

## ANALYSIS

U.S.A.: trilogy

*The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen-Nineteen* (1932), *The Big Money* (1936)



John Dos Passos

(1896-1970)

“The whole work has that character of abstract composition which makes us think so often in twentieth-century fiction of post-Impressionist painting.... In each of these novels [*The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and *1919*], there are but five persons out of whose experiences the author has chosen to make up his representative picture.... And for the ten principals we are given a much more detailed and consecutive history than for any of the characters in *Manhattan Transfer*. The sections are in general much longer, and the doings of the character in question are followed from day to day, sometimes from year to year.... The dominant characteristic of all these people is that they are just ordinary Americans, and the prevailing tone of the whole narrative is that of ordinary American speech and feeling.

In *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* two of the characters are young men who go from place to place engaging in every variety of unskilled labor. Another is a stenographer coming from an ordinary middle-class family. Her brother, Joe Williams, appears as a leading character in *1919*. He is just a boy who can't stand it at home and who, having deserted from the navy, drifts from job to job on merchant vessels. He has enough initiative and pull to get himself made a petty officer in the merchant marine; but otherwise he is a common sailor... Slightly higher in the social and cultural scale in *Daughter*, scatter-brained girl from Texas, who is looking for 'life,' and is finally killed in a crashing airplane with taking a ride with a drunken French aviator.... Much more ambitious spirits are found among the people of these books. Such are Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins, women of esthetic tastes with an eye to the main chance, who blossom out into interior decorators and end up with fat Red Cross jobs in Paris.... There is Richard Ellsworth Savage, a poor boy, who knows how to get in with the best set at Harvard, and manages to keep his pacifism from spoiling his prospects of promotion in the army. And, king of them all, is J. Ward Moorehouse, who rises fast in the business world, turns public-relations counselor with handsome offices in New York, and ends up as a Red Cross major...

There is one character with whom we are able to sympathize completely, although he is treated in the same objective, matter-of-fact way as the rest. That is Ben Compton, who makes his entry toward the end of *1919*. He is a Jew... This young man early espouses the cause of the working class, takes part in many strikes, gets beaten up with the wobblies at Everett, declares himself a conscientious objector, and is finally sent down to Atlanta for ten years for taking part in a meeting in sympathy with the Soviet Government. He is the only one of the leading characters who has devoted himself to any cause more unselfish than the gratification of his own appetites....

Dos Passos...hit upon three different devices for enlarging the reference of his chronicle. One of these is called the Camera Eye. It consists of forty-odd short pieces describing moments in the life of a growing boy and then the same boy grown and serving in the Red Cross during the war. There are many suggestions that this boy and man was the author himself. In *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* he is seen traveling abroad, at school in England, on a river steamer in Chesapeake Bay, going to church, at the university ('Four years under the ether cone). In *1919* he is shown in a great many places during his service in France. Child or man, he sees everything and understands nothing: and these pieces are likely to be a jumble of impressions without logical or rhetorical organization. It is in the Camera Eye that one traces the influence of Joyce and the 'stream-of-consciousness' system of notation. Perhaps by the Camera Eye, Mr. Dos Passos wishes to indicate a way of seeing things directly or naively before the process of interpretation and elimination has intervened to give a semblance of order to what is seen and fit it all into a consistent and idealistic view of life.

And that is, indeed, the first impression received from these dazzling, bewildering cubist compositions, in which fragments of so many disparate objects are set side by side, often in the same sentence, often with no punctuation of any kind. One has the blood and filth and stupidity of war in the same picture with the loveliest impressions of natural beauty, and with historical associations of the highest dignity. One has reminders of the gross material stakes involved in the war, along with echoes of Milton and Patrick Henry. At first all seems disorder and confusion of mind. And then one realizes that what we have, actually, is a cry for order in a world of confusion, and that each one of these pictures is cunningly composed, according to the best principles of balance, contrast, and proportion, so as to render in terms of art the disgust and loathing of a sensitive spirit faced with the actuality of a war-crazed world. Not every writer could be trusted with the liberties of this method. But I am inclined to think that among these sketches will be found many of the firmest and most glowing pages in the whole work of this extraordinary writer.

The second of the author's devices for enlarging the reference consists in a series of sketches of men prominent in the United States during the period covered. Such are, in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*, the Socialist leader Debs, the progressive La Follette, the spellbinder Bryan, and the inventors Edison, Steinmetz, Burbank. In *1919* are included Jack Reed, the 'playboy' of the Russian Revolution, the liberal or radical writers Randolph Bourne and Paxton Hibben, President Wilson, and the Morgans, four generations of bankers and financiers. It will be obvious how, by his particular 'slant' on each one of these head-liners, the author can suggest the tone of his personal commentary on the civilization they represent.

Thus Mr. Dos Passos features the shallowness and insincerity of the liberalism represented by Bryan and the tragic futility of that typified by Wilson. Of writers on social themes the one who has his most hearty admiration is, apparently, Randolph Bourne, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Of men of action, the two who, by their fighting spirit and their manner of death, arouse the strongest feeling in the reader are two organizers of the I.W.W.—Joe Hill, who was stood up against the jail wall in Salt Lake City, and Wesley Everest, logger, who was lynched at Centralia, after suffering abominable mutilations. Such were martyrs of the proletarian faith. The book ends with an account of the Washington ceremony in memory of the Unknown Soldier...the commentary of disillusioned America on the false sentiment associated with American militarism.

Dos Passos' third device is named from a feature of the moving pictures. 'Newsreel.' There are some forty of these newsreels scattered through the two books. They are made up of newspaper head-lines, stock-market reports, fragments of popular songs, etc. They serve the purpose, to begin with, of indicating the progress of time with their reference to such events as the Boer War, Roosevelt's bolt from the Republican party, the assassination of Jaures, the Armistice. But, what is more important, by their jumble

of miscellaneous news items they suggest the mentality which produces and is fostered by the newspaper, that epitome of our civilization. And reader who is puzzled by the way in which news of every conceivable type is all run together in paragraphs without punctuation, and alternated with head-lines in every degree of bold type, need only stop to consider his own manner of reading the daily paper—or at any rate the paper itself, with its almost total want of classification of news, and with its relative emphasis on scandal, disasters, popular amusements, personalities, and political hot air.

