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FROM THE FUTURE TO THE PAST: THE DISILLUSIONMENT OF JOHN DOS PASSOS

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The dramatic change in John Dos Passos's outlook between his writing of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, the last novel of which he finished in early 1936, and his subsequent writing of *Adventures of A Young Man* in 1938 is at the crux of his identity as a novelist and political thinker. Critics have long recognized this moment as the most significant turning point in Dos Passos's literary and political life.[1] This essay explores Dos Passos's political reversal in light of his concurrent reformulation of the relative imaginative power of the past and the future. Although critics have recognized the importance of Dos Passos's change in political direction, his simultaneous disavowal of revolutionary futurism and embrace of a nostalgic historicism deserves more attention.

Dos Passos's political views were fully integrated with his aesthetic position throughout his literary career. The death of Dos Passos's poet friend José Robles and Dos Passos's subsequent discovery of the Spanish Communists' attempt to conceal the Spaniard's execution precipitated Dos Passos's break with the political left and caused him to set a new intellectual course as a strongly nationalist historical researcher and as a novelist with a much more traditional narrative form. He turned away from Europe—counseling against U.S. involvement in the Spanish Civil War in 1937—and also recoiled from the modernity that had heretofore been a galvanizing influence on his art. Whereas Italian futurism, Russian futurism, and Russian constructivism, along with the poetic techniques of simultaneism, had previously provided Dos Passos with his artistic tools, later a more conventional narrative order appealed to him.

In a 1935 letter from John Dos Passos to his friend the novelist Robert Cantwell, Dos Passos rejected the application of "formulas of past events" to current events: "That's the great danger of sectarian opinions, they always accept the formulas of past events as useful for the measurement of future events and they never are, if you have high standards of accuracy."[2] A salient moment in Dos Passos's 1941 essay "The Use of the Past" in *The Ground We Stand On*, however, argues the opposite: knowledge of the past is a source of human salvation.

> In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men's reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking.[3]

What caused this remarkable change? As Dos Passos later recalled, he had witnessed from the inside "the greatest hopes and greatest disillusions lived by [his] generation."[4] Dos Passos's disillusionment is plain in *Adventures of A Young Man*, which registers Dos Passos's break with the political positions of his youth.[5] The novel abandons the simultaneist modes of writing—learned from the French poet Blaise Cendrars, whose work Dos Passos translated in *Panama*—that were central to the technique of *U.S.A.*[6] Following the same trajectory away from avant-garde invention, Dos Passos's later works on historical subjects, such as *The Living Thought of Thomas Paine, The Ground We Stand On, The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson*, and *The Men Who Made the Nation*, show the author's later sustained devotion in name to a national revolutionary tradition but in spirit to the ideas of history and historical continuity—the very weight of history at which revolutionaries and futurists typically bristle. Dos Passos's early work wants to break the bonds of history and the authority "history" represents; his late work flies to an idea of history as haven.

In 1917 Dos Passos wrote in his diary, "We are in the position of the great Russian revolutionists who struggled and died in despair and sordidness—we have no chance of success, but we must struggle—I don't know why—I hardly believe in it—yet" (*FC*, 180). By 1932 Dos Passos was prepared to quote Joseph Stalin as a cultural guide,[7] vote for the Communist ticket of Foster and Ford in the national election, and join other literary figures who publicly revealed their Communist voting preferences.[8] He published his account of the Harlan County Miners Strike, "Free Speech Speakin,'" in the Communist Party-led National Student League's paper, *Student Review*, in the same year.[9] Communist Party sectarianism challenged Dos Passos's political commitments during his work on behalf of the Harlan County Miners in 1932 and after the rioting between Socialists and Communists at a political meeting at the Madison Square Garden in 1934. Of much greater long-term significance for his outlook, however, were other events between 1935 and 1938: the execution of Dos Passos's friend the poet Jose Roblés by the Communists in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (which helped terminate his close friendship with Ernest

Hemingway) and the Moscow Trials, by which Stalin eliminated his internal political enemies in the Soviet Union, demolished Dos Passos's previously held convictions about politics and art. By 1944 he was prepared to vote Republican.[10] In the early 1950s Dos Passos was more of a "willing aide" to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiries into possible revolutionary subversion than he was an object of those federal inquiries.[11]

Sometimes drawn in by the purported gradualism of this transition from left to right, critical treatment of Dos Passos's career can understate the importance of the change in the author's conception of art and history in 1937. This misperception, encouraged by the author in his later years, can be maintained only by ignoring his consuming work in the futurist revolutionary theater of the 1920s and his writings in *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. Schooled by such evasions, many readings of Dos Passos's work diminish both his strong commitment to revolution and the spectacular quality of his later recantation of revolutionary politics.[12] Since the divide between the early and the late Dos Passos is so immense, one should be wary of accepting the author's recollections of his own earlier disposition. However, some of his later comments about his writing provocatively juxtapose two literary selves: the novelist of the present and the historian of the distant past.

