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“Fighting lies”: the committed essayist and the biographies in Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*

Vincent Ferré (Paris 13/CENEL)

John Dos Passos deserves our attention today, not only for his defence of Harlan County’s miners in 1931, of Sacco and Vanzetti four years earlier, or for the texts that he published in *New Masses*. The biographies included in *U.S.A.* must also be examined. They have been puzzling critics since the publication of the masterpiece (*The 42nd Parallel*, 1930 ; *1919*, 1932 ; *The Big Money*, 1936 ; gathered in one volume in 1938<sup>1</sup>), but debates about their nature have overlooked their relation with the tradition of the American essay.

I would like to analyze the generic reference to essays in the *U.S.A.* trilogy which is crucial in Dos Passos’s commitment: his writing aims at inviting the reader to rid himself of clichés, ready-made ideas and preconceptions, and to *act*. When Sartre asserts in his famous text that Dos Passos’s novels are an incitation to “revolt”<sup>2</sup>, I should like to argue that this is largely due, to the biographies, rather than to diegetic chapters. Dos Passos uses some essayistic features of the biographies; as a “persuasive discourse” (Angenot), modern essay is characterized by its attention to its reader, so much so that the essayist is viewed as a “committed” writer, a “temptator trying to win others to his cause” (Bense).

My hypothesis is that *U.S.A.* is different from other works by Dos Passos (*Manhattan Transfer*, for instance), not only on account of its scope, but because in this book, commitment is three-fold. *U.S.A.* expresses a political and social commitment, which echoed in the writing that is itself committed because it refers to a genre (the essay) which is specifically viewed as capable of *committing* readers to react. To prove this, I will show that the biographies in *U.S.A.* are close to contemporary essays. This resemblance sheds a light on the faculty that they possess to establish a relation with the reader – which is precisely an essayistic feature – and to commit him into action: to *think*, in this case. But where is the dividing-line between *inciting to think* and *influence*?

## I. “Biographies” and essays

### A problem of identification

Twenty-seven biographies of political or union leaders, of magnates, artists or inventors alternate in *U.S.A.* with three other types of chapters: the diegetic chapters focused on a dozen characters – Mac, Janey and Joe Williams, Moorehouse, Richard Savage... –, the *Newsreels*, and the fragments of an apparently autobiographic narrative (*The Camera Eye*). From 1 to 11 pages long, usually 4 or 5, these biographies have puzzled many critics and readers, struck by their energy, but perplexed as to their nature and the term that should apply to them. They are diversely designated as *biographies*, *portraits* – the words used by Dos Passos, who is not very explicit, and does not theorize about them<sup>3</sup> – but also as *poems*,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996. Page references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> J.-P. Sartre, “A propos de John Dos Passos et de *1919*”, in *Situations I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947 (1992), 14.

<sup>3</sup> See the interview with F. Gado (*Idol*, 1969, 45, repr. in *Major Nonfictional Prose* [hereafter *MNP*], D. Pizer, ed., Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1988, 283) and the “Introductory Note” to the 1937 edition of *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*: “Portraits of a number of real people are interlarded in the pauses in the narrative [...]”.

“effigies in stone” or simply “passages of a page or two”<sup>1</sup>. Their digressive nature is much commented upon; Upton Sinclair sees them as *interpolations*, another critic as “interludes”<sup>2</sup>.

They are important in *U.S.A.*, owing to their effect on readers, but also through the intention of the writer, who modified his initial project. Instead of writing a series of reports, with a certain number of recurrent characters, he decided to *add* biographies to an original narrative, in order (as Dos Passos put it himself) “to get different facets of my subject and [...] to get something a little more accurate than fiction. The aim was always to produce fiction. [...] I was sort of on the edge between [fiction and nonfiction], moving from one field to the other very rapidly”<sup>3</sup>. But what exactly are these biographies ?

### **Political and biographical essays**

The relation of the biographies to a type of American essay, political, biographical and serial, has not been taken into account – as far as my knowledge goes. Some critics (like Landsberg) suggest here and there a resemblance between them; but a more systematic similarity appears when one compares the biographies to essays published at the same period<sup>4</sup>.

