

Pospíšil, Tomáš

Mexico

In: Pospíšil, Tomáš. *The progressive era in American historical fiction: John Dos Passos' The 42nd parallel and E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime*. 1. vyd. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1998, pp. 54-68

ISBN 8021017481

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/122897>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Mexico

As I have already pointed out, there are a number of connections between The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime. Similar – sometimes even “identical” – characters move in the same cities during the same historical period, both authors share leftist political sympathies. The thematic closeness of both novels goes even as far as to share a very improbable motif: the journey of a male character to Mexico.

Both characters are disenchanted with American society. They are repelled by the way it treats the underprivileged. They have tried to fight the system, but after their failure to change anything, they come to regard any more actions at home as meaningless. That is why they turn to Mexico, where the ongoing revolution is still giving them some hope for a better world. In both cases, however, the desire to help build a better society, is not the only motive of their journey across the Rio Grande. Ultimately, the endings of both novels show that both characters have found what they had been consciously and, even more importantly, subconsciously longing for.

Both the drifting radical Mac from Dos Passos' novel and the Younger Brother from Ragtime are in their own ways lonely, isolated from the people around them. Though Mac enjoys other people's company, he is somewhat isolated by his restless nature which does not allow him to build and maintain durable relationships and allegiances. Compared to Mac, Mother's Younger Brother (of the New Rochelle family) is more withdrawn from other people. He suffers from grave inner problems. He “was thought to be having difficulty finding himself.” (R 4) But there is a difference in how both young men dealt with their frustrations. Whenever Mac found himself under pressure, he hit the road again. The Younger Brother exorcised his inner demons by seeking refuge in his work. It is no accident that he became most creative when designing explosives.

Radical with a Different Cause: Mac

From the point of view of my comparison, the former of the two, Mac, is a very useful character. While the last pieces of his narrative invite a comparison with

the Younger Brother, the initial stages of his career bear some resemblance with other Ragtime figures, Tateh and his family. Fainy McCreary, alias Mac, is born in poor immigrant quarters in Middleton, Connecticut, which look very much the same as those in Tateh's Lower East Side. The utter poverty, inadequate housing conditions and loads of work deprive both families of their mothers, and the remaining family members move out. In accordance with the demographic trend of the day, Fainy's uncle Tim takes them to the "the great and growing city of Chicago." (FP 34) In Chicago Fainy learns from his uncle the trade of a printer. However, when his uncle's radical political activities bring about the closing down of the small family business, Fainy must earn his living somewhere else. He answers an advertisement and is employed by a certain Doc Bingham, a typical literary figure of a western confidence man, whose lofty rhetoric, fluid attitudes and cheap tricks remind us most of all of the famous rascals of Mark Twain's: the Duke and the King. Like the two entertaining frauds from Huckleberry Finn, who end up tarred and feathered, Doc Bingham's appearance in The 42nd Parallel takes a similarly undignified end.¹ A jealous husband drives him out with a gun, from the bedroom of his wife who Bingham was on the point of seducing. With the swift disappearance of the half-naked, scared and humiliated con-man Fainy realizes that their "business trip" to the Mid-West is over. But he has no intention of returning to his family in Chicago. Instead, he decides "to see the world" and so he embarks on the long, picaresque journey of his life. As if to underline this, at the same moment the narrator abandons his original name. From now on, the vagrant leftie will be referred to as Mac.

Together with a friend, Mac gets to Winnipeg, works in Canada, takes a boat from Vancouver to Seattle. In Seattle the boys get tricked by a couple of girls and during a wild party lose all their money. Soon Mac loses his hobo friend as well. Finally, via Portland and Sacramento, Mac reaches his first in a long series of temporary homes, San Francisco. In "the City" he feels "as lonely as a ghost" (FP 105), but after a while finds a job and starts going out with a girl, Maisie, a shop assistant at San Francisco's Emporium. The Earthquake of 1906 brings them closer to one another, but before they can get married, Mac heeds the call of the Wobblies, with whose cause he greatly sympathizes, and departs for Goldfield, Nevada to help – in his job as a printer – the local miners in their strike (the descriptions of his involvement in the strike is another point where Mac's narrative corresponds to Doctorow's account of Tateh's story, i.e. Tateh's participation in the strike at Lawrence, Mass). A letter from Maisie, informing him that she is pregnant, however, interrupts Mac's political activity, and he rejoins her in San Francisco. Soon they get married and depart to start a new life in San Diego. "Life in San Diego was sunny and quiet" (FP 131), yet Mac remained dissatisfied. The move of the family to Los Angeles could be seen as the last attempt to save an unhappy relationship, which was bound to fail right from the

