A HUMBLE PROTEST
A LITERARY GENERATION’S QUEST FOR THE HEROIC SELF, 1917 – 1930

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

Through the life and works of novelist John Dos Passos this project reexamines the inter-war cultural phenomenon that we call the Lost Generation. The Great War had destroyed traditional models of heroism for twenties intellectuals such as Ernest Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Dos Passos, compelling them to create a new understanding of what I call the “heroic self.” Through a modernist, experience based, epistemology these writers deemed that the relationship between the heroic individual and the world consisted of a dialectical tension between irony and romance. The ironic interpretation, the view that the world is an antagonistic force out to suppress individual vitality, drove these intellectuals to adopt the Freudian conception of heroism as a revolt against social oppression. The Lost Generation rebelled against these pernicious forces which they believed existed in the forms of militarism, patriotism, progressivism, and absolutism. The Lost Generation also viewed the world romantically, as an opportunity for the individual to immerse herself into immediate, self-creating experience. By interpreting William James’s radical empiricism as
a mandate to experience the world, these writers completed their understanding of the heroic self as the individual, who, according to Dos Passos, is free to thrive upon a “threshold of a new world of experience, of reckless abandoned adventure.” As a result, the Lost Generation’s quest for the heroic self culminated in the celebration of the individual as both a hero of revolt and the exemplar of the flourishing life.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On January 6th, 1918, nineteen-year-old volunteer ambulance driver Malcolm Cowley published his first writing concerning the effects that the war had upon soldiers like himself. Cowley’s introduction to combatant life consisted of rummaging through the trenches that had been evacuated by Hindenburg after the German retreat in the spring of 1917. Cowley and friends not only found wine bottles and cooking utensils, but “shells still piled in the storehouses, rusty bayonets scattered along the path, clips of shells, signboards and a cemetery growing with flowers.” When Cowley was about to enter another German trench further on, a French corporal commanded him to halt. The trenches were still possibly booby-trapped, a lesson the French had learned the hard way until they “began to use prisoners for the work of trench cleaning.” In explaining this scenario, Cowley granted his American audience the requisite anti-German propaganda it wanted to hear. Missing the irony of his own martial inclinations, Cowley declared, pejoratively, that it was the Germans who regarded the war as “a normal state of affairs.” As proof, Cowley pointed out the empty German trenches that contained “solid, permanent, comfortable” structures, which expressed the “permanency of the German
occupation.” There was nothing makeshift, and it appeared to the young ambulance drive that “the invaders had set about the Prussianization of the country because they were determined for “the annihilation of everything French.” Cowley stumbled upon a makeshift grave, which, in his mind, reinforced the German concept of war. The marker read references to “Kaiser, God and Fatherland,” but even more remarkable was its construction entirely out of materials from a French cemetery, making it “in other words, typically German.”

When the volunteer ambulance drivers exhausted their curiosity of the trenches they wandered around a French village, which “Like all French villages in that region,” consisted of mere “outlines of walls and heaps of crumbling stone.” In contrast to the war-mad Germans, Cowley remarked, the French endured the oppressive hardships of the war “without great effort to lighten them.” Cowley believed that such resignation would eventually overcome all enemies, even if the French lost this particular war. “And it seemed to me suddenly,” he exclaimed, “that even if the invader did succeed in destroying every vestige of past civilization in the country and killed every human being they would hardly succeed in their work of Germanization.” No matter how transformational the war was upon the French landscape, in the end “the land itself would conquer them, just as it had conquered Celts and Romans, Franks and Northmen in past centuries, making them over into its own spirit.” Cowley posited that the French commitment to the strength and vitality of its own history and culture fortified its

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resignation into a dynamic resilience. There were no appeals to heroism, Cowley declared. The French fought to “end war for good.” There are “no militarists over here.”

Novelist John Dos Passos also noticed the striking attitude of the French toward the war. He wrote in his journal that the “marvelous part of the French is how unheroic they are.” The French, he believed had resigned themselves to a despair that was “absolutely Greek in its calm beauty.” Paying particular attention to the French priests who wandered about during “shell fire,” he lauded their conduct that was “never a bit preachy, always quiet and absent minded and mildly amused – They make things go marvelously smoothly & well.” Instead the French soldier does not “talk hypocritical bosh about the beauty & manliness of war: they feel in their souls that if they weren’t cowards they would have ended the thing long ago – by going home, where they want to be.”

Dos Passos regarded the Americans differently. Americans were motivated by personal heroics. Highlighting the calm resignation of the French priests’ attitude toward the war Dos Passos finished a diary entry with a facetious imperative to himself to “imagine a troop of heroic American clergymen in their place.”

Neither did Cowley apply his praise of the French resigned resilience to his homeland. Along with Dos Passos he believed that Americans did not fight as the Germans did, from an aggressive

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3 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 95, 98.

4 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 95.
nature, nor as the French for national survival. Americans were much more interested in individual heroics, and as a result claimed to fight “for personal liberty.”

The Lost Generation intellectuals initially shared American society’s objective of liberty, but actual experience of the war quickly disabused them of such a romantic interpretation. The war created a common experience and a common narrative, and we cannot overemphasize the importance of the war for providing historical unity among the Lost Generation writers as they sought to interpret during the nineteen twenties. This project uses the war as its starting point the Lost Generation’s belief that, according to Hemingway, the war created a historical context in which “all the heroes are dead.” This belief engendered a new way of looking at the world and the notion of the heroic individual. As a result, this dissertation is an intellectual history of the nineteen-twenties’ writers whose art reflected a worldview that attempted to address and counter the effects of the war upon postwar American society, and how they sought to find new models to uphold the integrity of the heroic individual. With this understanding of postwar society, this dissertation will argue that the impetus behind the Lost Generation’s literary production from 1917 to 1930 was the search for what I call the heroic self. These writers conceived the heroic self as an individual who has become a personage, someone who has set his or herself apart from the rest of society by demonstrating the supreme value of his or her individuality. Working with this understanding of the individual, I will show that these writers understood the characteristics of the heroic self to be that person who rebelled against the conventional model of heroism defined by the war hero, who rejected

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the social convention of postwar patriotism, who dismissed the historical optimism that was prominent in the progressive era, and as someone who celebrated life through immediate experience.

Who Are the Lost Generation Writers?

Before outlining the modes of heroism that the chapters of this dissertation address, it is important to define the group of writers that we are going to discuss. The post-WWI group of intellectuals is most commonly referred to as the Lost Generation writers, and the primary figure of our observation is the novelist John Dos Passos. Along with Dos Passos we shall also look at his circle of friends, which included two novelists Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, two literary critics Malcolm Cowley and Edmund Wilson, and two poets E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane. The diverse genres of this literary group allow us a broad analysis of the ideas that these writers worked with and the new ideas that they generated.

As a result, the importance of these writers in intellectual history, as well as in social, cultural, literary, and modernist studies has accounted for a large cadre of scholars, including many Lost Generation members, to try to codify the defining characteristics of this dynamic group.7 Malcolm Cowley, one of the key architects and analysts of the Lost Generation spilled quite a bit of ink beginning in the mid-nineteen

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7 Marc Dolan’s 1997 Modern Lives provides a brief history of this discourse.
twenties trying to define what determined a writer to be of the Lost Generation. He developed a theory of literary generations, believing that, except for a few anomalies, writers were born in clusters, which he outlined in *And I worked at the Writer’s Trade*. Working backward from America’s entry into the Great War in 1917, Cowley considered the Lost Generation a select group, primarily because its members were born between 1894 and 1900. These writers were at the right age to experience the war firsthand, and came to artistic and intellectual maturity in the years after the armistice. In a very real and dramatic sense, Cowley posited, the war created the Lost Generation, and it played out as a leitmotif in its literary repertoire more than other writers of the era. Even for those writers who did not experience the war firsthand, such as Fitzgerald or Crane, the Lost Generation’s literary emphasis on the war’s social and cultural impact was distinct.

Socially, Cowley maintained, the Lost Generation writers were college educated. Many left college to see the action of war, or had just graduated in time to do so. As a result, they maintained a combination of youthful exuberance and intellectual hubris that colored their vision of the war. While in school many of the writers developed their artistic sensibilities and critical skills, writing for monthly literary periodicals, local newspapers, and of course for their professors. From this academic environment these budding artists developed an artistic culture, according to Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*, in which they maintained a religious commitment to “art for art’s sake.” Such a culture demanded that they had to be committed, not just to art, but to the production and critique of the modern art of the avant-garde. In order to do this Lost Generation writers lived in exile for at least part of the postwar decade. Whether it was France, Germany, England, the Middle East, or Mexico, traveling abroad was necessary in order to refine one’s art
and one’s perspective of America. And above all, an unspoken criterion for Lost
Generation status was that one had to be good at one’s craft. At one point in the late
twenties over thirty thousand would-be artists and writers were in Europe, but the
mediocre talent of most of them precluded them from true Lost Generation membership.8

Defining the Lost Generation has been difficult. Cowley’s criteria set the
parameters for the social and artistic requirements, but not the intellectual requirements
for the group. Twenties historians and literary critics alike have treated the Lost
Generation the same way, having been attracted to the society and culture that created the
group. As a result they have treated the group more as a literary or social phenomenon;
they have not addressed the Lost Generation as a distinct intellectual phenomenon with a
particular vision of the world. We cannot fault these commendable studies such as
Warren Susman’s *Culture as History*, Nathan Millers *New World Coming*, or Ellis
Hawley’s coverage of the Lost Generation in *The Great War and the Search for Modern
Order*, because neither their objective nor scope meant to provide exhaustive treatment of
the Lost Generation’s intellectual growth. The intellectual histories of the nineteen
twenties, such as Ann Douglas’s *Terrible Honesty*, and Lynn Dumenil’s *The Modern
Temper* admirably integrate the twenties intellectuals into their social and historical
context, but again, these scholars approach the Lost Generation from a twenties

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8 We must keep in mind that Cowley’s criteria were not hard and fast rules, but instead were offered as a
categorizing of shared experiences that unified a particular group of writers. Not all Lost Generation writers
fit the criteria. Of the six writers that we will discuss along with Dos Passos, there were exceptions to the
rule. Hemingway and Crane never went to college, and Fitzgerald was forced to drop out of Princeton after
two years. Fitzgerald and Crane never went to war. The war ended just before Fitzgerald was set to go, and
he never got over it. Crane went to sign up late in 1918, but decided at the last minute against it. And all the
writers confronted various problems of expatriate life. Dos Passos decried the cult gatherings of bohemians
in Montparnasse. Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda had little patience for French life, preferring the quick-
paced American social life instead. Of the writers discussed, Hemingway was the only one who made life
perspective rather than visa versa. The numerous treatments that cover the expatriate life of the these writers, such as Noel Riley Fitch’s *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation*, Humphrey Carpenter’s *Genius’s Together*, and James Mellow’s *Charmed Circle* provide excellent coverage of the Lost Generation’s ventures over seas, but treat its experiences biographically rather than thematically. The bulk of the work on the Lost Generation has been tackled by literary scholars, and it does consist largely of biography. These studies are invaluable, but by its nature the genre makes integrative analysis of the Lost Generation as a group more difficult. There is a need to understand the twenties through the intellectual life of those who helped to interpret the twenties to their contemporaries as well as to subsequent generations. My project seeks to address this need.

In defining the Lost Generation, these other notable works have targeted any combination of three categories for definition: the group’s sense of being lost, its hedonism, and its expatriate life. Although definitions that fall under these categories are necessary, they are insufficient because they do not target the root of what made this generation write and interact with the world in the way that it did. As of yet, no one has framed the Lost Generation writers’ experience in terms of how they tried to understand their world.

Therefore, I suggest that the Lost Generation should be understood as a group of artists who were primarily concerned with creating a world in which the individual is free to experience that world and to express that experience through his or her art. This definition emphasizes the agenda of the Lost Generation writers – the desire to create a

in Europe more than a vacation stopover, living a number of years in Paris with the intent of perfecting his writing.
new world – while retaining its emphasis on the greatness of the individual and his or her ability to find immediate experience in the world. This definition also encompasses the traditional three categories: the denial of freedom created these intellectuals’ deep sense of being lost; the drive for immediate experience engendered their hedonism; the need for experience and a desire to create an art form commensurate with that experience drove them overseas.

Why the Lost Generation?

This fuller understanding of the Lost Generation demands a different approach to this group of writers. There are certainly notable works from historians who have specifically targeted the Lost Generation and broadened our understanding of the group such as Paula Fass’s *The Damned And Beautiful*, and Roderick Nash’s *The Nervous Generation*. These commendable works place the Lost Generation within the context of the nineteen twenties, but they emphasize the social rather than the intellectual history. Frederick Hoffman’s 1949 *The 1920’s* still remains a standard intellectual history of the Lost Generation and the postwar decade but it is dated. Its age does not speak to its irrelevancy, but to the need for a fresh look at a generation that has done so much to shape American modernism.

Secondly, from a perspective of American intellectual history, the best studies have traditionally covered figures whose intellectual maturation reached its peak before the Lost Generation writers came of age. One thinks of Casey Blake’s *Beloved*
Community, James Kloppenbergs’s Uncertain Victory, Louis Menand’s The Metaphysical Club, and Bruce Kuklick’s Rise of American Philosophy. The intellectual growth of the Young Americans, the via media intellectuals, the founders of pragmatism, and Harvard’s philosophy department all had lasting effects upon the Lost Generation writers. But the subjects of these fine works predate the nineteen twenties. One must acknowledge the need for a similar analysis of the twenties in Kloppenberg’s anecdotal charge for someone to follow his Uncertain Victory, which ends by 1920, with a book entitled Certain Defeat. I am not rising to Dr. Kloppenberg’s challenge, but his comments do set into relief a gap in the coverage of nineteen-twenties intellectual history. As far as intellectual history goes, the twenties is that great trough between the swells of progressive pragmatism and the depression era social awareness. This project seeks to fill that trough. With that said, we can acknowledge that as a subject of historical inquiry, the Lost Generation may be well-trodden terrain, but from the perspective of intellectual history it is a road less traveled, and from the vantage point of the groups vision of the world it is the road not taken.

Synopsis

The Lost Generation maintained a worldview that was receptive to the variegation of worldly experience. As a result, these encounters of the world manipulated the group’s moods, motives, and persuasions, resulting in an often erratic, unsystematic development of the ideas that drove its art. As a result, I have chosen to approach the study of this
fascinating group of writers synchronically by organizing it into five separate but interrelated essays on how these writers’ understanding of the heroic self came to be defined in various historical circumstances between the years of 1917 – 1930.

The objective of the first chapter, An American Phenomenon, is to place Dos Passos and his fellow writers within the historical and intellectual context of the post war period and to demonstrate the special nature of Dos Passos’s thought. I begin with a look at Dos Passos’s distinctiveness by outlining his penchant for social criticism. Then with a brief overview of Dos Passos’s life, I will trace his intellectual journey up to the writing of the USA Trilogy, which earned him his place in literary history. I will then discuss Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of Dos Passos in order to place he and other Lost Generation writers as modernist writers and argue that they maintained a dialectical vision of the world that vacillated between romance and irony.

The purpose of the second chapter, The Death and Birth of the Hero is to show the Lost Generation’s attempt to construct a new way of understanding the heroic self in the wake of World War I. We begin with the decline of the traditional conception of heroism, understood as the martial ideal, in the late nineteenth century due to urbanization and commercialism. Robert Weibe’s The Search for Order is one of a number of works to remind us that around the time of Frederick Jackson Turner announced that the frontier had closed, America’s identity was being shaped by urban and industrial forces. The resulting social condition disheartened intellectuals like the Waldo Frank and the Young Americas, argues Casey Blake in Beloved Community, because conventional notions of the heroic self were rendered obsolete.

Kloppenberg suggested this at a talk at the Ohio State University.
Intellectuals like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Theodore Roosevelt sought to revive the martial ideal, and as David Blight argues in *Race and Reunion*, they were prompted by a positive memory of the Civil War because white America, at the expense of the freed slaves, had successfully preserved the nation. Other intellectuals such as painter Thomas Eakins and philosopher William James tried to provide alternate models of heroism that emphasized the heroic acts of everyday life. James posited a “moral equivalent to war” model, which sought to provide a warrior-like sense of heroism to a society, says intellectual historian George Cotkin, that had succumbed to social ennui. James feared that if apathy and restlessness were allowed to take root in American society it would look to the pernicious martial ideal to satiate its heroic desires.

Not only was the martial ideal under attack, biological determinism, which maintained that human acts cannot be heroic because they are mere responses to biological stimuli, threatened to make all modes of heroism meaningless. William James and Sigmund Freud challenged biology’s threat to the heroic individual but the their worst fears became reality when the western nations were sucked into the vortex of war. Biological determinism was far from innocuous, manifesting itself socially in the pressure to conform to national militarism, a pressure to which the Lost Generation initially succumbed. But Dos Passos and friends quickly became appalled by what they deemed a senseless fight in which there could not possibly be any heroes. Seeking an alternative to the martial ideal, the Lost Generation writers turned to psychoanalysis, one of the most potent intellectual forces in America, to provide a heroic model that could be applied to the exigencies of war. Psychoanalyst Otto Rank’s *Myth of the Birth of the Hero* offered an alternative model of heroism, defined by revolt against tyranny, that the Lost
Generation could apply to their experience of war. By 1917, the tyranny in America was the very militarism of which these writers had been a part. The Lost Generation writers knew experientially, what military historians John Keegan and John Meuller in *A History of Warfare* and *Remnants of War* discovered historically. The heroic conceptions of war can quickly become unfashionable because war is a social construction in which even the winners become losers. As a result, the Lost Generation writers translated their revolt against militarism into various forms of pacifism that had been espoused by William James, Bertrand Russell, and Lowes Dickinson.

Revolt against social tyranny had its consequences, however. It contributed to the Lost Generation’s sense of “lostness.”¹⁰ Many discussions of the Lost Generation have mentioned, often in passing, that the Lost Generation became lost because of the war and its postwar disillusionment. This assessment is certainly true, but the paucity of analysis concerning the specifics of the war’s effect, and just what that disillusionment entailed demands our attention. The first part of chapter two, *The Celebration of Discontent* argues that three factors contributed to the Lost Generation’s lostness: a deep sense of personal futility, an altered conception of the self, and the insignificance of the heroic individual. The Lost Generation chronicled these convictions in its war novels, such as William Faulkner’s *Soldier’s Pay*, William March’s *Company K*, Thomas Boyd’s *Through the Wheat*, Laurence Stallings’ *Plumes*, and John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*.

The existential effect of the war was only part of the Lost Generation’s disillusionment, however. The American postwar literature takes into account the deep

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¹⁰ I use the term “lostness” from here on out to denote a state of being, and not just a descriptive device for the twenties literary generation.
sense of irony described by Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*. The irony, that war is never what one initially expects, not only expresses the Lost Generation’s reaction to the war, but a society’s commitment to celebrate patriotically a war in spite of its disillusionment. That society was also disillusioned has been well established by many historians since Henry May’s 1959, *The End of American Innocence*. David Kennedy in, *Over Here*, provides a plausible explanation, by arguing that America’s governmental institutions worked overtime to convince the American people that the war was not only a necessary evil, but also a positive good. Postwar America’s unwillingness to confront institutional dishonesty, a circumstance revealed by Grand Rapids, Michigan’s failure to adequately memorialize its war heroes, was repugnant to the “terrible honesty” of the Lost Generation. Along with the war, this national denial contributed to the Lost Generation’s disillusionment and social alienation, i.e. its sense of being lost. These writers responded by rejecting America’s postwar patriotic fervor.

Finally, the nation’s intellectual dishonesty convinced the Lost Generation that freedom of thought, a democratic ideal that America supposedly cherished, was in fact a ruse. Eric Foner’s *The Story of American Freedom* argues that America’s governing institutions were able to suppress effectively dissenting views, and maintain the chimera of hope and progress that characterized prewar America. The suppression of free thought completed the Lost Generation’s sense of lostness. The Lost Generation reaction was a deep antipathy, expressed in its literature, toward an institutional America responsible for the war and postwar dishonesty.
Identifying America’s dishonest response to the war caused the Lost Generation to reject the historical optimism that had interpreted the war so auspiciously. Chapter three, *A Romantic Nihilism* begins by assessing the prewar optimism that the Lost Generation encountered, primarily through its organ of choice, the *New Republic*. Under the literary tutelage of the founding editors Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, and Walter Lippmann, the young college-aged writers received a healthy dose of pragmatism’s social application. Concerning the war, however, the Lost Generation sided with antiwar intellectuals like Randolph Bourne rather than the progressivist John Dewey, for the main reason, outlined by John Diggin’s in *The Promise of Pragmatism*, that pragmatism was substantively insufficient to provide a meaningful explanation of the war. In turn the Lost Generation repudiated not only progressive optimism about the war but progressivism’s optimistic historicism. The resulting battle that ensued in such intellectual journals as *Vanity Fair*, *Bookman*, and *Dial* over the course of the nineteen twenties, signaled the Lost Generation’s separation from its intellectual predecessors’ optimistic historical consciousness that, according to Dorothy Ross’s article “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” dominated American prewar thought.

In rejecting the optimism of its progressive counterparts, the Lost Generation accepted a vision of western society advocated by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. These intellectuals agreed that America was bereft of intellectual culture, an analysis corroborated by one of the Lost Generations’ intellectual heroes, journalist H. L. Mencken. In response to Spengler’s and Mencken’s historical pessimism, the Lost Generation developed a historical consciousness that was characterized by poet Wyndam Lewis as Romantic Nihilism; a consciousness that encompassed both English
Romanticism’s cyclical view of history, exemplified by Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and a callousness toward life of its own making. A particular examination of Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* reveals that the Lost Generation embraced a historical consciousness that envisioned a social decay which was exemplified by the oppression of the individual.

We cannot leave the Lost Generation with such a negative state of mind, however. For such an ironic, Sancho-like, end to the Lost Generation experience fails to take into account the redemptive hope the Lost Generation found in the spirit of Don Quixote. The Quixote spirit was exemplified by the Lost Generation’s application of William James’s radical empiricism to individual experience, the hero worship of the romantic other, and in the spirit of newness that America herself provided.

Chapter four, *A Vital Encounter* enters a discourse already well in progress concerning intellectual trends that most affected the Lost Generation. The brief coverage in this chapter sets the stage for the Lost Generation’s application of these currents. The chapter begins by demonstrating the Lost Generation’s rejection of Hegelian absolutism for the individual vitalism promulgated by both William James and Freidrich Nietzsche. The decline of absolutism and the rise of Jamesian pragmatism in the first decades of the twentieth century have been sufficiently addressed by Bruce Kuklick’s *The Rise of American Philosophy*, James Kloppenberg’s *Uncertain Victory*, and Jeffrey Brown’s dissertation *Vitalism and the Modernist Search for Meaning*. Nietzsche’s introduction to America came primarily through H. L. Mencken, and Nietzsche’s influence on early twentieth-century American thought has been established by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen’s dissertation *Neither Rock nor Refuge*, and Michael Drimmer’s still
valuable 1965 dissertation *Nietzsche in American Thought*. The Lost Generation intellectuals’ application of both James’s and Nietzsche’s experientially based morality allowed these writers to find in themselves the expression of the heroic self after which they sought.

The Lost Generation discovered a context for the heroic self in the romantic other, which for them consisted of pre-industrial environments in which a person could freely express his or her individuality. For Dos Passos and Hemingway this country was Spain, but for others, such as poet William Carlos Williams it was America’s pre-industrial past. Although Jackson Lears in *No Place for Grace*, and Casey Blake in *Beloved Community* apply the drive for the romantic ideal to prewar intellectuals, and define it differently – for Lears it is premodern society, for Blake the genteel feminine ideal – the Lost Generation intellectuals did not deviate from the path set for them.

Finally, this chapter will demonstrate that for all of its criticism of America, the Lost Generation never considered America anything but its home. This was in part because America offered constant newness and excitement on a level that attracted European artists, as seen in Irene Gammel’s *Baroness Elsa*, and Francis Naumann’s *New York Dada*. In these intellectual, historical, and social forces the Lost Generation found its heroic self and its redemption.

**Conclusion**

I have titled this project, *A Humble Protest: A Literary Generation’s Quest for a Heroic Self, 1917-1930*. The “Humble Protest” is taken from one of Dos Passos’s
*Harvard Monthly* articles in which he contrasts the individual’s romantic ability “to fathom and to create,” with the need to shout out the ironic “discontent among us.” Both of these themes permeated the minds, acts, and arts of the Lost Generation writers and defined the Lost Generation’s vision. As a result, this dissertation is an intellectual history of a literary generation that created a distinct form of American modernism. Instead of trying to define modernism for all American people or epochs, or trying to determine whether the American experience should be understood as a single modernism or multiple modernisms, this project seeks to provide an understanding of modernism that certainly includes a wide array of people, time periods, media, and techniques, but that is first and foremost an epistemological view of the world that shaped the way a post World War I literary generation interpreted that world.
In 1938, the Lost Generation writer John Dos Passos was at the height of his career. He had just published the final volume of the *USA Trilogy, The Big Money*, and was basking in the glow of the Trilogy’s critical success. He was just as, if not more popular, than his already canonized friends F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, and was endeared by the Russians and American leftists alike. It was during this year the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre read Dos Passos’s second volume of the *USA Trilogy, 1919* and in a 1938 essay *John Dos Passos and 1919* declared Dos Passos to be the “greatest writer of our time.” This chapter will demonstrate what set John Dos Passos apart from his contemporaries. I will begin by introducing John Dos Passos with a biographical sketch that outlines those intellectual currents that were important to him and shaped his thinking. Then I will discuss Sartre’s analysis of Dos Passos, in which I will argue that Dos Passos and other Lost Generations writers were modernists who maintained a phenomenological vision of the world that was characterized by a dialectic between romance and irony.
One cannot deny, even after reading just his novels, that John Dos Passos possessed great talent. Ernest Hemingway understood well the magnitude of Dos Passos’s ability, confessing to Scott Fitzgerald in 1928 that he “sometimes envies Mr. Dos Passos.” He admitted his admiration directly to Dos Passos in 1932, declaring to his friend, “You can write so damned well it spooks me.”

But talent was not unique amongst the group of writers who make up the Lost Generation. Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, E. E. Cummings, and Hart Crane were artists whose talents separated them from a host of other writers during the nineteen twenties, and each one provided a unique perspective of the world through their art. Fitzgerald depicted their youthful generation within the context of the twenties freewheeling atmosphere of opulence and “10,000 parties.” Hemingway portrayed the mood of the Lost Generation by focusing upon the wandering ennui of his characters. Cowley’s and Wilson’s literary perceptions set them apart as leading literary critics who were able to increase the critical value of the new twenties’ literature. Finally, the two poets, E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane applied the tastes of modernist poetic technique, demonstrating the Lost Generation’s break from the old and its creative response to the artistic new. All of these artists overlapped their interests. They all wrote poetry, prose, literary and social criticism, and they all worshipped at the

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religious altar of “art for art’s sake.\footnote{Cowley, Exiles Return, A Literary Odyssey of the 1920’s (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 102.} Each one clearly had their thematic penchants and preferred media by which to express their ideas. All of them were talented.

But Dos Passos was unique. What separated him from these other Lost Generation artists was the use of his talent to harmonize avant-garde techniques and philosophy with the exigencies of postwar society in ways that his contemporaries did not. This is not necessarily a matter of qualitative superiority on Dos Passos’s part, but rather one of thematic emphasis.

First, in ways more obvious than his literary friends had done, Dos Passos worked out his epistemology in his novels. \textit{Three Soldiers, Manhattan Transfer}, and \textit{USA} all explore human consciousness and the variegated nature of human experience and how it affects one’s interpretation of the world. \textit{Streets of Night’s} entire thematic structure is built around Jamesian epistemology. Secondly, Dos Passos was consumed by the diminished role of the heroic individual in postwar society. One cannot hesitate to argue that all of his novels, from \textit{One Man’s Initiation} to the \textit{USA Trilogy} are built upon the foundation of either the individual’s strength, or the suppression of that strength by America’s institutional infrastructure. Thirdly, Dos Passos was far from alone in being affected by the war, but he was the most sensitive to its consequences, a condition that Hemingway long maintained was a weakness in his talented friend.\footnote{Cowley, Exiles Return, A Literary Odyssey of the 1920’s (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 102.} Certainly, the writers who experienced the war firsthand never got it out of their systems, but while Malcolm Cowley struggled just to become anti war, and Hemingway and Cummings found in it an opportunity to demonstrate their own brand of heroic bravado, Dos Passos

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\footnote{Cowley, Exiles Return, A Literary Odyssey of the 1920’s (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 102.}
could not shake the haunting reality that it was just an institutional execution of millions of individuals. Finally, Dos Passos was brutally honest about his place in society. Where Hemingway masked his character foibles under a veneer of masculinity, Fitzgerald and Crane under the guise playboy alcoholics, and Wilson and Cummings under label of sexual experimentation, Dos Passos openly expressed his fears and frustrations with an authenticity not equaled by his contemporaries. Let us briefly look at Dos Passos’s life in order to see how he developed as a person and a writer.

John Roderigo Madison was born on January 14th, 1896, to Lucy Madison, the mistress of John R. Dos Passos. Mr. Dos Passos did not adopt his son until 1908, when, as a widower he felt free to marry the mother of his son. It was at this point that the youngster took his father’s last name to become Dos Passos Jr. This awkward circumstance was directly responsible for the rootless, cosmopolitan life that began from his first year of existence. Dos Passos was born in Chicago, sharing Midwestern origins with his friends Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Sherwood Anderson, but at just a year old, his mother moved him to Brussels where she could be near friends yet apart from any gossip she might have to hear about her illegitimate son.

These years in Belgium immersed the youngster into the French language, an education that sparked him to become “mad about” languages, and spurred him to learn Greek, Latin, Spanish, and German by the time he was twenty-five. But Lucy and her five-year-old son left Brussels in 1901 in order to be nearer to the child’s father. After just a year in Washington D.C., she and Dos Passos Sr. decided they wanted the young Dos Passos to be educated in England. Mother and son moved to London in 1902 and

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13 Stephen Koch, The Breaking Point, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of Jose Robles (New York:
remained there until 1906. At the age of ten, young Dos Passos put his foot down, telling his parents that he wanted to finish his education in America, which accommodated his mother’s desire to once again be near his father. After another year in Washington D.C., Dos Passos spent his remaining four years of secondary education at the Choate School in Wallingford Connecticut, where he graduated early because of his precocious intellect.

Dos Passos passed his entrance examinations to enter Harvard in the fall of 1911, but Dos Passos Sr. believed that his fifteen-year-old son should see more of the world before confining himself to an institution of higher education for four years. On a sailboat with a young Dominican seminarian, Dos Passos sailed to England, France and through the Mediterranean, where he spent considerable time in Egypt, Greece, and Italy between November 1911 and March 1912. Not only did these experiences remain indelibly imprinted upon the young writer’s consciousness, they became the primary impetus for his catching the “travel bug” from which he never recovered.14

The journey marked the beginning of what Dos Passos considered to be his “real” education apart from school, which he demonstrated in many of the stories that he wrote for the Harvard Monthly during his college years. He opens “Les Lauriers Sont Coupés,” a story aroused by his 1912 revisit to Brussels, with “A dim halo, a pale intense light hangs about your childhood memories, suffusing them with strange beauty.” Detailing these memories, he writes that the “hissing of white clouds of steam and the corpse-like glare of arc-lamps shrouded in smoke, bring back inevitably my first exultant awe and wonder at the swiftness of trains and the hugeness of crowds.” The memories became

Counterpoint, 2005), 159.

14 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 24
vivid romantic excursions, as he watched the Belgian trains come and go from the station. He declared that compared to the recollections of his memory, “no one has sufficiently expressed the romance and mystery of trains at night.”

In the fall of 1912 Dos Passos matriculated at Harvard. During this time his sickly mother passed away, an event that pushed the young student closer to his father, a familial relationship that typically had been formal. He spent the majority of his Harvard years writing for the *Monthly* and immersing himself in the latest European and American literature, confessing that he often fell behind in his required schoolwork. But he received a broad education in the humanities. It had not been many years since Harvard’s curricula had been modified by former president Charles Eliot to encompass a liberal arts approach, which meant that one was required to take a broad range of courses to obtain one’s degree. Dos Passos concentrated the bulk of his course work European literature and art, and he majored in philosophy, with an emphasis in classical Greek studies.

Harvard also helped to introduce Dos Passos to modern art. He most likely did not visit the 1913 International Exhibit of Modern Art at New York City’s 69th Street Armory, but he did see it at the April 28th through May 19th showing at Boston’s Copley Hall where, because of limited space, all the American and some of the European painters were excluded, leaving 244 modernist paintings for the seventeen-year-old Dos Passos to absorb. He admitted later that he did not remember most of the painters or their works, except Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, but he did recall the exhibit having a

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profound effect upon him; the art was innovative and modern in a way that he and his artistic friends would come to define modern.\textsuperscript{16}

He regarded 1916, however, his senior year at Harvard, as the year that he really discovered what modern art would mean for him. He recalled that his friend Edward Nagel, a Harvard art major and stepson of prominent sculptor Gaston Lachaise, “infected both Cummings and me with the excitements and the experiments of the school of Paris.” \textsuperscript{17} Dos Passos learned the modernist credo: “in the arts everything was abolished; everything must be reinvented from scratch.” In Nagel’s room Dos Passos read his first copies of Wyndam Lewis’s \textit{BLAST}, which contained Eliot’s early poems as well as modernist aesthetic theory. Concerning his conversion to modernist art, he maintained that “Diaghilev’s Ballet and the novelties at the Boston opera and the Armory Show did the rest.”\textsuperscript{18}

In the spring of 1916 Dos Passos graduated replete with knowledge, but more fully with a zealousness to leave academia behind in order to see the world, and especially the war that was ravaging Europe. Dos Passos Sr. would not allow it, and used his parental financial leverage to dissuade the young adventurer from going to war. Dos Passos’s decision to go to Spain in the fall of 1916 was made for him. Spain was not at war and it was the only destination his father would fund, so it was Spain or stay at home. Spain was also attractive because it offered a chance for the young Dos Passos to pick a career. His interests lay in both painting and writing, but he was fully aware that neither


\textsuperscript{18} Dos Passos, \textit{Best Times}, p. 35.
was lucrative. His father encouraged him to choose architecture, knowing that it would provide financial stability and help to satiate his son’s artistic cravings to study under the Spanish masters. Architecture was a good compromise. Dos Passos admitted that he was enamored with buildings and he liked to sketch. With help from friends, Dos Passos Sr. secured a position for his son at the University of Madrid for the fall of 1916. On October, 14 1916, Dos Passos set off for Spain for more education, but tucked in his travel bags were items closer to his heart: letters to three different Spanish poets with whom he had already been in contact.

The day before he left he received a copy of his first published article outside the *Harvard Monthly*, titled *Against American Literature*, an essay disparaging the banality of American literature. Receiving the first paycheck for his writing had a predictable effect on the young writer, convincing him that a life in literature was what his heart truly desired. Also of significance is the fact that his article was published in the *New Republic*, a periodical that he believed to contain the best combination of social and cultural criticism. The *New Republic* was the organ through which Dos Passos and many other writers of his generation developed a keen sense of social insight.

Dos Passos was unable to spend more than one semester in Spain as he was forced to return to the United States in February of 1917 due to the death of his father. After minding to the details of his father’s estate he settled in New York and mingled with the Bohemians. After a healthy diet of antiwar literature and attendance at pacifist meetings led by Emma Goldman, he declared that “every day I become more red.”

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19 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 74
These few months, between February and June 1917, were intellectually transforming for Dos Passos. Not only did he delve into at least three critical writings of William James, immerse himself into politics and social criticism, he began to express his romantic and dialectical vision of the world. We can see this in the profound tensions between his pacifist “red” declarations and his insatiable desire to see the war. Laden with incendiary ideas, having no parents to temper his passions, and America’s declaration of war in April all conspired to drive Dos Passos to the Western Front.

On June 20th 1917 he sailed for France to begin training for ambulance service in the war. He witnessed his first action at Verdun during the late August French offensive and saw the horrific ravages of what war could do to human beings. He found himself overcome by bouts of nihilism concerning the decisions that corrupt governments could make regarding their subjects. After the short venture at Verdun, the ambulance drivers were moved off the front. During the short reprieve he began writing his first novel Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho. Seven Times was never published, but portions of it morphed into his first two war novels, One Man’s Initiation: 1917, and Three Soldiers. After his ambulance duties ended with the medical corps, Dos Passos journeyed to Italy to join the Red Cross, where he remained until June, 1918 when he was dismissed for his pacifist declarations.

The war was not only psychologically transforming, it altered the way Dos Passos and the Lost Generation writers looked at both life and literature. Dos Passos wrote in his diary, “I’m dying to write – but all my methods of doing things in the past merely disgust me now, all former methods are damned inadequate – Horror is so piled on horror” that
the only option seemed to be utter resignation to “despair.” Dos Passos’s horror found expression in his two war novels, *One Man’s Initiation – 1917* and *Three Soldiers*, the former of which was an attempt to find some solid explanation for the war upon which his bruised psyche could rest. When *Three Soldiers* hit the American audience in September, 1921 it caused an immediate stir for its controversial themes. The novel would remain one of Dos Passos’s most popular among his American audience, in part for its overt anti-institutional message and sermonizing plot designed to elevate the importance of the individual. The war was so integral to Dos Passos’s thinking that it provided the centering structure to all of his early novels from *One Man’s Initiation* through to the *USA Trilogy*.

After being dismissed from the Italian Red Cross in June 1918 Dos Passos sailed for the United States and enlisted in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. His unit sailed back to Europe after the armistice and he was finally released from the corps in March of 1919. His new found freedom from military life provided him with the initial exuberance to begin professional studies. He was accepted into the Sorbonne’s graduate program and began work to earn his Ph.D. in anthropology. By August he was already bored. He was repelled by the thought of spending so much time in dusty libraries when there was so much of the world yet to see. He set off to his beloved Spain, where he traveled throughout the country, much of it on foot, until May of 1920. One of his travel companions was poet E. E. Cummings, a friend of Dos Passos’s since Harvard, but the Spanish venture secured their lifelong friendship.

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Spain “bewitched” Dos Passos. He trumpeted his own knight-errant spirit by announcing to friends that he was off to Spain “by the grace of Don Quixote de la Mancha and all the other Iberian divinities.” Facetiously, he told his friends that he was infused with the spirit of Cervantes’s knight, but in reality Dos Passos envisioned many of his experiences in Spain as extensions of the Quixote journeys, evinced in his numerous references to Quixote in his daily correspondence. He applied his devotion to the romantic Quixote in his 1922 travel narrative *Rosinante to the Road Again*, a title named after Don Quixote’s steed Rocinante.

By the summer of 1920 Dos Passos was back in New York trying to make his living as a writer. But once again, his restless energy impelled him to leave the city and head for foreign lands. He left for Europe in March of 1921, and after yet another brief jaunt through Spain he headed back to Paris, a city that he would always love. In Paris Dos Passos met Paxton Hibben, the secretary of a Near East Relief mission. Intrigued by the possibility for new experiences, Dos Passos set off for Constantinople in July to travel with the mission through Asia Minor until December. These adventures provided the experiences for his second travel narrative *Orient Express*.

In February 1922 Dos was back in New York and living in Greenwich Village, once again trying to settle into a consistent pattern of writing. 1922 was Dos Passos’s most domesticated year since he had left for Spain in 1916, and it was during this time that he began to mingle with other American writers, such as Edmund Wilson, who would remain an lifelong friend, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, of whom Dos Passos remained somewhat wary, and Sherwood Anderson. The lull between travel engagements

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and the Village artistic atmosphere compelled him to finish his Harvard-years novel *Streets of Night*, the clearest Lost Generation literary application of William James’ radical empiricism. Being true to his own philosophy regarding the primacy of lived experience, Dos Passos once again caught the travel bug. He was convinced that travel was the only thing that could satiate his desire to experience the world. He confessed that “at the slightest excuse I bolted for foreign parts. It was during these years that I lost track of the number of times I crossed the Atlantic.” Dos Passos recalled that young women he met at cocktail parties told him he was running away from himself. He admitted, “that was partly true. Maybe I was running away from them. I never got around to explaining that I was running toward something too. It was the whole wide world.”

By 1923 Dos Passos was a successful writer, especially after positive reviews circulated concerning *Three Soldiers*. The $8,000 royalties he received for the novel would sustain him for a good portion of his twenties travels. In the spring of that year he returned to Paris and met American expatriate painters Sara and Gerald Murphy. The Murphys became the nexus for the European avant-garde friendships that Dos Passos developed as an expatriate. He mingled with such artists as Natalie Goncharova, Georges Braques, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Leger and poet Blaise Cendrars. It was during this time that the young writer was exposed more fully to the techniques of the European painters, an education that spawned the Lost Generation’s first technically modernist novel, *Manhattan Transfer*. The novel was a critical success and Dos Passos’s second to cause a ripple among America’s literati. The celebrated novelist Sinclair Lewis did not know Dos Passos well – he had only met him once – but when he reviewed Dos Passos’s 1925
modernist novel, he hailed it as the first sign of the “foundation of a whole new school of novel-writing.” He touted that the novel was more important than anything written by Stein, Proust, or Joyce. Lewis respectfully deferred to the ability of those novelists whose works were “treatises on harmony, very scholarly,” but he believed they were “confoundedly dull” whereas “Dos Passos is interesting.” Lewis regarded *Manhattan Transfer* as “the moving symphony itself.”

Over the next few years, between 1923 and 1926 Dos Passos intermittently traveled, wrote, and mingled with other writers. During this time he formed a bond with, as yet unpublished, Ernest Hemingway. They would remain close friends until 1937 when Hemingway betrayed Dos Passos’s confidence during the Spanish Civil War. He journeyed to New Orleans, and to Key West, Florida in order to finish *Manhattan Transfer*. Around 1925 he met poets Malcolm Cowley and Hart Crane, two members of the Lost Generation who help to define the era’s literary criticism and poetry. During this period he wrote his first play *The Moon is a Gong*, which was performed in 1925 and published in 1926 as *The Garbage Man*. In 1925 he joined the executive board of the leftist journal *New Masses*, and in 1926, after traveling to Morocco, he helped to found the leftist oriented New Playwrights Theater in Greenwich Village.

1926 marked Dos Passos’s full immersion into American politics. After interviewing the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, whom many intellectuals believed were innocent of the murders for which they were convicted, Dos Passos began his own investigation into their case in order to gain a retrial for the

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23 Sinclair Lewis, “Manhattan at Last!” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 (December, 5, 1925), 361.
condemned pair. Dos Passos’s failure to secure a new hearing and the pair’s execution in 1927 became a turning point for the young idealist. In response to what he considered to be the grave social injustice of the Sacco and Vanzetti case he began writing The 42nd Parallel, the first volume of what would become the USA Trilogy, the novel that targeted the pandemic inequality in American society.

The Trilogy marked the highpoint of Dos Passos’s literary career. In these pages he joined together his best writing, his most mature expression of modernist techniques, and his indicting, biting social criticism. Dos Passos’s challenge in the Trilogy was to develop a format by which he could tell his story in a way that effectively combined individual human experience and the larger social context without compromising the essentials of either one. Dos Passos overcame this problem through the novel’s structure. Besides the character narratives that comprise the bulk of the Trilogy, he utilized three other literary techniques: the Newsreels, the Camera’s Eye sections, and the cameo biographies of famous or socially significant Americans. Malcolm Cowley believed that the “rich in emotional detail”24 in Camera’s Eye sections and the biographies provided the necessary space, outside of the character narratives, for Dos Passos’s subjective analysis of American society.25 The function of the Newsreels was to ground the novel in a temporal context, providing historical focus points that help to situate the disparate narrative sections.26

It is in these non-narrative sections that Dos Passos blatantly criticized an American society that could condemn the innocent Sacco and Vanzetti. In a poignant Camera’s Eye section he laments the power of the American bourgeoisie: “they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers they hire the men with guns the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons.” In the Newsreel preceding the Sacco Vanzetti Camera’s Eye section, Dos Passos lists contemporaneous headlines to place the Sacco Vanzetti case within historical context. He includes seemingly innocuous events such as “Tiny Wasps Imported From Korea in Battle To Death With Asiatic Beetle,” and “Boy Carried Mile Down Sewer; Shot Out Alive,” as well as politically sensitive headlines such as “Washington Keeps Eye on Radicals,” and “Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die.”

Dos Passos used the novel to posit his conviction that there existed in America two separate nations, the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors, what he called the “other,” or the “aliens” were winning. Dos Passos considered the Sacco and Vanzetti executions as the triumphant bugle of enemy victory so that “history itself had been captured by alien elements,” until “there is nothing left to do/ we are beaten/ we are beaten.”

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28 David L. Vanderwerken, “U.S.A.: Dos Passos and the ‘Old Words,’ *Twentieth Century Literature*, May77, Vol. 23 Issue 2, 195. According to Vanderwerken, Dos Passos believes that the “what” and “who” of America are represented by America’s language, America’s words. The “Old Words” are the speech of the people, and Dos Passos believes that the special language of America has been betrayed by the oppressors. Vanderwerken views this betrayal as one of the central motifs of the Trilogy.

Over the next ten years, until the 1938 publication of the Trilogy’s last volume *The Big Money*, Dos Passos continued to write and travel. Along with *USA*, he wrote more plays and became a regular contributor to the *New Masses*, as well as other political and literary journals. During this time he traveled to Russia and Mexico, and worked his way across America in order to satisfy his travel urges. But the America he loved, and he did love it, ended in 1927 with the death of Sacco and Vanzetti. Years later he admitted that from America he “seceded privately the night Sacco and Vanzetti were executed.”

What comes through this short narrative of Dos Passos’s life was his desire to engage, qualify, and interpret the American society that had formed so much of his thinking. What separated Dos Passos from his contemporaries was his emphasis on social issues as well as personal ones. Interpreting one’s place in the social panorama was not unique to the Lost Generation writers, but Dos Passos took that social position to the next level, seeking to expose society for its detrimental effect upon the individual.

The Writer as Intellectual and Social Critic

One can see in the literature of the Lost Generation that these writers were involved in various aspects of social criticism. But Dos Passos stood above his contemporaries in combining the latest artistic trends to expose social ills. Although F. Scott Fitzgerald overstated his position by remarking that “It was characteristic of the Jazz Age, that it had no interest in politics at all,” a general apolitical sentiment remained

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among Lost Generation writers. But not for Dos Passos. By the time he finished his *USA Trilogy* his reputation for insightful social criticism was firmly established. For it was on April 30th, 1937, that Eric Blair, a young aspiring English writer accosted Dos Passos outside of an elevator in Barcelona, in order to meet the man whose fame as a literary genius and social critic was at its height. After being the victim of a one-sided petty rivalry instigated by Ernest Hemingway, and having witnessed the innumerable deceptions surrounding the Spanish civil war, Dos Passos was glad to finally meet an honest man. They talked. And in Mr. Blair, whose literary and socially critical genius the world would also come to recognize, Dos Passos recognized a keen perception of social issues. Years later, long after Mr. Blair had come to be famously known by his pen name, George Orwell, Dos Passos remembered that “This man Orwell referred without emphasis to things we both knew to be true.” In 1947, concerning the need to express his ideas about things he knew to be true, Orwell published a little tract, *Why I Write*. He gave four reasons behind his own impetus for the art, the first of which was just to satisfy the ego, as he chided, “all writers are vain, selfish and lazy.” But he believed that his fourth reason, writing for political purposes, was what transformed his craft. He had an insatiable “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.” He emphasized his belief that, “no book

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32 Fitzgerald.
33 John Dos Passos, *The Theme is Freedom*, (New York, 1956), 146.
is genuinely free from political bias.” Indeed, he proclaimed, “the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”

Orwell’s convictions matched those of Dos Passos, of whom literary critic and friend Edmund Wilson recalled, more than any other writers of his generation had sustained a passion for political and social affairs. The relationship between what was new in art and the exigencies of social criticism found in Dos Passos a success unachieved by his contemporaries. Twenties literary critics recognized that in Dos Passos something new had entered American letters. In one of his many accounts of the twenties, Malcolm Cowley confirmed that while Dos Passos was as interested as any other writer about language and art, he was “vastly more interested in the social panorama.” Dos Passos was the most adept at combining his art with philosophical trends and social criticism, a point conceded by poet Allen Tate in 1926 when he declared that Dos Passos was the writer who most accurately “measured the current taste,” as he seemed to be “caught in some of its deeper extensions.”