The very name of one such later talk, "Contemporary Chronicles,"[13] conflates the novelist of the present moment with the historian of the past, yet in his own practice these moments were discrete. Introducing a discussion of the futurist and expressionist influences on his own work in "A Novelist Talks About History," Dos Passos repeats the idea that a novelist's interest in "the fleeting present" and a historian's interest in "the recorded past" are related. Yet he concludes the essay by writing that "the sort of novel I started out to try to write in the . . . [time of the First World War][14] . . . was intended to be very much a chronicle of the present."[15] As he noted in his diary during the war, ever more emphatically, "the future has become the present" (*FC*, 115). Although his retrospective self-refashioning works to conflate the views of the historian of the past and the novelist of the present, clearly the present moment is the overriding concern of the novelist. In practice Dos Passos's *contemporary* chroncles are quite distinct from his later historical essays.

Dos Passos's early allusions to "history" use the word nearly interchangeably with the word "society," for he regards historical forces and social forces as synonymous with the politics of the present. As he

writes in a 1932 essay, "The writer's business is to justify God's ways to man as Milton said. For God read society, or history."[16] In 1928, he asserts that "the only excuse for a novelist, aside from the entertainment and vicarious living his books give the people who read them, is as a sort of second-class historian of the age he lives in."[17] Defending the New Playwrights Theatre production of John Howard Lawson's play "The International" in *The Daily Worker* in 1928, Dos Passos observes that the play "is a broad cartoon of the dynamics of current history."[18] Dos Passos strove to capture the essential social oppositions of contemporary characters within the "snarl of the human currents" of the time, as he writes in *The New Republic* in 1934.[19] There is a basic consistency in Dos Passos's perspective before 1937: "current history," the image of "the snarl of human currents," "contemporary chronicles"—and even his chosen title of "second-class historian of the age he lives in"—all refer to the author's anticipatory engagement with a present portending a novel political future.

In "The Writer as Technician," a 1935 essay, Dos Passos continues to participate in a spirit of formal and political invention that grapples with the present and breaks free from the trappings of the past. He calls for changing and rebuilding the language; for recognizing the power of the word in an era of mass production of print; for producing modern products of art that show "discovery, originality and invention"; and for taking "crossbearings on every one of the abstractions that were so well ranged in ornate marble niches in the minds of our fathers."[20] In applying this military analogy to depict a literary plan for destroying the mental mold of an older generation that sent his own generation to war, Dos Passos reveals how the war experience inculcated his revolt against the oligarchic guardians of tradition. A confusing and tumultuous present was almost to be welcomed for the opportunity it provided to destroy inherited, ossified language.

It is therefore a misapprehension to see what contemporary readers receive as the "history" in the trilogy *U.S.A.* as the "history" of the author at the time that he wrote. The temporal distance between the writer and the events that he chronicles was on average only about a decade in the trilogy's three novels *The 42nd Parallel*, *1919*, and *The Big Money*. Although some of the figures in the biographies of the trilogy, such as Luther Burbank, count as true historical figures from Dos Passos's point of reference, even in *U.S.A.*'s short biographical sketches the period of time represented in the trilogy is not far distant from the author's own. As he concludes his "Statement of Belief" in

1928, "I think any novelist that is worth his salt is a sort of truffle dog digging up raw material which a scientist, an anthropologist or a historian can later use to permanent advantage" (26). The reader of *U.S.A.*, not the novelist himself, collects the truffles. In this analogy, the author simply buries the items of his own time, awaiting future historians who will uncover what he has stored. It is the reader of *U.S.A.*, not the author, who is most likely to adopt an historical perspective.

Thus Dos Passos's attraction to history was a startling new development in the late 1930s. His new sense of direction led him to begin working on the essays collected in *The Ground We Stand On* and to write *Adventures of a Young Man*, a major departure from his approach in *U.S.A.* This departure takes place on three levels. Dos Passos abandoned his futurism as a literary method, as a political orientation opposed to historical constraints, and as a form of internationalism.

Contemporary power relations figure more importantly than truly historical forces in Dos Passos's early understanding of society. In recognizing Dos Passos as a revolutionary writer during the first phase of his life, it is easy to assume that he was at the same time devoted to "history"; "revolution" and "history" are often paired in thinking about politics generally. True, the biographies of J. P. Morgan, F. W. Taylor, and Big Bill Haywood in *U.S.A.* "suggest some of the underlying forces that condition historical events,"[21] yet these figures, like the character J. W. Moorehouse, who is emblematic of a new era of American public relations, illustrate primarily the distribution of social power in Dos Passos's contemporary society—what he calls, in 1928, the "dynamics of current history."

The distinction might appear to be a fine one. Dos Passos read Marx, cited Marx, depicts characters whose thinking is influenced by Marx, and at times envied the commitment of Communists who, moved by the feeling that history and justice were on their side, could act on their political convictions in a collective effort in concert with the largest leftist party in the country and in the world during the early 1930s. Despite the influence of Marx the historian, however, Dos Passos did not integrate a principle of historical causality into *1919*, the very novel that marks the crest of the author's belief that the capitalist system is being shaken by its fundamental flaws and its inexorable laws of development. *U.S.A.* lacks historical consciousness, yet it abounds with class consciousness; for Dos Passos, these are different things. The trilogy discovers the "social nexus" lacking in the earlier *Manhattan Transfer*,[22] but the literary discovery of this "social nexus" is not joined

with a new sense of historical causality.

Dos Passos's historical studies began soon after he finished proofreading the copy sheets of *U.S.A.* in March of 1936.[23] A *Time* magazine reporter who prepared a story on Dos Passos for the August 10, 1936 issue in all likelihood caught Dos Passos in the midst of these new researches. The writer of the article dubbed the author of *U.S.A.*— in capital letters— a "Private Historian."[24] Not aware that he was seeing the new historian suddenly emerging from the chrysalis of a futurist, the reporter blindly accepted the historical researcher and the "historical" author of *U.S.A.* as the same literary persona. Within months Dos Passos would resign from the *New Masses*, and within a year he would return from Spain and publicly attack the Communist Party.