But there is more to it than this. Mr. Malcolm Cowley, in a significant and highly favorable review of *1919*, remarks that, 'in themselves, judged as writing,' these newsreels 'are not successful.' This may be true, but we can hardly judge them in themselves, as pieces of writing, without regard for the cumulative effect they have as an oblique commentary on the narrative. There are certain sinister notes, hardly remarked at first, which make themselves heard more and more insistently as the work proceeds, till finally, like the leitmotifs of Wagnerian opera, they begin to take strong possession of us. And they are all the more impressive in that, as they are combined with other notes, they have distinctly the character of dissonances.... These separate items begin to range themselves in a meaningful pattern like the pieces of a puzzle-picture. Certain paragraphs of fragmentary news items begin to stand out as epitomizing the saddest ironies of our social and spiritual life....

So there we have three special thematic devices by which Dos Passos gives to his narrative a larger reference than could be had in the mere chronicle of private lives. Between each section of straight narrative are inserted anywhere from one to four of these briefer commentaries: Camera Eye, Newsreel, sketch of prominent citizen. The effect is to keep one perpetually alive to the wider issues, the broad social background on which the few obscure persons play their parts. Here again we have the fondness for the breadthwise cutting, the composite view. And we have also the disposition to build up a composition out of elements which, however unrelated they may at first appear, are found to have their cunningly related correspondences and to result in the end in significant pattern.

And it will now be clear how well this technique goes with the disposition to regard the novelist's subject as the entire social organism. The author's first concern is no longer with individuals, with their precious moral problems to be met, their precious sentiments to be indulged. His first concern is with that Leviathan, society, striving weakly to adjust itself to the industrial conditions of the new world, more or less blindly struggling forward to the creation of a group consciousness and a group will. It is an unusual combination in one writer, so strong a social significance and so great a command of his craft. And it is this combination which makes Dos Passos one of the most important novelists now writing in English."

Joseph Warren Beach  
*The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique*  
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 501, 503-11

"In the trilogy ending with *The Big Money*, Dos Passos is trying to write a private history of the thirty years that began with the new century and ended with the crash in 1929. He continues to deal with the lives of individuals, but these are seen in the perspective of historical events. His real hero is society itself—American society as embodied in forty or fifty more or less typical characters who drift along with it, struggle to change its course, or merely to find a secure footing—perhaps they build a raft of wreckage and grow fat on the refuse floating about them; perhaps they go under in some obscure eddy—while always the current sweeps them onward toward new social horizons. In this sense, Dos Passos has written the first American collective novel.

The principal characters are brought forward one at a time; the story of each is told in bare, straightforward prose that describes what they do and see but rarely what they feel. Thus, Fainy McCreary, born in Connecticut, is a printer who joins the Wobblies and later goes to Mexico to fight in the revolution there, but runs a bookstore instead. J. Ward Moorehouse, born in Wilmington, Delaware, begins his business career in a real-estate office. He writes songs, marries and divorces a rich woman, works for a newspaper in Pittsburgh—at the end of fifty-seven pages he is a successful public-relations counselor embarked on a campaign to reconcile capital and labor at the expense of labor. Joe and Janey Williams are the children of a tugboat captain from Washington, D.C.; Janey studies shorthand and gets a job as J. Ward

Moorehouse's secretary; Joe plays baseball, enlists in the Navy, deserts after a brawl and becomes a merchant seaman. Eleanor Stoddard is a poor Chicago girl who works at Marshall Field's; she learns how to speak French to her customers and orders waiters about 'with a crisp little refined moneyed voice.' Charley Anderson is a wild Swedish boy from the Red River Valley who drifts about the country from job to job and girl friend to girl friend, till at last he sails for France as the automobile mechanic of an ambulance section [in WWI].

All these characters are introduced in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and, except for Fainy McCreary and Charley Anderson, they all reappear in *1919*. Now they are joined by others: Richard Ellsworth Savage, a Kent School boy who goes to Harvard and writes poetry; Daughter, a warm-hearted flapper from Dallas who becomes a radical. Gradually their careers draw closer together, till all of them are caught up in the War.... Three strikes is out for Joe, when his skull is cracked in a saloon brawl at Saint-Nazaire on Armistice night. Daughter is killed in an airplane accident; she provoked it herself in a fit of hysteria after becoming pregnant and then being jilted by Dick Savage—who for his part survives as the shell of a man, all the best of him having died when he decided to join the army and make a career for himself and let his pacifist sentiments go hang. Benny Compton gets ten years in Atlanta as a conscientious objector. Everybody in the novel suffers from the War and finds his own way of going to hell—everybody except the people without bowels, the empty people like Eleanor Stoddard and J. Ward Moorehouse, who stuff themselves with the right sentiments and make the proper contacts.

In *The Big Money* the principal character is Charley Anderson, the skirt-chasing automobile mechanic, who comes sailing back from France as a bemedaled aviator, hero and ace. He helps to start an airplane manufacturing company (like Eddie Rickenbacker); he marries a banker's daughter, plunges in the stock market, drinks, quarrels with the men under him, loses his grip and gets killed in an automobile accident. Dick Savage, the Harvard esthete of doubtful sex, is now an advertising man, first lieutenant of the famous J. Ward Moorehouse in his campaign to popularize patent medicines as an expression of the American spirit, as self-reliance in medication. Eveline Hutchins, who played a small part in both the earlier novels, is now an unhappy middle-aged nymphomaniac. Don Stevens, the radical newspaper man of *1919*, has become a Communist, a member of the Central Executive Committee after the dissenters and deviationists have been expelled (and among them poor Ben Compton, released from Atlanta).

