

23 CRITICS DISCUSS

John Dos Passos

(1896-1970)

“Dos Passos *may* be, more than Dreiser, Cather, Hergesheimer, Cabell, or Anderson the father of humanized and living fiction...not merely for American but for the world. Just to rub it in, I regard *Manhattan Transfer* as more important in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar, Mr. Joyce’s *Ulysses*. For Mr. Dos Passos can use and deftly does use, all their experimental psychology and style, all their revolt against the molds of classic fiction. But the difference! Dos Passos is *interesting!*”

Sinclair Lewis
Saturday Review
(5 December 1925) 361

“Dos, fortunately, went to the war twice and grew up in between. His first book was lousy.” [To F. Scott Fitzgerald, 15 December 1925] “Neither Wilder nor Dos Passos are ‘good writers.’... Dos Passos is often an excellent writer and has been improving in every way with each book he writes.” [To Paul Romaine, 9 August 1932] “There is no snobbishness like radical snobbishness and when it is working in Dos he is not natural nor much fun. But he is a good fellow...” [To Harry Sylvester, 5 February 1937] [Hemingway and Dos Passos were friends and frequent companions until they quarreled over the Spanish Civil War in 1937.]

“You can trace the moral decay of his [Edmund Wilson’s] criticism on a parallel line with the decline in Dos Passos’s writing through their increasing dishonesty about money and other things, mostly their being dominated by women...” [To Maxwell Perkins, 25 February 1944] “Dos I always liked and respected and thought was a 2nd rate writer on acct. no ear. 2nd rate boxer has no left hand, same as ear to writer, and so gets his brains knocked out and this happened to Dos with every book. Also terrible snob (on acct. of being a bastard).” [To William Faulkner, 23 July 1947]

“Dos Passos is more intelligent than most of his associates—he is able to enter into more points of view—and he is a much better artist...[than] John Howard Lawson [writer and head of the Communist Party in Hollywood].... Dos Passos is, one gathers from his work, a social revolutionist: he believes that, in the United States as elsewhere, the present capitalistic regime is destined to be overthrown by a class-conscious proletariat. And his disapproval of capitalistic society seems to imply a distaste for all the beings who go to compose it. In *Manhattan Transfer*, it was not merely New York, but humanity that came off badly. Dos Passos, in exposing the diseased organism, had the effect, though not, I believe, the intention, of condemning the sufferers along with the disease; and even when he seemed to desire to make certain of his characters sympathetic, he had a way of putting them down....

In [his play] *Airways*, there are several characters whom Dos Passos has succeeded in making either admirable or attractive, but these are, in every case, either radicals or their sympathizers. His bias against the economic system is so strong that it extends beyond its official representatives to all those human beings whose only fault is to have been born where such a system prevails and to be so lacking in courage or perspicacity as not to have allied themselves with the forces that are trying to fight it. In Dos Passos, not only must the policeman not fail to steal the money with which the street-kids have been playing craps; but even the young people of *Airways* who, however irresponsible and immoral, might be expected to exhibit something of the charm of youth—become uglier and uglier as the play proceeds, till they finally go completely to pieces in a drunken restaurant scene which is one of Dos Passos’s masterpieces of corrosive vulgarity.... For Lawson or Dos Passos, an aviator cannot be an authentic hero, or even, apparently, a genius, because he is not on the side of the revolution.... To a Lawson or a Dos Passos, he is suspect: they cannot let him get away with anything, and eventually, in what they write, they succeed in destroying or degrading him....

Now, the life of middle-class America, even under capitalism and even in a city like New York, is not as unattractive as Dos Passos makes it—no human life under any conditions can ever have been so unattractive. Under however an unequal distribution of wealth, human beings are still capable of enjoyment, affection and enthusiasm—even of integrity and courage. Nor are these qualities and emotions entirely confined to class-conscious workers and their leaders. There are moments in reading a novel or seeing a play by Dos Passos when one finds oneself ready 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 rescue us from helplessness, ignorance and squalor as the prophets of revolution. We may begin to reflect upon the relation, in Dos Passos, of political opinions to artistic effects. Might it not, we ask ourselves, be possible—have we not, in fact, seen it occur—for a writer to hold Dos Passos’s political opinions and yet not depict our middle-class republic as a place where no birds sing, no flowers bloom and where the very air is almost unbreathable?

