

"Can you do us a colorful series on 'Why We Don't Need Government Relief?'"

Herb Kruckman

Airways, Inc. was published in 1928, *The 42nd Parallel* in 1930, and *1919* in 1932. Here, then, are three or four years of comparative clarity. And in those years Dos Passos was close to Communism. At this time he actually believed in something like the Marxian analysis of history, and it worked. He also felt a stronger confidence in the working class. Communism did not make him a novelist, but it made him a better novelist.

What I failed to realize at the time of the publication of *1919* was the extent to which Dos Passos' interest in the Communist Party was a matter of mood. He had not sufficiently overcome his fear of conclusions to make a serious study of Marxism, and he had only partly subdued his passion for aloofness. Little things could—and, as it happened, did—disturb him. He was on the right track, but not much was required to derail him.

In the four years since he left the track Dos Passos has gone a long and disastrous way. Last summer, as has been said, he came out of Spain with nothing but a question mark, and committed himself to a hysterical isolationism that might almost be called chauvinistic. Last December he and Theodore Dreiser held a conversation that was published in *Direction*. Dos Passos' confusion—equaled, I hasten to say, by Dreiser's—is unpleasant to contemplate for anyone who expects some semblance of intellectual dignity in a prominent novelist. He is still looking for an impartial observer of the Soviet Union, and thinks he has found one in Victor Serge. His new-found devotion to the United States continues to run high: "America is probably the country where the average guy has got a better break." "You can't get anywhere," he says, "in talking to fanatic Communists." He talks about revolution: "A sensible government would take over

industries and compensate the present owners, and then deflate the money afterwards." And this is his contribution to economics: "Every time there is a rise in wages, prices go up at the A. & P."

After one has noted the banality, the naïveté, and the sheer stupidity of most of Dos Passos' remarks in his talk with Dreiser, one knows that politically he is as unreliable as a man can be and is capable of any kind of preposterous vagary. But I am interested in Dos Passos' politics only insofar as they influence his writings, as of course they do. When *1919* appeared, I believed that Dos Passos had established his position as the most talented of American novelists—a position he still holds. As early as 1934, however, I was distressed by his failure to shake off habits of mind that I had thought—quite erroneously, as it turns out—were dissolving under the influence of contact with the revolutionary movement. At that time, reviewing *In All Countries*, I said: "Dos Passos, I believe, is superior to his bourgeois contemporaries because he is, however incompletely, a revolutionist, and shares, however imperfectly, in the vigor of the revolutionary movement, its sense of purpose, its awareness of the meaning of events, and its defiance of bourgeois pessimism and decay. He is also, it seems to me, superior to any other revolutionary writer because of the sensitiveness and the related qualities that are to be found in this book and, much more abundantly, in his novels. Some day, however, we shall have a writer who surpasses Dos Passos, who has all that he has and more. He will not be a camp-follower."

Now that Dos Passos is not in any sense a revolutionist and does not share at all in the vigor of the revolutionary movement, what about the virtues that I attributed to his asso-

ciation with the Communist Party? I am afraid the answer is in *The Big Money*, most of which was written after 1934. One figure dominates *The Big Money* to an extent that no one figure dominated either *The 42nd Parallel* or *1919*. It is Charley Anderson, the symbol of the easy-money Twenties, the working stiff who gets to be a big shot. ("America is probably the country where the average guy has got a better break.") His desperate money-making and drinking and fornicating take place against a background of unhappy rich people and their unhappy parasites. Further in the background are some equally unhappy revolutionists, who are either futile or vicious. ("You can't get anywhere in talking to fanatic Communists.")

It seems to me foolish to pretend that an author doesn't choose his material. Dos Passos didn't have to lay his principal emphasis on the hopeless mess that the capitalist system makes of a good many lives. He didn't have to make his two Communists narrow sectarians. He didn't have to make the strongest personal note in the book a futilitarian elegy for Sacco and Vanzetti. There must have been a good deal in the Twenties that he left out, for large masses of people did learn something from the collapse of the boom, and the Communist Party did get rid of factionalism, and the workers did save Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, even though they failed to save Sacco and Vanzetti. *The Big Money*, in other words, grows out of the same prejudices and misconceptions, the same confusion and blindness, as the conversation with Dreiser.