These chapters in *U.S.A.* follow, more or less, the chronology of lives, and give an account of careers made of successive choices; they are rooted in reality, and refer to historical events. Thus, they correspond closely to the definition of biography given by Madelénat: a narrative in prose, “made by a narrator, about the life of a historical character” and which underlines “the originality of the individual existence and the continuity of a personality”<sup>5</sup>. One may recall, at this point, the resemblance between essays and biographies in general, established by theoreticians; some of them even consider the latter as a type of essay<sup>6</sup>. But this argument does not suffice. It is more important to compare in detail the *U.S.A.* biographies and contemporary American essays, thereby taking into account both the way biographies were written at the time Dos Passos worked on his trilogy and the history of American essays. The fact is that the biographies (by Dos Passos) echo those essays that are political and serial, and that biographies were a type of essays in the 20’s and 30’s.

Two examples will prove this<sup>7</sup>. In the history of the American essay, many essays that were published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were serial and political. Noteworthy among them is Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776), an important landmark in the growth of the American essay – Dos Passos wrote, indeed, a preface to an anthology of his texts, *The Living Thoughts of Tom Paine* (1940). This political vein continued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Walt Whitman was, as an essayist (he presented his *Democratic Vistas*, 1871<sup>8</sup>, as an “essay”, the result of his observations), an important reference for Dos Passos.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kazin, “All the Lost Generations”, in *Native Grounds. An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, New York: Overseas Editions, 1942, 114 ; M. Ross, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 23 Feb. 1930, (repr. in B. Maine, ed., *Dos Passos, The Critical Heritage*, London-New York: Routledge, 1988 [hereafter *CH*], 81).

<sup>2</sup> U. Sinclair, *New Masses*, Apr. 1930 (*CH*, 88) and *Bookman*, Apr. 1930 (*CH*, 91).

<sup>3</sup> D. Sanders, “John Dos Passos”, in G. Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: The “Paris Review” interviews*, New York: Viking Press, 1976 (*MNP*, 248).

<sup>4</sup> I am not dealing here with The Essay, as some critics do, overlooking the importance of context into specific times and places (even though common points exist, in essays from different periods). The way these political and biographical essays are rooted in a limited period is crucial here.

<sup>5</sup> D. Madelénat, *La Biographie*, Paris: P.U.F., 1984, 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Rohner, Klaus G. Just or Madelénat.

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed account is to be found in V. Ferré, *L’essai fictionnel chez M. Proust, H. Broch et J. Dos Passos*, PhD., Rennes 2, 2003, chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> W. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948, vol. 2, p. 208-259.

When Dos Passos wrote *U.S.A.*, American essays had undergone an important evolution, replacing the *Genteel Tradition* essays by more incisive texts. The latter attacked established values, such as the ones published by Randolph Bourne or Henry Louis Mencken. Dos Passos and those two authors published in the same journal, *Seven Arts*, in 1917<sup>1</sup>, and *1919* contains a very laudatory biography of Bourne. But Mencken is the most interesting reference here: indeed, a critic perceives a “considerable seasoning of Menckenesque irony” in *U.S.A.*’s biographies (*The Bookman*, 91). One may add that the topic of the biographies is not very different from Mencken’s *Notes on Democracy* (1926<sup>2</sup>), which deal with the origins of that regime, with citizenship, etc.

Moreover, one of the usual forms of American essays at the time is *biography*, following the example of Emerson’s portraits of Plato, Montaigne and Shakespeare (among others) in *Representative Men* (1850<sup>3</sup>). But the comparison with Mencken is particularly telling with respect to the nature of the biographies in *U.S.A.*, for he published, in the 1920’s, in journals or anthologies of essays, the *same type* of biographies as those in Dos Passos’s trilogy, on close and even similar topics. Mencken’s biographical essays on Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Bryan, Wilson, and the text on the presidential function (“Imperial Purple”) are 1 to 13 pages-long, usually 3 or 5, like *U.S.A.*’s biographies<sup>4</sup>. The evocation of Roosevelt, for instance, shows the way the First World War revealed his personality, as does his biography by Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* The common points are so strong that Mencken’s texts appear as possible sources for Dos Passos who, so to speak, *integrated* this type of essay in *U.S.A.*, fictionalizing it and expanding its scope by adding workers, union leaders, artists, and so on, as topics of the biographies. This is not to say that *U.S.A.*’s biographies *are* literally essays; but they *refer to* this model, and though they remain inside a novel, their essayistic features are perceived by contemporary readers or critics, who may consider the biographies as essays, as nonfictional chapters. They would not have been out of place in contemporary anthologies like Pritchard’s (*Great Essays of All Nations*, 1929) or Matthews’s *Oxford Book of American Essays* (1914)<sup>5</sup> - if extracted from *U.S.A.*, as the other texts in these anthologies are. These biographies account for the fact that some critics reckon that “political ideas” gave its shape to *1919* or evoke “the perfection of an advanced theoretical system of composition, and an advanced theoretical system of analysis and argument[:] all these exist almost to surfeit”<sup>6</sup>.