For, in the novels of Dos Passos, everybody loses out: if he is on the right side of the social question, he has to suffer, if he is not snuffed out; if he is on the oppressors’ side, his pleasures are made repulsive. When a man as intelligent as Dos Passos—that is, a man a good deal more intelligent than, say, Michael Gold [prominent Communist] or Upton Sinclair, who hold similar political views—when so intelligent a man and so good an artist allows his bias so to falsify his picture of life that, in spite of all the accurate observation and all the imaginative insight, its values are partly those of melodrama—we begin to guess some stubborn sentimentalism at the bottom of the whole thing, some deeply buried streak of hysteria of which his misapplied resentments represent the aggressive side. And from the moment we suspect the processes by which he has arrived at his political ideas, the ideas themselves become suspect.

In the meantime, whatever diagnosis we may make of Dos Passos’ infatuation with the social revolution, he remains one of the few first-rate figures among our writers of his generation, and the only one of these who has made a systematic effort to study all the aspects of America and to take account of all its elements, to compose them into a picture which makes some general case. Most of the first rate men of Dos Passos’s age—Hemingway, Wilder, Fitzgerald—cultivate their own little corners and do not confront the situation as a whole. Only Dos Passos has tried to take hold of it.... It is Dos Passos’s...relentless reiteration of his conviction that there is something lacking, something wrong, in America—as well as his insistence on the importance of America—that gives his work its validity and power.”

Edmund Wilson
“Dos Passos and the Social Revolution” (1929)
The Shores of Light
(Random House/Vintage 1961) 429, 431-34

“If we compare Dos Passos with other of our leading novelists, we find no one who is his superior in range of awareness of American life. In his tone, he most nearly approaches Hemingway. He can be as ‘hard-boiled’ as the latter, particularly when he is dealing with hard-boiled characters; his freedom of language is, if anything, greater; his viewpoint, also, is nearly as external and behavioristic. But he has a greater range of sympathy.... And his social sympathies, one might almost say his class passions, give a drive to his work that Hemingway’s, with its comparatively sterile point of view lacks. In its social implications Dos Passos’ work is more nearly akin to that of Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, and still more to that of Upton Sinclair. But where Sinclair’s people are wax dummies, Dos Passos’ are alive and convincing.”

Henry Hazlitt
Nation
(23 March 1932) 344

“We can say now that the Harvard aesthete in Dos Passos is almost dead. The spiritual malady of tourism no longer drains his powers. He has entered the real world. He has definitely broken with capitalism and knows it is but a walking corpse. He wars upon it, and records its degeneration. But he has not yet found the faith of Walt Whitman in the American masses. He cannot believe that they have within them the creative force for a new world. This is still his dilemma; a hangover from his aristocratic past; yet this man grows like corn in the Iowa sun; his education proceeds; the future will find his vast talents, his

gift of epic poetry, his observation, his daring experimentalism, and personal courage enlisted completely in the service of co-operative society." [This critic was prominent in the Communist Party.]

Michael Gold
English Journal
(February 1933) 97

"Dos Passos will perhaps be remembered more as the inventor or at least the early practitioner of a technique in fiction than for the lasting significance of his novels.... Dos Passos attempts to catch in fiction the inventions of the day, the camera eye, the movie, the newspaper headline. He conveys dates and the background by flashes of contemporary events. The effect on the unity of the novels is confusing but the representation of confusion is evidently one of the author's chief aims. The 'hero' of the novels is the contemporary scene rather than any individual. He attempts to crowd an era, a whole cross-section of a city or a period of economic development into a novel."

Halford E. Luccock
Contemporary American Literature and Religion
(Willett/Harper 1934) 148

"Dos Passos owes to Joyce the conception of a novel devoted to the life of a city (for *Ulysses* is more concerned with Dublin than Mr. Bloom), to Proust the use of significant detail and careful documentation, to Stein (of the *Three Lives* period) the notions of the importance of the simple lives of obscure people and the effectiveness of bald narration. But he added to his borrowing a great deal of his own: a feeling for the common man which led him to picture all the strata of life, a knowledge of life on the great majority of these levels, a sense of the universality of the evils that he found, a lyrical spirit, and some technical devices which are remarkable for their success—and for their failure, in the main, to put off the traditional reader."

