



The Adventures of Jon Dos Passos

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from: Writers on the Left by Daniel Aaron

CHAPTER FIFTEEN -- THE ADVENTURES OF JOHN DOS PASSOS

(pp. 343-353)

UNTIL HIS REVIEW of *The Adventures of a Young Man*, Cowley had been one of the most intelligent and appreciative critics of John Dos Passos. He had read each volume of his trilogy *U.S.A.* with sympathetic attention although the bleakness of Dos Passos's "final message" clashed with Cowley's mid-thirties optimism about the out- come of the class struggle. "For all their scope and richness," Cowley wrote, "they fail to express one side of contemporary life -- the will to struggle ahead, the comradeship in struggle, the consciousness of new man and new forces continually rising. Although we may be a beaten nation, the fight is not over."¹ Nevertheless, he ranked Dos Passos among the few serious novelists of the times.

Three years later, only a few months before Cowley himself would break with the movement, he pronounced Dos Passos's novel of the Spanish Civil War his weakest book since *One Man's Initiation* (1921). This judgment, he confessed, "may have been affected by disagreement with his political ideas," but he found the novel tired and derivative as well as factually unreliable and its conception of human motives low and mean-spirited.²

In the summer of 1939, the Spanish Civil War was already a bitter memory, but for a few months it had been the one conflict on which Left radicals of almost every persuasion could agree. It touched "people of my sort," Cowley wrote, more deeply than "any other international event since the World War and the Russian revolution." To him, as to most American intellectuals, Communist and non-Communist, it seemed to lay bare without ambiguity "two systems of life": Landlords, the Church, the Military and Finance representing class privilege and intolerance; and the aspiring workers and peasants, artists and poets guiding "a poverty-stricken people toward more knowledge, more freedom, more of everything." If the Republican government lost to the Franco-Hitler-Mussolini coalition, then fascist-inspired insurrections "might be repeated in Czechoslovakia, in France, in all the free nations of Europe."³

Cowley's pro-Loyalist fervor had been quickened by a visit to Spain in July 1937 as a delegate to an international writers' congress held in Valencia. He went absolutely convinced of the party's correctness in opposing the anarcho-syndicalist elements in Spain (denounced as "uncontrollables" or "Trotskyites") and found his views confirmed by the Propaganda Ministry in Barcelona. He gave no credence whatsoever to the reports emanating from Spain since the early summer, and publicized in the anti-party press, of the brutal repressions carried out against antifascist anarchists and socialists by the Stalin-dominated government.⁴ The kindest explanation he could offer for Dos Passos's acceptance of such charges was

his anger and remorse over the death of a friend executed (understandably, in Cowley's opinion) by the Spanish Government.*

[* According to Cowley, Hemingway, after interceding for Jose Robles, the friend of Dos Passos, "with the highest officials of the Spanish government became convinced of his guilt. Dos Passos continued to believe he was innocent, even after learning that he had been convicted and shot." NR, XCIX (June 14, 1937), p. 163. Replying to Cowley (ibid., pp. 308-09), Dos Passos gave his opinion that his old friend and translator had been murdered by the Communist controlled "special section," because Russian secret agents felt that Robles knew too much about the relations between the Spanish war ministry and the Kremlin and was not, from their very special point of view politically reliable."]

The hero of *The Adventures of a Young Man* is not John Dos Passos, but his career and the author's are symbolically parallel. Glenn Spotswood joins the Communist Party because ostensibly it fights for better social order. He works as an organizer in Harlan County until he discovers the party exploiting the strike to enhance its own prestige rather than to save the miners. Glenn's refusal to follow the twists and turns of the party line makes him a renegade in the eyes of the party leaders, and their vindictiveness dogs him in Spain after he joins the International Brigade. Persecuted as a Trotskyist and jailed, he is released only to be sent on a mission which is nothing less than an unofficial death sentence.