Engagement with social conditions was the original intent of literary intellectuals. Nineteenth century society understood intellectuals to be public figures. The appellation “intellectual” was first used in 1860’s Russia to denote individuals who were part of the nation’s intelligentsia. The word was meant to convey sociological and psychological

34 George Orwell, *Why I Write*, 46.


37 Allen Tate, “Good Prose,” *Nation*, 122 (February, 10, 1926), 161.
concepts as well as a moral code.\textsuperscript{38} Intellectuals were concerned with matters of public interest; they believed in their responsibility to express themselves publicly through action and text to confront political and social problems.\textsuperscript{39}

In 1892, the founder of the philosophy of language, Gottlob Frege, provided philosophical credence for the public role of intellectuals by differentiating between ideas and thoughts. Ideas, he asserted, are individual and private. Thoughts, unlike matter, are invisible, but they are still public domain. When an intellectual expresses his or her ideas, they become thoughts that can be judged by society as to their merit.\textsuperscript{40} In 1913, Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, whose work Dos Passos greatly admired, argued that “thought is inward language,” and to articulate those thoughts via verbal or written language “arose out of the need of communicating our thought to our neighbors.”\textsuperscript{41}

Critical Theorist Jurgen Habermas codified the historical function of the intellectual, suggesting that those ideas that were subjective, “the innermost core of the private” were always meant to be “oriented to an audience.” In the English coffee houses, the French salons, and the German Tischgesellschaften, were formed the “public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters,” within which the community “attained clarity about itself.” For Habermas it was not possible to separate the intellectual from the


\textsuperscript{40} Gottlob Frege, “Thought,” from, \textit{Compound Thoughts}, 351-372.

\textsuperscript{41} Miguel de Unamuno, \textit{Tragic Sense of Life}, 7.
public sphere. It is the role of the intellectual to critique, to mold, and to refine the community to the best of his or her ability.\footnote{Jurgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Categor of Bourgeois Society}, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 49, 51.}

The term “intellectual” was popularized in late 1890’s France during the Dreyfus Affair. In response to Dreyfus’s imprisonment, one of the most celebrated fin-de-siecle French writers, Emile Zola primed his literary pump and let loose with a series of invective letters and essays which received national attention.\footnote{Bernard-Henri Levy, \textit{Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century}, trans, by Richard Veasey, (London: Harvill Press, 1995), 9-10. Though he does not mention it in his correspondence or journals Dos Passos was at least familiar with Zola’s writings. In \textit{Rosinante to the Road Again} he mentions that one of his favority Spanish novelists, Blasco Ibanez, was inspired by Zola’s method.} Arguably Zola’s most famous socially critical work was \textit{J’accuse’}, his published letter to President Félix Faure, in which he scorned the French judicial system for slapping truth and justice in the face. He believed that it was his moral responsibility to tell the truth because France had fallen victim to “monstrous betrayals that scandalize History itself.” Combating the urge to resign himself to greater forces he implored the president to remember that “Truth and justice – how ardently we have striven for them! Not for one minute do I despair that truth will triumph.” At the letter’s end he expressed his “ardent protest,” from his very soul that “light be shed.”\footnote{Emile Zola, \textit{The Dreyfus Affair: J’accuse’ and Other Writings}, trans. by Eleanor Levieux, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 43 –53.) Dreyfus was exonerated in 1906, due largely to the literary activities of the intellectuals, thereby indelibly inscribing the title \textit{intellectual} upon those members of the literati who were concerned with social issues. Both Malcolm Cowley and Dos Passos referred to \textit{J’Accuse} when considering their own various imprecations against American society.}

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\item \textit{Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century}, trans, by Richard Veasey, (London: Harvill Press, 1995), 9-10. Though he does not mention it in his correspondence or journals Dos Passos was at least familiar with Zola’s writings. In \textit{Rosinante to the Road Again} he mentions that one of his favority Spanish novelists, Blasco Ibanez, was inspired by Zola’s method.
\item \textit{The Dreyfus Affair: J’accuse’ and Other Writings}, trans. by Eleanor Levieux, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 43 –53.)
\end{enumerate}
In short, social critic and intellectual are interchangeable terms that refer to those members of society who use their pen to comment upon the pertinent issues of society. Dos Passos fit both the criteria and sentiments of a public intellectual. In August, 1916 he proclaimed his desires to make a public mark, to change society through his writings. To his friend Arthur McComb, Dos Passos reviled, “I have no ideas Except a vague and very teasing desire to hack and hew, to agitate against the bogies which are being battened by warfume and are gradually obscuring the fair sky of democracy (the last phrase I shall recommend to Mr. Wilson!). He continued, pleading, “Really, Arthur, I am darned serious – ‘the forces of reason’ must get together, must make a fuss – We want a new enlightenment – new Byrons new Shelleys new Voltaires before whom 19th Century stoginesss on the one hand and 20th Century reaction on the other shall vanish and be utterly routed ‘like souls from an enchanter fleeing.’”

George Bernard Shaw, one of Dos Passos’s many literary heroes, had “already formed a nucleus” of intellectuals. Dos Passos questioned the role of the new generation, asking “where are [Shaw’s] successors? We want people of personality who can catch the popular imagination and wring tears and blow ardors up like a very bellows.”

Dos Passos wanted to change the world. During his tenure in World War I, Dos Passos began writing Seven Times Around the Walls of Jericho, a novel that was never to be published. He confessed that he wanted it to be a “gas bomb thrown at the head of the American public,” though he feared, with too much confidence in his own mediocrity,

45 Dos Passos, Correspondence with McComb, 24-25.
that it would “remain a stink-box smoldering in my own pocket.” But he retained his belief in the power of verbal expression. He was adamant about his role as a social critic who would function as “A voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He said that “I still believe in that. To turn ones nose to the moon and bay – To blow trumpets and have the walls of Jericho crumble. To call loud till the gods come back from hunting, like the Priests of Baal – and perhaps in the end to help Judith place the nail in the forehead of Holofernes – at least, out of cryings and bayings and laughter to forge the nail that some future Judith will use to transfix the augst stupidity of Holofernes’s brow.” The end of the imprecation was erased by a wartime censure.

Dos Passos admitted his distress that the war had scattered his coterie of intellectuals around the world. “The muses are driven from Parnassus,” he complained, while “the world hurries on its course to idiocy.” As a result, he believed that he must lead the charge. He confided in his wartime friend and fellow playwright John Howard Lawson, “I feel murderously energetic, slit’em up and shash’em and blow’em up with T.N.T.”

Academic and public intellectual Lionel Trilling believed that what made Dos Passos’s writing so poignant was his interaction with American society. Being socially

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47 Dos Passos, *Correspondence with McComb*, 92. The biblical references are a conflation from two stories. One is from the apocryphal book of Judith, which tells of Judith cutting off Holofernes’s head, and the other is from the book of Judges where Jael drives a spike through Sisera’s temple.

48 Dos Passos, *Correspondence with McComb*, 103.


engaged is what made his writing not only aesthetically powerful, but socially poignant. Historian John Patrick Diggins has said of Dos Passos that he is one of America’s best writers because he was immersed in his society’s history.\textsuperscript{51} Literary critic Granville Hicks suggested by 1952 that Dos Passos was still a dynamic and effective social critic even though “the fact that he has reversed his emphasis, so that he now attacks Communists, Socialists, and New Dealers and defends businessmen and conservative politicians is irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{52} Writers like Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Faulkner, Hicks believed, often feel estranged from their society because they are in explicit “rebellion against the existing social structure.”\textsuperscript{53} It was their detachment that made them such good social critics.

Although other Lost Generation writers tended to think of themselves as apolitical, they actually demonstrated the same desire to “hack and hew,” although with less force than Dos Passos. The same Fitzgerald who confessed that he was not interested in politics admitted that he was bursting with all the “terrible honesty that all our sophistry cannot destroy.”  \textsuperscript{54} In \textit{This Side of Paradise} Fitzgerald defined an intellectual as someone who is not just “brainy and well-educated” but also someone who is a participant in society so as to have an “active knowledge of the race’s experience.”\textsuperscript{55} Novelist Floyd Dell’s 1926 \textit{Intellectual Vagabondage} revealed his generation’s flight

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item John Patrick Diggins, \textit{Up From Communism}, 107.
\item Granville Hicks, \textit{College Education}, 356
\item Granville Hicks, \textit{College Education}, 360.
\item F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{This side of Paradise}, 169.
\item F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{This side of Paradise}, (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 275, See also the definition offered by Richard Posner, in \textit{Public Intellectuals}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
from what he considered the late nineteenth-century’s conception that intellectuals should be “divorced from serious participation in the affairs of the world.”56 But now the artist immerses himself into a “quasi-mystical identification of artist” with the object of his art. As an artist, Dell continues, “I imagine myself to be a poor wretch dying in a slum, and I suffer his pain; I then glorify that pain by the words in which I describe it; and it has been well worth while for me to suffer, in order that I might write.”57 In a heated conversation, Fitzgerald’s protagonist in *This Side of Paradise*, Armory Blaine declares that the world should “beware the artist who’s an intellectual also. The artist who doesn’t fit – the Rousseau, the Tolstoi, the Samuel Butler.”58 Both Tolstoy and Butler were intellectual models among Lost Generation writers. Tolstoy, a leading proponent of the artist's need to express, wrote, in his 1898 essay *What is Art?*, that art is a “human activity” whereby one person “hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” Art, for Tolstoy, created a “union among men,” uniting them with similar feelings for the betterment of all humanity.

The Lost Generation writers did not classify themselves as intellectuals or social critics, but we can define them as such by their function rather than by an arbitrary label. In short, these writers communicated through their art their vision of American society and culture. They gave the readers both an America that they wanted and an America that was worthy of criticism, but they were not removed from the political and social America that was the object of their critique.

57 Floyd Dell, *Intellectual Vagabondage*, 204.
58 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, 275.
Modernist Writers

The Lost Generation’s desire to make a social difference did not go unnoticed by European intellectuals, especially the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre believed that the social criticism of writers like Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Faulkner was in large part due to their understanding of human consciousness. He believed that these writers works were infused with a modernist epistemology that as yet had not been utilized in Europe. Sartre sought to prove his point especially about Dos Passos as a leading modernist writer by introducing us to the idea that reading a novel, any novel, is like stepping into a mirror. When the reader enters the mirror, the novelist reflects the world upon that mirror and interprets that world to the reader. When the reader closes the book and steps out of the mirror, the mirror simply continues to reflect the surroundings of the world, and as Sartre explains, “you swear that art is a reflection.” But American modernist Dos Passos is different. He presents the world in *1919* “to show it only,” without interpretation. The effect, according to Sartre, is a sustained reflection in which the reader does not know whether she is inside the mirror or not, because both the world and Dos Passos’s reflection look so much the same.\(^{59}\)

The technique is effective, says Sartre. By only reflecting the world, the reader sees what Dos Passos wants her to see, but no more. And what he reflects to the reader are “untragic lives” that are immediate and present. The characters are like most of us who merely “slip by without leaving a trace, without involving anyone, until the time

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when one of them, no different from any of the others, suddenly, as if through clumsy trickery, sickens a man for good and throws a mechanism out of gear.” The salient feature of Dos Passos’s style, Sartre declares, is that the characters’ actions are what matters, not the author’s interpretation of those actions. To do this, Dos Passos “clearly outlined,” facts about his characters but never contemplates the significance of those facts. They are “ready for thinking about. But Dos Passos never thinks them.” Instead, he sets his plot around myriad of irreducible events that are joined by no particular causal analysis. He simply continues in a journalistic narrative with the conjunction “and… and… and….” The result is an “unpleasant impression of an indeterminacy of detail,” in which “the great disturbing phenomena – war, love, political movements, strikes – fade and crumble into an infinity of little odds and ends which can just about be set side by side.”

Without psychological insight or preconceived judgments, *1919* presents characters within a setting where the “dice are not loaded, for fictional man is free.”

By refusing to analyze the “character chronicles,” as Dos Passos coined them, his characters become free in the present tense to experience the world as it is. This technique, for Sartre, manifests a “kind of conformity between the psychological state and the exterior situation.” What he means is that moods and emotions simply come upon Dos Passos’s characters and are not imposed upon them by a transcendent author.

The technique is phenomenological. It is the characters’ interaction with external phenomena, the experiences of the world, that defines who they are. There is no essential

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60 Jean-Paul Sartre, “John Dos Passos and 1919,” 61-64.

61 Diggins, 99, quoting from Benedetto Croce, “History and Chronicle,” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), 51. Diggins’s interpretation of Croce is given in
make up of the characters. As a result, it is in phenomenological awareness that the reader develops his or her knowledge of the characters through those characters’ experience of the world. The actions and circumstances in which the characters participate have no innate meaning derived from the reader’s a priori knowledge of the world. The reader only knows the characters through their experiences.62

To prove his point, Sartre singles out Dos Passos’s portrayal of one of the most tragic characters in the trilogy, Joe Williams. Joe survives the sinking of two torpedoed ships, endures a failed marriage, succumbs to numerous beatings, spends time in jail, and suffers constant penury. Dos Passos analyzes none of these events. And in describing Joe’s apathy toward his own existence, he simply echoes Joe’s desire to simply sink into the void on one of his torpedoed ships. Nothing more is said. Joe’s entire story is devoid of any conscious connection with Dos Passos as the author. In the final scene of Joe’s life, he jumps onto a burning ship that everyone else has abandoned. Sailors on the dock scream at Joe as he scuttles up a rope ladder and when he lands on the deck “he wondered what the hell he was doing up there.” The thoughts do not get any deeper. In a particularly casual, even calloused moment, Joe says out loud, but to himself “God damn it, I hope she does blow up.” The thoughts are simply recorded not scrutinized. As Joe meanders around the deck his thoughts appear to us: “He reckoned the boat had hit a mine or been torpedoed. The crew had evidently left in a hurry as there were all sorts of bits of clothing and a couple of seabags by the davits aft where the lifeboats had been.” The reader only gets the mirrored reflection as Joe rummages through the abandoned

booty and finds a nice sweater and a box of Cuban Havanas. Again Dos Passos simply records Joe’s thoughts: “It made him feel good to stand there and light a cigar with the goddam tanks ready to blow him to Halifax any minute. It was a good cigar, too.” Joe never analyzes his confrontation with death. The reader only knows that Joe gets back onto the dock and then walks out to see the town.\textsuperscript{63} Dos Passos only provides the tangible evidence of his character’s actions.

To bolster his case for Dos Passos’s innovation, Sartre compares Dos Passos’s style with what he considered to be the more conventional psychological approach to literary characters utilized by Marcel Proust in \textit{In Search of Lost Time}. Proust does not hesitate to head straight for his character’s psyche. He tells the reader exactly what the characters think, and more significantly, why they think it. The consequence, Sartre contends, is that through the sheer weight of analysis, Proust makes events and emotions inevitable for the characters. In short, he pre-determines his characters’ experience of the world. For example, \textit{In Search of Lost Time’s} first volume, \textit{Swann’s Way}, the story opens with the narrator’s half-asleep, self-conscious reflection about being the subject of a book he had just been reading. The narrator explains that these mental impressions “did not offend my reason” but after some time his thoughts began to seem “unintelligible, as the thoughts of a previous existence must be after reincarnation.” He then penetrates his own psychological state, detailing how “the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to apply myself to it or not; and at the same time my sight would return and I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and

\textsuperscript{62} Jean-Paul Sartre, “John Dos Passos and 1919,” 65 – 68.

restful enough for my eyes, but even more, perhaps, for my mind, to which it appeared incomprehensible, without a cause, something dark indeed.” ⁶⁴ Over the next sixty pages the narrator recounts his numerous psychological impressions of time and space as he mentally searches out various bedrooms of his past. Little of the novel actually takes place in the present time. The narrator tells the remainder of the story in narrative layers of memory, provided by Proust, with each layer revealing a deeper psychological level than the preceding one. For Sartre, Proust’s narrator can only experience the world through a psychological makeup that Proust has given him. Experiences are run through the sieve of the narrator’s mental structure, and he inevitably interprets those experiences accordingly.

What sets Dos Passos apart is that he was fully aware of the benefits of psychological analysis for developing persuasive literary characters. In 1914, The Devil’s Garden, was a “much talked about book, an interesting psychological study” of a rural English man and his family. ⁶⁵ Dos Passos recognized the psychology as the cohesion of the novel, and was disappointed because he believed the plot “undoubtedly blurs the carefully built up picture of the man.” ⁶⁶ Romain Rolland permeated his 1910 publication Jean Christophe with psychological determinacy. The novel was one of Dos Passos’s favorites, though he detested its cult following, because Rolland’s narrative exhausts the

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⁶⁵ John Dos Passos, Literary Journal, Papers of John Dos Passos, Accession #5950, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va., 15.

⁶⁶ Dos Passos, Literary Journal, Papers of John Dos Passos, Accession #5950, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va., 32.
multiple levels of his protagonist’s fragile and unsettled psyche. Speaking to the readers in the first person plural, as Rolland often does when revealing a new psychological experience, he concludes that as we grow and our bodies change, “so also do we change our souls: and the metamorphosis does not always take place slowly over many days; there are times of crisis when the whole is suddenly renewed. The old soul that is cast off dies. In those hours of anguish we think that all is an end. And the whole thing begins again. A life dies. Another life has already come into being.”

Rolland’s narrative is filled with sidebar conversations with the reader so that the psychological development of the characters is always in the forefront.

As powerful as Rolland’s narrative was to Dos Passos, he did not engage in this form of psychological analysis. It did not take Sartre long to realize that the Dos Passos’s techniques were not just innovative, they also had a particularly American flavor. He discovered in Ernest Hemingway and Faulkner the same phenomenological, non-psychological approach to literature. Sartre’s lifelong partner, Simone de Beauvoir, confessed that she and Sartre had been inspired by Hemingway’s style, and that they tried to emulate his straightforward account of physical action. For Hemingway, the honor could not have been greater, knowing that his work had inspired the founder of French Existentialism. When he met Sartre for the first time in 1943 war-torn Paris, Hemingway, half-drunk, wrapped his thick arms around the great French philosopher and cried, “You’re a general. Me I’m only a captain. You’re a general.”

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William Faulkner’s genius, for Sartre, lay in his ability to conceal a character’s consciousness, or at least to keep it secret, allowing only glimpses of it at crucial points in the narrative. Like Dos Passos and Hemingway, Faulkner does not explore the psychological reasons behind his characters’ actions. He displays acts and gestures only, for “everything is aimed at making us believe that these minds are always empty and evasive.” Through these gestures the character’s consciousness is slightly unveiled, but for just a moment. Faulkner conspires, Sartre contends, to make the reader believe that consciousness is empty, that it is fleeting. And Faulkner “is not unaware of our impatience; he counts on it and stops there, to chat innocently of gestures.” Sartre playfully chides Faulkner for knowing that consciousness is not empty, and yet, he still refuses to tell the reader what is inside. Faulkner intentionally conceals his characters’ consciousness in order to make his readers guess at what is internal. The effect is potent for the reader because she must seek to know the unknowable, and “whatever is touched by divination becomes magical;” the reader’s connection with the character’s consciousness becomes ineffably “beyond language.” By only showing acts and gestures Faulkner conveys to his readers that “the real drama is behind the boredom, behind the gestures, behind the character’s consciousness.” Since the reader cannot fully grasp a character merely through what is presented, she must search behind the presentation of acts and gestures to see the human characteristics that exists. What is inside a human, the reader can only conceive, and Faulkner only suggests it. The only thing that the reader knows for sure is that consciousness is alive and vital, for “the boredom is in the social order, the monotonous languor of everything [the characters] can see, hear or touch.”70
The affect that these writers had upon Sartre was monumental. He declared that the baton of portraying the human condition had passed from the French to the Americans. He recognized that something new had burgeoned in American literature that was more than just literary technique. These writers had captured a way of looking at the world that resonated with his own philosophic suppositions. An individual’s existence, Sartre posited, is not determined by essential human qualities, but by one’s activity in the world. Believing that people need to be existentially free to experience that world, much of Sartre’s own philosophic quest was to unshackle the strata of human experience from the chains of essentialism. It is experience, an individual’s mode of being-in-the-world, Sartre demanded, not a person’s mental or physiological structure, that reveals who a person is. For Sartre, the American narrative technique of merely describing individual experiences without analysis, shows a humanity freed from a priori essentialism, a humanity unchained from any natural or social determination.  

Sartre maintained that psychological analysis, which these American writers did not provide, is a subsequent and derivative procedure, and thereby secondary to human experience. Without analysis there is no meaning, and without meaning there is no necessity, no determining mechanism by which to gauge a character’s life. The defining qualities of the character’s existence surface freely. What so impressed Sartre was that

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characters who are free from psychological determination become personal to the reader. Dos Passos’s refusal to impose upon his characters “explanations or comment” become “are our own lives, these innumerable, planned, botched, immediately forgotten and constantly renewed adventures that slip by without a trace, without involving anyone.”

But this personalization is only a minor consequence. The major implication is that the technique allows the reader, not the author, to interpret the characters’ psychological state. As a result, the reader is able to connect his or her consciousness with that of the character’s, not the author’s. In fact, in the absence of authorial analysis the character’s consciousness finds its very existence dependent upon the reader’s consciousness. Most literature, Sartre argues, suppresses the reader’s individual consciousness by providing too much of a psychological profile. Consequently, the reader cannot differentiate between his or her own consciousness and that of the author’s.

By removing themselves as a subjective source of consciousness, these writers allow the reader and the characters to interact directly with each other. Even more striking is that the reader’s knowledge of the character, which he uses to connect his consciousness to the character’s consciousness, is based upon the character’s life experiences and nothing else. The epistemological effect is stunning. We get an understanding of humanness that is based on ontic experience rather than on ontological essentialism.

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74 Jean-Paul Sartre, “John Dos Passos and 1919,” 67, 69. I use “ontic” here in the Heideggarian sense as that which is factual about reality, as opposed to ontological which pertains directly to Being itself. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, tr. By J. Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), Division 1, section 4.
Dos Passos made no explicit references to the writers who might have shaped his style. We do know that he was a voracious reader who recorded both his love for and disappointment of many books. His literary journals give Dos Passos biographer Townsend Ludington reason to suggest that William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Louis Coupernus’s *Small Souls* introduced Dos Passos to the technique of presenting characters from an external rather than a psychological source. Dos Passos did claim these novels to be wonderfully satirical, and exemplary in exhibiting the best character development. In one of his *Harvard Monthly* reviews, Dos Passos proclaimed that the *Small Souls*’ characters were “admirably portrayed.” “Without a trace of didacticism,” he declared, “the novel is a tremendous satire, cold and unemotional, on the life of a small European capital.” *Vanity Fair* earned Dos Passos’s recognition as “one of the great books of the world,” because of its “inimitable characters, the satire, the wit, the humorous descriptions, the universality of the book is overwhelming.”

We cannot dismiss the importance of these literary influences, but our discussion of Sartre’s analysis of Dos Passos shows us that what lay behind Dos Passos’s technical innovations were less a matter of stylistic preference than a new way to conceive human experience. The same experienced based understanding of the world can also be found in Lost Generation intellectuals such as literary critics Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, poets E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane, as well as in novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. This group of writers best exemplified the intellectual themes that surfaced in the postwar decade.

75 Dos Passos, *Literary Journal*, Papers of John Dos Passos, Accession #5950, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va., 4.
A Dialectical Vision

As we have seen, some of the most influential Lost Generation writers viewed the world through a lens that emphasized human experience – being-in-the-world – over a priori principles as the interpretive arbiter of truth, because the meaning of modern life and modern warfare proved resistant to facile nineteenth-century absolutist explanations. We can call this mode of looking at the world an experience-based epistemology because it permitted the Lost Generation to interpret the heterogeneous nature of modernity within a framework that addressed modernity on its own terms instead of seeing it from an imposed mental framework of fixed a priori principles. And this was important, for as political scientist Marshall Berman points out in his catalogue of modernity in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, modernity was anything but a sedentary experience.

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth, systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies, increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist and world market.\(^6\)

Berman’s list is staggering, and to the young twenty-somethings of the postwar period it was overwhelming. With this list of modernity’s kinetic pace in mind, however, Berman has developed a definition of modernism that benefits our understanding of how the Lost Generation interpreted their historical context. Berman defines modernism as “any attempt by modern man and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern word and make themselves at home in it.” Berman’s definition of modernism emphasizes a being-in-the-world worldview. It takes into account the mutually affective relationship between the external world and the individual subject. In this relational scenario the world shapes the individual by providing him or her with experiences that he or she can understand, interpret, and express back to the world. The world is then transformed by that individual’s expression, which in turn provides new experiences for the individual to once again apprehend. The circle never stops. Berman’s definition of modernism leaves room for the constant interplay between the world-experiencer and the world-experienced.77

Berman’s epistemological definition of modernism is also effective because it is sufficiently broad enough to include what he calls the “curatorial” approach to

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77 See Wilhem Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies to the Sciences,” in Dilthey: Selected Writings, H.P. Rickman, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 62. Dilthey described the same process of experience and expression as such that, “the individual’s knowledge of life springs from the generalization of what has thus accumulated. It arises through procedures which are equivalent to induction. The number of cases on which the induction is based constantly increases in the course of a lifetime and the generalizations formed are constantly corrected.” Dilthey believed that as the individual’s repository of experience increases so does that person’s ability to make judgments concerning his or her own interaction with the world. The judgmental maturity that is gained from these individual historical experiences is then offered to society through some form of communicative expression. Dilthey suggested that, “on the basis of what the historical person experiences within himself, he transfers knowledge of customs, habits, politics, religion, etc., to these historical remnant.” We project our refined
modernism, one that “breaks up human activity into fragments and locks the fragments into separate cases, labeled by time, place, language, genre and academic discipline.”

These more specified and academically honed definitions of modernism, such as William Everdell’s emphasis on discontinuity, or Stephen Kern’s understanding of modernism as a stage in which various artistic and intellectual disciplines respond to social and technological transformations as they occur in time and space, provide the vital nuances under Berman’s definition. Berman admits his definition is broad, but he maintains this is necessary to allow the historian to “see all sorts of artistic, intellectual, religious and political activities as part of one dialectical process, and to develop creative interplay among them.”

Berman’s epistemological understanding of modernism has credence in modernist studies. Literary scholar Brian McHale has argued that the artistic impulse of modernism comes from questions of epistemology; that modernists were primarily concerned with providing a new understanding of the world. McHale’s argument is predicated upon what he sees as the changes between modernist and postmodernist literature, a shift in what he calls the dominant. The concept of the dominant was popularized in a 1935 lecture of the Russian structuralist, Roman Jakobson, who posited that “The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components.” The dominant demarcates epochs in aesthetic history by highlighting in each epoch a way in which artists approach their art. The dominant understanding of society back into society. For Dilthey, storytelling through literature was one of the innumerable ways in which social understanding is promoted.

78 Berman, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, 17
provides a “decisive” framework that functions as a “particular whole.” In modernism, McHale argues, the dominant, the particular whole that drives the era’s art, is epistemology.

Though Berman’s and McHale’s epistemological emphasis provides a necessary lens through which we can view modernism, they do not account sufficiently for the nuances of American modernism and the Lost Generation experience in particular. For this we turn to Christine Stansell’s and Ann Douglas’s conceptions of modernism. Stansell’s *American Moderns* sees modernism in terms of men and women embracing what is new in the modern world. Citing the French writer Charles Péguy’s 1913 comment that “The world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years,” Stansell’s heroes “ushered in that day of transformation in America” from Victorianism to modernity. Stansell’s pre World War I time frame does not specifically take into account the Lost Generation, but the criterion of embracing what is new applies to the Lost Generation’s attention to the fresh intellectual currents as well as the watershed event of the Great War.

Ann Douglas provides the other side of the coin, defining modernism as the historical moment in which individuals face the ugly reality of modern life with “terrible honesty.” Douglas’s understanding is particularly helpful because she presupposes an


80 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, (New York: Methuen Inc., 1987), 6. McHale maintains that in postmodernism the dominant carries an ontological emphasis in its art, which is a shift from the epistemological dominant of modernism.

epistemological approach to modernity in which “being truthful” is vital to one’s intellectual survival, a point emphasized by Malcolm Cowley when he posited that such honesty was crucial “even if it hurt their family and friends, and most of all, if it hurt themselves.” Stansell’s and Douglas’s definitions round out the full spectrum of American modernism, emphasizing both what is new, exciting, and beautiful, along with what is frightening, tumultuous, and ugly.

It is out of these antagonistic components of the American experience that the Lost Generation attempted to fashion an understanding of the heroic individual. But lest one see a Manichean dualism between Stansell’s and Douglas’s definitions of modernism, it is better to conceive of the Lost Generation’s modernism even more specifically as a dialectical tension between romance and irony. Here, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* sheds some light. According to Frye, fictional literature can be divided into different modes of expression, around the interpretation of the fictional hero’s role in society. The modes demonstrate the historical declension of the hero as he or she has moved from the status of the divine being of ancient Greek poetry to the flawed, powerless, and tragic human being of modernity. Through the course of literary history, Frye contends, the power, position, and autonomy of the hero has slowly enervated, culminating in the ironic fiction of the twentieth century where the hero is “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity.”

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It would be incorrect, however, Frye asserts, to ascribe exclusively the genre of
irony to the modern writers. For even modernists, such as Edmund Wilson, who
suggested that the Lost Generation’s postwar realism accounted for the feebleness of their
heroes, never completely represent reality. Regardless of the mode within which the
author of fiction functions, says Frye, he or she will always imposes some myth into his
or her work, because no author completely imitates life. And myth, according to Frye’s
definition, is simply any deviation from reality, the “abstract, literary world of fictional
and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar
experience.” The proximity to pure myth in fiction depends upon how much the polar
opposite, naturalism, enters the content of the story. All fictional productions exist
somewhere between pure myth and pure naturalism, and fiction that leans toward myth
simply depends more on analogy to develop its narrative. In all literature, Frye contends,
there is constant a tug-of-war between the two poles; modern writers are just drawn
toward a naturalistic explanation of the world.84

Frye’s analysis is important because the Lost Generation writers provide a
textbook case study for the oscillation between realism and idealism, between Stansell’s
emphasis on newness and Douglas’s terrible honesty. Frye takes this polarized
understanding of the world into account by postulating four basic literary genres that
present the writer’s arrangement of the world. The Mythos of Summer he associates with
the genre of romance, the ideal world of innocence and the fulfillment of dreams. In
contrast the Mythos of Winter, the genre of irony and satire, is the world of experience

84 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 34
and failure. But Frye does not suggest that a fictional work fit neatly into any one category. All four of Frye’s mythoi involve some movement from one genre to another. In the Mythos of Spring, the genre of comedy, the narrative moves from the real to the ideal, and in the genre of tragedy, the Mythos of Autumn, the narrative moves from the ideal to the real, from innocence to experience. Using Frye’s paradigm, we see the Lost Generation shifting between the mythoi of Summer and Winter, between romance and irony.

One of the Lost Generation’s models for this dialectical vision of the world was Cervantes’s fictional characters Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Quixote represented the individualist who believed in the power of a person’s soul “over all things,” including the modern world, while Sancho, the industrial materialist, was the individualist “to whom all the world was food for his belly.” In Spanish history and art, Dos Passos contended, these “two complementary characters can be traced, changing, combining, branching out, but ever in substance the same. Of this warp and woof have all the strange patterns of Spanish life been woven.” These mythical Spaniards exemplified the ironic and romantic dialectic, harmonizing “the difference between the world of flesh and the world of spirit, between the body and the soul of man.” The “peculiarities – the picturesqueness – of Spanish faces and landscapes,” Dos Passos maintained, “seemed to spring from this powerful sense of the separateness of things.” That “separateness of things” that characterized Spain fashioned the very dialectic of romance and irony by which the Lost Generation writers lived and wrote.86

85 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 161
The dialectic between romance and irony provided the Lost Generation with its epistemological framework. Through this dialectic they interpreted the chaotic modern world. With a fuller understanding of the Lost Generation’s epistemology, we can now look at some examples of how the Quixote/Sancho dialectic played out in the Lost Generation’s art. For Dos Passos, romance and irony show up most conspicuously in his first two war novels, *One Man’s Initiation – 1917* and *Three Soldiers*. The protagonists Martin Howe and John Andrews romanticize the role of the individual in the war, yet each one must also face the inevitable reality he is nothing but a cog in the great social machine. Dos Passos also devoted whole books to either one of the two poles. While his 1925 *Manhattan Transfer* and 1936 *USA Trilogy* leave little room for romantic interpretation, his travel narratives *Rosinante to the Road Again*, and *Orient Express* are categorically romantic portrayals of Spanish and Middle Eastern cultures. Romance and irony fill the pages of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, a novel in which the romantic peripatetic wanderings of the Lost Generation are offset by the violence of bullfighting. The dialectical tension is also manifest in the sexually incompatible love affair between the impotent hero and his nymphomaniac heroine.\(^{87}\) Equally so, the raptures of love and finality of death are the driving themes behind *A Farewell to Arms*, a narrative that also juxtaposes personal heroism and futility. Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* can be read as a historical narrative of the myths and realities of the American experience. Its historical circumscription glorifies Columbus, Pocahontas, and especially that great symbol of modern architecture the Brooklyn Bridge, while accounting for America’s social and

spiritual decay, telltale signs of a nation bent on industrialism at the expense of humanity. And of course, we must read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first two novels *This Side of Paradise*, and *The Beautiful and Damned* as copiously detailed accounts that romanticize the twenties social life, while *The Great Gatsby* and Fitzgerald’s 1934 *Tender is the Night* concentrate upon the ironic decline of the Roaring Twenties spirit.

What makes the Lost Generation’s dialectical epistemology so attractive to historical analysis is that it refused to supply a Hegelian synthesis. These writers chose sides. They rejected the optimistic pragmatism – one might say the *romantic* pragmatism – advocated by William James between 1890 and 1910 that the progressivists so enthusiastically applied as a social panacea during the prewar years. The Lost Generation was raised in this sanguine intellectual and social milieu advocated by such intellectuals as Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, and John Dewey but repudiated it for a more dire interpretation of western society offered by Oswald Spengler and H.L. Mencken. Yet the Lost Generation conveniently retained James’s pragmatic romanticism for the individual, which fostered its development of the heroic self. At times they believed that the power of the heroic self could conquer all social ills, while at other times they slid into despondency, believing that the heroic self was just a self-inspired mythological projection that society would surely stamp out. It was not uncommon for these intellectuals to shift between romance and irony from day to day, or even within single pieces of writing.

The tension of apprehending the world dialectically, without providing a synthesis, meant that the Lost Generation’s intellectual development was characterized

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87 Thanks to friend Paul Sipes for giving me this example.
by constant flux, a realistic pattern of mental growth concerning the variegated nature of modernity. But such “terrible honesty” played havoc with the psychological stability of Dos Passos and his friends. For many, the incompatible tension between romance and irony expressed itself in the rabid alcoholism of Scott Fitzgerald and Hart Crane, the sexual exploits of E. E. Cummings, and the flight to Europe by everyone.

Conclusion

Dos Passos made no effort to conceal his personal and social dialectical tension of romance and irony. He expressed these sentiments in his literature, but his essays, personal correspondence, and journals are permeated with both romantic delusions and ironic fatalism regarding his place in society. It is Dos Passos’s philosophical, literary, and social interests that I have used to help clarify and enlarge our understanding of the Lost Generation. But the six other writers who complement this study – Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wilson, Cummings, Crane, and Cowley – had a vested interest in all of these areas as well, and many times their passion equaled Dos Passos’s. With that said, using any of the other six as the grid by which to look at the Lost Generation would have yielded a different dissertation, but I would argue that the differences would be in points of emphasis not subject matter. The emphasis on Dos Passos is far from arbitrary. Of the Lost Generation writers, he best represents the quest to apprehend epistemically the heroic self in postwar society.
Aaron Burr became an icon for heroism during the nineteen twenties. He was the appropriate metaphor for the *New York Times* when it covered the 1921 heavyweight fight between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier. The *Times* declared that like Aaron Burr, who “bade Hamilton to meet him over in Jersey and there destroyed his enemy,” Dempsey had emerged victorious.\(^{88}\) For poet William Carlos Williams, Burr was the ideal model of heroism because of his insatiable ambitions. Williams was enamored with Burr’s treasonous attempts to take over the presidency in 1800 because his rebellion sprang from a desire for “freedom of conscience, a new start, and to be quit of Europe.” American society could not abide such rebellion, and according to Williams, “that’s why they hated him: they feared his power. It was the dread and the love of his free spirit.”\(^{89}\)


\(^{89}\) William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1956), 201. When Williams personally encountered the embodiment of the debonair “Burr” spirit in a 1922 tawdry affair with the sexually aggressive Dadaist, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, he did not fare so well. Initially he was attracted to the Baroness because she exhibited the ambitious heroism that he admired in Burr. But when he became the object of her sexual ambitions, Williams began to parry her aggressive advances, especially when she suggested that he needed to contract syphilis from her in order to “free his mind for serious art.” Upon being repeatedly rejected, the Baroness responded with her own invective, “Why are you so small – Carlos Williams? Why do you not trust me – to help you? You love and
Aaron Burr was heroic to the nineteen-twenties mindset because he revolted against the socially prescribed mandate of his time, which deemed the individual’s submission to governmental authority as necessary for maintaining social harmony.

To be a hero in the tradition of Aaron Burr permeated the 1920 *This Side of Paradise*, the first novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel is Fitzgerald’s semi-autobiographical account of his own quest for heroic immortality that he expressed through the experiences of his college-aged protagonist Amory Blaine. More than anything, Amory wants to become “a personage,” an individual of distinction, someone who “is never thought about apart from what he’s done.” There is a problem, however. Amory soon realizes that America is not propitious for cultivating heroes. In America the heroic individual does not matter. Amory is disheartened that, during a time when Americans pride themselves on their individuality, he cannot classify contemporaneous America as “a period of individualism.” In America, he complains, when anyone takes a

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90 Jeffrey Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 269. Meyers spends abundant time on Fitzgerald’s psychological state as a writer. Fitzgerald was haunted by a perpetual inferiority complex, which caused him to develop a strong sense of hero worship. He was not only envious of his close friend Ernest Hemingway’s nineteen-twenties fame, but Hemingways masculine heroic persona.
stand, they immediately “become two-minute figures,” quickly washed aside by an indifferent society.\textsuperscript{91}

For Amory, the demise of individualism means the end of heroism, and he surmises that the loss of both is a direct consequence of the Great War. He declares that the era in which “war used to be the most individualistic pursuit of man” is over. The war, he determined, “had ruined the old backgrounds,” it had “killed individualism out of our generation.” Amory sardonically questions how any schoolboy could “make a hero of Pershing,” America’s heralded Great War general. The war had destroyed the traditional metaphor of the hero as the gallant warrior. Amory understands that not only has the martial metaphor of heroism been obliterated, the antiquated thinking that created the whole “Victorian war” which accounted for “the deaths of several millions of young men” is no longer viable for determining conceptions of heroism. The understanding of the hero, he concludes, has “all got to be worked out for the individual by the individual.”\textsuperscript{92}

By the end of the novel Amory discovers that the heroic individual is someone who revolts against social propriety. That type of hero was represented by Aaron Burr, who personified the spirit of “gorgeous youth,” who was unafraid of the “strange corners of life.” In the spirit of Burr, Amory finally becomes a personage by fomenting his own personal revolt against the social mores by which he had been raised. He rejects society’s notion of a “definite abstract goodness.” He no longer trusts “generalities and epigrams.” In so doing he becomes one of those rare individuals who enters life’s “labyrinth as [a]\textsuperscript{91} F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{This Side of Paradise} (New York: New American Library, 1996), 115, 221.
stark soul,” someone who can face the “damned muddle” torrents of existence in heroic fashion. Amory embraces the necessary qualification of the heroic personage, which is to begin “all inquiries with himself,” the heroic individual.\footnote{F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{This Side of Paradise}, 269, 245.}

Fitzgerald’s search for the heroic individual was representative of the group of writers who made up the Lost Generation. The Lost Generation’s emphasis upon the individual was not derived from a commitment to individualism for individualism’s sake; indeed the very structure of American society had been built around deference to the integrity of the individual.\footnote{F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{This Side of Paradise}, 163, 270.} The Lost Generation emphasized the heroic individual in reaction to what it believed to be postwar society’s dismissal of the individual’s central role. It reasoned that a society which denied the prominence of the individual could only produce heroes “in history – not in life.” “No man can stand prominence these days,” reasoned Fitzgerald’s protagonist; “It’s the surest path to obscurity.”\footnote{Richard N. Bellah, Richard Masden, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, \textit{Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 142.} In the minds of the Lost Generation writers, the war had killed the heroic individual and opened the very door to the “path to obscurity.” But what the war actually dealt was the final blow to an already weakened sense of the heroic self.

This chapter will first demonstrate that by 1914 the American hero, understood in terms of battle-tested valor, had already lost its preeminent position as an object of social honor as a consequence of urbanization and commercial opulence. In reaction, fin-de-siècle intellectuals such as Theodore Roosevelt and Oliver Wendell Holmes tried to
reanimate the moribund military hero by appealing to the heroics exemplified in the Civil and Spanish American Wars, while painter Thomas Eakins and philosopher William James posited alternate models of heroism that emphasized heroic acts in everyday life. The onset of the Great War solidified the prominence of the martial ideal, but the senselessness of the war for the Lost Generation, destroyed for it any conceptions of conventional heroism.

Along with the martial ideal being under attack, all heroic acts were in danger of becoming meaningless as a result of psychoanalysis’s biological determinism. This determinism applied social pressure upon the individual to succumb to the martial ideal, and the doctrine was vindicated with the onset of war. But Freud and his teachings dominated the American intellectual trends in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This chapter argues that the Lost Generation writers turned to psychoanalysis as an interpretative looking glass through which to understand the war, and found in it a heroic model, defined by the individual’s revolt against social tyranny, that helped to create a new sense of the heroic self.

The Death of the Martial Ideal

In order to appreciate better the demise of the heroic individual it is important to recognize that in the nineteenth century individual heroism was primarily characterized by the war hero. Among the advocates of the martial ideal were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle. In 1841 Emerson maintained that a hero was defined by a “warlike
attitude” that was affirmed by his “ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies.” Emerson’s war language was not metaphoric. “We give the name of Heroism,” he insisted, “to this military attitude of the soul.” To emphasize heroism’s militant source, he declared that “Times of heroism are generally times of terror,” in which “human virtue demands her champions and martyrs, and the trial of persecution always proceeds.” Through the warrior persona of the hero, Emerson accentuated the identity of the hero as a distinct individual, asserting that “self-trust is the essence of heroism.” Heroism is “obedience to a secret impulse of an individual’s character,” and that character is the “last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents.”

1841 presented a double endorsement for the military hero. In that same year the English intellectual Thomas Carlyle published *Heroes and Hero Worship*, the text that would frame the discourse on heroism for the next century. Like Emerson, Carlyle aggrandized the individual, maintaining that “Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.” Carlyle’s hero was defined by military vigor, whether one was a prophet, priest, king, or poet. For Carlyle and Emerson the hero was a fantastic creature, a

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96 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 225-235. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals X, 7* (February 1864), found in George Frederickson *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 178. Emerson carried his vision of the heroic warrior through to the end of the Civil War, evinced in a wartime letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes that equated his individualist doctrine of “self reliance,” with the soldierly “professional feeling” that encountered neither “panics nor excitements.”

97 Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero Worship*, (New York: The Book League of America, 1942), 5. Pragmatic philosopher Sydney Hook credited Carlyle with shaping the discourse of heroism. Hook wrote *The Hero in History* a century later, acknowledging that heroism and war often go hand in hand; that it was during times of war when “the fate of peoples seems to hang visibly on what one person, perhaps a few, decide.” Hook’s philosophy of heroic history, qualifies Carlyle’s worship of the individual. It is true, Hook
Homeric demigod who in the face of mortal danger attained to a “Stoicism not of the schools but of the blood.”

We know that Emerson’s and Carlyle’s brand of heroism had a profound affect on American intellectuals by Henry Adams’s reaction to it. He complained to William James in 1882:

With hero worship like Carlyle’s I have little patience. In history heroes have neutralized each other, and the result is no more than would have been reached without them. Indeed military heroes I suspect that the ultimate result has been retardation. Nevertheless you could doubtless at any time stop the entire process of human thought by killing a few score of men. So far I am with you. A few hundred men represent the entire intellectual activity of the whole thirteen hundred millions. What then?

Like historian Frederick Jackson turner, who a decade later would use American geography to argue that the American identity was destined to change, Adams began his opus the *History of the United States of America* in 1884 with the “problem of geography.” Adams argued that a “sense of space” had always haunted Americans since the time of the Puritans. He determined that frontier life did shape the American individual, but, unlike Turner, he interpreted it as a harmful experience that “wore out generation after generation of women and children.” Adams determined that if frontier life had helped to instill the rugged warrior spirit into the American consciousness, then it was high time for the

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98 Emerson, *Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 228.

frontier to close and the martial ideal to be set aside. Adams’ remarks not only situate the late nineteenth century as an epoch in which the martial ideal was in decline; they reveal America’s readiness for new definition of heroism.

Adams’s declaration that the heroic warrior was an outmoded ideal foreshadowed Turner’s 1893 assessment that American geography had created a radical change in American civilization. Turner’s theory, based on the 1890 Census Bureau announcement that the nation was so settled that there could hardly be said to be a frontier line, declared that what had traditionally defined the American character, “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of settlement westward,” was gone, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

The closing of the frontier did not automate the decline of martial ideal, but it did signal that change was on the horizon, and that new forces would dictate America’s understanding of the heroic self. Those new forces, manifest in three social and intellectual conditions of American commercialism and urbanization, the Great War, and the biological determinism of Sigmund Freud, turned out to be detrimental, not only to the martial ideal, but to the very conception of heroic individualism.