Mason Wade
North American Review
(Winter 1937) 356

"Dos Passos has invented only one thing, an art of story-telling, and that is enough. I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time."

Jean-Paul Sartre (1938)

"He has again and again hazarded bold and enlightening solutions to problems of both content and structure that few traditional novelists have even recognized and fewer still have dealt with. Paramount has been his attempt to get a sense of the whole complex social panorama, and, as corollary, a sense of the flux, of the simultaneity of lives and events, and the passage of time in terms of the entire culture as well as individuals. Equally significant have been his attempts to integrate the individual with the period, to leave us everywhere conscious of how the age has molded the man, made him one of its peculiar products."

Milton Rugoff
Sewanee Review
(October 1941) 467-68

"If Hemingway dealt with the buried depths and the recessive impulses, John Dos Passos was the embodiment of the rational artist in our tradition—the conscious, moral, and progressive critic of our communal habits; and it is curious that both of these Americans should have started at a similar psychological and even geographical point. In the early Dos Passos, just as in the later Hemingway, there is the same central evocation of a detached and remote observer drifting on the tides of social renunciation. A grandson of a Portuguese immigrant, the young Dos Passos also found in republican Spain an apparent antidote to commerce under Harding and Coolidge: the Spain of Hemingway's fiestas and anarchists... It was from a Spanish revolutionary writer, too, Pio Baroja, that Dos Passos gained his early intellectual concepts. While Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, in 1932, was still fixed on the matador, Dos Passos' *Rosinante to the Road Again*, as early as 1922, was already discussing the masses.

And it was in Chicago, where Dos Passos was born in 1896, that his central trilogy, *U.S.A.*, would open: in the city which was the heart, or at any rate the nervous cortex, of the new American industrialism whose urban and strident rhythms also dominate Dos Passos' first major novel. In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), too, we notice the early forms of those technical devices that would distinguish the later trilogy: the use of popular songs, of newspaper headlines, of the speech of the people as against the speech of the scholars, and of the actual figures from Woodrow Wilson to King C. Gillette—all these sociological indices which are fused into the panoramic view of our city culture, and, in *U.S.A.* itself, our national culture....

Before Dos Passos, a score of American writers—including Norris, Fuller, Herrick, and Dreiser—had dealt with separate manifestations of the new industrialism, or in a series of novels had attempted to relate these manifestations. Of course the French from Balzac on were in a sense even closer to Dos Passos' arms, while Jules Romains suggested, in a later note, that the panoramic novel was *his* patent. But no one else had attempted to bring everything together at one moment and to set all the complexions of that 'moment'—extending from the Promise of the American Century in 1900 to the Crash of 1929—within so sharp a focus; and perhaps none of them had understood so clearly the nuances of their own historical scene."

Maxwell Geismar
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1302-03

"Certainly he is not a Tolstoy or even a Zola, to mention two masters of the panoramic form. In America today he ranks below Hemingway and Faulkner for many reasons, but principally because he seldom feels his way deeply into his characters. As a novelist—and in life, too—he is always moving, always hurrying off to catch a taxi, a bus, a train, a plane or a transatlantic steamer; and he tells us as much about people as a sensitive and observing man can learn in a short visit. That leads to his writing a special type of novel, broad and wind-scarred into intricate patterns like the Aral Sea, not deep like Lake Baikal, that gash in the mountains which is said to contain more water than all the Great Lakes together. There is, however, a converse to this statement. To achieve breadth in a novel is a difficult art in itself and it is one in which no other American writer—not even Frank Norris—has ever approached Dos Passos."

Malcolm Cowley
New Republic
(28 February 1949) 21

"Nothing is deeper in the man than his fear of power. To begin with, he feared the power of the military, as he had experienced it in the First World War, and the power of men of wealth. The hatred of war and exploitation grew so acute that he accepted for a time the tempting radical doctrine that only power can destroy power. But what he saw of communism in Russia, in Spain, and at home convinced him that the destroying power could be more dangerous than the power it overcame.... His sympathies are wholly with the people who get pushed around, whether it is Big Business or Big Government that does the pushing. His trouble is simply that he has not found the 'better than that,' the alternative to both bignesses, and hence his growing fear of government can only be accompanied by a growing toleration of business.... He has allowed himself to be forced into choosing one horn of the dilemma, and he is nicely impaled."