Dos Passos, an observer rather than a joiner, never belonged to the Communist Party, never organized a strike, never fought in Spain, but he watched these events with his own eyes. The death of Glenn Spotswood signified the end of Dos Passos's turbulent affiliation with the radical movement. His Spanish war novel must not be read as a sectarian tract or what a *New Masses* critic called "a crude piece of Trotskyist agit-prop." Rather, as Farrell rightly said, it describes "a dead-end of a historic movement -- the Communist Party."⁵

The beginning of his radical adventures dates back at least as far as 1916, his last year at Harvard, and possibly earlier. During his undergraduate years, he was conscientiously rejecting all the "truths" he had previously taken for granted. He smashed no idols, but symptoms of incipient rebellion crept into the favorable reviews of John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico* (1914) and *War in Western Europe* (1916) that he wrote for the *Harvard Monthly*.⁶ He particularly liked Reed's impressionistic style, the happy combination of the factual and the personal, which Dos Passos later incorporated into his own pungent brand of "reportage."^{*}

[* Nathan Asch described Dos Passos in 1934 as a kind of artist-reporter: "The usually vague distinction between the artist and the reporter become pronounced here and consists in the artist's having more depth and comprehension and sympathy, maybe more love for humans living. He has many functions, but when he re-creates something that really happens he does a better job than would an apparently cold, objective, will-not-take-sides reporter. Events in his hand become

significant, have a meaning, acquire direction, become a part of life, and place themselves in time's duration." NR, LXXVIII (May 9, 1934), pp. 370-71.]

After graduation and on the eve of his embarkation for France as a "gentleman volunteer" ambulance driver, Dos Passos's letters almost exploded with rebellion.

"I have been spending my time of late going to pacifist meetings and being dispersed by the police. I am getting quite experienced in the cossack tactics of the New York police force. I've been in a mysterious police raid, too; nearly piled into a black maria -- Every day I become more red -- My one ambition is to be able to sing the international --

"I think we are all of us a pretty milky lot, -- don't you? with our tea table convictions and our radicalism that keeps so consistently within the bounds of decorum -- Damn it, why couldn't one of us have refused to register and gone to jail and made a general ass of himself? I should have had more hope for Harvard.

"All the thrust and advance and courage in the country now lies in the East Side Jews and in a few of the isolated "foreigners" whose opinions so shock the New York Times. They're so much more real and alive than we are anyway -- I'd like to annihilate these stupid colleges of ours, and all the nice young men, therein, instillers of stodginess -- every form of bastard culture, middle class snobism.

"And what are we fit for when they turn us out of Harvard? We're too intelligent to be successful business men and we haven't the sand or the energy to be anything else. Until Widener is blown up and A. Lawrence Lowell assassinated and the Business School destroyed and its site sowed with salt -- no good will come out of Cambridge."

Or again, still bloody and facetious:

"I've decided my only hope is in revolution -- in wholesale assassination of all statesmen, capitalists, war-mongers, jingoists, inventors, scientists -- in the destruction of all the machinery of the industrial world, equally barren in destruction and construction.

"My only refuge from the deepest depression is in dreams of vengeful guillotines."

His distrust for Wilsonian platitudes antedated his war experiences, but his protests were high-spirited and gay. Eastbound on the U.S.S. Chicago in June 1917, he professed huge delight at the presence of five Socialists and poked fun at "Archie" Roosevelt and other patrician officers, bloodthirsty imperialists to a man. Were he back at Harvard, he wrote to Arthur McComb, he would be attacking conscription, the daily press, and "the intellectual classes." After a month's spell in a French training camp, his mood darkened:

"Politically, I've given up hope entirely -- the capitalists have the world so in their clutches -- I mean the elderly swag bellied gentlemen who control all destinies -- that I don't see how it can ever escape. There are too many who go singing to the sacrifice -- who throw themselves gladly, abjectly beneath the Juggernaut. It's rather a comfort to have given up hope entirely."

Although it was a relief to escape into "a pleasantly cynical sullenness" and "stride away from the human race," he knew that in time he would feel the twinges of conscience and "take up again my self-inflicted burden."

During the summer and fall of 1917, he caught the full blast of the war, later recorded ingloriously in his *Three Soldiers*: the mutilated bodies, the horses choking to death in poison gas, the drunken troops. He found it hideous and absurd. Wasn't it time, he asked, to stop crying over the dead or over a probably mythical liberty? "Like the Jews at their wailing place, the Liberals cover their heads with their robes of integrity and wail, wail, wail -- God, I'm tired of wailing. I want to assassinate." Only one thought consoled him. At least the poison gas of trench warfare was better than the miasma of lies that enshrouded the world, and if the war could not be stopped, one might still "heave 'arf a brick into the Temple of Moloch if nothing else" and "disturb with laughter the religious halo of the holocaust." He still saw the ridiculousness of Richard Norton, surrounded by fat officers, addressing the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Unit: "and as gentlemen volunteers you enlisted in this service, as gentlemen volunteers I bid you farewell."

