

# John Dos Passos

*Edited by*  
Barry Maine

The Critical Heritage



# **JOHN DOS PASSOS: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE**

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# JOHN DOS PASSOS

## THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

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**BARRY MAINE**



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## General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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## Introduction

John Dos Passos wrote more than forty books during his lifetime, including poetry, plays, travel books, political tracts, histories, and biographies. He is better known, though, for his novels, and best of all for the documentary-style fiction he wrote during the twenties and thirties. I have limited the documentation of his critical reception to the novels he is best known for, and to those others which are representative of a period in his career or of a change in political or stylistic direction. Though it is certainly true that no American writer has been more subjected to political judgment than Dos Passos has, the history of the critical response shows that what made him the most promising American writer of the thirties and a much less respected writer later on had as much to do with his art as with his politics, if indeed the two can be separated. As Joseph Epstein observed, in a retrospective on Dos Passos's career:

What is crucial to the judgment of political novels is not only the extent to which a novelist's politics are intrinsic to his work, but the extent to which in his work he is incapable of transcending them—for to that extent, if one does not share these politics, one is scarcely likely to bear to read the work.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, as the record shows, reviewers are often equally incapable of transcending *their* politics; thus the critical reception of a political writer such as Dos Passos is likely to become a complex affair. We delude ourselves, moreover, if we believe that we exist outside a historical process that plays a role in determining which literary texts we will include in the canon. A critical reception never stops developing, and neither does historical consciousness ever fully reveal itself in openly stated principles or propositions. It reveals itself more in the kinds of questions about literature that readers and critics ask than in the answers they give, and it exists, to borrow a term from Hans Robert Jauss, as a 'horizon of expectation', beyond which the reading public by and large is unable to see and unwilling to go.<sup>2</sup> 'A literary work', Jauss reminds us, 'is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period.... The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience.'<sup>3</sup> In other words, the reading and interpretation of a literary work over time is its literary history just as surely as its genesis is.

It is often the case that contemporary reviews do not reveal what eventually become the most important critical issues. This is most often the case when an author's reputation

comes into its own rather late, perhaps because of some gap between the sensibility of the writer and that of the reading public (its 'horizon of expectation') during his lifetime or during his most productive period. (In American literature, Herman Melville and William Faulkner come immediately to mind, among others.) Dos Passos's critical reputation, on the other hand, was never so great as it was during his most productive period; and one problem critics of Dos Passos did not have was learning how to read him. This does not mean they all read him correctly, only that they could read him well enough to appreciate the best (and worst) in his work. With the exception of the Joycean Camera Eye sections in *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos's work did not challenge the patience or understanding of readers the way Joyce did, or Pound, or Faulkner, for whom the contemporary response was often bewilderment if not irritation and outright dismissal. It is true that some reviewers, especially British reviewers less well-disposed toward experiments in narrative form, were perplexed or even put off by the narrative fragmentation in Dos Passos's early work, that some critics objected to its sordid subject matter, and that a good many reviewers reacted violently against its satire of American institutions. Nevertheless, and partly as a result of such strong reactions, Dos Passos's impact upon the literary scene was as sudden as it was dramatic. His work was reviewed in all the major literary periodicals in America and abroad by some of the best critics of his day: Edmund Wilson and D.H. Lawrence in the twenties; Malcolm Cowley, Lionel Trilling, Bernard De Voto, V.S. Pritchett, and Jean-Paul Sartre in the thirties; Granville Hicks and Alfred Kazin in the forties. Add to this the decline in interest in Dos Passos since the forties relative to Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, and the result is a contemporary response which offers some of the best criticism written about him.

One aspect of Dos Passos's work that the contemporary reaction does not show is his development as a writer in response to it. He did not change his writing habits or adjust his style to suit his critics. Few good writers do, and fewer still admit to it. Like many artists of his generation Dos Passos instinctively mistrusted the literary establishment for its conservatism. ('Don't believe *The New York Times*,' he warned a friend about the war he was soon to see for himself.<sup>4</sup>) Later, a conservative himself, he mistrusted its liberalism. In either case, he was less likely to respond to critics than to the advice of friends such as Hemingway, who warned him against creating 'perfect' characters, and 'telling' rather than 'showing' what he wished to get across to the reader, or Edmund Wilson, who may have been Dos Passos's best critic.<sup>5</sup> He does appear to have responded favourably to such advice up to a point, but most of the time he went his own way, alienating many friends and critics who had praised his early work, even to the point where, during the early 1950s, he felt as if he were 'writing from the bottom of a well'.<sup>6</sup>