Granville Hicks
Antioch Review
(Spring 1950) 95-98

"Dos Passos' libertarianism is generally anarchist in character. That is to say, Dos Passos believes in absolute or primitive liberty, the supreme good of the anarchist creed. With Lord Acton, he believes that power always corrupts because by its very nature it exercises restraints. All social wrongs are therefore rooted in family, government or state authority; and the remedy lies in the curbing of this oppressive power. Each individual must live as he wishes and must not permit anyone to rule over his fellows, for each is a sovereign power."

Martin Kallich
Antioch Review

“The three novelists of the left or near-left whose work lifts them above the dead level of the proletarian formula novel are John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck. [Dos Passos and Steinbeck both subsequently evolved from the left to the right and became conservative anti-Communists.] Dos Passos’ major work is of course the massive trilogy *U.S.A.*... He had earlier, in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), experimented with what critics have since called the ‘collectivist novel,’ satisfied there with the Manhattan setting alone. In *U.S.A.* he expanded the physical and social range of his setting, introduced several new structural devices and reduced the importance of any one character in the interests of giving a dead-level equality of attention to all of them.

Jimmy Herf of *Manhattan Transfer*, survivor of Dos Passos’ still earlier fiction, is the sensitively honest soul in an alien world who dramatically announces his incompatibility with that world. He is also a hint of what in Dos Passos’ writing after *U.S.A.* became a primary concern; in his traditional origins (one of his ancestors had died in the Revolutionary War) he points to Dos Passos’ own pride in the American tradition described in *The Ground We Stand On* (1941); in his refusal to take advantage of his chances in the business world, he performs the act of renunciation so remote from the wills of most of *U.S.A.*’s people; in his solitary assertion of the precious values of individualism, he is the 1920’s version of Dos Passos’ later hero, Glenn Spotswood of *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939).

Dos Passos’ work had almost regularly dwelt upon a major preoccupation: the defeat of individualism in the modern world. In its aesthetic forms this individualism was that of the sensitive young man (the Martin Howe of *One Man’s Initiation*, John Andrews of *Three Soldiers*). More and more, as we proceed from novel to novel, this young man becomes clearly and poignantly aware of his being ineffectual and out of place. He is quite indignant in his earlier incarnations; as the emphasis shifts in Dos Passos’ fiction, from the sensitive young man as victim to the social configurations of *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*, his hero all but disappears from the scene. If *U.S.A.* has a character reminiscent of him, it is the author-artist of the ‘Camera Eye,’ who suffers all and sees all but is helpless to change whatever he sees. Society has closed in upon him. *U.S.A.* is, therefore, a massive document of twentieth-century American society, a condemned society impulsively, repetitiously working out its dismal sentence. Dos Passos had abandoned his earlier idea of an isolated victim and turned to the all-inclusive task of documenting both agent and victim of America’s social and economic drives.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 150-51

“Temperamentally, John Dos Passos is an aesthete; in untroubled times, or without a driving conscience, he might well have given himself up to Amy Lowell imagism.... The war was the first great influence upon his work, and it yielded his first important novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921). There were two other influences later on: his awakening to the injustices in American life through his labors for the Harlan County, Kentucky, miners and for Sacco and Vanzetti, and his subsequent disillusionment with the radical movement, which has now turned him not only against the Communist Party but also against the New Deal and its inheritance... Not he has changed but the times. Once the Republic was menaced by ‘extended Capitalism,’ Now the danger emanates from ‘extended Communism.’ He has fought both....

By ‘collectivist’ novel is here indicated a type of fiction in which the emphasis is not upon the life story of a single individual but rather upon the life of a social group, the individuals involved being significant merely as they illustrate the operations of ‘forces.’ Even the early ‘art-novel,’ *Streets of Night* (1923), which Dos Passos criticism in general has either condemned or ignored, divides itself between three hardly proper young Bostonians. There is a somewhat similar division in *Three Soldiers*, though here the most highly developed of the young men, John Andrews, the frustrated musician, certainly interests both the author and his readers more than either of the others....

