

MODERNISM AND THE AFFIRMATION OF THE SELF: THE CASE OF JOHN DOS PASSOS

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Modernism, a much discussed topic among literary critics in recent years, is not easy to define; yet in its numerous versions it is the major artistic and literary movement that emerged around the turn of this century and lasted well into it -some critics would argue that it still exists today, although most would assert that post-modernism now holds sway. The movement was extremely important for the novel in the United States, because it enabled a generation of writers coming of age after World War I the opportunity to express new attitudes in new ways. One student of the modernist novel wrote that the movement,

displays a revolt against prevalent style, even a rage against all established order, and concomitant formal inventiveness . . . Modernism exalts the literature of disruption over the literature of affirmation.

Modernist epistemology views the world as a function of the perceiver and devalues cognition and rationality as means of knowing. Modern industrial society is seen as an historical trap in which the individual is powerless to act. Consequently, traditional systems of belief -including religion, history, and philosophy, especially Romantic transcendentalism-are called into question and may be supplanted by art, or sometimes by Freudian, Marxist, or existential visions of reality.¹

1. Thomas Evans, North Carolina Central University. unpublished paper discussing Irving Howe, "The Idea of The Modern", in *Literary Modernism* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1967), pp. 11-40.

Again and again modernist writers expressed their conviction that “the individual is powerless to act”; yet again and again they acted, their very acts of writing a demonstration that they *had* a from of power, although that might only be aesthetic -art to oppose the brutality of an industrial, chaotic world.

No United States author became more caught up in the movement than John Dos Passos, whose life and most important work placed him directly at the center of literary modernism. Coming to believe that the individual was trapped by mass society, he constantly asserted that the self could be affirmed by words which, if well used, might rebuild history. Five quotations can serve to make the point:

Under various tags: futurism, cubism, vorticism, modernism, most of the best work in the arts in our time has been the direct product of [the creative tidal wave that spread over the world from the Paris of before the last European war].²

[A writer] whittles at the words and phrases of today and makes them forms to set the mind of tomorrow’s generation. That’s history. A writer who writes straight is the architect of history.³

U.S.A. is the slice of a continent. U.S.A. is a group of holding companies, some aggregations of trade unions, a set of laws bound in calf, a radio network, a chain of moving picture theatres, a column of stockquotations rubbed out and written in by a Western Union boy on a blackboard, a publiclibrary full of old newspapers and dogeared historybooks with protests scrawled on the margins in pencil. U.S.A. is the world’s greatest rivervalley fringed with mountains and hills. U.S.A. is a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bankaccounts. U.S.A. is a lot of men buried in their uniforms in Arlington Cemetery. U.S.A. is the letters at the end of an address when you are away from home. But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people.⁴

how can I make them feel how our fathers our uncles haters of oppression came to this coast how say Don’t let them scare you make them feel who are your oppressors America

2. John Dos Passos, Foreword to Blaise Cendrars, *Panama or The Adventures of My Seven Uneles* (New York: Harper, 1931), p. vii.

3. John Dos Passos, Introduction to *Three Soldiers* (New York: Random House, 1932), p. viii.

4. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. vii.

rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers
 districtattorneys collegepresidents judges without the old words the
 immigrants haters of oppression brought to Plymouth how can you know
 who are your betrayers America

or that this fishpeddler you have in Charlestown Jail is one of your
 founders Massachusetts? ⁵

we have only words against
 POWER SUPERPOWER ⁶

The first quotation comes from Dos Passos's foreword to his translation of *Panama or The Adventures of My Seven Uncles*, by Blaise Cendrars. Published in 1931, the piece reflects the tremendous influence European modernists such as Cendrars, Picasso, Modigliani, Marinetti, Chagall, Maikovsky, Meyerhold, Joyce, Stravinski, Prokofieff, and Diagileff had upon the American author, who, overwhelmed by the Great War, had sought in the modernists new modes to describe the disordered world he saw before him in the 1920's.

The second quotation is from his 1932 introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Three Soldiers*, the 1921 novel that brought him fame, not for the form, which was hardly radical, but for its bitter denunciation of organization, war, and the industrial age. "A writer who writes straight is the architect of history", he declared grandiosely. Although we should be skeptical, we should also recognize that the statement was more one of hope than of certainty. If other American modernists such as the poet Wallace Stevens found "not ideas about the thing but the thing itself" sufficient, Dos Passos, shaken by war, sought order, and eventually, affirmation, in history.

