

John Dos Passos

NEWSLETTER

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GENDER ATTITUDES IN DOS PASSOS' FICTION AND RECEPTION

A Book Review

by

Seth Moglen

DOS PASSOS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF THE FEMININE. By Janet Galligani Casey. Cambridge University Press, 1998. 230 pp.

Janet Galligani Casey's *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine* is a pathbreaking study, providing the first sustained feminist analysis of this major modernist's literary career. Essential reading for Dos Passos specialists, this book will also be of substantial interest to students of proletarian and left literature, and to scholars concerned with the current revisionary debate about the politics of American literary modernism.

Casey's book provides a strikingly new, if partial, explanation for the peculiar fate of Dos Passos' literary reputation. While other scholars have perceived Dos Passos' critical marginalization as the outgrowth of his discomfiting relationship to the anti-capitalist Left, Casey suggests that it stems in large part from the fact that both Dos Passos and his work have been persistently perceived as troublingly feminine in a literary culture that associates aesthetic and political value with maleness. Relying on letters and diaries, Casey shows that Dos Passos was personally uncomfortable with certain aspects of normative masculinity, especially with predatory heterosexuality. Some of his literary contemporaries—especially the ever-macho Hemingway and that would-be lothario, Edmund Wilson—were made uncomfortable by Dos Passos' style of masculinity (including his shyness, social awkwardness, and reticence about sexual matters), and they felt compelled to ridicule him as effeminate in their letters and published writings. Similarly gendered (and at times homophobic) arguments surfaced in evaluations of Dos Passos after his death. More broadly, Casey draws on interesting recent scholarship about the culture wars of the 1920s and 30s to argue that both modernists and proletarian writers sought to validate their sometimes conflicting cultural projects by

insisting that theirs was the truly virile literary enterprise and disparaging their opponents' as effeminate. Because Dos Passos was both a modernist and a socialist writer, he was at times caught in the cross-fire and "his work was always subject, implicitly or explicitly, by one side or the other, to the charge of effeminacy" (20). As a result, according to Casey, "Dos Passos emerges from the tangle of literary and cultural history as a feminized ... writer" (21).

This anxiously masculinist devaluation of Dos Passos also stems in part from the unusual centrality of gender considerations in his work. The bulk of Casey's monograph is devoted to exploring this crucial and neglected dimension of his fiction. Above all, she ably demonstrates that in the literary works leading up to and including *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos reveals the pervasiveness of misogynist gender ideology in early twentieth-century America. From this vantage point, Casey finds more of interest in Dos Passos' earliest fictions than most critics have. Specifically, she shows that his first stories, published in the *Harvard Monthly*, are already interested in exploring the nature of gender identity and male desire, albeit in an Orientalizing and conventionally romantic fashion. On her account, *Three Soldiers* reveals the misogynist structure of normative masculinity by representing male protagonists who view women either as status-markers, as pure romantic

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Melvin Landsberg contrasts Dos Passos' *The Best Times* with *The Education of Henry Adams*

Claudia Matherly Stolz reviews Lisa Nanney's *John Dos Passos Revisited*

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idealizations, or as the objects of a sexuality that is indistinguishable from violence.

Casey's critical analysis is most revelatory in her discussion of *Streets of Night* and *Manhattan Transfer*. Drawing heavily on the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, she argues that the main female characters in both novels are trapped in a "specular economy" in which they must either embrace the role of passive but willing object of the sexual male "gaze," or else lose the possibility of any form of sexual connection or social visibility. Either way, women are deprived of sexual subjectivity and social agency by this ideological double-bind. While in *Streets of Night*, Nan refuses to be the "object of the gaze" and is doomed along with both of her male suitors to sexual repression and frustration, Ellen Thatcher in *Manhattan Transfer* is the first of a series of Dos Passos' female protagonists to manipulate this ideologically constructed male desire for her own financial gain, as a sexualized media icon. Dos Passos forces us to recognize the disastrous position in which women have been placed by showing that the power acquired by even a consummate manipulator of the system like Ellen is nevertheless "a supreme illusion" because the ideological game she is playing has deprived her of any "sense of self, of true subjectivity" (118, 121). Casey is at her best when explaining the subtlety of Dos Passos' fusion of gender and class analyses in his fictional anatomization of "gendered capitalism" (114) in this novel: while Ellen's class position enables her to elude the economic exploitation suffered by the working-class Anna Cohen, for example, her financial privilege blinds her to the ways in which she shares the fate of female objectification, as sexual fetish rather than worker.

