

John Doss Passos' art of characterization in 'The Big Money'

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By the time *The Big Money* was written many things had happened to affect Doss Passos' radicalism, his faith in the reconstruction of the American society through Marxist revolution. Temperamentally prone to individualism and idealism of long-, held human values, he differed greatly from the communist mode of working, where the party's interest was supreme and where man's entity was submerged in an amorphous notion of mankind.

The novel covers the post-war period before the Wall Street crash of 1929. Money, as the title suggests, is the presiding deity in the novel. People are completely under the sway of the big money. Money to them is the only God to be worshipped, the only secret of success in life- both private and public- the only source of power and prestige. We see in the novel how this craze for big money corrupts three of the four leading characters, viz. Charley Anderson, Margo Dowling, and Dick Savage, as well as those who appear in their lives.

Thus *The Big Money* records the decline of Doss Passos' radical faith and hopes. The revolutionary heroes who should have revealed the promise of new life fully seem to suffer from inherent weakness, lust, greed and inner politics. Whatever vision of paradise lost lay behind Doss Passos's thinking, the U.S.A. trilogy, and *The Big Money* particularly, has turned into a sort of second rate inferno.

The central narrative of *The Big Money* has Doss Passos' familiar form a design of interwoven, representative lives. It is his remarkable eye for vivid yet typical details and his social irony that give the narrative its force. The main narrative consists of the lives of three typical Americans of the twenties. The first of the three is Charley Anderson, a big handsome country boy from Minnesota. He is thrust suddenly into the world of the *Big Money* when he returns to New York at the end of the war surrounded by the temporary glamour of his heroic achievements as a flier. For some time he enjoys himself in the role of a returning hero and finds himself overwhelmed by the luxury of New York. He is charmed and fascinated by the delicate and coldly selfish women of this world. Doss Passos thinks that the straightforward, vigorous sexuality of the simple Minnesota country boy has been badly corrupted by the luxury that is a part of the special appeal of these glamorous women. A.M.Mizener says:

It is a curious and interesting point, one that keeps reappearing in American fiction of the twentieth century—for example, in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, in both of which wealth, and sex get muddled in the heroes' imaginations and give certain women a false glamour for them.¹

After this brief stay in New York, Charley Anderson goes back to St. Paul and takes a job as a mechanic in the Ford garage where he had worked before the war. He also resumes his affair with the girl he had been involved with then. After his exposure to

the world of the Big Money he finds, life in St. Paul unbearably dull. At the first opportunity he quits St. Paul and returns to New York. He is offered a chance by one of his war-time friends to be a partner in a company that is going to make an airplane self-starter. A gifted mechanic that Charley is, he works hard at the plant and the company flourishes. He then starts following an upper-class New York girl. He also realizes that he is going to need big money quickly if he is to win her. He becomes indifferent to his job at the plant and begins to gamble on the stock market. He proves to be lucky but his girl ditches him anyway. He gets drunk and without consulting his business partner sells his stock to a big Detroit firm and takes a \$25,000 a year job with the company he has sold out to. In Detroit he marries a girl very much like the New York girl who had ditched him.

He starts hating the pseudo-elegant parties his wife gives and is happy only when he is drinking too much in the company of his old friends among the mechanics at the plant. When he gets in the way of his wife's social life following a bad flying accident he is despatched to Florida to recover from his illness. He grows into a flamboyant, overweight, overdressed businessman who drinks excessively and likes to think of himself as a handsome young man who can fly a plane and drive a car with dazzling skill. He is naive and innocent enough to think that he can defeat those who in some obscure and subtle way have cheated him. He has a grudge against his wife, his business associates and, indeed, his life. In his innocent way, Charley has accepted the popular values of his decade. Although he derives no pleasure from the activities of the world of The Big Money, still he cannot bring himself to reject this world. In order to buy his way into that world he lives the nerve-racking life of management politics and brokers' offices rather than the creative mechanic's life that he understands.