New people also appear: for example, Margo Dowling, a shanty-Irish girl who gets to be a movie actress by sleeping with the right people. Almost all the characters are now tied together by love or business, politics or pure hatred. And except for Mary French from Colorado, who half-kills herself working as the secretary of one radical relief organization after another—except for Mary French and her father and poor honest Joe Askew, Charley Anderson's friend, they have let themselves be caught in the race for easy money and tangible power; they have lost their personal values, they are like empty ships with their seams leaking, ready to go down in the first storm.

The trilogy has been getting better as it goes along, and *The Big Money* is the best of Dos Passos's novels, the sharpest and swiftest, the most unified in mood and story. Nobody has to refer to the earlier books in order to understand what is happening in this one. But after turning back to *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and *1919*, one feels a new admiration for Dos Passos as an architect of plots and an interweaver of destinies. One learns much more about his problems and the original methods by which he has tried to solve them. His central problem, of course, was that of writing a collective novel (defined simply as a novel without an individual hero, a novel of which the real protagonist is a social group). In this case, the social group is almost the largest possible: it is a whole nation during thirty years of its history. But a novelist is not a historian dealing with political tendencies or a sociologist reckoning statistical averages. If he undertakes to depict the national life, he has to do so in terms of individual lives, without slighting either one or the other. This double focus, on the social group and on the individual, explains the technical devices that Dos Passos has used in the course of his trilogy.

There are three of these devices, and it is clear enough that each of them has been invented with the purpose of gaining a definite effect, of supplying a quality absent from the simple narratives that form the body of the book. Take the Newsreels as an example. The principal narratives have dealt, necessarily, with shortsighted people pursuing their personal aims—and therefore the author intersperses them with

brief passages consisting chiefly of newspaper headlines and snatches from popular songs. Thus, a chapter dealing with Eveline Hutchins' love affairs in Paris during the peace congress is interrupted by Newsreel XXXIV: '*How are you goin' to keep 'em down on the farm / After they've seen Paree*'...

Obviously the purpose here is to suggest the general or collective atmosphere of the given period. A slightly different end is served by a second technical invention, the brief biographies of prominent Americans (which incidentally contains some of the best writing in the trilogy). The principal narratives have dealt with people like Charley Anderson and Dick Savage, fairly typical citizens, figures that might have been chosen from a crowd—and so in order to balance them the author also gives us life sketches of Americans who were representative rather than typical, of men like Woodrow Wilson and J.P. Morgan and Jack Reed who were the leaders or rebels of their age.

The third of Dos Passos's technical devices, the Camera Eye, is something of a puzzle and one that I was a long time in solving to my own satisfaction. Obviously the Camera Eye passages are autobiographical, and obviously they are intended to represent the author's stream of consciousness (a fact that explains the lack of capitalization and punctuation). At first it seemed to me that they were completely out of tone with the hard and behavioristic style of the main narrative. It seemed to me that their softness and vagueness and impressionism belonged to the art novel rather than the collective novel; that they were in contrast and even in conflict with the main narrative. But this must have been exactly the reason why Dos Passos introduced them. The hard, behavioristic treatment of the characters has been tending to oversimplify them, to make it seem that they were being approached from the outside—and so the author tries to counterbalance this weakness (though not with complete success) by inserting passages that are written from the inside, passages full of warmth and color and hesitation and little intimate perceptions.

I have heard Dos Passos violently attacked on the ground that all these devices—Newsreels and biographies and the Camera Eye—were introduced arbitrarily, without relation to the rest of the novel. The attack is partly justified as regards *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*, though even in that first novel there is a clearer interrelation than most critics have noted. For instance, the Camera Eye describes the boyhood of a well-to-do lawyer's son and thereby points an artistically desirable contrast with the boyhood of tough little Fainy McCreary. Or again, the biography of Big Bill Haywood is inserted at the moment in the story when Fainy is leaving to help the Wobblies win their strike in Goldfield. Many other examples could be given. But when we come to *1919*, connections of this sort are so frequent and obvious that even a careless reader can hardly miss them; and in *The Big Money* all the technical devices are used to enforce the same mood, the same leading ideas.

Just what are these ideas that Dos Passos is trying to present?... In Dos Passos's case, the leading idea is the one implicit in his choice of subject and form: it is the idea that life is collective, that individuals are neither heroes nor villains, that their destiny is controlled by the drift of society as a whole. But in what direction does he believe that American society is drifting? That question is more difficult to answer, and the author doesn't give us much direct help. Still, a certain progress or decline can be deduced from the novel as a whole. At the beginning of *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* there was a general feeling of hope and restlessness and let's-take-a-chance. A journeyman printer like Fainy McCreary could wander almost anywhere and find a job. A goatish but not unlikable fraud like old Doc Bingham could dream of building a fortune and, what is more, could build it.

But at the end of *The Big Money* all this has changed. Competitive capitalism has been transformed into monopoly capitalism; American society has become crystallized and stratified. 'Vag'—the nameless young man described in the last three pages of the novel—is waiting at the edge of a concrete highway, his feet aching in broken shoes, his belly tight with hunger. Over his head flies a silver transcontinental plane filled with highly paid executives on their way to the Pacific Coast. The upper class has taken to the air, the lower class to the road; there is not longer any bond between them; they are two nations. And this idea—which is also an emotion of mingled pity, anger and revulsion—is the burden of a collective novel that was the first of its type to be written in this country, and is likely to remain for a long time the best."