Casey's analysis of *U.S.A.* also contains valuable insights. Viewing the male-dominated biographies as the

most regressive strand of the trilogy from a gender perspective, she argues that the Camera Eye and Newsreel segments provide a "coherent locus of 'feminist' insight" (135). The Newsreels, in particular, focus increasing attention on women's growing economic and social power during and after World War One and on the violence against women that accompanied it. The fictional storylines of *U.S.A.* collectively demonstrate that "sexual destinies" and gender roles are "predetermined" by ideology: the male characters all assume cultural superiority to women and are represented as "sexual victimizers," while female characters must "learn to cope with their status as victims." Extending one of the trilogy's most emblematic assertions, Casey suggests that for Dos Passos "America is not only divisible into two economic nations... but also two gendered ones" (158).

Unfortunately, Casey's argument about *U.S.A.* is more tendentious, more contradictory and less convincing than her discussion of earlier works. She asserts that *U.S.A.* evolves in a feminist direction, as the predominant sexism of *The 42nd Parallel* and especially *Nineteen Nineteen* gives way to the dramatically more feminist outlook of *The Big Money*. Casey weakens her own argument by overstating her case. She claims, for example, that the feminist content of *The Big Money* is principally revealed by the fact that the most central male character in this volume, Charley Anderson, "represents the most complete susceptibility to the nation's dominant ideological paradigms," while the primary female characters, Margo Dowling and Mary French, embody "a valorized cultural resistance" (174). I suspect that few readers will be convinced that Margo, who is thoroughly implicated in the destructive new culture industry which Dos Passos deplored, should be viewed as a heroine in the author's eyes. And while Mary French is indeed the most sympathetic of *U.S.A.*'s fictional characters, Casey's claim that Mary is the "single efficacious radical figure" in the trilogy and offers "a new paradigm for social activism" seems unfounded (174). Mary, after all, like all the fictional radicals, participates in a long series of failed activist campaigns, culminating in the futile effort to save the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti—the lost cause of the radical Left which touched Dos Passos most personally.

The interpretive strains and overstatements contained in Casey's analysis of *U.S.A.* stem from a deeper conceptual problem. She has adopted an unnecessarily rigid and deterministic model of ideology which causes her to compromise many of her most sophisticated textual interpretations and her most significant historical arguments. Although she alludes to a large number of theorists, her conception of ideology derives principally from a particular strand of post-structuralist thought—exemplified most clearly by Laura Mulvey—which has attempted to adapt Althusserian and Lacanian models for feminist ends. In practice, Casey tends to view ideological determination as virtually complete and absolute. What she appears to admire most in Dos Passos is the way in which his novels suggest a

THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos' writings and biography, and will publish short articles on these subjects. It will also publish news items, notes, letters, and queries on these and other relevant matters. Among these matters are work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship.

For return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115. Our fax number is (785) 864-4298.

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similar determinism: she commends *U.S.A.*, for example, for demonstrating that “ideological imprisonment” is “inescapable” (175). Because Dos Passos represents misogynist gender ideology as central to the shaping of individual consciousness and American culture as a whole, Casey views him as offering a feminist critique. But Casey’s own progressive political ambitions as a feminist cause her to strain (for good reason) against her own deterministic ideological model. As a feminist, Casey is concerned to locate spaces of female and feminist agency in a misogynist culture—and she wishes to identify locations of resistance to ideological determination. Because her theoretical model makes it difficult to understand how determination and agency can coexist, however, she tends to vacillate between exaggerating the ideological determinism of Dos Passos’ texts and exaggerating the agency that he represents: hence the overstatement of Mary’s effectiveness as an activist.

Casey also seems to presume that ideological formations are relatively pure, consistent, and politically univalent. In the chapters on Dos Passos’ early fiction and on *Manhattan Transfer*, for example, she seems determined to avoid acknowledging that Dos Passos was capable of being *both* a misogynist *and* a feminist. As a result, she repeatedly quotes explicitly misogynist passages from his fiction and then tries to explain away the misogyny by suggesting unconvincingly that these passages might be construed as ironic. Casey’s tendency to view ideological formations as rigid has also reduced the subtlety of the historical arguments which her research should have enabled. She notes in several places, for example, that attitudes among American anti-capitalists toward women and feminism were “mixed.” But she repeatedly undermines this historical recognition by reifying the Left as simply misogynist. Similarly, while she endorses Cary Nelson’s call to revise conceptions of modernism in order to honor its complex relationship to Left politics, Casey’s opening discussion ends up reinforcing the vision that modernists and proletarian writers constituted distinct, warring camps.

