

John Dos Passos

NEWSLETTER

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**DOS PASSOS' U.S.A. BIOGRAPHIES AND
"THE LITERATURE OF POWER"**

by

Melvin Landsberg

When my university's library acquired the formidable twenty-four volume set of the *American National Biography*, the successor to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, I set about familiarizing myself with it.¹ Given my interest in John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, I had the idea of reading the *ANB* accounts of the subjects of Dos Passos' non-fictional biographical pieces in the trilogy. The contributors to *ANB* would have had access to about a half century of scholarship produced after Dos Passos' work, but my immediate object was not to see how Dos Passos might require correction. It was to compare his creative methods with the methods of *ANB* biographers of the same people. My comparisons could be comprehensive rather than representative, for all of Dos Passos non-fictional subjects except Wesley Everest are subjects of *ANB* articles.²

I knew what to expect in a general way, as *ANB* articles were "encyclopaedic," and Dos Passos' pieces were "literary." But Dos Passos' sorcery was in the particulars, which I will examine in this essay.

A typical *ANB* biography begins with the subject's full name (e.g., Veblen, Thorstein Bunde), the date and place of birth, and the date of death. It briefly characterizes the subject, offers some information about the parents' backgrounds, and sometimes their influence, and then proceeds to a chronological account of the subject's life. Whether the subject be a politician, inventor, industrialist, financier, or artist, the article offers details about the manner and nature of his or her achievements. Along the way the biographer

allows himself some interpretation, and after indicating the circumstances of the subject's death, concludes with an interpretative summation, and occasionally an account of contending interpretations. A brief bibliography follows.

The *ANB*'s articles are well-organized, clearly written, comprehensive and impersonal. But with occasional modest exceptions, they are not written to make any main point. In contrast, every one of Dos Passos' biographical pieces aims at making its point or often its points, and he has selected his data to make them. A Dos Passos piece does not assume that you have a prior interest in the subject. Its task is to make the biography compelling as soon as you encounter it, and to make it unforgettable after you have read it. The *ANB* biographies present "the literature of knowledge," and Dos Passos' pieces "the literature of power."

Here I am using the once well-known phrases of Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), the English essayist and critic. In a discussion of Alexander Pope's poetry, he distinguishes merely instructive from imaginative literature—that which teaches us from that which moves us. Imaginative literature, the literature of power, he says, addresses itself to the "great *moral* capacities of man." Then he goes on to explain: "Tragedy, romance, fairy tale, or epopee, all alike restore to man's mind the ideal of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else (left to the support of daily life in its realities) would languish for want of sufficient illustration."³

Even the titles of Dos Passos' biographies hold out the prospect of the literature of power. Only two, "Randolph Bourne" and "Joe Hill," are the subject's proper names. Typically Dos Passos' titles are tags to engage our interest, promising a story, sometimes with the aid of their allusiveness or tone: "Lover of Mankind" (Eugene V. Debs); "Emperor of the Caribbean" (Minor C. Keith); "Playboy" (John Reed); "A Hoosier Quixote" (Paxton Hibben); "The Bitter Drink" (Thorstein Veblen); "The Campers at Kitty Hawk" (Orville and Wilbur Wright); "Poor Little Rich Boy" (William Randolph Hearst).

Of Dos Passos' twenty-six biographical pieces, seven begin *in medias res* and two (J. P. Morgan's and Minor C. Keith's) with the subject's death. But whether, as literary works, they begin at the beginning (as does, say, the Moses story in the Bible); the middle (as in, say, *The Iliad*), or at the end (as in, say, Milton's "Lycidas"), they typically start with some novel concept or some concrete detail to engage the reader's attention.

The piece on Veblen starts *in medias res*:

Veblen,
a greyfaced shambling man lolling
resentful at his desk with his cheek on
his hand, in a low sarcastic mumble of
intricate phrases subtly paying out the
logical inescapable rope of matter-of-
fact for a society to hang itself by. . . .

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.