In Florida he has an affair with a pretty actress named Margo Dowling, who is the novel's third main character. He also speculates in the Florida land boom of the middle twenties under the guidance of a Southern senator who is much cleverer and more unscrupulous than Charley. His wife uses his relations with Margo Dowling to get a profitable divorce and to separate him from his children. He is also chucked out of the Detroit company when he is unable to look after his interests during a market crisis. One day he gets drunk in a Florida nightclub and picks up a stray girl whom he insists on showing what a marvellous driver he is. He finds himself driving alongside an express train and sets out to beat it to the next grade crossing. Charley wins the race but gets run over when his car swerves out of control and stalls on tracks just as the express arrives at the crossing. He dies without ever understanding what has happened to him.

Mary French is the second major character in The Big Money, and she happens to be the most politically conscious and active character in the novel. It is through her, and her interaction with other politically conscious characters, that the political theme is worked out in this novel. Mary French is the daughter of a busy doctor. His parents did not get along very well. Her mother always complained that if Daddy ever took half the trouble with his paying patients that he did with foreigners and miners, he would be a rich man and she would not be killing herself with housework. Mary hated to hear mother talk against Daddy. The daddy was a liberal, but the mother was class-conscious. She did not allow Mary to play with miners' children. The strained relations between Mary's parents anticipate the fissures that would later develop in American homes.

Mary was good at studies. At high school Mary's best friend was Ada Cohn whose father was a prominent Chicago lawyer who had to come to Colorado Springs for reasons of health. Her mother did not like Mary to visit the Calms because they were Jews. She would press her husband to join the Country Club. She wanted to lift her socially by associating herself with church activities and women's clubs. But her good work was negated because the Doctor persisted in loafing around with "all the scum in poolrooms and worse places for all she knew instead of working up a handsome practice in a city where there were so many wealthy sick people . . ."²

Mother's eternal complaint against Daddy was that he was not ambitious. Mary's only boyfriend was a young fellow with a clubfoot named Joe penny, the son of a saloonkeeper in Colorado city. He was a wizard in mathematics who hated liquor and John D. Rockefeller more than anything in the world. Mary and Joe and Ada would go out on picnic on Sundays to the Garden of the Gods or Austin Bluffs or one of the canyons and read poetry together. Mary very much wished to take her friends home the way Ada did. But she did not dare take anybody home to her house for fear Mother would be rude to them, or that there would be one of those yelling matches that started up all the time between Mother and Daddy.

Mary was popular at college. The instructors liked her because she was serious and downright about everything. Mary and Ada majored in sociology and they declared that they were going to be social workers. When Mary was still a junior Mother obtained a divorce from Daddy, giving intemperance and I mental cruelty as the case. Mary cried a great deal when she heard about the divorce. When Ada asked her why her eyes were so red, she said it was because "it had made her cry to read about all those poor soldiers being killed in the war in Europe."³ Mary, no doubt, tells a lie but it is also a significant clue to her thinking.

Mary and Ada took up jobs doing settlement work at Hull House in Chicago. Mary was greatly moved by the plight of the poor people:

..... it was so awful the way poor people lived and the cracked red knuckles of the women who took in washing and the scabby heads of the little children and the clatter and the gritty wind on South Halstead Street and the stench of the stockyards...⁴

Mary had developed radical ideas. She would not take, any money even from her mother because she believed that nobody had a right to money they had not earned. She also rejected a proposal of marriage from her close friend, Joe Denny. She told Joe that when she got out of college she would want to do social service work. A marriage was, therefore, clearly out of the question. Mary often thought of "the work there was to be done to make the country what it ought to be, the social conditions, the slums, the shanties with filthy tottering backhouses, the miners' children in grimy cools too big for them, the overworked women stooping over stoves, the youngsters struggling for an education in night schools, hunger and unemployment and drink, and the police and the lawyers and judges always ready to take it out on the weak..."⁵

Mary's friend Ada had taken up music and was studying the violin and could think of nothing but getting down to New York for concerts. But the outside world- the submarine campaign, the war, the election- was so vivid and live that many could hardly keep her mind on her courses or on Ada's gabble about musical celebrities. She went to all the lectures about current events and social conditions. She was greatly excited and impressed by GH.Barrow's lecture on 'The Promise of peace'. She liked Barrow because he looked as if he had been a working man. After the lecture he was at Mr. Hardkick's house where he talked beautifully about Labour's faith in Mr Wilson

and how Labour would demand peace and how the Mexican Revolution was just a beginning."Labour", he said," was going to get on its feet all over the world and start cleaning up the mess the old order had made , not by violence but by peaceful methods .Wilsonian methods".⁶

Many French was tremendously impressed and influenced by Barrow's radicalism. She desperately wanted to get out of a choky college life and into the wide and sprawling world.