The third quotation is a piece Dos Passos wrote in 1937 as a kind of introduction to *The 42nd Parallel, Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money* when they were published together as *U.S.A.*; while the fourth is from "Camera Eye (49)" near the end of *The Big Money*. In the autobiographical piece Dos Passos meditates upon the convicted anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. The fifth quotation is also from *The Big Money*; it is the last line of the final "Camera Eye" and the title line of the biographical sketch about the financier and embezzler Samuel Insull. Together the selections reflect Dos Passos's conviction that only through language, used accurately and not to distort or disguise, can any truths be affirmed about the past as history and about the present, as the speech of the people. "Rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges," he pleaded, because, renewed, these words could protect

5. *U.S.A.: The Big Money*, p. 391.

6. *U.S.A.: The Big Money*, p. 464.

the people from the corrupt brokers of power. In the last "Camera Eye," having found an identity for himself in an affiliation with the common people -coal miners on strike in Harlan County, Kentucky- he spoke as one among the "we" who had only words against "power superpower." But these could suffice if used truly, and that is what, as author, he had tried to do in the trilogy *U.S.A. There*, laid out before us through the narrative devices of the "Camera Eye," the fictional narratives, the biographical sketches, and the Newsreels is the language of the nation which constitutes its history during the period 1900-1930. It is, of course, a history of a nation hurtling ever faster from boom to bust, but Dos Passos's point was that only through understanding themselves truly could Americans comprehend the causes of their great collapse in 1929.

The quotations, thus, all look back; they are the affirmations after the fact of a modernist who had found himself during the years prior to 1930. The process was lengthy and involved the searing experience of war, the discovery of new forms, and the acceptance of history as a way to find meaning among the chaos of the twentieth century. Finally, of course, in Dos Passos's case to take refuge in history led him away from the modern. He turned to writing about a past as it had never quite been. So enamoured did he become with the "Golden Age" of Thomas Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers of the United States that he idealized it and half lost touch with his own time, but that is another story, one which need not concern us here.

Born an illegitimate child in 1896, Dos Passos had reason to struggle for self affirmation. Lonely, living what he later called a "hotel childhood," he was an obvious example of the adolescent alienated from a country he neither knew nor was sure he loved. As he matured he passed through Harvard University, whose young intellectuals were in the throes of cultural rebellion; there the seeds of modernism were planted in him. But by itself the Harvard experience was not enough to sever his bonds with the Victorians. Dos Passos emerged in 1916 a bit the aesthete given to imagist poems such as one entitled "Salvation Army," which exalted the common:

...the fanfare of the street,
 ...The noise of marts,
 And dinning market stalls, where women shout

Their wares, and meat hangs out-
 Grotesque, distorted by the gas flare's light-
 Into one sacred rhythm for the Devil's spite.⁷

7. "Salvation Army", *Harvard Monthly*, 62 (March, 1916), 12.

His intended revolt against propriety scarcely needs to be pointed out; yet it was of a *fin de siècle* sort, not that of a modernist as we understand the term.

Dos Passos's modernism stemmed specifically from the searing experience of the Great War. As he drowsed aboard the ship taking him to Europe in June 1917 he wrote a poem in his notebook which reveals his awareness that a break with the past was imminent:

I have no more memories
Before
My memories with various strands
Had spun me many misty-colored towns,
Full of gleams of halfheard music,
Full of sudden throbbing scents,

And rustle of unseen passers-by
Vague streets rainbow glowing
For me to wander in ...
Today,
As if a gritty stinking sponge
Had smeared the slate of my pale memories,
I stand aghast in a grey world,

Waiting ...
I have no more memories. ⁸

Little more that a month later he scrawled furiously in his notebook, "Paris - A strange Paris of whores and tragically sad widows - The abandon of complete misery - My God - how ridiculous it all is - I think in gargoyles." He wanted to write; a novel "called the Dance of Death" came to mind; he expected, however, that the title would be much used by the time he got to it. "I'm dying to write," he continued, "but all my methods of doing things in the past merely disgust me now, all former methods are damned inadequate - the stream of sensation flows by - I suck it up like a sponge." Anguished, he believed "Horror is so piled on horror that there can be no more"; and he became convinced that the world had been shattered by the general conflagration: "My God what a time," he burst out, "All the cant and hypocrisy, all the damnable survivals, all the vestiges of old truths now putrid and false infect the air, choke you worse that

8. *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Doe Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (Boston, Gambit, 1973), p. 86.