beginning: after a bitter disagreement over money, Mac leaves the family and proceeds on in his lifelong southward journey. He uses some of his radical contacts to gain access to the Mexican “comrades in the big battle”, takes a train to El Paso and crosses the international bridge “into the dusty–bustling adobe streets of Juarez,” Mexico. (FP 142)

Mac’s restless nature makes him a unique character in the context of The 42nd Parallel. His journey west and later south even “spoils” the otherwise striking spatial correspondence between The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime since the activities of all other characters remain by and large confined to the East. As already indicated, Mac’s restlessness means also rootlessness, the lack of meaningful relationships, isolation. However, his isolation does not only result from his vagrant ways. He stands alone in his political sympathies, outside of the American mainstream.

Beside being isolated on personal and political levels, Mac is also isolated in the overall structure of the book where his narratives form a kind of anomaly. Whereas the narratives of the other figures are intertwined, with their stories overlapping to a great deal and their narrative segments frequently being juxtaposed (e.g. Janey, Eleanor and Moorehouse playing roles in each other’s narratives, whose segments appear in successive turns), Mac’s narratives do not participate in this overall pattern. The book opens with a series of as many as seven segments devoted to Mac. Moreover, Mac encounters the other main figures (Janey and Moorehouse) only briefly in Mexico, at a point in his life when he is slowly heading toward authorial oblivion. Donald Pizer gives a plausible explanation of this irregularity, noting that

Mac’s lack of contact with the other narrative figures represents the vestigial and almost anachronistic role of the American radical in the emerging push toward a capitalist hegemony during the first two decades of the new century. Mac is characteristic of a phase of prewar American life –(...)–but this radical tendency in turn-of-the century American life was always under intense pressure, and it came to an abrupt halt with the war.(..) It is thus both historically and thematically appropriate that we are initially immersed in Mac’s narrative (...) and that, except for a final glimpse of him in a last brief segment toward the end of the novel, we move on to other figures who represent the emerging new ethos of American life. (Pizer 117)

Before turning to the question of how Mexico functions in the context of the book, we should examine why Mac decides to go there. An answer to this is connected to the question of who Mac is and to what extent he is typical of the group(s) he represents. Pizer describes Mac’s character as the coming together of a variety of sources. Beside what we might call the American hobo tradition

he mentions, "the typical experience of the I.W.W. radical, and the conventions of the picaresque narrative." (Pizer 118) Mac's radical strand stands out as a particularly interesting one to follow.

Pizer's description of Mac as somebody whose personal career typifies the rise and fall of the radical movement is a fairly widespread one. Melvin Landsberg for instance characterizes him in the following manner: Mac is "an I.W.W. member, and a convinced revolutionary. He escapes from a distressing marriage to a woman with middle class ideals (Maisie), but lacks the dedication to remain in the revolutionary labor movement." (Landsberg 198) Iain Colley seems to suggest an interpretation running along the same lines. He describes the impact of Mac's marriage to Maisie as "sinking further in the quicksand of compromise." (Colley 69) These quotes imply that at least at the beginning of Mac's career – which, as we have said, supposedly goes hand in hand with the rise and fall of the radical movement at large – there was a stage when his participation in the movement was solid, untainted by any compromise. Only in the course of time – these interpretations seem to suggest – did Mac sell out and lose his revolutionary creed. This is a view I find difficult to share. It seems to me that despite his revolutionary rhetoric, which he inherited from his uncle, Mac's relation to the causes of radical workers was somewhat problematic right from the beginning. Furthermore, a major part in modifying the intensity of his revolutionary creed and his readiness to participate in the struggle to build a better world is played by women.