Mary French attended another lecture by G.H.Barrow on 'Europe: Problems of Post war Reconstruction'. At the reception afterwards she was introduced to Barrow for a second time. She was happy to be able to give him some information he wanted about the chances ex-soldiers had of finding jobs in the Chicago area. Barrow met her again because he wanted information for a certain bureau. He thought that Mary would be able to furnish the relevant information because she was in daily contact with the actual people. They had an interesting talk about the employment situation. Later she accepted an invitation to go to supper with Mr. Barrow and explained to him that she had taken up social service work to be in touch with reality. She now felt cooped up and so institutional that she often wondered if she would not have done better to join the Red Cross overseas or the Friends Reconstruction Unit. But she hated war so much that she did not want to do anything which was even remotely' concerned with the war effort.

Mary who had enough of social service work now wanted to do real work in industry. As these were days of acute unemployment, Mary had to move around employment offices of several steel companies. Finally, she landed a reporting job through the good offices of a friend. Mary heard a great deal of talk in the office about how red agitators had infiltrated the mills. The Paper began to fill up with news of alien riots and Russian Bolsheviks and the nationalizaion of women and the defeat of Lenin and Trotzky.

One afternoon Mary French was summoned by the editor and given an assignment to investigate the lives of the red agitators who had come from Russia. Mr Healy , the editor said: ... "Well, I want to get the lowdown on the people working there ...what part of Russia they were born in, how they got into this country in the first place..... Where the money comes from... prison records, you know ... Get all the dope you can. It'll make a magnificent Sunday feature."⁷

Mary was greatly interested in industrial relations and she thought that it was a wonderful assignment. But she put it to Mr. Healy if conditions were not pretty bad in the mills. Mr. Healy's outburst was profusely pro-establishment and anti-labour. He believed that the guineas were making more money than they ever made in their lives. They bought stocks, washing machines and silk stockings for their women and they also sent money back to the old folks. While the real lovers of the country were risking their lives in the trenches, they held down all the good jobs. Mr. Heals' blamed the red agitators for everything. He said:

Those guineas are well off don't you forget it. The one thing they can buy is brains. That's how those agitators get at 'em. They talk their language &fill 'em up with a lot of notions about how all they need to do is stop working and they can take possession of this country that we've built up into the greatest country in the world..... I don't hold it against the poor devils of guineas, they're just ignorant; but

those reds who accept the hospitality of our country and then go around spreading their devilish propaganda....⁸

Mr. Healy is convinced that they are the paid agents of Russia. He is so contemptuous of the red agitators that he declares that shooting is too good for them. During the course of her investigation Mary met an interesting person named Gus Muscowski who was working for the so-called agitators. She was shown some photographs which depicted the brutality of the establishment: she saw the photograph of a dead woman with her head battered. She was eliminated for trying "to organize the working class; that the worst crime you can commit in this country."⁹

On her way back she saw the children of the agitators. They were a group of ragged kids making mudpies; they were pale; flabby, filthy little kids with pouches under eyes. Mary could not stand the sight of these deprived, underprivileged and unnourished children. Gus Muscowski commented satirically, "Git an eyeful of cesspool alley the land of opportunity."¹⁰

That night Mary French could not sleep. Images of poverty and squalor kept floating in her head.

In the afternoon she went to the office and filed a true and factual report on the conditions she had seen and investigated. Her report was not accepted; on the contrary, she was dismissed from service without an apology. She however was lucky to find another job doing publicity for the Amalgamated. Mary French worked very hard. She prepared releases, gathered statistics on tuberculosis, undernourishment of children, sanitary conditions and crime. She took notes on speeches of Foster and Fitzpatrick, saw troopers beating up men and women with their clubs, kicking children out of their way; chasing old men off their front stoops.