As a result of these theoretical rigidities, Casey has unfortunately obscured the most significant implications of her own project. Her excellent research and her often subtle textual analysis actually reveal that Dos Passos was a socialist modernist whose fictions are at once conventionally misogynist and daringly feminist. To see Dos Passos in this complex way ought to enable us to see the existence of a powerful anti-capitalist strand within modernism, and it should encourage us to understand that the gender politics of both modernism and the American Left were more conflicted than has usually been acknowledged. Casey fails to argue for these insights because she assumes that the rich contradictions and complexities that she finds in Dos Passos were not also present in the larger socialist and modernist ideological formations of which he was a part. Presuming that ideologies are rigid and totalizing, that they impose themselves on writers but are not continually altered by them, Casey ends up presenting Dos Passos as an anomaly, rather than as emblematic of modernism and

the Left. It is worth emphasizing the reductive effects of this model of ideology-critique because it has, in various forms, become commonplace in U.S. versions of cultural studies.

I do not, however, want to underestimate the significance of what Casey has achieved. *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine* is an enormous contribution to Dos Passos scholarship. With the waning of Cold War taboos, there is growing interest today in Dos Passos—and a new generation of teachers and students will be especially interested in the remarkable gender politics of his work. While Casey’s book is not the last word on this subject, she has inaugurated the discussion, and scholars will be indebted to her for this groundbreaking study.

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THE BEST TIMES
AND
THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS

A CONTRAST

by

Melvin Landsberg

The world is an entertaining though horribly trying place, and it is best enjoyed when one is young. It is only in reference to his youth that Dos Passos uses the title *The Best Times* for the memoir he published in 1966. How otherwise could the name apply to his experiences with World War I and the Sacco-Vanzetti affair? Friendship and travel are the major joys he describes in his 233-page book, which takes us from his birth to the years when *U.S.A.* was appearing. Sharing vicariously in his friendships and travels gives the book much of its savour.

I read recently that a Random House poll of literary critics has found *The Education of Henry Adams* the best work of non-fiction originally published in English in the twentieth century. Nobody asked my opinion, but if someone had I would have made a much more modest claim for *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (to use the full name). It is a neglected work, more sunny, more charitable, immensely more spirited, and at least as intelligent and interesting. Note that I do not claim that it, or any other book, is one of a select hundred.

Let us look first at each subject's achievements, a major source of our interest in any autobiography. And let us look too at what each wanted. Adams was an impressive historian, a journalist, the editor of the *North American Review*, and a Harvard professor. But a huge item in his account of his career was a strong grievance: the post-Civil War milieu did not allow him—a public-spirited and capable (as he saw himself) scion of the three generations of statesmen—to become president, or at least a leader in the nation.

Dos Passos was primarily a novelist, at his peak a great one, though never in *The Best Times* does he apply a yardstick to himself. He comes closest to the subject in the following passage, about his views in the early 1920s:

Literary invention could never be made really reputable. A writer who took his trade seriously would be sure to get more kicks than ha'pence. He would be lucky if he stayed out of jail. In my revulsion against wartime stupidities, as a priest takes a vow of celibacy, I had taken a private vow of allegiance to an imaginary humanist republic which to me represented the struggle for life against the backdrag of death and stagnation. Figures like Giordano Bruno,

Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne presided over my republic of letters. Among its latterday saints I classed Shelley, Stendahl, Flaubert, possibly Walt Whitman and Rimbaud.

This isn't the sort of thing one talks about, even to intimate friends, but it is these private dedications that mold men's lives. In this context the number of copies a book sold was neither here nor there. The celebrity racket made no sense at all (134).¹

Like Adams fifty-eight years before, Dos Passos attended Harvard College, but compared to Adams he was a gamin. Adams in his first sentence relates that he was born on Beacon Hill in Boston in 1838 and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Unitarian Church. Being a great grandson of John Adams and a grandson of John Quincy Adams, he was at the pinnacle of social distinction from the start.

Dos Passos' memoir does not even say where he was born—in Chicago, far from his father's and mother's separate homes, as he was the unacknowledged love child of a married man. The novelist's paternal grandfather fell light years short of John Quincy Adams' distinction; he was, Dos Passos tells us, a short-tempered man who left Madeira in a rush because of "some incident involving a stabbing" (4). He worked as a cobbler and later as a shoemaker in Baltimore, then moved to Philadelphia, where he married and had children. Though the family was poor and had little food, Dos Passos' grandfather would throw dinner out the window if his wife hadn't prepared it just right. Dos Passos' father, a forceful person, became an outstanding lawyer despite his impoverished childhood.

Dos Passos was not baptized, a fact that discomfited proper people when he was a boy, and he did not bear his father's name at Choate, the preparatory school he attended. Indeed, there is more than a whiff of the picaresque in his memoir.

