

JOHN DOS PASSOS IN THE 1930s

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In 1930 John dos Passos was nearing the pinnacle of his impressive career. **The Forty Second Parallel**, the first volume of his trilogy **USA**, would be published that year to critical acclaim; he was respected as a writer by political factions both left and right; he was actively involved in causes in which he believed such as Emergency Committee for the Southern Political Prisoners (the Scottsboro Boys); and he was newly and happily married to Katy Smith and enjoying his friendships with other literary lights such as Ernest Hemingway. When the decade ended, Dos Passos's literary decline had begun: **Adventures of a Young Man**, his first novel after the publication of **USA** as a trilogy in 1938, had been greeted with, if not scorn, then certainly dismay on the part of most critics, who sensed that his disillusionment with the political left had drained off much of his literary power. Dos Passos had withdrawn from many of his left-wing involvements, and while his marriage with Katy remained happy, his friendships with literary lights such as Hemingway had dimmed badly. He had reason to feel himself isolated, a situation

from which he never emerged during the rest of a career that ended thirty years later, in 1970.

What had happened to the American writer whom as late as 1938 Jean-Paul Sartre had declared to be "the greatest writer of our time?" The answer, I think, is simple: from the start of his career Dos Passos was an individualist very much in the North American grain; yet perhaps unexpected for someone who during the latter 1920s and the 1930s—at least until his open break with the leftists because of events in the Spanish Civil War in 1937—was one of their literary darlings. But his heroes had never been the organizers of systems that belittled the individual or aggrandized industries, cities, and mass media. Rather they were writers like the Spanish satirist Antonio Machado or the mocker of conventional society, William Thackeray; independent thinkers such as the economist Thorstein Veblen or the innovative architect Frank Lloyd Wright; brilliant designers like the Wright Brothers—whom he praised for doing the work on their airplanes themselves until the end of their days; maverick left-wing figures such as the labor organizers Big Bill Haywood and Wesley Everest; and most of all, the poet Walt Whitman, whose paean to the United States Dos Passos cited again and again. No hater of the U. S. A., Dos Passos was, rather, a fervent patriot—"I, too, Walt Whitman" was his cry—and when in the next-to-last *Camera Eye of USA* he wrote, "America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have bought the laws and fenced

off the meadows...we stand defeated America," he was expressing the mood of the disillusioned Whitman of Democratic Vistas.

The constant, then, was individualism, and all his life he searched for positions where he thought there was the greatest possibility for its expression. Once he had broken with "the establishment" because of what he considered the travesty of World War I, he embraced successively a kind of anarchistic socialism, communism (never the Stalinist version), an independent left-wing position not far from Trotskyism, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Eisenhower Republicanism, and finally Barry Goldwater's conservatism, which had Dos Passos lived he would have gleefully emerged triumphant in the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

In the history of all these shifts the 1930s stand out as the most volatile time. To clarify his changing stances his correspondence with his close friend, the critic Edmund Wilson, is especially useful. In early 1931, for instance, when he was generally assumed to be a member of the American Communist Party (but was not), he wrote Wilson:

I guess the trouble with me is I cant make up my mind to swallow political methods. Most of the time I think the IWW theory was right—Build a new society in the shell of the old—but practically all they did was go to jail

Even when he was perceived to be most outspokenly on the

far left, that is, Dos Passos was doubting the "party line." The individualistic International Workers of the World were who appealed to him. But they had never gotten far with their programs, he acknowledged. "This is all very confused," he closed his letter to Wilson, recognizing that he could offer no answers. (398)

Nevertheless, he continued working with the Communists, and in the fall of 1931 traveled with what came to be known as the Dreiser Committee to Harlan County, Kentucky, to investigate the conditions of striking mine workers there. While he was willing afterward to write an open letter seeking support for the miners, he was personally disturbed by the actions of the left-wing activists, especially the Communists, who he believed to be manipulating people like himself for their own advantage. Once again it seemed to him that the little man was losing out as organizations vied for power. In this case it was the Communists who seemed to him to be manipulating the miners in order to achieve publicity for political rather than humane ends. The Communists, of course, would have argued that only through political control could one achieve a humane system. Dos Passos, the individualist, would assert that ends did not matter except as the means were moral and did not abuse those who had previously been victimized. Although he would continue to work closely with left-wing groups for the next years, his drift away had already begun.