The difference is, of course, that there is a lot in *The Big Money* besides these faulty notions. I have written elsewhere about Dos Passos' gifts, and I need only say here that I admire them as strongly as ever. I know of no contemporary American work of fiction to set beside *U. S. A.* But I also know that, because of the change in mood that came between *1919* and *The Big Money*, *U. S. A.* is not so true, not so comprehensive, not so strong as it might have been. And, though I have acquired caution enough not to predict Dos Passos' future direction, I know that, if he follows the path he is now on, his claims to greatness are already laid before us and later critics will only have to fill in the details of another story of genius half-fulfilled.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

A Distorted View of Walt Whitman

WALT WHITMAN'S POSE, by Esther Shephard. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$3.75.

MISS SHEPHARD'S argument, in this queerest of all books about Whitman, is that the author of *Leaves of Grass* "learned how to be the poet-prophet of the nineteenth century from suggestions he got from a book, and that, in order to gain a reputation for originality, he thought it necessary to hide the

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source of his inspiration under a guise of 'naturalness' and feigned ignorance." The book that had this extraordinary effect upon the mind of Walt Whitman was George Sand's *Countess of Rudolstadt*, or rather it was not even that book as a whole, but its Epilogue—a passage in which appears, clad in the garments of a herdsman or a laborer, the figure of a kind of poet-prophet or answerer. This personage gives expression to some of the transcendental and humanitarian sentiments that one finds, not always in a very different guise, in the chants of *Leaves of Grass*. Transformed from the commonplace journalist he had been before reading this passage, Whitman set himself to the task of composing and offering to the world a great Poem of Humanity in which he himself should falsely appear as the Trismegistus of George Sand's eloquent Epilogue.

It was not part of his program, however, Miss Shephard argues, to admit his vital indebtedness to the Frenchwoman, and in fact Whitman "spent the rest of his life concealing the source of his inspiration" in a manner that presents him to us as "a small man, willing to prostitute his honest feelings for the sake of personal fame," "a poseur, always pretending to be what he was not, posing as a great religious prophet, 'Hebraic and mystic,' uttering Truth but actually being, in his character as seer, merely an artificer carefully concealing his secret sources," "engaged in weaving a web of deceit and subterfuge and perversion."

It does not seem likely that this eccentric view of Whitman's imaginative development, of his powers as a writer, and of his personal character, will gain any very wide acceptance, but since it is just possible that Miss Shephard's "discovery" will be exploited along with other interpretations to discredit Whitman as a poet of democracy, it may be worth while to say how much it amounts to. To do this is to point out that, in one sense, there is a good deal more in the contention than Miss Shephard herself makes of it, and that, in another sense, there is little or nothing in it. There is more in it than she contends because it is so interestingly true that Whitman did read the novels of George Sand—especially the *Countess* and its predecessor *Consuelo*—so eagerly, so repeatedly, and so responsively. The view he found set forth, in those two closely connected books, of the transcendental mission of the arts, of the spiritual role of the artist, and of the Religion of Humanity did certainly affect him deeply. It was, however, the two books together and as a whole that cast this spell over his mind, *Consuelo* at least as much as the *Countess*, and indeed so evidently and unmistakably that one finds literally unintelligible Miss Shephard's remark that *Consuelo* "had no influence on Whitman that would be traceable in *Leaves of Grass*." Yet the Trismegistus of the Epilogue is simply, in his later years, the Albert, Count of Rudolstadt, who has played a leading role throughout the two books, and who has again and again given voice to the kind of views he

recurs to, with perhaps a new exaltation, in that final passage. It is odd, too, that in her search for "sources," Miss Shephard was not struck by a remarkable passage in *Consuelo* that was almost certainly one of the imaginative germs of the "Song of the Open Road."