Adams says he "made no acquaintance in college which proved to have the smallest use in after life" (64). ". . . never would he have need of acquaintance to strengthen his social standing; but he needed greatly some one to show him how to use the acquaintance he cared to make" (64).²

Dos Passos, unlike Adams, was hungry for friends who had personal qualities to which he could relate.³ He made many at college, particularly on the *Harvard Monthly*, and enlivens his memoir with accounts of numbers of them: E. E. Cummings; Dudley Poore, another poet; Stewart Mitchell, later a historian; Robert Hillyer, a third poet; Arthur McComb, who became an art historian, and two who died early, Edward Massey, a playwright, and Wright McCormick, a journalist.

Of the friends he made in Spain after college, he describes José (Pepe) Giner, a devout young man who knew

“every sacristan and every forgotten masterpiece in the villages tucked away in the rolling lands of Castile” (30). Together the two walked through these lands and climbed in the Sierra Guadarrama. Another young Spaniard with whom he made trips, and who became a lifelong friend, was Pepe Robles, a cynical, sharp-tongued student who “laughed at everything,” and was an “*aficionado* of bull-fights” (32, 33).

The secret behind his friendships was that he was receptive to a wide variety of human beings. In the years after World War I, for example, he, E. E. Cummings, and some of their friends found the Jewish East Side “particularly romantic.”

Saturday nights we would foregather at Moskowitz’s “Rumanian Broilings” on a street east of Second Avenue.

Mr. Moskowitz was a courtly wasp-waisted little man who played the zymbalom while we drank his wine. . . .

Sometimes we talked about the Russian Revolution with Yiddish journalists and poets. These were well-informed and skeptical people. . . . Mr. Moskowitz played well. He liked to feel he was an artist among artists. Sometimes he would be so moved by the enthusiasm of our response that he would distribute free wine (84).

Contrast this comment with Henry Adams’, when he writes of coming into New York from Europe in 1868:

His world was dead. Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct, an intenser energy, and a freer hand than he—American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him, and an education that had cost a civil war (238).

In the *Education* we see the American Civil War from England with Adams. He served as private secretary to his father, the U.S. Minister to Great Britain, who sought to keep that country from aiding the Confederacy with armaments and recognizing it as an independent nation. The climax of the account of diplomatic maneuverings comes when Minister Adams, trying in 1863 to stop the preparation and unleashing of two ironclad rams built for the Confederacy, informs Lord Russell, the British foreign minister: “It would be superfluous in me to point out to

your lordship that this is war!” (172) Following his main thread, treating all his experiences as failures in his education, Adams tells how he misconstrued the intentions of Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, and of Russell. Amid his accounts of his father’s policies, he tells about how he himself fared in the London social season.

For Dos Passos, the most memorable war in his memoir is also the one he knew in his twenties: World War I in Europe. And he writes as a direct participant, often a front-line ambulance driver there. A pacifist and a socialist believing in revolution, he went to Europe because that was where the greatest and most momentous drama in the world was occurring. Once by the French front—and being twenty-one—he wrote of “building myself a snail shell of hysterical laughter against the hideousness of war” and “having a wonderful time” (51).

Education for Dos Passos came at every turn. Early in his activity on the road supplying Verdun, he and his friends Hillyer and Frederik van den Arend found a country villa that a shell had completely demolished; they were delighted, however, to find that it had a beautiful backhouse which was entirely intact. The three kept the place, with its scrubbed deal seats, their secret.

We had found the latrines the most hideous feature of the wartime scene, slippery planks over stinking pits. The Boche seemed to have an evil intuition about them; as soon as you squatted with your pants down, he would start to shell (42).

Does Henry Adams, in the five-hundred pages of his *Education*, written in an elevated diction nowhere descending to the plebeian, ever use a privy?

Before he left Europe, following his discharge from the Red Cross for writing pacifist letters, Dos Passos had a haunting experience. After an American offensive, probably Château Thierry, he answered a call for volunteers to work at a base hospital in Paris.

The night I particularly remember it was my job to carry off buckets full of amputated arms and hands and legs from an operating room.

Who could hold on to dogmatic opinions in the face of these pathetic remnants of shattered humanity? (70)

Still another part of his education came after he managed to get into the American army after his return to the United States. Now he was with ordinary American soldiers, not college volunteers; a farm boy from Indiana and an Italian from one of the western states helped him conceive of Chrisfield and Fuselli, two of the main characters in *Three Soldiers*.

“One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible,” says Adams (312). For him in the *Education*, it was two: Clarence King, the geologist, and John Hay, the author and diplomat, who was Secretary of State under Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Writing of the deaths of these two, Adams says that it was time for him to go:

The three friends had begun life together; and the last of the three had no motive—no attraction—to carry it on after the others had gone. Education had ended for all three (505).

For Dos Passos, the gates of admission to friendship are wider, and the procession of friends, as he sees them, is long. To follow his memoir is to view this procession, and also his ability to bond with many kinds of people.