Malcolm Cowley  
"Dos Passos: Poet Against the World" (1936)

*The Portable Malcolm Cowley*  
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 295-300  
ed. Donald W. Faulkner

“In Dos Passos...there is a beautiful imaginative sympathy which permits him to get under the skin of his characters, but there is no imagination, and no Don Quixote. Dos Passos testifies to all this by his use of newsreels, just as he seeks the full sensibility in the impressions of the camera eye and the heroic character in the biographies; but in his central narrative the standpoint is always narrowed to what the character himself knows as the quality of his existence, life as it appears to him. And this leveling drags with it and tends to make rather crude and sometimes commonplace the sensibility shown in the other panels.... The whole truth of experience (if past literature is not wholly nonsense) is more than the quality of most lives. One is sure that Dos Passos knows this, since it is the reason for his four forms and his discontinuity. His novel is perhaps the greatest monument of naturalism because it betrays so fully the poverty and disintegration inherent in that method. Dos Passos is the gifted victim of his own extraordinary grasp of the truth.”

Delmore Schwartz  
*Southern Review*  
(Autumn 1938) 364-67

“*U.S.A.* is a group of life-stories, of six men and six women, sometimes running remotely parallel and sometimes touching or crossing. The time is the first thirty years of the century, and the place the whole United States with parts of Mexico and France. Except when the war draws most of the characters into war activities they go their own ways. Mac, born in Connecticut, learns the printing trade in Chicago, wanders to the Northwest, then south to revolutionary Mexico, and opens a bookstore. J. Ward Moorehouse, born in Delaware, marries one heiress in Philadelphia and another in Pittsburgh, and builds a pretentious career as a public relations counsel in New York. Charley Anderson of North Dakota, a mechanic who becomes an aviator in the war, returns to be a hero, a financier, and a failure in Detroit. Margo Dowling, brought up in American vaudeville, marries a Cuban, runs away from Havana, and rises through calculating adventures in Manhattan and Florida to stardom in Hollywood.

Though Dos Passos presumably regarded these and the other characters as typical, he presented them as individuals. Their stories do not fall into the accepted patterns of American fiction, and seem to be dramatic biographies of actual persons. Though his sympathies were strongly on the side of the underprivileged, the neglected, the injured and insulted, he told his stories in a level tone which does not always avoid monotony. But the monotony is systematically broken by a series—or rather, three series—of experimental devices which run through the book.

One is a set of vivid, irregular, brief sketches of contemporary worthies who among them exhibit almost every phase of modern America. Another series is called Newsreel and is made up of a torrent of headlines, news items, popular songs and saying which sweep the country like an inquisitive searchlight. The third series, *The Camera Eye*, gives a sort of inner autobiography of Dos Passos, of his mind and heart from early childhood to the Sacco-Vanzetti trial: his own comment and his indication of his point of view. These experimental devices interrupt the broad stream of narrative, but they no less lift and enliven it. *U.S.A.* is a collective novel by a novelist who could not write always with dispassion but must now and then escape into irony or rise to poetry.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 337-38

“*U.S.A.* demonstrates Dos Passos’ extraordinary capacity for observation; his ‘scholarship’ in this respect is amazing; the sheer bulk and variety of his reading as reflected in both the biographies and the fictional sections have been tremendous. The work as a whole is one of the most impressive performances in contemporary writing. Yet one cannot say, ‘Here is the essence of American life.’ One can say rather that here in parallel columns is a pretty complete report of the human and social elements of American life from which the essence might be distilled. Eventually, however, the reading of parallel columns becomes monotonous.”

Margaret Marshall  
*Nation*  
(6 January 1940) 17

“The philosophy of *U.S.A.*: was taut, as the book itself was taut. Everything in it echoed its mass rumble, and the far-reaching tactile success of the book came out of that massed power, the heaping together of so many lives in symmetrical patterns of disaster. Dos Passos’ effects have always depended on a violence of pace, on the quick flickering of the reel, the sudden climaxes where every fresh word drives the wedge in. No scene can be held too long; no voice can be heard too clearly. Everything must come at us from a distance and bear its short ironic wail; the machine must get going again; nothing can wait.”

Alfred Kazin  
*New Republic*  
(15 March 1943) 353

“The real ‘hero’ of the trilogy...is of course the United States. Thus Dos Passos invented a series of technical devices in an attempt to widen the bounds of the novel: the ‘Newsreels,’ which form a running account of the actual events, as well as the crimes, fads, and follies of our society; the ‘Biographies’ which form the record of our special personalities from Debs, ‘lover of mankind,’ who opens the trilogy, to Insul, manipulator of ‘power super-power,’ who closes it some fifteen hundred pages later; the ‘Novels’ which form, by contrast, the record of the ordinary citizens in the great trading Republic of the West; and ‘The Camera Eye’ which forms, as it were, the personal diary of the novelist as he writes the novel, the record of his shifting emotions in the face of this national scene which he is recording so brilliantly. These devices not only catch the more intricate patterns by a stretching of every artistic resource to record ‘Nature.’ And while the aim was almost impossible the attempt was to a large degree successful....

For Dos Passos was among the best informed and the most learned of the moderns—and this set him apart in a tradition that had been marked at once by its freedom from and ignorance of ‘ideas.’ And yet, though the exposition in *U.S.A.* was brilliant and its picture of American life was full and varied, the novelist’s conclusion was simple, and not encouraging. Filled as the three volumes were with achievements of urban power in the land of power, the ‘Newsreels’ became ever more sensational and chaotic, while the ‘Biographies’ of our national heroes formed only the record of their disinheritance, the ‘Novels’ recounted only the disintegration of these average lives, from the obscure merchant seaman Joe Williams to the publicity wizard J. Ward Moorehouse; and the reflections of the author in ‘The Camera Eye’ became in turn increasingly desolate. Thus the immense national energy which had built up such a remarkable society within so short a period had apparently become centrifugal: the elaborate system was shaking itself apart. In fact, just as each novel of the trilogy was better than its predecessor, each was more despairing, and *The Big Money*, resembling in some respects Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, is a sort of apotheosis of stale horrors.

