

While this does not diminish his greatness, it suggests that even in the case of superior authors, the production and consumption of their ideas and books are shaped by specific historical forces. The art of every author has its social origins and functions. In themes and in subject matter it reflects the period in which it was created, as well as the subsequent periods in which it was read, with each successive generation interpreting its own version of the story. The author of *Borges and His Fiction* is to be commended for reminding the reader of these truths and for returning the erstwhile private experience of reading Borges to the public domain.

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## Dos Passos, Politics, and Art

John Dos Passos has undergone something of a critical renaissance in recent years: a prophet of social conflict during the Jazz Age and the Depression who declined to right-wing tendentiousness in his later years, he is now being forgiven some of his sins and is being recognized as a major writer who, in his best work, produced representations of American life possessing passion, depth, and considerable artistic power. Townsend Ludington's publication of Dos Passos's letters and diaries (*The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 1973) and of a meticulous authorized biography (*John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 1980) guarantees that copious materials are now available to scholars interested in investigating the relationship between Dos Passos's life and art. Robert C. Rosen's *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) has made excellent use of this information: it is the first critical study that brings to bear upon Dos Passos's work a detailed survey of the novelist's changing beliefs. Moreover, Rosen recognizes the full significance of his biographical materials and places the question of politics at the center of his textual readings. *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* is, quite simply, the single best critical study of Dos Passos that we have.

Rosen's main argument is that an appreciation of the complexities of Dos Passos's political views is essential to an appreciation of his art: Dos Passos was a consciously political being, and his works, while varying greatly in ideological orientation as well as in literary quality, consistently aimed to contextualize social experience in the framework of concretely historical analysis. Such a view of Dos Passos as *zoon politikon*, while perhaps self-evident to the many readers of his fiction, is by no means widely accepted by the majority of his critics. Rosen summarizes the difference between his own approach and the dominant tendencies in Dos Passos criticism:

Many critics simply ignore or deny the essential political dimension of Dos Passos's work and life. Formalists focus rather narrowly on the subtle qualities of a "text" that seems to them to exist outside of history and biography. Some critics take due note of the charged political surface of Dos Passos's fiction, but see beneath that surface a politics that is "clearly non-political," or "essentially apolitical"—in other words, just a distraction,

or a mannerism. Others admit that Dos Passos's fiction does indeed have serious political implications, but suggest, rather condescendingly, that Dos Passos himself wandered into a political arena where he (like all artists, presumably) did not belong, and ended up naively, and even embarrassingly, "parroting" the slogans and "uttering the cant" of various political groups. And still others dissolve Dos Passos's quite detailed social criticism into impossibly grand abstractions like "the human condition," or else simply find that criticism far less important than the deep-seated neuroses they are sure it manifests. (p. ix).

Rosen's acknowledgment of the centrality of politics to Dos Passos's work provides him with an illuminating angle of textual interpretation and evaluation and enables him to address what he calls "the complex relationship between political ideology and literary form." Because he has a firm grasp of the intricacies of Dos Passos's evolving views on self and society, he can effectively approach the contradictions—formal as well as ideological—informing the range of Dos Passos's work. Some of Rosen's observations about individual works have been proposed by other critics, but never before has the whole canon of Dos Passos's work been submitted to a scrutiny from such a rigorous point of view. Thus Rosen attributes the formal imbalances and irresolutions of the early fictions, from *One Man's Initiation—1917* to *Manhattan Transfer*, to the author's wavering between aestheticism and social analysis, elitism and identification with the oppressed—that is, to the absence of a coherent politics of materialist class analysis. The narrative point of view of *One Man's Initiation*, Rosen argues, is blurred by Dos Passos's sentimental valorization of the perspective of his sensitive petty bourgeois hero. *Three Soldiers* is structurally dislocated by Dos Passos's ability to empathize with only one of his three soldiers—namely, the quasi-autobiographical artist-hero, who possesses a critical awareness of self and world apparently inaccessible to the two working-class protagonists. *Manhattan Transfer* partially reifies the very alienation that it would condemn because the author does not match his vision of urban fragmentation with a commensurately powerful causal analysis.

