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### Ludington, John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey

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Townsend Ludington. *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980. xx, 568 pp. \$20.00.

John Dos Passos occupies a problematic position in the history of twentieth-century American literature. No consensus exists on many basic issues. Should he be considered a "lost generation" writer along with his friends Hemingway and Fitzgerald, or a political precursor of proletarian writers such as John Steinbeck and Richard Wright? Is *USA* a modernist classic worthy of comparison with *Ulysses* and *The Sound and the Fury*, or a curiosity of interest only to literary specialists? What accounts for the decline in quality of Dos Passos's post-*USA* fiction? For his political metamorphosis from socialist investigator of the Harlan County mine conditions to Goldwater Republican?

Townsend Ludington's *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* provides a valuable biographical approach to these issues. Working with the cooperation of the Dos Passos estate, Ludington has thoroughly researched his subject. Avoiding the excesses of the "what-Faulkner-had-for-dinner" school of biography, Ludington has written a lucid account of the events of Dos Passos's life. Ludington emphasizes external events — on occasion his descriptions of places Dos Passos visited seem over-long — and rarely speculates on his subject's state of mind or his personal relationships, particularly those involving his two marriages. In light of Hemingway's claim that Dos Passos's marriage to his first wife Katy accounted for the decline in Dos Passos's fiction, more probing might have been appropriate. Still, Ludington's external emphasis seems appropriate to a writer who considered himself in large part a chronicler of the American scene.

Ludington's success as a biographer, however, is frequently overshadowed by his limitations as a critic. Inevitably, the volume raises the dilemmas concerning Dos Passos's political and literary development. Unfortunately, Ludington attempts to explain the myriad seeming inconsistencies by invoking the overly simple principles of individualism in politics and satire in literature.

Ludington's political case is by and large more convincing than his literary position. He argues that Dos Passos's political stances were consistently predicated on opposition to institutions he saw threatening individual liberty. Thus he could enthuse in the 1920s

over a Soviet Union that had replaced a Czarist regime, and in the 1950s and 60s support the Republican right in opposition to what he saw as a stultifying New Deal Bureaucracy. Ludington notes the inconsistency of Dos Passos's support for Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts, attributing it to a fear of communist domination. One of the book's best realized sequences centers on Dos Passos's painful withdrawal from the left during and after the Spanish Civil War, a withdrawal which alienated him both from friends such as Hemingway and from many of the most influential critics of the time.

At times Ludington seems to imply that this political situation undermined Dos Passos's literary reputation. More frequently he attributes the decline in standing to a failure on the part of critics to perceive Dos Passos as a writer of satire. The best that can be said for this thesis is that it explains second-rate works such as the *DC* trilogy better than Dos Passos's masterpieces. At times it seems as if Ludington's desire to minimize the change in Dos Passos's political principles generates an untenable desire to argue a consistent satirical aesthetic. Significantly, nearly all of Ludington's evidence supporting Dos Passos as a satirist comes from the years following *USA*. In fact, Ludington offers little insight into Dos Passos's greatest works. He devotes just one paragraph to *Manhattan Transfer*, for example, although he discusses *The Grand Design* at length. If he allows more space to *USA*, his discussion is more descriptive than analytical.

In fact, Ludington never juxtaposes Dos Passos's work either with that of the modernist masters (Joyce, Faulkner) or that of the political and existential rebels (Steinbeck, Wright, Sartre). A reader relying on his critical descriptions would most certainly find Sartre's pangyric to Dos Passos as "the greatest writer of our time" incomprehensible. This failure to engage the core of Dos Passos's works renders *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* finally disappointing. Although it will probably remain the standard source of factual information, the deep interpretive work on Dos Passos remains to be done.

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