It might seem that Mac's radical sympathies are constantly undermined by his desire to drift, that the latter element of his character is somehow to blame for the loss of his convictions. Yet I will argue that both his desire to drift and his readiness (or reluctance) to participate in the fight stem from his falling (or functioning) relationship to women. One simply cannot take his revolutionary zeal quite seriously – at any point of the novel.

Take a look at "an early Mac" who, as Colley aptly put it, "in moment of hangover and spent resources gropes for the clarity to formulate his aspirations: I feel like hell...I wanta study an' work for things; you know what I mean, not to be a goddam slavedriver but to work for socialism and the revolution an' like that, not work an' go on a bat an' work an' go on a bat like those damn yaps on the railroad." (Colley 69) This formulation comes at a moment when Mac and his friend Ike got tricked out of their hard-earned savings by a pair of girls who the boys wanted to seduce. Obviously the girls got the better of the situation. It is the moment of hangover and spent resources after a failed seduction that functions as a catalyst for Mac's revolutionary statement.

Now consider the reason for his departure to Goldfield, the place of his greatest revolutionary engagement. Mac has a steady job in San Francisco, is engaged to Maisie, but their relationship is not ideal. When Mac was away from

her "he felt somehow sore at Maisie most of the time." (FP 108) Their interests are different, she has little understanding of his socialist views, and, this is a major point, does not please him sexually since Mac is bound to keep "whoring round" (FP 109), a practice which makes him "sick" afterwards. At a time when he keeps musing about Maisie's not being "a sport" (FP 109), he happens to meet the hard-boiled Wobbly figure of Fred Hoff. Hoff's urging that he is "just the kind o' stuff [the Wobblies] need out there," provides him with a convenient solution to the strains of his ambiguous relation to Maisie. He sets out to join the labor struggle. The circumstances of Mac's conversation with Hoff are also by now familiar. After a lecture by Upton Sinclair where Mac met Hoff,

they went and had a beer together. Fred Hoff belonged to the new revolutionary organization called The Industrial Workers of the World. He read Mac the preamble over a second glass of beer...

That night Mac went round to the local and filled out a card, and went home to his boarding house with his head swimming. I was just on the point of selling out to the sons of bitches, he said to himself. (FP 108)

The same pattern occurs again prior to his journey to Mexico. With Maisie's middle-class aspirations, their economic hardships and Mac's desire for change, the marriage is on the point of breaking up. While coming to terms with it, Mac meets Ben Evans, an old buddy from (what a surprise!) Goldfield – and they once again end up in a restaurant, this time just over coffee. "Everybody talked Mexico"... (FP 139) "The talk of revolution and foreign places made [Mac] feel happy and adventurous again." (FP 143) Soon afterwards, a conflict over money supplies the necessary excuse and Mac makes an abrupt end to his marital life. The road to Mexico opens, he is free to participate in the revolutionary struggle. Now, however, not even Mac himself has any doubts about the true nature of his southward trip. "I am free to see the coutry now, to work for the movement, to go on the bum again." (FP 142) Where the true accent of the above objectives lies can be illustrated by the following quote. When he meets Ricardo Perez, his contact in Juarez, Perez asks him: "What are you going to do in Mexico, fellowworker? Mac blushed. Oh, I want to kinda get into things, into the revolution." (FP 143)

Indeed, he has a point to blush as he "gets into things" immediately. Having suffered through one long revolutionary meeting which made him sleepy, Mac gets his reward. The Mexicans take their American colleague to a "house of a comrade" where they entertain him, feed him and serve him drinks "that (make) his head spin." (FP 145) Moreover, at the end of his first day in Mexico, he has his first Mexican girl, Encarnation. On the way to her room, his new friend Pablo pointed out some "tiny specks of fires" on the horizon (...) "and whispered,

Revolucion.” (FP 146) But revolution is no longer important, it gets locked out behind Encarnation’s door.

