

with the undulating landscape, the enormous sky, the column of men and animals. He makes a note: "It's charming never to know exactly what's going on. I was never happier in my life." Arriving in Damascus, he finds awaiting him a packet of reviews on *Three Soldiers*. The novel is acclaimed, a bestseller. But it gives no pleasure. "This wasn't me. I was the nameless traveler who'd been sitting by the campfire with Jassem er Rawwif." He tosses the clippings into a wastebasket.

This is as close as Dos Passos comes in *The Best Times* to give a meaning for his incessant traveling, and one may be excused for thinking this simple polarity between nature and civilization a little sentimental. But *World in a Glass* provides another, and deeper, dimension. For the entire world of Dos Passos' fiction is constantly moving. None of his people sit still except the abject poor—and the motives for their motion convey the most important themes of Dos Passos' novels, the themes that thirty years ago were rightly so significant to Sartre.

The vast restlessness in Dos Passos' novels is a symptom of democratic society. Men are free; therefore they move. Movement is the badge of freedom, and its proof. Dos Passos' novels are about human freedom in our time. Neither bound in body nor in mind, men dream, hope, aspire. What is, no longer suffices; present time, present place, present people, cannot satisfy. They yearn for something better, at least for something different. This is the root of the immense longing that Dos Passos' people feel, a longing toward which Dos Passos creates for his readers so poignant a sense of pathos and understanding.

For his characters are free to run away, and free to run toward, yet never free to stop and stay for long. When Dos Passos' characters arrive at a place it rarely turns out as well as promised, and the old places in retrospect hardly ever seem as bad as they once did. His people are forever leaving at the wrong time, just before important events, and arriving elsewhere just too late. Thus his characters live emotionally in waves, hope turning to despair and suddenly renewing; sourness giving way to pleasure and good feeling; then again sour. Moving on, stopping, and moving on once more; no rest until death.

Freedom is a blessing and a curse, a curse of everlasting desires unfulfilled, dreams of a future that can never match the dream. Dos Passos' novels convey endless pathos without tragedy, eternal yearning without catharsis. He could not conceive a life or a society sufficient to itself; he only became, after *U.S.A.*, in-

creasingly unsympathetic to his restless characters, less and less capable of rendering his story as art. The only possibly satisfying answer stemmed from his experience in the desert, living in the pure present, neither running away nor running toward, but simply moving, without thought. Movement in itself and for itself might provide a controlling form.

Still, whatever the ultimate insufficiency, in three novels—the *U.S.A.* trilogy—Dos Passos created a world as had no other 20th-century novelist, a vast and complex place where average people lived ordinary lives, an image in art of modern society. Though it seems only a mirror reflecting the real world, in truth it is a new world, strange and distant, a world of art. "In capitalist society," Sartre wrote, "men do not have lives, they have only destinies [Dos Passos] never says this, but he makes it felt throughout. He expresses it discreetly, cautiously, until we feel like smashing our destinies. We have become rebels, he has achieved his purpose."

And yet, as Sartre insists, Dos Passos impels the reader to rebel only against the world in the glass, not against his own world. The reader protests against the destinies of Dos Passos' characters, but can find no way to protest against his own. This is a major source of the pathos he makes his readers feel—the recognition that they are as frustrated in freedom as are Dos Passos' characters, that they too are trapped within their destinies, powerless to do anything about it. This does not detract from Dos Passos' achievement as an artist, but it suggests why he was unable to accomplish social objectives through his art, why after *U.S.A.* he turned from fiction toward history.

## The Infection of the World

THE DECLINE OF THE WEST. By David Caute. The Macmillan Company. 616 pp. \$7.95.

### SOL YURICK

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In an effort to preserve economic and moral interests in a conquered world, men are sent to war. In the process, atrocities are committed and expediency is rationalized by the erection of ideologies whose slogans always include words like culture, freedom, dignity. Individual lives are wrecked, people are tortured physically, or internally by the contradiction between ideal sentiment and what is practice in

One way to evaluate Dos Passos for a new generation of readers is to compare him with the young novelist Thomas Pynchon, whose fiction resembles Dos Passos' in curious and instructive ways. Pynchon's *V.* is surprisingly similar to *U.S.A.* in the breadth of its ambition, in its diversity of styles, above all in the restlessness and unfulfilled longing of Pynchon's characters. Moreover, Pynchon has made the image of a world in a glass—a mirror world, a world beneath the surface world, a world *sub rosa*—his central theme. In *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos created a more accomplished work of art than either of Pynchon's novels so far. Yet Pynchon displays an intricate intelligence unlike anything in Dos Passos. The fate of Pynchon's characters may not touch the reader, but his vision of a mirror world, a secret world, is deeply moving.

In the end, for all the apparent political commitment in his fiction, Dos Passos has wanted most of all to be a free and separate self; and his freedom has been as inconclusive as that of all his characters. The excerpts from his fiction in *World in a Glass* provide no view of the century more unified than the reiterated similarity of individual destinies. Pynchon's world in a glass represents instead a social gesture, whatever its lasting value, it opens up for the reader new possibilities for society—a visionary world's challenge to the world in which we live. It comes down, at last, to the nature of the vision. For Dos Passos, the individual; for Pynchon, society—a distinction which separates one novelist from the other, and may also prove the dividing point between the last great generation of artists and seers and the one that may now be emerging.

the world. The administrators of colonialism seem blinded to what they do; probably they commit the most barbarous acts with relish. There is no tragedy or pathos in their behavior; literature has rarely studied them long enough to invent abstract, high-sounding categories. At best, psychology settles for the term "sickness," which would put a Hitler into therapy. The tragedy lies in the fate of the man of good will who is caught up in these currents and who is unable to bring himself to act decisively (for "liberalism" is a political tragic flaw). The hope for a humanistic act of faith, in terms of commitment in the world, is what David Caute's new novel is about. It is a hopeful book and an impressive achievement.