All credit to Dos Passos, however, for while he had his doubts

as early as 1932 about the far left, he did not abandon it. But he was not the sort of person who enjoyed shouting from the ramparts, and he thought, rightly, that the most good he could do would be with his writing. Thus the first half of the 1930s was devoted primarily to creating *USA*, in which he meant to show what had gone wrong with the country during the years 1900-1929. If people could understand that, then something might be done. The country, he believed, had in its rush for "the big money" departed from the values upon which it had been founded. "I rather imagine that a great deal of the original slant of my work comes from that vein (the Whitmanesque) in the American tradition," he wrote a graduate student in 1938 who questioned him about his writing. "I'm sure it's more likely to stem from Whitman (and perhaps Veblen) than from Marx, whom I read late and not as completely as I should like. The Marxist critics are just finding out, with considerable chagrin, that my stuff isn't Marxist." (516)

Granted Dos Passos wrote this in 1938 after he had broken definitively from the Communist left, but he was accurate in asserting that he had never been a Marxist in outlook. He believed in free enterprise, unfettered by bureaucracy, and his objection was not against capitalism *per se*, but against the bureaucratic role of big business in the teens and twenties. When in 1932 the literary critic Malcolm Cowley wrote to Dos Passos to ask, in effect, what was going on in 1919, the second volume of *USA*, he responded, "I think

also—if I managed to pull it off—the later part of the book shows a certain crystallization (call it monopoly capitalism?) of society that didn't exist in the early part of *42nd Parallel* (call it competitive capitalism?)—but as for the note of hope—gosh who knows? (403-404) What America needed, he believed, were technicians to control technology, a humanized bureaucracy, in other words, or as he put it in his mini-biography of Thorstein Veblen that appeared in *The Big Money*, “a new matter-of-fact commonsense society dominated by the needs of the men and women who did the work and the incredibly vast possibilities for peace and plenty offered by the progress of technology.” (89) Nice idea, we might add, but how does one get there? Dos Passos, like the rest of us, never found an answer.

If his experiences in Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1931 had made him wary of the Communists, his gradually increasing approval of Franklin Roosevelt's social programs for the New Deal, coupled with his growing distrust of the Communists, moved him toward a position with the independent left by the mid-1930s. While not willing to embrace the New Deal, he observed to Wilson in the spring of 1933 that Roosevelt was a “fascinating performer” whom Dos Passos at least grudgingly approved of, even if a new sales tax Roosevelt had proposed would hurt “you and me and The Forgotten Man.” (430) Like many other liberal, radical, or nearly radical citizens, Dos Passos hoped for what might be termed a second *American* revo-

lution to cure the ills of the United States in the wake of the Crash of 1929.

Particularly he did not want a revolution on Marxian terms because he thought the Communists were less and less in accord with what was occurring in the country. When members of the Communist Party disrupted a Socialist Party rally at Madison Square Garden in New York in February 1934, Dos Passos signed "An Open Letter to the Communist Party" which protested its disruptive actions. Published in the *New Masses*, the letter brought a quick response from the *Masses* editors, who expressed dismay that Dos Passos had joined company with other "vacillating intellectuals." The editors hoped that he in fact remained "the revolutionary writer, the comrade." Dos Passos answered the editors' letter and declared his concern for the policies of the radical movement in the United States. He hoped for "a workers' and producers' commonwealth," he said. (Ludington, 324-325) To Wilson he wrote that "the whole Marxian radical movement is in a moment of intense disintegration." The Marxist might be correct in their analysis of what was wrong with the United States, but their every move only seemed to help the enemy.

Once more he refused to abandon the left altogether. "The only alternative is passionate unmarxian revival of Anglo-Saxon democracy or an industrial crisis helped by a collapse in the director's office," he asserted, and concluded:

How you can coordinate Fourth of July democracy with the present industrial-financial setup I don't see. Maybe Roosevelt is already as far as we can go in that direction. (435-436)

But he was moving toward "Fourth of July Democracy" as he became increasingly disillusioned by Stalinist Russia and by what he considered the belligerence of the American Communist Party. He could not accept the idea that the individual should allow himself to be entirely subservient to any movement, because that way dictatorship lay, whether from the left or from the right.

