviction that the past is as binding as it is liberating, that it is our only "ground to stand on," raises a question that has troubled many contemporary historians: whence did American democracy spring?

In simplest terms, did democracy rise from the natural environment or from the political mind? The question poses a serious dilemma for those who would claim superiority for America's his-

[13] Wilson to Dos Passos, May 3, 1939, Dos Passos papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. For permission to quote from this unpublished letter of Edmund Wilson and the letter of July 16, 1939 (see footnote 14, below) the author thanks Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, the Literary Executors of Edmund Wilson, and the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia.

[14] Wilson to Dos Passos, July 16, 1939, ibid.

torical experience. Those who prefer the environmental interpretation must deny the creative power of the political intellect, while those who choose the intellect must acknowledge the influence of European ideas, thereby compromising America's claim to "uniqueness." Dos Passos struggles with this problem in his discussion of Daniel DeFoe and Benjamin Franklin. Comparing their careers, he concludes that Franklin went further because America's social structure was freer, so open and inviting that Franklin "could go forward with a backwoodsman's beaver cap on his wise noodle instead of the wig that etiquette required." One may question whether Franklin was able to advance his station without conforming his beliefs. But at the basis of Dos Passos's attitude is the conviction that character is somehow related to landscape and that political liberty is a product of social mobility, simply "a question of elbow room."[15] In this prosaic explanation—which scarcely explains why there were not more Franklins—freedom was achieved not because it was desirable but because it was possible. As with other historicists, Dos Passos confuses the validity of an idea with its possibility, thereby identifying the actual with the ideal.

Dos Passos could pass over this distinction because of his romantic attitude toward the American past. For the novelist-historian, democracy had always been, even in *USA,* an ideal not so much to be realized as recaptured, to be invoked in the "clean words our fathers spoke." In this exercise history becomes an act of the imagination, a feat one could readily grant Dos Passos if only it did not get him into so many ideological difficulties. He would have us believe, for example, that Roger Williams was the torchbearer of the idea of toleration, the Milton of American democracy, when in reality the great dissenter's ideas about authority and equality are perhaps closer to those of Lenin than those of Jefferson. Similarly, if Williams may be too conservative to be used as a symbol of Dos Passos's libertarian ideals, Thomas Paine may be too radical. Dos Passos hails Paine as the eighteenth-century spokesman for world emancipation, but he also hints that the great American revolutionist came to discover in the Jacobin terror of Robespierre what Dos Passos's generation discovered in the Soviet "republic" of Stalin. "Republic!" Paine shouts to a friend in France:

[15] Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On,* pp. 187–205; *Occasions and Protests* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 52–76.

do you call this a Republic? Why they are worse off than the slaves of Constantinople; for there they expect to be beshaws in heaven by submitting to the slaves below, but here they believe neither in heaven nor hell, and yet are slaves by choice. I know of no Republic in the world except America, which is the only country for such men as you and I.[16]

Still responding to his own break with Europe in the thirties, Dos Passos wanted to dissociate America's political heroes from Europe's revolutionary tradition. The result became less an analysis than a metamorphosis. He contrasts Williams's planting a commonwealth of liberty in America to the failure of the English commonwealth and Cromwell's march on the Rump Parliament (which he likens to the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly); and he treats Paine as a jaded radical who repudiated revolution and reembraced America, a typical ex-fellow traveler who lost his faith and thereby saved his reason. One would never guess that Dos Passos was talking about the Paine who dismissed government as "the badge of lost innocence," who remained a sort of pre-Trotskyist advocate of universal "permanent revolution," who had a mind so given to abstractions that political experience could not enter it ("the Peter Pan of the Age of Reason," Cecilia Kenyon aptly called him), and who offered a model of "conscience politics" that would later be rediscovered by Dos Passos's own ideological foes—the New Left.[17] Searching for a "usable past" in the forties and fifties, Dos Passos became a literary hero of William Buckley, Jr., and the new American Right. He also became a conservative historian without a concept of conservative history.

