

INTRODUCTION



John Dos Passos

(1896-1970)

John Dos Passos is influential in literary history for (1) writing the first “collectivist” American novel in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925); (2) inventing the three technical devices of Newsreels, Biographies, and The Camera Eye, which alternate with the narrative line in his panoramic trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930-36), expanding and diversifying the historical context; (3) becoming the best leftwing American novelist after Theodore Dreiser; (4) reversing his politics from Left to Right, becoming an anti-Communist conservative after 1937. *U.S.A.* is leftist social history in the form of novels. The experimental techniques are more interesting than the characters, as in much Postmodern fiction. His early outlook is similar to that of many Leftists today, who will best enjoy *U.S.A.* if they pretend that Dos Passos did not change his mind.

Dos Passos is a Modernist in form: he (1) rejects 19th-century aesthetic conventions; (2) innovates with structures and technique; (3) writes in the Modernist mode of *intellectual expressionism* with James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane; and (4) uses multiple points of view, stream of consciousness and other Modernist techniques. Yet in his major works he is the opposite of other Modernists in being (1) overtly political; (2) a collectivist; (3) a rationalist lacking transcendence. In content, he is a Naturalist in the tradition of Frank Norris and Dreiser: (1) emphasizes determinism; (2) selects characters vulnerable to overwhelming forces; (3) reduces characters to insignificance; (4) uses a documentary scientific method; (5) expresses a comprehensive vision of life with a panoramic focus on a diverse sample of specimens; and (6) conveys a pessimism that subverts his implicit call for social revolution.

Of the many poems, essays, plays and 42 novels he wrote, only *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* are significant today. In those early works his Naturalism is Marxist in that he (1) reduces determinism to economics; (2) hates *monopoly* capitalism; (3) advocates the violent overthrow of the government. Unlike the Marxists he (1) believes in free speech and other civil liberties; (2) sees the novel as an art form rather than a weapon; (3) hates bureaucracies; (4) has no definite concept of what should replace *monopoly* capitalism; (5) differentiates between *monopoly* and *competitive* capitalism, implicitly accepting the latter; and (6) is more cynical than utopian. He is strongly critical of Communists even in his early books and apparently did not like them—after 1937 he hated them. Once in a Greenwich Village café he passed a note to a group of leftist friends making a remark that became famous: “Intellectuals of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your brains.”

BIOGRAPHY

John Dos Passo was born illegitimate in a Chicago hotel, the offspring of an affair between a wealthy Portuguese attorney with a wife and son, and a penniless widow from Virginia. His father had received the largest legal fee on record up to that time for an anti-trust case. His genteel Victorian mother felt ashamed of having had a child out of wedlock. The wife of his father died in 1910 and his parents then married, but his father did not acknowledge John for two more years.

Dos Passos had to conceal his parentage. He spent a lonely childhood in luxury hotels, mostly in Europe, traveling with his mother from city to city, feeling illegitimate and speaking with an accent. He blamed the social order for making him so unhappy. "He never seemed to have a nest, but only to be perched on a branch, as if he were a migrating bird," wrote the critic Malcolm Cowley. As a corporate attorney in New York his father represented the monopoly capitalism that Dos Passos rebelled against. In his twenties he was extremely shortsighted—he was cured later in life--shy, awkward in sports, and wore spectacles with gollywog lenses. He inherited almost nothing from his father and had to earn a living.

EDUCATION

His family eventually settled in Virginia, his mother's home state. Young Dos Passos attended the elite Choate prep school in Connecticut in 1907. He graduated early at the age of 15 and then traveled for 6 months with a private tutor through Europe and the Middle East, studying architecture, art and literature. He continued traveling all his life, probably more than any other writer of his time: "Young women I met at cocktail parties liked to tell me I was running away from myself." He attended Harvard from 1912 to 1916 just after T. S. Eliot and other Modernist poets had graduated. There he identified himself with an artsy literary group who called themselves "The Aesthetes." Already a rebel, he believed that western civilization was in decline and he hoped to become a revolutionary historian, the Gibbon of America: "We want a new Enlightenment."

Then he studied architecture in Spain while the First World War was going on. When his father died, he was abroad and his maternal aunt defrauded him of most of his inheritance. Dos Passos applauded the assassination of the Austrian prime minister in 1917. He was a pacifist who advocated violence: "If Anarchists can assassinate people so successfully, I don't see why Pacifists can't." His only hope was "in revolution—the wholesale assassination of all statesmen, capitalists, war-mongers, jingoists, inventors, scientists—in the destruction of all the machinery of the industrial world." All his early books imply that everything will get better after the revolution. Before the United States entered the war he volunteered for an ambulance unit in France with his friend the poet E. E. Cummings. He was exempt from the draft because of defective eyesight but drove ambulances in Paris and at Verdun, where the horrific death toll appalled him. Then he drove for the Red Cross on the Italian front, where he met and became friends with fellow ambulance driver Ernest Hemingway. He got into trouble, chiefly for singing "Deutschland uber Alles" during a bombing raid by the Germans, and got sent back to the United States. After the war he studied anthropology at the Sorbonne in Paris.