In France in 1938 Jean-Paul Sartre regarded Dos Passos as 'the greatest writer of our time' (No. 42) and he was not alone in thinking so. That Dos Passos was rated higher than Faulkner by their contemporaries but not by us reveals less about either writer than it does about changing criteria for great literature. Sartre preferred Dos Passos to Faulkner because he believed the latter's characters lived unnaturally in the past, as if looking out of the rear window of a moving car, and thus the premise behind his work was a 'false metaphysic'.<sup>7</sup> Dos Passos's characters in *U.S.A.*, on the other hand, were always looking ahead, even as they showed us a capitalist society in which men and women did not have

lives, but 'only destinies'. In other words, Sartre placed a high premium on social realism. In America, readers and critics alike during the Great Depression looked for someone to explain the relationship between the present and the past, to explain what had gone wrong. Faulkner, the more confirmed modernist, proved to be of little help in this regard because he showed in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *Absalom, Absalom!* that all order, historical sequence and causality included, is arbitrary and subjective. While it may seem at first that Dos Passos is saying the same thing in the fragmented narrative of *U.S.A.*, this is clearly not so. He expected his readers to read between the lines and to make the connections between past and present and between individual and society which the characters themselves are unable to make. They are unable to make such connections because Dos Passos believed participation in a historical process to be, for most people, largely unconscious. That does not mean that a historical process is not at work or cannot be identified. Marxist criticism of the sort that judged a novel by its revolutionary content was much more in the mainstream during the thirties than it is now, and the Marxist critics who saw no value in literature as literature, but only as a tool for revolution, rejected Faulkner out of hand and embraced Dos Passos. When it became clear later on that his commitment to a specifically Marxist view of history had never been what the leftist critics had hoped for, they rejected him as well. Even so, Dos Passos answered the call for social realism in the thirties and answered it better than anyone else.

Dos Passos's conservative politics in his later novels is much more in the mainstream today than it was when he wrote them. Does that mean we will see renewed interest in them in the years ahead? Though not out of the question, it seems unlikely, for as the contemporary response indicates, Dos Passos perfected his art in *U.S.A.*, and defended his politics at the expense of his art in the novels thereafter, and to students of literature that may always seem a waste of talent.

### THE 1920s

Dos Passos's first novel, *One Man's Initiation—1917*, a thinly disguised autobiography of his disillusioning war experiences, was written from diaries he kept as a volunteer overseas in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, the Red Cross, and eventually, the American Army. It was published in London by Allen & Unwin in the fall of 1920. Dos Passos was forced to help pay for its publication and to tone down some of the language which the printers (who in England were held liable) found offensive. The novel sold only sixty-three copies in six months.<sup>8</sup> The London critics ignored it completely. *Three Soldiers*, his next novel, was refused by fourteen publishing houses before George H. Doran in New York agreed to risk it.<sup>9</sup> Most Americans were ready to put the Great War in Europe behind them, so publishers were understandably reluctant to take a chance on a war novel. The language used by Dos Passos's soldiers presented another obstacle. Doran's acceptance of the manuscript was conditional upon Dos Passos's deleting sacrilegious and obscene words, despite his defence of these in the name of realism. He made the changes reluctantly.<sup>10</sup> Dos Passos left New York deliberately—with E.E. Cummings back across the Atlantic—when the date of publication approached. He was to repeat this pattern throughout most of his life, perhaps not so much to avoid the critics (for he did read



them) as to put each book behind him and go on to something new. Hence his novels were often followed by travel books, as *Three Soldiers* was followed by *Rosinante to the Road Again*, a collection of impressionist essays about Spain.

No one could have anticipated the storm of controversy *Three Soldiers* raised over the American military, and Dos Passos could not have been more delighted.<sup>11</sup> Not since Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* had an American novel stirred such heated debate. Whereas Dos Passos's first novel had yet to be reviewed at all, *Three Soldiers* was written up in all the major newspapers and literary journals in America, and most noticeably on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*—twice. Dos Passos, like Fitzgerald before him and Hemingway soon after, became famous overnight. Coningsby Dawson (No. 2), who had served in the Canadian forces, got the debate off to a rollicking start by proclaiming that Dos Passos's depiction of the American enlisted man's service in the army overseas was either 'a base libel or a hideous truth'. One reviewer after another—and some soldiers too—took a turn at saying which it was. Dawson condemned the book for its 'calculated sordidness' and 'blind whirlwind of rage which respects neither the reticences of art nor the restraints of decency'. He claimed Dos Passos must have exaggerated the misuse of military discipline and the disaffection, complaints, petty recriminations, and demoralized spirit of the American infantryman. 'If the picture is false', he concluded, 'the crime of presenting it is unpardonable', and he called upon American veterans to verify or denounce it. He got his wish two weeks later in the same forum in Harold Norman Denny's 'One Soldier on *Three Soldiers*'. Denny characterized Dos Passos's assertion that American soldiers were idealists crushed by the machinery of war as 'tommyrot'.<sup>12</sup> Other soldiers concurred. One veteran (No. 5), writing for *Foreign Service*, the official organ for American veterans of foreign wars, angrily denounced Dos Passos as a liar, while another (No. 7), writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, attacked the book as Communist propaganda and an 'affront to every just and decent principle upon which society is founded and organized business and government maintained'. The more liberal literary journals, on the other hand, heaped praise on the book. James Sibley Watson, under the pseudonym of W.C. Blum, lauded the novel in the *Dial*, as did Henry Seidel Canby (No. 3) in the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*.<sup>13</sup> John Peale Bishop (No. 1) hailed Dos Passos as a 'genius' for capturing 'the very stuff and breath' of the American Army overseas. He also praised his ability to move so many minor characters on and off the stage. Francis Hackett (No. 4) was similarly impressed by the collectivist approach in the novel and by Dos Passos's ability to substitute character and description for direct authorial statements about the war. Heywood Brown writing for *Bookman* (New York) flatly declared, 'Nothing which has come out of the school of American realists has seemed to us so entirely honest.... It represents deep convictions and impressions eloquently expressed.'<sup>14</sup> Impressionism or realism? There was no resolving the issue, for the novel elicited condemnation or praise depending upon one's experience in the war (a young war veteran's copy carried the inscription, 'This is the truest damn book ever written'<sup>15</sup>) or one's politics back home. Dos Passos's 'impression' was no doubt an honest one; but this was not the last time the representative quality of his experience was questioned by critics who did not share his political views whether they were liberal (in this case) or conservative (later on). H.L. Mencken (No. 6) contended—in excess of probable

impact—that *Three Soldiers* had ‘changed the whole tone of American opinion about the war’.