His break with the Communists became complete in 1937, when in Spain with Ernest Hemingway to make a film in support of the Republican cause, he became convinced that the Communists, while supporting the Republicans, had secretly murdered his friend Jose Robles Pantoja because he knew too much about their aim to take over the Spanish government if the Republicans could defeat the rebel forces of Franco. Whatever the exact truth of the incident, Dos Passos was convinced that his version was correct. Enraged, he quickly withdrew from Spain after a near altercation with Hemingway about Robles, but more, about their disagreement over what was occurring in the civil war. Back in the United States, he wrote a piece entitled "Farewell to Europe!" In Spain he declared,

behind the lines a struggle as violent almost as the war had been going on between the Marxist concept of the totalitarian state, and the Anarchist concept of individual liberty.

The Communists were forging ahead, he noted, and he still hoped for a Republican victory, but he wondered if the price, "a centralized military state," was worth it. He was happy to be back in the United States, where there were still alternatives to dictatorship. "Sure we've got our class war," he concluded,

we've got our giant bureaucratic machines for anti-human power, but I can't help feeling that we are still moving on a slightly divergent track from the European world. Not all the fascist-hearted newspaper owners in the country, nor the Chambers of Commerce, nor the armies of hired gunthugs of the great industries can change the fact that we have the Roundhead Revolution in our heritage and the Bill of Rights and the fact that the democracy in the past has been able, under Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, and perhaps a fourth time (it's too soon to know yet) under Franklin Roosevelt, to curb powerful ruling groups. America has got to be in a better position to work out the problem: individual liberty vs. bureaucratic industrial organization than any other part of the world. (Ludington, 378-379)

Dos Passos's erstwhile friends on the left attacked him for his statements, but this did not halt his expression of his views. Whatever doubts about his position remained after his farewell to Europe were removed when he published his next novel in 1939, *Adventures of a Young Man*, a story of the political disillusionment of a man very like himself who learns at the cost of his life about the perfidy of the Communists. Dos Passos was vilified by most critics,

and with that his literary reputation began to decline. Politics certainly played an important part in his loss of prestige, but it was not only a matter of his changing his colors. When he did the passion in his work dissipated, or better put, it became more vitriol and less passion. He had made up his mind entirely, and his books after USA lacked the fire, the complexity, that are evident in his great work.

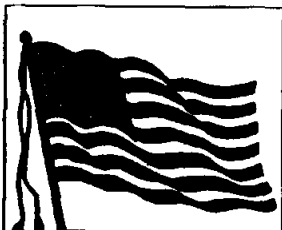
The story of Dos Passos in the 1930s is a fascinating one, involved as it is in the many political in's and out's of that tumultuous decade. And it is a very American one—North American, that is—for what gave Dos Passos both his strength and his weakness as a writer and thinker was the trait of individualism, which caused him to take political issues personally and to see them in absolute, black and white terms.

Works Cited

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Thank God for the Supreme Court!

THE Supreme Court of the United States has again upheld the Constitution and Americanism. By a unanimous decision, the National Recovery Act has been declared unconstitutional.

This decision will be hailed with gratitude throughout the country.

It marks the emergence of sanity—from the whirl of confusion, confusion, crazy bill-drafting and adolescent experimenting, which make up so large a part of the New Deal.

It spells the knell of an greedy and ineffect a bureaucracy as ever attempted to spread itself over a country dedicated to freedom and over a people pre-eminent for their sturdy virtues and self-reliant character.

Let us hope that it spells the end also of the pacifist innovator and empty-headed theorist in government.

THERE IS a way out of the depression; there IS an avenue to recovery; there IS an open return to happiness and prosperity,—but the road is the way of common sense, of respect for the fruits of work and enterprise, of respect for individual rights.

The way is the American way,—vindicated over and over again throughout our history.

It is the way that has made us a great and powerful nation; that has made the conditions of life among our people better than with any other people in the world.

It is the way of respect for our Constitution, the ark of our liberties, the foundation of our greatness, the marrow of our security, the promise of our future.

THANK GOD FOR THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES!

THE shifting gusts of short-lived and fleeting opinion cannot sway it. The froth of the strutting little reformers of the day, the unsharpened instruments of the moment, the litter of a so-called Brain Trust, are powerless to confound, much less sway, American judges.

Salutary, timely, needed, was this great decision.

It reminds the American people that the foundations of their life are deep-embedded in justice and freedom; and that reason, self-command and integrity both of thought and conduct are still American characteristics.

San Francisco Examiner, May 28, 1935

The Trojan Horse at Our Gate



Orr, Nov., 1935. © 1935, by the Chicago Tribune

"Gentlemen, a Toast!



Baer, Milwaukee Leader, Jan. 22, 1935