In 1921 he and Cummings sailed from New Bedford to Portugal on the freighter *Mormugão*. Before they left, Arthur McComb gave Dos Passos *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, by Henry Adams and his brother Brooks, to read on the ship. Dos Passos says that he hated the book “because it went against the Walt Whitman-narodnik optimism about people I’ve never quite lived down” (87). From Paris he went on across the Balkans and Turkey, witnessing untold post-war horrors along the way. In New York, he had met Paxton Hibben, an American who had been a U.S. diplomat, then a war correspondent, and now was with the Near East Relief. The two were by this time friends. Hibben was unable to get him work with the N.E.R., but instead got him a document allowing passage in a Soviet railway boxcar to the Persian border. In the boxcar he formed a friendly relationship with a Persian physician, *Sayid Hassan Tabataba*, who was returning home from a German medical school, and together they travelled on to Teheran. After Dos Passos made his way, by car, wagon, and rail to Baghdad (as ever, noting terrain, customs, and monuments on the way), a sympathetic British official arranged for him to journey in an Arab caravan to Damascus.

Over five weeks of sometimes dangerous travel followed, under the protection of Jassem-er-Rawwaf, the tall, dark-bearded caravan leader. Once again in the memoir, Dos Passos displays his interest in and liking for people. Sitting at Jassem’s campfire, he listens to the leader tell of his country in southern Arabia, and tries to explain how much he likes the life the Agail people live in the desert. Jassam invites him to give up the “stinking cities” and come live with them (117). However, when Dos Passos has a shave in Damascus and puts on a western suit, Jassem, tears in his eyes, repudiates him.

In the chapters following that which describes the caravan, Dos Passos talks much more about his friends or acquaintances, those we have mentioned and others. Many are celebrities, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane, John Howard

Lawson, Mike Gold, Picasso, Léger, Blaise Cendrars. Others are less well known, e.g., Dawn Powell and John Peale Bishop; still others are far from being public figures. None of the celebrities seems imported to gain the book notice; they were all very much part of his experiences. And however strong his liking, he can be memorable in judgment. Fond as he was of Cummings, he remarks of him in later life: “Tolerance is not a New England vice” (134). Of F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose talent he admired, he says: “The idea of being that kind of celebrity set my teeth on edge” (130). Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso were friends of Sara Murphy, another of his friends, and Léger became a favorite of Dos Passos; but of Picasso, he says: “He was skill incarnate . . . if he had had the gift of compassion he would have been as great as Michelangelo” (153).

Dos Passos in leading up to the cooling of Hemingway’s friendship, has a memorable passage, not quite a page long, but too long to quote here. The gist is: “As a man matures he sheds possibilities with every passing year. In the same way he sheds friendships” (218-219).

Hemingway had turned on his friend after Dos Passos denounced the activities of the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, and afterwards had wounded him with his comments. Dos Passos does not write of these later occurrences. But amid his more happy recollections of times with Hemingway, he has bits like: “Hem was the greatest fellow in the world to go around with when everything went right” (201). Quite deftly Dos Passos identifies the turning point in their relationship with an incident in Key West: Hemingway caught Dos Passos throwing his Panama hat at, and trying to ring, a plaster cast of a badly botched bust of his difficult friend (220).

By and large, though, Dos Passos’ tone is one of fond remembrance, as with his recollections of John Howard Lawson, who had onesidedly ended their relationship when Dos Passos wouldn’t stop denouncing the Communists.

Henry Adams’ extensive descriptions of his travels in Europe, in the chapters “Berlin (1858-1859)” and “Rome (1859-1860),” are rich in commentary and sometimes skillfully pithy. But as he subordinates the information to his quest for education, one recalls them primarily as well-wrought cerebration.

To read Dos Passos on his trip through the Caucasus in 1928 is, on the other hand, not merely to participate in the trip, but to do so through the senses and mind of a novelist renowned for his ability to create place, as in *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* A few sentences stand out in my mind:

From the moment we left Shat-toi—these names are all spelled wrong, I never could find them on any map—we were riding up one mountain pass after another. The guides would never take their horses farther than the next valley because it would be inhabited by a different people and they didn’t know the

language. The Russians were helpless as I was. At every night's stop we had to find fresh interpreters. . . . The uplands were sheep country. A shepherd we met on the road had never heard of America (184-185).

On part of the trip he travelled with Horsley Gantt, a Virginia physician who had been studying with Pavlov for years. The two Americans had met by chance in a Lenin-grad hotel, and they struck up a friendship that lasted until Dos Passos' death.