Again and again Mr. Dos Passos’ readers have complained of his failure to create memorable characters. We do not care for his personages deeply enough to remember them; even in *U.S.A.* one runs into another and we retain a clear recollection of only isolated scenes. To James T. Farrell all the Dos Passos people

seem to have 'the same eyes and the same nose.' It is true that part of this is Mr. Dos Passos's intention and that another part results inevitably from his methods of discontinuity and behavioristic notation. Along this line, Mr. DeVoto speaks of Dos Passos' intention 'to reduce personality to a mere pulsation of behavior under the impersonal and implacable drive of circumstance.' But the defense cannot proceed very far along this line, for, as we all know, novelists tend to choose methods as well as themes—or to have them chosen for them—with their own limitations in mind. It is not reassuring to hear Mr. Dos Passos declare that 'It seems to me that history is always more alive and interesting than fiction.' This belief would not a priori be likely to conduce to the production of fiction more interesting than history."

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 382-83, 388

"Chronic remorse, most moralists agree, is an unsalutary sentiment—the sinner who has genuinely repented does not become any the cleaner by rolling interminably in the mud; and chronic remorse is peculiarly disastrous where novelists are concerned. The novelist obsessed with the errors of the past—John Dos Passos is a case in point, since his political switch from left to far right—is irresistibly drawn to revenge himself on his past by rewriting it, by showing that what he found good was disgusting. And the literary results of such an enterprise are apt to resemble a dredging operation: The principal yield is mud."

Charles J. Rolo
Atlantic
(October 1954) 98

"Dos Passos' hate, despair and lofty contempt are real. But that is precisely why his world is not real; it is a created object. I know of none—not even Faulkner's or Kafka's—in which the art is greater or better hidden. I know of none that is more precious, more touching or closer to us. This is because he takes his material from our world. And yet, there is no stranger or more distant world. Dos Passos has invented only one thing, an art of story-telling. But that is enough to create a universe.... Dos Passos' world—like those of Faulkner, Kafka, and Stendhal—is impossible because it is contradictory. But therein lies its beauty. Beauty is a veiled contradiction. I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time."

Jean-Paul Sartre
Literary and Philosophical Essays
(Criterion 1955) 89, 96

"In retrospect, the work of Dos Passos falls into three periods. There is first the expression of the lonely dissident, the esthetic recluse.... Almost alone among the high individualists of the 1920's, those gifted expatriates and exiles, Dos Passos had, by the end of the decade, found a cultural base for his literary work. This base was a theoretical rather than strictly political Marxism. The product of the second period included *Manhattan Transfer* in 1925 and the major trilogy, *U.S.A.*, published from 1930 to 1936. These are still the core of Dos Passos' fiction; they are persuasive and penetrating novels; and their description of American civilization, which hardly applied in the 1930's, may seem all too prophetic in the 1950's. But the crux of the Dos Passos problem is right here, too. The collapse of his belief in the Russian Revolution, the disillusionment with the methods of the Communist Party, led not only to a major revision of his thinking, but, apparently, to a complete cessation of his creative energy and his human emotions. There was a psychic wound that has never stopped bleeding."

Maxwell Geismar
Nation
(14 April 1956) 305

"Many writers have depended upon social history as a frame for their narratives; but John Dos Passos, in the three novels of *U.S.A.*, invented a new form, in which social history itself became the dynamic drive and motivation of a cycle of novels. His real protagonist in these volumes is American life from just before the First World War until the period of the great depression in the early thirties. His writing since the completion of the trilogy in 1936 had not continued on the same level of imagination and excellence, but

the four chief works of that earlier period are sufficient to establish him as one of the most important of our recent writers....

Like many privileged young idealists of his generation, he was persuaded that the machine age somehow necessarily debased and enslaved mankind. From this position to proletarian sympathies and a Marxist philosophy was but a short and natural step for the intellectuals of his period.... His later novels, reflecting his changes in viewpoint [becoming a conservative], have been good, but not really comparable in either power or originality with his earlier work, even though they are more judicious.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2
(Norton 1956-67) 1583-84

“*U.S.A.* is the most impressive and possibly the best of American works in the naturalistic tradition. In any case, he deals with the biggest subject of all—not an industry, like Sinclair in *The Jungle*, not a profession, like Lewis in *Arrowsmith*, or a background, like Farrell in *Studs Lonigan*; but thirty years of the whole country, with many of its industries, many professions, a diversity of backgrounds, and hundreds of characters, all driven to failure, even the richest of them, by forces beyond their control.... For Dos Passos the laws were economic and governed the concentration of ‘power superpower.’ Every year, so he believed, a smaller number of always larger corporations was exercising a closer control over the lives of more and more Americans. His central purpose in *U.S.A.* was to explain how people were ruined by ‘the big money’.”