Dos Passos later explained that the "Russian Communists certainly played their part in that development. It wasn't exactly from the point of view of a novelist that I first became interested in American history. . . When I found all the beliefs our country was founded on being thrown on the trash heap, these beliefs suddenly became very dear to me." This statement accurately reflects how Dos Passos's interest in history emerged suddenly out of his own experiences. What follows, though, rewrites his own history: "I know it's contrary but I started out believing in individual liberty and I still believe in it."[25] Dos Passos was not simply a libertarian individualist throughout his life, however much he might have wished, in his later years, that this were the case. There is little continuity in his political perspective before and after the late 1930s.

Discontinuity destabilizes his novel following *U.S.A.*, *Adventures of a Young Man*, which evinces ambiguity in its politics[26] and a parallel ambiguity about the relationship between historical memory and the present moment. While the essays in the three sections in the later *The Ground We Stand On*, "The Use of the Past," "Roger Williams and the Planting of the Commonwealth in America," and "On the White Porch of the Republic," resound with a strong, if sometimes forced, confidence in the basic nobility of the revolutionaries of the American past and in the absolute foundation that American history offers, in *Adventures of a Young Man* history appears first as novelistic farce. Kids playing "Washington at Valley Forge" innocently point to fundamental human social problems as they imitate historical American figures; Dos Passos thus illustrates how eternal human verities underlie— and undercut—revolutionary aspirations.[27]

Fantasy and reality cross when the protagonist Glenn Spottswood, who declares that he does not want to play the role of Benedict Arnold,

is branded as a "quitter" in a clear parallel with the actual treatment of Dos Passos by the Communist Party after 1937. Freddy points out that Glenn's father, a Columbia University professor opposed to the First World War, is "against preparedness and that was the same thing as being a traitor to the flag." Glenn runs away and is called a "quitter" by "all the bunch" (9). This scene is one of many reminders in Dos Passos's novels and essays that the author rejected the social conformity and the militaristic logic that helped to produce the First World War, but it also refers to more contemporary events. As he finished *Adventures of a Young Man*, Dos Passos simultaneously congratulated, in words parallel to the early scenes of the novel, the Trotskyist editors of *Partisan Review* for their first issue assuming the new role of leftist cultural review independent of the Communist Party and resistant to what Dos Passos sees as the party's boyish conformity.

> I'm very glad you are starting up the *Partisan Review* again. Something is certainly needed to keep a little life in the left, which is rapidly merging with the American Legion. It won't be long now before the boys are selling Liberty Bonds and pinning the white feather on anybody who doesn't enlist for the next war for democracy.[28]

"The boys" of the Communist Party who are likely to "pin the white feather" on any critics, thus marking them as counterrevolutionary whites, are represented in the scene in *Adventures of A Young Man* as boys playing a game of American revolutionaries. As Dos Passos anticipated while writing the novel, he would himself assume the role of the Benedict Arnold of the American left at the end of the decade. Dos Passos's political allegory suggests the fullest development of his next political role.

Later in the novel, in a repetition of the game of American revolutionary, Glenn and his friend Paul Graves teach kids in a summer camp to play the "Red Army Game." No one wishes to be the "reds" in the struggles of the reds against the whites until Paul explains that the reds are workers and peasants: "that just meant embattled farmers and regular guys, like the Spirit of '76 . . . besides, they were winning all the battles" (40). This game, too, ends in disaster, for it initiates a series of events that leads to the dismissal of Glenn and Paul as counselors from Dr. Talcott's summer camp. Reiterating the theme of betrayal announced with the role of Benedict Arnold, Glenn and Paul are betrayed by "Fats," one of the kids at the camp. After being cracked "over the

noodle" with a quarter stave, Fats escapes by canoe and spends the night in the house of some actual workers and peasants who live near the camp and from whom he catches "scarlet fever" (46), a joke, perhaps, on the alleged virulence of Communism. (Reviewers like Louis Kronenberger, Michael Gold, and Malcolm Cowley, who could find little humor in the novel, missed this element.[29]) The discovery that Fats has been exposed to something catching leads to the financial ruin of the summer camp, yet Fats for his part seems singularly unaffected at first. "Those workers and peasants sleep three in a bed and something bit me, and the only make of car they know's a flivver. . . . I made those workers and peasants sit up," Fats smugly declares when he is rescued (44).

The later portion of the novel, dealing with the orchestrated death of the Trotskyist protagonist at the hands of the Communists, has attracted the most critical attention. The theme of political betrayal, however, is clearly sounded in these initial episodes, which reveal Dos Passos's newfound sense of "history." Dos Passos's earlier elation in the "dynamic of current history" was yielding to a conception of history as a tragic farce in which the conclusion is already known. By 1941 history was to be only tragic to Dos Passos, but tragic in a way that provides meaning the present lacks.