Near the start of Dos Passos' memoir, there is a longer and more vivid portrait than any of his others, that of his father. From "The Camera Eye" in *The Forty-Second Parallel*, we know how difficult the relationship must have been. In *The Best Times*, Dos Passos writes of another side of it: his father's friendship and intellectual tutorship. In introducing his account of the elder Dos Passos, the son makes clear how much pent-up emotion he has felt:

For years a wooden box full of my father's letters has stood on my mantel at Spence's Point. . . . Time and again I have started reading the letters, but each time it has been as if a great fist squeezed my heart. I just couldn't go on (1).

Charles Francis Adams might have been an even more engaging subject for the son's memoir, but Henry eschews an intimate account. The father was a dedicated and skilled diplomat, who worked under trying conditions and with inadequate resources. His country, as the son makes clear, owed him much. But the relationship between father and son is shadowy, for the son's emphasis in telling of his years as private secretary is, as ever, on the failure of yet another episode in his quest for an education.

After Arthur McComb pushed Dos Passos to read *The Education*, Dos Passos wrote him in October 1922:

My apologies to Mr. Adams. The Education is by far the most interesting American document I've thus far encountered, and as a sourcebook for futillitarianism is perfect. Imagine, it took him till he was 61 years of age to discover that woman's sex was a force in the world! The very unspicy pedestrian quality of it is vastly instructive.⁴

Dos Passos was intending, in part, to tease McComb. Adams' symbols endure as literature, though they are only curious relics as historiography. Many in the nineteenth century believed that science would constitute a model

for the study of society. Thus Adams writes as a historian seeking to model his subject on what he thinks of as scientific method. But he is unable to discover continuity—as expressions of force—among historical periods. How does one draw a line from the Middle Ages, when the Virgin Mary energized a society to construct cathedrals, to the beginning of the twentieth, when the power of the dynamo makes one want to worship it?

What kind of education enabled one to succeed, whether economically, politically, or morally, in this world of increasing energy? *The Best Times*, while not posing Adams' recurring question, addresses it implicitly by the value to which it adheres—social sympathy.⁵ As for individual success, for Dos Passos it is in maintaining the ideals of his "imaginary humanist republic."

While Adams' *Education* is available in several editions—including a superb one, edited by Samuels, with appendices, variant readings, copious notes, a bibliography, and a good index—*The Best Times* is now out of print. Readers today need a second edition of Dos Passos' memoir, retaining his illustrations, and adding an index, something I miss greatly in the first edition.

Notes

1. All page references to Dos Passos' memoir are to *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (first printing). New York: New American Library, 1966.

2. All page references to Adams' memoirs are to *The Education of Henry Adams*. Edited by Ernest Samuels. Riverside Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973.

3. Some readers may object to this contrast of Dos Passos' and Adams' comments on their undergraduate friendships, as well as contrasts of later matters, by saying that Adams was not writing an autobiography, but an account of an education. Ernest Samuels says that Adams did not authorize the subtitle "An Autobiography," on the title page of the 1918 edition, and he therefore omits it from his own edition (xxiv). However, I know of no exemplary autobiography that is merely a catch-all. Every one has its theme or themes, and in this respect Adams' book, with all its literary devices, and its subordinations, reticences, and omissions, is the "autobiography" he chose to write.

4. John Dos Passos and Arthur K. McComb, *John Dos Passos' Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*. Edited by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 200.

5. I am reminded of Walt Whitman's line in *Song of Myself*: "... whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud." Section 48 of the poem, in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*. Riverside Edition. Edited by James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959.

“ALWAYS THE INDIVIDUAL
AND HIS FREEDOM”

A Book Review

by

Claudia Matherly Stolz

JOHN DOS PASSOS REVISITED. Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 700. By Lisa Nanney. New York: Twayne Publishers (Simon and Schuster Macmillan), 1998. 264 pp.

When John Dos Passos appeared before a House Committee for Un-American Activities in 1953, he described himself matter-of-factly: “I am a writer. I was born in Chicago in 1896.” Lisa Nanney's study, which the Preface characterizes as a critical reappraisal of Dos Passos' works, explores his development as one of the most important modernist writers of the twentieth century; and it focuses in part on explaining Dos Passos' use of the visual arts when constructing his novels.