100 From Clive Bush, Halfway to Revolution, 71.

101 Clive Bush, Halfway to Revolution, 74.

102 Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” from Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 39, 54. Turner could only guess at how the American identities that had been shaped by the frontier, such as individualism, restless energy, and self-sufficient nationalism would translate to a new era.
Concerning the close of the frontier, and the rise of urbanization and commercialism, Adams and Turner understood that the heroic individual would be one of the casualties. The displacement of the genteel, decentralized, small town community life by the new urban industrial society of rampant commercialism rendered obsolete the need for a strong sense of heroism. Historian Robert Wiebe reminds us that no longer were intimate community relationships regarded as the social nexus of economics, politics and values. Urban growth, industrialization, and the corresponding rise of mass communication set new parameters on personal contact and the transmission of ideas.¹⁰³ These social changes negatively affected the American literati from Hawthorne to Hemingway, Leo Marx argues in *Machine in the Garden*, because they believed that the frontier wilderness which fostered defined the heroic spirit could not be sustained in an urban culture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Adams’s and Turner’s prescience that traditional forms of identity would crumble had come true for many intellectuals when it came to their understanding of the heroic individual.¹⁰⁴

The transition between the frontier and city life became a dominant theme for early twentieth-century intellectuals such as Waldo Frank and the Young Americans. This eighteen-eighties generation witnessed the sun setting on America’s pastoral frontier and they were nonplussed regarding how to respond. The new urban landscape and commercialism had created, they believed, a tenuous social condition that had drifted


¹⁰⁴ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, Oxford University Press, 1964), 32-33. For these intellectuals the modern era no longer sought refuge in nature as the nation’s spiritual center. Realizing that the machine was here to stay, Marx argues, that many writers struggled to provide through their literature a sense that humanity could be served by technology which did not destroy its bond with the natural world.
from stable Victorian mores that rigidly, but at least consistently, divided masculine and feminine ideals. Waldo Frank spoke for his generation by declaring his love for post-Turnerian America, but that the qualities he admired were shrouded in secrecy. Instead, all that America “bawled forth with a strident voice were the things I detested.”

Consequently, these social critics determined America to be confused “turmoiled giant who cannot speak.” Industrialism had become the new Puritanism that denied to America any life “beyond the ties of traffic and the arteries of trade.” It had “swept the American land and made it rich. Broke in on the American soul and made it poor.” In such frenetic times the individual’s significance was markedly devalued. This urbanized and industrialized America, for Frank and his coterie of Young American intellectuals, was no longer able to nurture a robust sense of heroism.

Alternative Heroic Models

Convinced as they were that the heroic individual had been emasculated by “modern decadence and over-civilization,” intellectuals, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Theodore Roosevelt sought to revive the heroic individual through Emerson’s and Carlyle’s martial ideal. Holmes, in “A Soldier’s Faith,” an 1895 Memorial Day address to Harvard graduates, conceded that “war is out of fashion,” in the modern era. It


106 Waldo Frank, Our America (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 3, 45, 98.
had been replaced by effete commercialism that had created men who no longer heralded the soldier’s glory of “honor rather than life,” as one who would rather die than “suffer disgrace.” Holmes pined for war’s ability to foment the warrior spirit. “War, when you are at it, is horrible and dull,” he admitted. “It is only when time has passed that you see that its message was divine.” Holmes’s view of war was complicated. He was a veteran of the Civil War, in which he was wounded three times, and he also witnessed the death of many friends. But he maintained a belief that war benefited society. Although he continuously affirmed his hatred for war, and faltered when retelling his personal accounts, he believed that war brought out the noble side of human nature. “I do not know what is true. I do not know the meaning of the universe” he confessed at the Memorial Day address. “But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of the creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt. . . that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has little notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.”

By romanticizing the effects of the Civil War, Holmes confirmed the social function that memory played in fostering the martial ideal. The two most significant social problems to overcome after 1865 were healing and justice. Though the war was over, it was far from clear to either northern or southern societies as to how they could reconcile their mutual animosity. Reconciliation did occur, however, argues historian

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David Blight in *Race and Reunion*, because sectional, political, and personal enmities toward each other were set aside, and were directed toward the freed slave.\(^{109}\) Consequently, white America was able to begin the healing process, and to memorialize the war in heroic fashion, without feeling that justice for regional and personal insults created by the war still demanded to be satisfied.

The consequence of the divisional healing meant that postwar generation youngsters like Teddy Roosevelt, who was born at the beginning of the Civil War, were able to come of age when national consciousness regarding the war was amenable to positive interpretation. Their historical consciousness was built through stories of heroic valor of troops and generals. Novelist Sherwood Anderson, born in 1876, remembered being raised on the tactical and personal Civil War accounts from his father, a man who “was made for romance” of war stories. The literary son grew up hearing his father testify that the war “was an affair of life or death. Why speak of the matter? My country needed me and I, and my intrepid companion, had been selected because we were the bravest men in the army.”\(^{110}\)

As these stories were translated to the postwar generation, men like Roosevelt seized the chance to “share in the glory of Manilla, in the honor of Santiago” during the Spanish American War. After his own wartime experience, in the spirit of martial heroism, Roosevelt praised the men of Chicago in his “The Strenuous Life” speech for being from the “State which gave to the country Lincoln and Grant, men who

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preeminently and distinctly embody all that is most American in the American character.” He offered his audience the chance to recognize that the highest plane of living comes through the one who “does not shrink from danger, from hardship or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.” Like Holmes, Roosevelt blamed the “over-civilized” man who had lost the “great fighting, masterful virtues.” Though it was difficult for heroic warriors, Roosevelt confessed, “Thank God for the iron in the blood of the men who upheld the wisdom of Lincoln, and bore sword or rifle in the armies of Grant.”

For Roosevelt, the martial ideal was not just beneficial for the individual hero, but for society as well.

Other post-Civil war intellectuals, such as realist writer William Dean Howells, painter Thomas Eakins, and Harvard philosopher William James understood the social ramifications of not having a robust sense of heroism, or clear parameters on which to build one. But they rejected the martial ideal as no longer a viable paradigm on which to base a modern industrialized society. In a 1914 interview, Howells deplored the warrior ideal for its pernicious spiritual affect on a nation’s culture. “War stops literature,” he demanded. As defense for his argument, Howells cited a post Franco-Prussian war conversation with a German novelist, whom Howells refused to name. The novelist maintained that “There are no longer any German novelists worthy of the name. Our new ideal has stopped all that. Militarism is our new ideal – the ideal of Duty – and it has killed our imagination. So the German novel is dead.” Because America had not entered the European conflict in 1914, Howells was delighted that “fighting is no longer

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our ideal.” Consistent with the Lost Generation’s rejection of a Carlylean heroic model that finds “valor in poetry,” Howells maintained that such valor was no longer fashionable, as it only “thrilled the writers of bygone centuries.”\footnote{William Dean Howells “War Stops Literature,” \textit{New York Times}, Sunday, November 29, 1914, Section: Magazine, SM8.}

Howells was not speaking just for himself. He reflected an anti-militaristic sympathy among intellectuals such as Harvard philosopher George Santayana, who offered an alternative model of heroism by suggesting that “if a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common man must be something of a saint and something of a hero.”\footnote{George Santayana, “Democracy,” in \textit{Reason in Society}, (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1905), quoted in Herbert Croly, \textit{The Promise of American Life}, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1912), 454.} The portrait painter Thomas Eakins had attempted to do just that. He glorified the mundane rituals of everyday life, accentuating the heroic in his sitters by drawing special attention to their achievements. His portraits of men celebrated traditional masculinity, in an attempt to elevate the moral, disciplined, self-made man. His 1872 \textit{The Pair-Oared Shell} emphasized men’s physical prowess, while his 1875 \textit{Gross Clinic} painting demonstrated the morality and discipline obtainable through education and science. Like Holmes and Roosevelt, Eakins was sensitive to what he perceived as the emasculating propensity of industrialized fin-de-siecle society. In reaction to what he believed to be a feminizing shift in American society, it was not uncommon for Eakins to exact his frustrations upon his female sitters. Eakins often painted women as a little older than they actually were, emphasized their facial creases while adding a slight stoop to their posture. Early photographs of \textit{The Artist’s Wife and Setter Dog}, featuring Eakins’s

\footnote{Elizabeth Johns, \textit{The Heroism of Modern Life}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Figure 91.}
own wife, Susan Macdowell Eakins, reveal that he originally painted her with soft and full facial features. He later painted over her face, drawing it out into a more gaunt and hollow stare. By performing these artistic manipulations, Eakins offered his art as a social corrective against the enervation of the heroic male.\textsuperscript{115}

The issue at hand was whether the “common man” model of the heroic self, suggested by Santayana and applied by Eakins, could replace the martial ideal while still engendering the sensual excitement and danger that the warrior model provided. William Dean Howells may have struck the intellectual chord that was antipathetic to the martial hero but he underestimated the allure of war. Harvard’s William James did not. Though a pacifist, James could not deny that many personal and social virtues were only attainable through war. His 1906 address to Stanford University, suggested that the “martial values” developed through war are “absolute and permanent human goods.” As much as it may have pained him, James determined that without war society would slide into moral “degeneration.” In the same vein, H.G. Wells confessed that “in many ways war is the most socialistic of forces.” In military service men “are not flung out of employment to degenerate because there is no immediate work for them to do. They are fed and drilled and trained for better services.”\textsuperscript{116} Reflecting on Well’s words, James recognized that it was military service and war that creates “universal responsibility” among denizens of nations; a virtue that “will remain a permanent acquisition when the last ammunition has

been used in the fireworks that celebrate the final peace.”^117 Along with Santayana and Eakins, James’s challenge at the beginning of the twentieth century was to find a way in which the heroic individual could recognize his or her individual endowment outside of war.

To replace the war hero, James adopted what he called a “moral equivalent to war.” He envisioned a social heroism that engendered moral development “without war,” while hoping for a “reign of peace” that would bring about the “gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium.”^118 James not only understood that the titillation of wartime exigencies naturally sprouted the heroic spirit, he was aware, suggests intellectual historian George Cotkin, that modern America was suffering from acute ennui.^119 Therefore, to achieve the same results peacefully, the requisite mandate entailed a “constant striving” in order to keep “moral equivalent” heroism from falling off a “precipitous edge.”^120 James’s confidence in such individual vigor was guarded. Without serious commitment from individuals, peacetime heroics as a legitimate replacement for war would die on the vine. Such a lapse in moral character would open the door to the social degeneration that James feared.


^118 William James, “Moral equivalent to war” from Approaches to peace : a reader in peace studies / edited by David P. Barash (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65-69


For intellectuals like Britain’s leading philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who confessed to being a disciple of James’s moral equivalent to war, such enthusiasm for an alternative to war seemed like a wonderful but evanescent dream. Writing in the fall of 1914, Russell hoped for a time when the “desire for triumph and power” could best be expressed through “ordinary contests of football and politics.” Russell recommended these ideas out of the social urgency to find any replacement for war other than watching his fellow Englishmen senselessly follow their “impulses that lead to martyrdom.”¹²¹

For America the guns of August, 1914, rendered moot James’s proposal for a “Moral Equivalent of War.” By 1917, the Great War fighting generation that had been born in the eighteen nineties had been following the daily headlines concerning the war. Hundreds of thousands of young men, including the Lost Generation writers, were chomping at the bit to test their own military valor. Ripe for a hardy sense of the heroic self, this generation had been raised in a fully industrialized society free from the defining effects of the frontier. Generational distance from the Civil War, and the relative insignificance of the Spanish American war meant that it could redefine itself under a modern martial ideal. Tied together with the progressive historical optimism of the early twentieth-century in which this generation matured, these factors contributed to its inability to distinguish between noble heroism and its more sinister alternatives of militarism, jingoism, and imperialism that had been unleashed in Europe.¹²²


¹²² Christopher Lasch’s Bibliographic essay on Thomas Carlyle in The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, offers a contextualized look at Carlyle’s thesis, suggesting that Carlyle’s oeuvre can best be understood by the theme of what it is to live in a world without wonder. Heroes and Hero Worship argues,
The Lost Generation’s initial belief that America’s involvement in the war was necessary and good, quickly turned cynical when it realized there were no winners in this conflict. With millions of individuals dead, the war had literally and figuratively killed the heroic warrior. Hemingway’s famous quote to his parents in October 1918, “there are no heroes in this war. . . All the heroes are dead”\(^{123}\) should be taken in both the physical and spiritual senses. But, physical death was not the problem for Hemingway; it was living with the aftermath of war that was so destructive to the human spirit. The real heroes, he exclaims, are the parents who “suffer a thousand times more” because they have outlived their sons. No, assured Hemingway, the dead “are the lucky ones,” because they had not witnessed the destruction of the martial hero. When Fitzgerald lamented to Hemingway at the end of 1925 that he had missed the opportunity to go to war, Hemingway reassured his friend that the only thing the war was good for was being the best literary subject. Otherwise, he confessed, he did not get “anything worth a damn out [of it] as a whole show.”\(^{124}\) Even Malcolm Cowley, who maintained a “beat Germany first” attitude throughout the war, confessed that Americans did not know what it meant to be at war for three years. For the wars of the modern world, he exclaimed “are no


\(^{124}\) Hemingway, *Selected Letters*, 176-177. For William Dean Howells, the Great War was not even conducive to good subject material. He would be proven wrong as the twenties war literature emerged, but Howells was concerned about the stifling effect that war had upon creativity.
longer the toy wars of the Middle Ages.”

Carlyle’s imperative that the poet is defined as someone who could not “sing the Heroic warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic warrior too,” was completely lost on the postwar poets. Edmund Wilson, one of the Lost Generation’s premiere literary critics, believed that “the effect of the war” on his generation’s literature revealed its gloomy view of the hero. He confirmed to publisher Maxwell Perkins, a conspicuous unwillingness of “the heroes of these writers never act on their fellows, their thoughts never pass into action.” Wilson’s assessment can be seen in Hemingway’s 1925 In Our Time, where he chose to describe the horrors of war and the loss of heroism by replacing the bloody encounters of war with those of Spanish bullfighting. John Dos Passos, who was the writer most sensitive to the war, declared that the war had stripped dignity and heroism from humanity. If men were not cowards” he wailed, “if men trusted themselves instead of their lying governors there would be none of this supreme asininity of war. We are all cowards and God we believe what we’re told.”

Dos Passos disclosed his dark feelings in his war novel Three Soldiers, in which his three protagonists exemplify anything but honor and military discipline. Fuselli simply fades into obscurity, Chrisfield kills a commanding officer with a grenade and Andrews deserts.


126 Carlyle, Heroes and Hero Worship, 106-107.


It did not take long for the Lost Generation to realize that their own fantasies of heroism would not come true in the Great War. Looking back on his experience poet E.E. Cummings admitted that though he and many of his fellow writers experienced the war, they never considered themselves “even slightly heroic.” He confessed “being neither warrior nor conscientious objector, saint nor hero, I embarked for France as an ambulance driver.”\textsuperscript{129} Already apathetic a year after America’s entry into the war, Poet Hart Crane tried to enlist in the army on a hot August day in 1918, not because he embodied either “patriotism nor bravery,” but because he wanted to get away from the heat and the tempestuous “conditions at home.”\textsuperscript{130} Though Hemingway has often been considered heroic for receiving injuries during the war, he probably reveals more of the truth in \textit{A Farewell to Arms}, when he admits that he was doing nothing heroic during the attack. Smugly, he tells a questioning doctor, “I was blown up while we were eating cheese.”\textsuperscript{131}

Not only had the war concluded the half-century debate that the most valid model of heroism was not the martial ideal, the warrior hero had become a subject of ridicule for postwar writers. In \textit{Soldier’s Pay}, William Faulkner satirizes a soldier who “jealously” wished that he had been “lucky enough” to be seriously wounded in combat. And he would have, he complains, or at least would have become a corporal if they had not “stopped the war on him.” The wiser soldiers in Faulkner’s portrayal understand “the old bunk about knights of the air and the romance of battle.” Patriotic heroism fades when

\textsuperscript{131} Ernest Hemingway, \textit{A Farewell to Arms} (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 63.
“the excitement is over,” and being wounded in battle was “stylish no more.” For E. E. Cummings in *The Enormous Room*, it was the witless soldier, the mindless drone, whose primary virtue was “heroism, as regards males.” And Thomas Boyd’s *Through the Wheat* characterized military heroism as a “handicap.” There was little enviable about the soldier who “believed that he was a crusader reincarnate, engaged in the holy service of saving religion, morality, purity, and civilization from the barbaric hand of that nation whose people he referred to as Huns.”

For the Lost Generation, the heroic warrior had not only died, it had failed to preserve traditional military postmortem honor. The Lost Generation realized what John Keegan concludes in *A History of Warfare*, that war taxes every emotion of a society, and that it is civilized society, not war, that makes the world turn. The Lost Generation realized that with the martial hero dead and dishonored, it had no choice but to repudiate Carlyle’s grandiloquent utterance “that all factors in history, save great men, were inconsequential.”

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Freud for a Lost Generation

The death of the martial hero in World War I meant that the Lost Generation needed an alternative avatar. Another problem had cropped up in the previous half century, however, that had proven to be more detrimental to the heroic individual than modern commercialism or even the Great War. These two forces had undermined and killed the martial heroic model, but the doctrine of biological determinism threatened the very conception of a heroic ideal. William James addressed the problem in the eighteen eighties, but it would take the innovative understanding of human nature ushered in by Sigmund Freud to create a heroic ideal that would provide the meaning of heroism for the Lost Generation.

Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer sparked the debate against staunch defenders of individual freewill, such as William James, by arguing that heroic acts were meaningless because they were simply biological responses to social stimuli “for those who are constitutionally fittest to thrive under the conditions in which they are placed.” Spencer’s interpretation of natural selection strove to flatten society out, leaving biology to determine who was prepared to rise to the top. Physical and mental traits would naturally prevail over volition, leaving no room to interpret as valorous any act performed by an individual because that act would not have been a choice, but a mere response to biological stimuli. As a perennial believer in the power of the individual’s will, William


137 See Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*, (New York, 1874), 344-346. James also

James had no choice but to take on “the error” of “Mr. Herbert Spencer and his disciples.”

James’s response to Spencer argued that it is the individual who shapes society, a view that would have a profound affect upon the Lost Generation’s sense of the heroic self. He outlined his views in “Great Men and Their Environment,” an 1880 lecture on the relationship between the individual and society which accentuated the defiance of an individual’s will. He challenged the converts to biological determinism to decide whether a person’s environment was “more likely to preserve or to destroy him, on account of this or that peculiarity with which he may be born?” James answers his own rhetorical question by postulating that even though biology may select great people, those heroic individuals then modify the environment in “an entirely original and peculiar way.” For proof of his theorem James pointed to the “accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions,” that had affected society. James postulated a mutually affective relationship between the hero and his or her environment, contending that

The mutations of societies, then, from generation to generation, are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the example of individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movement, setters of precedent or fashion, centres of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction.


140 As a scientist, James had always accepted Darwinian dogma, and he refused to disregard it in order to repudiate Spencer. His dilemma was to uphold the both the integrity of scientific biology and free will. He argued for both.
Although James was perfervidly individualistic, he did not consider the individual as a distinct entity separate from his or her environment.\textsuperscript{142}

With this caveat in place, however, James believed that the individual will is powerful enough to drive social evolution. Societies only evolve, James argued, when heroic individuals actively engage their social environment. “The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.”\textsuperscript{143} And society has always demanded that its heroes rise to the occasion. James offered more definitive proof two decades later in the \textit{Varieties of Religious Experience}, arguing that society believes “the world to be essentially a theater for heroism.” In fact, because in heroism, “life’s supreme mystery is hidden,” society will “tolerate no one who has no capacity whatever for it in any direction.”\textsuperscript{144}

Despite James’s efforts to dismantle biological determinism it remained obstinately at the forefront of the discourse on heroism. By 1900, through the conduit of Freudian psychoanalysis, the discussion had shifted from Spencer’s assertion that individual acts do not matter, to whether individual acts could be performed at all. James and Spencer had kept the discussion on the level of human action, but the power of biological stimuli forced Freud to contend with the primordial level of human nature. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} William James, \textit{Essays in Radical Empiricism}, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), fn. 170.
\item \textsuperscript{143} James, “Great Men and their Environment,” 441-459.
\end{itemize}
new hurdle was not whether certain acts could be considered heroic, or whether the
martial ideal was an appropriate model, but whether biology was so irresistible that all
acts were meaningless. If it was true that biology could not be resisted then not only
would the militarist impulse be impossible to suppress, it would mean that free will was
dead. There could be no heroes of any kind under this model of humanity.

As it had been for William James, biology was an enduring theme for Freud.
From his understanding of biology he postulated that one person’s hatred of another was
instinctual, a biological function fostered by a reaction against the fear of death. The
ubiquitous social reality of aggression and death compelled Freud to develop what he
called the ‘death instinct’ to explain the human propensity to want to destroy the other.145
Freud came to believe that human aggression was both innate and independent of
sexuality. He explained that “This aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main
representative of the “death instinct” which we have found alongside of Eros and which
shares world-dominion with it.”146 The individual’s biological antipathy of death was so
prominent in psychoanalysis that its adherents’ discounted all forms of heroism. In 1900,
Harvard’s Dean of Science, N. S. Shaler remarked that acts of heroism were nothing
more than a response to the terror of death.147 In 1915 the prominent American

University Press, 1985), 364.


147 Nathaneil Southgate Shaler, The Individual: A Study of Life and Death, (New York: D. Appleton and
Company, 1900), 214-215. Shaler maintained that all human altruism, including acts of sacrifice for the
greater good of society were predicated upon the individual’s fear of death. For a discussion on the
centrality of heroism and death in early twentieth-century society, see: Earnest Becker, The Birth and
psychologist G. Stanley Hall concurred that the “fear of death is natural and primitive.” Hall devalued any individual’s heroic love of life as simply an aversion of death, for it is in humanity’s nature, he said to “live as long, intensively, and richly as possible.” Indeed, the very motivation for any zest for life is the instinctual belief that “death has always called attention, more than anything else, to the soul.”

Faced with such a powerful biological impetus, Freud knew that “simple suppression of man’s aggressive tendencies” would bear little positive fruit. He needed an alternative to “divert it into a channel other than that of warfare.” For it is modern warfare that not only “affords no scope for acts of heroism according to the old ideals,” it “destroys lives that were full of promise; it forces the individual into situations that same his manhood, obliging him to murder fellow men, against his will.”

Freud’s teachings penetrated the American intellectual climate during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It began with Freud’s 1909 Clark University lectures. When William James’s student, E. B. Holt, professor of philosophy and psychology at Harvard from 1901–1918, attended Freud’s lectures he celebrated the German psychoanalyst for offering “the first key which psychology has ever had which fitted.” Although Freud’s lectures were offered in German, he reassured his audience


149 Sigmund Freud, “Why War,” Free World, 11:4 (April, 1946), 18. The correspondence between Einstein took place in 1931, and was published in English after World War II. Freud often used the term “Infinitilism” to describe the people who acted out of an aggressive or anti-social impulse, referring to the regression of an individual into a childlike tantrum. For a discussion of the struggle between the id, ego, superego in regards to Freud’s notion of heroes and villains, see: Martin Wain, Freud’s Answer: The Social Origins of Our Psychoanalytical Century, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 203-221.
during the first lecture that they would have “no need to be afraid that any special medical knowledge will be required for following what I have to say.”\textsuperscript{151} The following year, the lectures were translated into an elegant and simple prose, and published in the American Journal of Psychology. The impact was immediate, demonstrated by Virginia Woolf’s oft-quoted comment that “On or about December 1910, human nature changed.”\textsuperscript{152} Freud outlined in five lectures a historical compendium of psychoanalysis, touching upon the key themes of conscious and unconscious, repression, dream analysis, infantile sexuality, and transference.

The effect was far reaching. American intellectuals outside of academia, especially the Greenwich Village avant-garde bohemians such as Mabel Dodge, Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, and Eugene O’Neill became instant converts to the doctrines of psychoanalysis. They submitted to personal sessions of psychoanalysis, begged friends to try it, and most importantly, they infused their writings with psychoanalytic subject matter, making Freud and his ideas particularly vogue to a more general American audience. By 1915, Freud’s theories were prominent intellectual motifs, in part due to Holt’s popularization of Freud’s concepts with \textit{The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics}, psychologist James Jackson Putnam’s \textit{Human Motives}, and a series of articles by Eastman in \textit{Everybody’s} magazine.\textsuperscript{153} The postwar Lost Generation writers had been


largely influenced by the Village Bohemians, but in 1920 these younger intellectuals received a fuller expression of Freud’s principles when the highly readable *An Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, the English translation of Freud’s 1915-1917 Vienna Lectures was published.\(^{154}\)

Of course Freud had done for the Lost Generation what he had done for the Village Bohemians by freeing them from sexual restraints. Cummings told his sister that he expected her to be “coversant with two books: The Interpretation of Dreams, and WIT and the Unconscious.” He explained to her “SEX IS EVERYTHING(as Freud says): You either know this or you don’t.”\(^{155}\) During the latter half of the nineteen twenties, Cummings underwent his own psychoanalytical treatment to address what he felt were his own personal inadequacies. Malcolm Cowley remarked that Freud had converted even those who “seriously question his beliefs;” he had “helped to dissipate the atmosphere of puritanism that surrounded our youth.”\(^{156}\)

The ubiquitous presence of Freudian ideas in the preceding decades naturally meant that they were no longer considered vanguard by the twenties. Lost Generation writers were on the observing end of Freudian emancipation, watching as “young women all over the country were reading Freud and attempting to lose their inhibitions.”\(^{157}\) Though Malcolm Cowley conceded Freud’s lasting penetration into the twenties mindset, he also remarked that Freud’s teachings, especially that concerning sexuality, had

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become passe for the twenties literati, who did “not model their work on Freudian theories” as novelists had during the previous decade.\textsuperscript{158} The twenties intellectuals had become casual enough with Freud to jibe at and parody his influence on American society.\textsuperscript{159}

What these intellectuals played with, however, was Freud’s views on sexuality, not his teachings on other aspects of human nature. In short, the Lost Generation did not use Freud to free itself sexually. They used him to interpret the war. Psychoanalysis had allowed the Lost Generation writers to understand the war in terms that made sense. They had witnessed in the onslaught of war human nature’s drive toward violence, vindicating the “death instinct.”\textsuperscript{160}

William James’s died before he could witness the annihilation of his moral equivalent to war, but Freud was compelled to interpret the Great War as a catastrophe that cemented his belief in biological determinism. The war was the climax of a social history that had begun with prehistoric primitive individuals and had consequently devolved into a collective brutality that was “at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it.” Internally despairing, Freud confessed, “And


\textsuperscript{158} See David Vanderwerken, “Dos Passos’ Streets of Night: A Reconsideration,” 4 Markham Review (October 1975), 61-65. Vanderwerken is the only critic to ascribe to any of Dos Passos’s novels a profound Freudian influence. He draws his conclusions from the structure of the novel, not from any specific references from Dos Passos. Although the thesis should be considered because of Freud’s prominence during the era, it is doubtful that Freud played such a significant role in determining Dos Passos’s subject matter.

now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer to obscure us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction as it works itself out in the human species.” Such a struggle had infected every aspect of society, depreciating morality on every level. Freud expressed his disgust that the so-called “passionless impartiality” of the sciences had even been compromised by war, as anthropologists and psychiatrists alike joined the fray, claiming the enemy to be “inferior and degenerate” having a “disease of the mind or spirit.”\(^{161}\)

Adding weight to Freud’s assessment, British philosopher Bertrand Russell concurred that the war manifested a “primitive instinct of collective hostility to strangers.” He maintained that if a nation’s conviction was that “war is the ultimate test of a nation’s manhood,” then that nation’s social ethic was indeed based upon a “rather barbarous standard of values.” Unlike nations, Russell demanded, individuals no longer depended upon such primitive beliefs that “physical force is the most desirable form of superiority.”\(^{162}\)

Addressing the evolutionary process specifically, Freud determined that the Great War had demonstrated that humanity had in fact devolved. He maintained that sometime in the past society had developed to the point where a “path was traced that led away from violence to law.” The process toward law, however, had been circumvented, diverted onto an alternate path where law had become a tool of the state that turned out to

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\(^{160}\) Edmund Wilson, “The Progress of Psychoanalysis: The Importance of the Discovery,” by Dr. Siegmund Freud, of the Subconscious Self,” *Vanity Fair*, XIV (August 1920), 41, 86.


\(^{162}\) Russell, *Prophecy and Dissent*, 66.
be “nothing else than violence, quick to attack whatever individual stands in its path.” For Freud, the devolution was a vicious cycle that seemed unstoppable. Violence of the state simply begets more violence, and the process continues. The only thing that changes, Freud averred, is the precision and effectiveness of the weapons involved.

As a result, far from dismissing Freud as old news, the Lost Generation emphasized different aspects of Freud than had prewar Village writers who relied on Freud to release them from personal psychological constraints. Freud provided the Lost Generation with the necessary language by which to interpret the war, evinced by Dos Passos’s elation at finding in journalist John Carter’s 1926 *Man is War*, a Freudian view of the war that mirrored his own. Carter argued that the “cardinal impulse of the typical human society is toward war, and the nemesis of the typical social unit is its inability to escape from the destiny of its own character.” Mirroring Freud’s cynicism concerning social evolution, Carter assured his readers that “all social institutions carry within them the seeds of violence and death, and all suffer from the profound malaise engendered by the consciousness of this limitation.” Humanity could not escape war, Carter explained, for the cardinal human instincts were “self-preservation, self-perpetuation, self-aggrandizement,” all three of which were antithetical to the maintenance of peaceful

163 Sigmund Freud, “Why War,” 18. Freud went to his grave convinced that the “death instinct” could not be suppressed. In 1931 the question of humanity’s ability to resist the aggressive impulse plagued Albert Einstein, and his letter to Freud inquired whether it was possible to “control man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?” Freud’s answer revealed his resignation. He explained that historically “conflicts of interest between man and man are resolved, in principle, by the recourse to violence.” The evolutionary process had merely witnessed the agency of violence move from individuals to states in which “superior brains began to oust brute force.” The result was the same: victory over one’s enemies, by brutal means if necessary. For the modern “evolved” human sentiment, declared Freud, it is “the communal, not individual, violence that has its way.”
societies. “Inherent in the Atlantic way of life,” Carter defined war as the “organized violence of social groups seeking to impose their will by force.”\textsuperscript{164}

Edmund Wilson disclosed the new emphasis of Freud for new generation in his 1920 review of Freud’s \textit{Introduction to Psychoanalysis} in the pages of the \textit{New Republic}. Wilson admonished that all one had to do to see that Freud was right about human nature was to look “outside of Freud’s lecture room,” and see that “all Europe is organized for slaughter and destruction.” He used Freud to denounce western society for failing to suppress the martial ideal, accusing society of being merely “intent on manufacturing a thousand cases of nervous disorder for every one the Freud can cure.” Even more striking were those who condemned Freud as a “pornographic necromancer,” and blamed his teachings for the degeneration of the human condition. Wilson ridiculed them for merely reinforcing the truthfulness of Freud’s theories, saying

\begin{quote}
Within the lecture room as a citizen of the free republic of thought and perhaps also as a Jew, the lecturer maintains his place above the tumult, and explains, with calmness and patience, how little human individuals (let alone nations) really know what they are doing or why they are doing it. Do they blame him for vilifying human nature, for insisting that it struggles continually with passions which seem horrible and base? Let them look at Europe, subjected almost to a man to brutality and cruelty and lies, and then let them dare to say, in the face of the conscious life of mankind that he has slandered their unconscious life!\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

From the vantage point of post war experience, the Lost Generation realized the frightening validity of Freud’s dark assessment of human nature.

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\textsuperscript{165} Wilson, “The Progress of Psychoanalysis,” 41.
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Such an interpretation of the war left little hope for the heroic self. To make matters worse, psychoanalysis did not seem to leave much hope for a strong sense of the individual in a social environment dominated by the “death instinct.” For a generation that believed the heroic individual had been annihilated, Freud’s removal of the self-involved conscious ego from its pedestal was devastating. Edmund Wilson lauded Freud’s emphasis upon the human “indestructibility of spiritual energy,” but he winced at the theory’s interpretation of the unconscious that diminished the importance of the heroic self. Wilson noted that the sciences had always affronted humanity’s “naïve self-love,” but that Freudian psychology in particular challenged the “human mania for greatness,” with the discovery that the ego was no longer in charge. Eager to recapture a heroic self, postwar writers were rooting for the ego, which, Freud admitted, did not want to be displaced. But Freud had made the ego vulnerable, and Wilson complained that the “scanty information about all that goes on unconsciously” had robbed the conscious ego of its heroic bragging rights. According to Freud, individual humans were so weak they could not even control their own minds.

The Social Pressure of Militarism

If the Lost Generation was disheartened that Freud seemed to have proven, at least from the viewpoint of the human mental structure, that the heroic ego was a ruse, then the realization of the powerlessness of the individual against the social pressure of militarism.
militarism was salt on the wound. Bertrand Russell confirmed the social pressure toward militarism when he asserted that the greatest social faux pas was to be craven. Such a fear drives individuals toward a “passionate devotion” to nationalism that succeeds in convincing many for “self-sacrifice, for immolation to further an end greater than anything in any individual life.” Russell concluded that the “impulse of heroism for the welfare of the nation is more widespread than any other kind of subordination to something outside the Self.”

By 1917 Russell’s insight proved true in the United States. The nation had succumbed to the martial ideal. When Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that America’s involvement in the war was to ensure “that the world must be made safe for democracy,” the socio-psychological impact of the catch phrase provided its own social pressure. American college and university presidents watched as thousands of students submitted to the social pressure of militarism, and withdrew before graduation in order to beat the despised Germans. Harvard graduate John Dos Passos was among the enthusiastic.

Before he graduated from Harvard, Dos Passos had harbored honest convictions that America’s entry into the war would bring about the end, a long awaited good. He criticized America’s inactivity in a Harvard Monthly editorial, using the metaphor of an evangelist preaching to a volcano “from a safe distance.” Instead of “chattering empty headed about the war” he urged Americans to realize that they were not “isolated onlookers,” that “our destinies as well as those of the warring nations are being fought out on French and Turkish battlefields.” He issued a challenge to America to recognize

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167 Russell, Prophecy and Dissent, 69.
its “responsibility,” end the “old provincial slumbers” of isolationism and instead “give place to an intelligent and unselfish use of our power for good in world-politics.”

Although Dos Passos was a perennial critic of the American way of life, his pre-war writings often hailed the Behemoth’s potential to solve the crisis of world events, while criticizing her inaction. In “A Conference on Foreign Relations” another Monthly editorial, Dos Passos beckoned America to a courage that rejected the “spineless and cowardly temporizing which has become the tradition of our foreign policy.” He urged the nation to abandon its “laissez faire political dogma of the past” and live up to the responsibility of our greatness by offering an “intelligent and unselfish use of our power for good in world-politics.” He believed that “the deeper we Americans get into it, the harder we put our shoulders to the muskets and our breasts to the bayonets, the sooner the butchery will stop.”

Dos Passos found himself continually at odds with his Harvard friend Arthur McComb, whose pacifism reflected John Reed’s conviction that all war was evil, and therefore all belligerent nations were complicit in evil. Their dialogue offers considerable insight into the prewar social pressure experienced by Lost Generation writers. In the Monthly McComb reviewed the 1916 publication of Robert Herrick’s The World Decision, in which Herrick aggressively formulated that, “Those amorphous beings who, thanks to our modern economic wealth, have become ‘citizens of the world’ who wander physically and intellectually from land to land, who taste of this and that without incorporating any supreme devotion in their blood, our cosmopolites and expatriates and intellectuals, froth of a too comfortable existence, give forth a hollow sound at the savage

touch of war. They become pacifists.” McComb’s review rebutted that Mr. Herrick’s way “is not the way of civilization. Against his gospel of nationalism, we who are of the younger generation shall adopt the device of Voltaire: *Ecrasons l’infame!*”

In the same issue, Dos Passos censured his friend for neglecting “some of the most important points brought up by [Herrick’s] brilliant book.” Dos Passos had become convinced that despite the tales of brutality that had floated across the Atlantic, to be neutral “is impossible.” Comparing McComb’s form of pacifism to a man who, “while his house is burning sits down to make out plans for a new fireproof building to take its place instead of saving his furniture from the fire,” Dos Passos pleaded once again for America to renounce its “spineless condition.” Conceding McComb’s point that the world did indeed need to be made secure from such future conflagrations, at the present, Dos Passos argued, America needed to “decide what will be the ideal of European civilization in the future, and if necessary, to fight for that decision.”

In a personal letter to McComb, Dos Passos exhorted his friend to quit creating “catch phrases” such as “official brutality,” “fanaticism,” and “imperialist reaction.” For though these words, Dos Passos claimed, have “routed the enemy” in a “battle of phrases,” they do not “mean anything” in reality. Words, Dos Passos affirmed “must take upon themselves arms and legs and brawny muscles and poison gas shells before they can rout actuality.”

A few months later, Dos Passos once again tried to dismantle McComb’s pacifism by suggesting Hugh Walpole’s *Dark Forest* as reading material. McComb rebutted that he had “not the slightest intention of reading Hugh Walpole’s book.” “Besides,” he
retorted, referring to the crux of the problem, “I hate heroics and heroism too (in the usual sense of that word) and all the silly romance and hypocritical cant which this war is producing.”169 “Give me true realism,” he commanded.

Not to be outdone, Dos Passos rejoined that the book “isn’t heroics.” He was right. Walpole’s 1916 novel of life on the Russian Front demonstrated the fatuity of heroism. Initially, the protagonist was set on seeing the war for much the same reasons as Dos Passos, in order “to see what war really is,” and “to do some good if you can.” He quickly finds, however, that the war “differed so from my expectations.” Walpole treats heroism as a misplaced passion that eventually gets to be “farther and farther away from the real question.” Walpole reified that through war “one disbelieves in fantastic dreams” of heroism and glory.

But Dos Passos was fixated on his own prewar interpretation of reality. He needled his friend, saying “and I might suggest Mr. Pacifist… War is a human phenomenon which you can’t argue out of existence. You people are like Christian Scientists with yellow fever. All Your praying and all your ought not’s wont change the present fact. They may change the future, but only through the frank and sympathetic understanding of reality – which is not got by closing doors.” (McComb 29) With a final challenge, Dos Passos browbeat his friend, “Can you be brutal for righteousness’ sake? Can you give up prosperity that you may win peace? Don’t you tug too hard at that most important organ the purse? And at the same time you defy it.” With that the argument ended.

169 Arthur McComb, Correspondence With Arthur McComb, 39.
What makes Dos Passos’s early capitulation to militarism, and his self-righteous attempt to convince his friend, so relevant to our discussion on the social pressure of the “death instinct,” is that he was a confirmed pacifist. He complained that “Every day the misery, the grinding horror of it is ground into me more and more until it seems almost blasphemy to propound our glib pacifist schemes. They’re so damn simple, so almost infallible – if we could only once, for five minutes get a sane point of view.” He referred constantly to the “poisonous gases of militarism,” that had choked society into believing that war was the noblest option. In his journal he screamed out, “We must indicate the dignity of man – Oh the lies – the lies they kill us with – all society is a structure of lies – of lies for self interest by those in power who work on the cowardice of men.” One could easily argue that Dos Passos’s militarism arose less from the personal need of heroism than from his innate sense of social justice, but the fact remains that he determined war to be the answer. And if a pacifist could succumb to the social pressure of militarism, those without such a moral compass did not have a chance of resisting it.

The Lost Generation accepted human nature’s propensity toward the destruction of the other, that the individual has little power over its own instincts and mental function, and that social pressure toward violence can infect even the strongest of moral convictions. In this scenario, there seemed to be little hope of building an alternate heroic self on such a crumbled foundation.
A Heroism of Revolt

Although psychoanalysis had failed to find a way to conquer the “death instinct,” it did provide a model of the heroic self that the Lost Generation could not only apply to the war, but to postwar society as well. We must keep in mind that Freud had been forced to accept the inevitability of the individual human’s drive toward aggression. The typical psychoanalytic solution to violent tendencies was to apply social pressure as a suppressant of the “death instinct,” in order to obtain “mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city.”

Two problems occur, however. First, the war showed that society itself could not be trusted to suppress the “death instinct,” and secondly, the consequence to suppression was a desire for the individual to rebel against it. Psychoanalysis needed to devise a relationship between society and the individual that maintained the integrity of both.

The contentious relationship between the individual and society compelled Freud’s closest disciple, Otto Rank, to expand society’s function to provide an environment that would nurture that rebellion in socially beneficial ways. Rank developed a theory in which the rebellious individual would become society’s hero. He outlined his arguments in his 1908, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, a book that Freud not only endorsed, but to which he also contributed.

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Rank was introduced to American society with the 1914 English translation of his *Birth of the Hero*, and its success kept it in print longer than any other of Rank’s works. It received popular acclaim in 1915 when the prominent American neuropsychologist Peirce Bailey reviewed the book in the *New Republic*. To set up Rank’s book Bailey reminds the reader that the psychoanalysis is based on the principle that the child comes into the world “alive with racial experiences.” The early years pass with the child’s “struggle to fix its own position,” of which the mental record “sinks into the unconscious, only to be revived in symbolic dreams, in fancy and imagination all of which contains wishes.” The infantile mind, according to psychoanalysis, contains the “potentialities of everything human: its struggle to find itself reproduces all the life – and death – grapples of the race.” The child, Bailey continues, “generally conquers – generally reaches a normal biological fixation.” When the victory is not won, however, “the struggle continues into adult life, and is manifested in the extraordinary behavior of certain neurotics.” Rank’s book specifically addresses the problem of the individual’s, child or adult, inability to achieve victory, and is a book, according to Bailey that is “startling in its human truth,” because it “reveals things about ourselves or about our friends which arouse our finer feelings to revolt.”

Rank’s *Birth of the Hero* was predicated on Freud’s fear that biology had destroyed freewill and thus rendered meaningless not only heroic acts, but heroic individuals as well. Unlike William James, who sought to bolster the integrity of the heroic individual, Rank perceived the problem to be the very definition of heroism. James defined heroism by the individual’s impact upon society, but Rank, instead of
highlighting the individual, reconceived heroism in terms of its social function. While suppressing the impetus toward aggression, the social superego, in Rank’s model, refrains from suppressing the impulses of the heroic ego. Society’s role is to encourage the ego to burgeon in its heroic identity by providing an environment that nurtures “heroic myth,” the story that the heroic individual is central to a society’s health and evolution.\footnote{172}

Such a view restores what Edmund Wilson believed to be the dismantling of the heroic ego. The consequence, Rank posited, is the creation of a “true hero of the romance,” the dynamic individual that society has helped to shape. And society reaps the benefits in reciprocity. For after society provides the hero myth under which the ego flourishes, allowing it to rise above its biological impetus, the mature hero offers society any redemption it may need.\footnote{173} As examples of this reciprocal relationship, Rank provides in the first half of the book a descriptive catalogue of historical heroes, which include figures such as Oedipus, Moses, and Jesus. He highlights the importance of the social environment of each hero, and then describes the liberation these ancient heroes provided for their respective societies: Thebes from the terror of the Sphinx, the ancient Israelites from Egyptian slavery, and sinners from themselves.

The identity with these ancient heroes led Rank to conclude that heroism should be defined by the social function of revolt against tyranny. In psychoanalysis, he argued,


\footnote{172} Bailey, “Hero Myths According to Freud,” 160. James recognized the importance of the community for creating an environment for great individual acts, but Rank began with society as the necessary horizon for creating a hero. Whereas the biological determinist could still claim that James’s hero was still dependent upon his or her biology for great acts of will, the psychoanalytic hero is a product of society, not biology.

the hero sets himself apart from society at an early age. Society is initially represented by the hero's family, the social unit against which the hero rebels as he begins to recognize that his family is to blame for bringing him into a world that is filled with such hardships. In Oedipal fashion, the hero rejects the authority of the father, who is “the tyrannical persecutor.” As the child matures, he becomes heroic, not by succumbing to the aggressive impulse and engaging in battle, but by setting himself apart from society and asserting his own willful ego against social tyranny.\(^{174}\)

In his review of Rank’s book, Bailey concluded that Rank’s model “rejects absolutely the interpretation which personifies the hero with the process of nature.” The development of the hero was truly a social phenomenon derived from the “dream of the masses of the people.”\(^{175}\)

The Lost Generation Revolts

Rank had not tried to skirt around the problem of biology by ignoring it or dismissing its power. He used it to create an understanding of the individual that the Lost Generation could accept. For the impetus to revolt hit these intellectuals hard when they realized they had been complicit in America’s martial zeal. After a year of war, and long after he had rejected his own militarist compulsion, Dos Passos watched as American

\(^{174}\) Rank based his understanding of heroism as revolt upon the psychoanalytic understanding of the mind in which the conscious mind “denies the existence of the unconscious and has subjected it to repressions.” In psychoanalysis, sublimation is the process by which disturbing thoughts, which have been forced into the unconscious by the conscious mind, revolt against the tyrannical conscious mind and break through the repressive barrier it has imposed. Analogously, Rank translated the mental process of sublimation the relationship between the heroic ego and society.
soldiers wholeheartedly adopted the time-tested “death instinct” toward the Germans. He recorded in his diary what believed to be the “typical American spirit with regards to the war.”

I don’t fuck women but I’m going to – God – I’d give anything to rape some of those German women. I hate them – men women children and unborn children – They’re either Jackasses or full of the lust for power just like their rulers are – to let themselves be ruled by a bunch of warlords like that.  

Lost Generation writers began to separate themselves from such martially minded comrades through subtle forms of revolt.

The initial exemplar was Dos Passos’s pacifist friend Arthur McComb. McComb carefully guarded his ideals and refused to join the war. Fearing both conscription and ostracism, Dos Passos’s “unshakable anti-militarist” friend had fled for Spain because he could no longer bear beating “one’s hands impotently against a fog of hypocrisy, cant and stupidity of every conceivable variety.”

Poets E. E. Cummings and Slater Brown were the first Lost Generation writers to heroically face the martial wrath of combatant armies. The French wartime postal censors had confiscated Cummings’s and Brown’s letters in which they admitted their reluctance to kill Germans. Both were arrested, and when interrogated by French officials they refused to say they hated or desired to kill Germans; Cummings answered only “No, I like the French very much.”

Cummings boasted about his arrest in his novelistic account of the event in *The Enormous Room*. He wore

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175 Bailey, “Hero Myths According to Freud,” 160.
177 Dos Passos, *Correspondence with McComb*, 57
178 Cummings, *Selected Letters*, 149.
his own brand of pacifism like a red badge of courage, scarcely trying to conceal the fact from the French that he never been “so excited and proud. I was, to be sure, a criminal!”\textsuperscript{179} Only increasing his glory, Cummings paid a hero’s price for the rebellion. He spent three months in a French internment camp, in which he was poorly nourished and was never told for how long he was to remain. Both he and Brown, who was forced to stay many months longer, contracted scurvy, and Brown ended up losing a number of teeth.

Cummings was raised in a pacifist family. His father, Edward had been introduced to his lovely bride Rebecca by the matchmaking philosopher William James, who instilled into his young protégé graduate students a healthy dose of anti-war virtues. Besides being a socially liberal Unitarian minister, the Reverend Edward Cummings was head of the World Peace Foundation while young Estlin was growing up. The young poet began to express his own form of pacifism through verse. In 1916 he published “Belgium” in the \textit{New York Post}, a poem sympathizing with those “that liftest up they hands in prayer,” whose lives had experienced the “sudden ruin of glad homes.”\textsuperscript{180} Almost three years into the war, there lives now consisted of the “fruit of death.” A subsequent Harvard years poem, dropped all subtlety.

All is over, – a shrug from the world’s broad shoulders,  
What more?  
There is earth to bury a corpse. Is a nation’s sword-edge dull[?]  
The world will whet it again, and a skull is only  
A skull;  
And what cares the priest for a little stain on the

\textsuperscript{179} Cummings, \textit{Enormous Room}, 5.  
Altar floor?
‘Twill wash; it is only War.  