Hoping to capitalize on the success of *Three Soldiers*, the George H. Doran Company published an American edition of *One Man’s Initiation*—1917 the following year, a collection of Dos Passos’s travel essays (*Rosinante to the Road Again*), a volume of poetry (*A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922)) and his next novel, *Streets of Night* (1923). The reviewer for *Bookman* (No. 10) referred to *One Man’s Initiation* as ‘more a memoir than a novel’ and a ‘prelude’ to *Three Soldiers*. Lloyd Morris (No. 8) praised the immediacy of its descriptive passages, which he also found ‘poetic in feeling and conception’, although he maintained that Dos Passos’s response to experience was emotional and aesthetic rather than intellectual. This same romantic sensibility, he continued, rather than any clear understanding of the war’s causes, accounted for his anti-war sentiments. Constance Black (No. 11) praised his painter’s eye for detail (Dos Passos was, it so happens, an amateur painter) and his ear for American speech, especially slang. She predicted that he might one day write ‘the still unwritten great novel of modern America’. The critics were less kind to *Streets of Night*, an awkwardly self-conscious and in many ways immature novel about the sterility of Harvard aesthetes in comparison to the vigour and vitality of the working classes. Begun at Harvard before he had been overseas to see the war, *Streets of Night* is easily Dos Passos’s weakest novel. Nevertheless, the choice it offers between a physically active and passively intellectual life would become an important choice for many of Dos Passos’s later characters; we also find, as Robert Rosen has pointed out, Dos Passos clinging to the ‘notion of the virtuous and vital lower classes,’ a notion which ‘lies somewhere behind the radicalism of *U.S.A.*’<sup>16</sup>

*Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos’s next novel, was published by Harper & Brothers in November 1925. Dos Passos fought another battle over language and was forced to cut what Harpers considered blasphemous. Despite the cuts, Paul Elmer More, speaking for the genteel tradition, referred to the book as ‘an explosion in a cesspool’ (No. 16) and other reviewers as well objected to the sordidness of the setting and characters. Henry Longan Stuart (No. 12) believed Dos Passos had focused too much attention on the unpleasant, but the real flaw, he pointed out, was that he had ignored the extent to which the human mind can shut out what is ‘bewildering’ or ‘disheartening’. In other words, life was not so bad or so desperately unhappy or even so chaotic for most New Yorkers as Dos Passos made it out to be. (The tendency to judge what might very likely have been intended as satire by standards of social history is not uncommon in reviews of Dos Passos’s work.) But the novel found its champions too, and mostly among other writers. D.H. Lawrence (No. 15) admired the dizzying pace and overwhelming diversity Dos Passos had captured in ‘a breathless confusion of isolated moments’. Allen Tate praised his ‘swift, vigorous, dynamic’ prose style.<sup>17</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote Max Perkins to say the novel was ‘astonishingly good’,<sup>18</sup> Sinclair Lewis (No. 13) went even further, predicting that *Manhattan Transfer* might inaugurate ‘a whole new school of novel writing’. He noted the influence of the cinema in the speed and editing of the narrative. He claimed *Manhattan Transfer* was more important than anything written by Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust, or James Joyce because Dos Passos had placed their ‘experimental psychology and style’ in the service of a good (and readable!) story. This comparison may only reveal Lewis’s

limitations as a writer and reader, though it is certainly true that Dos Passos seems to have been influenced by Joyce. New York City is as much the subject as it is the setting of *Manhattan Transfer*, much like Dublin was in Joyce's *Dubliners*, and Dos Passos, like most serious writers of the twenties, had also read *Ulysses*. He may have borrowed some of his expressionistic devices from Joyce, though they more likely reflect his keen interest in experiments with technique in painting, sculpture, literature, and film.<sup>19</sup> Lewis completed his encomium by concluding that Dos Passos had captured the 'beauty and stir of life' in New York City better than Whitman, Howells, Wharton, or James before him. If this is true, it may be so only because Whitman alone had taken a collectivist approach to the city and included the full range of social classes in his portrayal of it, and because *Manhattan Transfer* was the only truly 'modern' novel about twentieth-century New York. Mike Gold, writing for the *New Masses*, the radical Left's mouthpiece in America, praised the experimental (and hence anti-traditional) style of the novel, and also compared Dos Passos to Whitman for managing to get all of New York's diverse peoples, nationalities, and occupations into his 'poem'. Dos Passos had captured *what* happens in New York City better than anyone before him, Gold concluded, but he had not explained *why* it happens. The 'hero' of *Manhattan Transfer* (Jimmy Herf) is, Gold contended, a 'baffled young middle-class idealist' who wants to escape from the evils of American commercialism but doesn't know how, because Dos Passos himself doesn't. Gold urged Dos Passos to throw his lot in with the radical branch of the labour movement to escape his bewilderment. This was an appeal made regularly to Dos Passos by the radical Left during the twenties and thirties. Dos Passos, however, was an observer, not a joiner; in an early letter to a friend written during his wartime service overseas he wrote, 'Organization is Death.'<sup>20</sup> In the *New Masses* he responded to Mike Gold's assertion that he was only a 'bourgeois intellectual' by arguing for intellectual independence and autonomy rather than thinking as the party line thinks. 'Intellectuals of the World unite: you have nothing to lose but your brains!' he is reported to have proclaimed at a dinner party.<sup>21</sup>