Then they said good night at the door of Encarnation’s little room that had a bed, a picture of the Virgin and a new photograph of Madero stuck up by a pin. Encarnation closed the door, bolted it and sat down on the bed looking up at Mac with a smile. (FP 147)

If Mac is a typical radical worker from the first decade of the century, the picture Dos Passos seems to paint of the movement by selecting him is a bleak one. After all, as I have been trying to demonstrate, Mac’s mind is full of leftist ideas and sympathies for the workers’ causes, but he gets actually involved only when moved by other motives, driven by sexual desires or by the contrary desire to get away from a woman, with his mind lubricated by alcohol. From a moralist’s point of view he is a drunkard, bum, an irresponsible womanizer, and an ultimate failure. Why is it that Dos Passos has picked somebody like Mac to represent a cause he had such strong sympathies for? Is it not far too mixed a message about the movement the author sends to the reader?

Dos Passos had a potential substitute for Mac in Fred Hoff, the fellow fighter from Goldfield. Yet, he refrained from making that choice. Fred Hoff does not share any of Mac’s weaknesses, in fact he has no weaknesses at all. He is a joyless fanatic, a one-dimensional revolutionary machine, a person with only one thing – the struggle of the working class – on his mind, somebody lacking even the most elementary qualities of human empathy and understanding. As Mac and Ben Evans, the friend who later sends Mac on the trip to Mexico, remark on one occasion in a Goldfield pub: “Fred’s a hell of a good guy, honest as the day an’ all that, but he won’t let a feller live.” However, they admit that “if the rest of us were more like Fred we’d get somewhere sooner. If we had enough boys like Fred Hoff we’d have a revolution, but we haven’t.” (FP 122)

It is Mac’s weaknesses that make him a failure. I also think that on a more general level this is a possible reason for the failure of the whole movement. Yet Mac’s weaknesses make him, from the humane point of view, a far superior character to the honest, tough revolutionary Hoff. With the price for the revolution being so high as to stop living, one has to ask whether the revolution is worth striving for in the first place. Mac answers the question in the negative and despite his flaws (or perhaps because of them) wins the author’s (and I also believe the reader’s) affection.

By choosing Mac as a typical representative of the working-class cause, Dos Passos managed to communicate some of the causes of the movement’s failure. At the same time he has called into question the notion of “homo politicus,” i.e.

a person whose motives for political action can be found only in the realm of politics. As the character of Mac suggests, it seems to be impossible to eliminate completely other motives, on the contrary, one can even be led by motives that may not be even apparent to the person or his surroundings. Furthermore, even if such a person – somebody like Fred Hoff taken at his face value – were possible, Dos Passos rejects his machine-like one-dimensionality.

If Dos Passos implicitly indicates his sympathies for Mac, and thus invites the reader to share them, he even more urgently communicates his indictment of the system that forces the working class to make a debilitating choice between resistance, which means giving up one's life, and compromise, which means living by somebody else's rules. Given the utter lack of options, Mac's departure for Mexico seems to be the best solution out of the bad ones at his disposal.

A Successful Revolutionary: Younger Brother

Whereas Mac from The 42nd Parallel was involved in the class struggle, Younger Brother from Ragtime fought against racial injustice. The (significant) other motive bringing Mac to Mexico was a flight from his wife toward a pleasant, satisfying relation with at least two Mexican women and toward a private space he created for himself beyond the American border. Younger Brother, on the other hand, was running away from the haunting memory of a woman, not looking for any spaces. Amidst the turmoil of the Mexican revolution he finally found what he had been desiring: his own death.

Throughout the whole novel Younger Brother is obsessed with passion for one of the fictionalized "real life" figures, Evelyn Nesbit. The medialized beauty of the day, according to the narrator, "provided the inspiration for the concept of the movie star system and the model for every sex goddess from Theda Bara to Marilyn Monroe." (R 88) Younger Brother's desire for Nesbit comes to a short-lived fulfillment after her husband, the eccentric millionaire Harry K. Thaw, kills her lover, the well-known New York architect Stanford White. With her husband in prison pending trial and her lover dead, she accepts Younger Brother, as she "could not resist someone who was so strongly attracted to her." (R 87) But despite Younger Brother's readiness to satisfy every whim of hers, she never considers him an equal partner. She longs for somebody who would be "challenging" enough, i.e. somebody with the charisma, social status and experience of a Stanford White. What she needs is a strong male figure, not just an adoring, athletic lover. It does not take long and she abandons Younger Brother and leaves with a professional ragtime dancer. Younger Brother, "pale, and thin, and more uncommunicable than ever" (R 117), invests all

his frustrated energy into his work and designs firecrackers and fireworks for the firm of his brother-in-law.