Dos Passos believed he was to suffer the same fate as had Cummings and Brown when censors discovered his less than laudatory statements regarding the war. When he wrote Cummings’s mother in December, 1917 asking of news of his incarcerated friend, he confessed “I sympathized with him so thoroughly, and my letters being anything but prudent, that I expected to be in the same boat.” He did find his own trouble when he wrote his Spanish friend Jose Giner Pantoja of the “fascinating mister,” “all the military stupidities,” and that the cause of war was simply “greedy nation as in a world drunk on commercialism.” He begged his friend not to let the same fate befall Spain. When a Red Cross official read the letter he quickly wrote to another official that Dos Passos belonged “to a group of pacifists,” and he should be “dishonorably discharged.” He accused the young pacifist of endangering “cordial relations” with America’s allies, which was grounds for his belief that “it is about time we had another object lesson.”

Dos Passos was ultimately spared the military ritual of dishonor, but afterward he believed he might have to face exile in Spain as had his friend Arthur McComb.

181 E. E. Cummings, “All is Over,” in Kennedy, Dreams in the Mirror, 135.
182 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 108.
183 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 152.
184 Letter from Bates to Lowell, in Fourteenth Chronicle, 151.
185 Dos Passos, The Fourteenth Chronicle, 179. Dos Passos was far from alone in his anti-martial zeal. Along with McComb, Cummings, and Brown, Dos Passos recognized the desire to revolt in poets Dudley Poore, Frederick van den Arend, Robert Hilyer, F. Foster Damon, Kenneth Burke, playwright John Howard Lawson, and painter Edward Nagel, all of whom demonstrated their courage through some form of pacifism. True courage, for these personages, meant being a “believer in the individual,” to be someone who would “put himself down as a conscientious objector on the draft,” and “refuse to serve.”
Dos Passos was motivated to revolt against the tyranny of militarism, in part, by the admonitions of some of his favorite intellectuals, the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno, the pacifist social critic Lowes Dickinson, and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Unamuno’s “anarchic fury” made his “angry insistence about his dogmas” completely “unforgettable” for Dos Passos. For one, Unamuno understood the social pressures that could be heaped upon the unwary individual. In his 1915 *Tragic Sense of Life*, of which Dos Passos spoke highly, Unamuno mirrored James and Freud in asserting that an individual’s understanding of the world comes from the relationship between what a person has already tucked away into his subconscious about the world of the past and his present day-to-day experiences. This epistemic structure means that an individual’s psychological understanding of the world is derived from his social environment. Consequently, Unamuno repudiated reductionist methodologies like the Cartesian model of stripping away the external world, reducing a person to pure mind, in order to find out what he can know about himself. Such a process, he argued, was the equivalent of a person “emptying himself of himself,” which ultimately left little upon which a person could be built.

Unamuno reversed Descartes, suggesting that an

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186 Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, 112.

187 James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 30. William James admitted that as a psychologist, who analyzed individual consciousness, he was prone to utilize the Cartesian method. But he warned against negating social context, which provided the fullest knowledge of individual consciousness. The Cartesian method, James inferred, removes not only the social influence but that part of the individual that society has shaped. Descartes taught that the distinction of extended bodies, the external world, are from one’s thoughts only,
individual only achieve true self-knowledge by immersing himself into the external world. The individual’s very ability to reason is in fact “a social product” because all of his best thoughts result from his “existence in society.”

How Unamuno conceived the relationship between the individual and society was vital for his, and hence, Dos Passos’s, sense of heroism. For if the mental structure of the individual is a social construct, then rejecting society’s beliefs, maxims, and morality becomes an act of rebellion. In Unamuno’s philosophy, the act of transcending imprinted social values is the highest form of human ethics, and the very “starting-point” of what it is to be human. “Our very essence,” Unamuno avers, is that we humans “persist indefinitely in our own being;” we cannot stop our drive to become heroic individuals because we constantly “hunger for personal immortality.” Unamuno’s use of the term “immortality” connotes a heroism that strives to overcome impossible odds but can do nothing less. That tension is “the tragic sense of life” that motivated individuals like the Lost Generation writers to rebel against America’s rampant militarism.

Unamuno declared that such human verve required a heroism that is not based upon cold socially induced philosophic reason, but upon a passion for the experience of which allowed one to doubt not only the reality of the external world, but any influences that world might have upon the individual.

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188 Calvin Rand, “Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25 (1964): 503-518, p. 514. The social construction of reason suggests that it is “common,” available to all individuals as they interact with society. As a result, when we reason as individuals, we never do it for the sake of knowledge alone, which, simply put, “is inhuman.” For Unamuno, everything that is “wrought by a man is for men,” and its very reality presupposes its function as a medium by which we understand ourselves.

189 See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, transl, by Howard and Edna Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. More than a half century earlier, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard codified such acts of rebellion as the *teliological suspension of the ethical*. Kierkegaard meant that sometimes for an individuals to remain ethical, they must intractably rise above the socially prescribed ethic in order to perform actions that they deem morally right.
life, represented in the mythical Don Quixote. Unamuno began his 1905 publication of *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, a protracted monologue on the subject of death, with “You ask me, my good friend, if I know how to incite delirium vertigo, any madness whatsoever, among these orderly and placid masses that are born, eat sleep, reproduced themselves, and die.” For the life of reason had enslaved the masses to the circle of life and death. The cure, Unamuno contended, was to take a “holy crusade to redeem the Sepulcher of the Knight of Madness from the power of the champion of Reason.” Unamuno concluded that it was in Don Quixote’s willingness to be ridiculous, to be “the fair game and laughingstock of all the world,” that he showed us that the “courage we most lack is simply the courage of the standing up to ridicule.”

For Dos Passos, Don Quixote represented the individualist who believed in the power of a person’s soul “over all things,” including the mercurial modern world. Just before his graduation from Harvard, Dos Passos told a friend, what would become a life long motto, that he simply longed to stretch his legs on a good piece of road and set off like Don Quixote. The war initially spurred his quixotic passion to save the world, but the realities of the carnage on both the physical and spiritual human quickly ignited his rebellious side.

Dos Passos and his coterie of writers found their nation’s martial ideal an appropriate form of oppression against which they could revolt. Both of Dos Passos’s war novels redefined heroism in anti-militaristic terms. For John Andrews, the protagonist of

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Three Soldiers, cowardice was gauged by one’s mental and physical acquiescence to the military mindset. “What a coward he had been anyway, to submit,” Andrews mused. He thought about the great individuals of history, who “had given themselves smilingly for the integrity of their thoughts.” Disgusted with himself he confessed that he “had not had the courage to move a muscle for his freedom.” Later, to a fellow soldier, Andrews postulated, “No . . . . I don’t think it’s right of a man, to go back on himself. . . . I don’t think butchering people ever does any good . . . I have acted as if I did think it did good . . . out of carelessness or cowardice.”

Near the end of One Man’s Initiation – 1917, Dos Passos’s first war novel, the protagonist Martin Howe, interacts with a cabal of leftist intellectuals. They mutually agree upon the absurdity of the war and that life should always be lived by facing reality. Later Howe remarks to himself that with men like those intellectuals, “we needn’t despair of civilization.” Howe’s interlocutor responds, “With people who are young and aren’t scared you can do lots.” For Dos Passos it was fear and cowardice that harmonized best with militarism and the warrior spirit. The truly heroic, those who “aren’t scared,” forge a path that is not determined by brutality of war.

Dos Passos’s sense of revolt was spurred by Unamuno, but his pacifism was an amalgamation of the anarchic pacifism of G. Lowes Dickinson and the utilitarian pacifism of Bertrand Russell. Dickinson vehemently condemned the immorality of the war in his 1916 publication The European Anarchy. He pleaded that the war would

195 Dos Passos, Correspondence with McComb, 22.
“bring no lasting peace to Europe unless it brings a radical change both in the spirit and in the organization of international politics.” The culprits, he demanded, were “states in the pursuit of power and wealth.” He defended his pacifism, not because war was always avoidable, but as a moral opponent to wars fought for such “imbecile” reasons. Dickinson reminds his readers that the governments now “dwelling on the unique and particular wickedness of the enemy,” are the same ones who before the war “meted out to the people called ‘pacifists’” the most “contemptuous and almost abhorring pity.” Yet, sadly rectified, Dickinson declares, “Well the war has come! We see now, not only guess what it means.”

In a 1915 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Dickinson confirmed that it was only a change of the “machinery of European diplomacy” that could render peace. He maintained that the “pacifists grow hopeful and active,” for the time when “commerce, travel, art, literature, science, begin to unite the nations.” For the time being, however, the war had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. People were able to witness that “armaments appear ridiculous, and wars what they are, crimes.” Dickinson’s pacifism was driven by the theory that a “change of will, change of ideas, moral and spiritual development” is the only thing that can save society; by a belief in idealism that departs from “those who believe that war itself is the ideal.”

Before going to war Dos Passos had read Dickinson and had been sympathetic with pacifism, but was not a full-fledged convert until he witnessed the destruction. His review of Dickinson’s *The International Anarchy, 1904-1914*, almost a decade after the armistice allowed him to relive the “fantastic comedy,” the “puppetshow” of diplomacy.

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that led to the “systematic slaughter of [Europe’s] citizens.” Like Dickinson, Dos Passos believed that the war was merely about economics. European states had become captive to “money and manufacturing and trading interest of ancient feudal mechanism based on landholding.” The war, Dos Passos assented, was about “squabbles over the spoils of a world subdued by European industrialism.” Entangled in the mess of economic diplomacy was the already “smoldering war” between capitalists and laborers, colonization for new markets and raw materials, national morality and idealism.198 These things conspired to create disaster.

Dos Passos also found much in Bertrand Russell’s utilitarian pacifism with which he agreed. Russell’s argument was predicated upon the mutually assured destruction of modern warfare upon all belligerent nations. Russell defined that destruction broadly to encompass more than just the destruction of armies. No nation, Russell declared in his famous 1915 essay on pacifism The Ethics of War, could escape the evil effects of war. In war, the “most courageous and physically fit in their respective nations, are killed, bringing great sorrow to friends, loss to the community.” But the greatest evil, Russell believed, was “purely spiritual evil: the hatred, the injustice, the repudiation of truth, the artificial conflict.” Russell did not believe that war is “under all circumstances a crime.” Many wars in history, he reasoned, were championed for the “good of mankind as to outweigh all the evils.”199


199 Russell, Prophecy and Dissent, 68.
This particular war was not one of them. And heroes who stood up against the war were few, as represented by the solitary struggle of Wisconsin Senator Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette. Dos Passos was enamored with La Follette, offering him tribute in one of his USA biographies, because for twenty years he was one of a “little group of willful men expressing no opinion but their own.” La Follette fought tooth and nail against the United States going to war. And as a heroic self, invited intense criticism and imprecations; he was burned in effigy, called “pro-German, pretty near pro-Goth, and pro-Vandal” by a fellow senator, was attacked mercilessly by the press, and considered to be an enemy of the state, in almost every state. But Fighting Bob never backed down.²⁰⁰

People like Fighting Bob, Bertrand Russell, Lowes Dickinson, as well as the Lost Generation writers themselves, conjured a new heroic identity along the lines of revolt. Such an intractable spirit compelled individuals like Dos Passos to declaim that the he was infused with a tempestuous desire to “hack and hew, to agitate against the bogies which are being battened by warfume.” Dos Passos placed all of his mustered hope in the heroic act of revolt. “When two men hold together,” he mused, “the Kingdoms are less by two.”²⁰¹

Conclusion

In 1938 Jean-Paul Sartre exclaimed that, like no other writer, John Dos Passos could “impel us to revolt,” to feel the “hate, despair and lofty contempt” of social

injustice. Dos Passos and the Lost Generation writers exemplified the new conception of heroism as revolt. It replaced the moribund models of heroism, such as the martial ideal and the moral equivalent to war, which had been killed by the accouterments of industrialism, conditions of modern warfare, and the science of biological necessity. Where Holmes, Roosevelt, Eakins, and James had failed, the Lost Generation succeeded. These intellectuals forged a new sense of heroism, by galvanizing the integrity of the individual.

Understanding heroism as revolt compelled the Lost Generation to define the heroic self in terms of the individual’s stance against social convention. They were able to apply the new sense of the heroic self by utilizing various forms of pacifism against the war and the social pressure to conform to the martial ideal. But the model of heroic revolt would carry the Lost Generation past the war and allow them to confront forms of social oppression other than the martial ideal, such as patriotism, progressivism, and absolutism. Revolt came to define the Lost Generation’s rebellion against conventions which society attempted to impress upon them. But most importantly revolt restored these writers confidence in the power of the individual.

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201 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 258.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE CELEBRATION OF DISCONTENT

At the end of The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald revealed that the novel had essentially been “a story of the West.” Fitzgerald’s West was “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns,” but “Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul,” cities that through the decades had preserved houses that were still known by their family names. Fitzgerald considered the West, the location of his own upbringing, to be vastly different than East Coast life and culture. In the novel “Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.” Unlike Sherwood Anderson, Fitzgerald did not embrace his Midwestern roots, equating such a life with the perpetual ennui that he so picturesquely fought in both This Side of Paradise and The Beautiful and Damned. Fitzgerald did not hesitate to denigrate the “crude, vulgar air of Western civilization,” that catches the unwary off guard, “in his underwear, so to speak.”


203 F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 184, 23.
Sherwood Anderson, the progenitor of Midwest modern literature, knew the distinctive pneumatic influence of geography upon his writing. Midwestern patriarchs, Anderson insisted, built their small towns, neither for permanency nor beauty, but out of “a dreadful desire of escape.” The inspiration behind Poor White, Windy McPhearson’s Son, Marching Men, and of course Winesburg Ohio all stem from escapism, what Anderson called a Midwestern imbibed “fear of the thing called culture.” Culture was “in some vague way to be breathed in the air of New York,” but not something one sought West of the Appalachians. Unlike Fitzgerald, however, Anderson was not bothered by this Midwestern attitude. Instead, there was “something sincere and fine” about Midwestern writers. They never seemed to worry whether they were part of some abstract definition of the Avant-garde; they worked at “trying to understand the life about them,” and then tried to express it in the best way they could. Such a mindset worked for Anderson. Literary critic Edmund Wilson remarked that Anderson had made the “inhabitants of a little Ohio town” to be just as significant as the “people with names,” he met later in Chicago and New York.

For Chicago born and raised Ernest Hemingway, the Midwest provided opportunity to explore themes of solitude and contemplation. His early short stories were sensory musings about his family vacations into the wilds of northern Michigan. He described his memories in his trademark aesthetic bluntness as “very beautiful in the spring and summer, the bay blue and bright and usually whitecaps on the lake out beyond the point from the breeze blowing form Charlevoix and Lake Michigan.” His Michigan inspired Nick Adams stories traced the childhood, adolescent, and post-WWI thoughts of Nick as he frequented the small northern towns Petosky and Rogers City. Only in
Michigan could one truly lose himself in fishing and hunting; it is a place where as a child “he felt quite sure that he would never die.” As an adult, Michigan offered for Nick the necessary mental and spiritual respite from Europe’s “machine gun fire in the street,” and it’s trenches where one had to lay flat and pray, “oh jesus christ get me out of here.”

Fitzgerald, Anderson, and Hemingway represent similar perspectives on nineteen-twenties Midwestern society. The nation’s heartland, they believed, was quieter, slower paced, wary of the East Coast intellectual, and, in many ways, downright naïve. But they could not dismiss the Midwest’s literary passion. Writer and publisher Ford Maddox Ford certainly did not. He wrote in *It was a Nightingale*: “The Middle West was seething with literary impulse. It is no exaggeration to say that 80 per cent of the manuscripts in English that I received came from west of Altoona, and 40 per cent of them were of such a level of excellence that one might just as well close one’s eyes and take one at random as try to choose between them.”

The Midwest was home to some of America’s greatest modern writers, yet these writers were aware that their idyllic heartland was characterized by a particular cultural innocence, a view of the world that was certainly challenged by the Great War and subsequent bohemian life in eastern cities. For example, it was not until he reached New York City that Cleveland born poet Hart Crane met someone like the Dadaist Baroness Elsa Von Freytag. He knew he was not in his hometown of Cleveland Ohio when the Baroness decided that she needed a typewriter and simply walked into his apartment one day and stole his. After a week of living without the machine, Hart and his roommate decided to retrieve their property. They waited for the baroness to leave her residence. They not only found the door unlocked, they could see the typewriter in plain view on the
table. But remembering the baroness’s mercurial personality, in a moment of panic, they decided it would be much easier just to buy a new typewriter.\textsuperscript{204} 

We cannot make too much of this story, however, and not just because the Baroness had an intimidating demeanor that was unique among artists even in New York, or that Hart Crane’s Midwestern upbringing made him unprepared for such encounters. We cannot overemphasize this scenario because the Midwestern writers drifted East with the expectation of something new, fast-paced, and exciting; they wanted to encounter someone like the Baroness. They understood the cultural differences created by geography and they pursued New York Bohemia and the avant-garde with the intention of rounding out their experience. And we cannot overrate Midwestern naivete because no location on the American map prepared the young Harvard, Yale, and Princeton elite, or New York bohemians for that matter, for what lay ahead at the trenches in France. The war was the great cultural equalizer and social unifier. It mattered little whether one was from the farms of Ohio or one of the Boston Brahmins.

But the Lost Generation writers soon discovered that although American society had been affected by the war, their interpretation of the war differed greatly from that of the rest of the country. For they had developed an ironic vision of the war that was not

\textsuperscript{204} We cannot make too much of this story, however, because the Baroness scared most men, irrespective of their geographical upbringing. When East Coast born and educated poet William Carlos Williams began a platonic love affair with the Baroness in 1922, exchanging love letters only, he realized quickly that he was in over his head. When he became the object of her sexual ambitions, Williams began to parry her aggressive advances, especially when she suggested that he needed to contract syphilis from her in order to “free his mind for serious art.” Upon being repeatedly rejected, the Baroness responded with her own invective, “Why are you so small – Carlos Williams? Why do you not trust me – to help you? You love and hate me. You desire me. In truth: you envy me.” The heroic myth of the savage spirit quickly shifted to daunting reality when she threatened to make one of his love letters public. A verbal altercation ensued at their next encounter during which the Baroness slapped Williams on the neck with what he insisted was “all her strength.” Afraid of the Baroness, as many men had come to be, he responded by buying himself a punching bag. He began to practice, and at their next meeting he “flattened her with a stiff punch in the mouth.”
shared by American society. There were not heroes in the war. While the previous chapter argued that urbanization biological determinism, and war destroyed traditional conceptions of the heroic self, this chapter focuses on the ways in which the war killed that hero.

In keeping with our thesis of the Lost Generation’s dialectical epistemology of romance and irony, this chapter concentrates upon the war’s role in creating the ironic, pessimistic view of the world, that characterized this group of writers as lost. Many works of scholarship have pointed to the war’s agency for creating this ironic, lost condition, but none have detailed just what that agency entailed. This chapter demonstrates three areas that contributed to the Lost Generation’s sense of “lostness.”

First, on an existential level, I show that the war created a deep sense of personal futility, an altered conception of the self, and a feeling of insignificance for the individual. Secondly, on a social level, I argue that American society’s commitment to patriotically celebrate a war in spite of its own disillusionment, created a sense of social alienation for the Lost Generation. Finally, the Lost Generation’s belief that American society, the military, and western governments in general were three institutions that could no longer be trusted because they were responsible both for the war and the suppression of intellectual dissent after the war. Through its twenties literature, the Lost Generation expressed its sense of “lostness,” as well as its revolt against these forces of oppression.
The Lost Generation writers initially participated in America’s prewar patriotism, not from a sense of duty, but from an equally exuberant desire to experience war. Even pacifist John Dos Passos enjoyed the brouhaha. Before he actually signed up to go to France he chattered excitedly in letters about the news from overseas. “Weren’t you excited over the great sea battle? I’d like to have been there,” he wrote to a friend. He confessed that, like so many others, he wanted “to see a little of the war personally,” for voyeuristic reasons “before the whole thing goes belly up.” Dos Passos later confessed his own fantastic illusions through his protagonist Martin Howe in *One Man’s Initiation*. During the Atlantic trek, Martin had “never been so happy in his life,” in his expectation to see the war.

And Dos Passos was an evangelist. He hammered away at other people’s aversion of the unpleasant truth that America’s involvement in the war was necessary. He complained, “If people would only look at life straight and sincerely without having to dim their sight – faulty enough, God knows – with colored glass of different sorts – with church windows and shop windows and the old grimy glass of outworn customs.” Though he failed to recognize his own illusions concerning the war, he at least understood inclination to do so, confessing that “ones own individuality is so much of a

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205 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 61

distortion of clear reality (and one can’t see except with one’s own eyes, can one?) that other little distortions don’t matter much.”

It did not take long however, for the scales to fall from Lost Generation eyes. The war was not only an experience that they alone shared with other American and European soldiers, it quickly disabused these intellectuals of their illusions, a process, Freud contended, that was the only true benefit any individual or nation could gain from the entire catastrophe.\(^{208}\) Dos Passos was one of the first in line to realize the imbecility of his puerile fantasies. For one thing, war was not at all what he expected it to be. It was dull. Even with its moments of intensity the war was actually a “poor sport;” for even in the moments of excitement “there is a sameness.” By March of 1918, after ten months of exposure, he had seen enough. “From a distance the war must seem a little theoretical, but here, or anywhere at the front, I assure you it is a wholly different matter,” he wrote to a friend. The war, “is boredom, slavery to all the military stupidities, the most fascinating misery, the need for warmth, bread, and cleanliness. I assure you there is nothing beautiful about modern war. I have lived in it for a year now, and many illusions have crossed the river Styx. It is nothing but an enormous, tragic digression in the lives of these people.”

Dos Passos’s disillusionment was an example of the deep irony of war, as Paul Fussell explains that all wars are worse than expected. This war in particular was more ironic that “any before or since,” argues Fussell, because the western world was bent on

\(^{207}\) Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 68.

\(^{208}\) Freud, “Reflections on War and Death,” 193.
the notion of progress. This war was a greater historical regression than other wars because of the West’s prevailing optimistic historical consciousness. Dos Passos recorded his ironic disillusionment in *One Man’s Initiation*, telling us that after his initial excitement, Martin Howe quickly realized that war was more akin to the story of Alice in Wonderland or “all the dusty futility of Barnum and Bailey’s Circus.” Dos Passos became so discouraged over his own disillusionment that he confided to a friend that the only thing left to do was to “retire into that famous shell of mine” and live in the world where “fantasy is the only escape” and the “drunkenness of the imagination” offers some respite.

Dos Passos’s desire to escape into fantasy reveals a pervasive sense of personal futility that the war created among the intellectuals who witnessed it. They were cognizant of the contrast between the glorious celebrations available for them as perceived heroes and the physical and spiritual annihilation of the heroic self caused by the war. Unlike Dewey, who saw in the war an opportunity for the growth of goodness, the Lost Generation did not “believe in the ‘spiritual good’ of war.” It was only a detriment to human existence, which Dos Passos confessed to his journal that “our whole life is a childish failure.” A firm believer in the power of the individual, Dos Passos lamented, in a moment of weakness, at human resilience, a quality that only perpetuated

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211 Dos Passos, *Correspondence with Arthur McComb*, 82. Even after experiencing the brutality first hand, there were rare moments in which Dos Passos felt the exhilaration of combat. He confessed to McComb that “A wild air raid last night with the brilliant sky full of throbbing aeroplane motors and shrapnel bursting like rockets and tin the distance the crashing snort of exploding bombs – rather cheered me up.” He sermonized that modern war was as exciting as football games and subway rushes and that “danger does make your blood dance about as if you were a properly alive human and not a symbol of repulsion.”
the senseless struggle. “If people were not so damnably adaptable to any form of misery,”
then maybe they could conjure the necessary motivation to rebel. Dos Passos codified the
lasting feeling for many soldiers that death offered the only way out of the vicious cycle
of life. In *One Mans Initiation*, Dos Passos accentuates one soldier’s last utterance of
futility: “I have broken the chain. I have defeated the inherent stupidity of life.”

Detailing his own experiences, poet Hervey Allen emphasized in his memoir
*Toward the Flame* the “feeling of utter yearning and despair, the fear of the last
indignities ahead, and the knowledge that the war might go on for years and years,
brought mental and physical paralysis to the individual.” Life, in the face of death
“seemed tremendously futile.” Preparing to go into battle, novelist Elliott White
Springs’s protagonist in *Contact* sighs, “What difference does anything make.” He knew
that he had to play his part, be an active participant on the world stage. He knew that “he
would be killed eventually – so would a million others – so what the hell?”

The meaninglessness of life that the war created trickled into Dos Passos’s
consciousness even before he saw actual combat. Though he expressed his excitement
about hoping to see the war, he was in tune with its grand social and personal
implications. In December of 1916, while living in Madrid, he told a friend that “there is
something frightfully paralyzing to me in the war – Everything I do, everything I write
seems so cheap and futile – If Europe is to senselessly destroy itself – Its as if a crevasse
had opened and all the fair things, all the mellow things, all the things that were to teach


us how in America how to live, were slipping in – a sort of tidal wave and blood and fire – I can’t grasp the idea of conflict anymore – it seems more something immense and malignant and living that is grinding the helpless nations.” Again, in May, before his departure to the western front, he wrote to his former headmaster at Choate that America too had “entered the dance of death.” He admits to some optimism when he suggests to his headmaster that he supposed it “would have been better had we done so earlier,” but he could not “reconcile myself to the thought yet.” The whole condition, he despaired, was hopeless. “All this complicated civilization the European races have labored and murdered and cheated for,” he railed, were “frittering itself away in this senseless agony of destruction.” In a clarifying coda he added, “Germany seems to me rather a symptom than the cause,” which, in a very real sense, was meant to release all belligerent soldiers from culpability, as they were simply victims of the entire western martial ideal.215

Dos Passos’s direct contact with the war confirmed his belief that the war had not just physically, but had also spiritually killed the heroic self. This condition heightened his sense of hopelessness. On July 31st, just after his arrival in France, Dos Passos complained bitterly to his journal,

How damned ridiculous it all is! The long generations toiling – skimping, lashing themselves crewing higher and higher the tension of their minds, polishing brighter and brighter the mirror of intelligence to end in this – My God what a time – all the cant and hypocrisy, all the damnable survivals, all the vestiges of old truths now putrid and false infect the air, choke you worse than German gas – The ministers from their damn pulpits, the business men – the heroics about war – my country right or wrong – oh the infinities of them! Oh the tragic farce of the world.”216

214 Elliott White Springs, Contact: A Romance of the Air (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1930), 54, 88.

215 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 60, 72.
A month later, writing to a friend, Dos Passos grumbled that the “whole performance is such a ridiculous farce. Everyone wants to go home, to get away at any cost from the hell of the front. The French soldiers I talk to all realize the utter uselessness of it all.”

The irony of war was not lost on Dos Passos. Instead of fostering heroism, the war’s very continuance demonstrated profound cowardice. He remarked in September of 1917 that he wished “if only people could realize the inanity of it – or if they had the courage to stop being dupes. . . I am convinced that it is through pure cowardice that the war continues.” “The soldiers fight, he quipped in another letter, “because they are too cowardly & too unimaginative not to see which way they ought to turn their guns.” As the infection of futility begin to spread, Dos Passos cried that “There are too many who go singing to the sacrifice – who through themselves gladly, abjectly beneath the Juggernaught. It’s rather a comfort to have given up hope entirely – you can just take refuge in a pleasantly cynical sullenness, and shake the pack off your back and give three leaps and stride away from the whole human tribe.”

In 1918, while still serving in the Italian Red Cross, Dos Passos admitted that the war had sapped his belief in the “gospel of energy;” he no longer valued his “old sentimentalizing over action.” Action, he complained “when it is anything at all is a foolish running about, a sheep-like scurrying from the wolves, or a wolfish snarling stalking of the sheep; let us have none of it.”

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boldly claimed, with tongue in cheek that he would refuse to act “to the last firing squad” or to “drag with the chain gang.”

Not only did the war generate feelings of personal futility, it seemed omnipotently able to alter the very structure of a person’s self. Far from bolstering a sense of heroism, the war mutated individuals into something less than human. Hugh Walpole’s revelation in his 1916 *Dark Forest* that the war had made his characters “very different now – very different,” could not have made much of an impact on prewar Lost Generation feelings, but the realization that war made people “less human than the Tin Woodman” rapidly grew in the consciousness of intellectuals as they witnessed the massacre. In his memoir, Hervey Allen remarks that “A man who comes out of battle does not get over it for a long time afterward,” because “men who have faced death often and habitually can never again have the same attitude towards life.” Or, more crassly put by Dos Passos, “You don’t get accustomed. The more you see the worse it is. Then you end by going crazy.” The mutable power of the war plays prominently in novelist Lawrence Stallings’s *Plumes*. After his protagonist Richard returns from war, his wife Esme looks upon “a man she had never seen before,” because she understands that his “philosophy of living had been somewhat altered by his experience.” The truth comes out that through

220 Walpole, *Dark Forest*, 34
221 Allen, *Toward the Flame*, 120.
222 Dos Passos, *One Man’s Initiation*, 99.
the war Richard had “lost youth.” It happened, “not gradually, with a compensating acquisition of age. Just plucked out of you raw and bleeding.”

For William Faulkner, who flew in the British Royal Airforce, the truth of life and war was “Rotten Luck.” No postwar novel exemplified the transforming affect of the war on the individual more than Faulkner’s *Soldiers Pay*. Donald Mahon, a pilot in the Royal Airforce, has come home with a conspicuous scar across the middle of his forehead. If some fellow soldiers on a train not befriend him, he never would have made it home on his own. Donald’s physical injury becomes the metaphorical leitmotif for the war’s ability to change a person; the war drains the very life force of the individual. When fellow soldiers first lay eyes on Donald they see “beneath the dreadful scar,” someone who is “young, yet old as the world.” Donald becomes Faulkner’s personification of spiritual, moral, and psychological “death in a man’s face.”

To enhance the metaphor, Faulkner creates a Donald who is unable to remember anything of his life before he was wounded, accentuating the personal transformation one undergoes during the war. A doctor confirms this analysis by pronouncing of Donald that “the man that was wounded is dead and this is another person.” So the reader can more easily make the connection Faulkner draws the bridge between the physical and the spiritual. The doctor confides that “it’s [Donald’s] apathy, his detachment, that’s so terrible. He doesn’t seem to care where he is or what he does.” The war has reduced Donald to mere physical existence, “a sorry substitute,” “practically a dead man,” most powerfully manifest in Donald’s father’s words: “This was Donald, my son. He is dead.”

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Although Donald exists physically, he is virtually dead spiritually. It becomes clear that his physical death will soon follow whenever that “final spark somewhere in him is no longer fed.”

Not only did the war generate sentiments of hopeless futility and alter a person’s sense of self, it diminished the size and role of the individual to microscopic levels on social and cosmic levels. Dos Passos voiced that sense of insignificance and smallness even before he went overseas. The death of John R. Dos Passos Sr., in January, 1917, compelled Dos Passos Jr., to complain to a friend that “It’s rather grisly, isn’t it, how soon a living man becomes nothing more than a collection of stocks and bonds and debts and real estate?” He lambasted modern society for “crushing the soul and mind” of the human being. The primary fear, Dos Passos proclaimed was that things worthwhile, such as individual vitality cannot be trampled out immediately, “but you can crush out the spark in ten generations.” And there is nothing one can do except cry out, for every “poor little individual objects to being under heel – to feel it slowly crushing the life out of him.”

Again, postwar literature draws attention to the sense of individual insignificance. After he had returned home, Stallings’s protagonist Richard began reading everything he could about the war, “trying to face the fact that he threw himself away.” He immersed himself in Englishman Richard Jefferies’s *The Story of My Heart*, a memoir, less autobiographical than Jefferies’s own psychological journey to the process of awakening. Jefferies spoke about being cognizant of the eternal Now, which released one’s psyche

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from the terrible truth that “in human affairs everything happens by chance – that is, in
defiance of human ideas, and without any direction of an intelligence.” Jeffries provides
philosophical credence for what Richard already knows through experience: there is no
grand design in the world because chance dictates world events while the individual gets
cught up in the turmoil.\textsuperscript{227}

Faulkner emphasizes Stallings’s sense of the individual’s aloneness and
senselessness in an impersonal world at the end of \textit{Soldiers Pay} by exploring the
theological change in Donald Mahon’s father, the town Episcopal Rector.

“It’s a funny world ain’t it?” the Rector asks his interlocutor.
“Funny?”
“Sure, Soldier dies and leaves you money, and you spend the
money helping another soldier die comfortable. Ain’t that funny?”
“I suppose so. . . . Everything is funny. Horribly Funny.”

The Rector becomes more convinced that humanity “scarcely learns anything as
we go through this world, and that we learn nothing whatever which can ever help us or
be of any particular benefit to us, even.” The Rector then ponders aloud, “Circumstance
moves in marvelous ways.” His interlocutor interrupts, “I thought you’d a said God,
reverend.”

“God is circumstance. God is in this life.” Summarizing an existentialist ethic, the
parson confesses: “We make our own heaven or hell in this world, Who knows; perhaps
when we die we may not be required to go anywhere or do anything at all. That would be
heaven.”\textsuperscript{228}

\textsuperscript{226} Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 66, 269.

\textsuperscript{227} Stallings, \textit{Plumes}, 88, 118.
The sense of futility, loss of personhood, and individual insignificance helped to destroy the heroic self. In Dos Passos’s words, the natural human response to such weighty oppression was “the resignation of people.” He confessed that this resignation was the only mood that war induced in people. “You bob like a cork on top of hideousness and agony and stride debonairly across tragic corpses. – Turn the screws of impressedness too far and you get laughter.”

The laughter of resignation became a prominent theme in Dos Passos’s statements about the war. It was the sardonic laughter of ridicule that allowed Dos Passos to gain perspective. “The military hubub is more ridiculous than I ever expected it to be, and less meaningful. Some day vast laughter will sweep through the world and all the Smug foundations will crumble and the horror will laugh away into thin air, and people will start to live again.” In another letter he brimmed that “the war’s a damned farce – not only ridiculous philosophically, but practically. I’ve built a snailshell of hysterical laughter.” But the laughter of absurdity most often ended in “one dull despair,” because the “absurdities are so multiplied in this macabre world of our day that the grotesque loses its gargoyle-force.” Early in his wartime experience, he confided to his diary that the ridiculous nature of the war made him “think in gargoyles.” By December 31st of 1917 he confessed that he hated the “negative attitude of detestation” into which he often slipped. He conceded, however, that “bitter hate is the only protection one has against the cozening influences of a world rampant with colossal asininity.” “O for a revolution of

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229 Dos Passos, *Correspondence with McComb*, 35.
laughter – couldn’t all the world at once see the gigantic humor of the situation – and laughter shall untune the sky.”

Dos Passos was not alone. After he had been arrested, E. E. Cummings experienced his futile insignificance when “Suddenly I realize the indisputable grip of nature’s humorous hand.” One of the most poignant passages of novelist William March’s *Company K* occurs when a young private is assigned to the grim task of writing letters to parents whose son has been killed in combat. In all the previous letters he worked hard to give “every man a glorious, romantic death with appropriate last words.” He confessed that after thirty or so letters “the lies I was telling began to gag me.” His decision to tell the truth in one letter finished as such:

DEAR MADAM:

Your son, Francis, died needlessly in Belleau Wood. You will be interested to hear that at the time of his death he was crawling with vermin and weak from diarrhea. His feet were swollen and rotten and they stank. He lived like a frightened animal, cold and hungry. Then, on June 6th, a piece of shrapnel hit him and he died in agony, slowly. You’d never believe that he could live three hours, but he did. He lived three hours screaming and cursing by turns. He had nothing to hold on to, you see: He had learned long ago that what he had been taught to believe you, his mother, who loved him, under the meaningless names of honor, courage and patriotism, were all lies.

Before the private tears up the letter up he begins to laugh at the absurdity of telling the truth and the absurdity of telling lies.231

Novelist Thomas Boyd ends the first paragraph of *Through the Wheat* with the simple observation that “life was worth very little.” In another section, the protagonist

230 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 60, 63, 82, 89, 128.
Hicks begins to laugh after killing a flock of farm chickens, recognizing the irony that “we were going to save these people’s homes – and now we’re killing their chickens.” To enhance the sense of futility, Hicks notices that the soldiers had not even bothered to eat the chickens. Instead they had gorged themselves on bottle after bottle of wine, after which they agreed that the drunken soldier is a “good soldier.” For he has “done his duty and he is willing to do it again.” For Hicks, his life donned little more purpose than a bug, whose only difference from a man was that a man was “conscious of a feeling that, were they no longer to exist, the end of the world would come.” Emphasizing the existential transformation of the war, Boyd’s very last words of the novel are “No longer did anything matter, neither the bayonets, the bullets, the barbed wire, the dead, nor the living. The soul of Hicks was numb.”

Personal futility, a destroyed sense of self, and an overwhelming sense of the individual’s insignificance in the world all contributed the Lost Generation’s lostness. But so far we have only part of the picture of the Lost Generation’s lostness. The realization that American society did not see the detrimental effects of the war, that it sought to memorialize the soul-destroying event with such optimistic fervor, and that it failed to admit its own illusions, caused the Lost Generation’s sense of social alienation, another dimension of its lostness.

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National Patriotism: A Case Study

If the initial point of the Lost Generation’s lostness could be reduced to an actual moment in time, it would be President Wilson’s November 11, 1918, announcement, “My Fellow Countrymen: The armistice was signed this morning. Everything for which America fought had been accomplished.” Contrary to what the Lost Generation believed, Wilson immediately ascribed to the war a great sense of purpose. A goal had been completed, something had been gained, and the nation was clearly better off than before it entered the war eighteen months earlier. And when he commanded that it was now time to ensure the “establishment of just democracy through the world” he interpreted America’s involvement in the war as not only necessary, but a positive good. The nation absorbed Wilson’s patriotic optimism and continued its zeal well into 1919 when its heroic soldiers began to trickle home. By the spring of 1919 there were still daily reminders of the war, as newspapers across the country continued to print casualty lists, but even as the body count reached the hundreds of thousands, it was a time for celebration not mourning. Writing as an eyewitness historian, Frederick Lewis Allen tells us that America was “not yet disillusioned.” As an example he pointed to the plaster archway over Fifth Avenue that New York City had built to honor returning soldiers as they marched underneath in a victory parade. No expense is to be spared, Allen declares, when “the nation welcomes its heroes.”


Like all post-achievement emotional highs, however, this one was bound not to last. Even more importantly, returning veteran intellectuals were bound to negatively interpret such enthusiasm as a profound example of national dishonesty regarding the objectives and consequences of the war. From the benefit of hindsight, Allen surmised that the war’s soldiers and ambulance drivers did not enjoy the parades. They only wished “the fuss was over and they could get into civilian clothes and sleep late in the mornings and do what they please.”234 The returning soldiers were no longer subject to any illusions about the objectives for war, and many of the returning intellectuals who would make up the Lost Generation were convinced that America’s entry in the war had little to do with the spread of democracy, and a lot to do with less praiseworthy goals of militarism, jingoism, imperialism. What made such a negative interpretation so difficult was that the majority of the country did not share it.

Evidence of the nation’s persistence to see the war through rose-colored stained spectacles is seen in the attempt of the Midwestern city of Grand Rapids, Michigan to memorialize the war. Two years before Grand Rapids actually erected its permanent war memorial in 1926, Reverend A.W. Wishart, pastor of the liberal Fountain Street Church, and a member of the city’s memorial commission, revealed its purpose in a single statement: “We are trying to get something that will tell a story….”235 The stone pylons at Veterans Memorial Park in downtown Grand Rapids do indeed tell the story of the city’s own that were lost in the Great War. But they also reveal another narrative, one that

234 Allen, Only Yesterday, 11.

235 Grand Rapids Press, December 4, 1924.
discloses the postwar ethos of a Midwestern city succumbing to the apathy of postwar disillusionment.

Founded in 1838, in a region “thinly populated and farmers were few,” Grand Rapids was incorporated as a village in an off-the-beaten-path area of Southwestern Michigan. By 1845 the village had around 1,500 residents whose homes surrounded the New England style commons which the residents called the Public Square. For the next half-century the square was deemed the social center for the village, where one could attend city meetings, watch birds, or catch up on the local gossip. For many Grand Rapidians, the square was hallowed ground, so they naturally sanctified the square for the location of a war memorial in 1918 when residents began to see the names of its young men listed among the dead, some of them recent graduates from local high schools.236 Using in its persuasive arsenal, words such as democracy, patriotism, and honor, Grand Rapids, replete with patriotic zeal, was one of the few cities in the nation, and the leader in the Midwest, to build a temporary memorial before the war had ended. To encourage community patriotism, monetary subscriptions for the interim structure were limited to ten dollars, in order that the community would be more widely represented than if a few individuals contributed the whole amount in a single day. The air was thick with patriotism at the September, 1918 induction ceremony in which a city official proclaimed, “This temporary memorial stands in the heart of the city as they stand enshrined in the hearts of the community…. It will be a constant reminder to us of the greatness of the cause for which they have given their all. Its sheaf of heroes names will

be an inspiration to us to do our best, serve as loyally, as earnestly, as completely as they did.”

When the news hit the Grand Rapids streets a couple of months later that Germany had surrendered, the city celebrated by closing down all shops and industries. Four days later, on the Armistice, the mayor declared the day a holiday, and again area businesses shut down for the celebration, which lasted the entire day. Grand Rapids responded like it had during the war, exhibiting extreme, “local zeal,” and a regular “intensity for the war effort.” Motivated by the post-war celebrations and the return of the veterans in 1919, memorial planners tried to find the best possible manner, regardless of cost, in which to express the gratitude to those, “who made the supreme sacrifice that their ideals of democracy might be realized.”

Such lofty dreams quickly bumped against concrete reality as the cost of such patriotism ignited an eight year debate over whether to build a cheaper purely aesthetic monument, or an expensive utilitarian structure that could serve other needs of the city. At a time when efficiency, virtue, and order were the protocol nomenclature of progressivism, a purely aesthetic memorial seemed almost a waste of good money to many citizens. The general sentiment seemed to be “in favor of something useful as well as beautiful,” but others believed a utility memorial “would be taking advantage of the

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237 GRP, September 25, 1925. GRP, September 27, 1925.
238 Lydens, 599.
239 GRP, March 14, 1919.
people’s devotion to their dead heroes to raise funds for something that some day the city itself may be called upon to build.”

Grand Rapids citizens may not have been aware that their debate over the best manifestation of patriotism was also a European one. After the Great War, European nations, appalled by what seemed such a great human sacrifice for so little gain would ultimately reject the notion of practical memorials. Before the war, Europeans had typically endorsed utilitarian monuments, attempting to use space around war memorials for ceremonies or sporting events in order to “transform them from dead to living memorials.” Sentiment changed after 1918. A new sense of sacredness surrounded the idea of memorializing the dead, and many feared that the noise created by big events could not be reconciled with the “spirit of reverence a war monument should inspire.” European nations opted to erect aesthetic memorials at battle sites inscribed with the names of the soldiers killed at those fields.

Five thousand miles away, in America’s heartland, the loss of life did not seem so unjustified. It did not, therefore, seem irreverent to build a memorial, as other American cities were doing, that was patriotic, celebratory, and relatively practical. One can sense America’s particular postwar patriotism and naivete when H.M. Kurtzworth, Director of Grand Rapids School of Art and Industry proclaimed that “In contrast with the European ideas of memorial edifices which are too often pure glorifications of war and of fighters, the men of the United States having entered a conflict through a love of the just rights of peace rather than a lust for conquest, we have a new problem to solve in erecting a

\[\text{240 GRP, January 1, 1919.}\]
memorial to them which must be met in a manner becoming to a peaceful and democratic people.” Citing the European model as the symbol of sensationalism, Kurtzworth failed to recognize his own maudlin vision when he determined that the “different qualities that Grand Rapids may seek to express in erecting a memorial building which shall represent a maximum of efficiency in point of being a noble monument, a fine tribute, a high mark of honor, a victorious symbol and an enduring inspiration to the people…”

Grand Rapids was far from alone however. By pushing for utility it was merely taking its cue from Washington. In 1919, the newly created national Bureau of Memorial Buildings stated, “Nothing is too good for them [veterans].” The bureau was commissioned to aid cities into building, “war memorials that would carry American idealism ‘into practical effect.’” Theodore Roosevelt summarized American sympathies, arguing that, “Surely a dead man or woman who is a good man or woman would wish to feel that his or her taking away had become an occasion of real service for the betterment of mankind, rather than to feel that a meaningless pile of stone, no matter how beautiful, had been erected with his or her name upon it in an enclosure crowded with similar piles of stone.”

Grand Rapids was proud to be part of a national memorial drive, but when estimates topped out at an exorbitant two-million dollar price tag for a utilitarian structure, the small furniture city’s local memorial commission balked. They were leery about trying to sell such a project to the community. Supporters of the utility memorial

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became incensed, however, that their city might not adequately represent the national consciousness. They asked commission members to defer to the Washington authorities who maintained that the utilitarian option best represented America. Prominent American cities such as New York and Washington, they argued, were building memorials that functioned for utility and praxis because they would not only be good for remembering the war heroes, they would also provide the opportunity for city beautification.²⁴⁴

Not wanting to be left out of the national consensus, the Grand Rapids commission agreed to gather information about the types of memorials other cities were building. Commission member Reverend Wishart expressed the need for cooperation as a sign of patriotism: “The work of erecting a memorial through which the community is to express its gratitude and appreciation of the patriotism and sacrifices of the world war heroes should be a labor of love. The erection of such a memorial is a project full of spiritual significance and should be carried out in the spirit of unity co-operation and good will.”²⁴⁵

But true patriotism had its price, and it was money, not social unity, that determined the city’s cooperation. The unattainable cost of a utilitarian memorial swung the pendulum of public opinion toward a purely commemorative memorial.²⁴⁶ Many residents recognized the hypocrisy, arguing that the city could best demonstrate its patriotism by putting up the money. “How else can the motive of the splendid spiritual service, which was the outstanding feature of the World war be perpetuated,” one citizen...

²⁴³ Hass, 57, 58
²⁴⁴ Hass, 57, 58.
²⁴⁵ GRP, December 8, 1919.
complained. “In my opinion any other kind of monument would dishonor the dead who sacrificed their lives in the spirit of service.” The consequence of irresolution was the city’s 1921 vote that altogether denied “a proposition to bond for a memorial.” A sense of national honor had its limits. People had grown weary of the city’s memorial commission which “had done nothing except argue over the type and location” of the proposed memorial. 247

Little was settled when the local commission, after two years of research, determined that other American cities seemed to be leaning toward commemorative monuments, with cost being a primary factor. The language of democracy and patriotism became the guns and bullets of the revived controversy. Believing that it was justifiable to “spend money just for love and beauty” Reverend Wishart revealed his true motivation for the commemorative monument, declaring that “nobly and grandly it will be the finest square of its size in the United States, and it can be said Grand Rapids has done a really fine thing.” Not to be outdone in patriotic ardor, an opponent countered that the “fight for democracy is a fight that has been waged since the dawn of civilization. I am in favor of a building in which the people can gather to fight the battle for democracy in time of peace as the soldier for it in times of war…. Another admonished the Reverend, declaring that the “fallen heroes died to accomplish something useful, and the only way this can be typified is to erect some useful monument.” 248 Whether the memorial was to be utilitarian or commemorative it was clear that concern over the proper way to memorialize dead

246 GRP, March 10, 1920.
247 GRP, May 10, 1921.
248 GRP, May 10, 1921.
soldiers had shifted to concern for what would be best for the city’s reputation and budget.