Along similar lines, Rosen links the narrative inertness and tedious moralism of Dos Passos's later work with the author's increasingly confused antiauthoritarian politics—his ritual invocation of a programmatic individualism as the antidote to all life's anxieties, public and private. In *Chosen Country*, for example, Dos Passos chooses to structure the text around an awkwardly domestic plot line, which improbably resolves a host of complex social questions through the hero's launching of a successful legal career and his long-awaited nuptials with the cheerful Lulie. (Dos Passos's tendency to define happiness as marriage with a chirping female is one of the more irritating recurrent traits of his later fiction.) The sentimental patriotism of *The Ground We Stand On* and *The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson* proposes an uncritical nostalgia rather than any clear perspective upon the relationship between Enlightenment ideals and modern capitalist society. Rosen remarks, "Dos Passos's discovery of the virtues of self-government through the lives of early Americans seems a priori: he comes to conclusions his own thinking and experience had already led him to. He finds hope, but few insights, and his ransacking of the American past at times verges on antiquarianism. . . . He never fully explains just how we learn from history" (p. 101). The tendentious anti-Communism of *Adventures of a Young Man, Most Likely To Succeed*, and *Midcentury*, Rosen argues, produces painfully stereotyped characterizations: in depicting his lone individualists who are victimized by heartless Stalinist bureaucrats, Dos Passos abandons the attempt to construct a plausible sequence of developing action and instead resorts to shallow psychology, special pleading, and melodramatic turns of plot.

Rosen's remarks on *U. S. A.* demonstrate that, by contrast, an impassioned absorption with the portrayal of class conflict is central to Dos Passos's most successful artistic production. While we might have wished for a more comprehensive examination of *U. S. A.*—it is, after all, on the basis of this trilogy that Dos Passos retains his reputation as a major novelist of the century—Rosen ably demonstrates that the strength of *U. S. A.* lies in its dynamic conjunction of subjective and objective perspectives, individual and collective experience. What is more, Rosen explores the ramifications of Dos Passos's changing politics during the time when he was writing *U. S. A.*: the period 1927-1935 was a crucial watershed in Dos Passos's political development, and his altering stances leave important ideological and structural traces in a trilogy that is too often treated as a single philosophical unit. In short, Rosen argues that Dos Passos is a writer to whom political ideas mattered immensely, and that any critical study which overlooks this intentionality—or reshapes it according to the critic's own preferred approach—violates the integrity of all Dos Passos's work, the failures as well as the successes.

If we scrutinize Rosen's argument carefully, however, we realize that it contains two related, but separable, propositions: first, that Dos Passos's writing is consummately political; second, that it is artistically successful to the extent that it is energized by the Marxian notion of class struggle, flawed to the extent that it lapses into one or another version of bourgeois ideology, whether the liberalism of the earlier years or the conservatism of the later years. This second proposition is more controversial but also more exciting than the first; unfortunately, Rosen blurs his theoretical stance here, and thus skirts the full implications of his incisive account of Dos Passos's life and art. Is Rosen suggesting that his argument about left-wing politics and effective literary form applies merely to the case of Dos Passos? The point is then well taken, but somewhat self-evident: most critics, of whatever ideological orientation, will grant that Dos Passos's best work is also his most Marxian. Or is Rosen operating on the premise that all political writing—indeed, perhaps all writing—is most effective when most influenced by the perspective of historical materialism? This point is intriguing—and, indeed, defensible from a Marxian point of view—but clearly it requires explicit theoretical explication, as it brings to the fore the problematic relation between aesthetics, politics, and standards for critical evaluation. Or is Rosen suggesting a view somewhere in between: that, for critical realists who, like Dos Passos, struggle against the limits imposed by bourgeois idealist explanations of social reality, a Marxian paradigm provides the most dynamic philosophical and narrative framework—since, it is implied, these writers are already tending in the direction of historical materialism in any case? This last possibility seems to me closest to the set of assumptions underlying *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer*. Rosen exhibits a clear preference for structural strategies that lay bare the dialectical relations among characters in the text's represented world; in other words, he employs an unabashedly ideological framework for aesthetic evaluation, one that could fruitfully be applied to a range of critical realist works—from *U. S. A.* to *The House of Mirth* to *Native Son*—which achieve formal coherence to the extent that they effectively represent the material relationship between individual fates and what Marx and Engels called “the real foundation.” But Rosen's reticence to openly proclaim his own vantage point leaves a slightly disturbing hiatus in his study. In his preface he announces his intention to investigate the “relationship between political passions and literary efforts,” but he restricts this inquiry to an unnecessarily particularized and descriptive level. His two-page closing section, “Politics and the Writer,” only whets our appetite; we hunger for a detailed conclusion devoted to the provocative questions the study has raised. The book would have gained force for its conclusions about Dos Passos—as well as a valuable theoretical dimension—had Rosen directly addressed the concern that has evidently spurred his interest from the start.