Born in America, yes, but as Nanney explains, Dos Passos' unusual childhood and the issues emanating from it had long-term effects on him and as a result on his art. Unlike most Americans, Dos Passos spent much of his childhood out of the country; hence, the appropriateness of the name of one of the chapters: “A Double Foreigner: The Shaping of a Writer.” “A sense of distance from the society he inhabited, a feeling of not belonging, a consciousness of the weight of large cultural forces on people's lives, such as the burdens propriety imposed on his and his parents' lives” (16), induced a rebellion against parental authority (of real parents or parental figures, such as government and the military) and prompted him toward “artistic and political experimentation and a rejection of traditional aesthetics” (16). Dos Passos' keen interest in art, not only as a connoisseur but also as an artist, is offered as an explanation for the innovation in narrative he produced, especially, according to Nanney, in his cubist novels *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* One of the most fascinating pieces of information the book offers is her description of *Manhattan Transfer* and the film technique used to construct it. Calling the novel “the purest expression of his American modernist style” (155), Nanney writes: “Manuscripts of the novel as it progressed show that he initially created each of the central narratives separately, then broke them apart and spliced the various pieces into the order he sought, a process remarkably like film editing. Fragmentation . . . was both the technique and the theme” (157). Throughout the study there are many references to the influence of film on his art, but the influence of Eisenstein, frequently cited by other critics as major is downplayed. The influences of D.W. Griffith and the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov are underscored. Nanney attributes the use of “The Camera Eye” in *U.S.A.* to Vertov's concept of the “kino-eye.”

Chapter 8, “The Colors of America: *Manhattan Transfer*,” which contains the discussion of film technique, is the strongest one (despite the repetition of information given earlier, a recurrent problem in the book). In this chapter the relationship of art and the novel is most clearly presented; it is here that the concept of “gesture” is clearly explained by example, and it is here that an excellent explication of one of the novel's chapters, “Steamroller,” appears.

Early in the study Nanney identifies the importance of “gesture” to modernistic works, both in the visual arts and prose. The concept, a thread which helps to unify *John Dos Passos Revisited*, represents a transition by Dos Passos from romanticism to modernism. It is a move beyond imagism, symbolism, and expressionism. His “experimental modernism was predicated on the realization that the ‘old words’ and the values of the golden age they represented were no longer viable in the culture the twentieth century was creating” (75). Nanney cites *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922), a collection of essays on Spain, as the pivotal transition to modernism. “What Dos Passos' two characters, Telemachus and Lyaeus, are searching for is a ‘gesture’—an immediate tangible sign—that will go beyond the ‘rubbish’ of words to express the essence of their [own] country and culture” (75, 76), and Dos Passos, too, was searching for a “gesture.” “Ultimately, Dos Passos suggests in *Rosinante*, the ideal gesture is one that ‘makes the road’ or the way of approaching knowledge ‘so significant that one needs no destination’: that is, the perception itself becomes the art” (78). The seed of the gesture sprouts in *Streets of Night*, but in *Three Soldiers* it begins to bloom. As many critics have noted, World War I is the line of demarcation between the old world order and the new; it was the catalyst for a search for a new aesthetic, or as Nanney names it, a “gesture.” In art, the cubists used multiplicity and simultaneity, a method used by Dos Passos in *Three Soldiers*. Also, “in Andrews' quest, Dos Passos expresses something of his own search for meaning beyond words” (148). “He [Dos Passos] believes the gesture, the individual action that becomes identical with what it expresses, is the only way individuals in modern culture can voice their thoughts and feelings” (149). Nanney supports the assertion by using Andrews' symphony “The Soul and Body of John Brown” as an example. As Andrews explains in the novel: “John Brown is a madman who wanted to free people.” The gesture is all the individual has to retain identity, and it takes many forms. In *Manhattan Transfer* “Jimmy Herf's gesture occurs when he rejects Manhattan in order to regain “faith in words” (162), much as Andrews rejects the military.

A great disappointment in *John Dos Passos Revisited* is that it makes short shrift of all works written after *The Big Money*, which inhibits the realization of one of the work's stated goals, a critical reappraisal. Unlike the previous chapters, which in great detail explain the influence of a particular school or schools of painting on a particular novel, the last chapter briefly mentions the influence of the regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton on Dos Passos'

The Grand Design (218).

Throughout her study, Nanney supports the statement: "The theoretical position Dos Passos assumed after the Spanish Civil War was in fact consistent with the political commitments he had thoughtfully evolved early in his career" (202). The statement is an important one, for it relates to an understanding of Dos Passos' politics and art, intertwined as they are. Always the individual and his freedom has been Dos Passos' concern, and as Nanney brings forth in Dos Passos' own words "the source of the threat to individuality and freedom . . . changed" (202), but not his concern for the individual's struggles against the source of threat.

Most readers, especially those who are quite familiar with the body of Dos Passos' work and his development as an artist, will find some stimulating ideas within the pages of Nanney's book. She says of *Century's Ebb* (1975) near the conclusion of her study: "As the book comes to a close, the segments create an increasingly bleak and violent image of a nation in decline" (233). Like the author, other critics have commented on the pessimism present in this novel. But twenty-four years after the publication of *Century's Ebb* (a novel incomplete at the time of his death in 1970), in light of the Oklahoma City bombing, numerous massacres at public schools, automation decreasing human contact, as with ATM machines, one could say the message from the man who spent his life studying American culture is prophetic and not merely the querulous voice of a disillusioned writer. If we are to revisit Dos Passos, we need to give more attention to his art after *The Big Money*.