From August 1917 until the summer of 1918, when he was sent back to the States because of his antimilitary views, he lived the life of a vagabond ambulance driver, first in France, then in Italy, finding the agony and the misery of Europe preferable to the American "orgy of patriotic bunk." With Robert Hillyer, he repaired broken engines, scavenged for wine and omelets, and collaborated on a novel. At this time, too, he saw a good deal of another "gentleman volunteer," a "certain Jack Lawson, a dramatist smoking a pipe of unexampled stench," busily engaged in writing "a future Broadway success."

Back in the States in the fall of 1918, he waited to find out whether he would be discharged on account of his bad eyes or assigned to another ambulance unit. The organization of army life appalled him. "Organization," he declared, "is death." And yet he did not want to be anywhere else. "I'm glad I'm here," he wrote to McComb, "even if I seem to grumble. I've always wanted to divest myself of class and the monied background -- the army seemed the best way -- From the bottom -- thought I, one can see clear -- So, though I might have escaped behind my sacred eyes, I walked with the other cattle into the branding pen" Dos Passos enlisted in the medical corps, but he saw no more active service.⁷

He emerged from the war an independent-radical seeker, filled with the mission (as he said of the Spanish novelist Pio Baroja) "to put the acid test to existing institutions, to strip them of their veils."⁸ Before his discharge, he spent the spring

of 1919 in Paris observing the Peace Conference with Hillyer, Lawson, and other friends, and sniffing happily the radical winds of doctrine blowing in from the east. "We knew that the world was a lousy pesthouse of idiocy and corruption," he wrote later, "but it was spring. We knew that in all the ornate buildings, under the crystal chandeliers, under the brocaded hangings the politicians and diplomats were brewing poison, fuddled old men festering like tent caterpillars in a tangle of red tape and gold braid," but the caterpillars could be burned.⁹ Discovering the drawings of George Grosz at this time seemed to Dos Passos like "finding a brilliant new weapon" or "hearing a well-imagined and properly balanced string of cusswords." * They mirrored the corruption that Dos Passos was setting down in words, and he may very well have patterned his corrosive satire after Grosz's visual images.

[* "A satirist is a man whose flesh creeps so at ugly and savage and incongruous aspects of society that he has to express them as brutally and nakedly as possible to get relief. He seeks to put into expressive forms his grisly obsessions the way a bacteriologist seeks to isolate a virus or a dangerous micro-organism.... Looking at Grosz's drawings you are more likely to feel a grin of pain than to burst out laughing. Instead of letting you be the superior bystander laughing in an Olympian way at somebody absurd, Grosz makes you identify yourself with the sordid and pitiful object." Introduction to Grosz's *Interregnum* (N.Y., 1936), p.18.]

The radicalism of Dos Passos simmered in the early twenties, boiled furiously between 1927 and 1932, and began to cool thereafter. At no time did he consider joining the Communist Party, but he supported it during his fellow- traveling stage as the successor to the I.W.W. and as the "arch-enemy" of privilege. In the public eye, however, if not his own, his association with *The New Masses* and with the radical writers of the New Playwrights Theatre from 1927 to 1929, linked him with the revolutionary movement; and his own *Airways, Inc.* (1928) -- packed with suicides, frame-ups, electrocutions -- was a horrendous diatribe against capitalist institutions. He obviously intended it to illustrate what he was calling at this time, "socially creative ideas . . . the new myth that's got to be created to replace the imperialist prosperity myth if the machinery of American life is ever to be gotten under social control."¹⁰

In creating this new myth, however, Dos Passos seemed to subordinate people to conditions, to be concentrating on the disaster rather than on the people concerned. Edmund Wilson, a good friend and his most astute critic, wondered if Dos Passos's hatred of capitalist society was not becoming a "distaste for all the beings who compose it." In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), his first collective novel, humanity "came off badly"; unintentionally Dos Passos had damned "the sufferers along with the disease." In *Airways, Inc.*, the sufferers were inconceivably hideous. Dos Passos did not distinguish capitalism's official representatives from the unprotesting multitudes unfortunate enough to have been born under the system and too stupid to oppose it. Such an impossible society of yahoos impelled Wilson "to rush to the defense of even the American bathroom, even the Ford car -- which, after all, one

begins to reflect, have perhaps done as much to save the people from the helplessness, ignorance, and squalor as the prophets of revolution have done." When a gifted and intelligent man like Dos Passos resorted to such flat dichotomies of good and evil, when he martyred his "good guys" and made "the wrong side" invariably repulsive, he was betraying an inward sentimentality "of which his misapplied resentments are merely the aggressive side." Dos Passos brought his own political ideas under suspicion "because we suspect the processes by which he arrived at them."¹¹

