

TOWNSEND LUDINGTON

John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey
New York: Dutton, 1980. Pp. 568.

Townsend Ludington's *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* appears at an opportune moment, for interest in Dos Passos has been steadily increasing since the novelist's death in 1970. Two critical anthologies on Dos Passos appeared in the early 1970's, as well as a political biography; two full-length critical studies have been published in the very recent past, and at least one other is forthcoming; Ludington's excellent edition of Dos Passos's letters and diaries came out in the mid-1970's, and *Modern Fiction Studies* recently devoted a special edition to Dos Passos.* This new authorized biography, which is replete with information about the author's personal, literary, and political life, should encourage still more study of Dos Passos and should help to restore to Dos Passos the major status that he surely deserves. For all the completeness of its compass, however, the biography has several weaknesses in historical and political conception that prevent it from illuminating Dos Passos's life as fully as we might wish.

Ludington's meticulously researched biography provides abundant material about Dos Passos's full and varied life. Dos Passos read widely and critically; he kept up a lively correspondence with some intriguing figures of his time; he traveled with dizzying frequency and energy. In Ludington's account, we glimpse the array of literary influences that acted upon this remarkably cosmopolitan writer, who absorbed the entire tradition of American and European letters and grappled with almost all the century. We gain insight into Dos Passos's complex—and at times painful—relationships with such personalities as Ernest Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, and John Howard Lawson. We also discover the multifarious connections between Dos Passos's personal experience and his fiction. For Dos Passos was an insistently autobiographical writer: from the Martin Howe of *One Man's Initiation* to the Camera Eye of *U.S.A.* to the Jay Pignatelli of *Chosen Country* and *Century's Ebb*, Dos Passos's fictive alter-egos rehearse much of the author's life. Ludington's biography supplies an invaluable resource to critics interested in tracing these fascinating connections. What is more, Ludington makes available to us some of Dos Passos's rough sketches for the conception of *U.S.A.*, which offer provocative suggestions about his authorial intentions, both realized and modified. Finally, the enigma of Dos Passos's childhood is judiciously treated here. Dos Passos's illegitimacy and his ambivalent attitude toward his father have been the subject of considerable critical interest. Ludington's book should advance the psychoanalytic study of Dos Passos to a higher level, for the biographer presents excerpts from the previously unpublished correspondence between the author's parents and offers rounded portraits of both the mother and the father. In short, Townsend Ludington has utilized his authorization to inspect the papers of the Dos Passos estate to good effect. Except for a minor slip that may be typographical—one of the protagonists of *Three Soldiers* is said to be Christfield, not Chrisfield—the text is admirably accurate; its careful scholarship will provide a firm foundation for Dos Passos studies of many varieties.

*See Allen Belkind, ed., *Dos Passos, the Critics, and the Writer's Intention*, Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971); Andrew Hook, ed., *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography, 1912-1936* (Boulder, Colo.: The Colorado Associated Press, 1972); Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist as American* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1979); Iain Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978); Townsend Ludington, ed., *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston: Gambit, 1973); *Modern Fiction Studies*, Special Issue: John Dos Passos, 26 (Autumn 1980). Robert Rosen has a book on Dos Passos's political views forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.