Mary got so involved in the lives of the strikers that she herself begs bloody heads, the wreck and destruction of family parlours, sofa and furniture destroyed. All these excesses were committed by the troopers looking for subversive literature. It caused Mary a great deal of pain to realise that the highpaid workers were not coming out to help the strikers. She feared that the low paid workers would lose their strike. Gus Muscowski bemoaned the lack of unity in the working class:

"What can you do when the workin' class won't stick together! Every kind of damn foreigner thinks the others is bums and the 'Mericans they think everybody's a bum `cept you an' me. Wasn 't so long ago we was all foreigners in this man's country Christ, Idunno why I string along wid'em."¹¹

Mary felt very close to Gus Muscowski on the emotional plane. She would have very gladly married him. But when Gus told Mary that a working man had no right to have a wife and family, she coyly put in that he could have a girl of his own.

A few weeks later Gus Muscowski was arrested distributing leaflets in Braddock. Mary saw him brought up before the squire and sentenced to five years. His arm was in a sling and there was a scab of clotted blood on the towy stubble on the back of his head. Mary herself was subjected to heaps of insults and abuses for associating with Gus.

She met Barrow again when he came there with the Senatorial Investigating Commission, and together they discussed the strike. Barrow was optimistic that the strike would end soon and all the boys would be released from jail. Barrow met Fitzpatrick and just about convinced him that the only thing to do was to get the men back to work. He had Judge Gary's own private assurance that nobody would be discriminated against and ' that experts were working on the problem of an eight hour day. Barrow said that once the technical difficulties had been overcome, the whole picture of the steel workers lives would change radically for the better. Barrow was keen that the gains made by the striking steelworkers should be incorporated in the legislation.

Mary and Don left for Charlestown to join the protest parade. She hadn't expected that there would be so many protestors. But they were not allowed to get close to the Charlestown jail. The cops used force and violence to disperse the crowd. Both Mary and Don were badly injured. But their morale was high. They started singing: Arise, ye prisoners of starvation....

The characters are ordinary citizens who represent the American society of that time, they are average Americans. Their individual stories are "tales of types". Some of these tales intersect, others run parallel, some continue for the entire sequence and others drop out from sight.¹² In *The Big Money* these people are ex-war aces, movie stars, promoters from Wall Street, social workers, reformers, Communist leaders, United States Senators. They are all influenced by the kind of living that demands the quick reward and by the millions that are made today and lost tomorrow.¹³ Although these people are typical Americans they do not compose a representative picture of all kinds of people in this society – Dos Passos made a limited selection of fictional characters. Some social groups are not included at all or only play a minor role, such as Non-White Americans or people in rural areas. The occurring characters belong to the broad middle class.

As in satire the fictional characters are always seen from above. There is no chance for the reader to identify with them, to be touched by their lives or to develop sympathies for them. The reason for that lies in the characters' lack of ideas – there is no reflection or consequential thought that is not connected with their appetites. These people are almost entirely occupied with their sensations and their longings.¹⁴ The narration sections do not contain much of deep emotion. Furthermore, the characters are only a depiction of "motor and verbal behavior". The characters in U.S.A. are hollow and without depth, they are "automatons" who do not feel and who are not affected by any intellectual values since they exist in a world without moral content or complication. They are not stimulated by anything aesthetic or depressed by anything spiritual – all the pleasures and pains pass them by.¹⁵ For example, Mary French's abortion is described only within a few sentences.¹⁶ The fact that Charley Anderson loses custody of his children is also presented with only a few words and does not evoke any sympathy.

References:

1. Twelve Great American Novels, p.97
2. U.S.A., p.821.
3. Ibid., p.822.
4. Ibid., p.823.
5. Ibid., p.825.
6. U.S.A., p.821.
7. U.S.A., p.838
8. Ibid., p.838.
9. Ibid., p.840.
10. Ibid., p.840.
11. Ibid., p.843.
12. Bradbury, *Modern American Novel*, 109.
13. Gregory, *Critical Heritage*, 131.
14. Doctorow, *Big Money*, XI.
15. Bernard de Voto, "John Dos Passos: Anatomist of Our Time," *Critical Heritage*, 126-127.
16. "In the end she had an abortion but she had to write her mother again for money to pay for it." John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000) 359.