Poets, writers, historians of the grand fictions, have always chosen certain times in history which they have designated as seminal—frozen moments which are decisive, turning points in history. For one generation it was the French Revolution, for another the Russian, for still another it was the Spanish Civil War; today it is Lyndon Johnson's Vietnamese temper tantrum.

For Caute it is the events leading to the birth of the Congo as an independent state. Caute calls his country Coppernica (named for vast copper deposits). What he means is a Copernican revolution, symbolic of a change in Western fortunes; two old worlds, in dialectic confrontation, synthesizing a third world. The original revolution displaced man from the center of the universe; Caute's revolution displaces Western man from the center of the moral universe. His novel may shock some readers (where is the old fiction gone; why are the new writers so morbid, what *personal* fantasies are they working out?) who will prefer to mistake a way of life for a catalogue of aberrations rather than truth.

To sum up the plot is difficult in short space. An African leader arises, Coppernica makes its way to freedom, forces of the West seek to preserve their investments. The revolution is dethroned and, as in the Congo, a leader more amenable to doing business in the old way replaces the revolutionary leaders, the counterrevolution stages atrocities on the *colons* . . . nuns are raped, babies spitted, bureaucrats disemboweled, but the blame is placed on the revolutionary "savages" Mercenaries, hunting down the liberation leaders, range the landscape killing and torturing in the name of a grandiose ideology whose justification is Spengler's great historical fiction.

From this, it begins to be easier to understand Frantz Fanon's fiery, cleansing appeal to destroy the colonizers and the native collaborators with their West-programmed hearts that great hunger for a fiery simplification. Finally, one man, James Caffrey, a kind of alienated liberal who dreams of action, but can, at first, only admire activism in a book (Malraux's *Man's Fate*), a sort of intellectual Mersault, brings himself to act and kill the leader of the *ultras*, Laval. He joins the revolution not of mere black against white—primitive against civilized—but the revolution of the humanists against the enslavers. This is too simple a summation. There are many characters, many scenes, flashing back and forth across time and space.

Caute's method is that of idealistic allusion in the midst of action. Wisely, he understands the plenitude of

motives that goes into decision making. He acknowledges many masters without being imitative or pointlessly eclectic. Every great political, moral and artistic event of the past generation is evoked and shown transformed in relation to this struggle. Characters in their immediate situations echo great catch phrases; a total reassessment is aimed for. And we learn how the need to preserve the best of Western culture can be used as rationalization for the protection of investments. The Bible, the divine right of taste, the primacy of personal urges, Carlylean evolution, Proust, Yeats provide touchstones. These become lenses through which to view the fight to determine which forces will rule Coppernica. In the hands of the inhumane, the humanities become another form of equity "everything is permitted." Mercenaries bomb villages and torture resistance leaders, while quoting Spengler. People's views of themselves constantly change and become a sort of working truth. British investment is condoned by a taste for Renoirs. American pragmatism becomes an expression of density to human sensibility. Good will, pushed to the wall of dividend-loss, fails.

Possibly the best scenes, those expressive of the multiple layers Caute is working, are shown in terms of torture and perversion. These are horribly informative metaphors . . . more real than the reportage he quotes. The body is reduced to produce a fact. The tortured becomes subhuman and the torturer becomes superhuman, but neither remains a man. The mercenaries march through the jungle seeking out the revolutionaries, but in reality hunting for their lost destiny, the destiny of the West. *The Decline of the West* is a novel of ideas, but more important, it is also a work with dramatic thrust, political aphorisms in Caute's hand achieve the dignity of poetry. It is at times a brilliant performance.

There are weaknesses. The central drive of the novel is frequently vitiated by mere psychology. Caute is weak about Americans, both black and white. Carrying indecision as a literary strategy too far, Jason Powell is dissolved and becomes ridiculous. The force of the demoniac in civilization is dissipated by flash-back psychology. This is not to say that men do not have biographies, but the analytical approach is deformed by excessive rationality. It doesn't take account of the social forces, filtered through biography all seems mere personal sickness.

In this way we come to see Laval—at first as dedicated as any Aztec priest and as primeval—explained as a man whose behavior becomes a sum total of the frustrations of youth. Here Caute

did not learn his lesson from Proust well enough. We end up feeling a little sorry for a man like Laval, understanding him, when it is dangerous and soft to do so. Then too, as a technique, biography tends to dissipate the dramatic drive of the novel. But these are minor faults in an ambitious, engrossing, all-encompassing work.

Since this book is addressed to men of good and weak will (the oppressed do not read books, nor do their oppressors), it would seem that Caute has an indoctrinating duty. This is not to say that he should write propaganda, he would thereby lose his audience and create bad art and worse truth. But it is the gripping terror of the word, the scene, the actors, their acts, standing as dramatic facts, that must convince, telling all. Fiction can convince; sociology and history do not seem to. Fiction can place one as participant and sufferer in this horror—the deliberate killing of nations of people. Tallies of facts do not involve the reader; they even lull, convincing us that this is the way things are. How many people these days have not tired of hearing about the 6 million—what has it to do with them?

And how are we to be convinced that out of the torture of Africans, out of their crucifixions, a new consciousness, a new moral center, should arise? Short of being tortured ourselves, the involvement fiction offers can do that magician's trick. To be sure, individual schizophrenia mirrors the multiple and contradictory splits of the world, but the burden of the infection is on the world, not on the individual. The cure lies in political involvement, not on an analyst's couch. Rage should mount, not be assuaged by the technique of calling it sickness.

This book has to be read; it is that exciting and important.



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