Dos Passos's didactic history is full of ideological difficulties, and nowhere is this more obvious than in his studies of Thomas Jefferson. The novelist's dilemma confronts every conservative writer who seeks to ground his creed in Jefferson's natural rights philosophy. How can we inspire respect for the past by holding up a philosopher who himself believed that no generation could bind another, that each newborn race of men enjoyed the "sovereignty

[16] John Dos Passos, *The Living Thoughts of Tom Paine* (New York, 1963), p. 47.

[17] Cecilia Kenyon, "Where Paine Went Wrong," *American Political Science Review*, XLV (Dec., 1951), 1086–1099; on the New Left's rediscovery of Paine, see Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New York, 1968); for Dos Passos's response to the student radicals of the sixties, see his "The New Left: A Spook Out of the Past," *National Review*, XVIII (Oct., 1966), 1037–1039.

of the present," and that the "earth belongs to the living"? True, every American interprets Jefferson differently; but for a conservative to comprehend his genius he must grasp the contrary tensions within a single intellect, an effort that perhaps requires what Kenneth Burke called the method of "perspective by incongruity." Dos Passos, however, always distrusted "double-minded" temperaments. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dos Passos lamented at the time of his friend's death, was a "split personality" who lacked the total integration of the "whole heart and whole intelligence" essential to an "unshakeable moral attitude towards the world." Dos Passos could never accept Fitzgerald's definition of a "first-rate intelligence" as "the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."[18]

As a result, Dos Passos could never fully appreciate the tensions and ambiguities that characterized Jefferson, a statesman who could be at once a democrat and an aristocrat, a nationalist and a cosmopolite, a speculative philosopher and a practical politician, a Lockean who denied innate ideas and a humanist who believed in "self-evident" truths, a theorist of limited government and a practitioner of national sovereignty, a champion of the Bill of Rights and a violator of civil liberties, an advocate of freedom and an apologist for slavery. Indeed, regarding the last issue, one has no sense from Dos Passos that Jefferson experienced guilt and self-doubt as he tried to reconcile black servitude with his philosophy of nature and natural rights. Had he explored this problem from within the interior of Jefferson's rich mind, he would have discovered an intellect that could hold contradictory thoughts on slavery and freedom and still maintain the ability to function rationally. This subject, the phenomenological-inner and political-outer world of Jefferson, contained the potential for fusing literature, psychology, and history into a brilliant portrait in paradox—one wonders what Styron or Faulkner might have done with it. But the subject also suggests a "doubleness" of consciousness repugnant to Dos Passos's moral sense and, in his view, inconsistent with Jefferson's character and with the culture of the Enlightenment itself.

Dos Passos's handling of the Sally Hemings affair reveals his reluctance to probe the complexities of Jefferson's mind and char-

[18] John Dos Passos, "A Note on Fitzgerald," in *The Crack-Up,* ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1956), pp. 338–343; Fitzgerald's statement is on p. 69.

acter. In view of Dos Passos's own illegitimate birth and his lifelong search for self-identity,[19] this affair may have had some personal meaning. He seemed to be concerned with it while working on *The Heart and Head of Thomas Jefferson.* "'Is there something rather interesting that has been kept out of sight about Jefferson's relations with Negroes?" Edmund Wilson asked him in 1950. "Did he have close and unprincipled relations with those that were made of brown extract for the lack of close relations with white people? I learn from the same source—and for the first time—that he had several mulatto children."[20] Dos Passos chose not to discuss the matter in the Jefferson book, which was published in 1954. In the mid-sixties, when a different moral awareness of American race relations emerged, he took up the Hemings affair and admitted that the "story had a kernel of truth." Yet instead of exploring the matter in depth in order to understand a political culture aspiring to egalitarianism and restrained by racism, Dos Passos resolved it with a twist of logic that was as uncanny as it was unenlightening. After quoting from a Henry Randall letter that had recently turned up in the James Parton papers at Harvard, he added his own wry judgment:

"Walking about mouldering Monticello one day with Col. T. J. Randolph (Mr. Jefferson's eldest grandson)," Randall wrote, "he showed me a smoke-blackened and sooty room on one of the colonnades and informed me it was Sally Hemings' room. He asked me if I knew how the story of Mr. Jefferson's connexion with her originated. I told him I did not. 'There was a better excuse for it,' said he, 'than you might think; she had children that resembled Mr. Jefferson so closely that it was plain that they had his blood in their veins.'"