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REVIEW NOTE

THE PROFESSIONS OF AUTHORSHIP: Essays in Honor of Matthew J. Bruccoli. Edited by Richard Layman and Joel Myerson. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. 251 pp.

David Sanders, who prepared the outstanding bibliography on Dos Passos, recently alerted us to Richard Layman's essay "John Dos Passos: The Ground He Stood On," in this volume (184-198). As we believe that this essay invites discussion, we are calling attention to it here.

Brilliant as *U.S.A.* was, writes Layman, attempting to imagine Dos Passos' train of thought, "*U.S.A.* was lost on the audience he wanted to reach . . . He gave up the experimental fiction of . . . *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*, not because he had lost his creative drive," but because he wanted to write for the only audience that mattered to him: "the common reader who is open to lessons about his or her history and place in the grand tradition of democracy" (194).

In the same festschrift, probably by coincidence, Gordon Van Ness, writing on James Gould Cozzens, says of him: "He believed Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, as he wrote on 30 January 1940, 'the only novel yet published in this century that will be commonly read a hundred years from now'" (207).

But discussion of Dos Passos in the volume is only incidental. We learn much about the personality, achievements and influence of Matthew J. Bruccoli, of the University of South Carolina—scholar, writer, teacher, textual critic, editor, publisher, and bibliophile, and we get a fourteen-page listing of his publications. Over twenty writings besides Layman's essay appear in Bruccoli's honor. This reviewer especially liked Joel Myerson's "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Income from His Books" (135-149) and Julian Muller's lively, instructive article on the history of American book publishing (53-63).

Melvin Landsberg

Letter

DOS PASSOS' WATERCOLORS

To the Editor:

Thank you for sending the *John Dos Passos Newsletter*. It is a badly needed and well-conceived publication. I wish you success in generating an academic exchange on this most American, most modern, and most important writer. I am distressed by inadequate attention given to Dos Passos in many university classrooms. Efforts such as yours can help to reaffirm his primary position among American writers.

I have recently been engaged in organizing Dos Passos' artworks. The major body of his work belongs to his daughter, Lucy Dos Passos Coggin. She loaned 262 artworks, mostly watercolors, eight letters from Katy Dos Passos to Patrick Murphy illustrated by Dos Passos, and nineteen of his artist's notebooks to the Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina. I catalogued the works and chose thirty-four, including four works borrowed from Honoria Donnelly, for a one-night preview exhibit at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City on 12 September 1998. On the basis of that show, the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina agreed to an expanded exhibit that opened on 4 April 1999 in Columbia. The McKissick exhibit was marked by a day-long program involving scholars and teachers discussing effective methods of teaching Dos Passos at the undergraduate level and presenting papers on key works. Participants included Lucy Coggin, Virginia Carr, Donald Pizer, David Sanders, and modernist art historian Bradford Scott. The exhibit is presently being marketed to travel to other galleries. If you or any of your readers have suggestions for venues, please contact me.

Dos Passos was a serious and energetic painter for most of his mature life. The first professional exhibit of his works was at the National Arts Club in New York in

January 1922. He also exhibited fifty works at the Whitney Studio Museum in March 1923 and was a frequent participant between 1924 and 1934 in the annual exhibits of the Salons of America, where his works were shown along with those of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Max Weber, and Robert Laurent, to name a few of the most famous exhibitors. While Dos Passos was well trained in art history with an emphasis on Renaissance art, his own works are unmistakably modernist, showing the influence of his friends Picasso, Fernand Léger, Gerald Murphy, George Grosz, and Dos Passos' teachers Adelaide Lawson, Robert Laurent, Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova. He synthesized an array of modernist approaches from both Western Europe and the revolutionary art of Mexico into a distinctive style that complements his fiction. Dos Passos was not one of those writers who painted as a hobby. His artworks were another means of forceful creative expression.

RICHARD LAYMAN
Brucoli Clark Layman, Publishers

PROJECTED ISSUE ON STUDENT RESPONSE

We want to publish an issue devoted primarily to people's experiences in teaching Dos Passos. In keeping with the scholarly-critical intent of the Newsletter, the emphasis should be on students' response to a work, not the instructor's pedagogical method, though method may be described in the course of the account. Our suggestion for length is one or two columns (475 or 1000 words).

When we get enough interesting contributions, we will publish the issue. Please send your essay, or query, to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.