In 1941, a few years after receiving his last acrimonious letters from his newly hostile leftist friends Lawson and Ernest Hemingway, Dos Passos expressed less humor about many aspects of politics than he did in *Adventures of a Young Man*. At the same time, his devotion to history sharpened. The analogies that he draws from "history" in *The Ground We Stand On* are obviously derived from his own experience. In "Citizen Barlow of the Republic of the World," an essay that could as easily be titled "Comrade Barlow of the Soviet of the World," Dos Passos discloses how the history that interests him is in fact his own: "With all his knowledge of French politics, even as late as '98, Barlow couldn't foresee what sort of consolidation of power under Bonaparte was brewing, any more than American sympathizers during the 1920s with the Soviet experiment could imagine that a new czar was hatching in the Kremlin" (358). Dos Passos's own strong identification with the historical American figures who are the subject of his research is plain.

The isolationist strain underlying his sympathetic critique of the naive American Barlow caught in Europe's politics is less visible if one forgets the prior international vistas of *U.S.A.* While the title of the

trilogy could lead one to conceive of the three novels as the work of a cultural nationalist, it is rather a long series of interconnected episodes on both sides of the Atlantic. Finished in 1936, before Dos Passos's political reformation, *U. S. A.* centers on cities—Paris first among them, followed by New York, Rome, and other capitals of Europe. While the geographical configuration is drawn out in his own organizational map of the second novel, *1919*,[30] this arrangement radiates outward to the two novels that preceded and followed *1919*. Paris of the year 1919 is a defining moment for the author. The well-known autobiographical Camera Eye 39, like the very title of the novel, is highly evocative of Paris and its potential for postwar revolution. In light of such renderings of internationalism, Dos Passos's subsequent reversion to the equivalent of Huck Finn stories and political isolationism is all the more marked.

One of the ironies of Dos Passos's political reversal in the historical essays and in the pivotal 1937 "The Communist Party And the War Spirit"[31] is that Dos Passos ignores the very point that he made to the novelist Robert Cantwell in 1935 about not using old frames of reference that would permit an incisive perception of the present: "That's the great danger of sectarian opinions, they always accept the formulas of past events as useful for the measurement of future events and they never are, if you have high standards of accuracy" (*FC*, 463). "The Communist Party and the War Spirit," however, seeks solace in outdated historical axioms. Dos Passos applies the lessons he learned from the First World War—that "wars for democracy" are invariably orchestrated by powerful opportunists who consecrate mass murder with lies. The manipulative nation-states that plunged their populations into the the war are analogous, Dos Passos argues, to the political leaders of the Communist Party. Although he supported the idea of sending aid—even arms—to loyalist Spain, Dos Passos worried that the American War Department would take advantage of a new war to "set up a totalitarian state" in the U.S. in the event of U.S. intervention: "Goodbye Bill of Rights. The totalitarian state is the logical partner of totalitarian war" (12). Fearful that Spain would become, like "brave little Belgium in nineteen fourteen," a "football of international diplomacy," Dos Passos stresses that "we've got to try to understand what is happening, and that's not easy" (13). Violating his own earlier admonition against applying the old political formulas to new situations, Dos Passos prematurely abandons his effort "to understand what is happening" through the use of new intellectual tools. Perhaps for the first time, Dos Passos

adopts a mode of thinking that reifies the past into an absolute truth of "history."

Since as late as 1932 Dos Passos was unsure how to end his trilogy,[32] one can assume that in important respects his resolution of the issues of his aesthetic and political agenda was a response to his immediate feelings about the "snarl" of his time. As Robert Rosen has observed, Dos Passos's voice of the early 1930s was altered by the end of 1936 when he completed *The Big Money*: "Vague nostalgia creeps into the latter parts of *U.S.A.*"[33] This subtle nostalgia, in full bloom in his later historical researches into the American democratic tradition, also appears in one of Dos Passos's letters to Lawson in October of 1934, even as Dos Passos calls for a bracing engagement with the present: "What we're going to need now is dugouts, camouflaged trenches, trained snipers—just think back to 1919—May one in Paris Ville Lumière and figure out how much bigger the chance of socialism by revolution was then" (*FC*, 447). This is perhaps the earliest glimmer of the political reflection leading to the essay "The Communist Party and the War Spirit" in 1937. Even as he recalls the power of a revolutionary moment in Paris in a renewed call to wage political warfare against the right, Dos Passos is already showing signs of a need to cling to a nostalgic memory rather than to devise a new language.

The climactic end of *The Big Money*, the last novel of the trilogy, is similarly suggestive of Dos Passos's turn against futurist revolution and intimates an incipient nostalgic turn in Dos Passos's thinking. One of only two traditional ballads included in the novel's Newsreels (unlike the plethora of modern Tin Pan Alley songs in them) is the penultimate song, "The Wreck of the old '97." The song recalls how the crazed engineer of the train known as the old '97 tries to travel at a speed that leads to disaster: "He was goin' downgrade makin' ninety miles an hour / When his whistle broke into a scream / He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle / And was scalded to death with the steam."[34] The use of a traditional ballad in the last Newsreel is itself a kind of folkish retreat from the modern jingles that dominate the Newsreel sections of the trilogy. The ballad's story also implies a retreat to nineteenth-century conceptions of, as Leo Marx terms it, "the machine in the garden": the destructive madness, not the generative possibility, of modern speed is underscored.