CAREER

Dos Passo published a first novel called *One Man's Initiation*, based on his experiences in the war. Then he attracted attention with *Three Soldiers* in 1921, a pacifist novel that offended many. The review in the *Chicago Tribune* called it a "textbook and bible for slackers and cowards." In 1922 he studied at an art colony in Maine and he remained a painter all his life, with a style blending Impressionism with Cubist Expressionism. His *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), as a "collectivist" novel with characters reduced to insects in the City—the capitalist modern world--expresses not only a Naturalist vision but a totalitarian sensibility. The perspective is comparable to that represented by public monuments such as war memorials erected by Nazis and Communists, massive forms without individuality, embodying the faceless totalitarian power of the State. Although he uses the stream of consciousness technique developed by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, his novels focus on external reality.

The revolutionary Dos Passos had outraged the older generation, whereas younger people gathered around him in the cafes of Greenwich Village. In 1927 he got intensely involved in the unsuccessful movement to prevent the execution of the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, who had been convicted of

murder. He toured Russia in 1928, studied their developing Communist system and came away wary of the police state. Nevertheless, he opposed the presidential nomination of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and joined with 51 other intellectuals in signing a manifesto supporting William Z. Foster, the Communist candidate. He wrote for the Communist periodical *The New Masses*. The Communists began calling him “Comrade” and promoted his work, hoping to make him their literary spokesman.

Yet he also published articles criticizing Communist political theory and the lockstep thinking of the Left. During the early 1930s he attended mass meetings, walked picket lines, and reported on strikes and congressional hearings for the labor press. In 1935 he participated in a writers convention sponsored by a Communist front organization, where he resisted the idea that Stalin should dictate to American writers. He began dropping out of Communist front organizations after a protest meeting in Madison Square Garden where the Communists howled down and drowned out the Socialists. Then the infamous “Show Trials” in Moscow in 1936 further alienated many Americans who had been attracted to Communism. Dos Passos joined a committee of prominent intellectuals formed to defend the exiled Communist dissenter Leon Trotsky, who was later assassinated in Mexico.

At the New Playwrights Theater in New York, Dos Passos worked with John Howard Lawson, a friend he had served with in the ambulance corps. Lawson went on to become head of the Communist Party in Hollywood. Lawson may have helped get Dos Passos assigned to write the screenplay for *The Devil is a Woman*, directed by Josef von Sternberg and starring Marlene Dietrich. Although he had Marxist friends, Dos Passos was primarily a libertarian with a temperament inclined to anarchism. His closest literary friends were Cummings, Fitzgerald, and most of all Hemingway, who called him Dos.

U.S.A. (1930-36)

Like the novels of Sinclair Lewis, the trilogy of Dos Passos was perfectly timed. *U.S.A.* is an anti-capitalist backlash to the stock market crash of 1929. It attempts the impossible: to comprehend the entire country in a Great American Novel—a megawork like *Don Quixote* and *Ulysses*. Dos Passos was inspired by the Spanish classic and influenced in techniques by Joyce. As an Expressionist painter as well as a novelist, he conceived the structure of *U.S.A.* as a form of literary Cubism. His three novels dramatize social history during the first 30 years of the 20th century and are titled by place, time, and currency: *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936).

Above all, Dos Passos wanted to be a social historian in the tradition of Gibbon and dramatize the Fall of America on a panoramic scale. History is literal, literature is figurative. Dos Passos had a literal mind. The patchwork collage of *U.S.A.* is like a movie montage, lacking the unity of an organic work of literature, especially the stream-of-consciousness passages, which are much less coherent than in Joyce or Faulkner and not at all textured or poet. Compared to them, Dos Passos is sloppy. Critics have complained that he created no memorable characters and that his proletarian style is often dull. The innovative techniques of Newsreels, Biographies, and The Camera Eye emphasize the temporal, ephemeral and trivial details particular to one historical period, whereas classic literature emphasizes the universal and timeless. Other American novelists, Modernists in particular, have been more successful in comprehending all America through the literary means of metaphor and myth.

There are hundreds of characters in *U.S.A.*, with 12 whose life stories are told—6 men and 6 women intended to be ordinary and typical—from different parts of the country. They are depicted as victims of monopoly capitalism. Dos Passos reverses the history and image of America from a magnet of liberty and economic opportunity to a land of failures. Historical figures are seen through a leftist lens, including Bryan the shallow liberal, La Follette the progressive, Debs the great Socialist leader, Randolph Bourne the brave radical journalist, Jack Reed the Communist hero, and Wesley Everest the Wobbly (I.W.W., a Communist union) martyr. Dos Passos is so distanced from his characters that the account of Everest is one of the few that might evoke a sympathetic response in a common reader.