Despite its many strengths, however, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* is somewhat weakened by the author's limited historiographical and political sophistication. For Ludington seems not to realize that, in order to bring his subject fully to life, he must pay greater attention to the historical tendencies operative in his subject's world. Ludington evinces little awareness of the dialectical relation between self and society; he rarely departs from the particulars of Dos Passos's experience to describe the context in which Dos Passos lived and, presumably, chose among significant alternatives. Perhaps it is Ludington's deep sympathy with his subject that has led to his near-complete absorption in the center of Dos Passos's consciousness; perhaps it is an unwitting replication of the narrative mode of the author, who characteristically followed the path of any given life—whether that of a Jimmy Herf or a Joe Williams or of a Camera Eye—from a deliberately narrowed angle of vision. But—at least in U.S.A.—Dos Passos gained breadth and objectivity by interweaving the fictional threads and by juxtaposing the private realm with the public, in the form of newsreels and biographies. Much of *John Dos Passos*, by contrast, reads like a near-sighted Camera Eye, without the overarching perspective of broader cultural change. Except in the last hundred pages or so—where Ludington clearly feels that Dos Passos responded in a distorted manner to the forces shaping American society after World War II—Ludington insufficiently delineates the tension between individual consciousness and the historical moment; for the majority of pages in the narrative, we are restricted to the novelist's perspective on his own life. And while this immersion in Dos Passos's subjective awareness creates, at each moment, a superficial sense of individual freedom, the opposite is the case when we view Dos Passos's life in its totality. A curious determinism pervades the biography: Dos Passos pursues a destiny rendered inevitable by immovable personal tendencies, and we have no sense of roads taken and not taken. The problem of separating out what did happen from what must have happened and what might have happened is, of course, a difficulty facing all historians and biographers, who must carefully distinguish among causality, contingency, and necessity in constructing a narrative of past events. Implicit acknowledgment of this historiographical problem is helpful in any biographical enterprise—but doubly so, it seems to me, in the case of a Dos Passos, who was a historical creature to the core and composed all his work in—and about—the crucible of historical change.

This historical myopia is related to a certain naivete that undergirds much of Ludington's discussion of political matters. For Ludington's political bias—which I would characterize as liberal anticommunism—leads him uncritically to accept as natural—indeed, praiseworthy—Dos Passos's eventual rejection of the Left. Ludington's conviction that Dos Passos's interest in revolutionary politics can only be construed as an error—perhaps understandable in the context of the 1920's and 1930's, but an error nonetheless—causes him to underplay the importance of, or altogether to omit, a number of statements and activities that suggest a more thoroughgoing radical commitment on Dos Passos's part than Ludington appears willing to grant. Dos Passos's growing political concerns during his college years; his reportage on leftist political organizing in Mexico, Detroit, and Anacostia Flats; his various Depression-era comments on the nature and function of literature; his public support of the Communist Party—these materials are slighted in Ludington's narrative, or buried under a multitude of references of Dos Passos's personal and financial affairs. More seriously, Ludington rather dogmatically stereotypes almost all Dos Passos's acquaintances in the Communist Party and thus fails to grapple with the actual aims and goals of leftists who were engaged in debate with "fellow-travelers" like Dos Passos. In describing Dos Passos's interchanges with leftist intellectuals like Mike Gold, Ludington often substitutes assumption for examination and forecloses the possibility of seeing the Communists as engaging in

anything other than cynical manipulation. Even Ludington's account of Dos Passos's long friendship with John Howard Lawson—who was a member of the Communist Party—lacks poignancy because of the biographer's inability to grasp imaginatively the ideological underpinnings of Lawson's eventual alienation from his former friend. Ludington's political preconceptions pose the most serious difficulties when he writes of that juncture in Dos Passos's life when the novelist's politics most closely correspond with his own—namely, the late 1930's, when Dos Passos felt himself thoroughly disillusioned with the Left but had not yet embarked on that rightward trajectory that was to land him in the camp of Joseph McCarthy. Note the problematic framework into which Ludington casts, for example, his discussion of Dos Passos's final analysis of the Spanish Civil War:

Preying on his mind was not only what he believed he had discovered about Communist scheming in Spain, but also a different understanding of the internal politics of that country. Earlier in the thirties he had argued repeatedly with Arthur McComb about its politics. McComb, *who knew Spanish history well*, argued that the country's plight was but a continuation of the historic pattern of military takeovers which had occurred throughout the nineteenth century. Franco, McComb *pointed out*, did not think of himself as a Fascist but as a conservative nationalist. His motto was 'discipline and unity,' and he had the enthusiastic support of many Spaniards. Before 1937 Dos Passos because of his enthusiasm for Spanish liberalism and the Republic *could not accept* McComb's arguments and *had wanted to believe* that the struggle was a straightforward one of freedom versus Fascism. But in the light of what he had seen and heard in Spain, he *could understand* McComb's view that the Civil War was an historically rooted, internal affair *made more complex* by its international implications and by the involvement of foreign nations. (pp. 377-78; italics added)

While apparently rendering an objective account of Dos Passos's debate with the conservative McComb, Ludington weights the dice in favor of McComb's analysis; his phrasing subtly suggests that McComb had the firmer grasp of the complexities of Spanish politics and that Dos Passos's earlier antifascist fervor had rested upon a simplistic reduction of the issues involved. Ludington does not prove this rather questionable proposition, however: he simply implies that Dos Passos awoke to a fuller vision of the truth, and then proceeds with his narrative.