In *Manhattan Transfer* and in the essay collection *Orient Express*, by contrast, Dos Passos had sought to create a new literary music out of the mechanized din of modern life. The description of the collision

of Charley Anderson's car with a train at the end of *The Big Money* could thus be read as an anti-futuristic passage. Although no single character in Dos Passos's collective novels carries the weight of the entire trilogy's plot, Anderson is the best candidate for assuming the proportions of a proletarian protagonist capable of attaining a left-wing political consciousness by the end of *The Big Money*. Although Anderson's collision with a train that emblematizes the mechanical essence of the twentieth century resembles a typically futurist explosion (Marinetti, too, crashes his car in his 1909 manifesto), the passage signals the end of Dos Passos's own futurist project. Anderson's crash, unlike Marinetti's in "Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," is a token of his failure to be anything more than, as *New Masses* editor Isidor Schneider called the character, "a lumpen millionaire."[35] It also kills him outright.

Anderson's episode of drunken driving leading up to his own collision, in contrast to the spree resulting in Hutchin's plane crash in *1919*, is less a result of the character's conflict with the world than the inevitable result of his own dissipation. For 1930s leftists expecting a more hopeful conclusion to the trilogy and a more stalwart working-class protagonist capable of realizing his own political potential, *The Big Money* was bound to disappoint. Anderson's end foreshadows Dos Passos's aesthetic and political reorientation.

The end of "Grade Crossing," the last narrative of Anderson, also resonates with Dos Passos's relationship to Ernest Hemingway, with whom he had worked to build an international modernism in the 1920s. The rise and fall of their friendship dramatizes how Dos Passos's political conversion totally restructured the author's personal and literary world. Dos Passos's sudden disfavor with the Communists as expressed in Gold's belated attack on *U.S.A.* in his "Keynote on Dos Passos' Works" in *The Daily Worker* of Feb. 28, 1938—and Hemingway's sudden popularity in the same quarter—reminds us of the central part their new political differences played as a melodrama of 1930s literary life. The replacement of Dos Passos by Hemingway in the Communist literary canon provided Herbert Solow, writing in the *Partisan Review* in April of 1938, with the opportunity for satiric commentary, as the title of his essay succinctly conveys: "Substitution at Left Tackle: Hemingway for Dos Passos."[36]

Dos Passos's review of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in the *New Masses* personalized his public remarks by referring to the novel as "a cock and bull story," a phrase punning on Jake Barnes's impotence

and the novel's bullfights. In an earlier personal letter that included a draft of the review, Dos Passos had praised the novel to Hemingway, writing in the draft that the descriptions of characters were so vivid that one could recognize their images in passbook photos—a recognition that some of the portraits in *The Sun Also Rises* are based on actual people.[37] Jake and Bill, whose fishing trip in Spain resembles a social oasis in the novel, came to signify for Dos Passos an expatriate world that he shared with Hemingway and their friends. These amiable interconnections between their lived experiences and their literary representations, however, left Hemingway and Dos Passos with powerful means of communicating their later mutual hostility. In editing *To Have and Have Not* in 1937, Hemingway was forced by the danger of libel to excise passages that could have made him vulnerable to suit, since the character Richard Gorton is based on Dos Passos.[38] The clash of their political perspectives would later be illustrated by the juxtaposition of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Dos Passos's *Adventures of a Young Man*,[39] and the authors would exchange barbs through portraits of each other in Dos Passos's *Chosen Country* and Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*.[40] Their tradition of such exchanges in their novels during their increasingly bitter feud is well known.[41]

Finishing *The Big Money* one year before the event that finally ended his friendship with Hemingway, Dos Passos might have been tempted to register this decline through the kind of private allusions in the novel—in this case of a piscine kind—that the two authors were known to use in their writing. In Anderson's last living moments with his brother Jim, who visits him in the hospital, Anderson nostalgically recalls their fishing trips together. "I want to talk like we used to when, you know, up the Red River fishin' when there wasn't any. We'll try fishin' out here. . . swell fishin' right outside of Miami here" (377).[42] As he had in his review of *Sun Also Rises*, Dos Passos might be writing on some level to Hemingway, his fishing partner in Key West and Cuba on more than one occasion. That there were no fish in the Red River—a possible allusion in *The Big Money* to their mutual and ultimately fruitless quest for political solutions—is a hint, perhaps, that their previous political understanding depended on the false dream that he had entertained, together with Hemingway, since the 1920s. It is intriguing that in *The Moveable Feast* Hemingway's character based on Dos Passos also draws on such metaphors: "Pilot fish" is held responsible for "the loss of Eden."[43] Months before he wrote his review of Hemingway's novel in 1926, Dos Passos had written Hemingway

breathlessly about the new society, theater, and architecture of Soviet Russia, telling his friend that in Russia the new man was in birth.[44] A dying Anderson could signify quite the opposite.