German gas - The ministers from their damn smug pulpits, the business men - the heroics about war - my country right or wrong - oh infinities of them!"⁹

After the one major offensive near Verdun in which he drove ambulances, he confided to his diary that he wanted,

to be able to express, later - all of this - all the tragic and hideous excitement of it [:]... The grey crooked fingers of the dead, the dark look of dirty mangled bodies, their groans & joltings in the ambulances, the vast tomtom of the guns the ripping tear shells make when they explode ... And through everything the vast despair of unavoidable death of lives wrenched out of their channels - of all the ludicrous tomfoolery of governments.¹⁰

As these images piled up, they caused him to scrub his artistic canvas clean of *fin de siecle* dabblings. But the process was slow; back in Paris in the summer of 1918 after service on the Western front and in Italy, Dos Passos drifted happily in a kind of aesthetic twilight. "I live on the Ile St. Louis, in the Seine, a beautifully old seedy part of Paris that I love," he wrote a friend in the United States. "I spend my time writing and sketching up and down the river."¹¹ The drawings, pleasant if not extraordinary, are nostalgic for what had been before the war. Shortly, they, like his writing, would change both in subject and form.

That change, of course, marked his commitment to modernism. First came the change in subject; from two novels which, loosely speaking, were about the aesthete's search for Life, he turned to registering the impact of the war. *One Man's Initiation-1917*, written at a furious pace during the summer of 1918, recorded an autobiographical hero's introduction to the nightmare of Verdun. The far more sophisticated *Three Soldiers* took an autobiographical John Andrews and other young Americans through war and the brutalizing crush of military organization.

But neither book seems entirely the work of a modernist. That came four years later, in 1925, with the publication of *Manhattan Transfer*, the novel in which Dos Passos seemed consciously to assert his creative will through the form he imposed upon his material. "I had done a lot of reading knocking about the warwacked world," he commented much later:

Some of the poets who went along with the cubism of the painters of the School of Paris talked of simultaneity. There was something about

9. *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, pp. 89-90.

10. *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, pp. 95-96.

11. *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, pp. 194.

Rimbaud's poetry that tended to stand up off the page. Imagism. Direct snapshots of life. Rapportage was a great slogan. The artist must record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it. By contrast, juxtaposition he could build reality into his own vision: montage.

New York was the first thing that hit me when I got back home [from traveling abroad in the early 1920's]. I started rapportage on New York. Some of the characters out of abandoned youthful narrative got into the book, but there was more to the life of a great city than you could cram into any one hero's career. The narrative must stand up off the page. Fragmentation. Contrast. Montage. The result was *Manhattan Transfer*.¹²

Perhaps it is unfortunate he was not a theorizer; there are few if any neat quotations which express precisely the point that the form of *Manhattan Transfer* is an affirmation of the self; yet it is. Such a conscious ordering of materials, such stylizing, cannot but be that. Like the artists who had influenced him, the variety of what he *showed* as well as the multiple perspectives, the devices of fragmentation and montage, and the effort to create an impression of simultaneity were the imposition of his creativity upon what he termed "the panorama of history that roared past my ears."¹³ For him, as for visual artists, there was no longer a single, simple, linear (or photographic) reality. Form and content were, as he observed in 1928 about his friend E.E. Cummings's *avant-garde* play *Him*, the means "to generate feelings and put them immediately up to the understanding, ... to express sensations rather than tell about them." Dos Passos explained that a "narrative exposition style [which I take to mean not only telling, as opposed to showing, but a semblance of objective realism] does not give us the satisfaction it once did. We want to recreate the event more immediately."¹⁴ To do that meant amassing the raw materials of a time and place and shaping them in stylized fashion on the page. Thus, *Manhattan Transfer* begins with an impressionistic passage that tries to convey the sights, sounds, and smells of a ferry slip; it is immediately followed by two narrative sequences. And a short while later, in the second chapter entitled "Metropolis," Dos Passos inserted fragments from a newspaper. The result has the effect of a collage, a fragmented, multi-perspective, but finally partial vision of a modern city.