In January of 1925, with the debate still unresolved, the commission rendered its verdict. The final decision was not determined by preference for aesthetics or utility, but money. The commission knew that the citizenry would never endorse the two million-dollar utilitarian structure, so it spread the word of a more reasonable 300,000-dollar price tag, tugging at the city’s sense of honor by reminding people that “If a body of women in the South known as the Daughters of the Confederacy, can take the burden of raising five million for the Stone Mountain memorial it should not be hard for you to raise $200,000 or $300,000.” Two days before the vote, Grand Rapids Mayor Swarthout offered three reasons for voting for the bond, never once mentioning the necessary propriety for the war heroes. He expressed candidly, first, the need for city beautification; second, that for surviving loved ones the “thought of utility in connection with a memorial to their dead grates upon their sensibilities;” and finally, “it is this memorial or nothing.” He warned the city, “It is my deliberate judgment that unless this particular project carries on March 4, the entire memorial project in Grand Rapids will be buried beyond resurrection.” He then concluded with a final emotional plea: “Shall their work go for naught? Shall we fail to commemorate the 250 Grand Rapids lads who lie in Flanders Field and our other heroic dead of the Spanish and Civil wars? Has Grand Rapids no heart of love and of remembrance? We shall see on March 4. Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet. Lest we forget; lest we forget.”

249 GRP, January 27, 1925  GRP, March 2, 1925.
Apparently, Grand Rapids forgot. They voted down the March 4th bond, and by April, the whole project for the memorial had been tabled. Eventually the commission voted to simply replace the temporary plaster pillars in Fulton Street Park with more permanent ones costing no more than 40,000 dollars. After more struggle to even find the necessary financing to build new pillars, Grand Rapids finally had its memorial, which was dedicated November 11, 1926. The ceremony lasted five minutes. The finished product was a far cry from the proposed 300,000-dollar commemorative memorial that would have included an ornate arch into the park that would have been surrounded by a shallow pool meant to reflect the arch’s image.250

The story of Grand Rapids’ attempt to adequately memorialize its dead, is not just a story of failed commitment, or the emptiness of American patriotism, or even of misplaced idealism, though all these motifs are present. The city had meant well. It is more a story of the process of disillusionment, a slow realization of the war’s senselessness that had evaded American society in the early months of 1919. By 1926, the meaning of the whole tired affair seemed clear: America’s fickle, naïve, and evanescent patriotism was merely the symptom of a deeper disillusionment that it failed to recognize. By 1926, the same year Hemingway documented in The Sun Also Rises the disillusionment that the Lost Generation had felt for almost a decade, Grand Rapids had lost its patriotic verve.

250 GRP, March 5, 1925. GRP, April 7, 1925.
The Lost Generation did not deny the sincerity of American attempts to positively interpret the war, nor did they doubt America's good will. John Dos Passos praised Americans for being a “great people.” “We have wealth, industry, splendid sanitation, and a will,” he exclaimed. Americans did not, however, know what to do with their virtues. He knew that America’s material accouterments exacted the heavy price of self-delusion. “So it follows naturally,” he continued, “that we have, as a people, the completest inability to see anyone’s else point of view.” Yet, America’s inability to see outside its own illusions was a significant factor in the disparity the Lost Generation writers felt between themselves and society. In a famous passage in Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms*, the protagonist Lieutenant Henry converses with his friend Gino, who tells the Lieutenant that because he is a patriot, he cannot allow himself to believe that the war has “been done in vain.” The Lieutenant does not answer. His soliloquy tells us:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.
For the Lost Generation words like “honor,” “glory,” and “sacrifice,” had been thoroughly discredited by the war. The manipulation of those concepts immediately after the armistice by Americans, such as the well-intentioned citizens of Grand Rapids, was odious to the Lost Generation. Hemingway explains to the reader in simple terms that because Gino was a patriot, “he said things that separated us sometimes.”

American patriotism was opprobrious to the Lost Generation. Writing just a month after being in France Dos Passos confessed that he could not stomach the “orgy of patriotic bunk” that characterized America. After Edmund Wilson joined the service, he reacted the same way to the “no end of enthusiasm: clapping, fish-horns, ‘Hip, hip, hooray for Uncle Sam!” He could have suffered America’s condemnation, he said, “but I cannot endure its compliments.” Of course, after the war it only got worse. Malcolm Cowley, who at least early on was vehemently pro war, exclaimed upon his return to America that he grew weary of playing the “bunk hero” that Americans so desperately needed. Edmund Wilson told a friend in 1922 that “you can’t expect survivors of 1914-18 to have very much ho! For the open road about them or to romanticize about adventures and wars of yesteryear.”

Wilson’s comments acknowledge the gulf between the returning intellectuals and American society, a problem that the literati explored through their literature. Faulkner’s

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251 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 68.


255 Cowley, *Selected Correspondence*, 45.

256 Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 80
Soldier’s Pay paints a postwar American society that is so unrealistic that “even sorrow is a fake.” In his war novel Company K, William March’s character Private Charles Gordon realizes his inability to comprehend American thinking. He complains that “Everything I was ever taught to believe about mercy, justice and virtue is a lie.”

The gulf between American patriotism and the soldier’s experience is a central theme in Elliott White Springs Contact. Preparing to go to France, the college educated Winnie asks not “if he would serve his country,” but “how he would serve it.” His father had put the pressure on Winnie by telling him to make sure to “come back honorably” from the war. Like many soldiers Winnie took imperatives for heroism seriously. During training Winnie crashes his plane and becomes consumed by fear. But he cannot allow for such emotions. He cannot return home a “baby,” that was “made of soft stuff.” “Never do to turn yellow,” he surmises. “Better to hit another stone wall on purpose.” Such feelings are highlighted when one of Winnie’s friends contracts a venereal disease while on leave. Feeling the pressure to live up to the homeland’s expectations he implores his superior not to send him home because his father “would never get over it.” He begs to be transferred to the front so that he can be “bumped off honorably.” Winnie confronts his own apathy toward patriotism when a fellow pilot is killed in combat. Guilt ridden, Winnie chastises himself for not “swearing vengeance to heaven and planning to kill six Germans to balance the score.” He concluded that something was wrong with him because in “books and movies heroes always swore vengeance on the bodies of their dead comrades.” Near the end of the novel, Winnies eyes are opened. He sees the war as “the

257 Faulkner, Soldier’s Pay, 91
campaign of the Anti-Christ,” and privately swears that if he had his way, he would
“demolish every statue of every military hero.”

Laurence Stallings’s *Plumes* insightfully explores the disillusioning power of war against the backdrop of American patriotism. When the protagonist Richard Plume is drafted, his Academic Dean at college recites the conventional incantation: “If the Lord has chosen, in His infinite mercy and wisdom, to call one of us to the flag, it is fit that Richard Plume should be called. He is strong, he is worthy, he is young.” Richard’s wife, Esme understands the social pressure of patriotism and quietly laments to herself that she is not proud of him for going to war. She only detains herself because “it would ruin his life if he didn’t go.” As Richard boards the train to leave, Stallings records that

Each wanted to shout things they would not say. “What an ass I’m making of myself!” Richard wanted to shout, as the Pullman porter seized his luggage roll. “And what a brute I am to leave you pregnant with a prospect of fifty-seven dollars a month if I am killed. And what a fool I am to risk my own precious neck.” Esme seized his arm. Her heart was begging her mind to get out of the way. “You left me,” her heart was pumping, “at the end of six months of perfect happiness to rush off to shoot at people who have never harmed us. You get the glory. I bear the child. If you leave me here by myself you’ve lost something, and you can never bring it back.”

When Richard returns home, crippled from an exploding shell, he faces the brutal truth about the glories of war. “Strange that one should be proud because his grandfather in a moment of misguided romanticism should have become riddled in some muddy field, screamed and bled a while, spit cotton and died.” When his college Dean cautions against such negative “moments of bitterness” Richard challenges him by condescendingly

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259 Springs, *Contact*, 9, 55, 66, 152, 205, 220, 290-291.

asking, “do you mean to say that as I grow old I’ll become dishonest enough to make myself out to be anything but a broken fool?” Esme understands “all the phenomena of postwar disenchantment,” through the months of visiting Richard in the hospital wards. For Richard, life in France had taught him to look at life in “terms of humanity and not of imaginary geographical lines.” He confessed that after the war “I fell under the freight train while attempting to steal a romantic ride.” In the end, “War was wrong. Fighting was stupid.” As he watches men sing *My Country Tis’ of Thee* he finds the object of his disgust: “Fools like this kept me from ever knowing the truth.” Surrounded by the gall of patriotic adulation, Richard concludes that “The only man worth while is the one who withdraws altogether from the stupidity and ignorance about him.”

In considering why America’s patriotism was so noxious to the Lost Generation, we can see that the Grand Rapids case study offers the real possibility that Americans were in fact not very patriotic, that they also were disillusioned by the war, that they too did not really believe that any heroes had returned from Europe. The inertia that cracked the patriotic façade revealed a city that had in fact become disillusioned by the war but had also refused to admit it. The consequence of refusing to remove the blinders revealed a patriotism that was not founded upon genuine hero worship but upon national coercion to act with socially appropriate behavior. The Lost Generation discovered that American patriotism was built around a hollow commitment to social propriety, a reality that was insidious to these writers, not just for its disingenuousness, but for its pernicious effects on the returning veterans. America’s unwillingness to admit its disillusionment meant

\[261\] Stallings, *Plumes*, 53, 54, 57, 80, 82.
that the Lost Generation writers were unable to find much empathy from American society.

Hemingway best expressed the social alienation felt by the Lost Generation in his first novel *In Our Time*, a collection of loosely connected stories of postwar America. In the story *Soldier’s Home*, private Krebs does not leave France until the summer of 1919 with the second wave of returning soldiers. Hemingway remarks, “By the time Krebs returned to his home town in Oklahoma the greeting of heroes was over. He came back much too late. The men from the town who had been drafted had all been welcomed elaborately on their return. There had been a great deal of hysteria. Now the reaction had set in. People seemed to think it was rather ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late, years after the war was over.” But Krebs needed to talk. He needed to express the truth of the war, but the only way he could get people to listen was to lie about it. Everyone in town had already heard the gory details, and their interest in the truth was “barred by their patriotism.”

The Lost Generation’s aversion to America’s dishonesty did not mean it could not empathize with the desire to flee from the harsh reality. Freud regarded illusions to be necessary because “they spare us emotional distress.” And because the war had “aroused our sense of disillusionment” it was natural, Freud declared, for people to want to retain their illusions. Most people could not admit to the “low morality shown externally by states which in their internal relations pose as the guardians of moral standards.” It was difficult to acknowledge “the brutality shown by individuals whom, as participants in the

262 Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 69, 85.
highest human civilization, one would not have thought capable of such behavior.”

Hemingway understood that it was “much better to die in all the happy period of undisillusioned youth, to go out in a blaze of light, than to have your body worn out and old and illusions shattered.” During the war Dos Passos had hoped that Americans could somehow be exposed to the war’s disillusioning power. He wrote that there still was a “dreadful need for people who have minds of their own – and they are rare God knows – to come over to Europe and see exactly what sort of a party this is in which Europe is so merrily suiciding. Just so that they can understand the next war – when it comes.” But he understood the importance of illusions. After reading Flaubert’s “Bouvard & Pecuchet, a “desperate book which so exposes people’s idiocies” Dos Passos realized that without our self-deception life was like the “utter illusionless” novel that leaves one only with the “feeling of miserable futility.”

The American Institution

The Lost Generation intellectuals may have been able to empathize with the nation’s unwillingness to let go of its illusions, and determine that social alienation was

263 Freud’s essay was eventually published as: Sigmund Freud, “Reflections on War and Death,” Psychoanalytic Review, 8 (1921), 193. See Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920’s, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 171. Douglas says that “Freud had hoped the Great War would destroy the nineteenth century’s belief in that bogus notion called “progress.” Three points of consideration: A) The language of Freud’s essay is much more tentative regarding any benefits the war might offer; B) The breaking down of illusions was not a wish fulfillment, but a de facto statement regarding the powerful psychological effect of the war; C) The notion of war’s ability to repel the illusion of progress does not explicitly enter into the essay.

264 Hemingway, Selected Letters, 19.
the consequence of their disillusionment, but the problem was not so innocuous. The Lost Generation believed that American society, the military, and western governments in general were three institutions that were not only culpable for the war, they were responsible for suppressing postwar individual freedom. We need to clarify that the Lost Generation defined institutions rather broadly as any force that suppressed individual liberty, and it did not always distinguish between particular institutions, often referring to a general institutional machine. But these three institutions stand out as the oppressive forces against which these writers felt compelled to rebel.

Dos Passos was the most sensitive of the Lost Generation writers to the infringement upon his personal liberty. And when Dos Passos spoke of liberty, he almost always interpreted it in terms of one’s freedom to think and speak for oneself. Though Edmund Wilson described him as a “social revolutionary,” and though he often fought alongside Marxists for social and economic liberty, Dos Passos’s sense of freedom was predominately individualistic. Malcolm Cowley remembered that Dos Passos, when questioned about his communist sympathies, remarked that he was “just an old-fashioned believer in liberty equality and fraternity.”

The Lost Generation believed that its postwar dissent from the socially prescribed patriotism was unacceptable to American society. Society initially demonstrated its institutional power by suppressing pacifists and other dissenting voices during the war. Dos Passos was convinced that democratic societies were just as adept at stifling


individual thought than imperial regimes. Taking a queue from Tocqueville, who a century earlier had criticized the totalitarianism of the mob, Dos Passos told his diary that western nations are “constantly making the mistake of confusing liberty with democracy – They have nothing in common at all – In America the one means ‘every man as good as his neighbor’ – liberty means nothing, except possibly political autonomy. I mean that the idea of liberty being the expression of the right of the individual to the freedom of thought and expression and to ‘the pursuit of happiness’ in his own way – does not exist.”

For Dos Passos, President Wilson’s declaration that the war was being fought to “make the world safe for democracy,” was a blatant lie. Postwar society was not any freer for the individual thinker than it been during the war.

Historian Eric Foner points out that the government did try to suppress social dissent, but that society had done much of the work already. English novelist D. H. Lawrence wrote in 1923, “I have never been in a country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen.”

Dos Passos demonstrated in the USA Trilogy his awareness of Foner’s assessment. At the end of 1919, the character Ben Compton had been arrested before the armistice for his participation with radical causes. His trial date was set after the armistice, and, in futile hope, Ben’s friends tried to convince him not to worry. “We’ll take your case to the President,” they exhorted. “Now that the war’s over they can’t keep the liberal press muzzled any more.” Ben knew it was wishful thinking.

For the same people that had charged him were the same ones who “sent Debs to jail,

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268 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 221.
those are the people who shot Joe Hill, who murdered Frank Little, Those are the people who beat us up in Everett, who want me to rot in jail for ten years.”

The nation’s reaction to Bolshevism, expressed in the 1919 round up of radicals was not only a violation of civil liberties. For Dos Passos it was a violation of intellectual freedom. His decision to name the second volume of the trilogy 1919 was no accident. The novel is devoted to the struggle of free thought. He devoted his final two biography sections to historical figures whose dissent had not only been suppressed but had cost them their lives. In the first case, Dos Passos highlights the complicity between society and the legal institutions to suppress individual freedom by narrating the killing of IWW leader Joe Hill. Mr. Hill, Dos Passos declares, fought to form “the structure of the new society within the jails of the old,” and as a result was framed for a murder he didn’t commit. Hill was executed for his crimes, and through his final words, shed light on America’s reason to silence him: “Don’t mourn for me organize.”

Dos Passos’s other example was killed by society alone as a victim of mob violence. Wesley Everest, was “a logger like Paul Bunyan” and there was “not a thing in this world Paul Bunyan’s ascared of.” He fought to make “the Pacific slope safe for the workingstiffs.” But postwar America would have none of it, Dos Passos declares. “To be red in the summer of 1919 was worse than being a hun or a pacifist in the summer of 1917.” After defending an IWW meeting with violent force, Everet finally succumbed to force of the mob. While in its clutches Everet taunted “You haven’t the guts to hang a

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270 Dos Passos, 1919, 359.

271 Dos Passos, 1919, 338.
man in the daytime.” He was right. They waited until the cover of darkness to cut off his genitals and then “hanged him from the bridge in the glare of the headlights.”

Society represented an oppressive force from which Dos Passos feared he could not easily escape. His only refuge seemed to be a place of solitude where he could retreat into his mind and freely prattle on about the “horror of existence.” He confided in his journal that

Like [Rousseau] I long for an Island Avalon where I may go and sleep and dream and build my soul a garlanded altar; white, implacable, where I may place a sacrifices all my past and all my future. O to get away from all troubling things from war and governments and the entrenched stupidity of people – to get away and breathe and find myself and then come back to strive and love and hate and blow my little trumpets and unfurl my little flags until I can slip away on my last exile to Avalon or St Helena or Ellis Island – who cares – so long as it is an island where one can be alone with the dawn and the sunset.

Retreat from society seemed even more attractive after just minimal exposure to the oppression of military discipline. Just as he had first optimistic about the war Dos Passos was convinced early on of personal benefits of military service. A year before he ever stood in line or marched to a command Dos Passos conceded that he would probably enjoy military life, “because it would make young men rub shoulders more, get to know people outside of their class – be actually instead of theoretically democratic.” Intensely shy, Dos Passos was speaking therapeutically of what the military could do for people such as himself, “who sort of have solitude in their blood.”

272 Dos Passos, 1919, 369.
273 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 133, 216.
274 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 45.
The romanticism of military life dissipated quickly after he realized that nothing
killed a sense of the heroic self more than the slow death of the intellect through military
life. Dos Passos complained in a letter that he was subjected to the “slavery to all the
military stupidities,” a statement that eventually got him in trouble with military censors.
One of his definitions of “stupidities” was the suppression of free speech by the
government, of which the military was the most salient representation. When one man in
Dos Passos’s section was discharged for “unfavorable criticism” and the “low moral
tone” of his letters, Dos Passos became outraged. He acutely felt the “sheer meanness &
small mindedness” of such umbrage.275

Institutional power of the military was not just displayed in its ability to
dishonorably discharge or jail dissenters, but in its ability to stifle the spirit of the heroic
self. Dos Passos strove to stymie his slide toward complete mental and spiritual
resignation to such institutional forces, but confided later to his diary that such mental
acquiescence was alluring because of the realization that against such power “there’s
nothing one can do about it – no more than one slave can protest when another slave is
whipped.” The military institution demanded that one be like “good little pigeons,” and if
not, one was under the constant threat of being “kicked and beaten by the officers.”276
After the military had taken care to “remove all joy of life,” Dos Passos declared that he
no longer heard of any revolutionary spirits set to overthrow the machine. Feeling the

275 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle. 135, 152.

276 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 135, 164, 170.
institution’s power to sap the one’s energy for heroic revolt, he simply whimpered “I believe in nothing.”

Dos Passos found historical validation for his assessment of military life in the nineteenth-century French poet Alfred De Vigny, whose Servitude and Grandeur of Arms he thought a “curious little book” that spoke out against the “hollowness of old wars.” But even in their hollowness, Dos Passos remarked, the wars of old were fought for “Kudos and for personal devotion,” which were “strange outworn stupidities, but stupidities that had a halo of belief about them.” Vigny’s criticism, however was of the modern world, where the military is not a gathering of civilians to fight for a single cause but a separate and distinct “nation within a nation.” The consequence of such a specialized force, Vigny asserts is that it thinks like a child, “its intelligence is retrograde, forbidden to grow up.” As a result, modern military life kill individualism, “like the iron mask on the nameless prisoner, and gives every man of arms a uniform expression of rigidity.” Vigny likened military service to slavery, a condition the devolves individual cognition so that it can perform “acts by rote.” Such an existence involves the “complete renunciation of the freedom to think and act,” a constant pricking crown of thorns that allows nothing more “doleful than that of passive obedience.”

Dos Passos was enamored with such insight to his own present condition, which he compared to the “wisdom of the snake,” the cunning “Gospel of the army.” The military had reduced its inhabitants to puppets, who have “nothing to do and no chance to do anything you want to do.” The soul-killing environment of military life caused Dos

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277 Dos Passos, Correspondence with Arthur McComb, 53.
Passos to complain, in less than a month of military service, that “one is too tired to be anything but bored,” in the “dry dustiness of it all.” In a letter to young Rumsey Marvin, who was pondering taking courses at Yale in military tactics, Dos Passos commanded his young friend to abandon all such inanities, citing for his reasons the “boredom brutality and stupid dirtiness of military life.” He confessed that the “agony of boredom” that characterized so much of military life had even made him “homesick for the front.” But instead, he merely succumbed to the “closed in dullness of army life” and wrapped himself in “such a mantle of Ennui,” that he could only write odes to her majesty “Queen Ennui, the most powerful of all goddesses.” “But she is not a bad mistress,” Dos Passos muses. For once one has embraced her “kissed her square on the mouth” she begins to “lull you to waking sleep with her strange nostalgic songs.”

Dos Passos’s tendency to retreat into the harbors of boredom show us that the military was not conducive for intellectual rigor. He could muster little of Otto Rank’s heroic revolt to combat the spiritual sluggishness that had taken over his psyche.

The same cannot be said for his reaction against the governments that had started the war. While the social and military institutions sought to stifle freedom of speech and to sap individual vitality, governments exhibited not only their ability but also their willingness to destroy lives. To validate one’s assumption of the inherent corruption of institutions, Dos Passos maintained, all one needed to do was count the almost nine million sheep with “a dumb submissive look about the eyes” that had been sent to the slaughter for governments’ interests. For Dos Passos, America’s governmental tyranny


reared its ugly head when the President Wilson instituted the military-service law, causing Dos Passos to despair that “liberty [in America] is extinguished for a long time to come.” He did not reserve his indictment to America, but blasted all of western society because the “idea of individual liberty does not exist anywhere.”

The Lost Generation’s belief that western governments abused their power fomented the ire of revolt. Dos Passos declared that the time had come for “the balance sheet between the power over the individual of a national government and the good to the individual of a national government must be drawn.” Democratic governments, Dos Passos railed, were supposed to be accountable to the people and to function for the benefit of the people. But history had not only shown government’s unwillingness to cede power or spotlight to the heroic individual, but it to even give the individual “a chance for once.” Instead, governments had proven to be insidiously incompetent, unable to “accomplish what it sets out to do even if what it sets out to do is necessary.” The implications to such incompetence were not harmless. The result was always same; the strong exercised their “power over the weak.”

Dos Passos was reacting to the American government’s tactics to ensure national acceptance of the war. Historian David Kennedy reminds us that the American government’s “War Issues Course” obliged colleges and universities to offer courses in war tactics. The intention was to intellectually mobilize the civilian population in support for the war. These courses placed professors in the role of war propagandists.

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government sponsored indoctrination caused many postwar novelists to spew derogatory statements toward all American institutions, singling out the government for special vitriol. Thomas Boyd expressed his exasperation that so many men had gone to war for impure ambitions that had been encouraged by a government that “had generously made itself the cultural father” of such individuals. Laurence Stallings remarks that the “White House swallowed the same aphorisms” that it fed everyone else. Taft and Wilson were “dolts and fools,” who were “duped” by their own intellectual incompetence. But again, the government’s diminished intellectual capacity was far from harmless. William March’s *Company K* envisioned individual soldier’s as “pawns whored about to serve the interest of others.” Soldiers were prisoners of their own system, just as condemned as prisoners of war in a foreign camp because a “roomful of politicians decided for them that their honor had been violated.” Hemingway’s direct language expressed the sentiments of many postwar writers: “There is a class that controls a country that is stupid and does not realize anything and never can. That is why we have this war.”

No two novels exposed institutional oppression more than Cummings’s *Enormous Room* and Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers* did. Cummings novel was based on his three-month incarceration in a French prison. Cummings internment was collateral damage

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284 127-128


286 Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 51.
from his friendship with fellow poet Slater Brown, who had written some uncomplimentary things about the French government in a letter picked up by the censors. The novel is simultaneously an indictment of all governmental authority as well as a celebration of the heroic spirit. In his review of the book Dos Passos believed that it had “approached the mood of recklessness adventure in which men will reach the white heat of imagination needed to fuse the soggy disjointed complexity of the industrial life about us into seething fluid of creation.” Witty, inflammatory, sardonic, and bitingly sarcastic, the novel reads as a light-hearted narrative of a three-month internment. But the reader cannot escape the fact that the novel is directed toward the French military institution that imprisoned him, an institution that represents all institutions.

Cummings’s well-placed use of humor exacts an ironic criticism that is subtle in presentation but powerful in effect. He begins by comparing the metaphoric prison of military life to the *de facto* life in a French prison. As Cummings physically transfers from one to the other his spirit ironically shifts from bitterness to joy, revealing his deep antipathy to the military institution. Playing with the irony, Cummings facetiously speaks: “To borrow a characteristic-cadence from Our Great President: the lively satisfaction which we might be suspected of having derived from the accomplishment of a task so important in the saving of civilization from the clutches of Prussian tyranny was in some degree inhibited, unhappily, by a complete absence of cordial relations between the man whom fate had placed over us and ourselves.” As explanation for his protracted

assessment, Cummings offers in simple “vulgar American idiom” that he “didn’t get on well” with his military superiors.  

Cummings is not long under French watch before he begins to direct his incisive wit toward the French Government. After his arrest, he jokingly announces to his fellow American soldiers, “Gentlemen, friends, comrades – I am going away immediately and shall be guillotined tomorrow.” So begins Cummings’s ridicule of France’s government, an institution that does not allow one to ask the time of day, for “there is no more time, the French government forbids it.” Dotted throughout the narrative, Cummings takes care to mockingly attribute the French government with divine epitaphs such as the “excellent and inimitable and altogether benignant French government.” He ordains the government with references like “Almighty Wisdom,” “All wise,” “great and good,” and “utterly and incomparably moral.”

Cummings invective continues throughout a novel that is stitched together by a series of individual character portraits. These depictions reveal individuals that are heroic because they are personages who did not sell out to the institution, whom for whatever reason revolted against French authority and paid for it with their freedom. Cummings openly declares his own heroic rebellion at the end of the novel, when he is released. He tells us that he smiles at the prison warden in a way that says, “If I could see your intestines very slowly embracing a large wooden drum rotated by means of a small iron crank turned gently and softly by myself, I should be extraordinarily happy.”

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290 Cummings, Enormous Room, 173.
Dos Passos’s anti-institutional novel, *Three Soldiers*, is replete with anti-institutional rhetoric without any of Cummings’s comedic relief. Where Cummings emerges from the depths of prison life victoriously sneering at the institution, Dos Passos’s three protagonists are subsumed by it. The driving thesis of *Three Soldiers* is the institution’s successful suppression of the individual. The narratives of the two secondary characters, Chrisfield and Fuselli fade into oblivion. Chrisfield kills his commanding officer over a condescending comment. He neither pays for the crime, nor does his existence in the army matter. Dos Passos simply quits talking about him. Fuselli, who has unsuccessfully tried to rise through the ranks of the army gets the same authorial dismissal. These characters not only represent Dos Passos’s assertion that the war offered no sense of closure for its participants, but that in the grander scheme of things their lives do not matter much anyway.

Like Fitzgerald’s Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, Dos Passos’s protagonist John Andrews strives to become a heroic self. To do so, however, he must sacrifice his freedom. Early in his military service, Andrews, a musician representative of all artists, realizes that he does not have the strength of character to stand alone. He has already become “sick of revolt, of thought, of carrying his individuality like a banner above the turmoil.” He acquiesces into “the mud of common slavery” while his two friends, Chrisfield and Fuselli, are at home in the army, hardly “appalled by the loss of their liberty.” After taking a swim, Andrews is repelled by the thought of having to put his army issued shirt back on, commenting out loud but to himself that it was “like voluntarily taking up filth and slavery again.” An army YMCA chaplain, the metaphoric institutional foil to Andrew’s individuality, overhears Andrews and responds, “D’you call
serving your country slavery, my friend?” Andrews reacts, “You’re goddam right I do.” After giving the young private a warning that such talk could land him in trouble, the “Y man” begins to pontificate that their presence in Europe is for “the cause of democracy” so that Andrew’s children will be able to live peacefully. “I’ve heard the great heart of America beat,” he prophesies. “O boys, never forget that you are in a great Christian undertaking.”291

Andrews rejects such political and religious triumphantism, yet he does not have the spirit to revolt. He confesses later to Chrisfield that the army had “tamed him.” He was in fact “no sort of person at all.” Such a belief convinced Andrews that he should desert in order to forget the degradation to which he had been subjected. For military life is composed of “grinding out lives with lives, crushing flesh with flesh,” both in the physical and moral sense. A minor event in the novel, but rife with meaning, is the point where Andrews must ask help from a superior officer in getting an application for study at the Sorbonne. He knows that Army polity makes it nearly impossible to get anything accomplished without manipulating people and circumstances. When Andrews does just that “disgust surged up within him.” Dos Passos makes a careful point to show the reader that it is Andrew’s willingness to play the game, to jump through the hoops, to bend to the will of the system that brings about the “fury of his humiliation.” It is the most dehumanizing thing he has had to undergo, even worse than enduring a war that he considers the result of a “psychology of slavery.”292

291 Dos Passos Three Soldiers, 19, 24, 136.
The bane of the institution that Dos Passos shows us in *Three Soldiers* is not just the trivialization of the individual, but the moral dilemma into which it places the heroic self. The hero is not allowed to perform heroic acts; he is not allowed to choose between himself and others, but between himself and the system. The hero believes that submitting to the system is morally reprehensible, yet he is fully aware that his only protection from the system is to submit to it. The institution is the organized-crime boss who “encourages” people to pay him so that they can receive protection from he and his cronies. Dos Passos gives Andrews this choice. He can lose his moral liberty and retain some form of physical freedom, or he can buck the system, as an individual’s moral prerogative, and achieve intellectual redemption, but by so doing he must sacrifice his physical freedom. In this scenario Andrews’s heroism of revolt requires great personal sacrifice.

But Dos Passos does not let Andrews get that far. Pondering the significance of his position, Andrews resigns himself to the reality that in the modern world there are no more heroes. He does not define heroic individuals by the great warriors of the past, Alexander the Great nor Napoleon, but by the lone truth-telling artists Michaelangelo and Da Vinci. At the end of the novel when Andrews finally deserts, a friend finds him and tries to convince him to go back, pleading that “one man alone can’t buck the system like that.” Andrews does not see his defiant act in heroic terms, for the machine kills heroes physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It is resignation that leads Andrews down his path of rebellion. “I’ve got to a point where I don’t give a damn what happens to me,” he declares. “I don’t care if I’m shot or if I live to be eighty.”

Unlike *The Enormous
Room, in which Cummings emerges from prison as the heroic individual, *Three Soldiers* has the institution win. The army captures Andrews physically and he has no moral strength left to stand on his own. The system controls both. He has resigned.

Dos Passos’s novel was written in a social context in which the governmental institutions of Europe and America had honed the ability to escort the individual, screaming or not, to the front lines and discard him for the sake of trying to gain a few yards of soil in futile advances across “no man’s land.” Dos Passos mirrored Freud’s assertion that everyone had been reduced to a “cog of the gigantic machine of war.”

The novel leaves the reader with a dual sense of perfervid individualistic rigor and the futility of going against the almighty machinery of the institution.

Conclusion

Reflecting back on his 1929 publication *The Modern Temper*, Joseph Wood Krutch maintained that it was clearly “Existentialist, if the word had then been in popular use.” Krutch’s book presented a nineteen-twenties in existential crisis, a world in which “the human spirit cannot find a comfortable home.” So many people, Krutch declared, were “not yet awake” to the new realities of the modern world. “It is not a changed world,” Krutch argued, “but a new one in which man must henceforth live if he lives at all, for all his premises have been destroyed and he must proceed to new conclusions.”

The values and thoughts that society had established had been “swept away along with

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the rules by which [an individual] thought they might be attained.” Krutch’s only palliative was the belief that “our novels, our poems, and our pictures are enough to reveal that a generation aware of its predicament is at hand.”

Krutch was speaking of the Lost Generation, who understood that its predicament was existing in a postwar society in which the personal and social rules had changed. The war contributed to the Lost Generation’s sense of “lostness” by not only altering the individual’s concept of self, but by transforming a society that did not want to recognize its own disillusionment. The result was an ironic vision of one’s personal existence and the society within which the individual lived a “lostness defined by the combination of personal futility and social alienation.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE ROMANTIC NIHILISTS

John Dos Passos romanticized his childhood memories because they brought new, present day experiences. He told friend Rumsey Marvin that he had taken to writing down his youthful memories because they were a source of amazement and joy. In 1916, at twenty years old he used the metaphor of searching an old house, “wandering in those quaint dark, dimly fragrant rooms – You find so much – it’s like rummaging in an attic. Except you are wild to go back sometimes – just to step into the picture you’re drawing.” Dos admitted that he often preferred the mental life of his memories because they were always utopian with “so much charm and wonder – and one never had the cold.” He confessed to Rumsey that although craved experiences such as gaping at other dancers, or even dancing some himself, neither compared to the “spin in the attic.”

He opens his short story about his childhood experiences in Brussels, “Les Lauriers Sont Coupés” with “A dim halo, a pale intense light hangs about your childhood

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297 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 54.
memories, suffusing them with strange beauty.” Life had carried the young writer beyond those lasting memories and something had changed. He reminisced that “so much has intervened – both for me and for Brussels – since then, that I doubt if we could ever recapture our old intimacy.” He ends the story in memory of a tale that his nurse used to tell him, about a certain house in Brussels where a king lived with his subjects of gypsies, murderers, and bandits, until his wife killed him by pouring hot lead into his ears while he slept. As a child, Dos Passos always became too frightened to hear the whole the story and would ask anxiously, “But that was very long ago?” “Not very long,” she would reply. He wonders as he closes the story with a song that his mother used to sing to him, whether even today the gypsies roam the streets of the city.

Along with Dos Passos, the Lost Generation maintained a high regard for the past. It was a commitment that seemed contradictory to the typical modernist mindset that wanted to destroy the past in order to create that which was new. But like the Young Americans Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, and Van Wyck Brooks, the Lost Generation found in the past a model of understanding history used by the Romantics that meshed with its own. This chapter will first address the Lost Generation’s repudiation of progressive idealism in order to determine the intellectual separation that occurred between the two generations of intellectuals.

I will begin by briefly outlining the prewar historical optimism exemplified by such intellectuals as Walter Weyl, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. Then I will demonstrate that the separation between the prewar and postwar generations emerged


after the war, in a periodical discourse that began around 1922 after the Lost Generation’s dismissal of prewar historical optimism instigated an equally dismissive response by the historical optimists toward the pejoratively labeled, “younger generation.” The consequence for the Lost Generation meant they had to forge their own intellectual terrain.

Finally, I will demonstrate that the intellectually ostracized Lost Generation writers adapted a historical consciousness they that they believed better reflected the chaos of a postwar world. Their considerably cynical historical consciousness, which poet Wyndam Lewis named Romantic Nihilism, fell in line with Oswald Spengler’s assessment of western society in *The Decline of the West*, and was manifest most clearly in Dos Passos’s 1925 *Manhattan Transfer*.

**Prewar Historical Consciousness**

Historians of twentieth-century America have well established the connection between progressivism’s reformation agenda and its optimistic historical consciousness that played itself out in social reform. Historian Dorothy Ross, argues that the progressives were the first social intellectuals who took seriously the understanding that changes in society are the result of historical progress. The progressive’s optimistic historical consciousness was the consequence of nineteenth-century historicism which maintained “confidence in human powers and a unidirectional sense of time.”

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consequence of such a progressive vision of history, according to historian Michael McGerr, was a belief that human nature was malleable and therefore able to reform. Bad habits were the mere consequence of a bad environment, social scientists determined; immoral behavior was not hereditary.\textsuperscript{301}

Our purpose is not to establish the progressive agenda, an already well covered historical topic, but to suggest that the Lost Generation’s rejection of progressive ideals ran deeper than simply rejecting progressivism’s morality. What the Lost Generation rejected was the optimistic historical consciousness that lay behind its reforms exemplified by the \textit{New Republic}’s other two editors, Walter Weyl and Walter Lippmann, and a regular contributor to the organ, philosopher and public intellectual John Dewey.

Weyl earned his Panglossian stripes through his 1909 publication \textit{The New Democracy}. He considered modern Americans to be vacillating between those who retained an immense optimism for economic success and those who had become “disenchanted with the fruits of a century of independence.” But Weyl put his hope in progressivism’s new spirit of democracy that would increasingly challenge the power of the American plutocracy. That spirit was no chimera intended to give the underprivileged false hope. In the “language of social reformers” the new spirit was an experiential reality, of which “our conscious social actions are but a fulfillment, a sanction, an epilogue.” It was the “individual interest in the common lot” that would find its

expression in the “more equal distribution of wealth and income.” Weyl emphasized progressivism’s corrective to social ills as a national grassroots attention to democracy.\(^\text{302}\)

If democracy was the conduit by which social equity would be actualized, then pragmatism was the philosophical base from which it would grow. Walter Lippmann, the New Republic’s third original editor, was more demure concerning the condition of American prewar society than Weyl, but he believed progressive ideals could be realized through the application of Jamesian pragmatism. In his 1914 watershed book *A Preface to Politics*, he opens with the criticism that there has been “something monotonously trivial and irrelevant about our reformist enthusiasm” because it refused to position politics among the real “creative activities of men.” As a result progressive politics had become devoid of meaning, a “vague abstraction without substance.” He asks, “if men find statecraft uninteresting, may it not be that statecraft is uninteresting?” Lippmann believed that progressive politics was too divorced from action because its intellectuals were trying to work within the framework of set theories inapplicable to the American political scene. As a result, Lippmann believed there was not enough use of pragmatism’s doctrines in the modern world. He castigated those intellectuals who regarded their theories as “true and binding,” of which they must realize that none are. The hope for America, Lippmann challenges, is to work with “living ideas,” that are adaptable to a society that is in constant flux. America will reach its potential when “no creed possesses any final sanction.” In Jamesian language, Lippmann asserted that any political theory was “to be judged only as an effective or ineffective instrument of a desire.”\(^\text{303}\)

John Dewey is the historical figure in which democracy, education, and pragmatism all come together under the umbrella of a progressive historical consciousness. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his support for the war. In his 1915 essay *German Philosophy and Politics*, sections of which were printed in the *New Republic*, Dewey not only displayed his positive spin on the war, he revealed the historical consciousness behind it.

It is futile to work for the negative end of peace unless we are committed to the positive ideal which it cloaks: Promoting the efficacy of human intercourse irrespective of class, racial, geographical and national limits. Any philosophy which should penetrate and particulate our present social practice would find at work the forces which unify human intercourse. An intelligent and courageous philosophy of practice would devise means by which the operation of these forces would be extended and assured in the future. An American philosophy of history must perforce be a philosophy for its future, a future in which freedom and fullness of human companionship is the aim, and intelligent cooperative experimentation the method.  

Dewey’s historical language manifested a belief that the war could spur humanity on to a greater future, which could be achieved by adherence to the pragmatic vision. In Dewey’s mind the war had not damaged pragmatism. If anything Dewey believed that “the present world scene” evinced “an *a priori* and an absolutistic philosophy gone into bankruptcy.” The war was socially and individually destructive, to be sure, but it “forces

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303 Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York: M. Kennerley, 1914), 236, 237. Lippmann did concede that building philosophical systems that work out logically “obviate certain dangers,” such as avoiding intellectual inconsistencies. But those dependent on consistent systems of thought in a chaotic world are entrenched in the misguided belief that the intellect can rise above the vicissitudes of life. The system is bound to ideas and must make life fit with those ideas. “There is nothing disastrous,” he asserts, “in the temporary nature of our ideas.”

a consideration of what type of general ideas is available for the articulation and guidance of our own life.”

We have already established in the previous chapter the Lost Generation’s unwillingness to positively interpret the war, but we can say here, as a reminder, that the Lost Generation sided with Randolph Bourne, who challenged Dewey: “If the war is too strong for you to prevent, how is it going to be weak enough for you to control and mold to your liberal purposes?” Reversing the pragmatic paradigm, of action preceding perception, Bourne argued that with an event as extreme as war, ideals and ends must be analyzed and worked out before action is taken. Bourne criticized Dewey for confusing the use of force with the implementation of democratic values, suggesting that with Dewey’s pragmatic emphasis upon the “efficient and expedient” pragmatism had confused “the illegitimate power of the state with the constituted authority of government.”

305 Dewey, “German Philosophy and Politics,” 251


307 Randolph Bourne, in John Patrick Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 374. Intellectual historian John Diggins, cites not just the war, but Dewey’s positive spin on it as a determining factor in pragmatism’s decline as a socially viable tool. According to Diggins this emphasis upon action preceding value judgments was an unrealistic and unworkable goal that merely laid bare the inability of pragmatism’s philosophical agenda to provide adequate meaning for something as significant as the war. For Diggins, the overthrow of traditional authority was not the paramount problem. It was that pragmatism promised to replace the traditional authority with something better. But in the end individuals were simply left “going along with” society; going along with whatever worked. According to Diggins this surrogate authority was too ambiguous and “never made much sense” to astute cultural critics like Henry Adams and the other intellectuals who felt alienated from a society that had once attached meaning to social absolutes. Pragmatism, Diggins argues, was inadequate for answering the problem of alienation between two worlds; the world of absolute values of the nineteenth century based upon philosophical rationalism and the scientific and naturalistic world of the twentieth century that exalted empiricism and technology. When technology was used for such horrific purposes during the First World War the fallacies and shortcomings of pragmatism were exposed because of its inability to make sense of something that was a direct social experience.
Dewey bet all the progressive chips on the gamble of the war. He was simply following the logical end of his historical consciousness. For if pragmatism could provide adequate meaning for something as catastrophic as the war it could rise to any social challenge. But Dewey, one of the earliest founders of an experience based epistemology, had not derived his knowledge of the war from experience. He and his fellow progressivists had not driven the ambulances that transported broken bodies away from the front, nor had they witnessed firsthand the end of optimism on the day when “bloated rats swam through the muck feeding on dead in the flooded trenches” of Flanders.\textsuperscript{308} No, unlike the Lost Generation the progressivists were not ready to chime in with the war’s veterans and sing that “all the vestiges of old truths,” including those of progressivism, were now “all cant and hypocrisy.”\textsuperscript{309}

The Clash of History

The Lost Generation’s rejection of the progressive ideals and its historical consciousness did not set well with the prewar progressive intellectuals. A battle ensued in April, 1922, when \textit{The Freeman} editor Albert Jay Nock, the self-appointed representative of the older generation, “whose last fine flowers in the domain of thought were William James and Josiah Royce, proclaimed that he was sympathetic to the generation that with “the war in its memory” had committed the “little heresy of doubting

\textsuperscript{308} John Dos Passos, \textit{Mr. Wilson’s War}, \textit{From the Assassination of McKinley to the Defeat of the League of Nations}, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 274. See also, \textit{Best Times}, 124.

\textsuperscript{309} Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 90.
whether the future was likely to be much better than the present.”

Realizing that the younger generation maintained a jaded historical consciousness Nock understood that its pursuit of immediate gratification was due to a belief that “time is a cheat, and the future is time’s basest accomplice.”

The June issue, however, displayed a frustrated Nock, who seemed to believe that if the pejoratively labeled “younger generation” would just accept “sound spiritual guidance,” then it could refrain from its struggle, “however ineffectual, towards the things of the spirit.” He offered his guidance, explaining that if the younger generation “had had the benefit of continuity and progress in criticism, it might do better.” Nock’s examples of the younger generation’s rudimentary intellectual abilities were Gilbert Seldes, editor and drama critic for Dial, and John Chipman Farrar, poet and Bookman editor, both of whom, like Dos Passos, were born in the 1890’s, and were leading social and literary critics of the postwar period. These younger intellectuals, Nock maintained, have tolerated without complaint an educational system under which it is practically impossible for youth to become, in a substantial sense, educated or civilized. It has embraced and ever held fast a theory of social life under which the best aspirations of youth are hopelessly narrowed and vulgarized. It has floated from an enlightened and satisfying ideal of civilization, and has met with active opposition or passive discouragement every effort to check and reverse those currents.

310 Dos Passos had always liked Nock, calling him “a man of his word.”

311 Albert Jay Nock, Freeman, April, 1922, 102.

312 Nock, Freeman, June, 1922, 383.

313 Nock, Freeman, July, 1922, 454.

314 Nock, Freeman, June, 1922, 383.
Concurring with Nock in the June edition, J. E. Spingarn, former professor of literature at Columbia University, and founder of the Harcourt, Brace and Company publishing house, argued that the younger generation was merely a product of youth, which thrived on revolt. He denied the “les jeunes” its thunder by dismissing its rebellion. For the only real division in society and culture, he maintained, “is the difference between an old-fashioned materialism and a new idealism.” The younger generation, he chided, must learn “once more to speak and to think in terms of ideal values. It must acquire a new vocabulary, or, if you will, it must take those old words that once meant so much to mean and breathe the breath of life into them.” It is only a return to the spiritual solidity of an earlier time that will free the younger generation from “the bondage of its restless and homeless life.”

More attacks on the Lost Generation came from different sources. In the July 1922 edition of *International Journal of Ethics*, a philosophy student presented her belief that her “younger generation” had succumbed to the “extremely insidious and serious social disease” of hedonism, citing as her evidence the abundance of contemporary literature, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s, that was filled with immorality. The reason was that its authors were in the “grip of disillusionment,” of which she was naively convinced, was the “most severe the world had ever seen.” She continued the article as an attack on the “moral anarchy” of hedonism as a philosophical system, arguing that the hedonist is neither a pragmatist nor an idealist. That type of person, she avers, is simply a pessimist, who is in danger of determining “life values for all of us.”

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condemn younger generation’s hedonism, she faulted instead its philosophical basis that was unable to provide for it a consistent ethic.

The article revealed a patronizing trend in those critics, such as Nock and Springarn, who released the younger generation from moral culpability because of its naïve youth. A 1926 article by journalist Irving Bacheller blamed America’s moral breakdown on the vigor of a youthful generation that no longer responded to America’s great moral traditions. The article stressed that patience was the key. Like the young of all generations, this generation too would outgrow its immaturity and realize that “youth is a good companion, but a bad leader.” They are not to blame, he continues, but he admonishes the younger generation toward intellectual growth, because its members are proud of their college degrees and “there is nothing so dangerous as the ignorance of the learned.”

With similar condescension, George Albert Coe, former theology professor at Union Theological Seminary, blamed the older generation for not training the younger generation properly. The younger generation is “simply trying to fend for itself,” from the “complete mess made by their elders.” The older generation’s gravest mistake, for Coe, was in failing to provide quality religious education in America’s colleges, the consequence of which was poorly trained minds that had no choice but to rebel. Adding insult to injury, another generational critic suggested that such a patronizing vision of the


318 George Coe, *Literary Digest*, Dec 13, 1924, 32.
“modern temper” was repugnant to the younger generation because they did not “want to be understood or explained, for that would take most of the joy out of their lives.”

Such patronization was not only insulting it failed to address the deeper issues behind the surface hedonism that the older generation could observe. For the members of the younger generation the generational divide lay much deeper than simple morality. At the end of the twenties theologian Reinhold Niebuhr astutely observed that the moral decline amongst the younger generation was the result of a “complete moral skepticism.” It “laugh[s] at the values with men call good and bad” because it “finds that the rules of conduct which govern his fellow men are remnants of superstitions or outmoded fashions which ought to bind no sensible person.” For the younger generation, Dos Passos’s generation, the root of a variant morality had grown in a different soil. They did not reject conventional morality for rebellion’s sake; they had rejected the philosophical basis that made such moralism necessary.