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That on Minor C. Keith, a founder of the United Fruit Company, begins with the subject's death:

When Minor C. Keith died all
the newspapers carried his picture,
a brighteyed man with a hawknose
and a respectable bay window, and an
uneasy look under the eyes.

Much of Dos Passos' biographical material is in free verse or prose poetry, and most of the pieces are amenable to individual study by the analytical methods employed by New Critics. (See, e.g., Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, first published in 1938). But to say this is to say little as, I repeat, the sorcery is in the particulars.

Here is a brief free-verse passage from the Edison biography, "The Electrical Wizard." Dos Passos uses plodding, repetitive prosody to describe the unimaginative aspect of three great American achievers:

Thomas A. Edison at eightytwo
worked sixteen hours a day;
he never worried about mathe-
matics or the social system or general-
ized philosophical concepts;
in collaboration with Henry Ford
and Harvey Firestone who never wor-
ried about mathematics or the social
system or generalized philosophical
concepts. . . .

In a passage from "Tin Lizzie," the piece on Ford, Dos Passos' virtuosity with rhythm is much more spectacular than in the Edison biography. Note that we have a single periodic sentence with alliteration (a combination which Walt Whitman used in his *Lilacs* elegy).

At Ford's production was improving
all the time; less waste, more spotters,
strawbosses, stool-pigeons (fifteen min-
utes for lunch, three minutes to go to the
toilet, the Taylorized speedup everywhere,
reach under, adjust washer, screw down
bolt, shove in cotterpin, reachunder ad-
justwasher, screwdown bolt, reachunder-
adjustscrewdownreachunderadjust until
every ounce of life was sucked off into
production and at night the workmen went
home grey shaking husks).

("Gray shaking husks" might remind one of Shake-
speare's phrase "bare ruined choirs" in Sonnet 73, both
phrases suggesting devastation.)

Like traditional verse, and rhetoric too, Dos Passos' presentations sometimes use recurring verbal formulas as

refrains or near refrains. I shall cite several instances. In "Playboy", he writes twice, "Reed was a westerner and words meant what they said," and a third time, "Reed was a westerner words meant what they said." Dos Passos also has "why not revolution?" three times in "Playboy"; and three times, with variations, "a man's got to like many things in his life."

Within the Woodrow Wilson piece, he incorporates the formula "Did Meester Veelson see . . .?" or "Did Meester Veelson know. . .?" three times. Writing of Minor C. Keith, he twice uses the strategically placed formula "Minor Keith didn't die," and also uses the phrase "uneasy look under the eyes" at the end as well as at the beginning of the piece.

In the Morgan biography he uses the parenthetical comment "(war and panics on the stock exchange, bank-ruptcies, warloans, good growing weather for the House of Morgan)" and at the end of the piece adds "machinegun-fire and arson" and "starvation, lice, cholera, and typhus" to the formula, in a manner perhaps reminding us of incremental repetition in verse.

Dos Passos' poetic skills, practices, and devices are indeed too numerous to recount in this brief essay. I list only a few of the other outstanding ones.

1. The exact word and the memorable phrase: Veblen's memorial—"the sharp clear prism of his mind."
2. The telling detail, as in the sketch of Woodrow Wilson: "while he was courting [the girl he married] he coached her in how to use the broad 'a'."
3. The use of allusion, as in the biography of William Randolph Hearst: "never man enough to cross the Rubicon."
4. Metonymy and synecdoche: William Jennings Bryan—"a silver tongue in a big mouth."
5. The technique in the sketches of John Reed, Isadora Duncan, and Rudolph Valentino of being both outside and inside the character.
6. The employment of tempo, so that we experience the furious pace of Isadora Duncan's life, and are brought up short by the abrupt conclusion of the piece, with a similarly rapid tempo, as if in mockery of the rushing account of her career:

The heavy trailing scarf caught in
a wheel, wound tight. Her head was
wrenched against the side of the car.
The car stopped instantly; her neck
was broken, her nose crushed, Isadora
was dead.

