VISIONS OF WAR IN DOS PASSOS' "ONE MAN'S INITIATION" & "THREE SOLDIERS"

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Abstract: *Despite the huge amount of literary fiction inspired by the WWI, Dos Passos' "Three Soldiers" may be placed among the most outstanding novels of the time. As suggested by the title itself, war is described from the perspective of the soldier, from his own real experience on the battlefield. Horrible images of destruction, violence, blood and death, all mingle in a completely terrifying picture of the war. Even the chapter titles "Making the Mould", "The Metal Cools", "Machines", "Rust" and "Under the Wheels" are meant to underline the idea of an awful mechanized world the produces soldiers". A feeling of absurdity and disillusionment characterize the entire book. Dos Passos' sharp disgust with the war is obvious, the novel turning into a sort of anti-war protest. However, the crux of the book is represented by Chrisfield's murder (the central character) of Sergeant Anderson, his commanding officer. The aim of my paper is to analyse these two opposite visions of war: that of the soldier, fighting effectively on the battlefield and that of officers who "encourage others to kill and die for humanity, keeping themselves clean".*

Keywords: *literary fiction, images, visions*

Despite the huge amount of literary fiction inspired by the WWI, Dos Passos' books "One Man's Initiation" and "Three Soldiers" may be placed among the most outstanding novels of the time. Their importance lies not only in the high emotional state that they infer or in the greatness of the historical subject that he chose to present but rather in the writer's courage to rise against the war. And even if, nowadays, this fact weren't considered as something extraordinary, as we are all aware of the negative aspects of the war and we all try to overcome conflicts in order to avoid it, the period when Dos Passos published these books, was a confusing one. Most Americans regarded war as the only "gate" towards freedom. They were dominated by an aura of idealism which diminished gradually during the war. When it ended in 1918 there was a great deal of euphoria enhanced by the conviction that America had played a prominent role in the conflict. However most of those who fought in the war, faced a reality that awakened them from the world of illusions that they had created before entering the war. The impact was a rather shocking one for the naïve and inexperienced young man Dos Passos. His disappointment, anger and frustration resulted in the two novels mentioned above published immediately after the end of the war; and, although "One Man's Initiation" wasn't really appreciated at the time (it achieved critical popularity and success later), the novel opened the way to an entirely new generation of anti-war writers that Gertrude Stein called "the lost generation".

John Dos Passos, like most of his contemporary fellows who had been on the battlefield, wrote not only about the horror of war but also about the irony of war, meaning the two visions of war: that of the soldiers, who just like "machines" had to cope with the horrible images of destruction, violence, blood and death and that of "officers or remote leaders who exploited the civilized order and used it to promote the war […]. The 'Y' men-clerics strutting in uniform on the sidelines […] encouraged others to kill and die for humanity while keeping themselves clean".[1]

[1] Wrenn, John, *John Dos Passos,* Twayne Publishers, New York, 1961, p. 110

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This opposition manifests for the very first time in Dos Passos' book "One Man's Initiation". The war is seen and analyzed from the perspective of Martin Howe an American serviceman "whose frustration and anger […] is directed not toward the war as an abstract, inimical presence, but at the much more tangible entities and governments that have made the war possible" [1]

However, at the beginning of the story, the central character is full of illusions and is convinced that the "war has everything to do with him and he can hardly get enough of it".[2]

The service seems the right place for him to be especially if we take into consideration that the location of the events is France, that the action takes place in spring, that his main task is to "evacuate the wounded and dying but not share their pain. He will always have the special immunity of the outsider, the onlooker, the sensitive detached guest who, even though he might imagine it, must never be allowed to face the creeping horror". [3]

He doesn't have to risk too much by carrying the wounded; death is not something that will occur to him since he doesn't have to face the danger of the moving shells. Yet, towards the middle of the book, Martin's former idealistic perspective changes into a pessimistic one. His situation becomes similar to that of the battlefield soldier who has already witnessed the horror of war. The shift from the initial soldier's view, unaware of the fact that 'he was going to death' (as an old French woman states in the book), to the experienced participant in the war takes place gradually, awakening Martin from his previous dream-like account of the war atmosphere. This is the most important moment in the novel, the moment of revelation when Martin realizes that soldiers are just puppets in the hands of officers and other superiors who prefer to keep themselves distant from the war but urge others to kill and die for country, for freedom, for ideals.

"First we must burst our bonds, open our eyes, clear our ears. No, we know nothing but what we are told by the rulers. Oh, the lies, the lies, the lies, the lies that life is smothered in. […] Oh, they have decided us so many times. We have been such dupes, we have been such dupes!"[4]

In "Three Soldiers", the vision of war as perceived by the soldier is even more stressed being conceived as a "huge machine which destroys individuals"[5].

As Malcolm Cowley states in his book "After the Genteel Tradition", the book is the story of a talented young musician, John Andrews, who, during the war, finds that his sensibilities are being outraged, his aspirations crushed by society as embodied in the American army. He deserts after the Armistice and begins to write a great orchestral poem. "When the military police come to arrest him, the sheets of music flutter one by one into the spring breeze; and we are made to feel that this ecstatic song choked off and dispersed on the wind is the real tragedy of the war"[6].