Even so, Dos Passos's political activity increased during the late twenties and early thirties. He wrote up for the *New Masses* an eyewitness account of a textile strike in Passaic, New Jersey during the spring of 1926.<sup>22</sup> He expressed his discomfort and embarrassment in that piece over being a privileged outsider, a middle-class spectator. Nevertheless, his association with the *New Masses* deepened his commitment to radical politics and strengthening the political side of his writing. If one could point to a single event that galvanized his disillusionment over the prospects of legal and economic justice in a capitalist society, it would be the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts. He covered the trial for the *New Masses* and immediately felt a kinship with these two soft-spoken men of deep convictions who he believed were charged with murder only because they were immigrants and anarchists (and, therefore, undesirables). In *Facing the Chair*, a pamphlet he wrote for the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, he wrote that if such men were executed, 'what little faith many millions of men have in the chance of Justice in this country will die with them'.<sup>23</sup> The division of America into the 'two nations' of U.S.A. began here, even though the division he drew between the empowered and unempowered 'classes' was more rhetorical than factual. Dos Passos himself did not know how to bring the exploited and their exploiters together into one

nation, but he did yearn to reject his class background (Choate, Harvard) and assert his immigrant heritage. He had begun work on 'a very long and difficult novel', *U.S.A.*, that would show America what had gone wrong with her experiment in democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Before completing the first volume of that trilogy in 1930, he became involved in an experimental theatre group committed to revolutionary drama for the masses, and for which he wrote several plays himself. He continued to travel widely, including a trip to Russia (which he found full of contradictions), and he continued to write incendiary pieces for the *New Masses*. Concerning his attitude toward capitalism, Dos Passos was accused on several occasions by several critics of 'damning the sufferers along with the disease'. It is important to note, however, as Lionel Trilling (No. 40) has, that Dos Passos saw the sufferers as bearers of the disease. The fault with capitalism lay in the opportunities it afforded individuals to exploit others. Human nature was to blame, and the closer he got to the radical Left during the early thirties the more disaffected he became with it, because it brought him closer to the realization that human nature was the cause of society's ills, not its economic system or form of government. Yet believing in the importance of free choice, he defended individualism from beginning to end against all forms of bureaucracy, from the military in *Three Soldiers* to big labour unions in *Midcentury*. What most concerned him was the individual's role in shaping his society, a role which could be superseded by society's power to shape him. For that reason all his novels have a rhetorical dimension aimed at educating the reader about the forces in society that shape him, and inciting him to resistance and action in his own and in his society's behalf. The role that the individual plays in history was to become the central focus of *U.S.A.*

### THE 1930s

*The 42nd Parallel* was published in February 1930. Dos Passos fought another battle with Harper & Brothers over such words as 'crissake' and 'sons of bitches'. He insisted these words were essential to the authenticity of his characters' speech, and he was popular enough now to get what he wanted. A British edition came out later that year. The publisher, Constable, had wanted to delete the Newsreel sections (a montage of newspaper headlines, news stories, and popular song lyrics for each year) and the Camera Eye (fragments of impressionistic autobiography) but Dos Passos had refused. (British critics were not so pleased with the experiments in narrative form, either. Allan Angoff had written off *Manhattan Transfer* in the *Times Literary Supplement* as no more than an impression of chaos.<sup>25</sup> The reviewer of *The 42nd Parallel* for the *London Spectator* (No. 22) observed that Dos Passos might be a good picaresque novelist if he abandoned experimental style and left biography and history to themselves.) Within a year the novel had been translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Czech, and Russian, indicating the great interest in Europe not only in American fiction but in radical politics and the experiments in narrative form that gave expression to it. The greatest foreign interest in Dos Passos's work was probably in Spain and Russia. In Spain he was admired for his leftist politics and his interest in Spanish culture (as in *Rosinante to the Road Again*); in Russia, he was regarded as the American novelist most likely to work towards a Communist revolution in the United States.