Consequently, the “younger generation” took umbrage to the elder’s condescension. A “younger generation” art critic Paul Rosenfeld viewed the attempts by Nock and Spingarn to release his generation from its culpability because of its youth, and to offer it the spiritual guidance of maturity, as a grave insult. His September *Vanity Fair* response was filled with scorn for Nock and his generation’s hubris. Rosenfeld acknowledged the generational gap by defending himself as one of “this growing band for whom the test of ideas is their truthfulness and the test of art is its excellence, and not

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319 Elizabeth Benson, *Vanity Fair*, April 1927, 60.

the fact whether ideas or art were produced today or six hundred years since.”

Burton Rascoe, literary editor of the New York Tribune, chimed in with Rosenfeld and challenged the notion whether those critics of the older generation were “really more cultured than Dos Passos, [had] more affection for the classics than [Edmund] Wilson, or [were] more sincerely interested in the things of the mind than Seldes.”

Although the debate was essentially about two divergent visions of the world, it quickly digressed to issues of morality. Edmund Wilson was appalled. He knew that the debate had grown nasty because it failed to address the most significant differences. He complained to Fitzgerald that the Freeman and Vanity Fair fight showed both sides to be “utterly incompetent to engage intelligently in the simplest sort of controversy.” The whole clash, he confided to John Peale Bishop, gave “little credit to the intellectual powers of either the Younger or Older Generation.” Criticizing the mentality of both generations, Wilson believed that “every member of the Younger Generation identifies the Younger Generation with himself and ascribes his own private virtues and preferences to a whole movement, and the Older Generation does the same thing.”

Consequently, both sides dug in their heels. Progressivism refused to give up on its ideals and the Lost Generation writers were unwilling to apologize for their youth, their morality, or their restlessness. The result was an intellectual separation that neither side cared to bridge.

321 Paul Rosenfeld, Vanity Fair, 1922, 84.
322 Burton Rascoe, in Rosenfeld, Vanity Fair, 84
323 Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 88, 92.
Dismissing progressivism’s social ideals was only part of what the Lost Generation rejected. We must now establish the greater epistemological difference between these two generations of intellectuals that made their separation complete.

A New Historical Consciousness

The Lost Generation intellectual’s rejection of progressive idealism, and the subsequent ostracism by progressivists, put them in an intellectually precarious position. Because progressive idealism had dominated the intellectual current since the turn of the century, and they were unwilling to return to any form of nineteenth-century absolutism, the Lost Generation writers were forced to forge their own intellectual identity. Their belief that progressivism’s optimistic historical consciousness was irrelevant in a postwar society, compelled to Lost Generation to search for a historical consciousness that had been shaped by a historical circumstance more in line with its own experience.

As a result, this “younger generation” of intellectuals turned to the cyclical historical consciousness of the English Romantic poets of the early eighteenth century, demonstrating Malcolm Cowley’s claim that the Lost Generation had “more respect, if not reverence, for the work of the past”⁴²⁵. Therefore, when Dos Passos declared America needed a new Shelley and a new Byron, he was not speaking facetiously. He and his Lost Generation compatriots believed that the historical consciousness of the English

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⁴²⁴ Paul Boyer suggests, is that under the guise of altruism, progressive reform often sought to control the lower classes, to change them without giving them opportunity for self-reform, self-organization, or social protest. Intellectuals like the Lost Generation writers naturally rebuffed such attempts a social reform, as Robert Crunden argues, because they viewed progressivism as an inept political movement that focused on conversion, moral reform, and maintenance of absolute ideals rather than providing social equity.
Romantics, which had enabled them to confront the social and intellectual transformations of the eighteenth century, could provide an intellectual model by which the Lost Generation could understand a society that had been transformed by the Great War.

Poet Wyndam Lewis labeled the Lost Generation’s clearly ironic historical consciousness, Romantic Nihilism. Lewis was one of the first intellectuals to notice something different in the historical consciousness of the twenties writers. This “younger generation” exhibited a dark appraisal of life, a cynicism that separated it from previous generations of intellectuals. Lewis claimed he had recognized it immediately after the war, but conceded that Elliot Paul, editor of the literary magazine *Transition*, first categorized the new historical consciousness in a May 1927 issue. Paul proclaimed that “in the years immediately following the war,” it had become evident that “old values had become meaningless. The importance of the individual seemed to have dwindled.” The prewar “ideals of the humanists, of those who believed human brotherhood could be realized by the awakening in each man and woman of their unselfish and kindly instincts,” had effectively been “swept away by the war.” Rising out of the war’s ashes emerged a literature “completely dehumanized,” that functioned in a “sphere which knows neither morals nor compassion.” The new literature emphasized the “degenerate, nostalgic animal” side of humanity that no longer viewed heroism “with the superman conception,” but instead, “the new hero neither feels nor shows superiority, only an utter amorality and a clear head which finds futility everywhere and accepts it as natural law.” Such a historical consciousness Paul avers, “renounces Christ and Nietzsche as if both

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Cowley, *Exile’s Return*, 98
were schoolboys,” and “America’s noise and activity, the glitter of the dollar and the whirl of the machine, are stripped of constructive value.”

Elliot Paul’s lone American literary example was none other than Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*. Paul highlighted the scene where Chrisfeld casually tosses a grenade at his commanding sergeant because “the latter has ‘got his goat.’” The callousness of such a humanity, says Paul, is appalling to those “uninformed persons,” who seek to “protect the rickety shelters of their complaisance.” It is not necessary, Paul continues, “to accept this perfect inhumanity in order to acknowledge its importance. There can be no more doubt as to its existence and scope. It goes way beyond the Russian Nihilism of Turgenev’s time.” Paul concludes his diatribe with the recognition that the Humanists “are now on the defensive.” “The disciples of the Nazarene,” he maintains, “must feel that the burden of proof is on them, that they are offering no new brand of goods but an old one which has proven disappointing in many important respects.”

The New Romanticism was far from new, however. When Wyndam Lewis canonized what he variably called the “New Nihilism,” or “New Romanticism,” or “Romantic Nihilism two years later in his periodical *The Enemy*, he maintained that it was nothing more than a “return to the feverish ‘diabolism’” of the “revolutionary aristocrats” to which “Byron and Shelley, and, later on, Swineburne, belonged.” The original Romantics also rejected the optimistic vision of history that had been handed to them by Enlightenment intellectuals. Instead of a linear and progressive historical

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consciousness, the Romantics envisioned a cyclical human history of decline and redemption that better represented the human experience of history. Percey Shelley’s *Adonai*, a poem that Dos Passos considered the exemplar of the English language, reflected the Romantic’s cyclical history. An elegy to fellow Romantic poet John Keats upon his premature death Shelley’s poem vacillates between despair of death: “He will awake no more, oh, never more!” and the realization that the grave is merely a portal to a higher existence: “Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep.”

The Lost Generation interpreted the romantic movement to be “a revolt of the individual” against social conformity. In the Romantic historical context revolt meant rebellion against what they believed to be the dehumanizing power of science. In his 1925 Lowell lectures, Alfred North Whitehead suggested that the Romantics reacted to the “mentality of the eighteenth century,” which meant “the acceptance of the scientific ideas at their face value.” Relying on Whitehead’s analysis, Edmund Wilson maintained that Romanticism was a “reaction against scientific ideas.” For the Romantics, “the universe was not a machine, after all, but something more mysterious and less rational.” In romanticism, post-enlightenment humanity had become alienated from its natural roots. Humans had lost touch with Rousseau’s noble savage and Shelley’s and Keat’s spiritual world mirrored in nature.

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The Romantics elevation of the natural world was especially fitting for Dos Passos during the war. It was not uncommon for him to spend entire evenings immersed in Shelley’s poetry, captivated by Shelley’s vision of the world that embraced the fullness of both spiritual and material concepts. While in Milan, in 1917, Dos Passos confessed that he was compelled to read Shelley “so ecstatically” after a strange scene of listening to the reports of “detonating of guns in the distance [that] shook the windows of the café at the end of the wharf.” Then he would turn and gaze upon the “snowcovered mountains rising form shadowy foothills to clusters of brilliant peaks to the north and west [that] were stained wine-rose from the sunset.” Shelley, like no one else for Dos Passos, captured the wonderfully horrific dichotomy of the ravages of modern warfare with the serenity of nature’s resplendence.

But Dos Passos’s appreciation of Shelley during the war revealed a similarity with the bard’s historical consciousness of a world that was in decline. The interpretation of the postwar world as an epoch in decline permitted Wyndam Lewis to connect the Lost Generation’s Romantic Nihilism to the “desouling of the human being” nihilism of Oswald Spengler. Americans were introduced to Spengler with the 1924 English translation of his *Decline of the West*. Spengler’s thesis, aptly revealed in his title, is that western civilization has reached its apex, and like other dominant societies of the past

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333 Fourteenth Chronicle, 39, 52 112.


335 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 113. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked, “I suppose I’ve read ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ a hundred times. About the tenth time I began to know what it was about. And caught the chime in it and the exquisite inner mechanics. . . . Knowing these things very young and granted an ear, one could scarcely distinguish between gold and dross in what one read.”

that had reached their peak and then declined, primarily the Greek and Roman, the Occident will also founder. Developing “the” philosophy of the future, Spengler argues that the problem of the western thinker is his or her inability to recognize four historically universal truths: “insight into the historically relative character of his [society’s] data, which are expressions of one specific existence and one only; knowledge of the necessary limits of their validity; the conviction that his ‘unshakable’ truths and ‘eternal’ views are simply true for him and eternal for his world-view; and the duty of looking beyond them to find out what the men of other Cultures have with equal certainly evolved out of themselves.” These four historical truths, or failures, according to Spengler, have created intellectual provinciality that precludes these societies from accurately appraising their own condition.

Spengler’s argument is predicated upon a quantitative rather than qualitative difference between culture and civilization. They are distinct. Culture, of which the Greeks were the paragon, is not the zenith of a society. “Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture,” Spengler argues. Culture beholds the best that a society offers: “peoples, tongues and epochs, battles and ideas, states and gods, arts and craft-works, sciences, laws economic types and world ideas, great men and great events.” Civilizations, for Spengler are the “most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable.” Singling out the Romans, Spengler declares that the problem of civilization is that it is reducible to a single power: money. The natural consequence of such an ideal is that, “Imperialism is Civilization unadulterated.” Spengler then lowers the boom: “In this phenomenal form the destiny of the West is now
irrevocably set. The energy of culture-man is directed inwards, that of civilization-man outwards."

The Lost Generation was enamored. Fitzgerald was given to reading Spengler, and Zelda compared her own mental breakdown to Spengler’s motif of decline. Translating Spengler in 1924 for his own benefit, writer and publisher Kenneth Burke believed that regardless of what one thought of Spengler’s conclusions he had made “new and vital” discoveries on the interpretation of history. Burke could not deny that he was always falling “prey to Spengler and cynics of more reasonable tongue.” Burke admitted to Malcolm Cowley that his tendency of “slipping back to Spengler” was the result of his sense of the vacuity of American culture.

Hart Crane, however, like his friend and fellow poet, Allen Tate, was completely enamored with Spengler after his initial reading. In an era when “convictions of any sort are hard to maintain,” American society seemed beholden to prove that “Spengler is right.” The Decline of the West was instrumental in Crane’s intellectual development. He told Waldo Frank that he had found Spengler “stupendous,” for he had “conspired in a strangely symbolic way” toward developing Crane’s vision of his opus The Bridge. After reading Spengler he believed it imperative that one move “beyond the acceptance of fate

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338 Spengler, The Decline of the West, 31.
339 Fitzgerald, Correspondence, 256, 390.
340 Kenneth Burke, Selected Letters of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, 102-103.
341 Hart Crane, Letters, 158. Crane found Burke in constant denial of “a true spiritual revelation which is really his birthright,” because he was always falling for Spengler.
342 Crane, Letters, 267.
as a tragic action.” It is in that state of mind where “immediately every circumstance and incident in one’s life flocks toward a positive center of action, control and beauty.”

“To Brooklyn Bridge,” considered by Crane to be “the best thing I’ve ever written,” expresses both the ironic fate of social decline and the romantic hope of freedom. For our purpose we see that Crane’s emphasis on decline offsets America’s triumphantism by focusing on the nations slide toward Spengler’s civilization. America builds its towers of Babel, in which businesspeople pour over “figures to be filed away;/ - Till elevators drop us from our day.” Crane then evokes the imagery of Plato’s cave, where the populace is seduced and entranced by shadows on the wall, believing them to be reality, never turning to face the light of wisdom offered by the sun outside the cave. For Crane it is the cinema with the “multitudes bent toward some flashing scene.” And as Plato’s captive audience never perceives reality, the truth is “never disclosed” to Crane’s viewers. The harsh vision, the brutal truth of reality is only “Foretold to other eyes on the same screen,” a reference to the prophetic ability of the poet as expressed by Shelley. In this dark world of machines, buildings and shadowy images there exists a chaotic society populated with suicidal bedlamites, social pariahs, and romantic lovers, all who pray to the divine bridge, asking that it condescend “Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend/ And of the curveship lend a myth to God.”

Even before he had read Spengler, Crane was frustrated by his conviction that the “commercial aspect is the most prominent characteristic of America.” Even more appalling was the realization that “we all must bow to it sooner or later.” Crane felt the

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343 Crane, *Letters*, 274.
pernicious effects, the “daily grind” of Civilization over Culture. Until his suicide in 1931, Crane’s life had been a series of failed jobs too menial to give him either spiritual satisfaction or money enough that he could spend more time writing. He told fellow poet Gorham Munson that he constantly felt subsumed by the “business life,” which was the primary consequence of “modern life and its vacuity.” He witnessed the pernicious effects of consumerism as he watched fellow artists slide into “indifference.” They were “enormously busy – making money, attending teas, motoring, starving.” He admitted to Munson his incapacity for such an existence that “makes me reel! Life is too scattered for me to savor it any more.” Pointing to the war as the culprit fomenter of such a national condition, he asks, rhetorically, “how much less vertigo are we going to suffer in the latter whirl than we did in the first blows and commotion [of war].”

Spengler’s thesis exposed the disease. Crane expressed the symptoms. Spengler’s project, begun before the advent of the war, was published in the original German between 1918 and 1922, but its mid-twenties translation seemed contextually appropriate for a generation who believed that the war was nothing but a monstrous slavery to “industry, to money tot he mammon of business, the great God of our times.” Dos Passos was particularly disgruntled by what he believed to be the culpability of “swaggbellied old fogies in frock-coats” for their part in starting the war. What a “God-damned mess they have made of organized society,” he complained to his diary. His list of culprits included “the bankers and brokers and meat packers – and business men.”


345 Crane, Letters, 40, 44.

346 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 91, 152.
He cited more than once a reference to an ancient bard who “used to pray on entering a city that the wise might remain poor.” Dos Passos considered himself one of the wise who desired “to achieve freedom from utter asininity” from the “inessential absurdities” of American business life. He demonstrated his disdain for such financial pursuits when he counseled Rumsey Marvin to take up writing, or at least to engage in an honest trade of a blacksmith or cobbler, anything, he declared, to save “oneself from the chaingang of offices & from the petty thievery of a business career.” “If we only governed the world instead,” he mused. Although he admitted that he and his cadre would make mistakes, “better any tyranny than theirs. Down with the middle aged!” With the war, “the day of triumph for plutocracy” had arrived.\(^\text{347}\) For it was obvious to anyone who could see that the capitalists, the “elderly swagbellied gentlemen who control all destinies have the world so in their clutches.”\(^\text{348}\)

His fury against commercialism was not just about the pursuit of money; it was the philosophical deficiency of such pursuits. The “tragic fallacy in the minds of Americans” he complained is that they take the “means for the ends.” Look at their faces, he warned young Marvin. Just talk to them and you will see that “their sense of values is pathetically wrong.” Without any sympathy for such lowlifes, he condemned them for not even knowing why they went to work each day, where they “get to be mules in the tread mill in order that their wives may spend thousands boring themselves elaborately in ‘society.’”\(^\text{349}\)

\(^\text{347}\) Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 69, 70, 91, 153.
\(^\text{348}\) Dos Passos, *Correspondence with McComb*, 52.
\(^\text{349}\) Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 265.
The reason for such an imprisoned condition, Dos Passos believed, is that one’s “mind is moulded by his occupation.” No one, he demanded can live without a trade, something that “preoccupies him supremely above anything else,” something that provides “any sort of happiness in this shaggy old world.” But he cautioned young Marvin that the “ideas of a banker [are] useful in banking. Think what your mind will be like after forty years of exploiting other people.” In every occupation one had to sell one’s soul for it. Using his own father as a prime example, Dos Passos explained that his father, who had “the best brain I’ve ever known,” got so entangled in the life of business that when he “wanted to start being a person instead of a business man he couldn’t disentangle himself.” Dos Passos chalked up his father’s inclinations as a “tragedy of his generation.” “Don’t be an anachronism,” Dos Passos commanded his young friend. For being rich is already out of date; “what was rather splendid in 1860 becomes mesquine and sordid in 1920.” Anything, he said, is better than “making a trade of exploitation.”

For Dos Passos western capitalism was the disease that not only encouraged poverty, but was responsible for the war. He often slipped into dark moods, reducing America’s role in the world to its financial prowess. His motto for the nation was “‘Be good & you’ll have money’ – or ‘have money and you’ll be good.’” Near the end of the war he confessed to his diary that the “idea of property” was the “great central evil in the world – the cancer that has made life a hell until now.” It was responsible for civilization’s pursuit “to suicide.” He mulled over conventional leftist doctrine as he contended that the first step towards civilization is that “every man against his neighbor” will be “supplanted by cooperation.” “The tyranny of the feudal money lords,” he railed,
“is driving the lower classes together into a cooperative fraternal existence – The lower classes are therefore what the new society must be founded on.” Succumbing to a rare moment of Marxist historicism, he maintained that “There is nothing for the rich but extinction.”

Dos Passos was the most political of all the Lost Generation writers, a fact established by his contemporaries and numerous literary critics, and he did not hide the fact that his sympathies were on the left. He was, however, no Marxist. First, he was adamant that he “did not have faith enough in human nature,” for such dogmas. Secondly, he was a perfervid individualist, and though he honestly believed in economic equity, he could never buy into a program that insisted on such uniformity in ideology. One’s ideas, he suggested, “can’t go according to conventional lines, if they are going to be ideas at all.” Thirdly, and most importantly for our discussion, he rejected the historical determinism of Marxism. He rejected the inevitability of a class based government, as he declared, “What other government does man need but his mind? and his soul?” It is more correct to simply call the Dos Passos of the twenties and thirties an anti-capitalist. His kinship with socialists, anarchists, and pacifists beginning in 1917 was in large part a consequence of these groups' minority status in American intellectual life. They were the free thinkers, the one’s not taken captive by the run for the almighty dollar. That is why he was so elated when he discovered five socialists on the ship that was edging toward the western front in 1917.

350 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 266.


Dos Passos decried anything that muted the power of the individual, and American capitalism did just that. Herbert Croly’s discussion of the individual in society resonated with Dos Passos’s social sentiments. The individual, for Croly, has been suppressed by that pernicious American institution of “unlimited economic competition.” Democracy, Croly chides is supposed to enhance the individuality of each person. Yet, with every person pursuing the same objective of “money power” individuality is destroyed. Though the means for obtaining wealth may vary, the objective is the same, and “the kind of individuals created by such an economic system are not distinguished one from another by any special purpose.” The harm in the system is that the success it rewards by its own standards reinforces the individual’s belief that he or she is different. “Properly speaking,” he contends, “it has not encouraged individualism at all.” Like Croly Dos Passos insisted that American individualism had been reduced to the pursuit of wealth, and those who remained impoverished were becoming increasingly skeptical of the possibilities of the vast American future that had sown the seeds of a promised egalitarianism.

Novel of Romantic Nihilism

Dos Passos came to a Spenglerian historical consciousness through Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon was bandied about at many Lost Generation dinner parties, and Dos Passos himself had twice read the six-volume tome by the time he was in his mid twenties. Gibbon developed his historical acumen
within the enlightenment tradition, producing what Gibbon scholar J. G. A. Pocock calls
*Enlightenment History* that was characterized by those eighteenth-century historians who
sought to challenge the authority of the church at the expense of maintaining a peaceful
society.\(^{354}\) The enlightenment drove Gibbon’s belief in reason and intellectual
scholarship, but he rejected the enlightenment ideal of progress, in part because he was
skeptical about enlightenment optimism concerning human nature.\(^{355}\) The human
tendency to exalt the past while depreciating the present countered the enlightenment
view of progressive history.\(^{356}\)

Gibbon believed that human nature, which is driven toward avarice, was a
primary cause of Rome’s decline and fall. He maintained that human nature is
unalterable, which allows our love of power, one of our most reprehensible “passions and
appetites,” to demand the subjugation of the multitude.\(^{357}\) Humans remain fettered to
despotism because the “human character, however it may be exalted or depressed by a
temporary enthusiasm, will return by degrees to its proper and natural level, and will
resume those passions that seem the most adapted to its present condition.” Therefore, the
same nature that drives humans to know and understand the “narrow span of our
existence” also drives the destructive appetites. Rome’s glory days accentuated the idea
that “peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the privileges of wealth and luxury.” The
focus on material wealth contributed to the empire’s fall as the northern barbarians

\(^{353}\) Croly, *The American Promise*, 276.


\(^{355}\) Per Fuglum, Edward Gibbon, His View of Life and Conception of History (Oslo: Akademisk forlag, 1953), 187.

\(^{356}\) Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 35, 42, 44, 45, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66, 123, 148, 193
sought gold and silver as the “first objects of their avarice.” Violence in the empire became the norm.\textsuperscript{358}

Secondly, Gibbon declared that Rome’s destruction was the consequence of abandoning its intellectual tolerance. What had originally made Rome great was her religious tolerance, which was in accord with her desire to create a society that was guided by the “love and order of justice.” The empire preserved her power by adapting the philosophic “wisdom of ages,” which domestically led to “peace and union.” Rome took what was best from Greek culture, its science and literature, yet rose above Grecian ideals of the “dignity of human nature and the origin of civil society” with a fecundity that “restored a manly “spirit of freedom.”

The intellectual freedom nurtured by Rome’s tolerance for polytheism crumbled, however, with the political acceptance of the Christian religion. The “connection between the throne and the altar,” meant power was consolidated to the throne and not the citizenry.\textsuperscript{359} The “decrees of the emperor, of the senate and of time,” imposed the Christian religion upon the people. Because the new religion was not determined by a “popular tumult,” the empire began to lose its intellectual integrity. According to Gibbon, “every motive of authority and fashion, of interest and reason, now militated on the side of Christianity” which was still the minority religion. Roman intellectuals saw the loss of

\textsuperscript{357} Gibbon, \textit{Essays}, 50

\textsuperscript{358} Gibbon, \textit{Decline and Fall}, 1, 75, 188, 269, 534, 1040, 4

\textsuperscript{359} Gibbon, \textit{Decline and Fall}, 1, 53, 256, 573, 1041, 1035, 29, 8, 27, 36, 67, 47 Post-Christian Rome stymied intellectual creativity by threatening excommunication for those whose conduct and doctrine was not deemed worthy of the church. In Gibbon’s interpretation, the church’s overwhelming power was displayed in its ability to effectively suppress and practically stamp out paganism was a singular event in human history.
intellectual freedom as the result of a “dreadful and amazing prodigy which covered the earth with darkness and restored the ancient dominion of chaos and night.” In short, the moral and religious doctrines of the Christians, according to Gibbon, “debased and vitiated the faculties of the mind; they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science.”

Any parallels between ancient Rome and nineteen-twenties America were not lost on Dos Passos. Because Gibbon so effectively wrote of Rome’s fall, not as an emotionally detached historian, but as one who believed that Rome’s fate was “still felt by the nations of the Earth,” Dos Passos could not have helped believing that “the most awful scene in the history of mankind,” made that much worse the “proportion to her former greatness,” was a fate beset for America.

Dos Passos gave credence to a Gibbonesque vision of contemporary western society in by using fire as a leitmotif of his 1925 Manhattan Transfer. He permeated the novel with a sense of fatalistic destruction as the city and its unwitting inhabitants endure an onslaught of tenement building fires. Fire is always on the minds of the characters in the novel. They constantly hear sirens or see engines running by at breakneck speeds in futile desperation to thwart the destruction. These numerous scenes are not a surprising theme in the novel since in 1919 alone, the New York City Fire Department fought 13, 429 fires that destroyed over 12 million dollars worth of property.

\[360\] Gibbon, Decline and Fall, 735, 286, 311, 407, 1039, 233, 234, 447, 558, 568, 573, 743.

\[361\] For Rome, the world’s most expansive empire until the British one in the nineteenth century, there was no redemption. Gibbon ends his analysis of the Roman empire by offering the symbol of fire, the “most powerful agent of life and death” as the motif for social destruction. Through Nero’s conflagration, the “monuments of Grecian art and of Roman virtue” were destroyed. And even though 315 out of the ashes
Early in novel someone shouts “Fire!” and the conflagrations begin. With careful
detail Dos Passos narrates a story that is strikingly similar to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist
Factory fire: “It was a narrowwindowed sixtory tenement. The hookandladder had just
drawn up. Brown smoke, with here and there a little trail of sparks was pouring fast out
of the lower windows. Three policemen were swinging their clubs as they packed the
crowd back against the steps and railings of the houses opposite.” He describes the thin
pillar flames as a romancandle, while onlookers gaze upon the carnage in helpless
anonymity. The protagonist Ed Thatcher feels sick as he watches. “When the smoke
cleared he saw people hanging in a kicking cluster, hanging by their hands from a
windowledge. The flame in the center of the house flared brighter. Something black had
dropped from a window and lay on the pavement shrieking.”

The reader cannot escape
the Dos Passos’s inclusion of innocent people who have become victims of random social
destruction.

The destruction of seemingly innocent people as well as the city’s physical
infrastructure has caused critics to wonder whether the novel’s fiery judgment is aimed at
the city or its denizens. Critic E. D. Lowry suggests that fire is an apt symbol for a
civilization that deserved to be consumed by fires for its lawlessness and spiritual
aridity. Also seeing the masses as the moral culprit, Ian Colley suggests that the fires

\footnote{Rome “arose with fresh beauty from her ashes.” 1037, Gibbon reminds us that “every wound is mortal
when the trophies of victory and antique treasures were forever obliterated.”}

\footnote{Mannhattan Transfer, p. 14. Then, like he is filling in a gap at the center of a canvas, Dos Passos
describes that “in the empty space in the middle of the street the fire engine and red hosewagon shone with
bright brass.”}

\footnote{E.D. Lowry, “Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos’ Wasteland, found in Andrew Hook, ed., Dos Passos: A
provide a unifying metaphor because the energy and color coincide to describe the destructive and misdirected movement of the denizens.364

Although such criticism may rightly suggest that Manhattan Transfer’s residents were the victims of such destruction, it is doubtful they were Dos Passos’s intended objects. Dos Passos’s political sympathies, affinity for the masses, and distress over the plight of the poor indicates that he pronounced judgment on the city itself, specifically the bureaucratic machine that ran the city.365 It is more likely that Dos Passos, influenced by the literary realism of Dreiser, Lewis, and Sinclair, cast judgment upon the whole city because in real life circumstances innocent people and buildings succumb to both the literal and metaphorical flames of industrial society. In a 1928 essay, A City That Died by Heartfailure, he suggests that “cities are like men except that they live longer. Like men they suffer from diseases, they are carried off young by consumption; in old age they die slowly of cancer or hardening of the arteries. Sometimes heart failure or murder does them in in a few days.”366 According to this vision society and the city are monolithic, and are therefore vulnerable to the same favorable and harmful aspects of life.

For Dos Passos, social decay always meant that the individual would be sacrificed. He first addressed the decay of the social machinery at the expense of the individual in Three Soldiers. Using the rusting of steel as a metaphor for social entropy, he titled the sections of the novel Making the Mould, The Metal Cools, Machines, Rust, The world Outside, and Under the Wheels. The titles evince a decaying fatalism as the

metal objects eventually succumb to rust and deterioration. The deterioration seeps through the narrative as protagonist John Andrews feels the futility of battling the social machine, ultimately losing the fight.\textsuperscript{367} Young American social critic, Waldo Frank expressed similar fatalism in his 1915 \textit{The Unwelcome Man}. The protagonist Quincy ends up in New York where “he is one more molecule in a blind level of mass and flow, of clinging death and leaping restlessness.” Quincy annihilates his own soul by surrendering to the suffocating conformism of industrial society.\textsuperscript{368}

Dos Passos was also influenced by an Old Testament biblical destruction motif where judgment was less a consequence of immoral behavior as it is a consequence of social injustice. Biblically speaking, the effects of such a cycle can be felt on both a national level, such as described in Ezekiel 14:3 or on an individual basis as in Ezekiel 15:7 which portends the Lord consuming people with fire because they have forgotten to care for the poor and widowed. The destruction of the individual by society impelled Dos Passos to liberally fill \textit{Manhattan Transfer} with biblical accounts of judgment where the righteous are permitted to be caught up in the sins and condemnations of the world.

Dos Passos and Hemingway used to sit and read the Bible out loud to each other, and Dos Passos became enamored with the cycle of judgment and redemption theme of the Old Testament. In the third section of the novel the opening and closing titles refer to Old Testament apocalyptic narratives. The opening title “Rejoicing City That Dwelt


\textsuperscript{367} Dos Passos, \textit{Three Soldiers}, 29.

Carelessly,” leaves out the rest of sentence in the biblical narrative, which revealed that the condemned city “said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me. . . .” In this passage of judgment found in Zephaniah 2:15, the God of Israel condemns the city of Nineveh, infamous for its corruption detailed in the Book of Jonah. Critic Phillip Arrington argues that this imprecatory verse is aimed at New York City’s arrogance over its perceived position at the center of the world. Arrington suggests that Dos Passos believed New York was corrupted by its wealth and success and that he saw himself as a modern day prophet who would have had the city pay heed to the rest of the verse because, like Nineveh, New York had become “a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! Every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand.” The section concludes with the chapter title “The Burthen of Nineveh,” the opening lines of the Book of Nahum’s vivid apocalyptic detail of the fall of Nineveh. Arrington argues that Dos Passos is drawing a parallel between the Old Testament imprecatory prophecies and the image of destructive fire in Manhattan Transfer. The difference, Arrington contends, is the source of the destruction. In Manhattan Transfer the city burns from within whereas God initiates the destruction of ancient Ninevah. Regardless of the destructive source, both cities are destroyed for their avarice and indifference toward the individuals within it.369

The raging heat of the fires, the pandemonium they create, and the subsequent rush of fire engines in Manhattan Transfer creates a sense of immediate need for an escape, for salvation. Not to be seen as overly apocalyptic, Arrington softens his position.

of categorical destruction by arguing that Dos Passos provides salvation, an escape to the quiet lure of rural America. Arrington’s analysis is useful for our discussion on Dos Passos’s historical consciousness, because it suggests that Dos Passos intended there to be a way of escape, that he provided a salvation motif.

The argument of ultimate salvation might seem plausible when a minor character in the novel, milkman Gus McNiel mentions to his wife that he has filed an application for free farming land, implying that it might be better for the kids to get out of the city. The salvation motif does have some problems, however. Gus’s real motive for leaving the city is for financial gain, as he hopes to make “a pile o money in wheat.” Like most of the characters in the novel Gus never does leave, and Ellen voices the silent thoughts of many of the city’s inhabitants when she claims, “What I wouldn’t give for a chance to get a way from New York.” The city’s impervious draw away from any salvific pastoral ideal is mouthed by Ellen’s friend Ruth, who declares “I won’t go out of New York whatever happens.”

Arrington points to Jimmy Herf as the example of Dos Passos’s “narrow gate” salvation for those who truly desire it. Arrington argues that Jimmy, a character who deplores his role as a small cog in the city machinery, finds salvation in the pastoral ideal that he seeks at the end of the novel. However, when the driver of a furniture truck asks Jimmy how far he is going Jimmy casually responds, without any dramatic sense of hope, “I dunno. . . . Pretty far.” At best the salvation motif is muted, and the reader can only guess that Jimmy has rural America in mind, which throws some doubt on the validity of constructing Dos Passos’s soteriology based upon an escape into an idyllic pastoral
refuge. Also, Bud Korpenning, the hapless character whose fate seems to be determined by the city, had moved to the city from the country, where he felt himself stagnating, in hopes of making something of himself. While living in the country Bud suffered continued poverty and the intolerable physical abuse from his stepfather.

The pastoral ideal and the reality of the industrial have often converged in American literature. The pastoral ideal has persisted as one of the great American myths promoted by Thomas Jefferson’s idealization of the mythic yeoman. Dos Passos, the committed realist, did not buy into the pastoral myth. In the USA Trilogy he indicted all of America’s institutions, including small town and rural ones. The constant fires in Manhattan Transfer connote a sense of internal social combustion at all levels, the self-destruction of a society that has lost its soul. Dos Passos did not intend the city to be a scapegoat for those of his generation who embraced the pastoral ideal. New York represented all of American society. The import of the novel is not the salvation motif, but that the city is caught up in the historical cycle of decline.

Conclusion

We have tried to establish that the Lost Generation’s driving concerns were epistemological. As a result, the focus of this chapter has been on the Lost Generation’s epistemology of history, its historical consciousness. The Lost Generation repudiated progressivism’s attempts at moral reform, but its antipathy to such social projects came

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370 Dos Passos Manhattan Transfer, 47, 261, 404.
from something deeper than an aversion to being told what to do. Being stubborn was certainly part of it, but what the Lost Generation found much more objectionable was an optimistic vision of history that not only had culminated in the Great War, but tried to put a positive spin on it. Consequently, the Lost Generation set off on its own, as it were. They created a historical consciousness that represented their experience in a postwar world. Romantic Nihilism posited a cyclical history that was predominately pre-industrial.

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371 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (London:
CHAPTER SIX
A VITAL ENCOUNTER

On February 2, 1922 Sylvia Beach, proprietress of Shakespeare and Company, handed James Joyce the first published copy of his *Ulysses*. That same year saw the publication of T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*. After reviewing the two works, Gilbert Seldes, editor and drama critic for *The Dial*, commented that Joyce’s novel and Eliot’s poem represented an “expression of the spirit which will be ‘modern’ for the next generation.”

American novelist Willa Cather recognized the watershed year in American letters when she pronounced that “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.”

1922 was the year that Cather won the Pulitzer Prize, but a scathing review of her work in October of that year by Edmund Wilson confirmed that she was unable “to put the fear of God into our hearts – as *Ulysses* has done to those who have read it.” Joyce’s work, which convinced John Dos Passos that western literature had been revived from the dead, had become the new standard for comparison.

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Wilson continued, “the younger novelists can evade the moral of Miss Cather’s example by protesting that she is dull; and I am sorry that I should not be able to contradict them.”

Cather represented what was stale in American literature when a young John Dos Passos admonished that “Our books are like our cities; they are all the same. Any other nation’s literature would take a lifetime to exhaust. What then is lacking in ours?” What the young writer wanted was not just a new literary form, but a literature so bright its “sun will fade the carpet Puritan ancestors laid there,” it will celebrate life’s “bizarre pains and passions” and “hot moist steppe-savour,” it will thrive upon a “threshold of a new world of experience, of reckless abandoned adventure.”

Literary critic H.L. Mencken believed that Dos Passos had produced just such a novel. In December, 1921 he told his *Smart Set* readers that Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*, published three months prior, was filled with a “passion for the truth,” complemented by an “imagination that makes the truth live.” Dos Passos was not yet aware of the novel’s critical success, however. He had been traveling throughout the Middle East since July, 1921 and had spent the month of December on camelback, traveling with a caravan from Baghdad to Beirut. In January, 1922 a letter of congratulations from novelist Sherwood Anderson reached Dos Passos in Beirut. Tired but encouraged, Dos Passos jotted a quick

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374 Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 129.

375 Edmund Wilson, “Mr. Bell, Miss Cather and Others” *Vanity Fair*, (October, 1922), 27.


377 John Dos Passos, “Against American Literature,” *New Republic*, 8 (October 14), 270.

378 H.L. Mencken, “Variations upon a Familiar Theme,” *Smart Set*, 66, no. 4 (December 1921), 144.
reply, “Thanks a lot for your note. Since it seems to be a time for the passing of gold-embossed chamber pots let me blurt out that there’s nobody in the country such a note means so much from as from you.”379 Dos Passos was not patronizing the older writer. Anderson was one of the Lost Generation’s heroes who had himself broken from literary tradition, whom critics hailed to be one of America’s first “modern” writers.

One of the most poignant examples of Anderson’s modernism came in the first chapter of his critically acclaimed, *Winesburg Ohio*, “The Book of the Grotesque.” The protagonist, an elderly man, offers his theory that at the beginning of the world there “were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth.” In order to make sense of the innumerable thoughts “man made the truths,” but each truth was a “composite of a great many vague thoughts.” “Hundreds and hundreds were the truths,” the man explained, but they “were all beautiful.” Discontent, however, with so many truths, each person “snatched up one of the truths” as his or her own. The consequence was dehumanizing. The old man declared that when a person “took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.”380

To be a grotesque, according to Anderson, one simply had to define oneself by a single, absolute truth. The Lost Generation intellectuals rejected such an understanding of


380 Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg Ohio*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 26. One of Thornton Wilder’s protagonists in his 1927 Pulitzer Prize novel *The Bridge of San Louis Rey*, the Marquesa de Montemayor, was misunderstood by everyone in her village. She wrote beautiful letters, but no one understood “the whole purport of literature, which is the notation of the heart.” Her letters were the result of vivid life experiences which “in return acted upon her ideas as a tide acts upon cliffs.” Through her experiences she grew to disbelieve in the sincerity of those around her, that no one truly loved, but rather “lived in a wasteful atmosphere of custom and kissed one another with secret indifference.” She realized that she had allowed her life to be “gnawed away” because for so many years of her life she had fallen in
the self, and instead adapted a “composite” formation of the self in which the self is defined by his or her interaction with the world. Such an understanding of the self frees the individual for self-creation; it frees him or her to engage the world in a heroic manner. As we have seen, that manner entails revolt. Without undermining revolt as a necessary component of heroism, we must acknowledge that it is an incomplete picture of the Lost Generation’s selfhood because it implies that reaction was the only defining attribute of the Lost Generation’s conception of the heroic self. This chapter seeks to unfold the positive aspect of the Lost Generation’s heroic self, by focusing on what these writers were for.

To set up the Lost Generation’s positive thrust, however, we must begin with the Lost Generation’s revolt against nineteenth-century absolutism, which was a primary consequence of the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and William James. To replace the intellectual void left by the decline of absolutism, this chapter will show that the Lost Generation writers adapted William James’s radical epistemology, with its emphasis of pure experience, in order to form a conception of the self that is built upon the individual’s experience of the world.

Secondly, this chapter will show that the Lost Generation writers not only used James’s epistemology to view the whole world as a repository of experience, but they also interpreted James’s emphasis on pure experience as a command to go into the world and seek out experience. I will focus on travel and literature as two primary sources from which the Lost Generation gained access to the world.

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Finally, I will demonstrate that even though America provided some of the most energetic experiences for the Lost Generation, her industrial and commercial culture did not provide a social context in which the heroic individual could flourish. As a result, the Lost Generation looked to both the paragon of modernity, New York City, and pre-industrial Spanish society to find respite from American’s commercialism and discover a social model in which the individual was central.

New Wine in New Wineskins

Our story of the Lost Generation’s rebellion against “grotesque” absolutism and its acceptance of radical empiricism begins in the nineteenth century. Although this story has been well narrated by both Bruce Kuklick and James Kloppenberg, we need to set the stage for the Lost Generation’s conception of the heroic self. The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of philosophical inquiry and development for American intellectuals, as most philosophical thought, intellectual historian Bruce Kuklick reminds us, was practiced by nonprofessional philosophers, who were theologians, scientists, or members of other splinter amateur groups. These American intellectuals maintained a largely absolutist epistemology, a belief that reason, not experience, was the arbiter of truth.

Hegel was one of the most influential proponents of absolutism and the one to which nineteenth-century intellectuals paid close attention. Hegel declared first, that “Reason is Sovereign of the World,” meaning that reason, not experience, drives “the
history of the world” in a “rational process.” Secondly, reminding his readers in The Philosophy of History that he had “traversed the entire field of philosophy” he declared that “truth alone is absolute,” and the human mind can know the mind of God, the absolute source of knowledge, because it has direct access through reason. The consequence of Hegel’s epistemology is that, apart from experience, each human being has knowledge of the world as it really is. Experience serves to validate that knowledge.

The supremacy of reason faced its first major crisis in 1860, when the nonprofessional philosopher’s faced a radical refutation of reason’s sovereignty in Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species. The new science undermined the validity of absolute knowledge, and American intellectuals struggled to defend orthodox theology and to

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384 See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Trans. By Paul Guyer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), B, 143, 297. Kant proposed in his 1781 treatise The Critique of Pure Reason that both reason and experience could be salvaged. He distinguished between two realms, the noumenal, where things existed in themselves, apart from their appearances, and the phenomenal realm, the world of appearances and human experience. He intended the barrier between the two realms to be absolute, resulting in the complete inability of reason to know the noumena, arguing that “the understanding can therefore make only empirical use of all it’s a priori principles, indeed of all its concepts, but never transcendental use.” The structure of Kant’s epistemology left the phenomenal world open to sensory experience. In what he called his philosophical Copernican Revolution, Kant reversed Hume’s position that the mind must conform to what the world gives it. He posited that the objects of the world conform to the mind’s a priori pure intuitions of time and space. As a result, anything in the sensible world that is subject to these intuitions can be a knowable experience. However, if everything in the phenomenal realm can be knowable through experience, then all objects of experience are bound by the structure of the mind. They must obey not only causal but also all other categorical relationships that have an a priori structure in the mind. Kant legitimimized experience from the ravages of skepticism but subjected it to the determination of
salvage legitimate religious belief. As these issues began to converge on the academic scene at Harvard University in the 1860’s, Kuklick tells us, the content of the intellectual dialogue began to change. American philosophers such as Harvard professors William James and Ralph Perry, and Columbia University philosopher John Dewey began to discuss the significant pitfalls of both traditional absolutism and empiricism. They began to rethink the relationship between reason and experience in order to provide a model more appropriate to the pressing needs of modernity. The result, intellectual historian James Kloppenberg argues, is that these philosophers gave up the nineteenth-century quest for certainty in truth and contented themselves with an “imperfect and open ended” epistemology, a belief that “valid knowledge could be derived from nature and lived experience.”

They called this new epistemology pragmatism.

By William James’s death in 1910 American philosophy had shifted toward pragmatism, having discarded much of its Hegelian roots. We can see this in Walter Lippmann’s 1914 Preface to Politics in which he criticizes the old absolutists, who, through the “miracle of genius,” attempted to “generalize [their] experience for all time and all space.” For these outmoded thinkers “there is never anything essentially new under the sun, that any moment of experience sufficiently understood would be seen to contain all history and all destiny – that the intellect reasoning on one piece of experience could know what all the rest of experience was like.” If such an antiquated system of

the mind. Hegel’s denial of Kantian epistemology resulted from his eradication of Kant’s fixed barrier between the phenomenal and noumenal realms.

thought were to prevail, Lippmann charged, “nothing would be embryonic, nothing would grow. Experience would cease to be an adventure.”\footnote{Lippmann, \textit{Preface To Politics}, 205.}

But the allure of absolutism in early twentieth-century American society, and the reason it was still around for the Lost Generation, was its strong epistemological foundation in the face of social and moral uneasiness. In his 1912 \textit{Present Philosophical Tendencies}, Harvard philosopher Ralph Barton Perry, reminded his readers that absolutism rejected the prevailing relativism, a natural outgrowth of pragmatism, which conceived of truth as a production of the independent vagaries of the mind. Absolutism offered certainty of truth, the “assertion of a maximum or superlative ideal having metaphysical validity.” Thus construed, the maximum ideal of the Ultimate Good, the Infinite Substance, the Universal Will, or in religious terms, God,\footnote{Ralph Barton Perry, \textit{Present Philosophical Tendencies}, (New York: Longman’s Green, and Co, 1912), 19ff.} was still an ideal that most philosophers accepted and were tentative to question.\footnote{Ralph Barton Perry, “The Futility of Absolutism,” \textit{Hibbert Journal}, 1910, 621-640. Perry rejected absolutism based on principles of logic, suggesting that absolutism is guilty of formalism, equivocation, and dogmatism. These logical errors, Perry believed, undermines absolutism’s case for religious belief.}

Perennial absolutist, Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce, admitted the assertive influence of pragmatism upon the American philosophical scene, but spoke for many by declaring it insufficient to answer life’s more compelling metaphysical and moral questions. He confessed that he retained a mix of idealism and pragmatism, because any philosophic denial of absolutism was “simply to reaffirm it under some new form.” He
argued that absolutism would always be part of American philosophy and that other philosophical systems must genuflect to its established millennial history.\(^{389}\)

The Lost Generation was raised and educated in this philosophically unsettled environment where the forces of absolutism and pragmatism were struggling for intellectual supremacy. These young writers found their way out of the muddle through two of their philosophical heroes, Friedrich Nietzsche and William James, who were, Walter Lippmann declared, “in reality the best watchers of the citadel of truth.”\(^{390}\) Nietzsche and James provided for the Lost Generation two different pieces of the epistemic puzzle.\(^{391}\) Nietzsche’s philosophy concentrated on the break with the old absolutism, while James’s emphasized the acceptance of the new, what he called “radical empiricism. Both of these modes of understanding, rejection and acceptance, became integral parts of the Lost Generation epistemology.

Beginning with the rejection of the old, we can safely say that no one detested absolutism more than Friedrich Nietzsche, whose flair for the dramatic made his philosophy so attractive for American audiences during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Nietzsche built his philosophical reputation on denouncing absolutism, arguing that those who believe in the absolute nature of truth are the most deceived, but the deception is necessary because they are the “most delicate, most evanescent beings.”