It is true that the term *essay* itself is not often present in these comments, but it is either for historical reasons – the status of the essay as a genre was not firmly established at the time – or because critics prefer to use Dos Passos’s designations, mentioned above (*portraits* and *biographies*). On the contrary, a more recent critic like M. Landsberg evokes in passing the “partisan essays in history”, in *U.S.A.*<sup>7</sup>. But although the term is not explicitly mentioned, most critics consider these chapters as argumentative and nonfictional prose<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> See “Young Spain”, republished in *MNP*, 39-47.

<sup>2</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*, New York: Knopf, 1926.

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Emerson, *Collected Works IV, Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, Cambridge-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Published between 1918 and 1931, that were reprinted in *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982, 220-257.

<sup>5</sup> F. H. Pritchard, *Great Essays of All Nations*, London, Bombay, Sydney: G. Harrap, 1929 ; B. Matthews, *The Oxford Book of American Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1914.

<sup>6</sup> M. Cowley, “John Dos Passos: The Poet and the World”, *The New Republic*, 27 Ap. 1932 (repr. in A. Hook, ed., *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974 [hereafter *CCE*], 83) ; B. de Voto, “John Dos Passos: Anatomist of Our Time”, *Saturday Review*, Aug. 1936 (*CH*, 129).

<sup>7</sup> M. Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography 1912-1936*, Boulder: The Colorado Associated University Press, 1972, 193.

<sup>8</sup> A contemporary critic qualifies them, for instance, as “expository comment[s]” (A.C. Bessie, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 23 Aug. 1936; *CH*, 141).

which is precisely a definition of the essay<sup>1</sup>. The chapters appear not only as biographies in the sense of factual accounts of real lives, but also (and above all) as a series of sequences expressing, in their succession, a critical discourse against capitalism and the pursuit of profit; this discourse is illustrated by the lives of exemplary characters, used as proofs in this demonstration.

Thus, the biographies in *U.S.A.* are, to a certain extent, similar to contemporary American essays, by dint of their biographical aspect, the importance of the *I* (the narrative voice) and their relation to American essays of the past (political and serial) and of the time. A more exhaustive demonstration would also analyze their fragmentary aspect, the use of typography, and answer possible objections (the fact that Dos Passos himself does not mention the term *essay* or that some critics consider biographies as more narrative than discourse). But the reasons why Dos Passos integrated these chapters in *U.S.A.* are more enlightening and will bring another proof of the similarity between the biographies and the essays.

They are rooted in his conception of the role of writers in society, especially after his experience of the First World War. Hence (to summarize) his choice of a novel form associating fiction and *nonfiction*, viewed as “modern” – this is another feature of contemporary essays, whose genre was perceived as in harmony with the period – and aiming both at a form of knowledge and totality. Let us remember his purpose when he added biographies to his narrative, “to get different facets of my subject” and “something a little more accurate than fiction”<sup>2</sup>. The relationship that these chapters establish with readers is the third main reason, and one that will be analyzed now. The biographies in *U.S.A.* possess a powerful faculty of demonstration, superior to the diegetic chapters: as Barbara Foley puts it, they “presen[t] a sophisticated analysis of class relations beyond the reach of even [Dos Passos’s] most politically conscious fictional characters”<sup>3</sup>.