In one sense the basic view of life in *U.S.A.* defeats itself, for, if Dos Passos’ people are really what he seems to think they are, there would be little value in the social revolution which is his central hope of redemption. A revolution implies the release of human traits which the older social order has been inhibiting. But what is there, in these grasping and empty American personages, left to release? The total picture is one of inherent human weakness rather than of chained power, of barely restrained human viciousness rather than of an inhibited human grandeur. Indeed *The Big Money* records the twilight of Dos Passos’ radical hopes too, and here the revolutionary heroes who should perhaps reveal the promise of life most fully, show it least, while whatever vision of Paradise Lost lay behind the trilogy has turned into a sort of second-rate inferno. His two later novels, also possessing related episodes (*The Adventures of a Young Man*, 1939, and *Number One*, 1943) do not recover any of the vision.”

Maxwell Geismar  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1302-04

“In his trilogy Dos Passos looked backward to the optimistic American faith of 1900 from the vantage point of the collapse of prosperity in 1929 and drew a savage indictment of those forces in our society

which had frustrated its immense promise. Could that promise be reinstated with some chance of fulfillment? The poet in Dos Passos reached beyond indictment and social criticism into prophecy and the first two volumes of his trilogy implied the answer to this question. Nothing less than an overturn of the existing order would restore the promise of American life, he surmised; and he pledged his faith to a future social revolution. But before the third volume of his trilogy appeared, this faith had deserted him. The work that had begun as an epic closed as an elegy, and on a note of despair.”

Lloyd Morris  
*New York Herald Tribune*  
(2 January 1949) 3

“Dos Passos...knows the everyday world of the ordinary apprehension—in which the essential Dos Passos appears to be so self-consciously not at home—as the movement of whole groups and classes and the clash of group prejudices. He is so preoccupied with representing these movements by newspaper headlines, historical figures, and, above all, by type characters that he reduces the movement of awareness in his characters to the simplified pattern we ascribe to the imaginary average man. You do not know his people except as you know the journalist’s average businessman, Vassar girl, or labor leader; nor can you believe that the drama of their lives represents Dos Passos’ full awareness of experience; the stifling personal and sensory awareness of the ‘Camera Eye,’ so completely isolated from any larger context, is the Dos Passos who is omitted from the narrative: it is his Mallarme, as the narrative is his Lenin.”

Arthur Mizener  
*Kenyon Review*  
(Winter 1950) 16-17

“*U.S.A.* is a fictional history of America in the first three decades of our century. Both time and space are vitally important to this history, and it is to the mass quality of these decades that the trilogy addresses itself. *The Forty-Second Parallel* is a portrayal of its youth: here there are energy and promise, the beginnings of industrial greatness and business strategy; there is youth also in the individualism of ‘Mac,’ the IWW vagabond (who contrasts with the generally unflattering portraits of Communist organizers in the later volumes) and in the adolescent gestures of the other characters. It is a youth, however, that carries within it, not the promise of successful independence but the certainty of eventual surrender to the social and economic drives even here gathering strength.

*Nineteen-Nineteen* is a record of war, of the inevitable triumph of its predominating concerns over whatever native and individual strength the characters of the first novel had seemed to have. The war itself is a preparation for the documentation of the boom years in *The Big Money*. This last novel presents a culmination of all of the developments so exhaustively detailed in the first two novels. If anything, the figure of Charley Anderson detaches itself from the prison of documentation; in his reckless and mad drive toward wealth and finally to death, his role is a symbolic underscoring of all of the drives which are here dramatically culminated.

If *U.S.A.* has within it a purpose, it is not to point readily or easily to solutions or to point up doctrinal strategies. The leftists are as dismally treated as the professional exploiters; the evidence, if anything, points to their being ridiculous and unhappy creatures. And whatever gratification one may derive from the biographies of such men as Debs, La Follette and John Reed—portrayed as selfless and dedicated spirits—is obtained in the face of the recognition that they too are largely ineffectual. To this massive document of corruption and materialistic obsession, Dos Passos brings the timid observation and the self-defeating despair of the Camera Eye’s consciousness. It is both a way of underscoring the gross triumph of the world of *U.S.A.* and of pointing up the inadequacy of the Camera Eye’s protesting insight. For *U.S.A.* is not a tragedy so much as it is a holocaust; and it is a holocaust because, however effective its narrative style is, its success leads mainly to a deadening, automation equality of motive and action. The manner is that of the surface reporter at his most brilliant.

Dos Passos is unequalled in his talent for manipulating social and economic history in fictional forms; the details are selected with an almost uncannily acute perception of their pertinence; the exactly right surface record, from the newsreels and the tabloids, is always at hand; the narratives achieve a pace and a



surface conviction of detail that are ideally suited to the final dramatic impact of the culminating scenes of *The Big Money*. There is an awful inevitability in all this. Yet no one character seems to have escaped either its documentary drive or its essential superficiality. Any single scene in the trilogy suffers from the consequences of the method and purpose which dominate the whole. In achieving this purpose, individual effects must be sacrificed; or, rather, their effectiveness stops at the boundary of demonstration. The limitations...are limitations of insight, evidences of an all-pervading and deliberate shallowness in the characterization....

The details go no deeper and say no more, anywhere else, about the inner life of his characters; instead there is a sense of the need to rush on from one to another, giving on the way a wholly factual, surface record of men and women in motion and conflict but not in thought or reflection. Yet there are no lapses of taste, no violations of a fictional decorum previously established. The tone of the three novels is remarkably consistent throughout. It is the tone of the...superficial. If there are ranges of emotional volume, degrees of emotional intensity with the narrative itself, these are to be found in the 'Camera Eye,' where indignation and despair provide the only tonal commentary upon the narrative; and in the strategy of the whole, the 'Camera Eye' is itself objectively placed and reacts not at all upon its final effect as the cries of young Howe and young Andrews, or the criticisms of Jimmy Herf, do upon theirs. As Kazin has said, 'for Dos Passos there is nothing else, save the integrity of the camera eye that must see this truth and report it, the integrity and sanctity of the individual locked up in the machine world of modern society'."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 151-55

"Actually, *U.S.A.* is one novel in three parts, or—since there was no more reason why it should stop after nearly 1,500 pages than at 500 or 2,500—perhaps one should call it rather a gigantic fragment. Its technique seems well adapted to describe the aimless lives of its characters. Dos Passos could not very well have had them *all* kill themselves, but it is difficult to think of any other decisive action of which most of them could have been capable. In *U.S.A.* Dos Passos tries to do for the nation what *Manhattan Transfer* had done for the metropolis, but this time he goes in for a lesser degree of disconnectedness by limiting himself to the life stories of twelve main characters—six men and six women—whose histories are narrated in installments which sometimes overlay, so that one reads about many of them under both their own and others' headings; the public relations man, J. Ward Morehouse, for example, draws a number of them into his orbit.