Indeed they did, and blood even more precious to Jefferson than his own.[21]

The tendency to turn an embarrassment into an eulogy suggests the extent to which the essential strain of skepticism is missing from Dos Passos's history. The "storybook democracy" ethos of his history also suggests why he faced several difficulties in trying to

[19] Blanche Gelfant, "The Search for Identity in the Novels of John Dos Passos," *PMLA,* LXXVI (March, 1961), 133–149.

[20] Wilson to Dos Passos, Sept. 5, 1950, Dos Passos papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. (The source Wilson referred to was Roy Othley's *Black Odyssey.*)

[21] Dos Passos, *Shackles of Power,* pp. 152–154.

transmit the meaning of Jeffersonianism to the twentieth century. First of all, his naturalistic historicism left him without a method of analyzing ideas as autonomous moral principles, ideas that would have to transcend the eighteenth-century environment in order to convey binding ethical significance to the modern world. Even when Dos Passos discusses ideas there is no evidence of his having reflected upon their significance. Indeed, the profound political and moral problems the Framers wrestled with are turned into platitudes simply through the reification of words like "freedom," "self-government," and "happiness," concepts the authors of the Constitution themselves found difficult to reconcile.

Convinced that the Founding Fathers knew what they meant and meant what they said, Dos Passos was certain that the meaning of their ideas could be comprehended not by interpreting but simply by invoking them, as though the *Declaration of Independence,* and not Madison's *The Federalist* or John Adams's *Discourses on Davila,* provides the last word in American political theory. Moreover, Dos Passos was in the awkward position of assuming that the past was both exceptional and exemplary, unique as well as analogous. He was attracted to colonial America because it offered a milieu politically and morally superior to contemporary industrial America. At the same time he was forced to argue that we could learn from colonial Americans who "in spite of the changing conditions of life . . . were not very different from ourselves . . . [and] managed to meet situations as difficult as those we have to face."[22] What, then, can be learned? In 1934, Dos Passos declared that "at this particular moment in history, when machines and institutions have so outgrown the ability of mind to dominate them, we need bold and original thought more than ever."[23] Dos Passos assumed he found this "thought" in colonial history, but he was hard pressed to demonstrate that the fundamental structure of the past was so economically and culturally the same as the present that we can learn anything from the Founding Fathers—least of all learn how man could "dominate" machines and institutions from those who deliberately built institutions and the "machinery of government" to check democracy and control man.

[22] Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On,* p. 3.

[23] Dos Passos, *Occasions and Protests,* p. 11.

III

Dos Passos looked forward to ruin, backward to hope. His attempt to recapture the moral and political milieu of the American Enlightenment was his way of asking us to appreciate a world that we have lost. His history is a poignant study in old moral principles long forgotten, good ways not taken. Yet Dos Passos's vision of eighteenth-century order was more willed than true, a triumph of imagination over inquiry.[24] He was enamored of his majestic vision of the Jeffersonian world but unclear as to what forces brought that world into being; he was even less clear as to what factors led to its decline. In *The Shackles of Power* Dos Passos marks 1831—five years after Jefferson's death—as the year of declension, the moment when commercial capitalism, mass society, and the Leviathan state began to emerge like a visitation from nowhere. But even though he drew upon the travel accounts of Tocqueville, he could not follow the Frenchman's analysis to its unsettling conclusion—that the rise of Jacksonian democracy threatened Jeffersonian liberty, that Jefferson's own Lockean "pursuit of happiness" turned every individual into a conformist and a materialist, and that Jeffersonian liberalism itself became a life of mindless action and endless acquisition, "a joyless quest for joy."[25]