American reviewers were frustrated by the lack of cohesion in the novel and by the noticeable absence of closure. Upton Sinclair (No. 20) objected to the enigmatic impressionism of the *Camera Eye* and the slight connections between the characters in separate narrative sections. Though he acknowledged Dos Passos could 'write circles around' Theodore Dreiser, he could learn from Dreiser how to tell a story straight without all the jazzed-up special effects. Like many other reviewers, though, Sinclair believed Dos Passos had the potential to become the greatest of American novelists. Edmund Wilson (No. 19) called *The 42nd Parallel* a 'striking advance' over *Manhattan Transfer* because Dos Passos had captured 'the minds and lives of his middle-class characters' with astonishing realism, and made us see America through their eyes. He noted that Dos Passos was the first American writer 'to have succeeded in using colloquial American [speech] for a novel of the highest artistic seriousness'. He was particularly impressed by his ability to tell so much about a character so quickly entirely without authorial intrusion or commentary, though he noted that occasionally the characters became 'two-dimensional caricatures of qualities or forces which [Dos Passos] hates'. Yet Dos Passos seemed to be 'the only novelist of his generation who is concerned with the large questions of politics and society', and for that reason, the completed work 'may well turn out to be the most important novel which any American of Dos Passos's generation has written'. On the political Left, Granville Hicks (No. 23) wrote that 'Dos Passos catches, as no other author has done, the peculiar quality of life in our era—the new forces and their effects on men's thoughts and actions.' Like most critics on the Left, however, he believed at this point that Dos Passos's promise was greater than his achievement and awaited the commitment to revolution that they looked and hoped for.

*1919*, the second volume of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, was published by Harcourt Brace in March 1932.<sup>26</sup> It received excellent reviews. Malcolm Cowley in the *New Republic* called it a 'landmark of American fiction'. Henry Hazlitt in the *Nation* thought it was better than *The 42nd Parallel*, which he had rated as the best American novel of 1930. In the *Chicago Tribune* Fanny Butcher claimed Dos Passos had captured better than anyone else the 'pulse', 'tempo', and 'throb' of life in modern America. *1919*, the review concluded, 'is the kind of book a reader never forgets'.<sup>27</sup> John Chamberlain (No. 25) saw *1919* as something akin to social history, like Mark Sullivan's *Our Times* or Frederick Allen's *Only Yesterday*, only Dos Passos did a lesser job of showing what happened and a more thorough job of showing what effect the news, and the men and women who made the news, had upon typical Americans. Chamberlain also noted that while Hemingway continued to work out his personal problems in his fiction, Dos Passos had cast a much wider net. He did express one concern, however, which was fast becoming a common one among Dos Passos critics: the characters seemed 'flat' at times and very 'transparent' as symbols. Few of the characters were memorable, and as the product of yesterday's headlines, they could become yesterday's news. Matthew Josephson (No. 26), on the other hand, praised the collectivism of *1919* and the Marxist view of history which he believed the novel revealed. He saw the characters as 'driven beasts' in accordance with it, yet he noted as a limitation the behaviouristic approach to character which permitted no inward glances and no authorial comment, apparently unaware of the fact that the behaviouristic approach was largely responsible for making the characters seem like 'driven beasts'. The review is

a revealing one because it shows, on the one hand, how eager critics on the Left were to find a Marxist thesis in Dos Passos's work, and, on the other hand, how unwilling some of them were to embrace a theory of literature that placed art in the service of propaganda.

Two Russian editors of the journal *Literature of the World Revolution* penned an open letter (No. 29) to Dos Passos expressing their support of his work even though they found it ideologically weak and warned him against seeking refuge from political realities in art. They were destined to be disappointed by Dos Passos's final volume in the trilogy which did not endorse a communist revolution, *1919* would be his last work made available to the Russian reading public for a long time to come.<sup>28</sup> It marked the high watermark in his career from the perspective of Marxist critics in America as well. As Granville Hicks saw it, 'the concept of the class struggle and the trend towards revolution, deeply realized in the emotions and translated into action [in *1919*], has given Dos Passos a greater sensitiveness to the world about him...has shown him the relations between apparently isolated events and enabled him to see the fundamental unity beneath the seemingly chaotic complexity of American life'.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Faulkner, 'spinning complex melodramas out of his neuroses', or Hemingway, 'with his twin opiates, drink and bull fighting', Dos Passos had not succumbed to the modern causes of their despair: 'whatever place the future may grant his books', Hicks concluded in his Marxist study of American literature since the Civil War, 'he cannot be denied the historical importance of having been a challenge to a generation that considered itself safely lost'.<sup>30</sup> Mike Gold (No. 30) also continued to praise Dos Passos as the best writer in America, believing that all Dos Passos lacked was, significantly enough, Walt Whitman's faith in the masses.

In 1934 Dos Passos signed an open letter to the Communist Party printed in the *New Masses* protesting against their violent disruption of a Socialist Party meeting held in Madison Square Garden, New York City, on 16 February. He believed such squabbles over ideological differences hurt the revolutionary movement, but his 'fellow travellers' on the Left saw his signing of the letter as an indication of his losing faith. Never one to follow 'the party line', Dos Passos would go his own way in *U.S.A.* despite all the pressure from leftist critics to make a clear political statement. Hemingway, on the other hand, reminded his friend that 'there was no left and no right in writing.... There is only good and bad writing.' His advice to Dos Passos regarding characterization (no 'noble communists' and 'keep them people, people, people, and don't let them get to be symbols') revealed a limited understanding of Dos Passos's art.<sup>31</sup> His characters are always representative types. Hemingway need not have worried about 'noble communists', however, for Dos Passos was about fed up with Communist Party politics.<sup>32</sup>