Malcolm Cowley
The Literary Situation
(Viking/Compass 1958) 78, 81

“Although Dos Passos is sometimes considered primarily a proletarian propagandist, his main contribution to literature has lain in the technical development of the novel. In the tradition of Zola, he treats humanity as a pattern of conflicting social masses rather than as an aggregation of individuals. This attitude owes something to the modern scientific tendency to study social groups with laboratory techniques (modern sociology) as well as to the Marxian idea of the class struggle; the Dos Passos ‘collective novel’ is a sort of sociological experiment in fictional form.

Unlike Zola, however, Dos Passos treats this sociological material with a new and radical technique; his style is far more original than his content. Dos Passos is one of the founders of the modern *roman fleuve* or pattern novel, a work lacking any plot in the usual sense and comprised of an intricate patchwork of characters linked together by their common participation in a social situation. The apparent aimlessness of the *roman fleuve* is intentional; it is merely the purposelessness of nature seen at too close a vantage, a purposelessness which resolves itself to the detached observer as an ingenious machinery. Dos Passos worked experimentally with this technique in *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and brought it to fruition in the trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930-36). His influence in this respect has been tremendous, especially in Europe; Jean-Paul Sartre has called him ‘the best novelist of our time’ and imitated him frankly in his *Roads to Freedom* series. Along with Joyce, he has influenced a whole generation of young writers in the Thirties and later who sought new and radical forms for the novel.

Dos Passos’ failings are those of most collective novelists: he seldom creates memorable characters, since he is little interested in individuals, and his work continually hovers on the brink of propaganda. But his books remain fixed in the reader’s mind if his characters do not. Dos Passos is by inclination a creative artist; if he is momentarily carried by his passion to undermine a rotten capitalistic system, he never forgets that the duty of the artist is to create a striking and original world of the imagination.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 132-33

“The whole of his busy life as a writer reveals him as torn bitterly and tragically between two extremes: a deep individual fastidiousness and a highly sensitive, exacerbated social conscience. [Alfred] Kazin

remarks that, like Emerson, 'he likes Man, not men.' Profoundly attached to liberty as the founders of America conceived it, he hates the mechanistic age that swallows up liberty and the men who are the tools of their own technology.... He came to maturity as a novelist with *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), called by John Chamberlain 'a collective portrait of the huge sprawling organism of New York City.' In its technique it anticipates his later work, since here he seeks to give a picture of the whole by producing a long procession of merging human lives that represent the mass scene. Thereafter Dos Passos became more and more interested in the 'little man'...

U.S.A. [1930-36] was regarded by many critics as a massive achievement. It exemplifies the special technique that Dos Passos has often used to tell a story: a combination of narrative proper, the 'Camera Eye,' the 'Biographies,' and the 'Newsreel.' The story is not easy to follow. The huge diversity and dynamism of the details make an impression as bewildering as life itself. Often the passages turn into prose poems, usually expressive of the author's despair.... Estimates of the work of Dos Passos vary widely. Joseph Warren Beach called him 'an artist of bold originality, ingenuity, and dash.' Alfred Kazin called him 'first of the new Naturalists.' George Snell saw him producing 'the first and still more artistic, long fiction based on broad social issues.'

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Dos Passos' picture of America succumbing to decay as competitive capitalism gave way to monopoly capitalism is powerful, but in the end subjective; one is not obliged to accept his notion of a catastrophic decline and fall.... One of his self-imposed tasks was to report events in such a way as to reveal underlying forces. If he had been wrong about those forces during his early career, mightn't he be equally wrong after his loss of faith in the workers' revolution? The question must have nagged at him—though he didn't mention it to others—and it would help to explain the discouraged tone of his later fiction."