## II. Committed biographies: the relation with the reader

In pragmatics, fiction is defined by a type of reference and an absence of commitment of the locutor as to the truth of his statements. One may thus understand why the biographies in *U.S.A.* have been considered as nonfictional (even if this is debatable<sup>4</sup>), for their commitment – both pragmatic and political – seems obvious. It is possible to say, at least, that they remind us of a nonfictional model, first by a *political commitment*: the reactions of readers show that the political criticism in these chapters is particularly acute. According to Wagner, they are more explicit than narrative chapters; Whipple consider them as the most Marxist parts of *U.S.A.*<sup>5</sup>. And there is a second commitment, towards the reader. The comparison between these biographies and essays may be pursued to demonstrate that the former’s relation to readers is akin to the latter’s: they produce an effect on readers, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the Glaudes and Louette’s definition (*L’Essai*, Paris: Hachette, 1999, 7), following Genette and Angenot’s analysis.

<sup>2</sup> For a more exhaustive demonstration, answers to possible objections and a comment on the relation to modernity and knowledge, see V. Ferré, *L’essai fictionnel : essai et roman chez Proust, Broch, Dos Passos* (PhD, Rennes 2, 2003, chapters 1 and 7-9).

<sup>3</sup> B. Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*, Durham, Duke UP, 1993, 430. In her analysis, Foley equates the “biographies’ narratorial voice” with Dos Passos, which is debatable, despite the obvious common points between the two: “Through the mordant irony of the biographies’ narratorial voice, Dos Passos [...]”.

<sup>4</sup> On their fictional or nonfictional nature, see Ferré, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> L. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist as American*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979, 92 ; T.K. Whipple, “Dos Passos and the U.S.A.”, *Nation*, 19 Feb. 1938 (*CH*, 151).

possess, very similarly, what may be called a *committing power*. The biographies, by imitating the model of essays in a sort of fictional *mimesis* (I refer to Genette here), benefit from some of their characteristics – this is my hypothesis.

In a word, these chapters in *U.S.A.* are aimed at persuading readers. They are pervaded by a subjectivity, interacting with the reader: first, the use of the pronoun *we* is stylistic, when a passive form may be used (“[...] Mr. Duncan, whose behavior we are led to believe had been grossly indelicate”, 896) or when it relates the experience of an *I* (“and we flatten into the mud/ and make ourselves small cowering in the corners of ruined walls”, 1006); secondly, the presence of an *I* is patent when he expresses his feelings, for instance the indignation in the evocation of Debs’s arrest: “But where were Gene Debs’ brothers in nineteen eighteen when Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta [...] / where were the big men [...] / where were the locomotive firemen and engineers when they hustled him off to Atlanta Penitentiary ?” (31-32). Thirdly, a relationship with the reader is established by the use of the present tense, used to presentify a situation and to refer to a contemporary context: “Henry Ford [...] lives besieged [...]”, “The first workers republic/ was established and stands” (813, 375). The biographies mention more and more frequently the present times, *today*, in the trilogy, as in the last pages of F. L. Wright and Hearst’s portraits in *The Big Money* (1130-1132, 1168-1169)<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the address to the reader is visible in rhetorical questions, repeated as a means of persuasion:

was it for that the pilgrims had bent their heads into the storm, filled the fleeing  
Indians with slugs of their blunderbusses  
[...] was it for that the pioneers had crossed the Appalachians [...]  
was it for that the Indiana farmboys had turned out [...] ? (511)

They call the reader to witness, inviting him to check the facts by himself: “the wobblies’ desk still stands in the Chamber of Commerce” (747)... and it would be possible to see it.

Hence, by their commitment, the biographies in *U.S.A.* are close to essays, in that a crucial part is left to the reader. Just like essays, they try to “win [him] to their cause” (Bense) ; this relation is not merely that of every literary text, which Iser and Eco analyzed<sup>2</sup>. One of the specificities of the essay as a genre is to be “focused” as much on the reader as on the essayistic *I*<sup>3</sup>. More precisely, this attention to the reader is an *action* on him. For Bense<sup>4</sup>, an essayist is “committed” in that he is a “temptator”, who “[questions] the opinions of the reader”: essays have to do with ethic, and express the writer’s commitment, his will to “educate” (135-6). The term *commitment* is recurrent in theoretical texts about essays: for Terrasse, the essayist is as committed as a philosopher, for he believes that he is able to “reach an objective reality” (7). This commitment must be understood as that of the telling of the truth as G. Good puts it, “The essayist implies that his representations *are* literally true *within the terms of his relationship to his reader*”<sup>5</sup>. Essays do not belong to the field of science, of fixed knowledge which can be verified by experiments: Angenot sees essays as a form of *doxologic* discourse, among the category of “persuasive discourses”<sup>6</sup>; an essayist does not express *the* truth but *his* truth, trying to convince the reader.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: “the empire of the printed word continues powerful by the inertia of bigness [...]” (1169).