In another sense, as I say, there is little or nothing in the thesis of this book, and that for the plain reason that, far from concealing in some sinister manner his debt to George Sand, Whitman spoke of her, as it appears, again and again, at least in later life, to such friends as the Gilchists, Kennedy, Harrison Morris, and Traubel, and that on two or three occasions he mentioned her respectfully in print. So, in fact, Miss Shephard herself points out, she could hardly have ignored Whitman's enthusiastic conversations with the Gilchrist family about *Consuelo* as a greater character than any of Shakespeare's heroines, or his remarks to Traubel on the "historic preciousness [of *Consuelo*] to me," or his mention of the book in a very late prose sketch for a magazine as one of his favorites. Miss Shephard makes note of all these facts herself, and as she does so her grandiose conception of Walt Whitman's "pose" evaporates—for the unsuspecting ordinary reader at least—into thin air. Readers of that type will surely feel that there is something a little forced in Miss Shephard's suggestion that the old poet's speaking so frankly about George Sand as he did to Horace Traubel "is a clever trick by which he intends to keep the young man who is to be his 'historian' from ever discovering how great was his debt to this novel." At this pace, pretty much any case whatever can be made out against any poet who ever composed a page of verse.

The book, in short, is a kind of unwitting parody on a tendency that is present in a great deal of "scholarly" writing on such literary questions—the tendency, I mean, to pounce upon some new or apparently new fact or source or connection or what not, and instead of fitting it judiciously into its place in a balanced structure of interpretation, to blow it up to the proportions of a rubber giant in a carnival and insist on its dominating the whole landscape. George Sand was certainly one of the writers who gave Walt Whitman's mind the bent that it increasingly took: it is curious that more has not been made of the point long since. But she was only one, and she affected him as she did only because his sensibility was already prepared for her influence—prepared, after all, primarily, by his own temper, his own particular genius, and also by the whole intellectual climate of his age. If Whitman had not already or concurrently been reading Goethe and Rousseau and Coleridge, Carlyle and Emerson and Margaret Fuller, it is doubtful whether the Epilogue to the *Countess* would have struck his fancy more than momentarily; and, of course, if all those other writers had not been the great characteristic poets of the age, George Sand would not have written the books that we have in *Consuelo* and its sequel. Without *Biographia Literaria* and "The Hero as

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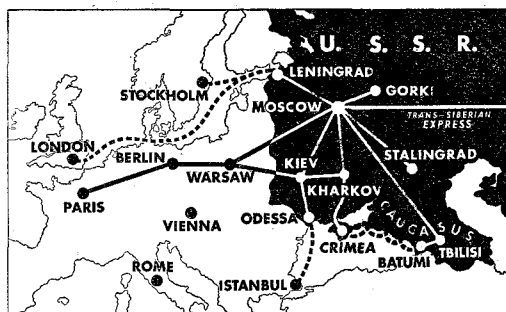
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Poet" and Emerson's essay on "The Poet," the rapt Trismegistus of the Epilogue would have spoken to Whitman in vain—if indeed Trismegistus himself would have been conceived by his creator. All this is the A, B, C of criticism, but like other "elements," it seems to call for occasional restatement.

As for the "pose" of Walt Whitman—well, that is not the simplest matter in the world, and many things would have to be said about it if space served. When one is assured that the poet of the "Song of Myself" and "Drum-Taps" was a conscienceless poseur, one is tempted to fall back upon some weak paraphrase of Lincoln's alleged and hackneyed comment on the whiskey of which General Grant was said to drink so much. Miss Shephard herself is troubled by some confused feeling of this sort. "If *Leaves of Grass* is a great work of art," she says, "it will not matter much in the final appraisal where the inspiration of that work of art came from." She is inclined to believe that some of the poems in that book have a certain power. One could wish that she had dwelt more thoughtfully on this somewhat more fundamental question: if she had done so, it is possible that her startling "discovery" might have seemed less vital than she makes it out to be.

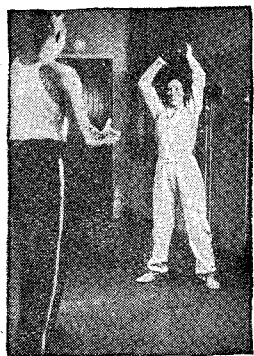
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