If Wilson deprecated his friend's "infatuation" with social revolution, the Communists did not. They held up Dos Passos to the wavering or timid literati as the prime example of a man who had saved himself and strengthened his work by seeing "the promise of a dynamic tradition in the new social order that is slowly emerging today...." True enough they could not applaud his preference for political independence or agree with his advice to middle-class liberals (namely, "everybody who isn't forced by his position in the economic structure of society to be pro-worker or anti-worker") to try to mitigate the ferocity of the class struggle, but they took pride in his revolutionary temper and in his growing reputation in the Soviet Union. All signs pointed to his closer union with the party.¹²

But future events proved what some party spokesman already suspected: Dos Passos's "psychological orientation" was "not revolutionary,"¹³ at least not to the extent of endorsing all party practices. The New Masses was grieved early in 1934 when it found the name John Dos Passos among the signers of "an Open Letter to the Communist Party" protesting against "the disruptive action of the Communists which led to the breaking up of the meeting called by the Socialist Party in Madison Square Garden of February 16th."

The Socialist Party had called the mass meeting to honor the Socialist victims of Chancellor Dollfuss, whose soldiers had shot down Viennese workers and bombarded their apartment houses. In their efforts to take over the meeting, Communist "goon" squads provoked a riot. "Instead of working class unity," the signers declared, "factional warfare ruled. Speakers were howled down, fists flew, chairs were hurled, scores were injured." The riot dishonored the antifascist cause, and although the signers opposed the Socialist leadership here and abroad, they nevertheless held the Communists culpable.¹⁴

Communist spokesmen, blaming the Socialists for the fracas, expected the "nauseatingly distorted" accounts perpetrated by the "scribes" and "lackeys" of the capitalist press, but Dos Passos was a comrade, a contributor to The New Masses, a man whose "books have helped mold a challenging attitude toward capitalism and its concomitant evils," a "literary guide and inspiration." What was he doing in this "queer company" of "revolutionary butterflies"? Dos Passos replied that he signed the letter because he feared for the future of the American radical movement, "of which the Communist Party in this country is politically the most advanced outpost."

"What happened in Madison Square Garden was shocking to me because it indicated the growth of unintelligent fanaticism that, in my opinion, can only end in the division of the conscious elements of the exploited classes into impotent brawling sects, and in the ruin for our time of the effort towards a sanely organized society."15

From the party point of view, Comrade Dos Passos's answer obviously showed he was confused; he mistook Bolshevik firmness for "unintelligent fanaticism." But reviewers in *The New Masses* continued to speak of him as America's first novelist, and Hemingway's superior, until he returned from Spain disenchanted. Only then did the once-neglected Hemingway, who had written only a few pieces for *The New Masses* and had kept his individuality inviolate, become in 1937 and 1938 the party's favorite literary name. Dos Passos in the summer of 1937 was well on his way to becoming a class enemy.

Herbert Solow, tracing the shifting literary reputations of Dos Passos and Hemingway, explained the causes for Dos Passos's devaluation. In Spain,

"Dos Passos found bombs horrifying, bloodshed gruesome, anarchists hounded by a Stalinist camarilla, the People's Front conceding to Anglo-French imperialism and suppressing socialism. He consequently criticized the Stalinists to his companion.

"Hemingway found bombs intriguing, bloodshed exciting, anarchists 'reasonable,' the People's Front noble, socialism nonsense. He consequently denounced his companion."

Back from Spain, "Dos Passos published articles criticizing the Communist International, defended the honor of the Spanish anarchists, supported the Trotsky Defense Committee, opposed collective security.