<sup>2</sup> See Eco (*Lector in Fabula*, 1979) or Iser on the “interaction” between the text and the reader (*L’Acte de lecture, Théorie de l’effet esthétique*, Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> J. Terrasse, *Rhétorique de l’essai littéraire*, Montréal: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1977, 127.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bense, “Über den Essay und seiner Prosa”, *Merkur*, 3, 1947.

<sup>5</sup> G. Good, *The Observing Self. Rediscovering the Essay*, London: Routledge, 1988, 13.

<sup>6</sup> M. Angenot, *La parole pamphlétaire. Typologie des discours modernes*, Paris: Payot, 1982, 32.

The etymology of the word *essay*, coming from *exagium* and *agere* (to drive, to produce an effect) should be called to mind. The action exerted on readers by *U.S.A.*'s biographies is enlightened by the comparison with essays, which is a supplementary proof of their affinity. But is it possible to carry on this comparison? Which form precisely does this action on readers take?

### III. What are the limits to commitment?

The action of the biographies reveals a paradox, between, on the one hand, the free tone of *U.S.A.*'s biographies, which do not repeat any ready-made discourse, not even communist, but invite the reader to think freely; and, on the other hand, the way this "freedom" claimed by the biographies is in fact guided and delimited, in so far as it is framed by them.

#### Inciting readers to think...

The biographies in *U.S.A.* denounce illusions and propaganda, "desenseigne[nt] la sottise" [unteach stupidity], to use a phrase describing Montaigne's *Essays*<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the biographies try, to persuade the reader to adopt a critical state of mind, and to think for himself, in keeping with what Dos Passos had written in 1917, in his diary: after the war, his duty would be (he felt) to write to advocate freedom, "to try to make a splash, however small, in the stagnant puddle of the American mind."<sup>2</sup> In a moving echo, one of the characters of *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (published three years later), urges his friends to "fight the lies" (169).

Dos Passos's conception of literature, in this period of his life, shows his determination to engage with life in society, instead of "liv[ing] in a tub and writ[ing] verses", which is Jack Reed's first intention, according to his biography in *U.S.A.* (372). In this text (a possible self-portrait), a young Harvard student rejects the promise of a bright future in order to defend workers, to denounce the war and travel around the world.

Another reflexive biography – not surprisingly, Bourne's – 'translates' Wilson's cant and shows the reality hidden behind words (449):

for *New Freedom* read *Conscription*, for *Democracy*, *Win the War*, for *Reform*,  
*Safeguard the Morgan Loans*  
for Progress Civilization Education Service,  
Buy a Liberty Bond,  
Straff the Hun,  
Jail the Objectors

"[To see] clear and sharp" without being fooled, like Bourne, is also the narrator's program, who urges readers to cast off *cliches*, of ideas and beliefs imposed on them. By telling the lives of the people who "made" the United States, the biographies give the facts and elements to judge them and understand the political and social context... in order to change it.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie de Gournay, "Préface" to Montaigne's *Essays* (see for instance <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k580587/f24.table>>)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in J. Dos Passos, *One Man's Initiation: 1917* [1920], Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969, 13.

But, to this end, they “prod people into thinking”, even if they do not want to, because “Thinking hurts”<sup>1</sup>; and not only do they incite readers, but they also *force* them to act. Do they call them to revolt, as in Reed’s biography, in which a question is repeated: “why not revolution?” (373)? Where is the limit between *inciting* to think and *influence*?

### ... or forcing them to?

The facts and elements given to the reader to ponder upon are not always objective and complete, but the biographies sometimes oversimplify, exaggerate, and even caricature them.