Dos Passos's picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine the week *The Big Money* was published, and in the cover story he was compared to Tolstoy, Balzac, and Joyce for choosing the contemporary history of his country as his subject in fiction.<sup>33</sup> The reviews were, again, overwhelmingly favourable despite some recurring criticisms held in common. J. Donald Adams cited Dos Passos's greatest strength as 'his range of close acquaintance with American types, groups, and classes' which was 'probably wider than any other well-known American novelist'. He noted, however, as others had previously, that some of the characters never emerged as individuals—instead they embodied 'a set of

sympathies'. He also believed Dos Passos's portrait of America was too pessimistic. 'We are not a lost people', he argued, for there are plenty of people in America who live 'with integrity, with purpose and by standards which are not for a day'.<sup>34</sup> The reviewer for the London *Times Literary Supplement* (No. 36) registered the same complaint, even while hailing the novel as an outstanding contribution to American literature. Goronwy Rees (No. 37), writing for the London *Spectator*, speculated that Dos Passos might be a better historian, sociologist, and reporter than novelist. Dos Passos is more interested in 'telling the truth', he argued, 'in explaining a historical process, in expressing certain moral values, than in creating works of art'. (This was a perceptive and even prescient criticism which confirmed (or seconded) Hemingway's fear that Dos Passos was becoming a polemicist.) On the other hand, Rees argued, the fact that Dos Passos's characters are more the product of history than imagination encourages the reader to look beyond the self-governing world of fiction to the actual world of historical events. (It is easy to see why Marxists were so enamoured of Dos Passos from the beginning, and felt so betrayed by him later on, for he clearly placed art in the service of history instead of the other way around.) Rees ended his review by comparing Dos Passos's vision of America to Whitman's, concluding that Dos Passos saw defeat of American democratic principles everywhere Whitman had seen victory and promise. Horace Gregory (No. 33) pointed out that the political thinking behind *U.S.A.* was closer to Thorstein Veblen than Karl Marx, and that cinematic influences were more in evidence than literary ones where the narrative technique was concerned. Malcolm Cowley analysed the narrative technique of the novel with respect to what he took to be Dos Passos's intentions, which were to show 'that life is collective, that individuals are neither heroes nor villains', and 'that their destiny is controlled by the drift of society as a whole'. The only hero in the trilogy was the nation itself, which stood defeated at the conclusion. In a follow-up article, he complained that this defeat was premature and inaccurate, for there were still many (like himself, presumably) who carried on the struggle.<sup>35</sup> All Dos Passos had managed to express was his own disillusionment.

Granville Hicks (No. 41), responding to what he and other leftist critics regarded as an out-and-out betrayal in *The Big Money*, found precedent for its lack of commitment in Dos Passos's travel books, which revealed 'a deep emotional unwillingness to face the intellectual implications of things seen and heard'. Dos Passos had 'sympathies' but no 'convictions' because he seemed unwilling 'to think his way through' to them. Hicks believed the despair in *U.S.A.* was unearned because Dos Passos had forsaken his responsibility as a writer to use his intellect as well as his powers of observation. According to Hicks, Dos Passos achieved clarity of thought only during those years he was closest to Communism. The further he got from it, the more 'stupid', 'banal', and 'naïve' his political thinking became. Hicks predicted a decline in the quality of Dos Passos's work on political and intellectual grounds. Mike Gold (No. 39) deduced simply that Dos Passos, like the French novelist Celine, 'hates Communists because organically he seems to hate the human race'.

There were some critics who saw weaknesses in Dos Passos's art more significant and potentially more damaging than any weaknesses in his political thinking. Bernard De Voto (No. 32) believed Dos Passos's vision of human experience was too constricted, too

narrowly pessimistic, crabbed, and humourless. The characters lacked depth enough 'to engage one's sympathies', and the rigorous behaviourism made them act like 'lobotomized automatons'. We remain untouched by them. When Harcourt Brace brought out a one-volume edition of *U.S.A.* in 1938, it became an occasion for more praise, but also some of the same criticisms. Delmore Schwartz (No. 43) agreed that Dos Passos had succeeded in showing only one side of the truth about America. Believing literature ought to distinguish itself from history and journalism, Schwartz argued that the flaw in Dos Passos's artistic conception might not be the paucity of inner life for his characters (which might be true-to-life) or the absence of any historical dialectic (which might be true-to-life as well), but rather an excessive 'naturalism' in the form of behaviourism which left out all human potential. T.K. Whipple (No. 38), writing for the *Nation*, agreed. Whereas the subjects of the biographical sketches in *U.S.A.* had 'minds, consciousness, individuality, and personality', the fictional characters seemed 'devoid of will or purpose' and appeared to have no power to choose. He could only conclude that there was a flaw in the narrative technique. Edmund Wilson, on the other hand, saw this technique working to Dos Passos's advantage since what he attempted to show, Wilson presumed, was how swept along by the currents of social change most Americans were. In a letter to his friend upon first reading *The Big Money* he had written:

One of the things which you have done most successfully—which I don't remember any novelist's doing—is show people in those moments when they are at loose ends or drifting or up against a blank wall—such as a passage in the first volume which stands out in curious relief in my mind, when Moorehouse has washed up in Pittsburgh and simply lies on the bed for several days, not knowing what he is going to do next—moments when the social currents, taking advantage of the set of the character, will sweep the individual in. These moments and the purposive careers of your eminent men and women are the positive and negative poles of your book, between which you probably allow for more of life, cheat less on what real human experience is like (the principal exception to this is that I think you strip away too much the glamour and exhilaration of the good time which the Americans thought they were having during the Boom), than any other radical writer.<sup>36</sup>

Lionel Trilling (No. 40) agreed with the prevailing view that *U.S.A.* 'confirms but does not advance, summarizes but does not suggest', but he believed Dos Passos's portrait of America was 'consciously selective' and 'consciously corrective' of the cultural tradition of the intellectual Left: 'he is almost alone of the novelists of the Left...in saying that the creeds and idealisms of the Left may bring corruption quite as well as the greeds and cynicisms of the established order'. The justification for his political stance would, Trilling believed, show itself in future history. Trilling defended the selectivity of *U.S.A.* on the grounds that the trilogy did not 'falsify' existing conditions in America. The class struggle, for instance, was portrayed as an internal battle fought by all the characters as they tried to improve their material circumstances. Even so, Dos Passos's main concern throughout the trilogy, Trilling contended, had been moral integrity rather than social class: 'The



national, collective, social elements of his trilogy should be seen not as a bid for completeness but rather as a great setting, brilliantly delineated, for his moral interest.' If Dos Passos is a social historian, he is so only 'to be a more complete moralist'. For Dos Passos, Trilling concluded, 'the barometer of social breakdown is not suffering through economic deprivation but always moral degeneration through moral choice'. Society and history are shaping influences but not determining ones. The rest is up to character.

The Spanish Civil War became a *cause célèbre* for most liberals in America during the mid-to-late thirties, for whom the struggle was a clear-cut one between the Fascists, military dictatorship, and class privilege on the one side, and the Loyalists, social and economic justice, and popular rule on the other. Dos Passos and others wanted to make a documentary film (eventually entitled *The Spanish Earth*) about the horrible sufferings of the people living in the villages brought on by Franco's revolt against the Republic. Along with Hemingway, he sailed for Europe more than a little uneasy about the strong Communist presence in the Loyalist camp. When he arrived in Spain, he discovered that his long-time friend José Robles (who had translated *Manhattan Transfer* into Spanish) had been arrested by police working for his own (Loyalist) side. Dos Passos feared that Robles's commitment to the Republic had been interpreted as a threat to Russian Communist designs on Spain. Soon he learned that his friend had been executed, presumably for talking too loosely about military plans, or so ran the official explanation. Dos Passos was so dismayed by Robles's execution, and by what appeared to him as a Communist takeover of the Loyalist cause, that he backed out of the film project and returned home to America.<sup>37</sup>

The incident proved to be a crucial one, for it marked the final break between Dos Passos and the radical Left. He usually translated his political experience into fiction, and this time was no exception. In his next novel, *Adventures of a Young Man*, the solitary (as opposed to collective in *U.S.A.*) hero, Glenn Spotswood, listens to his conscience and leaves the Communist Party when he realizes the Party cares more about the revolution of the future than the striking miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. (Dos Passos himself had aided strikers there in 1931.) When he attaches himself to the Loyalist cause in Spain, he is assigned a suicide mission by the International Brigade, which suspected him of being a Trotskyite.

The reviews of *Adventures of a Young Man* were mixed as Dos Passos anticipated (expecting to be crucified by the liberal press). One of the kindest reviews was turned in by John Chamberlain (No. 44), who submitted that Dos Passos had in this latest novel made up for assigning 'too little importance to the human will' in his earlier books, for Spotswood does make a choice which decides his destiny, whereas so many of the characters in *U.S.A.* had seemed driven to theirs by historical forces. He correctly sensed that Dos Passos's intention was to satirize the American radical movement now dominated by Communists. The dilemma Dos Passos explores through Spotswood is 'how to keep the political struggle for power from conquering or corrupting the humanity to which all reformers and revolutionists should aspire'. In other words it was a novel about ends not justifying the means. Not unjustifiably, Malcolm Cowley (No. 46) accused Dos Passos of allowing personal feelings to overcome what should have been intellectual commitment. Dos Passos's idealism, he claimed, was too lofty to embrace or respect any

sort of political activity. But politics aside, he believed the novel was Dos Passos's weakest since *One Man's Initiation*, because it lacked the technical innovations of *U.S.A.* and Glenn Spotswood was 'simply not interesting or strong enough to carry the burden of the story'. Writing for the *New Masses*, Samuel Sillen (No. 48) predictably derided *Adventures* as a 'rotten' book, a 'bald political tract' which slanders 'everything decent and hopeful in American life'—echoing the rhetoric of attacks upon *Three Soldiers* by conservatives during the early twenties. (It is ironic that leftist critics such as Sillen objected to the polemical character of *Adventures* when what they had complained about all along was its absence in his earlier work—they didn't get the polemic they wanted.) Sillen found the characters static, and the development pitifully programmed or missing altogether. He compared the novel unfavourably to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published the same year.