"Hemingway performed at the Communist Party's Writers Congress, joined sixteen C.P.-controlled committees, wrote a play "exposing" the 'Fifth Column,' fished tarpon at Key West, and socked Max Eastman."16

The party critics still were unwilling to abandon Dos Passos, but his retreat to middle-class liberalism, his new confidence in an America cut off from Europe's ruling cliques by a friendly Atlantic, his revived interest in the American democratic heritage seemed a "strange metamorphosis."17 And his published "Conversation" with Theodore Dreiser, surely one of the oddest and wooliest political discussions ever carried on between two distinguished novelists, must have seemed even stranger.

It took place in Dreiser's apartment, December 17, 1937. From a rather uncertain exchange on the political situation in New York City, the conversation veered to Upton Sinclair, Quakerism, and W.P.A. writers to the subject of Russia:

Dos Passos: Five years ago, a great many Americans pretended to be very hopeful about Russia. I think now because of this terrific terror, because of the fact that the terror has to keep on, and keeps going on, people feel that something is not working there.

Dreiser: Well, I was strong for Russia and for Stalin and the whole program, but in the last year, I have begun to think that maybe it won't be any better than anything else.

Dos Passos: Well, though, look at the achievements of the French Revolution, a great many survived through the period following Napoleon. I think a great many of its achievements are still going on.

Dreiser: Yes, and a great many achievements of the Russian Revolution are right here with us. We're indebted to them for a lot of things -- 40 hour week, W.P.A. -- I mean for public works -- the dole, because they had the dole over there from the first. Wages and laws, control of farming. This bill that's up now. That would never come in this country except for Russia in 1917, at least not in our day.

Dos Passos: No, I think all the great achievements of the Russian Revolution have been made, and that's absorbed into history. And I still don't understand what's happening there. It sounds like . . .

Dreiser: And damned if I do. They claim that they give the Russians a liberal education, you know, a technical education from farming and dairying up. They also give them training in the arts, pertaining to the theatre, the libraries, and gymnastics, health, diet -- all that's supposed to go with being a Russian. But what seems to be lacking is the question of ideology, of what they are to think. And they are to think that any other form of government is insane and that everybody outside Russia is worse off than they are, that they are less miserable than anybody else. I know that to be a fact. Still, that may be a temporary condition, an attempt to achieve cohesion and unity. It has been how many years now? Twenty years, and they have done that much, but it's just a question in my mind whether they'll do more, or whether Russia will be liberalized. Maybe they do want to have a little religion, or greater class differences, or a little more money -- less standardization in life, you know.

Dos Passos: Yes.

When asked by Dreiser if he would like to "Russianize" America if he could, Dos Passos said he would not. Although he agreed with Dreiser that the situation was very bad, America still had a chance: it was "probably the country where the average guy has got the better break." Nationalize the monopolies, yes, but find a way to instill the spirit of "the New England town meeting into bureaucratic industry."¹⁸

A few months after the "Conversation," Mike Gold passed judgment on Dos Passos in the *Daily Worker*. Arnold Gingrich, publisher of *Esquire*, had sent Gold a copy of *U.S.A.*, the separate volumes of which Gold had read and praised, asking him if he did not think it was "the greatest book written in modern America." Gold disliked sitting "in 'esthetic' judgment" on the book of a writer infected with the lunacy of Trotskyism. Once, he admitted, he had praised Dos Passos enthusiastically, as many other American and Soviet critics had done, because he was "going somewhere." And rightly so: "we recognized in him a powerful if bewildered talent" and "tried to help him free that talent from the muck of bourgeois nihilism." On rereading the trilogy, Gold was struck by the pervasiveness of the word "merde," symptomatic of Dos Passos's disgust with the world and his hatred of humanity. "Like the Frenchman Celine, Dos Passos hates Communists because organically he hates the human race."¹⁹

Other critics not so passionately involved in the movement would later assess Dos Passos's disaffection more clinically than Mike Gold did, seeing his 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. And when the party, speaking for the oppressed, became itself in his eyes an agency of the oppressor, he repudiated it. His change of heart was already apparent in *The Big Money*, the third volume of his trilogy, in which the revolutionary leaders appeared, according to Isidor Schneider, as dehumanized robots, and in which Dos Passos's concern extended only to the lone individual.

"My sympathies," he wrote in 1939, "lie with the private in the front line against the brass hat; with the hodcarrier against the strawboss, or the walking delegate for that matter; with the laboratory worker against the stuffed shirt in a mortarboard; with the criminal against the cop."

Several decades later, this chronic oppositionist and foe of organization was still conducting a one-man campaign against universal Bureaucracy.²⁰