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Absolutism undermines the human intellect because it “presupposes that man does not know, cannot know, what is good for him” and therefore requires access to God in order to know how to think and act.\footnote{392 Nietzsche, “Letter to His Sister” in \textit{The Portable Nietzsche} (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 31.}

Nietzsche made a big splash on the American scene. The first English translations of Nietzsche’s writings arrived in 1896, and the first American doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche’s thought appeared in 1899, the year of his death. Over the next decade Nietzsche’s philosophy was the object of considerable debate as his supporters and self-declared enemies traded insults in periodicals such as \textit{The Nation}, \textit{The North American Review}, and \textit{The Bookman}. But the watershed event occurred in 1908 with H. L. Mencken’s immensely popular publication, \textit{The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche}. Over the next five years, the book saw three printings and one special British edition. In the third, 1913 edition, Mencken stated that no American “reader of current literature, nor even of current periodicals, can have failed to notice the increasing pressure of [Nietzsche’s] ideas.”\footnote{393 H. L. Mencken, \textit{The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche}, (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1913), viii.} In 1913, literary and social critic, Paul Elmer More posited that “if the number of books written about a subject is any proof of interest in it, Nietzsche must have become the most popular of authors among Englishman and Americans.”\footnote{394 Quoted in Patrick Bridgewater, \textit{Nietzsche in Anglosaxony}, (Leicester: Leicester University Publishing, 1972), 151.}

Mencken found a philosophical comrade in Nietzsche. In his 1920 translation of Nietzsche’s \textit{The Anti-Christ}, Mencken explains in his introduction that he does not

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Venture into the absurdity of arguing that, as the world wags on, the truth always survives. I believe nothing of the sort. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that an idea that happens to be true – or, more exactly, as near to
truth as any human idea can be, and yet remain generally intelligible – it always seems to me that such an idea carries a special and often fatal handicap. The majority of men prefer delusion to truth. It soothes. It is easy to grasp. Above all, it fits more snugly than the truth into a universe of false appearances – of complex and irrational phenomena, defectively grasped. But though an idea that is true is thus not likely to prevail, an idea that is attacked enjoys a great advantage. 395

Nietzsche’s philosophical popularity for the Lost Generation lay in his ability to break down and ridicule traditional or antiquated forms of thought. Nietzsche’s command to throw off the old, to destroy absolute beliefs, and his call for a generation of Overmen to rise up and rush into the new was hard to ignore for the youthful and intellectually curious Lost Generation writers like Malcolm Cowley, who, in a 1916 letter to Kenneth Burke, declared that his “old views are dropping off one by one.” 396

E. E. Cummings, who carried around a well marked, dog-eared copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, expressed his exhilaration in throwing off the shackles of absolutism. In a 1922 letter to his sister he railed “THE MORE WE KNOW THE LESS WE FEEL! Destroy, first of all! TO DESTROY IS ALWAYS TO THE FIRST STEP IN ANY CREATION.” 397 Cummings believed that destroying the old was vital for any new creation, proclaiming that “the inexcusable and spontaneous scribblings which children make on sidewalks, walls, anywhere, cannot be grasped until we have accomplished the thorough destruction of the world. By this destruction alone we cease to be spectators of a ludicrous and ineffectual striving and involving ourselves in a new and fundamental


396 Cowley, *The Selected Correspondence*, 25.

397 Cummings, *Selected Letters*, 84.
kinesis, become protagonists of the child’s vision.” He commanded his sister to “NEVER TAKE ANYONE’S WORD FOR ANYTHING,” because there is no singular truth. Rather, he counseled, “THE ONLY SINGULARITY IS PERSPICUITY.” The old way of thinking has no place in modern society, he said. “There is no such thing as ‘doing wrong’ or ‘being right about something’ – these are 4th hand absurdities invented by the aged in order to prevent the young from being alive.”

Poet Wallace Stevens accepted Nietzsche’s challenge for a new generation of overmen to rise up. In his 1923 volume of poetry Harmonium he celebrated his new creative source, “The Imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world.” Wallace declared that “the world is beyond my understanding,” and so casting off old attempts to know the world, he only wanted to become “lost in Ubermenschlichkeit,” (the state of being a superhuman) for then our “wretched state would soon come right.”

In good Nietzschean fashion, Dos Passos expressly rejected absolutism by declaring war on America’s commitment to its religious ideals. He declared that he had become “suspicious of the decalogue,” and weary of outdated ethical “morbidities & fastidious barriers.” He had come to realize that society’s “ingrained taboos were taboos & were not fast in the core of the things.” Dos Passos viewed religion as a show of “low comedy,” a “farce.” To a friend Dos Passos mocked, “Exult ye generations of psalm-droning puritans! The whole room is humming and moaning to your tunes, sitting in rows on the hard unpolished benches of your faith – sending up a thin incense of son to the

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399 Cummings, Selected Letters, 84.
evangelical God who straightens the ends of his white necktie and smooths his frock coat at the sound of it.” In *A Humble Protest*, one of Dos Passos’s *Harvard Monthly* editorials, he accused Pied Piper priests who merely had the ability to lead witless people who have “a strange fondness for following processions.” Upon being relieved from his military duties in summer of 1918, Dos Passos regretted having to return to “God’s country,” because he questioned whether it had truly thrown off the “incubus of feudalism and the incubus of religion.” Americans he believed still judged people, “according to conventional lines,” which usually involved celebrating the “hypocritical clergymen,” who preached worn out doctrines from “damn smug pulpits.”

But the “fullness of man” in modern society, he proclaimed, must throw off the shackles that “Roman stoicism, Pauline Christianity, and the Ages of Faith have kept prisoner under varying bonds.” Other Lost Generation writers followed suit, taking pride in being irreligious. Hart Crane had rejected Christian Science, Malcolm Cowley Swedenborgism, and Fitzgerald did not struggle much when he cast off his Catholic roots, confessing in a 1920 letter to his sister that “you’re still a catholic but Zelda’s the only God I have left now.” Even Hemingway’s committed Catholicism was a conglomeration of the old and new. He reassured his mother that he believed in “God and Jesus Christ and have hopes for a hereafter,” but he confessed to his friends he did not put much stock in religious creeds. He had no patience for the evangelist who “might start

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401 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 37, 214, 196, 208, 90.
403 Fitzgerald, *Correspondence*, 53.
rolling on the floor,” nor did he hold much “admiration for martyrs or Saints.” Looking back on the twenties, Edmund Wilson, in a letter to friend and fellow poet Allen Tate concluded that “religion – that is, in the sense of a church – had become impossible.”

Nietzsche would have heartily approved of such blasphemy because his philosophical specialty was in admonishing his readers to reject old systems of belief such as absolutism and religious faith. In his call for a new society of overmen, however, he was not as effective in communicating a concrete replacement for absolutism as the primary source of knowledge. This was not a problem for the Lost Generation, for where Nietzsche provided the Lost Generation with its impetus break with the old, they looked to William James, who effectively constructed the new, to provide an epistemology to replace absolutism.

William James’s empiricism was part of the public discourse during the early decades of the twentieth century, in part, because of the accessibility of his fluid and clear writing. The November 7, 1914 opening issue of the *New Republic*, Dos Passos’s favorite prewar organ, reviewed a new anthology of James’s most popular works. James, the reviewer noted, had an ability to share in the “philosophical doubts and worries as we happen to have,” but was grounded in the reality of the world’s problems. The reviewer challenged readers to “open William James almost anywhere and before long your feet will be on moral ground.” William James, he promised, with devout religious language, is with you in your struggles, for the “words he chooses, and the cadence of his

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sentences, so like the cadence of good talk, quickly bring you into his presence and keep you there.”

The reviewer’s rhetoric is sycophantic and sappy but both James and his writings had that affect on people, including members of the Lost Generation. James’s philosophy was introduced to many Lost Generation writers through one of his students, Gertrude Stein, the self-proclaimed matriarch of the Lost Generation. Immensely proud of the fact that she had been one of James’s favorite students, she never let others forget that her intellectual capacity was forged by her favorite philosophical mentor. She related James’s prompts that she keep her mind continually open to discovery. Late in life Stein proclaimed at the opening of a lecture on literature that it was James who had taught her the centrality of experience based epistemology, that “one cannot come back too often to the question what is knowledge and to the answer knowledge is what one knows.” She recalled James’s imperative to her, “Never reject anything. Nothing has been proved. If you reject anything, that is the beginning of the end as an intellectual.”

Gertrude Stein’s brother, Leo Stein contributed to his sister’s philosophical growth. An integral member of the 27 Rue de Fleurus Saturday night gatherings before the Great War, Leo was equally enthralled by Jamesian epistemology, confessing in 1909 that “my own thinking goes so absolutely on all fours with his.” Leo later boasted that he had discovered pragmatism before he had read James, and in Gertrudian-like self-promotion proclaimed that “me and Billy James were the only really concrete people I

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knew.” Leo was convinced that, like himself, James had too much philosophical integrity to believe in the old epistemic doctrine of absolutism. Leo would sit for hours on the Saturday evening dinners at Rue de Fleurus, competing with his sister for pontificating time, and was always eager to outperform his sister in philosophical erudition. As a result, a Jamesian epistemology that emphasized one’s experience of the world was waiting and ready to be imparted unto the eager minds of Lost Generation students fresh off the passenger ships from Manhattan.

And it worked. A number of Lost Generation writers, including, among others, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert McAlmon, and John Peale Bishop, built their epistemology by making the rue de Fleurus a stop on their regular itinerary during the twenties. As Hemingway remembered, Stein talked for hours, dominating the conversations with talk about various intellectuals and artists, continually boasting about her relationship with William James, as well as dropping innumerable references of her friendship with another Harvard philosophy great Alfred North Whitehead. Stein taught her pupils well. “She had a personality that when she wished to win anyone over to her side she would not be resisted,” Ernest Hemingway recalled. Edmund Wilson recognized that Stein’s philosophy and aesthetic had a formidable influence upon the writing of the younger generation, especially for Hemingway, who caught Stein’s “slow rhythm of time or the ominous banality of human behavior in situations of emotional


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In a 1923 letter to Stein, Hemingway admitted that after spending so much time with her, she had “ruined me as a journalist.” “Her method” of looking at life and literature, he told Wilson, “is invaluable for analyzing anything.”

Others, like Dos Passos found James on their own. Dos Passos’s proximity to epistemological currents was demonstrated in his 1923 Streets of Night, a novel which attempted a literary application of William James’s epistemology of radical empiricism, a doctrine which stresses the continuity of all mental and sensual experience. Dos Passos disclosed his Jamesian influence just before he sailed for war in the spring of 1917 by commissioning his young lifelong friend Rumsey Marvin to “get hold of William James’ Shorter Psychology or his Varieties of Religious Experience,” so that he could have “an awfully interesting time, as they are wonderfully fascinating books and not a bit dry. And they are the most interesting books on psychology I know.” That same summer, in a letter to friend Arthur McComb, Dos Passos pleaded with Arthur to read James’s Radical Empiricism since “most of the ideas I find to be my very own.” Dos Passos, as well as his fellow writers translated their newly found Jamesian epistemology through their literature by emphasizing the role of individual experience.

James’s emphasis on immediate experience was influential upon the Lost Generation intellectuals, but such a doctrine grew out of James’s repudiation of

\[\text{\footnotesize 411 Edmund Wilson, Axel’s Castle; A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984), 252.}\]


nineteenth-century absolutism. James acknowledged the importance of absolutism for forming “a part of the philosophic atmosphere to-day.” James knew that empiricism had too often been equated with “inhumanism and irreligion,” while absolutism’s religious commitment had lost touch with “concrete facts.” It was the avoidance of the concrete facts, of the experience of reality that James found so objectionable in absolutism. In a conversation with a student, James recalled that the student had believed that when someone entered a philosophic classroom, “you had to open relations with a universe entirely distinct from the one you left behind you in the street.” But it was the world of the street, the world of “concrete personal experiences,” beyond imagination, that faces the contradictions of life without escaping into a safe intellectual world of thought, with which James was concerned.\footnote{415} James desired a philosophy that grappled with everyday experience.

Like Nietzsche, James, in his series of essays\textit{ Pragmatism}, renounced traditional Hegelian philosophy for its “abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad \textit{a priori} reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.”\footnote{416} Reacting to absolutism James declared that “Nothing shall be admitted as fact, except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experient.” In one of his more famous statements against absolutism he contended that “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events, its verity is in fact an even, a process: the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{416} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 25.
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process namely of verifying itself." But James’s reaction against absolutism was not as important to the Lost Generation than his confrontation with traditional empiricism. For it is his refutation of traditional empiricism that provided the basis for the Lost Generation’s epistemology.

James believed that traditional empiricism was just as much of an epistemological problem as absolutism, because its allowed absolutism to retain its epistemic hold. James knew that he had to address the problems with traditional empiricism that were exposed by eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, if he was going to be able to construct a viable experience based epistemology.

Hume believed that particular experiences of the world are isolated events that the individual’s consciousness apprehends one experience at a time. Between those mental interpretations of experience, however, there lie gaps in the human consciousness. Hume contended that

in single instances of the operation of bodies, we never can, by our utmost scrutiny, discover any thing but one event following another. The same difficulty occurs in contemplating the operations of mind on body; where we observe the motion of the latter to follow upon the volition of the former; but are not able to observe or conceive the tie, which binds together the motion and volition, or the energy by which the mind produces this effect."  

A committed atheist, Hume rejected the absolutist proposal that a divine force connects cause and effect by filling in the breaks between a person’s consciousness of disparate experiences with an absolute consciousness. In the absence of absolute knowledge to fill

\[\text{\textsuperscript{417}}\text{William James, } \textit{Essays in Pragmatism}, \text{ (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948), 146.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{418}}\text{David Hume, } \textit{An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding}, \text{ (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Company, 1993), 49.}\]
in those epistemic breaks, Hume believed his only option was to maintain a radical skepticism about the continuity of experience.

Hume’s inability to fill the epistemic breaks in experience, James believed, is what left traditional empiricism vulnerable to having gaps between the consciousness of experiences to be filled by Hegelian absolutism. Without filling those gaps, James reasoned, an experience based epistemology would never be free from the domination of the mind.\(^{419}\) As a result, filling the gap between the individual’s consciousness of experiences drove James’s epistemology.

To solve the dilemma James first posited that the problem was not gaps in consciousness but in the points of perception. All people, James reasoned, are immersed in a flood of experience but they only perceive a fraction of those experiences. Consequently, the subject’s consciousness of these experiences may be more or less complete, not because consciousness is deficient, but because not every experience is perceived.\(^{420}\) Consciousness is constant, but perception is not. Therefore, James was able to repudiate traditional empiricism’s contention of gaps or “inner duplicity” between an individual’s consciousness of different points of experience by positing that the gaps between perceived experiences are actually themselves pure experiences. The innumerable pure experiences that occur daily and enter into a person’s thoughts, regardless of his or her consciousness of them, James argued, becomes the liaison between particular points of experience.\(^{421}\)

\(^{419}\) William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 43.

\(^{420}\) William James, *Psychology, Briefer Course*, (Franklin Center: The Franklin Library, 1983), 77, 159.

\(^{421}\) James, *Radical Empiricism*, 4, 43.
Radical Empiricism was the name James gave to the continuity that these pure experiences provided for perceived experiences. He maintained that even if those experiences fall into different categories of subject and object, and are in continuous flux, they are all a seamless unity of experience in the individual’s mind.\(^{422}\) Between two moments of experience the transition between those experiences is continuous and is itself a separate experience. That continuity becomes the unifying factor in experience. Therefore, finding an alternative road between traditional absolutism and empiricism, James declared that to be radical “an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.” And he rebuffed absolutism by determining that “Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real.” One can only call oneself a radical empiricist, he argued, when one concedes that there is only one “primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed,” namely pure experience.\(^{423}\)

Our analysis of James’s radical empiricism is important because it was the ethical ramifications of pure experience that captured the Lost Generation. Such a mental structure, James argued, means that all experiences, whether or not the individual is conscious of them or not, come into the mind through direct contact with the world of experience. It is the individual’s sensual life that appropriates all reality.\(^{424}\)


\(^{424}\) James, *Radical Empiricism*, 49, 51.
Unlike their progressive predecessors, who romantically interpreted Jamesian pragmatism for social purposes, the Lost Generation romantically applied such a vision of pure experience to the individual. Upon the epistemology of radical empiricism the Lost Generation’s search for the heroic self rested. What James’s radical empiricism did was reinforce and provide philosophical credence to what the Lost Generation already knew through experience.

If we were to point to a literary source for Dos Passos’s radically empirical interpretation of life, it may have well been through a novel such as Sommerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, a book that worked its way through the *Harvard Monthly* group of writers. Maugham’s 1915 semi-autobiographical novel set in contemporary times is a tale of the quest for individual experience that elevates the individual above the burden of life. The story contrasts young Philip Carey, the protagonist, with his stern and passionless uncle who is an Anglican priest. When Philip is finally old enough to leave the strict religious education to which he has been subjected, he exclaims, “I want to have experiences”. So eager is Philip to experience life, he leaves school just one quarter before graduation, sealing his fate of ever getting into Oxford.

In a rush of excitement Philip travels to France and Germany in order to search out “the manifold expanse that [life] offers, wring from each moment what of emotion it presents.” Yet even in these exotic nations of modern art, the artists also submit their lives to art, being “dupes of the instinct that possessed them, and life slipped through their fingers unlived.” He comes to believe that life is to be lived not just portrayed. The
theme of the primacy of experience climaxes when a friend tells Philip that life should be lived according to Kant’s Categorical Imperative. Philip rejects such a notion because “It suggests that one can choose one’s course by an effort of the will. And it suggests that reason is the surest guide. Why should its dictates be any better than those of passion?”

Works like Maugham’s impelled Dos Passos and other Lost Generation writers to interpret James’s radical empiricism emotionally rather than cognitively. They interpreted James’s emphasis on pure experience, the intent of which was to solve an epistemological problem, as a command to go and experience all of life and to view all of life as an experience. Hart Crane demonstrated the primacy of experience when he confessed that he preferred the “beauty of experience rather than innocence.” He clarified later that the only thing that could offer a person happiness was “the identification of yourself with all of life.” Couching experience in religious terminology he affirmed that “Experience seems only to sharpen a native integrity and an almost clairvoyant sense of spiritual values.” In This Side of Paradise, the protagonist, Armory Blaine is a dreamer, who always believes in the “becoming” and “never the being.” Life is a process that is not to be marked by one’s age or ideas, but by the content of one’s experiences. An older character in playwright John Howard Lawson’s 1923, Roger Bloomer, complains that “people have lost the old standards,” because they were now listening to their passions.

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425 Sommerset Maugham, Of Human Bondage (New York: Penguin, 2007), 120.

426 Maugham, Of Human Bondage, 207, 246, 324, 606, 582. Near the end of the novel, Philip is willing to sacrifice almost anything for experience. He rejects offers of a steady income in his profession, even after years of poverty; he rejects love from a woman he cares for deeply and a life of consistency. His concern has only been his one hope, to travel. At the end of the novel Maugham leaves some redemption for the endless seeker of experience. Philip realizes that experiences can be found in love and domesticity, but the ending feels more of a moral add on than the true passion for experience that exists in Philip’s heart.

427 Crane, Letters, 168, 140, 154.
and ignoring conventional ideas of right and wrong. The theme of the play is that
“Experience is the only thing that counts.”

The pithy, terse prose of Hemingway’s 1929 *A Farewell To Arms* offers the
clearest exposition of the Lost Generation’s new epistemology. In a lighthearted
exchange of insults with his friend Rinaldi, the protagonist Lieutenant Henry concludes
the banter of abuse with “You are ignorant, stupid. Uninformed. Inexperienced, stupid
from inexperience.” Experience was central to Hemingway’s art. He learned not to
think about his writing after he had stopped for the day. “That way,” he declared, “my
subconscious would be working on it and at the same time I would be listening to other
people and noticing everything.”

Although William James’s promulgated radical empiricism to engage an
epistemological debate, he did little to discourage such a romantic interpretation of his
ideas. He maintained that the process of consciously appropriating experience was what
most people simply called life, found in “personal consciousness, minds, selves, concrete
particular I’s and you’s.” In the *Varieties* he warned of experience’s formidable power,
alerting his readers that “invasive experiences” could come into consciousness and upset
the equilibrium. This process, James asserted, happened primarily with religious belief,
where “the voice of human experience within us, judging and condemning all gods that

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428 Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, 185, 270.

49. Lawson says that the old guard maintained that “every crime or misfortune is due to disorganization of
ideas.”


431 Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 69.

432 James, *Psychology*, 25.
stand athwart the pathway along which it feels itself to be advancing.” For the Lost Generation, worldly experience became a new religion, confirming James’s contention that experiences “can be, and they are, as a rule, much more convincing than results established by mere logic ever are.”

Fitzgerald expressed such a religious type of fulfillment in *This Side of Paradise*. Protagonist Amory Blaine cries out “I’m restless. My whole generation is restless.” For Amory and his generation, there is no God and the “waters of disillusion had left a deposit on his soul.” By the end of the novel, however, Amory captures a “love of life, the faint stirring of old ambitions and unrealized dreams.” Instead of just watching and recording life he desires to be “living it,” doing the bizarre and uncanny, getting beaten up just for the experience of it.” Looking back on his experiences Amory realizes that he had “neither been corrupted nor made timid” by them.

The Radical Empiricists

At Harvard, Dos Passos was initially attracted to Hegelian idealism for its holistic view of the world. His philosophy classes as well as his voracious independent reading habit exposed him to the platonic monism of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, whose philosophy of nature attempted to extract consciousness out of natural objects. In his 1922 travel narrative, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, Dos Passos recalled that he was drawn to such pantheism, quoting his favorite Shelling phrase “Man

is the eye with which spirit of nature contemplates itself.” Such notions were reinforced
by one of Dos Passos’s favorite Spanish poets Don Francisco Giner and the romantic
nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, who proclaimed “All is one Being,
all is in the Idea and for the Idea.” Dos Passos considered his own pantheism “a mushy
sort,” as he had become “rather sentimental about the oneness of protoplasm.” As his
thoughts matured, however, he became suspicious of philosophical doctrines that gave
one the feeling of “being cut off from the world. – not being en rapport.” By January
1918, after firsthand experience of war’s horrors, he realized that there was no “all the
world to be in rapport with.” Having discarded all the sentimentalizing of nineteenth-
century absolutism, he admitted, “I’m a much heartier son of a bitch than I used to be,
much readier to slap my cock against the rocks of fact.”

Having discarded German idealism, the “rocks of fact” became the new basis of
knowledge for Dos Passos and his fellow sojourners. The requisite mandate for such
knowledge, they believed, was to acquire as much as experience is possible. Dos Passos
was an exemplar of interpreting all of life as an experience. He told Rumsey that he doted
on something as pedestrian as shopping because that is “when you are on the war path for
interesting things – rugs and tea cups and gay window curtains.” His letters are filled with
references of “glorious swim[s]” mountain climbing, and especially walking. He told
young Rumsey how to cure boredom with what he called the “walking cure.” “It
proceeds thus: When you have reached the last stage of boredom and are surrounded on

434 Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise, 287, 223, 282.
435 John Dos Passos Rosinante to the Road Again, in Dos Passos: Travel Books & Other Writings, 1916-
436 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 134.
all sides by blue devils, take your hat, or leave it behind, which is better, and with in one
hand your favorite poet, march out. Go in any direction, not noticing where you are
going, if possible chanting your poet (or your own works, according to taste) to the May
breezes as you walk.” Dos Passos claimed the cure was always successful because, “at
the end of two hours you’ll be rather hoarse, tired and generally contented with life.” Dos
Passos continually asked his friends to “rampage together someday in search of adventure
with a capital A.” Life, for Dos Passos, offered a constant barrage of experiences in
which he “‘Never let a chance go by’ – a chance for an adventure, a story, a dinner. Life
doesn’t often hold out her hand to you – I think one should take it when she does and let
the consequences take care of themselves, rather than stop to ask if she wears gloves or
not.”

Dos Passos’s emphasis on travel and literature, and whenever possible, such as
the “walking cure,” a combination of the two, were two primary epistemic sources that
provided the Lost Generation with knowledge of the world. Regarding travel, Dos Passos
declared to Rumsey Marvin that “I think we both have the disease.” “How I long,” he
pined, “to stretch my legs on a good piece of road and set off.” In a remarkable statement
he confessed that he had “always envied Satan” in the Bible’s book of Job, because he
was constantly “going up and down the earth.” “Don’t you want to go up and down the
earth?” he asked young Marvin. Dos Passos’s reasons behind his insatiable desire to
travel usually consisted of statements about how interesting life is “on the breast of the
teeming earth.” Travel, for the Lost Generation was a chance to be “the only one[s] who

437 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 37.
had ever attempted anything so bold,” to leave behind the “scornful automobiles packed with the petite bourgeoisie.”

In *Intellectual Vagabondage*, novelist Floyd Dell proclaimed that for the twenties intellectuals there was no Heaven or Hell, “the present moment is all.” There was little thought of the problems of life and death and the compelling poem was Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” which Dos Passos took as his burdening call to see the world.

He wanted to live by the words,
Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Travel was freedom. Just before he crossed the Spanish border for his second jaunt through the Iberian Peninsula in 1919, Dos Passos screamed his words into a letter, “Libertad, libertad! As Walt would have cried, tearing another button of his undershirt.”

The travels of the Lost Generation writers are the stuff of legend. There have been many interpretations of the motives behind their travels, helped along by Malcolm Cowley’s assertion that the war and American cultural philistinism compelled them to flee. These reasons are certainly true, but they focus on the negative impulses. On the positive side, the side of experience based epistemology, travel offered opportunities for

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438 Dos Passos *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 24, 37.


pure experience. Two of the Lost Generation’s favorite novelists provided a
philosophical basis for travel. Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, which Dos Passos had read
multiple times by the time he graduated from Harvard, focused on young Kim’s thirst for
life. The monk, Kim’s traveling companion, remarks “God causes men to be born – and
thou art one of them – who have a lust to go abroad.” When the two lose their way on
their quest to find the river that removes sin, the monk declares, without remorse, that it
does not matter for, “I delighted in the sight of life the new people upon the roads, and in
thy joy at seeing things.” Travel is freedom for young Kim. When the British require him
to attend boarding school, Kim agrees not to run away on the condition that when school
is out, he is allowed to once again wander the countryside, “Otherwise, I die!” He asked
that his time be his own for all he wanted was “to see new things.”

Kipling’s *Kim* focused on the immediacy of experience, but R. L. Stevenson
elevated travel to one of the highest human attainments. While at Harvard Dos Passos
expressed his conviction that two types of people inhabit the world, those who live
through constant experience, and those who “merely vegetate,” a distinction already
catalogued in Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* and *The Inland
Voyage*. For Stevenson the contrast was between the spectator who “paralyses personal
desire,” feeling the result that the “world is dull to dull persons,” and the voyager, who

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441 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 244.

was all pure delight – the wandering road, climbing, dipping, and sweeping about the growing spurs; the
flush of the morning laid along the distant snows; the branched cacti, tier upon tier on the stony hillsides;
the voices of a thousand water-channels; the chatter of the monkeys; the solemn deodars, climbing one after
another with down-drooped branches; the vista of the Plains rolled out far beneath them; the incessant
twanging of the tonga-horns and the wild rush of the led horses when a tonga swung round a curve; the
halts for prayers; the evening conferences by the halting-places, when camels and bullocks chewed
solemnly together and the stolid drivers told the news of the Road – all these things lifted Kim’s heart to
song within him.”
has been “provoked out of [his] indifference,” and sets his mind to “take it all in all.” Stevenson equates the spectator with the rich banker who never ventures out, who, without a doubt maintains a quieter existence but in the end “die[s] all the easier.” The voyager may encounter either love or death, both of which the spectator are afraid, but when the journey is finished the voyager has made himself “feel bigger.” He vows that he would rather remain on a boat for life rather than “occupy any position under Heaven that required attendance at an office.” The Scottish novelist, a favorite also of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Cowley, codified the Lost Generation’s own vision of travel as a primary form of experience.443

Thornton Wilder’s character, Uncle Pio, in his *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* possessed the six gifts of an adventurer, which among others were “inexhaustible invention” and “freedom from conscious.” With his gifts he never did anything for more than two weeks out of fear of being tied to anything of “long engagement.” But every endeavor he undertook always produced abundant results. From within his adventuresome spirit, however, was a well of “reverence for beauty and charm” which

443 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 14; R. L. Stevenson *Travels With a Donkey and Inland Voyage* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 12. Dos Passos especially enjoyed *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, a 1878 travelogue of his vagabond life in France, and *The Inland Voyage*, the diaries of his journey to a French artists’ colony where he fell in love and had to tour the French countryside to gather his emotional stability. Stevenson wrote that he did not travel to go anywhere, but to “travel for travels sake. The great affair is to move; to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly; to come down off this feather-bed of civilization, and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints.” Stevenson manifests the tripartite equation of travel, life, and experience. In *Inland Voyage*, he declares that he wanted to move “among the old oaks, as fancy-free” to wander through the “forest and starlight, not touched by the commotion of man’s hot and turbid life,” for it was these experiences that made his “heart beat at the thought.” Stevenson then provides the apex of his thought: “‘Tis to fail in life, but to fail with what a grace! That is not lost which is not regretted.”
usually manifested itself in the worship of beautiful women. He believed that those who had never loved had never really lived.444

Dos Passos’s first published piece in the Harvard Monthly, “The Almeh” revealed the romance that travel held for him. He tells us that once he entered the “Mouské in Cairo” one of the “most important streets of the native quarter,” he was consumed with immediate experience of a foreign culture that was so much richer than the “prosaic West.”

From every doorway streams forth to the traveler an intoxicating cloud of incense, which, mingled with the odor of the donkeys, of the camels, with the reek of crowded humanity, form a great part of the atmosphere of the glorious East. The latticed windows of the harems, the open shops, the arcades, the donkeys picking their way down the muddy street, the thousand strange sights and sounds, all tell that one has left the prosaic West and entered the Orient, the land of a thousand enchantments.445

Another primary source of experience for the Lost Generation was reading literature. Dos Passos expressed the Lost Generation sentiment when he proclaimed that a book is “like magic.” For when queen ennui begins to go to work, reading a book is “like diving out of everything bothersome and plunging in a new comforting world where you have adventures and drink canary sack, and live a dozen people’s lives instead of your own puny little one.”446 The Lost Generation writers were voracious readers. It was not uncommon for them to go weeks at a time reading at least a book a day in the genres of

444 Wilder, Bridge over San Louis Rey, 112-119. Wilder contrasts Uncle Pio to the Peruvian village priest, whose Epicurean education prepared him for philosophical study apart from social interaction. A dearth of life experience had removed him from having never known happiness, were “insensible to misfortune.” Furthermore, “like all the rich he could not bring himself to believe that the poor (look at their houses, look at their clothes) really suffer. He believed that only those educated few, who had read widely “could be said to know they were unhappy.”

poetry, plays, novels, and in non-fiction with topics as varied as history, philosophy, politics, science, psychology, art history, and literary theory. This list does not include their immense desire to remain up on current issues in politics and literature through daily newspapers and literary and political organs. Most of this stemmed from their belief that self-education was the only education worthwhile.

Life and literature were often combined in the Lost Generation mind. Dos Passos confessed that “Dostoevsky combined with D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* set me to panting for ‘real life.’” In 1915 Dos Passos declared that *Crime and Punishment* was “a wonderful novel, hideously unpleasant – to read it is like a night-mare, it grips you so.” Three years later, re-reading the novel, Dos Passos recorded in his diary that “it is curious how reading it extinguishes ones proper life and makes one live only in the novel.”

*Sons and Lovers* opens with a young wife who is trapped in a loveless marriage, where “the world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her” because “life made her feel as if she were buried alive.” Her young son Paul was “full of life” yet at the dawn of adulthood felt he “was a prisoner of industrialism.” At work he would gaze out the window, for it was outside that the “brightness and the freedom of the streets made him feel adventurous and happy.”

Dos Passos confirmed the Lost Generation’s belief that literature was a primary source of experience when he reviewed John Reed’s *Insurgent Mexico* in the *Harvard Monthly*. He exalted the book’s “vividness of description” because it gave the reader a

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447 Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 128/

“wonderful color and tangibility” that created a mental experience by which the reader “lived the passionate, picturesque life of the country.” The book’s “refreshing quality of adventurous youth” ignited Dos Passos’s desire for more experience that celebrated “the old spirit of daring and naïve enjoyment of danger and excitement” that was “altogether too rare in recent literature.” By quoting Longfellow’s statement that “Life is real, life is earnest,” Dos Passos concluded that “Life is not an empty, and very unpleasant, dream.”

We have discussed the role that radical empiricism had upon the Lost Generation and the importance of travel and literature as sources of its knowledge about the world. It has been necessary to establish the centrality of Jamesian epistemology in order to stress how the Lost Generation’s interpretation of James was unique and vital for its formation of the heroic self. Therefore, just as the Lost Generation interpreted Freud for its own historical, wartime context, emphasizing Freud’s teachings on human nature as a cause of war rather than their liberating attributes that freed Max Eastman, Mabel Dodge, and Eugene O’Neill from sexual constraints, we must now show the uniqueness of the Lost Generation’s interpretation of Jamesian radical empiricism.

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449 Dos Passos, “Book Reviews,” *Harvard Monthly*, 59 (February), 169, 168. Art, theorized by Santayana and lived by Dos Passos, created both experience and the desire for more experiences. Freud’s student Otto Rank posited that artists not only created art, but used art in order to create. Art becomes part of the epistemic experience as the artist takes the “art given to him formally, technically, and ideologically, within his own culture.”
The New Individual

The power of Jamesian epistemology was no more formative for the Lost Generation than it had been for the progressives. Malcolm Cowley mirrored progressive language when he told Kenneth Burke that the skull of the “younger generation” contains an “instrumental mind” that has “no objects of it’s own;” it does not rely on conceptions of absolute truth.\(^{450}\) Freeman editor Albert Nock, in the 1922 \textit{Freeman} and \textit{Vanity Fair} debate, recognized that the influence of pragmatism on American society.

For forty years the tendency of all our popular instruction in school, college, and university, has been steadily against formative knowledge and in favour of a mere instrumental knowledge. A corresponding intention has animated every practical enterprise in which we have invited our youth to participate; it has been behind business and the professions, politics and social life. To justify ourselves, and give our procedure the weight and dignity of a philosophical codification, we developed the doctrine of pragmatism.\(^{451}\)

Nock had declared it. The Lost Generation’s “instrumental mind” was an extension of what had been the intellectual trend for decades.

What separated the Lost Generation from other advocates of Jamesian epistemology was its individual rather than social interpretation of James. For the progressives, Jamesian pragmatism provided an action based epistemology that could transform society. For the Lost Generation writers, Jamesian radical empiricism provided


\(^{451}\) Nock, \textit{Freeman}, 383.
the philosophical basis through which they could realize the heroic self.\textsuperscript{452} The difference was the war, which confirmed for the Lost Generation that society could not be reformed. Consequently, drawing on James for their own wartime and postwar historical context, the Lost Generation applied James’s in a new way.

Using Jamesian radical empiricism as its guide, the Lost Generation permeated its literature with the centrality of the individual and that individual’s experience of the world. In Dos Passos’s short story \textit{The Shepherd}, we meet a young boy of fifteen, who upon realizing that he is alone, lost in the countryside, experiences a burst of exhilaration at the notion that he is on an adventure. The onset of nighttime darkness begins to curb enthusiasm but a little self-reflection allows him to see that his life “had been a great bare room equipped with globes and mathematical tables.” Wandering through the dusk fog he meets another solitary character, a shepherd who is eager to share his own adventures to anyone who will listen. As he speaks of swimming large rivers to see a girl, and of a shipwreck he survived as a sailor, the young boy is filled with “fierce excitement” as “scrolls of gold and purple seemed unrolling before his eyes.” The morning after, he runs home to the care of his loving mother, but a changed boy. He now believed that “the world, all the kingdoms of the earth seemed stretched out before him. He felt he was on the threshold of a new world of experience, of reckless abandoned adventure.”\textsuperscript{453}

Dos Passos’s most mature expression of Jamesian empiricism for the individual came with his 1923 novel \textit{Streets of Night}. The novel, which he started at Harvard, revolves around three college friends who believe that experience is vital to their

\textsuperscript{452} We do not want to make too much between the distinction between James’s pragmatism and his radical empiricism. Instead of two different epistemologies, they are better seen as two different expressions of the same experience based epistemology.
individuality, but who are all at different stages of development in becoming personages

454 The reference point of heroic individuality is the Renaissance writer Pico Dell Mirandola, whose *On the Dignity of Man* elevates the individual human to an angelic status, by brazenly proclaiming, “I have placed thee [Adam] at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world.”

Fanshaw, the sensible one of the two men who make up the menagerie, compares his own humdrum life with Mirandola, pondering that it must have been less futile to live back then because “things were so much cleaner, fresher. Everything was not so muddled and sordid then.”

456 He knows that individuals have the power to “burst into flame in the likeness of a seraph,” but he has not yet experienced it. Fanshaw exists in a world where thinking is not devoted to the singular purpose of achieving greatness; rather, his generation “fritter[s] it in silly complications.”

457 Fanshaw’s conviction that the world only suppresses his individuality renders him heroically impotent.


456 Dos Passos, *Streets of Night*, 42

457 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 35. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995), 237, 239. Fanshaw’s time is post *Brothers Karamazov*; where Ivan’s story of the Grand Inquisitor robs humanity of the dignity of freedom. Freedom is the horrific cross upon which all humanity has been crucified, rendering impossible any form of future happiness. The inquisitor demands that “nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.” People approach it with “fear and dread,” because freedom wracks the conscience with guilt so that “man is tormented by not greater anxiety than to find some one quickly to whom he can had over the gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born.”
In contrast to Fanshaw, Wenny is determined to explore the freedom of his individuality at whatever the cost. He drops out of his Masters program, cuts himself off from his father’s trust fund, and determines to live each day to the fullest. He boisterously challenges Fanshaw’s “old dusty Pico,” crying to his friends that “you have to put yourself out to live at all... not to fossilize.” Most people, he continues, “are mere wax figures in a show window... tied in a row on the great dredges of society.” Consumed by a passion for lived experience, Wenny begins to carry a gun because, for one, he has never done so before, and also because the “thought of death in my back pocket makes me a little nervous, and I’d like to try my nerve out.” Eventually Wenny’s intensity pushes away Nan Ellen, the final member of the trio, and the object of his love. She fears his insatiable quest for experience. Unable to cope without Nan Ellen’s love, Wenny climbs to a bridge parapet and before he experiences the rush of death in the revolver pressed up against his throat, commands to the silent night, “Spread out your bed for me, Nan Ellen, death.” Dos Passos’s portrayal of the suicide is ambiguous. The reader is left with the feeling that Wenny kills himself in part because of unrequited love, but even more, that Wenny does it just for the experience of it. Regardless of Wenny’s motives, it is clear that the primacy of experience makes Wenny a heroic individual in both life and death. Dos Passos’s use of experience to mold the three characters demonstrates the Lost Generation’s conviction that experience defines the individual’s sense of self.  

We have already mentioned that, for the Lost Generation, the positive implication of defining the individual’s sense of self by the individual’s relationship to the world of experience is that the individual is free to create himself heroically. Some of the Lost

458 Dos Passos, Streets of Night, 71, 53, 121.
Generation writer’s boldest affirmations of their own pursuit of experientially based heroism came through their poetry. Robert Hillyer exclaimed that the desire for experience is “buried deep in me,” for it has “dominated all my life’s endeavor.”

Cumming’s poem “Crepuscule” sings of the heroic individual’s relationship with the world of experience:

I will wade out
till my thighs are steeped in burning flowers
I will take the sun in my mouth
and leap into the ripe air
  Alive
  with closed eyes
to dash against the darkness.\(^{459}\)

Stewart Mitchell explores his rise to the heroic challenge:

SOMEHOW the spirit of that day –
Rain-clouded streets and brooding air –
Determined me to live and dare,
Living, to laugh the world away.\(^{461}\)

But no poetic lines accent the choice between the heroism of daring experience and the death of a life spent in mere existence more than S. Foster Damon’s account of sneaking into the home of a Spanish beauty to dance with her. We can feel the tension as he describes:

“The passage was black; but he risked it –
death in the darkness –
or her hot arms.”\(^{462}\)


In his posthumously published *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway accentuated the hero-killing consequence of separating experience and the sense of self. The consequences are spiritually catastrophic when one must confront the “death of loneliness that comes at the end of every day that is wasted in your life.” Hemingway’s prime example of such an unheroic selves are the wealthy who, instead defining themselves through experience, seek attract people through a façade of happiness and performance. In the end they only expose their unfilled lives that are “usually inexperienced.”

The Experience of Education

In June of 1915, a Professor at University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Economics, was fired for his radical views. Newspapers and journals around the country picked up on the story, declaiming their own versions as to why Scott Nearing’s tenure had been terminated. Nearing’s opponents on the Board of Trustees admitted that he had never preached his views in the classroom; rather “his heresy was preached on the outside, on the public platform and in the newspapers.” They confessed that he was not only a “competent and highly efficient” teacher, but also that he was “not the only radical in the university.” The trustees complained that it was not so much what professor Nearing said, as much as the way he delivered it. One trustee objected that “he does not give his utterances from a pulpit, but from a prize ring,” alluding to the fact that Nearing was more pugilistic than philosophic. Nearing, he complained. “is a magnet for headlines.

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463 Ernest Hemingway *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 13
He gets into the newspapers on everything from the high cost of living to the resuscitation of the recently drowned.” The *New York Times* suggested that the real reason Nearing was let go was because the “University of Pennsylvania sails after him like a highly respectable tail attached to a frisky and plunging kite.”464

At risk in the Nearing case was not just academic freedom, but an intellectual atmosphere congenial to ideas and their modes of presentation. An anonymous professor contributing to the *New Republic* admitted that while he himself was staunchly conservative, he believed in preserving neutrality in his classroom. He reminisced that in the 1890’s his students could never determine which way he was going to vote. Before the progressive spirit, “orthodoxy reigned; the Constitution was revered; McKinley and Mark Hannah were their prophets, and the people still worshipped.” Most of all, “public interest in academic utterances was weak.” But that had changed by 1915, the professor continues, and so had the country’s view of radicalism. Many college boards were persuaded that president Wilson leaned in that deplorable direction. The anonymous professor regarded the 1912 election to be the fulcrum for integrating politics in classroom discourse. At that point, he contends, boards of trustees began to clamor about ideological discrepancies among its university faculty. Institutional bureaucracy and economic conservatism began to determine both the content and the manner in which a professor could introduce controversial topics in the classroom.465

Under these new political times, Nearing was a powder keg of controversy. He maintained his innocence about being a socialist, but did admit to leaning in a radical

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464 *New York Times*, July 18, 1915, p. SM4

direction. He openly proclaimed that existing labor conditions were threatening the stability of American life as “Never in the history of the world has it been so easy for the few to live high on the toil of the many;” a statement not uncommon after 1912. The breaking point came when professor Nearing and the dean of the department were interrogating a student who had consistently exhibited poor work habits. When Nearing discovered that the student had come from an Episcopal Academy, he remarked, “I’d rather send a boy to hell, or a Billy Sunday meeting than to the Episcopal Academy.” The remark was offhanded and the other faculty member took no offense. The same was not true for the student, who broadcast the heresy to anyone who would listen, including university officials. Because the remark was offered on the university campus, it was an “intemperate” declaration and therefore “invites dismissal.” The interviewed trustee concluded that professor Nearing “can’t say anything without saying it in such a way as to arouse antagonism and hurt people’s feelings; he hurts ours; he can’t say anything without the newspapers printing it, and when they print it the University of Pennsylvania is always mentioned so as to make the institution seem responsible not only for what he says but for his manner of saying it.”

The firing sparked immediate outcries. Some saw the dismissal as a direct violation of constitutional free speech; others categorized the debate in terms of academic freedom. Others, like the progressive editors of the nascent New Republic viewed the scenario in terms of the antagonism between the institution and the individual.

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468 Editorial, New Republic, 3 (July 10, 1915): 240-241
The fledgling periodical had positioned itself as the premiere progressivist organ just eight months before Nearing’s firing and three months after the advent of the Great War. One topic which permeated its pages for the first two years was the social effect of the progressive reforms undertaken by the nation’s primary, secondary, and collegiate educational institutions. Some individual cases the organ took to heart, including the Nearing case. Picking up on the story a few months before Nearing’s actual termination date the organ called into question the university’s authority to dismiss a professor on the grounds that he was teaching elements that had not received a “certificate of orthodoxy.”

Dripping with irony, the organ’s editors suggested that the trustees at the University of Pennsylvania had performed a “service to the cause of academic freedom.” They had thrown into the open a “murmuring of innuendoes” about academic freedom and institutional “usurpation of power.” Upon firing professor Nearing the trustees had separated the “sheep from the goats, [demanding] men to declare themselves,” whether they were for or against the institution. The periodical brazenly demanded that the board of trustees at the University of Pennsylvania rescind their decision out of reverence for the integrity of the individual.

The suppression of intellectual freedom in America’s universities was an important issue in the minds of the Lost Generation writers. They were demonstrably disgruntled about the stifling effects of their own educational experience, which they believed did little to encourage intellectual creativity.

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470 Lightner Witmer, *New Republic*, 3 (July 31, 1915): 33

It is not ironic that an expose of the breakdowns in America’s institutions of higher education came through the progressivist organ the New Republic. Progressivism, among other things, was committed to using education as the conduit by which to create a more democratic society, and the periodical’s commitment to expose any systemic fissures or bureaucratic politics that might undermine democratic ideals was consistent with the progressive spirit. Even more significant, for our purposes, is that some of the periodical’s most enthusiastic readers were the young college-aged students who would make up the Lost Generation. The New Republic was largely responsible for introducing these young writers to progressivism’s commitment to education as well as to its historical optimism. Believing that the New York Times promoted ignorance and the acceptance of untruths after the outbreak of war in Europe, John Dos Passos hailed the New Republic as the best source for social and cultural education; it was the “only live magazine in the country.”

Edmund Wilson, who would become the magazine’s editor in 1921, said that as far as quality liberal organs, the “New Republic has the field almost to itself.” In short, the periodical was the bridge between the older pragmatists and the nation’s young intellectuals.

Without being specifically leftist in its orientation, like the Masses or the Call, the New Republic sought a critical balance that appealed to what it believed to be a thoughtful and curious readership. More importantly, it was replete with the vigor of

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472 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 35.

473 Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 43.

“young ardent optimists,” founders who regarded its position in society as a reformist periodical in the liberal tradition.\textsuperscript{476} The founding editor, Herbert Croly, confirmed in 1922 that the organ was created “less to inform or entertain its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions.”\textsuperscript{477} In explaining the organ to a friend, Croly promised that the magazine would be “radical without being socialistic. . . and pragmatic rather than doctrinaire.”\textsuperscript{478}

But Croly had a distinct agenda for the organ, which he revealed in his 1912 publication, \textit{The Promise of American Life}. Croly began the treatise with the confident assessment that “The average American is nothing if not patriotic.” The book then details his vision of a patriotism that entails “unlimited belief in the future of America” and in her ability to sustain financial freedom for those who are willing to sacrifice and work. America as “the Land of Promise,” Croly argued, entails an unflappable belief “that the future will have something better in store for them individually and collectively than has the past or the present.” The most patriotic “continue resolutely and cheerfully along the appointed path,” combining such optimism about the future with a nostalgic loyalty to American tradition. Croly did not place the entire onus upon the individual. Croly declared that his brand of idealism could only be achieved when the social, political, and

\textsuperscript{475} Editorial, \textit{New Republic}, November 7, 1914, ix.

\textsuperscript{476} John Dos Passos, \textit{Mr. Wilson’s War}, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1962), 196.

\textsuperscript{477} Herbert Croly, Editorial, \textit{New Republic}, December 6, 1922, 322.

\textsuperscript{478} Croly to Leonard Hand, January 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1914, in Charles Forcey, \textit{The Crossroads of Liberalism}, p 124.
economic conditions of a nation were favorably disposed to the development of the individual.\textsuperscript{479}

Croly’s optimism was warranted, he believed, because America’s educational institutions were in concert with the plan to make America the land of promise. Our purpose here is not to reestablish progressivism’s emphasis on education, which is well-covered terrain, but to emphasize the optimism behind its educational agenda in order to contrast it with the Lost Generation’s cynical attitude toward its own educational experience. Croly’s optimism was behind his belief that the health of the nation is predicated upon the idea that each “American is trained for such democracy as he possesses.” Croly went so far as to say that the American promise could be “fulfilled only by education.” Education provides the individual with the necessary discipline “both for fruitful association with his fellows and for his own special work.” Education reforms the individual, Croly insisted, by providing a context through which the individual can judge his or her own personal experience, and make necessary reforms. The individual then uses that knowledge for “realizing his purpose” in democracy.\textsuperscript{480}

America was an opportunistic field of harvest for progressivism’s lofty goals, and, unfortunately, according to Yale University professor Henry Canby, it worked. Canby asserted that progressive idealism had helped Americans to remain entrenched in their mental ruts. In his 1920 Everyday Americans, a critique of America’s intellectual climate, Canby remarked that America’s educational system had failed to get Americans to quit thinking like Americans. Such a “disease,” Canby argues, seeks to merely conserve

\textsuperscript{479} Herbert Croly The Promise of American Life (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 3, 5.
“principles of life, government, and industry” by stifling the growth of the individual’s intellect. Canby’s vision of a monolithically educated America resonated with many university officials. Columbia University’s President Nicholas Murray Butler opened his 1908 publication *The American as He Is*, with the words: “The most impressive fact in American life is the substantial unity of view in regard to the questions of government and of conduct among a population so large, distributed over an area so wide, recruited from sources so many and so diverse, living under conditions so widely different.”