On the other side of the political fence, Wilbur Schramm (No. 51), writing for the more conservative *Virginia Quarterly Review*, saw nothing inconsistent in Dos Passos's work. He 'is a friend of the underdog', Schramm wrote, 'and a hater of "money culture", as he always has been. He is not a Stalinite—and probably never was—simply because he fears a heavy centralization of governmental power. 'He claimed the book was much better than the liberal press would allow and he admired Dos Passos for his courage in writing it. James T. Farrell (No. 50), another lapsed leftist, took Cowley and others to task for allowing their liberal politics to affect their judgment. Like Trilling before him, Farrell saw 'moral integrity' as the issue Dos Passos addressed in all his works. The flaws of *Adventures*, he argued, were the flaws of Dos Passos's writing in general: stereotyped characters, routine description, and a bad ear for dialect. Edmund Wilson (No. 49), however, was not so willing to praise the new novel at the expense of *U.S.A.* In a letter to his friend he was frank about his disappointment in *Adventures* and perceptive (as usual) in his analysis of its failings. What was missing was the 'organic connection' between character and description that made *U.S.A.* one of the great novels of the century. In that work the reader saw the world through the characters' eyes whereas the description in *Adventures* remained just that—description with no internal reference point in character.

Dos Passos was by and large correct about the situation in Spain, but so were the critics about this latest novel. He seemed less interested in art than in defending his politics.

#### THE 1940s AND AFTER

Not surprisingly, given the polemical nature of his most recent fiction, and his loss of faith in Marxist revolution, Dos Passos looked for an ideal to replace it with, and found one in early America's 'storybook' democracy. He began writing historical essays, biographies, and narratives about the colonial and revolutionary periods, hoping to discover in the past what was missing in the present.<sup>38</sup> In the meantime he continued to travel widely at home and abroad during World War II, which affected him oppositely from World War I: he began to see America and her democracy as civilization's only hope.<sup>39</sup>

He also continued to write fiction, more conscious than ever of his role as social reporter and chronicler of his times. His next novel was *Number One* (1943), a satire on the contemporary abuses of democracy responsible for electing demagogues such as his central character, Chuck Crawford, modelled on Huey Long. The narrative technique,

aside from some prose poem inter-chapters, was conventional as in *Adventures of a Young Man*, and this latest novel was more favourably received if only because it was more expected. Horace Gregory called it 'one of the best... I have read in the past two years'.<sup>40</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét (No. 53) praised the novel for its realism, claiming many a Chuck Crawford could be found in the 'Congressional Record'. In spite of this, however, he felt the novel lacked the depth of characterization and the range and scope of the *U.S.A.* novels. Alfred Kazin (No. 54) was less generous, complaining that the novel lacked any rootedness in character or setting. The style was as fresh as ever, but Dos Passos, Kazin argued, had tried too hard to convert his readers to his way of thinking. In a more recent study of Dos Passos's politics, Robert C. Rosen summed up this phase in his career as follows: 'Unable to reconcile his idealized vision of America, drawn largely from his studies of its past, with the actuality of its present institutions, Dos Passos would increasingly tend to substitute moral exhortation of individuals for a thorough, critical analysis of their society'.<sup>41</sup> One could argue that the 'moral exhortations' had been there all along in Dos Passos's work, but one could scarcely deny the weakening justification for them in the world of his fiction. Finally, *Number One* might have fared better over the years if Robert Penn Warren had not written a much better novel on the same subject (*All the King's Men* (1946)).

Dos Passos's next novel, *The Grand Design* (1949), about the bureaucratic centralization of power put into place by Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' administration, prompted a heated debate, not only about this novel, but about the value of Dos Passos's work in general, and the politics of reviewing it. Most of the reviews were negative. Maxwell Geismar and Vance Bourjaily attacked the point of view as narrow and distorted. Lloyd Morris dismissed the novel as a political tract. Henry Morton Robinson observed that its weakness proceeded from Dos Passos's inability to discover or reveal 'the complex nerves of passion and motive underneath' his characters. George Miles concluded bluntly that the characters are no longer characters and 'the revelations are no longer revelations'.<sup>42</sup> Even his friend Edmund Wilson (No. 55) took Dos Passos to task for his 'unconvincing characters'. Some friends and critics rose to his defence. John Chamberlain stressed Dos Passos's importance as a social reporter, and maintained that he had consistently expressed his faith in the human individual and his intolerance for any power that threatened to rob him of his autonomy. J. Donald Adams protested that critics were treating the book unfairly for they had not learned 'to value writers for what they are' instead of what they wanted them to be. Dos Passos's strength had never been 'the creation of character', but descriptive writing and social reporting. He also implied that critics had allowed their politics to affect their judgment.<sup>43</sup> Granville Hicks (No. 56) countered that political bias was 'not a vice peculiar to the left', and Malcolm Cowley denied that Dos Passos had ever been a good social reporter because his pessimism was subjective and personal. As for the politics of reviewing, Cowley insisted that there was little else to review in the novel except for its author's political opinions. As for Chamberlain's contention that Dos Passos had kept his faith in the individual, Cowley saw few individuals in Dos Passos's work 'to love or hate or admire'. 'As a novelist—and in life too,' Cowley observed, 'he is always moving, always hurrying off to catch a taxi, a bus, a train, a plane or a transatlantic steamer; and he tells us as much about people as a sensitive and observing man can learn in