One accepted version of Dos Passos's political transformation is that Dos Passos, who was a member of the executive board of the *New Masses* at its birth in 1925, "moved away from the Communist Party in 1934 and become deeply skeptical of Popular Front politics."[45] In the 1930s, Townsend Ludington contends, Dos Passos "wrote Edmund Wilson several long letters which clearly reveal his shift toward United States democracy. . . . He could more easily tolerate the tyrannies of American monopoly capitalism, he wrote from Jamaica, than he could the tyrannies of the Communist ideologues" (*FC*, 421). Nonetheless, in April of 1934 Dos Passos wrote to Wilson to express the fear that Roosevelt could emerge as a dictator[46] since true democracy and the "present industrial-financial setup" are simply incompatible. Following the conventional Communist argument that social democratic reforms lead to fascism, he added that "maybe Roosevelt is already as far as we can go in that direction but if you dont put your money on the Communists—it's no use putting it on anybody else until they've proved something" (*FC,* 436). While he harbored doubts about the Communist movement, Dos Passos's break with Stalinism was more abrupt than Ludington suggests. To Wilson Dos Passos also wrote, on February 5, 1935: "Bunny it's not the possibility of Stalinism in the U. S. that's worrying me, it's the fact that the Stalinist C. P. is doomed to fail and bring down all of the humanitarian tendencies I personally believe in" (*FC,* 465). Moreover, Dos Passos signed the call for the First American Writers Congress published in the *New Masses* of January 22, 1935. The announcement, which was signed by sixty-two writers, in addition to Earl Browder, Secretary of the Communist Party, and Alexander Trachtenberg, head of the Communist Party Publishing House, was, in the words of Malcolm Cowley, "an agglomeration of Party slogans: 'Fight against imperialist war and fascism; defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression.'"[47] Did Dos Passos recoil from this strong language? In a letter to Wilson at this time, Dos Passos criticizes the Communist Party, not for its proletarian stridency, but for its resemblance to a literary racket—an organization productive of "middleclass Communism" (*FC*, 468). Dos Passos's letters to Wilson and also to Lawson at this time do not suggest that Dos Passos had completely rejected Marxism in its political forms. Despite his increasing

reservations about the Communists, Dos Passos writes to Cantwell in September of 1934, "I'd like to see 'em [the reds] hang red ribbons on the liberty bell and take it away from Chase National bank" (*FC*, 442).[48]

In October of 1936, however, the Moscow trials and the "Communist policy in Spain" precipitated Dos Passos's break with the *New Masses*, a magazine that had been closely tied to the Stalinist camp for years. In a letter to Isidor Schneider,[49] Dos Passos wrote:

> I feel, rightly or wrongly that the Stalinist policy is absolutely disastrous for everything you and I care for. So naturally I am unable to associate myself with any magazine that continues under its influence. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take my name off the list of contributors to the *New Masses*. The recent executions in Russia coupled with the Communist policy in Spain, leave me no alternative.

That it was necessary to break with the *New Masses* in this way in October of 1936, well after *The Big Money* was finished, suggests that Dos Passos's political transition might have been more sudden than it is often assumed to have been. As we have seen, just two months earlier, Schneider had favorably reviewed *The Big Money* in the *New Masses*. Dos Passos owned a copy of a detailed 1936 booklet published by the People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R in Moscow, *The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovivite Terrorist Centre*, a reading of which might have influenced his letter to Schneider.[50] Yet his interest in the case was that of a dissident leftist, not that of a Trotskyist.[51]

"Make it really new!" was Gold's headline in the *New Masses* in June, 1926; it appeared adjacent to an essay by Dos Passos "The New Masses I'd Like." At this time, Dos Passos joined Gold in a plea on behalf of "the new": "I hope that it is not for nothing that the *New Masses* has taken that dangerous word new into its name." While each of them was trying to claim "the new" for his own political purpose at the inception of the *New Masses*, for both Dos Passos and Gold the idea of modernistic invention encompassed both politics and art. Thus the gulf between this earlier advocacy of "the new" and his later desire for continuity and tradition was an immense one. Dos Passos's newfound belief in the essential value of the past as a lifeline to a troubling present remained unchanged for the remainder of his life. Such a reversal amounts to a direct rejection of the futurist vision in Camera Eye 39 of *U.S.A.*:

> revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower
> that burns up our last year's diagrams the dates fly off the calendar we'll make everything new today is the Year I Today is the sunny morning of the first day of spring.[52]

The first day of spring in this Camera Eye is May 1, International Labor Day, to which he refers in his letter to Lawson in 1934 (*FC,* 447).

It is striking how the period in which Dos Passos employs the modernist techniques in *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* coincides with the period in which he was a *New Masses* Board member. Intellectually, Dos Passos found himself among those who assimilated Communist Futurism—what Louis Lozowick coined as *Comfut* in his essay "Soviet Painting and Architecture" (collected in *Voices of October* in 1930). Lozowick, who often illustrated the *New Masses*, identifies an "inherent affinity" between Russian futurism and Communism that is represented by the term.[53] However much Dos Passos caviled at party discipline and then, later, caviled at the gross intolerance of the Stalinists, his intellectual coterie from the late 1920s until 1937 included a large number of writers and activists associated with the Communist Party and with the aesthetic vision Lozowick describes.

It was perhaps a corollary of Dos Passos's early revolutionary futurist vision—the first drafts of *Manhattan Transfer* were written in Italian notebooks—that he would accentuate the depravity of an old order and the ascendancy of a new one. Dos Passos's early devotion to this vision contributed to his own later need to recant it, for in his case, he had learned that "growing up is the process of pinching off the buds of tomorrow."[54] Dos Passos's desire to rewrite his own history is linked to his own and his readers' inability to recognize the full force and finality of what he captured metaphorically as pinched buds. Late in life Dos Passos preferred to think of himself retrospectively as a lifelong historian rather than as a former futurist—although in the face of some hard memories he would disparage his former affiliations as those of a "goddam camp follower."[55] Given his polarized views, neither Dos Passos the futurist, born of the year 1919, nor Dos Passos the private historian, born of the year 1937, could have properly recognized the other. "The only substitute for dependence on the past is dependence on the future," Dos Passos's assertion of 1916 in "Against American Literature," had been translated, in effect, as: "the only substitute for dependence on the future is dependence on the American past."