Having tried work, an extravagant, bohemian lifestyle, and a great number of excentricities that would enable him to dispose of "enormous amounts of energy" and prevent him from "slipping into the vast distances of his unhappiness" (R 188) Younger Brother finally discovered a way out. He found an issue capable of channeling his excessive energy, a cause that would imbue his life with a new meaning: the struggle of the black piano player Coalhouse Walker, Jr. for justice.

Here is Younger Brother, contemplating Coalhouse's car, which comes to symbolize the grave racial injustice of society, as it gets further destroyed by elements and people.

There in no question then that Younger Brother was fortunate to conceive a loyalty to the colored man. Standing at the pond he heard the lapping of the water against the front fenders of the Model T. He noted that the hood was unlatched, and lifting and folding it back, saw the wires had been torn from the engine. The sun was now setting and it threw a reflection of blue sky on the dark water of the pond. There ran through him a small current of rage, perhaps one-hundredth, he knew, of what Coalhouse Walker must have felt, and it was salutary. (R 190)

Younger Brother then joins Coalhouse's gang and participates in its violent terrorist attacks on fire stations. His pyrotechnic skills prove to be invaluable for Coalhouse and his young followers. The attacks carried out with Younger Brother's bombs are devastating. The group's activities culminate in their seizing of the famous Morgan Library. This brings Coalhouse to the position of being able to regain his car in its original condition, as he had demanded, and in this way to achieve a largely symbolic satisfaction. Wisely enough, at the end of the incident, Coalhouse bargains his own life for those of his colleagues. While he is killed, the other gang members escape in his car. But Younger Brother's revolutionary career does not end with his escape from the Morgan center. He starts immediately looking for another cause and finds one in Mexico.

Thus the motive of Doctorow's Younger Brother for going South corresponds to that of Dos Passos' Mac. While their actual readiness to stand up for what they say, i.e. that they want to get involved in the revolution and possibly join Zapata's army may vary, the minds of both characters display the same surface of revolutionary attitudes. At the same time, both authors also hint at the presence of some other important motives, predominantly of a sexual nature, hidden underneath their rhetoric.

We can observe an interesting difference in relations between the sexual fulfillment of both characters on the one hand and their performance as revolutionar-

les on the other. In the figures of Encarnation and Concha, Mac finds an understanding, responsive and pleasing partners. He never joins Zapata and is lost for the cause of the revolution. Like Tateh, he is a further example of a basically nice person who "sells out" and is rewarded by a relative amount of happiness. Younger Brother, on the other hand, cannot be satisfied by a Mexican woman, in fact by any living woman, since what he is haunted by is just a memory, a chimera, a dream. So he succeeds in joining Zapata and becomes very useful, leading "guerilla raids on oil fields, smelters and federal garrisons." (R 320) As a revolutionary he is undoubtedly a success, which is further magnified by his heroic death.

Naturally, this argument is not supposed to present any general statements about historical reality. In other words, I do not believe that the driving force behind people's involvement in political or revolutionary struggle is their emotional and sexual frustration. Truly enough, one might certainly find a number of historical figures whose careers would support such a claim, on the other hand an equally representative selection of personalities would inevitably undermine it. Moreover, people's (and characters') motives for action are always more multifaceted. Therefore, reduction to a single possible motive as a universal key that would unlock all doors and explain everything about a person (or character) and his or her actions is hardly entirely satisfactory. Similarly I do not want to imply that this is what either Dos Passos or Doctorow think, for we are moving in the realm of the fictional and our access to the minds of the writers is rather limited. Hence, the only thing I would venture to express with some confidence is that within both texts such an interpretation yields more plausible results than other, more traditional readings and that both texts, in this particular respect, remarkably complement each other.