Within the series of biographies, high praise of people fighting the capitalistic system contrasts with sharp attacks against lies, hypocrisy or activities based on gain. The first and last biographies in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (the first volume), for instance, are among the most laudatory in their description, first of La Follette’s crusade against corruption and economic interests, in order to restore a real democracy (315-318); secondly, of Eugene Debs’s attempt to organize workers, which ends tragically when the life of this “Lover of Mankind” (30) is broken by his imprisonment – foreshadowing Bill Haywood’s career and portrait, in the same volume (87-89). By way of contrast, the final biography of the trilogy (in *The Big Money*), entitled “Power Superpower”, through the caustic portrait of Samuel Insull, allows a retrospective interpretation of the series of biographies as a sharp criticism of power and money, and of their frailty (1210-1216).

The distortion of facts is obvious in other portraits, Bryan’s for instance, which does not mention the part he took in important reforms, such as the right to vote given to women or the senatorial elections – which would have been an important element in his defence. Neither do the biographies, conversely, contain criticisms against the communist party such as those we find in narrative chapters, where two characters – Don Stevens and Ben Compton – have become important members of the Party, in *The Big Money*. Thus, Compton’s political exaltation leads him to “sacrifice [his] personal feelings for the workingclass” (1144), as well as his relationship with Mary French; she is also humiliated by Stevens, who does not tell her of his marriage with a member of the Party (1229). The way they treat the same woman, in a repetition which is very striking for the reader, shows that they are not very different from Richard Savage or Moorehouse, who put their careers first. To this absence of consideration for human beings, Stevens adds political hypocrisy: he is more anxious of his well-being than of Sacco and Vanzetti’s case, hiding his selfishness behind hollow statements on “the power of the workingclass that’s got to be saved” (1153). Very symbolically, while Compton is finally excluded as a free mind, Stevens, obeying Moscow’s orders without discussion, is destined to a ‘bright’ career within the party (1122).

All this is omitted in the biographies. They are not balanced at all, but very simplistic and contrasted; thus, it would be a mistake to consider the narrator’s position as Dos Passos’. He expressed, writing in his own name, more balanced opinions; and the gap between the narrative voice in the biographies and the writer – which is linked to the problem of autobiography in *U.S.A.* – may be interpreted as an illustration of his belief, expressed in 1935, a year before the publication of the third volume, that a writer has to keep politics at a distance. As a citizen, he may take part in political life, “in the struggle against oppression”<sup>2</sup>; but not on the forefront. And he must not “abandon the state of mind of freedom”. The right position is balance, finding the right distance “from the obsessions of the hour” but being at

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<sup>1</sup> This is Dos Passos’s definition of his own writing and *satire* (in a specific sense), in “Acceptance of John Dos Passos”, in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*, 1958, 8 (repr. in *MNP*, 221).

<sup>2</sup> “The Writer As Technician”, in Henry Hart (ed.), *American Writers’ Congress*, New York: International Publishers, 1935, (*MNP*, 171).

the same time in touch with the context: “Artistic works to be of lasting value must be both engaged and disengaged”<sup>1</sup>.

From *U.S.A.* as a whole, in the combination of diegetic chapters and biographies, a complex political discourse can be inferred; but the biographies are more “engaged” than Dos Passos’s assertion indicates. And this is not only due to the political aspect, but also to the fact that they are close to discursive writing, close to essays.

Strictly speaking, it would be possible to explain why these biographies are not essays, and to examine their combination with diegetic chapters, or the difference between them and essays published at the same period by Dos Passos. But this paper has aimed at analyzing the way *U.S.A.*’s biographies commit the reader into action, using essayistic features and a committed writing, echoing another commitment, the political one. The relation to reality and truth is different in fiction from that of nonfictional genres such as essays, which are the model of *U.S.A.*’s biographies.

The gap between the engaged / disengaged attitude of the writer and the committed *I* of the biographies leads us to see the latter as the extreme incarnation of the committed writer. Accordingly, the voice in the biographies is also a *writer* in the strongest sense, given by Dos Passos in “The writer as technician” (169): “The professional writer discovers some aspect of the world and invents out of the speech of his time some particularly apt and original way of putting it down on paper. If the product is compelling, and important enough, it molds and influences ways of thinking to the point of changing and rebuilding the language, which is the mind of the group.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “What Makes a Novelist”, *National Review*, 16 jan. 1968 (*MNP*, 273).

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