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[1] Nank, Christopher, *World War I Narratives and the American Peace Movement, 1920-1936*, Florida State University, FSU ETD Collection, Florida, 2005, p. 37

[2] Aldridge, John, *After the Lost Generation*", McGraw-Hill, New York, 1951, p. 62

[3] Ibid, p. 63

[4] Dos Passos, John, *One Man's Initiation*, MD: UP of America, Lanham, 1986, p. 120

[5] High, Peter, *An Outline of American Literature,* Longman Inc., New York, 1986, p. 150

[6] Cowley, Malcolm, *After the Genteel Tradition,* Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1965, p. 137

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The main idea is that no feelings or sensitive things can survive the war; better said, nothing good can face and win the battle with the destructive force of war. Therefore, Dos Passos' characters are dominated by insubordination, hatred or desire of revenge. In the end, even Andrew, the artist, despite his sensitive nature, turns into a person governed by hatred: "hatred for saluting officers, for receiving their derision and criticism, for submitting to their orders."[1]

But the climax of Andrews' hatred is marked by his arrest for having forgotten the leave papers. Although he tries to explain everything, the military policeman seems to care more about not being properly greeted, according to his position (rank) rather than Andrew's attempts to justify his absence from the Sorbonne Detachment. All these facts make him detest all that is connected to the war, to the army.

"There is a conspicuous absence in Three Soldiers of officers performing any acts of bravery or heroism in battle. Often they are depicted as being even more out-of-touch and confused than the enlisted men, and only seem to be sure of themselves when giving routine orders in the safety of non-combatant zones."[2]

Such moments of officers or commanders showing off their superiority in front of the subordinates are inserted all along the novel. Dos Passos disregards them from the first chapter to the last one concentrating on the soldier's view whose situation (condition) he knew best. Phrases like: "Hep, hep, hep," cried the sergeant, glaring down the ranks with the aggressive bulldog expression" or "Don't you know your name, eh?" said the officer glaring at the man savagely, using his curt voice like a whip" used in the open section of the book are evident proofs of the high consideration that the officers think they have. They amuse themselves by giving orders and by waking up soldiers in the middle of the night. The repetition of the word "get up" which appears at least three times in the inspection that an officer makes in the barracks where the soldiers usually rest reinforce the idea of the low opinion that superiors have on soldiers. They consider all of them to be uneducated and unable to manage by themselves. Indeed, the army is formed of both highly-educated men such as John Andrews and uneducated ones such as Chrisfield. But, they all strive to become well-appreciated soldiers. Unfortunately they all fall under the "humanity-crushing machine which is the army; […] the army becomes a symbol of all systems by which men attempt to crush their fellows.[3]

All the three characters fail to become the great soldiers that the reader expects. Chrisfield, the Indiana farm boy ends by killing the commanding officer without feeling bad about it. In fact, his refusal to subordinate Sergeant Anderson is described into small fragments all along the novel till the moment of the murder. He is a naïve, country boy with a violent temper. The murder is not only the result of the orders and of the superiority that the officer exposes; it is the outcome of a long series of events starting with the confession that he makes with regard to his stabbing a feller:

"Ah was just going to tell you Ah nearly did kill a guy once… Ah was pretty drunk at the time …Hell, Ah doan even know what it was about, but Ah got to quarrelin' with a feller. Ah'd been right smart friends with. Then he laid off an' hit me in the jaw. Ah

[1] Nank, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.48
[2] Ibid., p. 51
[3] Barry, Maine, *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 33

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doan know what I done next, but before Ah knowed it Ah had a hold of a shuckin' knife an' was slashin' at him with it…" [1]

Chrisfield's cruel temper is also revealed when he is caught taking baby birds out of their nests. But the cleric's remark (the "Y" man as he is called) when he sees Chrisfield's deed is even more surprising: "An American soldier being deliberately cruel. I never would 've believed it" [2]. It is an awkward observation if we take into account the scene when the soldiers are crammed by the Y men into a hut to watch a propaganda film which promoted hatred against Germans. Instead of being closed to the soldiers, the "Y" men are ineffective "reveling in authority and surety of their belief"[3] just like the army officers. The film is not a training exercise but an attempt to deepen the soldiers' hatred against their enemies. And the result seems to be the one desired by the authorities; the soldiers' intentions when they leave the hut are to rape German women and to hate all that is linked to Germans. As for Chrisfield, the murder he commits doesn't provoke him any regrets; he is just afraid of being caught therefore, he chooses to desert from the army.

Fusilli's aim is to stand well with both his fellows and his superiors in order to become a corporal but he fails miserably alone. John Andrews, the third character in the novel is the protagonist of te story. His hatred against the superiors and the humiliation to which he is exposed are constantly rendered from beginning to end. He is an intellectual, a man governed by reason, therefore, one might expect Chrisfield and Fusilli to fail since they are dominated by emotions but in the case of Andrews the situation is different; he is supposed to succeed, to escape the nightmare triumphantly. Having a mind that allows him to escape the soldier's condition whenever he feels like he doesn't suffer at the beginning, on the contrary, he takes it cheerfully. But "the petty tyranny of the discipline imposed by officers wears his nerves […] He is wounded, held in routine after the armistice, released for the paradise of school training in Paris, caught on leave without absence and thrown into the labor gang."[4] . His will, his temper, his individuality are crushed by the army discipline.

In conclusion, we may say that there are two main visions of war: on the one hand there is the perspective of the soldier who takes part effectively in the conflict while on the other hand there is the perspective of the commanding officer who witnesses the war indirectly. In Dos Passos' novel "Three Soldiers" we deal mainly with the soldier's view of war and authorities. However, although the book is a harsh critique of the discipline imposed by officers and clerics, it is worth mentioning that Dos Passos' intention was not to raise against discipline (which is essential in the army) but against war and the poorly trained superiors who applied discipline to "men not made to be soldiers".

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[1] Dos Passos, John, *Three Soldiers*, Signet Classic, New York, 1997, p. 21
[2] Ibid., p. 149
[3] Nank, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.46
[4] Barry, Maine, *op. cit.*, p. 39

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