Malcolm Cowley
A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation
(Penguin 1973) 83, 107

"Have you read *The Gallery* by J. H. Burns. I thought it was excellent. Much better than Dos at Dosses's stuff." [To Maxwell Geismar, 10 September 1947] "Dos fooled us all I think. But he fooled himself the most. The last book, *Chosen Country* [1951] made me sick to read. My only hope for him as a writer was that it was a re-write of something dear Katy [Mrs. Dos Passos] had written for a Woman's Magazine. But that is not a very fine hope. Have you ever seen the possession of money corrupt a man as it has Dos? When Eisenhower received his tax free money from the Democrats for his book he became a Republican. His political development, and that of Dos, have very strange parallels." [To Edmund Wilson, 8 November 1952] "...the only writers I ever liked, really, were Dos when he was still straight in early days, Scott when he was sober..." [To Harvey Breit, 3 July 1956]

Ernest Hemingway
Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961
(Scribner's 1981) 177, 366, 456, 557, 623, 625, 793, 862
ed. Carlos Baker

"Dos Passos's subject is the degradation of democracy into mass society, of politics into sociology. His conviction is that the force of circumstances—call it the State, and 'war is the health of the state'—is too strong for the average man, who may never rise above mass culture, mass superstition, mass slogans.... Dos Passos, though he was swept along by American history, thought that the function of art was to resist."

Alfred Kazin
*American Procession:
The Major American Writers from 1830-1930*
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 386

“By the time he entered Harvard, Dos Passos had already substantially defined the two interests that would shape his life—literary aestheticism and reform politics.... Dos Passos was directly influenced by the leaders of the reform movements of the prewar years. At Harvard he studied Thorstein Veblen’s penetrating analysis of capitalistic society as well as Walter Pater’s aesthetic theories, and he read Theodore Dreiser as well as Gustave Flaubert. It was characteristic of him that his contributions to the *Harvard Advocate* included a review of the radical John Reed’s *Insurgent Mexico* as well as reviews of the experimental poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot....

In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) the impact of the First World War is placed against the larger backdrop of an emerging urban, technological civilization. In this, his first major novel, Dos Passos began to develop the tone that became characteristic of his work, a tone in which protest and despair mingle with some residual irrepressible hope. But he also began experimenting with style and structure in ways that continued to mark his art. Sinclair Lewis said of *Manhattan Transfer* that its composition was based on the ‘technique of the movie, in its flashes, its cut-backs, its speed.’ In narrative shifts and jumps (with the absence of transitions reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ and Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*), Dos Passos also began finding techniques that would convey the stark contrasts and abrupt changes of urban life. In subways and skyscrapers he began finding images of a society whose great energies and skills, lacking purpose, are surrendered to mere motion and empty innovation....

Though he never joined the Communist Party—in 1930 he called himself only a middle-class liberal—he found himself, as the Great Depression deepened, increasingly entangled in labor disputes and related controversies, yet also more and more disenchanted by the strong-arm tactics of communism.... The idea of calling his trilogy *U.S.A.* came to Dos Passos at about the same time that he broke with Hemingway and returned to the United States planning to write the ‘truth’ about the Communist activities in Spain.... [He adopted] an increasingly patriotic and conservative stance. Although he remained aware of the many imperfections of the United States, Dos Passos also became convinced that in a corrupt world the United States remained the best hope for individual liberty and human progress.”

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1289-92

“Horrified by the war’s brutality, by the official lies, by the meaninglessness of the suffering he witnessed, he grew increasingly radical and further alienated from the world his father represented. In *Three Soldiers*, an attack on the army, he sought, through formal means, to break out of the narrow perspective of his own social class: this early novel is narrowed in turn from the points of view of three different soldiers, one an artist and Harvard man, but the other two very much ‘average’ soldiers. Dos Passos’ desire to broaden further the social perspective in his writing, along with his intense interest in postwar developments in the arts, led to the experimental novel *Manhattan Transfer*, published in 1925. Here the point of view shifts rapidly, providing over a hundred fragments of the lives of dozens of characters, so that no one individual, but rather Manhattan itself—dazzling, but lonely and alienating—emerges as the novel’s protagonist....

Dos Passos’ writing after *U.S.A.* never approached the power of the trilogy. His experimenting with the literary form had been very much tied up with his radical political ideas and he began rejecting those ideas in the late 1930s (becoming, in later life, extremely conservative).”

Robert C. Rosen
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1588

Michael Hollister (2015)