Their histories are interrupted by (1) 'Biographies'; (2) 'Newsreels'; and (3) 'The Camera Eye.' These terms indicate: (1) twenty-five sketches of persons prominent in the American life of the time, ranging all the way from Woodrow Wilson to Rudolph Valentino; (2) jumbles of newspaper items and headlines, quotations from popular songs, and other ephemera of the period, all set down upon the page in the same kind of confusion in which they existed in contemporary minds; and (3) stream-of-consciousness musings, 'acting as the small self-portrait in a painting,' a device through which the author was enabled to comment upon his material. 'Device' is the right word for these features, yet each does make its contribution.

The 'Camera Eye' sections, needlessly obscure, are written in that annoying kind of loose rhythmic prose that reads as if it had been turned out by a machine. Some of this 'artiness' carries over into the 'Biographies,' which seem to me to have been somewhat overpraised. It has been suggested that the Biographies try to create a modern mythology; it has also been said that this material is needed to counterbalance the aimlessness of the fictional characters. Yet many of the biographies, famous though they were, were spiritual failures, and Dos Passos is quite as likely to do his best work with those whom he despises as with those, like Debs and Randolph Bourne, whom he admires. Personally I have found great pleasure in the 'Newsreels,' though, strictly speaking, they are neither fiction nor any other kind of original writing, and I cannot be sure that they would be extraordinarily effective with readers unable to recall many of the events alluded to. The juxtapositions, at any rate, are often extremely clever."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:*  
*From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*

“*U.S.A.* (trilogy, 1930-36) is actually a single novel divided into three parts: *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen-Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). The work was reissued in one volume in 1937. As in *Manhattan Transfer*, there is no comprehensive plot; the work is filled with a profusion of characters who grow up, mate, struggle, succeed or fail, and die without finding any particular meaning in their lives. The ostensible purpose of the work is to paint a complete panorama of American life in the era from 1900 through the Thirties. This is admittedly a staggering project. Dos Passos fails principally in that his picture of America is partisan rather than objective; the basic approach of the novel is that of classic Marxist criticism of capitalistic society. Capitalism, materialism, the factory system, and the ‘American way of life’ are ruthlessly attacked. As a result of this basically negative approach there are few sympathetic characters; the reader finds it as difficult to admire Dos Passos’ social workers and labor organizers as his swollen bosses and bankers.

*U.S.A.* is nevertheless an interesting and important novel if only from the point of view of technique. Only parts of it are narrative in the ordinary sense. Interwoven into the fictional plot are various forms of documentary materials. ‘Biographies’ are short impressionistic accounts of the lives of eminent Americans ranging from Thorstein Veblen and Ford to Woodrow Wilson, written in a style resembling free verse with lines broken to indicate reading stress. These sketches include portraits of labor leaders and radicals, who are usually shown as martyrs of the capitalistic system, and biographies of business ‘moguls’ and statesmen who have build the system and now control it.

‘Newsreels,’ the second type of documentary insertions, are paste-pot compositions made up of the speeches, headlines, and popular songs of the time; these sections are intended to evoke the mood of the age. Slanting is apparent here; the headlines are carefully chosen to demonstrate the viciousness of the capitalistic system and the irresponsibility of the idle rich. ‘The Camera Eye,’ the third type of inserted material, presents semi-autobiographical impressions written in stream-of-consciousness style. The unnamed protagonist of the Camera Eye sections grows gradually older as the novel proceeds; he represents the author’s own consciousness as it moved through the era being described. The best of the documentary materials, however, are the Biographies; the sketches of Ford and Wilson are little masterpieces, and are frequently reprinted. Each of the characters of *U.S.A.* has his own destiny and his own story; these destinies are interlinked, yet the threads are distinct and separate. The pattern is somewhat confused in the chronological presentation of the novel, and can best be analyzed if the careers of the chief characters are considered separately. These chief characters are as follows:

J. Ward Moorehouse is a self-made man, labor politician, and publicist who uses his winning manner to achieve great wealth and power. He marries twice; his first wife, Annabelle Strang, provides him with the money he needs to make a start in the world, and his second, Gertrude Staple, assists him in his career through her influence and advice. During the First World War he serves the government, and with this start he becomes a publicist and advertising executive in the postwar period. Symbolically he represents the ambition and opportunism which continually threaten to corrupt the labor movement.

Eleanor Stoddard is an artistic and intelligent girl refined in taste and sexually cold, who reacts violently against her sordid childhood by spending her life in a search for beauty. She becomes an interior decorator in New York, where she meets Moorehouse and becomes his platonic companion. During the war she serves in the Red Cross. In the postwar period considerable success comes her way, but her monotonous and spiritually empty life leaves her dissatisfied.

Richard Savage is a sensitive idealist who goes to Harvard, becomes an aesthete and something of a snob, but develops enough character to join a volunteer ambulance unit with the outbreak of the war in 1914. Later he serves as an officer in the American army. During the war his ideals are selfless and liberal, even radical; but in the postwar era he is driven by the cynicism he inherits from his generation to ‘sell out’ and go to work for Moorehouse’s advertising agency. Savage represents the disillusionment of the intellectual class and its abandonment of the liberal ideal in the postwar period.