In 1968 Dos Passos found himself an outspoken critic of the new left, and in this capacity he served rarely as a member of the old left and often as the converted traditionalist that he became after 1937. The persistent nonconformity he showed in 1917, in 1937, and, one might add, in 1968, shows a commitment to a "truth" that did not rest easily with him or with his audience. Indeed, Dos Passos's dedication to this separate cause, requiring that he resist powerful political and personal pressures, has invited rather suspect kinds of psychological interpretation. In *Writers on the Left*, for example, Daniel Aaron observes that critics have seen Dos Passos's "chronic rebelliousness, his dogged search for a satisfying faith, and his stubborn libertarianism as a manifestation of latent hostility to his father and a consequence of adolescent frustrations. Whatever its origin, however, it seems clear enough now, as it seemed to some of his contemporaries in the thirties, that Dos Passos never found any form of collectivism congenial."[56] The persistent impulse to use reductive psychological explanations for Dos Passos's aesthetics and politics suggests that his authoritative role has strongly conditioned not only his own orientation toward his work and his political choices but also his reception by a reading audience that continues to regard him as a politically symbolic figure. If so, then our contemporary critical judgments, still at times beholden to the left's residual sense of betrayal and to Cold War prejudices, should bear further examination. If, as Michael Denning says, "after the 1940s, no one argued about Dos Passos,"[57] it would be valuable again to ask, in the contemporary spirit of critical re-examination of the canon, why this is so. Perhaps then Dos Passos's metamorphoses in 1917 and 1937 would be less disconcerting to an audience desiring close identification with the author's views and demanding, if not always heroic literary characters, then heroic authors.

Notes

I am grateful to Robert Shulman for his University of Washington graduate course on John Dos Passos and Josephine Herbst.

[1] See Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Avon, 1961), 356–66; Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 358–411; Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos's Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography* (Boulder: Colorado Associated Univ. Press, 1972); Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos, A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (New York:

E. P. Dutton, 1980), 362–99; Robert Rosen, *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Boulder: Colorado Associated Univ. Press, 1981); John Rohrkemper, "The Collapse of Faith and the Failure of Language: John Dos Passos and the Spanish Civil War," in *Rewriting the Good Fight: Critical Essays on the Literature of the Spanish Civil War* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1989), 215–28; and Robert Sayre, "Anglo-American Writers, the Communist Movement and the Spanish Civil War: The Case of Dos Passos," *Revue Française Américaines* 2, no. 29 (1986): 263–74.

[2] Townsend Ludington, ed., *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston: Gambit, 1973), 463. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *FC*.

[3] John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 3.

[4] Marc Chenetier, "'The Jazz Age: Its Spirit and Music As Illustrated by John Dos Passos's Four Main Novels: *Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* Trilogy" w/inserted ALS, Marc Chenetier to JDP, 184-page diss, p. 24. Accession 5950–AC, Box 13 of Special Collections, Alderman Library, Univ. of Virginia.

[5] The very date of the publication of *Adventures of A Young Man* is an important political marker that has in at least one instance been significantly misrepresented. According to FBI records, Dos Passos apparently told the FBI in 1951 that *Adventures of a Young Man* was published in 1933, a date that would effectively shorten by five years the period that he was in any way associated with the politics of the Communist Party. See Ray Lewis White, "John Dos Passos and the Federal Bureau of Investigation," *Journal of Modern Literature* 14 (1987): 103.

[6] Dos Passos did not return to the style of the verbal collages of public discourse that are found in the sixty-eight Newsreels of *U.S.A.* until he wrote the novel *Mid-Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

[7] "Whither the American Writer: A Questionnaire," *The Modern Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1932): 12.

[8] Dos Passos was a signatory of *Culture and Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists and Other Professional Workers of America* (New York: League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, 1932). I am indebted to Andrew H. Lee of the Tamiment Library at New York University for locating this elusive item for me. Dos Passos later conceded that he gave consent for his name to be used in a list of "literary people" who declared that they would vote for Foster and Ford. In this statement and in an F.B.I. report (see White), Dos Passos retrospectively and unconvincingly describes his voting for Foster and Ford as merely a protest vote. See AMS beginning, "As the literal-minded young men of the F.B.I. have occasionally reminded me . . . " Accession 5950–AE, Box 11, UVA.

[9] "Free Speech Speakin's," *The Student Review* 1 (Jan.–February 1932): 5–6. *Student Review* was directed by the Communist Party; see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 413n.

[10] Rosen, 111.

[11] White, 97.

[12] Barbara Foley, for example, concludes her perceptive analysis of *U.S.A.* as a collective novel representative of Soviet influence by drawing the conclusion that "Dos Passos's experiments with collective form did not make him a revolutionary" (436). While formal experimentation alone does not qualify as a substitute for revolutionary politics, it does not necessarily replace or substitute for it. Foley's work, while offering important new insights into the literary left as a whole, tends to isolate the 1930s from the 1920s, thus foreshortening her treatment of Dos Passos's individual political and literary career.