Dos Passos makes repeated use of irony in the biographical sketches—as the New Critics were continually speaking of irony, I suspect that their lack of attention to him was partly due to their different social and political beliefs. There is, for instance, the irony in "Tin Lizzie," where the very man who introduced mass production of au-

tomobiles does not understand how it altered the economy. Moralistically he blames the stock market crash of 1929 on “people’s gambling and getting into debt.”

“The Campers at Kitty Hawk” is a more complex piece of irony. Here, in a prose poem with sections of free verse, Dos Passos writes in admiration of the two young mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, who, solving centuries-old problems, constructed and flew the first airplane. At the same time he tells of their efforts to cash in on their invention; besides being mechanics they were businessmen in the American mold. The Wright brothers demonstrate their invention before European heads of state and receive a shower of medals. Now without transition the biographical account ends, and we are with Dos Passos’ generation in World War I as he and others cower before machine-gun fire from attacking aircraft. But despite the wake of wartime carnage, and the exploitation of a new industry by financiers (in this exploitation Dos Passos sees the brothers as tainted with guilt) the author feels exaltation in the technical achievement of the two young men.

Viewing this piece we can see Dos Passos—influenced we know by Thorstein Veblen—yearning to separate inventors and technicians from the big-business and military civilization in which they are immersed. As an innovator and craftsman in language (this is mostly implicit in U.S.A.) he has separated himself from the pollution of high finance and carnage, and wishes the Wright brothers had desired and been able to do the same.⁴

The critic Waldo Frank once wrote that H. L. Mencken brought energy to despair.⁵ In contrast, as we see in the biographical sketches in *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos brought energy to scorn (e.g., for Minor C. Keith), hope (e.g., for Frank Lloyd Wright), defiance (e.g., of William Randolph Hearst), and admiration (e.g., for Robert M. LaFollette). It was because of Dos Passos’ energetic resistance to the social outrages about him that he appealed to many of his contemporaries in the 1930s. His imaginative treatment of the subjects and his moral desiderata make his biographies choice examples of the “literature of power” in American letters.

Notes

1. *American National Biography*, edited by John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. “Vag,” in *The Big Money*, might be regarded as a fictional biography.

3. Thomas De Quincey, Review of “The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire. By W. Roscoe, Esq.” *North American Review*, August, 1848. In *De Quincey’s Literary Criticism* (ed., H. Darbishire). London: Henry Frowde, 1909. Consulted in reprint by Folcroft Library Editions (1973), pp. 94, 96.

4. The contrast between Dos Passos as depicted in “The Camera Eye” and the public relations men depicted in narrative sections of *U.S.A.* is implicit. On Veblen’s influence and on writers as technicians and inventors, see Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to “U.S.A.”* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), pp. 174, 224.

5. Waldo Frank, *The Re-discovery of America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), p. 321.

U.S.A. Volumes in New Paperback Editions

THE 42nd PARALLEL. By John Dos Passos. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Mariner Book edition. 323 pages. \$13.00

1919. John Dos Passos. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Mariner Book edition. 380 pages. \$13.00.

THE BIG MONEY. John Dos Passos. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Mariner Book edition. 448 pages. \$13.00.

Houghton Mifflin Company, Dos Passos’ longtime publisher, has brought *U.S.A.* out in three attractively designed trade paperback volumes. Each has the same foreword: a five-page biographical, critical, and appreciative essay by E. L. Doctorow. The dimensions are generous for paperbacks (8 1/4 by 5 1/2 inches), the paper stock is noticeably white, the type and leading promise ease for the eye, and the page margins are of decent size. One may regret that the publisher did not include Reginald Marsh’s illustrations, but doing so would have raised the cost of the books.

Cost is a matter of concern to people teaching *U.S.A.* The three low-priced Signet-NAL paperback volumes of *U.S.A.* are out of print; but fortunately teachers wishing to include a volume of *U.S.A.* in a literature course now have recourse to any of the three moderately priced Mariner books.