I take issue with Ludington's veiled political stance not only because it disguises tendentiousness as objectivity, but also because it distorts the history of the 1930's and prevents us from exploring questions that are central to an understanding of Dos Passos's changing beliefs. Ludington is, of course, willing to set himself apart from the Dos Passos of later years and to criticize the sets of assumptions that removed Dos Passos from the mainstream of liberal thought. But in his portrait of that crucial period when Dos Passos was producing those novelistic chronicles for which he is famous, Ludington fails to provide insight into the quite complex nature of Dos Passos's radicalism. In particular, he fails to offer a cogent discussion of Dos Passos's dialogue with the Left, or to give reasons for the Left's failure to win Dos Passos to a fully Marxist conception of historical process. To reduce this relationship to a simplistic picture of Dos Passos escaping from the machinations of self-interested Stalinists does nothing to illuminate the basic questions involved. Ludington should give us more insight into such matters as the Left's conception of culture; of the relationship between cultural activism and revolutionary change; finally, of the relationship between consciousness on the one hand, and the forces and relations of production on the other. Then we could glimpse the full dimensions of the debate in which Dos Passos was engaged. From this examination, I suspect,

the Communist Party would hardly emerge as flawless, but neither would it take shape as the mechanistic and self-serving organization that appears in so many conventional discussions of the writer and the Left.

I am not suggesting that Dos Passos is an unsung revolutionary. Even at his most radical he stubbornly retained a number of pronounced bourgeois tendencies. But it was not *fated* that this personal intransigence would prevail. As *U.S.A.* demonstrates, Dos Passos's best work was energized by the notion of class struggle, which enabled him to transform the narrative inertness of the early aesthete novels and the kaleidoscopic diffusion of *Manhattan Transfer* into a powerful portrait of a nation locked in internal combat. What is needed now is a study of Dos Passos that offers a sophisticated analysis of the historical process, both personal and political, that led to—and away from—this dynamic vision. Ludington's study provides the necessary data for such an undertaking, and it offers a highly sympathetic appreciation of Dos Passos's own angle of vision. Dos Passos scholarship now awaits a "U.S.A." about Dos Passos himself, which locates the novelist's subjective experience in that larger objective process with which Dos Passos grappled so consistently and passionately in all his major writings.

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Ideology and Caribbean Literature

Most persons committed to the study of the Caribbean and its literature will no doubt agree that conditions in that part of America cry out for major structural changes in the social, economic, and political spheres, and that authentic literary production from the region will naturally reflect the concrete problematics of life confronted by its writers. At the same time, it seems clear that no particular formula for structural transformation is obviously preferable to all others, and that no particular type of relationship between Caribbean literary expression and Caribbean social reality is in any sense binding upon writers, critics, or the reading public—whether such interested parties are native or non-native to the region. Beyond this, it seems to me that the ends of politics and ideology are better served by journalism and essayistic prose than by imaginative literature, since the former are primarily referential, while the imaginative work is first of all an aesthetic construct, a unique selection, arrangement and interpretation of experiences which calls attention to itself as such a construct, as well as to its medium, language.¹

¹Certainly, art has an ideological content, but only in the proportion that ideology loses its substantiveness by being integrated into the new reality of the work of art. That is, the ideological problems that the artist chooses to deal with have to be solved *artistically*. Art can have a cognitive function also, that of reflecting the essence of the real; but this function can only be fulfilled by *creating a new reality*, not by copying or imitating existing reality. In other words, the cognitive problems that the artist chooses to deal with have to be solved *artistically*. To forget this—that is, to reduce art to ideology or to a mere form of knowledge—is to forget that the work of art is, above all, creation, a manifestation of the creative powers of man." Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), pp. 40-41. Spanish original published in 1965, here translated by Marco Riofrancos.