Mexico: The Space Outside

The motives (or their combination) driving both characters down to Mexico are certainly interesting, but I believe that there are more important threads to follow. Their departure South namely enables us to compare how the two respective spaces – U.S. and Mexico – are represented in both novels. For a variety of reasons, the situation in the U.S. does not provide much ground for a general satisfaction. Vast groups of the population are deprived of their rights. For the workers, ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, there is hardly any hope in sight as the ruling class keeps controlling both space and money, i.e. mutually conditioning entities that enable further maintaining and expanding of power in the society.

The United States, as represented in The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime, is a society embarked on a journey toward greater complexity, which however does not

automatically result in a wider array of options on the part of the disadvantaged sections of the population. On the contrary, channels of possible resistance are closing down, opportunities on the part of the disempowered to lead meaningful lives without giving up their allegiances and dignity are diminishing and their chances to be treated as equals are virtually nonexistent.

The rapid technological developments of the day have a number of consequences for the ongoing power struggle. They give the ruling class an even better command over space (thus making them less vulnerable), they bring about a more efficient production of goods (thus multiplying their profits), and furthermore help create a desirable, less resistant public opinion. Both books abound in examples. The accounts of strikes (Goldfield, Arizona in The 42nd Parallel) and in Lawrence, Massachusetts in Ragtime) show the space of both cities under effective control of the respective local militia. The passage in Ragtime depicting Ford's introduction of the assembly line production demonstrates the potential of the new technology for mass-production (which brings about a further standardization of tastes and lifestyles). The stories of numerous characters convey the message that public opinion in the United States is produced (Moorehouse, Tateh), taste is manipulated (Nesbit) and that oppositional voices are effectively silenced, either by suppression (Debs, Goldman) or by cooptation (Tateh).

Mexico, thanks to its relative backwardness and the political flux of the moment, functions in both novels as a viable alternative to the fixed, wrongly conceived reality of U.S. society. Whereas lives of the American population get further regimented by the routines of their industrial jobs, with surrogate dreams fed to them by the entertainment industry and with their political opinions cleverly mismanaged by a host of skilled manipulators, Mexico goes through the period of "explosive time," which, as defined by Gurvich (Harvey 225), is marked by "revolutionary ferment and collective creation, with the present and past dissolving into a transcendent future." While the American space functions as a valuable commodity in the speculations of real-estate brokers, a fact which makes land increasingly inaccessible for substantial sections of the population, in Mexico the peasants roam freely throughout the whole territory as members of Villa's or Zapata's "armies." The situation may be chaotic, the "revolutionary armies" may be cruel, ragged and crude. But they are also much freer than their American counterparts.²

Even the power of money, so all-pervading the United States reality, is diminished in Mexico. Naturally money talks even here, but on a completely different level. It functions as an inevitable tool in the hands of little local wheeler-dealers and ambitious rascals of all kinds, enabling them to bribe corrupt state representatives and thus to improve their position in the society and possibly their business prospects (Mac's Mexican friend Fernando), yet it does not achieve the kind of unlimited power that raises those commanding it above ordi-

nary humanity to an almost godlike position "beyond the world's value system" (Doctorow's Morgan). (R 147)

In other words, unlike in the U.S., there is no solid, smoothly functioning power structure, no subtle system of coercion by cooptation and persuasion, which resorts to other, more violent, methods of control only when seriously challenged. In Mexico, conflicts are resolved at the outset by fire power. As one leader after another gets ousted, having been killed or forced to flee the country, nobody even knows who will finally emerge as the country's permanent ruler. Neither was it very clear at the time to what extent American economic and geopolitical interests would be respected. The Carranza government, for instance, which was trying to run the country when Mac and Younger Brother arrived in Mexico, was known for its reluctance to yield to the pressures coming from the U.S. business circles and from the U.S. government. Thus, the disenchanting representatives of the American left, whose hopes for any positive change at home finally collapsed with the rise of American nationalism prior to the U.S. entry into World War I, viewed the fluid, open-ended Mexican situation with some expectations. After all it represented the last hope they could embrace.

Both authors give vivid accounts of the chaotic nature of the times. Here is the description of Mac's journey from Juarez to Mexico City:

The train took five days. Five times it was held up while section hands repaired the track ahead. Occasionally at night bullets came through the windows. Near Caballos a bunch of men on horses rode the whole length of the train waving their big hats and firing as they went. The soldiers in the caboose woke up and returned the fire and the men rode off in a driving dust-cloud. (FP 314)

Now compare with the following passage from Ragtime:

When Villa did his march south to Torreón, two hundred miles along the destroyed tracks of the central railroad, Younger Brother was in the throng. (...)