[13] Dos Passos informed Melvin Landsberg that "Contemporary Chronicles" was prepared for a talk between 1958 and 1964. The essay was published in *The Carleton Miscellany*, 2 (1961): 25–29. An editor's note indicates that Dos Passos gave the talk at Carleton College on November 30, 1960. See Landsberg, *Dos Passos's Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography* (Boulder: Colorado Associated Univ. Press, 1972), 253 fn4.

[14] These barely legible words appear to be a reference to interludes during the First World War when Dos Passos had time to write.

[15] "Contemporary Chronicles," Accession 5950–AC, Box 12 "8 TMS readings re: 'Contemporary Chronicles,' n.d." and "A Novelist Talks About History," Accession 5950–AC, Box 9, "TMS 'A Novelist Talks About History,' 10 pp. n.d." Alderman Library, Special Collections, Univ. of Virginia. I am grateful to the Dos Passos family for permission to quote from this and other unpublished manuscripts held at the Alderman Library.

[16] Dos Passos, "Whither The American Writer," 11.

[17] John Dos Passos, "Statement of Belief," *Bookman* 68 (Sept. 1928): 26. Repr. in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1988), 115.

[18] John Dos Passos, "Novelist Hits Review," *The Daily Worker*, January 20, 1928, 6.

[19] John Dos Passos, "The Business of a Novelist," *New Republic*, April 4, 1934, 220.

[20] John Dos Passos, "The Writer As Technician," *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 79. Repr. in Pizer, ed., *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 169–72.

[21] Rosen, 79.

[22] Rosen, 80.

[23] Ludington, *Odyssey*, 351.

[24] *Time*, August 10, 1936, 53; quoted in Ludington, *Odyssey*, 354.

[25] John Dos Passos, "A Novelist Talks About History," n.p.

[26] Sayre, 270.

[27] John Dos Passos, *Adventures of a Young Man* (1938; repr. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 8.

[28] Dos Passos, 1938 letter to the editor, *Partisan Review* 4 (January 1938): 63. The letter reiterates Dos Passos's point that American intervention in Spain is perhaps more dangerous than fascism itself.

[29] For a summary of the immediate reception of *Adventures of a Young Man*, see James T. Farrell, *American Mercury* 17 (August 1939): 489–94.

[30] Donald Pizer, *John Dos Passos' U.S.A., A Critical Study* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1988), 96.

[31] "The Communist Party and the War Spirit: A Letter To A Friend Who Is Probably a Party Member," *Common Sense* 6 (December 1937): 11–14; repr. in Pizer, ed., *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 187–92.

[32] Luddington, *Odyssey*, 286.

[33] Rosen, 89.

[34] Dos Passos, *The Big Money*, in *U.S.A.* (New York: Random House, 1937), 521.

[35] Isidor Schneider, "Greatness," *New Masses* 20 (Aug. 11, 1936): 40.

[36] Aaron, 364.

[37] Alderman Library, UVA, Accession 5950, 10250f 1920–1933.

[38] See Robert Fleming, "The Libel of Dos Passos in *To Have and Have Not*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (1989): 597–601.

[39] Sayre, 266.

[40] Donald Pizer, "The Hemingway-Dos Passos Relationship," *Journal of Modern Literature* 13 (1986): 122, 125.

[41] The relationship between Hemingway and Dos Passos has also been described in detail by Scott Donaldson in "Dos and Hem: A Literary Friendship," *Centennial Review* 29 (1985): 163–85.

[42] The last sentence quoted here appears in *The Big Money* but not in "Grade Crossing" as published in *Partisan Review*.

[43] Pizer, "The Hemingway-Dos Passos Relationship," 123.

[44] Dos Passos's letter and the draft of his review that he sent to Hemingway are at the Kennedy Library. At the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia; the letters from John Dos Passos to Ernest Hemingway paraphrased above are in Accession 10250–F.

[45] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 166.

[46] In keeping with the themes of some of his essays, such as "Radio Voice" (published in *Common Sense* in February 1934), Dos Passos was thinking of Roosevelt's skillful use of new media of communication. Although Dos Passos voted for Roosevelt in 1936, he said later that his support for Roosevelt's third term was the "political act I have most regretted in my life" (Rosen, 76, 111).

[47] Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of The Golden Mountains* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 271.

[48] During the same month Dos Passos wrote to C. A. Pearce asking him to send a copy of his *Three Plays* to Julia Dorn, care of the International Union of the Revolutionary Theater in Moscow (*FC,* 442).

[49] I wish to thank Jean Ashton, Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University, for permission to quote from Dos Passos's letter. Schneider Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

[50] Accession 5950–AE, Box 24, UVA.

[51] Dos Passos appears to have told the FBI in 1951 that although he "was never interested in his [Trotsky's] philosophy," he had read Trotsky's works and had felt that Trotsky deserved defense. Dos Passos also told the FBI that he had served on the American Committee for the Defense of Trotsky (White, 107), although to the best of my knowledge there is no other evidence that this statement is true.

[52] Dos Passos, *1919*, in *U.S.A.*, 344.

[53] Louis Lozowick, "Soviet Painting and Architecture," in *Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930), 271–72.

[54] John Dos Passos, "The Workman and His Tools: An Apologia at Thirty Six," Accession 5950-AC, Box 9, UVA.

[55] TMS 'Spanish Tragedy' with autograph revisions by John Dos Passos in two parts, Accession 5950–AE, Box 11, UVA.

[56] Aaron, 365.

[57] Denning, 167.