It is strange that in *USA* Dos Passos drew upon Veblen (and to a certain extent Marx) for a radical critique of capitalist society, but in his historical works he refrained from using Tocqueville's equally brilliant conservative critique. It is also curious that Dos Passos failed to sustain a consistent standard of historical judgment that would morally bind the present to the past. In the novels *USA* and *Midcentury,* Dos Passos held up Moorehouse and Judge Lewin to execration because they trafficked in money and public relations, investing themselves in their own investments. But Robert Morris, the colonial financier who speculated profitably on the American

[24] Dos Passos apparently felt no epistemological embarrassment in the admission that he was both discovering history and creating it: "A set of ideas, a point of view, a frame of reference is in space only an intersection, the state of affairs at some given moment in the consciousness of one man or many men, but in time it has evolving form, virtually organic extension. In time ideas can be thought of as sprouting, growing, maturing, bringing forth seed and dying like plants. To make sense of the tangled jungle of men's thoughts and impulses that makes up the history of a culture we have continually to invent sequences which we can follow like footpaths through the thickets of what was" (Dos Passos, "The Use of the Past," in *The Ground We Stand On,* p. 16).

[25] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), p. 251.

Revolution, is cheerfully tolerated in *The Men Who Made a Nation* as "everybody's banker."[26] Even Veblen's villains become domesticated as Dos Passos moves back into the eighteenth century. A history without antagonists is a past too consensualized to comprehend. "Where there is no strain," R. G. Collingwood has written, "there is no history."[27]

Ultimately Dos Passos was at a loss to explain how a majestic past developed into a miserable present. Without sensitivity to the demands of causal explanation, he retained in his historical works the same characteristics of chronicle writing that infused his early novels. In *USA* Dos Passos was appalled by the contingency of history; in *The Ground We Stand On* he is amazed by its rationality. Thus the vision of chaos is gone, but the meaning of events has yet to emerge from the vision of order. As a narrative historian, as a raconteur of episodes and anecdotes, Dos Passos shows us this and he shows us that, but of the world that has been forsaken he does not show us "why." He asks us to move forward to yesterday, but he offers no hint of how to get there. We are as lost as the characters in *Manhattan Transfer* or *USA*. Even more so, for we have come further and know less.

Perhaps the real question is whether a historian has a right to demand more of Dos Passos. The answer is, I believe, no. Too honest a writer to claim more than he could see, Dos Passos was too humble a thinker to claim a privileged understanding of the movement and process of history. Through the dialectical "Logic" of perfect contradiction, Hegel and Marx may have explained how man becomes alienated from history, how *homo faber,* the maker of history, loses his freedom to forces beyond himself. Throughout his life Dos Passos was also painfully aware of the estrangement of history from freedom, the tendency, that is, of power to "autonomize" itself, to cut itself off from its subjects and become an independent force over them.[28] Indeed fear of power is at the heart of Dos Passos's political philosophy. Yet the conservative novelist wisely refrained from allowing his anarchist desires to coincide with the presumed course of history. In this deliberate restraint, Dos Passos resembles Tolstoy,

[26] John Dos Passos, *The Men Who Made The Nation* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), p. 56.
[27] R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (London, 1940), p. 75.
[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs,* trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., 1964), pp. 223ff.

who likewise would not control force by becoming its agent on the assumption that man can master his destiny by identifying with history. "There is nothing stronger in us," Nicola Chiaromonte has written of *War and Peace,* "nothing we know with more certainty than this force about which we know nothing."[29] These words capture perfectly Dos Passos's skeptical stance in *USA,* where he chooses with Veblen to "peel the onion of doubt" in the face of alienated force and energy. And when he rediscovers the American Enlightenment, he also follows Veblen back to a preindustrial world of harmony and dignity, where power had presumably been humanized by character, disciplined by a healthy balance of self-determination and self-control. Dos Passos's historical works offer, then, not a teleology of deliverance but a moral vision of redemption by retrospection. His odyssey had to end with the Founding Fathers, lest his quest for freedom become a quest for power by identifying history with prophecy. The task of the historian is not so much to change history (that is being done independently) but to ponder it, even celebrate it ("I too Walt Whitman"). The American Enlightenment must catch up with American energy.

[29] Nicola Chiaromonte, *The Paradox of History* (London, 1971), p. 55.