Mary French, daughter of a physician, spends her childhood in Trinidad. Like Savage, she is intensely idealistic in her youth; she retains this idealism longer than any other character in the novel. She becomes a social worker, then secretary to a union official. While working on the Sacco-Vanzetti aid committee she meets Don Stevens, a Communist Party member; the pair become engaged. But Don goes to Moscow and returns with a wife 'assigned' him by the Party, and Mary's disillusionment with the radical movement comes at last. She continues to devote her life to the liberal cause, but her heart is no longer in it.

Evaline Hutchins is an unhappy young woman who feels an inclination toward art but has little talent. Although at one time she is Eleanor Stoddard's partner in a decorating business, her life is a failure. She tries to forget this through experiments in sensualism, but becomes constantly more bored and neurotic. At last she takes her own life through an overdose of sleeping pills.

Secondary characters are Mac McCreary, an underprivileged boy from a shanty-Irish family who becomes successively a salesman of pornographic books, an itinerant printer, a reluctant husband and family man, and a revolutionary in Mexico; Janey Williams, a stenographer who cuts her family when she gets a 'respectable' position as Moorehouse's secretary; Charley Anderson, a talented inventor who becomes wealthy in the airplane business and turns into a typical capitalist; and Benny Compton, a Jewish labor agitator who is jailed several times, once for a long term in Federal prison, and eventually becomes the paramour of Mary French.

Although *U.S.A.* presents a picture of the postwar generation similar to that found in *Manhattan Transfer*, its political message is stronger and more specific. In many respects it is a typical Marxist novel. The characters are divided sharply into 'haves' and 'have-nots'; the first are ruthless and corrupt, and the second bitter and frustrated. Most of the chief characters begin as idealists, and from there go on to one of two paths. The 'haves' acquire success and gradually lose their idealism, 'sell out,' and turn to a ruthless self-aggrandizement; the backbone of the capitalistic class is made up of former idealists. The 'have-nots' also begin as idealists, but find little success; the capitalistic world crushes them down, and even their own radical movement disillusioned them through its cynicism and the opportunism of its leaders.

It is individualism—opportunism and ambition—which continually threatens the radical movement. The renegades of labor are those, like Mac McCreary, who put their personal affairs ahead of their devotion to the movement. The capitalistic system is so firmly entrenched that democratic means are powerless to eradicate it; it is only through solidarity, mass action, and class warfare that the socialist state can be achieved. It is in virtue of the foregoing that *U.S.A.* is a Marxist novel. Its principal 'heresies' with respect to Marxism are the unfavorable light in which it shows the proletariat, its exposure of the cynical tactics of labor leaders, and the implied criticism of the Soviet Union in cases such as that of Don Stevens.

The total impact of the novel is great; the reader is left with a powerful, if somewhat one-sided, picture of life in the Twenties and Thirties. The novel effectively presents the message that the capitalistic system is corrupt and anachronistic and that the hope of the future lies in some variety of radicalism. But Dos Passos is a better polemicist than he is a political planner; no real blueprint of the socialist state, no positive political ideology other than revolution is presented. Here Dos Passos reflects the attitude of the period he is describing; the intellectual temper of the pre-New-Deal era was critical rather than constructive. The novel is undeniably one of the most ambitious attempts thus far to present an encompassing panorama of American life in the twentieth century."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 136-39

"By presenting many lives in brief—and, I might add, in varieties of harsh and rather dull prose that he regards as appropriate to their narrow fields of consciousness—Dos Passos tries to suggest what happened to the whole nation during the first thirty years of the century. The story ends just before the Wall Street Crash, but its somber mood is that of the early Depression years when everything was going to pieces as if by the operation of inexorable processes beyond human control. The author is bent on showing that more and more financial power was being concentrated in fewer hands, that the middle class was losing its independence, and that the poor were being driven from their homes. 'All right we are two nations,' he

says in one of the Camera Eye passages that reflect his own feelings. One nation is represented at the end of the trilogy by a starving vagrant who stands beside the road trying to thumb a ride, and the other by a businessman who eats too well and vomits as he soars overhead in a silvery plane.

Dos Passos finds no hope of salvation for individuals in either the nation of the rich or the nation of the poor. The businessmen of his trilogy go bankrupt or suffer from heart attacks, the star of silent movies finds that she has no voice for talking pictures, the rising young executive becomes an alcoholic blackmailed by Negro homosexuals, the pure-hearted radicals are either corrupted or else expelled from the Communist party and cast into darkness by their friends, everybody good and bad is involved in a common disaster. There is no hint of the wild hopefulness felt by many young persons who believed that everything must soon be changed. When one reads *U.S.A.* in the light of later events, it seems to be an absurdly pessimistic novel, but even the bleak prose of the narrative section has the power of deeply held convictions. The book holds together like a great ship freighted with the dead and dying, and it expresses what many people besides the author felt in those years when the nation seemed to be careening into the depths.”

Malcolm Cowley  
--*And I Worked at the Writer's Trade:  
Chapters of Literary History, 1918-1978*  
(Penguin 1979) 108-09

“The constant movement of his characters was to be more memorable than their personalities. The rapidly flashing, image-crackling style of physical sensation he developed not only came out of the painful but exciting unsettlement of his early years; it became his way, in the early Camera Eye sections of *U.S.A.* that relate the author’s personal experiences, of blurring everything he still needed to conceal.... Dos Passos was a naturally impressionistic talent deeply influenced by painting and poetry; *U.S.A.* was to interpolate biographical and historical pictures of American life in free verse. Dos Passos would always depend on some fast-running mixture of prose and verse to project the many ‘pictures’ of travel he carried in his head.... His one lasting book, *U.S.A.*, continued to dazzle readers as *the* American experimental novel of the 1920s [with] his ability to bring the whole new century into his trilogy...”