Furthermore, it is a vision of the present, not the past, and one in which the characters who pass on and off stage can find no particular meaning. They remain alienated in good modernist fashion, even if we, through the form, come

12. Portion of a manuscript entitled "How the Contemporary Chronicles Began", pp. 3-4, Box 47, Folder 14 of the Dos Passos collection at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

13. Manuscript, p. 3.

14. "Mr. Dos Passos on 'Him'", *New York Times*, April 22, 1928, Sec. 9, p. 2.

to understand what the city is and is not. One character commits suicide; another dies too drunk to save himself in a fire; a third, described as a porcelain figure, responds to an offer of marriage, "I guess I can stand it if you can George"; and a fourth, when asked how far he intends to travel after he has walked out of the city past "dumping grounds full of smoking rubbishpiles," responds, "I dunno... Pretty far."¹⁵ None gains perception or a sense of order.

This modernist novel, however, by an author rebelling against the past, is what he later termed a "chronicle of the present."¹⁶ It would take the shock of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti to turn him toward history for an answer to the modernist search for meaning. They died in 1927; after an extended trip to Russia, from which Dos Passos returned unconvinced that communism was the solution to the ills of monopoly capitalism, he set out to chronicle the first three decades of the twentieth century. Rebuilding the foundations -the language- of democratic government ruined by "lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges" would, he hoped, enable Americans to make sense of the present. The first step was to understand the past, and so, using multiple narrative devices such as he had in *Manhattan Transfer* but adding more, he set out to write a trilogy that would present a collage of the U.S.A. as many layered, or angled, as he could make it.

What one needs to recognize is that modernists, Dos Passos among them, still had faith in the validity of language, if truly used. Words signified things -facts- that could be accepted. Through words laid out so as to expose falsity, one could gain insight, could see a pattern to history. But, someone might wonder, Dos Passos was treating fact as fiction; hence was he not denying history? Partly, is the answer, yet *U.S.A.* is less fiction than first it might seem. The same year as he began the trilogy he commented in a "Statement of Belief" that the ideal form of narrative would be one that combined fiction and history, and he saw himself "sort of on the edge between them, moving from one field to the other very rapidly."¹⁷ The "fictional" elements are the narratives about characters such as Mac, J. Ward Morehouse, Richard Ellsworth Savage, and Charlie Anderson. Yet each of these is less fictional than we may think; all draw heavily from Dos Passos's experiences and knowledge of actual people, while the Camera Eyes, biographies, and Newsreels are "fact," granted always the slant Dos Passos gave them to convey his ironic sense of history. As Alfred Kazin observed while speaking about *U.S.A.*, "The old faith that 'history' exists objectively, that it has ascertainable order, that is what the novelist most depends on and appeals to, that

15. *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), pp. 375, 404.

16. "Contemporary Chronicles", *Carleton Miscellany*, 2 (Spring, 1961), p. 25.

17. "Statement of Belief", *Bookman*, 68 (Sept. 1928), 26; "The Art of Fiction XLIV", *Paris Review*, no. 46 (Spring 1969), 64.

'history' even supplies the *structure* of the novel -this is what distinguishes the extraordinary invention that is Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* from most novels published since 1940."¹⁸

Dos Passos, thus, can serve as one model of the American writer who came to modernism during the early twentieth century, a writer who, while discarding many of the old truths, in some ways like William James before him willed himself to believe in the possibility of order, although to discern what that might be was an arduous, even well nigh impossible task. He was too much the economic determinist to believe that the individual might find refuge on some island in the stream of events, as his sometime friend Ernest Hemingway did, or to be satisfied with a private existence in the present, natural world as Wallace Stevens was. He hoped to find answers by trying to sort through the nation's language, which was its history.

Such faith, if it can be called that, is what separates the modernists from their successors, the post-modernists, novelists such as Thomas Pynchon in *V* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, and E. L. Doctorow, in *Ragtime*, for whom the twentieth-century is so blurred as to make fact and fiction, hence "history", indecipherable. But while we may find it fashionable to accept the absurdity, apocalypse, and chaos in post-modern apocalyptic or non-fiction novels as absolutes on an intellectual level, on a more personal one most of us are conscious of some sort of order or system to things even if it not be overarching.¹⁹ We continue, I believe, to owe a debt to the modernists, whose visions introduced us to the snarl that is our age, but whose works are affirmations that the self can create. Of the plunge into the murky depths beyond, they might warn us, "That way madness lies."

18. Introduction to *The Forty-Second Parallel* (New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. v-vi.

19. For an excellent discussion of this, see David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads", *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcom Bradbury (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1978), pp. 108-109.