After the victory at Torreón, Younger Brother wore the cartridge belts crisscrossed over his chest. He was a villista but dreamed of going on and finding Zapata. The army rode on tops of railroad freight cars. With the troops went their families. They lived on the top of the trains with guns and bedding and baskets with their food. They were camp followers and babies at the breast. They rode through the desert with the cinders and smoke of the engine coming back to sting their eyes and burn their throats. They put up umbrellas against the sun. (R 318)

These extracts may sound similar enough but the role of Mexico in both novels is nevertheless different. Younger Brother's journey to Mexico is a necessary step in his acquired career of a revolutionary. The violent conflagration there provides him with an appropriate setting for the annihilation he desires. Otherwise, however, Doctorow's interest in Mexico is marginal. He highlights the chaos, the crudeness and the fluidity of the situation, yet the interpretation of the Mexican space as a meaningful alternative remains largely implicit, due to his critical treatment of the American space and society. Dos Passos, on the other hand, describes the Mexican reality in much greater detail, and does present Mexico – quite explicitly – as a meaningful option. It is a country where Mac can, for the first time in his life, achieve economic security. Naturally, Mac's running of his own bookstore makes him vulnerable to the same charge that might be made against Tateh: that he has switched sides in the great struggle for social justice. However, unlike Tateh, who becomes a successful film-maker, and thus a skilled manager of the public opinion, Mac only withdraws into the personal sphere (even outside the U.S.A.!) and becomes a passive observer. Moreover, as I have tried to argue earlier, Mac's revolutionary convictions are – right from the beginning – far from convincing. The careers of both Mac and Tateh, along with their happy endings, however, show that one can achieve happiness only by compromise with the system or by its evasion. Otherwise the U.S. society "will not let [one] breathe." (R 137)

Despite all the political instability of the moment, Mac also finds personal safety in Mexico. Things may appear dangerous from time to time, as when Zapata's army is expected in Mexico City, Mac panics and wants to leave the country (and thus is ready to abandon his Mexican lover Concha), but in the end he changes his mind, stays and is rewarded by a peaceful, harmonious breakfast of "chocolate and pastry" (FP 333) with Concha and her sister.

There is yet another "Mexican dimension" that Doctorow ignores and Dos Passos stresses with great vigor: the great potential of sensual pleasures a person like Mac can enjoy there. The freshness of the morning wind in Mexico City, the "sweet smell of flowers and roasting coffee" (FP 328), the Mexican food he gradually begins to like, "turkey with thick chocolate brown sauce and enchiladas with cheese" (FP 318), the cognac, beer, or tequila, accompanying Mac's leisurely conversations with his friends.

The wealth of pleasant sensations an American male immigrant to Mexico could enjoy would not be complete without an appropriate account of Mexican women, who in Dos Passos depiction, look and act like some fairy tale-like figures from a macho paradise. The Mexican women in The 42 Parallel, as exemplified by the character of Concha (and partly Encarnacion), are thrifty, caring, tolerant, sociable, devoted, desirable and easy to have. Having found somebody like Concha, it would be foolish for Mac, even if he still wanted, to join Zapata's

rebels. In fact, it would be foolish to move anywhere. However, it seems to me, that even these stereotypical and almost mythical qualities Dos Passos ascribes, in a rather patriarchal manner, to the Southern women can be interpreted as a comment on class and gender in America. It would be possible to ask, for instance, what kind of partner could somebody like Mac win at home in the United States? Independent, intelligent, self-made women like Eleanor Stoddard are beyond his reach as much as is somebody like Moorehouse's wife Gertrude, a daughter from a rich family. Even Janey, the simpleton on the rise in Washington, would not give him serious consideration. So Mac is bound to end up with Maisie, a working-class girl. And such girls are not as a rule conditioned by their society to be imaginative, informed or intellectually challenging. Neither do they necessarily relish in their own sexuality. Their major desires can be located on the material front as they want to make it to the middle class. These diverging desires (for sensual pleasures on Mac's part and for an advance in class on Maisie's part) are accountable for the failure of their marriage.