If a teacher wants to assign all of *U.S.A.*, he or she should consider using the Library of America one-volume hardcover edition. It costs forty dollars and, unlike the Mariner editions, has a scholarly apparatus.

Abstracts of Ph.D. Dissertations

We attempt to publish abstracts of recent dissertations on Dos Passos that may be of interest to our readers. Such publication depends, however, on receiving the author's permission.

“John Dos Passos and the Crisis of American Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Literary Form,” by Seth Moglen. 207 pages.

This dissertation seeks to retrieve from neglect one of the most ambitious works of modern American literature, the *U.S.A.* trilogy. This recovery forwards two larger projects: it provides access to aspects of early twentieth-century American radicalism that have been virtually erased by the Cold War, and it enables us to rethink the relationship between modernist and naturalist modes of story-telling.

Chapter One offers a revisionary account of Dos Passos' politics, emphasizing the democratic and humanist character of his socialism. It then charts the two crises that shook and ultimately destroyed the writer's radical faith: the repressive Red Scare that followed World War One and the catastrophic emergence of Stalinism within the socialist movement itself during the 1930s. *U.S.A.* is suspended between these two political traumas, and its multiple narratives represent a sustained and dynamic response, conducted over ten years, to this evolving, complex and increasingly confusing political experience.

Chapters Two and Three examine the psychological and ideological differences between *U.S.A.*'s modernist and naturalist narratives. In the modernist biographical prose-poems dispersed throughout the trilogy, Dos Passos invented a literary form that enabled him both to mourn the traumatic losses suffered by socialists during the Red Scare and to contextualize those disappointments within a forward-looking project of tradition-building. This dual undertaking was enabled by a modernist documentary technique that records the hard facts of repression while transforming them into subjective metaphors that bare the libidinal roots of socialist aspiration.

In contrast to the biographies, the naturalist fictions of *U.S.A.* struggle to end what Dos Passos called “the torment of hope.” Employing naturalist strategies of determinism and misanthropy, Dos Passos sought to prove that socialism was doomed to failure. These fictions enabled him to express his rage at social forces that seemed beyond his control and at impotent characters who embodied his own aspirations. At the same time, through this fictional “fantasy of despair,” Dos Passos attempted to free himself from feelings of responsibility by authorizing the acceptance of impotence as a universal and inevitable fact of human life.

University of California, Berkeley, 1999

“Scriptor Ex Machina: John Dos Passos and the Emergence of Posthuman Poetics,” by Evan J. Nisonson. 225 pages.

I structure my study around a central thesis: that scientific discoveries in the area of the technologies of observation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fomented a radical shift in understanding subjectivity, and thus became part and process of a parallel shift in poetics. These poetics characterized the period of modernism. By considering technologies of observation in his epic novel *U.S.A.*, John Dos Passos synthesizes ideas presented by Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov and French avant-garde poet Blaise Cendrars to develop a posthuman poetics. Posthuman here means a reconfiguration of the humanist/enlightenment concept of human, oftentimes envisioned as being a marriage or structural coupling between the organic and inorganic—a hybrid of machine and human—and a reorganization of the value of existential boundaries manifesting itself in simulation. This configuration of the posthuman most pointedly demands a re-evaluation of subjectivity: of what is it constituted and where is it located? Dos Passos' emerging science of narrative construction fomented an altered legitimacy to the value and definition of human, shaping the period of modernism and prefiguring the ways in which information, computer, and medical technologies in the later part of the century were to explicitly call into question these very terms. Indeed, he foregrounds the ways in which information technologies of the mid-twentieth century and cyber technologies of today continue to shape a posthuman writer.

University of California, Los Angeles, 1999

“PAPERS OF JOHN DOS PASSOS” SECTION

**The University of Virginia guide, reproduced exactly by
the *John Dos Passos Newsletter*.**

The guide was compiled and written by Philip J. DiBenedetto, a library volunteer.

As the University of Virginia Library is the major repository of Dos Passos' papers,
this guide is a most valuable resource for Dos Passos scholars.

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