There are no...heroes and heroines among the fictional characters of his novel; they are mediocre, futile, forgettable. The tonic edge of *U.S.A.*, its stylistic dash and irony, its gay inventiveness, finally reflect Dos Passos’s own practicality in getting down the sweep of the national existence in our century. The people are just case histories—as more and more Americans are to themselves. But Dos Passos’s own sense of his art as something new is one of the great themes of the books... We find that our primary pleasure in the book is in its scheme. A real ingenuity went into *U.S.A.*

Dos Passos invented a remarkable tool for evoking the simultaneous frames of existence. History in the most tangible sense—what happened—is obviously more important in Dos Passos than the people to whom things happened. The matter of the book is always the representative happening and person, the historical moment illustrated in its catchwords, its songs, its influences, above all in its speech. What Dos Passos wanted to capture above anything else was the echo of what people were saying, exactly in the style in which anyone might have said it. The artistic aim of his novel was to catch the litany, the tone, the issue of the time in the voice of the time, the banality, the cliché that finally becomes the voice of mass opinion....

Completing his trilogy in 1936 with *The Big Money*, an account of the boom, Dos Passos portrayed a society gone mad with greed. The only fictional character in *The Big Money* who gets our respect is Mary French, the doctor’s daughter and earnest social reformer who becomes a fanatical Communist in her rage over Sacco and Vanzetti. The emotions of the Sacco-Vanzetti case provide Dos Passos with his clearest and most powerful memories—‘*all right we are two nations.*’ But Mary French is giving her life to the Communist Party.... *U.S.A.* was distinguished by its clarity, its strong-mindedness, the bold and sharp relief into which it put all moral issues, all characterizations—all human destiny in America....

Yet by the end of his book Dos Passos had made it clear that although the subject of his book was democracy itself, democracy had meaning for him only through the superior man, the intellectual-elect, the poet who can never value what the crowd does. The philosophy behind *U.S.A.* was finally at variance with

its natural interest, its subject matter, its greatest strength—the people and the people’s speech. *U.S.A.* turned out to be a book at war with itself. It was bright with the artistic confidence of the twenties and always so distinct in its effects as to seem simple in its values. Its America was finally all external. Not a single character Dos Passos imagined mattered to him in the slightest. When he was through with the radical mood, he was ready for no other American mind and hero but Thomas Jefferson.... Dos Passos wrote like a stranger in his own country.”

Alfred Kazin

*An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930*  
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 377, 382, 384, 386-87

“In his masterpiece, *U.S.A.*...Dos Passos created a story that extends chronologically from the prewar years to 1936 and reaches geographically from New York to California, from Chicago to Mexico, and beyond America to Europe. His panoramic canvas includes isolated farms and airplane factories, picket lines and ghetto streets, union offices and corporate headquarters. Matching his canvas, his cast of characters includes farmhands and factory laborers, hoboes and vagabonds, advertising executives and Hollywood actresses, entrepreneurs and financiers. Yet despite the vast sweep of his story and the shifts that characterize it, Dos Passos establishes the central conflict of his story as a conflict between ‘two nations’—a small group of rich and powerful people who successfully manipulate the social and economic forces that shape history and a large group of poor and sometimes hopeless people who are used by those forces only to be abandoned or destroyed.

In addition to telling the individual stories of eleven major characters in *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos employs three supplemental devices that broaden the scope of his work. In the first of these, called ‘Newsreel,’ he presents materials that create a public framework for the incidents and themes of his narrative. ‘Newsreel’ includes headlines and snippets of articles from newspapers (‘Wall Street Stunned’); lines from slogans, mottoes, and popular songs (from a ballad about Casey Jones or a union protest song); and bits and pieces from public reports and political oratory. In the second supplemental device, called ‘Camera Eye,’ he presents bits and pieces expressive of private and subjective feelings that are sometimes lyrical, sometimes elegiac, sometimes satiric, sometimes angry, and sometimes threatening (‘all right we are two nations’).

In the third supplemental device, Dos Passos brings twenty-seven carefully crafted biographical sketches of prominent figures (movie stars like Rudolph Valentino, politicians like Woodrow Wilson, inventors like Thomas Edison, financiers like J.P. Morgan, social critics like Thorstein Veblen, labor leaders like Eugene Debs) into his narrative. Like the stories of his own fictional characters, the stories of these actual personages focus on different modes of failure and success and on the social and economic forces that shape success and failure alike. They thus serve to extend Dos Passos’s chronicle of the transformation of the United States in the first third of this century.”

David Minter

*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1290-91

“The trilogy *U.S.A.* clearly reflects Dos Passos’s deepening radicalism as well as his increasing ambition as a writer, for the subject of *U.S.A.* is the history of American life in the first three decades of this century. His best work, the trilogy also represents a culmination of Dos Passos’s experimentation with literary form. In *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos found the technical means to delineate the connections between the kinds of human suffering and alienation he dramatized in *Manhattan Transfer* and the social structures that produced it. Most of this lengthy trilogy consists of twelve interwoven fictional narratives, each told from the point of view of its central character. These twelve narratives are interrupted not only by each other but by three kinds of formal devices:

(1) Sixty-eight ‘Newsreel’ sections, carefully constructed collages of actual newspaper headlines, news story fragments, and snatches of song lyrics, political speeches, and advertisements that together trace mass culture and popular consciousness over the years; (2) twenty-seven biographies...of key public figures, people who shaped or represented or resisted the major social forces of the era; and (3) fifty-one ‘Camera Eye’ sections, stream-of-consciousness fragments that depict the developing awareness of a sensitive and artistic, individual (not unlike Dos Passos) growing up in the disturbing world portrayed in the rest of the

novel. These four components—narratives, Newsreels, biographies, and Camera Eye sections—work together to dramatize the impact of public events on private lives, to illustrate the very social nature of individual experience, and to indict capitalist America.”

Robert C. Rosen  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1588

Michael Hollister (2015)