Four years later Harvard English Professor, Bliss Perry, argued in *American Mind and American Idealism* that Americans had developed a settled way of “considering intellectual, moral, and social problems; in short, a peculiarly national attitude toward the universal human questions.”

America’s intellectual provinciality, public intellectual Randolph Bourne argued, was manifest in its undergraduate intellectual life. In “these days of academic self-analysis,” he declared, “the intellectual caliber of the American undergraduate finds few admirers or defenders.” Many undergraduates themselves, Bourne continues, complain that the “student soul vibrates reluctantly to the larger intellectual and social issues of the day.” Intellectual growth was low on the priority list of most undergraduates, who have created a “primitive culture” on college campuses that apply social pressure that encourages lackluster academic performance.

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480 Croly, *Promise of American Life*, 400, 403.


But Bourne did not let the onus fall completely on the students. Colleges and universities were able to entice students with promises of social excitement. When he reviewed Canby’s book on university life and education, *College Sons and College Fathers*, Bourne appreciated Canby’s argument that universities were far less successful in generating actual learning in than in developing an invigorating campus life. Students’ natural “sheep-like gregariousness [and] infantile will-to-power has been tamed and civilized” by higher education. In an effort to make better citizens, the universities had created worse students. Schools, Bourne lamented, have “let too many undergraduates pass out into professional and business life, not only without the germ of a philosophy, but without any desire for an interpretive clue through the maze.” Unlike European universities, Bourne asserted, American universities had developed a “sporting philosophy” that had turned the college experience into a race with the prize at the end. The entire system was to blame. It bent the energy and consciousness of the undergraduate toward “playing the game right, rather than assimilating the intellectual background of his teachers.”

The *New Republic* agreed with the intellectual provincialism of the America’s universities, and argued that America’s system of higher education provided the wrong kind of training. One article parodied debate competitions between Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, stressing the phenomenon that students were able to “espouse all sides of every question with equal conviction.” These students, the article explained, had failed to develop skills in critical thinking. They were no different than politicians who do not

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work to “consider the facts and accomplish the desired result, but to justify a platform before an electorate of loyal partisans.”486 Another contributor wailed that despite a resolve to “get an education,” it had only taken the university a few weeks to kill it. Quoting Thomas Huxley, he regarded the university mantra as: “They work to pass and not to know, and nature takes her revenge: they do pass and they don’t know.”487 The organ’s editors complained that university education had conspired to put the student “into an attitude of passivity.”488 Richard Rice, an associate professor at Indiana University, was chagrined over his school’s lack of emphasis upon teaching students to think. The methods employed provided “little service in any real challenge to [student] opinions.” He cited as evidence a group of freshman, who, when asked about the profession of advertising, agreed that such a subject must be taught in one of the disciplines of the arts and sciences.489

Such a pessimistic view of America’s institutions of higher education was corroborated by one the Lost Generation’s intellectual heroes, H. L. Mencken. Mencken criticized America’s universities, railing that “everywhere the teacher must fashion his teachings according to the creed and regulations of the school.” In the end, even the college professor is a “mere perpetrator of doctrines.” Mencken suggested that a person’s intellectual ability is to be judged, not by doing what anyone could accomplish, but by doing things beyond the power of the average person. “Education, as we commonly

observe it today,” he declared, “works toward the former, rather than toward the latter.”

To support his contention, Mencken cited Friedrich Nietzsche, another Lost Generation idol. Nietzsche had a particular antipathy toward all institutional life, of which, the German educational system was a primary one. Contending that educators only taught students to obey authority instead of nurturing them toward skills in independent thinking, Nietzsche argued that those patrons of the state were the “most ignorant and stupid class of men in the whole group of mental workers” for their complicity in felicitating the power of existing institutions. The college professor was Nietzsche’s archetypal buffoon for spewing institutional dogma and receiving a paycheck for it. In a footnote, Mencken reminds the reader that Nietzsche was speaking of the German educational system, but Mencken adds that “his arguments apply to other countries as well and to teachers of other things besides philosophy.” Mencken translated Nietzsche’s comments to America’s universities, arguing that professors were required to remain in the intellectual rut or risk losing his place.

The primary casualty of an educational system that had conformed to the lowest common denominator was the student who was truly endowed with intellectual curiosity. Bourne complained that America’s universities had failed to “set the mass of students intellectually on fire.” The New Republic reviled the college system that strove for the “cooperation between the colleges and practical life” because it only resulted only in

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491 Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 44.

492 Randolph Bourne, “The Undergraduate, 197.
making the classroom a “field for business propaganda” without intellectual nourishment.\textsuperscript{493} One \textit{New Republic} contributor decried the “dry, inflammable fields” of intellectual scarcity that stemmed from a deep-rooted fear of intellectual curiosity. He challenged, “must we turn our students away from sources of wide and intensive knowledge, simply because the facts may be presented to them in the form of special pleading, and some facts may not be the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”\textsuperscript{494}

Evidence of the Lost Generation’s reaction to the intellectually confining college experience was Dos Passos’s advice to his young friend Rumsey Marvin to never let “college interfere with one’s education.”\textsuperscript{495} He often looked fondly on his 1912-1916 Harvard experience, which was in large part due to his participation with the \textit{Harvard Monthly} and the lifelong relationships that flourished as a result of it. For “all its delights and intellectual smugness,” he confessed, Harvard was a positive experience, though he was often loathe to admit it, calling it a “weakness of the flesh.”\textsuperscript{496} He encouraged his younger friend Rumsey Marvin that if he were determined to go to college then Harvard was the preferable institution. But he should limit his studies strictly to the humanities, for only in those fields was there anything worthwhile to be gained.\textsuperscript{497} He exhorted young Marvin in many letters to never let school get in the way of his real education because the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{493} Editorial, \textit{New Republic}, July 19, 1915, 314.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{494} James Theron Rood, “Education With a Breadth,” \textit{New Republic}, January 2, 1915, 23.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{495} Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 42.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{496} Dos Passos, \textit{Correspondence with Arthur McComb}, 37.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{497} Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 160.}
“intellectual life in college is slim.” Real education, he declared, is “what you plug out for yourself.”

For the most part, Dos Passos kept his grumbling to himself during his Harvard years, but after graduation he expressed a general attitude that “college interfere[s] with ones education most horribly anyway.” He counseled young Marvin that “all the education one gets comes from ones own reading or ones own living and you really have to have the reading to have a standard to test the living by.” Good literature he maintained allows one to cultivate things of interest so one can “let the rest go hang.” Concerning formal education, he reminisced that the “things people try to teach you in order that you shan’t flunk exams – are most of them terrifically perfunctory and shouldn’t be taken too much to heart.” He reminded his friend that he would receive no good education outside of his own intellectual pursuits unless he took a “decent unpractical course.”

Dos Passos’s primary complaint was Harvard’s inability to satiate his literary appetite. He wondered “how people get along without reading all the glorious things there are to read.” He believed the result of such mental deficiency compromised the good life. Most people do not live at all, he exclaimed, they “merely vegetate, like cabbages.” Dos Passos was so intent upon autodidacticism that he constantly got behind in his classes. He minded little. Formal education was unable to provide the right kind of knowledge necessary for the attainment of a vibrant life. He counseled Marvin that if one


does not take formal education too seriously “one can chug very happily through four years and emerge without having ones intellect utterly mossed over.”\textsuperscript{500}

Such a negative view of education was not limited to the Lost Generation. Between 1900 and 1917, education was often viewed by the students themselves as a necessary stage in life but an impediment to worldly experience. In his seminal study \textit{The Emergence of the American University}, Laurence Veysey points out that while at school many American undergraduates preserved a relaxed attitude toward the instructional formalities of higher education. Tacked up above doorways in the living quarters of college students throughout the United States hung the mantra that Dos Passos inflicted repeatedly upon his friend Rumsey Marvin, “Don’t Let Your Studies Interfere with Your Education.”\textsuperscript{501}

At Harvard, where Dos Passos, Cowley, and Cummings attended, the preferred, almost environmentally mandated, novel was Owen Wister’s 1901 publication \textit{Philosophy 4: A Story of Harvard University}. The novel opens with Bertie and Billy, two students for whom “studious concentration was evidently a painful novelty.” The two lackluster students are being tutored by Oscar, an overachieving intellectual pedant, so that they could pass their final examinations for their Philosophy 4 class. After reviewing the Greek concept of motion, Billy, one of the two students, exclaims, “Good Lord! I can make up foolishness like that myself.” The two apprentices constantly make similar remarks regarding the uselessness of philosophy for achieving their primary practical aim, which is to socialize as freely and frequently as possible. The novel climaxes with

\textsuperscript{500} Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 67.
the two boys ditching their last eight-hour day of tutoring in order to find a secret café, the whereabouts of which only the socially experienced on campus know. On examination day, the two philosophy novices use their personal experiences of the preceding day as to answer the exam questions. Each scores a higher mark than Oscar, whose examination is a perfect reproduction of the professor’s lectures. The novel concludes with Oscar’s astonishment that Bertie’s and Billy’s answers were “the sort of thing which the professor had wanted from his students: free comment and discussions, the spirit of the course, rather than any adherence to the letter.”

The Lost Generation was determined not to let America’s universities guide its educational process, in part, because it found intellectual life at college to be stifling. In his more garrulously anarchic moods, Dos Passos concluded that the problem was America’s educational infrastructure that impeded intellectual individualism. American colleges and universities, to Dos Passos, were mere factories bent on producing entertaining athletes who invariably had brains the “size of a pea and are awful bores.” He charged that the atmosphere of the American school was “numbing to the intelligence,” insisting that “everything is so pleasant and well managed and healthy and godly that no one has a moment’s time in which to think out a darn thing for himself. Everything is so predigested that the mental gastric juices disappear through pure inaction.” Even more caustically, he sermonized,


Lower than the stupidity of the uneducated is the stupidity of the educated whose education is nothing but a wall that keeps him from seeing the world – And most of our schools and colleges do that merely – Then there are so many other sorts of education – a farmer’s boy who has never been to school may be beautifully deeply educated – again he may not But a stupid farmer is no lower on the scale than a stupid Harvard Graduate – one who can’t see beyond wealth and clubs and that abominable coverer up of things – niceness – See what I mean? – It is hard to get away from the lingo, from the little habits of speech and action, from the petty snobberies of ones own class that it takes a distinct effort to see real “illumination” and appreciate it.\textsuperscript{504}

Just before sailing for war torn France in the spring of 1917, a place where he could finally “work off incendiary ideas,” he railed his imprecations at those institutions.

All the thrust and advance and courage in the country now lies in the East Side Jews and in a few of the isolated foreigners whose opinions so shock the New York Times. They’re so much more real and alive than we are anyway – I’d like to annihilate these stupid colleges of ours, and all the nice young men in them – instillers of stodginess in every form, bastard culture, middle class snobbism –

And what are we fit for when they turn us out of Harvard? We’re too intelligent to be successful business men and we haven’t the sand or the energy to be anything else –

Until Widener is blown up and A. Lawrence Lowell assassinated and the Business School destroyed and its site sowed with salt – no good will come out of Cambridge.\textsuperscript{505}

Dos Passos’s anti-educational ranting was less a consequence of any unhappy experiences he had encountered at Harvard than an antipathy of an American institution that was supposed to nourish creative thought, but seemed committed to intellectual mediocrity. Malcolm Cowley regarded Harvard “America’s greatest university,” but he

\begin{footnotes}
\item[504] Dos Passos, \textit{Fourteenth Chronicle}, 48.
\item[505] Dos Passos, \textit{Correspondence with Arthur McComb}, 47. Ground was broken for Widner, Harvard’s main library during Dos Passos’s freshman year and opened for circulation his senior year. A. Lawrence Lowell became the University’s president in 1909, the year after he helped establish the business school. The
\end{footnotes}
facetiously told Kenneth Burke that there were “only three universities in the United States” worth anything in the first place.

Summarizing the Lost Generation attitude toward progressivism’s educational idealism, Malcolm Cowley confirmed in *Exiles Return* that it was a “topic that put us to sleep.” The aversion to higher education, intellectual historian Steven Biel confirms, was due to the entrenched belief that university life succeeded in obstructing individual liberty by denying the intellectual seeker access to immediate knowledge of the world.

The Geography of Experience: New York City

The banality of American education prompted the Lost Generation to seek other venues for its education of the world. One of its primary sources from American society itself. Although the Lost Generation writers deplored America’s militarism, patriotism, optimism, and absolutism, they not only considered America their home, they considered America to be a primary source of their greatest experiences. The Lost Generation had a dialectical love and hate, romantic and ironic relationship with America, but they could not deny its central role in creating the heroic self.

Many times the Lost Generation simply regarded America with disdain. After Hart Crane watched the parade celebrating Cleveland Ohio’s 125th anniversary in 1921, he commented dryly that such an anachronism “could only occur in America.” He concluded that “All I can say is – it’s a gay old world! If ever I felt alone it has been

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business school had 120 students Dos Passos’s freshman year, 190 his senior year and 232 by the end of the school year 1917.
today.” In 1922, Crane reminisced in a letter about a friend who had “rebelled against religious restrictions” of America and who was the epitome of “wonderful kindliness and tolerance and a true Nietzschean.” But that person, Crane concluded was one friend of many “broken against the stupidity of American life.”

As much as it was contemptuous of American society, however, the Lost Generation remained adamant that it had not rejected America. Even though Dos Passos wrote in the fall of 1918 that “There [is] in America no inkling of the conception that a man has a right to his opinion no matter what it is – therefore there is no honesty in America,” he also recognized that “in America lies the future.”

Edmund Wilson believed that even though he inflicted “devastating criticism of America,” it was a great country. Hemingway expressed the tension best in a 1919 letter in which he admitted, “I’m patriotic and willing to die for this great and glorious nation. But I hate like the deuce to live in it.” For these reasons, and many others, the Lost Generation sought refuge in the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Mexico, and primarily Europe, confirming Hemingway’s 1920 acknowledgment that Europe “gets in the blood and kind of ruins you for anything else.”

But America’s allure could not be denied. It was home, and while abroad the Lost Generation maintained a Westward gaze. The same Hemingway who hated to live in America often regretted “buzzing all over Europe when there is so much of my own

506 Cowley, Exile’s Return, 73.
507 Crane, Letters, 62, 93.
508 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 122.
509 Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 54.
country I haven’t seen.” Dos Passos’s 1921 Middle East travels indelibly stitched into his mind the romance of foreign cultures but he could not wait to get back to New York. “To fellow poet Stewart Mitchell, Dos Passos confided that their mutual friend Arthur McComb had “washed his hands and feet forever of the U.S.,” but that he, along with Walt Whitman would loudly declaim, “Allons Democracy, I have not deserted you ma femme.” And Malcolm Cowley remarked in 1922 that the primary benefit of Europe was that gave such “an excellent perspective on America.” But the Lost Generation did not just appreciate America for sentimental reasons. America offered a wide array of experiences from which the Lost Generation could draw.

Many of those experiences that the Lost Generation writers celebrated sprang from New York City, a place that both enthralled and appalled them. Dos Passos liked the East Side and Greenwich Village, those parts of the city that were “nice and human.” But the city also embodied avarice and commercialism, the greedy stockbrokers that were a part of “life’s meaner things.” After just brief stints in the city, Dos Passos would complain that he was “still in this beastly New York,” feeling like he could never remain long because of “its cold inhumanity.” New York exuded opulence and snobbery that made it blind “to the human beauty that everything is warm with.” Even worse, New York sucked him in as a “cotton-wool plutocrat.” New York was a dialectical enigma. In 1920 Dos Passos decided that “New York is rather funny – like a badly drawn cartoon –

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510 Hemingway, Selected Letters, 21.
511 Hemingway, Selected Letters, 37.
512 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, 270
513 Cowley, Correspondence, 120.
everybody looks and dresses like the Arrow-collarman.” He finished one letter with “After all N.Y.’s damn jolly to look at. Babylon gone mad.”

Whatever their contentions with the city, none of the twenties intellectuals doubted that New York was alive with constant activity. By 1920 Manhattan alone had 2,284,103 inhabitants and was full of all kinds of danger and opportunity. The daily newspapers, which Dos Passos copiously quoted in his “Newsreel” sections of the *USA Trilogy*, record snippets of a number of the 5.4 murders per 100,000 people between the years 1921 to 1925. Yet Dos Passos also “delighted in exploring the creeks and channels and backwaters of the city. . . always as the visitor, the tourist on his way to the railroad station.” In a letter to friend and writer Arthur McComb, Dos Passos admitted that after he had finished *Manhattan Transfer* that it was a novel “full of niceties of observation & the total effect is certainly to give one the feel of the wonderful horror which is N.Y.”

The “wonderful horror” that made New York distinct is what drew European artists like Marcel Duchamp and other Dadaists and Futurists to America. New York, rather than European cities, was the appropriate city to connote the motion, speed, and fragmentation of cinematic montage that was gaining tremendous appeal in the plastic arts. In a 1915 interview Duchamp rebuked American artists’ reliance upon the

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514 Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 37, 47, 69, 74, 299.

515 Dos Passos, *Correspondence With McComb*, 207.

516 Michael Spindler, “John Dos Passos and the Visual Arts,” *Journal of American Studies* 15 (December 1981), p. 396; David Sanders in *Writers at Work: The ‘Paris Review’ Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton, 4th ser. (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 272. Some critics have incorrectly suggested that Sergei Eisenstein’s films were the impetus for Dos Passos. Dos Passos had not yet seen Eisenstein’s work so his introduction to montage probably had American origins. Literary critic Michael Spindler contends that Eisenstein’s films could not have influenced Dos Passos’s writings of the early 1920’s because his first film *Strike* was never released in America and his second film *Potemkin* was not released until 1926. Part of the confusion is due to Dos Passos’s own memory. In an interview with David Sanders in July 1962, Dos Passos said that
European art tradition. He declared that “New York itself is a work of art. Its growth is harmonious. And I believe that your idea of demolishing old buildings, old souvenirs, is fine. The dead should not be permitted to be so much stronger than the living. We must learn to forget the past, to live our own life in our own time.” In the same interview Duchamp announced that European art was dead, claiming that “America is the country of the art of the future.”

Duchamp realized that America’s love of technology was more passionate than Europe’s. New York exemplified the mechanization that these European artists sought to capture in their art. Some of the European avant-garde believed that European cities had tended to stagnate as cultural innovators by the time of the Great War. Duchamp and his coterie believed that by 1913 France was no longer the central arbiter of artistic taste. The cultural icons that had for so many years made Paris the center of the art world were waning in their power to influence. For many avant-garde artists a new age had dawned and Fernand Léger, along with other avant-garde painters, believed America to be the most complete expression of the technological age. America was the place where art, trade, and industry were closely allied.

Like Duchamp, Dos Passos believed New York’s constant activity could best be expressed through montage, the avant-garde technique utilized by Duchamp in his 1912

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he may have seen Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* before writing *Manhattan Transfer*, but he could not remember for certain. We now know that he did not see the movie before writing the novel, but he believed he had seen D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *Birth of a Nation* and 1916 *Intolerance*.

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Nude Descending a Staircase. Dos Passos affirmed that the “artist must record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it. By contrast, juxtaposition, montage, he could build drama into his narrative.” Dos Passos went on to say, specifically of his novel of the city, Manhattan Transfer, that “I started a rapportage on New York. Some of the characters out of abandoned youthful narratives got into the book, but there was more to the life of a great city than you could cram into any one hero’s career. The narrative must stand up off the page. Fragmentation. Contrast. Montage. The result was Manhattan Transfer.”

Manhattan Transfer was the Lost Generation’s best portrayal of New York’s energy. Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer. In order to accentuate the chaotic panorama of the city that he detailed in its pages, Dos Passos painted the cover for the novel’s first edition. Watercolor of New York Harbor captures the city’s chaos, displaying a crowded building scene that dominates the center of the picture. Half of the buildings’ colors are muted primary red and yellow, the visual colors of fire, a constant theme in the novel. These color-filled buildings offset the series of black and white buildings, creating a sharp contrast in the city as if one is looking at the city during night and day simultaneously, a city that never sleeps. The scale of the harbor pales in comparison to the convoluted cityscape as the buildings bear down upon the waterfront. The dark blue harbor is dotted with red and yellow boats, which connotes more of the city’s never ending activity. To aid in the sense of chaos, a series of white jagged shapes sporadically cover large sections of the city, creating the effect of a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces.

The cover creates a pictorial mood of the city commensurate with the novel’s narrative that the city is an imposing place where the individual gets lost.

Dos Passos’s depiction of New York in *Manhattan Transfer* offers a collage of images that creates a sense of the individual’s insignificance in the great city. A character like Bud Korpenning has nowhere left to go in New York because he has run out of space. Dos Passos created Bud to be weak, insignificant, and at the mercy of the great city. While downtown Bud cannot escape innumerable sensations that make up the cityscape. He walks past “empty lots where tin cans glittered among grass and sumach bushes and ragweed, between rows of billboards and Bull Durham signs, past shanties and abandoned squatter’s shacks, past gulches heaped with wheelscarred rubbishpiles were dumpcarts were dumping ashes and clinkers.” Dos Passos fills the narrative with so many images that the individual becomes overwhelmed. Bud walks past “knobs of gray outcrop where steamdrills continually tapped ad nibbled, past excavations out of which wagons full of rock and clay toiled up plank roads to the street, until he walking on new sidewalks along a row of yellow brick apartment houses, looking in the windows of grocery stores, Chinese laundries, lunchrooms, flower and vegetable shops, tailors’, delicatessens.”

When Bud makes his way to the city center toward the mayor’s office, a man facetiously tells him that it is the center of things, hinting that there is no center of the city. The center is everywhere, in every neighborhood and around every corner. Bud is not enthralled by the energy of the city. He cannot escape the confines of the city,

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believing “they’re all of em detectives chasin me, all of em, men in derbies, bums on the Bowery, old women in kitchens, barkeeps, streetcar conductors, bulls, hookers, sailors, longshoremen, stiff in employment agencies.”

New York was a true dialectic for the Lost Generation in that it represented all the best and worst parts of America. Its romance was its ability to provide the rush of experience, and its irony was its categorical modernity. It was New York’s modernity that both attracted and repelled the Lost Generation writers. But its modernity, Dos Passos demonstrated, left the individual insignificant.

The Geography of Experience: Spain

The Lost Generation’s conception of the heroic self, the self defined by one’s interaction in the world, was ambitious. But America’s monolithic commitment to industrialization and commercialism did not provide an environment, as depicted in Manhattan Transfer, in which the individual could flourish. As a result, the Lost Generation was forced to look outside of America, in pre-industrial nations to find a society that nurtured the heroic self. For Dos Passos, nineteen twenties Spain was the nation in which he found respite from modernity’s hectic pace and a social environment in which the heroic individual was permitted to thrive.

Spain was embroiled in its own romantic and ironic dialectic, but unlike America it had not yet succumbed completely to modernity. There was a pre-industrial environment that made the country “a temple of anachronisms,” a place where he could

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522 Dos Passos, Manhattan Transfer, 125.
feel the “strata of civilization.” Dos Passos was hooked. He spoke of how the “Celt-Iberians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Moors and French have each passed through Spain and left something there – alive.” He sensed that the whole culture was a tangle of other civilizations that had been imprinted into the land. He said that one could feel it in the “old, old roads which have been worn to a sort of velvet softness by the feet of generations and generations and generations.” Romanticizing the past was consistent with the Lost Generation writers, Malcolm Cowley avers, because they “didn’t look forward, really, to a new collective society based on economic planning and the intelligent use of machines; they were skeptical and afraid of bigness; in their hearts they looked toward the past.”

Dos Passos was impressed by Spain’s resiliency against the soul deadening rise of industry. By the twentieth century the course of those generations in Spanish society had split. Much of the country was intent on modernizing Spain and bringing it in line with a western world, but there were those heroic individuals, in Dos Passos’s mind, who were fighting to retain the nostalgic past, the magical, mythical, historical, pre-industrial Spain of Don Quixote. Dos Passos met one of those heroes, a baker in the village of Almorox, who explained for him the social divisions in contemporary Spain. Of the Spanish peasantry the baker spoke of its beautiful simplicity of life that was exercised by giving a higher priority to one’s family than to one’s work. But the Baker pointed far off, Dos Passos explains, to an almost ethereal realm where “in the dim penumbra of things half real, of travelers’ tales, lay Madrid, where the king lived and where politicians wrote in

— Dos Passos Fourteenth Chronicle, 56, 57, 64.
the newspapers, - and all that was not Almorox.” There was in Spanish society, the baker
told Dos Passos, a disparity between the plain country folk with rustic sensibilities and
the hard-waxed polished and sterile sense of the government and its machinations.525

The Spanish baker for Dos Passos was a modern day Don Quixote, a lone,
romantic individual in a modern world of industry, who refused to let go of his nation’s
history, who refused to be dominated by the swift winds of change. Dos Passos could feel
the baker’s resistance to the “modern world of feverish change,” while all around him
“things changed, cities were founded, hard roads built, armies marched and fought and
passed away; but in Almorox the foundations of life remained unchanged up to the
present.” Sadly, the baker told Dos Passos that what was lost on the government was that
everywhere in Spain were “roots striking into the infinite past.” In the peasant baker and
his family, Dos Passos could feel the generations of Spanish life “wax and wane, like the
years, strung on the thread of labor, of unending sweat and strain of muscles against the
earth.” 526

Dos Passos’s glorification of Spain was a reflection of the modernist sentiment to
deify pre-industrial society. Jackson Lears explains in No Place of Grace, that the
“primitive impulse” led toward “an apotheosis of pious simplicity, toward a reasserted
republican morality of self-control, toward a fascination with the uncivilized, the
uncanny, the inexplicable.”527 The Lost Generation writers were not the first to search for

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525 Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, 43.

526 Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, 25.
conceptions of selfhood in pre-industrial society. The Young Americans discovered a useable sense of identity in the American Romantics, who lived in a historical context that, like twentieth-century Spain, had not yet succumbed to industrialism.

In *The Golden Day*, a series of lectures delivered in Geneva in 1925, Lewis Mumford saw the dialectic of romance and irony among the Romantics. It was a time of “disintegration and fulfillment: the new and the old, the crude and the complete, the base and the noble mixed together.” It was an era on the eve of great change from a pre-industrial society to an industrial, and it handled it with fortitude and grace. It was an age when even the “barbarism of the industrial age” could not quell the dominant sense of hope that pervaded the culture.  

Greenwich Village historian, Ross Wetzsteon, reminds us that during the first three decades of the twentieth century, Greenwich Village bohemians avidly read Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, key thinkers who helped to inaugurate the modern mentality. But the Bohemians never lost their celebration of nineteenth-century American ideals. In the end, the villager’s creed was “closer to Concord and Brook Farm than to Paris or Vienna.”

The Lost Generation followed the Young American intellectuals in its search for respite from modernity in a pre-industrial society, but they also found in such a social context a place where the heroic individual could thrive. Despite its battle with modernity Spain was able to keep its balance and nurture an “intense individualism” that was unlike

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anything he had observed in other nations. It was an individualism connected to the social life of the nation. Spain’s “individual vitality” made it the “most” democratic country in Europe. Unlike America, Spain constructed its individualism on a national level and conceived of it in terms of social liberty.

The consequence of such liberty was that Spain’s individualism, Dos Passos believed, was rooted in the individual’s celebration of the society that honored her. It was the harmonious relationship between society and the individual that allowed the heroic individual to flourish. Spanish individualism, Dos Passos maintained, was grounded in the ancient Iberian culture that had cultivated a lasting “anarchistic reliance on the individual man,” but that never left the individual alone; she walked along a path trodden by generations of people who “had tilled and loved and lain in the cherishing sun with no feeling of a reality outside of themselves, outside of the bare encompassing hills of their commune.”

America, Dos Passos sadly reasoned, could never achieve this relationship between society and the individual because it did not have the Spanish history that was replete with personality and passion, a history in which the individual had striven to resist the cultural hegemony of imperialistic nations over the previous millennia, a history in which the integrity of the individual had not been absorbed into the many cultures that had inhabited Spain. Spain’s individualism was its cultural purity. No revolution or invasion, whether from the “Goths, the Moors, Christian doctrine,” or the “fads and

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530 Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, 27.

531 Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, 24.
convictions of the Renaissance” had displaced the “changeless Iberian mind.” All foreign influences had simply metamorphosed into the stream of Spanish thought and culture.\textsuperscript{532}

Not only did Spanish individualism celebrate Spanish society and history, it had remained intact through the onslaught of modernity. Almost a century after the Industrial Revolution had swept through Europe, Dos Passos wrote in 1916, the fundamentals of Spanish life still lay in its isolated village communities – \textit{pueblos}, “over the changeless face of which, like grass over a field, events spring and mature and die.” As his primary example, of such resistance, Dos Passos romanticized the Spanish novelist Blasco Ibáñez, who expressed happiness at being an anarchist in a country that celebrated community and family. But for In Ibáñez’s, what made Spanish society so great was its commitment to individualism. Dos Passos understood that if it came down between society and the individual, Ibáñez would choose the individual every time.\textsuperscript{533}

In his novel, \textit{La Barraca} (The Cabin),\textsuperscript{534} Ibáñez demonstrated the centrality of the individual through a story of a peasant family that moves to a cabin in a village. The locals have condemned the cabin, and anyone who lives there because the former tenants murdered the landlord. After suffering perpetual persecution from hostile neighbors, the protagonist Batiste awakens one night to find the cabin on fire. None of the neighbors come to aid the peasant family. The family rebuilds the cabin in the midst of continued social persecution, but the point of the novel is clear. The individual’s courage and

\textsuperscript{532} Dos Passos, \textit{Rosinante to the Road Again}, 79.

\textsuperscript{533} Dos Passos, \textit{Rosinante to the Road Again}, 87.

\textsuperscript{534} Of Ibáñez’s novels, Dos Passos also read \textit{Sonnica la Cortesana, La Catredral, La Bodego, Sangre y arena, The Argonauts, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and Los Enemigos de la Mujer.}
strength, his or her willingness to fight against a hopeless situation in the face of human indifference or cruelty is what makes Spain great.  

Such individuality fostered a national attitude of defiance against a modern world that desired to kill the individual spirit. That model of that defiance was Pastora Isadora, one of the most famous Spanish dancers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dos Passos described her dancing form as a “yellow flame against maroon and purple cadences. . . an instant swagger of defiance in the midst of a litany to death the all-powerful. That is Spain.” While thinking of Pastora, Dos Passos’s protagonist in *Rosinante to the Road Again*, Telemachus meets up with a modern day Quixote knight-errant, who tells him that for all the injustice done in the world, “no one but a man, an individual alone, can right a wrong.”  

But the modern knight also reveals his dismay that Spain will eventually succumb to the modern world. He tells Telemachus that “Every man’s life is a lonely ruthless quest” against a seemingly omnipotent enemy. Dos Passos also feared that Spanish individualism would crumble in the face of modernity, as it had in America. For what the Lost Generation despised most about modernity was its pernicious affect upon the heroic individual. Spain was for Dos Passos one of the last bastions of hope that the defiance of individualism could stem the tide of the modern world.  

Dos Passos’s fears were embodied in the Catalanian poet Juan Maragall. Maragall was the embodiment of the dialectic tension between romance and irony, of Don Quixote


Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, 59.
and Sancho Panza. He was at once a mystic whose life seems “strangely out of another age,” and a materialist who only wanted to enjoy the fruits of the earth until “the poison of other-worldliness wells up suddenly in him and he is a Christian and mystic full of echoes of old soul-torturing.”

The problem, Dos Passos’s believed is that the mystic side of Spain, the spirit of Don Quixote, would not sustain its courage, that it would flee the modern world and hide in the mystical world of prayer and submission. Dos Passos saw this tendency in Maragall’s *El Comte ‘Arnan*. Initially, the poet seeks to experience all that the world has to offer. He asks:

“Then to be man more than man
to be earth palpitant.”

He is granted his request:

“You shall be wheel and rock,
you shall be the mist-veiled sea
you shall be the air in flame, you shall be the whirling stars,
you shall be man more than man for you have the will for it.”

Then, Dos Passos interjects, the fear of life “gushes suddenly to muddy the clear wellspring of sensation,” and the poet, beaten to his knees, writes:

“And when the terror-haunted moment comes
to close these earthly eyes of mine,
open for me, Lord, other greater eyes
to look upon the immensity of your face.”

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537 Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, 54.
538 Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, 88.
539 Dos Passos, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, 122.
The mystic’s inability to stare down modernity was a concern for Randolph Bourne because he believed that the mystic’s spiritual power made them capable of withstanding such an oppressive force. Bourne knows that mystics want to retreat from the modern world, but it is the mystics that the world needs. In “The Mystic Turned Radical” Bourne suggested that the mystic holds a precarious position in modern society because he must “not only recognize the scientific aspect of the age – he must feel the social ideal that directs the spiritual energies of the time.”

Bourne witnessed the strength of the mystic when he visited the Chartres cathedral in Paris. He thoughtfully admired “the inevitable band of black-bonneted old women performing their devotions before the altars.” For Bourne, these devout women maintained a “sort of last desperate bulwark against the encroachments of the modern spirit.” Both Bourne and Dos Passos feared that such faith would not be enough.

But we must end on a positive note because Dos Passos did. He found a single ray of light peaking through the encroaching maelstrom of modernity. He found the Spanish playwright Don Jacinto Benavente. Benavente still had castizo. The word technically means an acute sense of style, a particular manner of doing things, but Dos Passos expanded the definition to mean “the essence of the local, of the regional, the last stronghold of Castilian arrogance, [which] refers not to the empty shell of traditional observances but to the very core and gesture of them.” Castizo is confidence in what one does. Benavente, who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1922, embodied castizo, not

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just through his vision of the world, as did Maragall, nor through his manner of life, as had the baker of Almorox, nor through the overt defiance of Pastora Isadora. Benavente showed castizo through his art. As the wave of modernity was slowly swallowing traditional Spain, relegating the nation to the “same level of nickel-plated dullness,” of the industrialized world, it was in the Spanish theater where one could find castizo, and Benavente was the avatar of its expression. What made the Spanish theater superior to American theater, Dos Passos argued, was that the Spanish theater played “on the nerves and intellect” rather than simply playing on already tightly drawn emotions. It made people think. And this combination of art and intellect, Dos Passos believed, could raise a heroic individual out of the rubble of modernity.542

For Dos Passos, Spain was the place where the individual was still celebrated. He regarded Spain to be one of the few western nations that emphasized a way of life “which is in the firm grasp of the individual, is real.” But Spanish reality Dos Passos discovered, was also grounded in the commitment to a harmonious relationship between the individual and society. Spanish reality confirmed for Dos Passos William James’s assessment that individuals “do think in social situations,” that conceptions of the self are built from the individual’s “relation to a context solely.” James explained his position best in Radical Empiricism, declaring that “the individualized self, which I believe to be the only thing properly called self, is a part of the content of the world experienced.”543 Spain was the place where society celebrated the individual. And through such a celebration the individual was permitted to flourish into a heroic self. This heroic

542 Dos Passos, Rosinante to the Road Again, 67.
individual is at once mystically defiant, a rebel against social oppression, and a celebrant of the society that has provided the experiences from which the heroic self is formed. The heroic self becomes part rebellious romantic and part social ironist.

Nothing describes this dialectic more than Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. At the end of Cervantes’s tale, we see a humble and clear-headed Don Quixote on his deathbed. He turns to his traveling companion Sancho and, in ironic reality says, “Forgive me, my friend for having caused you to appear as mad as I by leading you to fall into the same error, that of believing that there are still knights-errant in the world.” Sancho comforts his beloved master, and with mystical romance says “Ah, don’t die, your Grace, but take my advice and go on living for many years to come; for the greatest madness that a man can be guilty of in this life is do die without good reason, without anyone’s killing him, slain only by the hands of melancholy.” There is no better description for the Lost Generation’s conception of the heroic self than Cervantes’s two heroic individuals.

Conclusion

Friedrich Nietzsche helped to successfully dismantle absolutism from the Lost Generation’s consciousness. The consequence was the Lost Generation’s freedom to recreate an epistemology that was relevant for its historical context. These writers discovered in William James an epistemology rooted in individual’s experience of the world. These twenties intellectuals, however, expanded the application of James’s

543 William James, *Radical Empiricism*, 62.

544 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 2668.
epistemology for their own purposes; they not only interpreted radical empiricism as a 
way to understand the world, they saw its emphasis on pure experience as an opportunity 
to realize the heroic individual.

As a result, the Lost Generation pursued experience. Through travel and literature 
they began to accumulate self defining experiences. These writers then expressed, 
through their literature, the use of experience for completing the conception of the heroic 
self, creating characters who defined their sense of self by their interaction with the 
world.

But the Lost Generation was in a conundrum. They wanted to experience the 
world for the good of the individual, but the modern world, manifest primarily in 
America, was not an environment that nurtured the heroic individual. Consequently, these 
intellectuals headed for foreign soil, and in Spain Dos Passos discovered a society that 
celebrated the individual. Spain was Dos Passos’s antagonist to American modernity, and 
Dos Passos found in Spanish society a defiant, Don Quixote spirit that strove to remain 
individually heroic in a world that was fast submitting to the wave of modernity.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Having a clear vision of the world was essential to Dos Passos but it meant being able to see the world panoramically, missing none of its egregious failures or its wonderful accomplishments. For Dos Passos and other Lost Generation writers it meant viewing the world with a healthy combination of irony and romanticism. In this dissertation, I have argued that the dialectical tension between irony and romance was a modernist epistemology of the Lost Generation’s creation; it was an epistemology developed in a particular historical context that had been shaped by the Great War and postwar society’s interpretation of the war. We shall now summarize our discussion of this unique generation’s equally unique modernist epistemology by looking briefly at Dos Passos’s vision of the world in the twenties, the fifties, and in 1969, a year before his death, in order to show the long term impact of twenties society and culture on this group of writers.

We can safely say that the nineteen twenties fully disclosed an ironic understanding of the world for the Lost Generation. In a 1926 publication for the newly established New Masses, Dos Passos wrote an article “The New Masses I’d Like,” in
which he outlined his interpretation of life in America, declaiming to his readership that “being clear-sighted is a life and death matter.” Having a correct vision of the world, of American society in particular, was vital for these intellectuals. For it was during “these terribly crucial years when the pressure is rising and rising in the boiler of the great imperial steamroller of American finance that’s going to try to grind down even further the United States and the world.” Twenties America consisted of “fat men in limousines,” a world of ill-gotten gains that had become “the curse of this continent.”

Dos Passos believed that the market-driven culture of the fledgling giant had succeeded in dulling any intellectual life. Dos Passos was convinced that as the “mechanical power grows in America general ideals tend to restrict themselves more and more to Karl Marx, the first chapter of Genesis, and the hazy scientific mysticism of the Sunday supplements.” America, in the ironic oriented eyes of the Lost Generation writers, nurtured small, boring, unheroic individuals who sequestered themselves inside bubbles of safe doctrines and an “imbecile faith.” Such intellectual pettiness was unable to confront the realities of postwar American life. Most Americans, the Lost Generation believed, were insulated by America’s great economic prowess, afraid of the world outside of financial security, and consequently, at “all costs avoid the great future” that a rich world of experience can provide.

This negative interpretation of postwar American society occupied a significant portion of the Lost Generation’s intellectual energy. But Dos Passos understood that such a continued confrontational appraisal of the world, without the benefit of some

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545 John Dos Passos, “The New Masses I’d Like,” *New Masses* (June, 1926), 27.

546 Dos Passos, “The New Masses I’d Like”, 27.
demonstrable response, would only drive the Lost Generation into its own form of provinciality. Dos Passos admitted as much, writing that “such skepticism is merely the flower of decay, the green mould on the intellect.”

But such skepticism did not overwhelm the Lost Generation writers because the other side of their epistemology, the romantic understanding of the world, tempered the skepticism by declaring the individual to be vitally important in American society. The Lost Generation writers’ romantic vision of the world was inspired by Don Quixote, the dreamer who named his noble steed Rocinante because it “impressed him as being sonorous and at the same time indicative of what the steed had been when it was but a hack.” That same dreamer set himself apart from society, bestowing upon himself the title Don Quixote de la Mancha because it conferred upon him noble heritage. He then determined that he was to be a chivalrous warrior, so he polished his armor, converted his morion into a closed helmet, and set out on his knight-errant journey to find a lady “of whom he could become enamored; for a knight-errant without a lady-love was like a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without a soul.” In his heart resided a passion for justice becoming of a knight-errant, and he projected the force of his virtuous nobility against the iniquity of the world, seeking to right the wrongs in life and bring evil perpetrators, such as forty hapless country windmills to immediate justice.

This delusional character was the Lost Generation’s model. Yet, the fascinating thing about Don Quixote is that by looking at the world through his eccentric, if not insane eyes, these writers saw a world that could be remade in Quixote’s own romantic image. As his journey progresses throughout the novel one cannot help but to notice that
it is the world that is aberrant and incomprehensible, not the heroic individual. The Lost Generation set out to do the same thing. They activated the individual’s power in two ways, by emphasizing the individual’s need and ability to revolt against social conventions, and by celebrating the individual’s capacity to create his and herself through experience.

Concerning revolt, the heroic individual did not have to sit idly by and watch society slowly degenerate. These intellectuals’ epistemic romance freed them from mental sloth and allowed them to define themselves by criteria other than the traditional American standards of prosperity and morality. The ironic skepticism did not paralyze the Lost Generation; it demanded a response, fomented rebellion, called for action. Intellectuals, Dos Passos maintained, had too often been “more disciplined in thought than in action.” He demanded that “I’d like to see that state of things reversed for once.” He called for action against an ironic world that was bent on suppressing the heroic individual.

Armed with such romantic verve, Dos Passos and his literary friends took action, in part, by putting other people’s ideas to work for them. What they adapted to confront an ironic world was the Freudian conception of heroism, which defined the heroic individual as one who revolts against social oppression. Utilizing the hero of revolt as its model, the Lost Generation rebelled against the pernicious social forces which they believed existed in the forms of militarism, patriotism, progressivism, and absolutism. They fought militarism with various forms of pacifism, which did nothing to stop the war, but allowed them to

547 Dos Passos, “The New Masses I’d Like”, 28.
identify themselves as distinctive social rogues. Against patriotism, the Lost Generation spilled out novels that took American society to task and ridiculed the institutions responsible for nurturing a world so hostile to the heroic individual. They also set themselves apart from the optimistic historical consciousness that had dominated the previous generation of progressive intellectuals. They developed their own historical consciousness, a Romantic Nihilism that they deemed appropriate for a historical context that the exigencies of the war had produced. And because of the war, the Lost Generation intellectuals repudiated any forms of thought that could not adequately explain the new world in which they lived. They rejected absolutism, not just in theory, but in action, pursuing a world of pure experience.

The war, as we have just noticed once again, was the watershed event for these writers, so much so that in 1955 Dos Passos reminded his readers in *The Theme is Freedom*, that “It’s hard to overestimate the revulsion wrought by the first world war in the minds of a generation that had grown up in the years of comparative freedom and comparative peace that opened the century.” They were not prepared for the war. They had been seduced by the “intoxication of the great conflagration.” They were naïve, demonstrated by the reality that they “came home with the horrors.” The Lost Generation did not adapt to the war. The war had dragged these intellectuals and every other member of society down to the lowest common denominator, in which the individual’s significance had been reduced to whether he could scrap out a few more yards of dirt in no man’s land for mother and country. The war devalued life and it caught these quixotic dreamers off guard.
But again we can safely say that the Lost Generation intellectuals were different from other members of society. They figured out that they had been duped and the war became the perfect opportunity to exercise their anger. The war fomented revolt; it fostered in these writers a desire to fight and kick and scratch, to find some meaning that they could use to rebuild the crumbled individual. They responded in heroic rebellion against a war that was a “waste of time, waste of money, waste of lives, waste of youth.” Full of righteous indignation, the Lost Generation writers knew that “We had to blame somebody.” That somebody was society, the government, college professors, clergy, businessmen, reformers, philosophers, and anybody who did not share their ironic vision of the postwar world.

The heroism of revolt was a vital characteristic of the Lost Generation’s interaction with the world during the nineteen twenties, but it did not offer a complete picture of these intellectuals. By depicting the Lost Generation solely by its reactionary impulses, we focus too much on the purely negative side of the romantic heroic self. A fuller understanding is necessary because these writers also embodied a romantic interpretation that saw the world as a dynamic opportunity by which they could create a new sense of heroic self that was defined by the individual’s immediate, pure experience of the world.

William James’s epistemology inspired this positive romantic interpretation of the world. Just as Dos Passos and his friends had interpreted Freud for their own purposes,

549 Dos Passos, *The Theme is Freedom*, 34.

550 Dos Passos, *The Theme is Freedom*, 35.
for their own historical context, they interpreted William James’s radical empiricism out of the need to create a complete, vibrant sense of the heroic self.

In a very tangible sense Dos Passos never wavered from this experientially based interpretation of James, demonstrated by an interview he gave in 1969, the year before he died. David Sanders, a Dos Passos scholar, who, over twenty years ago, published the standard bibliography of Dos Passos’s writings, conducted the interview. This is an important fact, because Sanders knew what sort of questions to ask the aging writer, and right out of the gates he asked about the centrality of worldly experience in Dos Passos’s life and writings. A second important fact is that Dos Passos gave the interview on his farm at Spence’s Point, on the Northern Neck of Virginia, where his parents had lived and where he spent his youth when he was not away at school. This is significant because Sanders asked Dos Passos how the “polarity” of life – one might say, the dialectical tension of life – affected him. Looking back on his illustrious career and provocative ideas, Dos Passos answered generally that “of course anything that happens to you has some bearing on what you write.” Speaking specifically of the differences between life on a farm and the life of world experience, Dos Passos remained adamant that he still had a “good deal of unfinished traveling.”

At the end of his life, it was still about experiencing the world.

Coupled with experience, of course, was Dos Passos’s continued emphasis on the individual. “There is a type of mind that does tend to say,” Dos Passos explained, “that the minority is always right.” He referred to his position that he developed in Three Soldiers, the notion of the individual’s effort to “retain some dignity and to make a decent
life” in the world. He still had “great sympathy” for the “nineteenth-century humanism” of the Russian writers Dostoevsky and Turgenev, who placed the individual at the center of their literature. Dos Passos believed that the world had lost its celebration of the individual. But even at the height of the Cold War in 1969, he maintained that it was still what both Americans and Russians wanted.

The interview revealed that experience and the individual were still central themes in Dos Passos’s consciousness. What Dos Passos’s entire life revealed was that his quest for the heroic self culminated in the celebration of the individual as both a hero of revolt and the exemplar of the flourishing life.

551 John Dos Passos, “Interview,” 74.

552 John Dos Passos, “Interview,” 84.


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