The last we see of Mac is when he has breakfast with Concha and her sister. He is enjoying the meal, he is enjoying their company. Probably nothing important will happen to him in the years to come. In relative happiness he is fading away, an unimportant relic of the past.

His happiness is not untainted. In order to achieve it, he had to abandon his former wife and leave her with two small children. He had to stop fighting the system. His new partner is clearly subordinate, a kind of a pleasing toy in his hands. Moreover, in order to find an inhabitable space, he had to leave his own country. But still, his private space "outside" seems more acceptable, than what is in store for most of the other characters of The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have closely examined one of the common traits of The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime, the motif of a flight of a male character to Mexico. Both characters, the ex-Wobbly Mac from The 42nd Parallel and Younger Brother from Ragtime leave for Mexico, claiming they want to get involved in the Mexican revolution and possibly join Emiliano Zapata's army. Since both Mac and Younger Brother have a record as fighters against injustices of the American system – Mac gets involved in labor struggle while Younger Brother joins a radical African-American group fighting against racial injustice – it would appear that it is the unbearable political and economic situation in their society that makes them leave their country. Nevertheless a close reading of the novels reveals other perhaps even more significant motives for their southward journey. Both char-

acters want to escape their inner frustrations caused by their current or lost relationships with representatives of opposite gender.

I put forward the argument that one can interpret Mac's character as a much less convinced revolutionary than he has generally been held to be. His readiness to participate in the class struggle is always fuelled by problems in his relationships with women. Likewise, Doctorow conceives the character of Younger Brother in a similar way. Only after the break-up of Younger Brother's relationship with Evelyn Nesbit, does Younger Brother get involved in the violent struggle of the black piano player Coalhouse Walker, Jr. against the white establishment. Younger Brother's participation in the fight functions in fact as a surrogate issue enabling him to relieve of his frustrations and channel his excessive energies.

The above argument is further underlined by the characters' respective success as revolutionaries. Whereas Mac, upon establishing a satisfying relationship with a Mexican woman, immediately abandons his revolutionary aims and becomes a kind of outsider, observing the chaotic upheavals around him, Younger Brother, who cannot be satisfied by an ordinary woman, since what he desires is an inaccessible image from the land of medialized makebelieve, gets involved in combat and finally manages to become a Zapatista. Being emotionally frustrated, his career as a revolutionary is breathtaking, leading to its logical conclusion of a heroic death.

In the final part of this chapter I have focused on how the Mexican space is presented in both novels. Mexico, backward and fluid as it is, functions in both texts as a viable alternative to the fixed, regimented reality of the U.S. society. In Doctorow's Ragtime this is largely implicit and his interest in dealing with the Mexican space is not so intense since his primary concern remains the situation in the United States. Mexico functions as the site of Younger Brother's annihilation, an appropriate setting for the death he desires. For Dos Passos' Mac, on the other hand, Mexico becomes a meaningful option. Although (or since) the political situation is unstable, Mac manages to find a modus vivendi, a stable relationship and relative happiness. Mexico, like many other countries in the world in the course this century, offers to an American expatriate more freedom, a wealth of pleasant sensations and a more dignified way of life.

Notes

1. Despite his infamous disappearance from the narrative, Doc Bingham makes a triumphant return some eight hundred pages later, toward the end of The Big Money. Some critics have regarded Bingham's return as an expression of the ultimate failure of the American system, the symbolic closing of a circle of

this generally unhappy narrative: in the course of the trilogy the petty trickster rises to a successful proprietor of a great patent–medicine firm.

2. This statement, of course, is somewhat double–edged. Chaos does not only mean the loosening of political and social ties, which brings about the weakening of power on the part of the ruling sections of the society and in turn more liberty to the traditionally underprivileged groups. Chaos may also well limit citizen’s personal freedom in many other respects. Nevertheless the degree of hopelessness of the U.S. society, as depicted by both authors, allows me – despite the term’s ambiguity – to interpret the Mexican chaos as something liberating and hope–giving.