One other difficulty besets this otherwise persuasive study of Dos Passos's politics and art—namely, Rosen's occasionally superficial and stereotypical treatment of those forces on the organized left with which Dos Passos associated himself in the 1920's and 1930's. If Rosen believes that Dos Passos wrote his best novels when his politics were most left-leaning, why, the critic might ask, did the novelist not align himself more decisively with the Communist Party, which furnished the crucible of his theoretical development and political activism? Rosen judiciously covers the major political crises in Dos Passos's life in the mid-1930's: that is, the novelist's objections to the "dual unionist" strategy adopted by the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) during the Harlan County miners' strike; the Communists' attack upon a rally held by the Socialist party at Madison Square Garden in 1934; the death of Dos Passos's friend Jose Robles during the Spanish Civil War, possibly at the hands of the Communist Party of Spain, who claimed that Robles was a spy for the fascists. But these separate biographical experiences constitute an inadequate analysis of the causality behind Dos Passos's political development—inadequate, at least, in a study such as this, which takes significant steps toward delineating the complex relationship between a writer and the multitude of political forces operative in his historical moment. Rosen's unexplained description of the CPUSA as "rigid" (p. 69); his facile counterposing of "dogma" with "democracy" in his discussion of the editorial policies of the early *New Masses* (p. 51); his questionable reliance upon a typology of the radical personality offered by Max Eastman, hardly an authoritative or dispassionate source of information about the early communist movement in the United States—these biased formulations suggest that Rosen has perhaps been somewhat uncritical in his absorption of conventional bourgeois accounts of the relationship between the writer and the left during the Depression. Certainly there were serious difficulties in the line that the CPUSA adopted toward art and artists—a line that departed from basic Marxian principles in important ways—but Rosen's occasional resort to cliché detracts from his ability fully to investigate these matters. In a study of lesser political subtlety we might routinely expect such reductionism; in an examination possessing the generally admirable objectivity of Rosen's, we are led to hope for a more consistently probing investigation of the relationship between the organized left and the sympathetic artists whom it hoped to organize.

Despite these flaws in its methodology, Rosen's book is a welcome—and much-needed—addition to the recent harvest of Dos Passos criticism. Because of the seminal relation that Dos Passos bears toward contemporary experiments with narrative forms that blend fact and fiction, and because of the renewed interest in ideology and historicity that is currently being voiced among literary critics, we may expect that Dos Passos's star (or should we say "stock"?) will continue to rise. *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* provides an excellent biographical and critical discussion of a novelist who is too often ignored; it should spark further inquiry—not only into the texts themselves, but also into the broader theoretical and ideological questions—about politics, history, and writing itself—that Dos Passos's best work so urgently raises.

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