Dos Passos portrays the logger Wesley Everest as a crack shot like Natty Bumppo and a mythic hero “like Paul Bunyan.” He gives the false impression that all or most loggers in the Northwest were members of the I.W.W. (Wobblies), whereas in fact they were a radical minority. Their goal was to organize all the

trades into one big union run by Wobs, in effect the Communist Party: “The wobblies were reds,” as Dos Passos says. A Wob named Harry Orchard confessed to a series of bombings and shootings that killed at least 30 people including a former governor of Idaho. Orchard named three union leaders he claimed paid him for hit jobs. The public was outraged when the union leaders were not prosecuted, intensifying a vigilante mood in many communities. During the First World War the Wobblies disrupted the national defense with arson and sabotage and 93 were convicted of conspiring to obstruct the draft and encourage desertion. The Loyal Legion of Loggers was formed to log and mill timber for the military.

During the war about 400 armed Wobs threatening mayhem chartered a steamer and docked at Everett, Washington where they were met by law officers. When the shooting ended and the ship withdrew, the sheriff had several bullet wounds, 2 deputies were dead and 16 were wounded. The Wobs reported 5 dead and 31 wounded. After the war, veterans raided the union hall of the Wobblies in Centralia, Washington and beat up several of the radicals who had obstructed the national defense—unpunished traitors and terrorists in their eyes. The next time the American Legion held a parade, the Wobblies had snipers concealed on rooftops and hills and in windows along the parade route.

When the Legionnaires passed the Wob union hall, several veterans left the march and ran over and tried to force the door open, resulting in a hail of gunfire. Wob snipers had fired at the marchers in close proximity to townspeople along the parade route, killing 3 veterans who dropped dead in the street. In response other marchers charged the union hall and 2 of them were shot. Wesley Everest shot another marcher who chased him, then Everest pistol whipped the dying man. Townsmen finally caught Everest. They lynched and mutilated him. Dos Passos is deceptively vague and implies that the marchers were entirely at fault: “Rifles cracked on the hills back of the town, roared in the back of the hall.” Fired by whom? He does not acknowledge that this was an ambush by the Wobblies nor that Everest killed anyone until after he was being chased: “Wesley Everest shot the magazine of his rifle out...”

Dos Passos depicts Everest as a noble hero “like Paul Bunyan” who is supposedly defending himself against a lynch mob: “The mob was at him. He shot from the hip four times, then his gun jammed. He tugged at the trigger, and taking cool aim shot the foremost of them dead. It was Dale Hubbard, another ex-soldier, nephew of one of the big lumbermen of Centralia.” We are supposed to feel that Hubbard gets what he deserves. Dos Passos conceals pertinent facts, turning history into propaganda. Everest was the leader of a deadly ambush by a terrorist organization.

POLITICAL REVERSAL

In the early spring of 1937 Dos Passos went to Spain with Hemingway to work on a film about the Civil War going on there, *The Spanish Earth*. The Fascist Francisco Franco, supplied by Adolph Hitler, was in the process of overthrowing the democratic Republic of Spain. Hemingway would later use this film to raise money, particularly in Hollywood, to supply the Loyalists resisting Franco. Many American liberals and leftists went to Spain and joined the Loyalist army, as Hemingway dramatized in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). After they arrived in Valencia, Dos Passos learned that his friend and translator Jose Robles had been arrested and charged with treason.

Jose Robles was a Spaniard teaching at Johns Hopkins in the United States who had gone to Spain and became an official in the Loyalist Ministry of War. Dos Passos went straight to government headquarters in Madrid, a hectic capital under siege by Fascist artillery. He visited one ministry after another vouching for the innocence of his friend. He grew infuriated by a bureaucratic conspiracy of silence. Then he was told that Robles had been executed. The Loyalist government claimed it had no knowledge of the event and blamed the Anarchists. It was never determined who shot Robles. Dos Passos concluded that the Communist militia in Spain had executed him on orders from Moscow, because Robles might not be politically correct—he was unreliable and knew too much.

Dos Passos was so outraged he turned with a fury against the Communists. He hated them so much he equated them with the whole Loyalist cause and placed himself on the side of the Fascists being supplied by Hitler. Hemingway understood the chaos in Spain and he wanted to continue making their film and defeat Franco and Hitler in order to prevent a Second World War. Their bitter disagreement destroyed their

friendship. Dos Passos returned to the States and published an article, "Farewell to Europe," declaring that America offered the last hope for human liberty. "I have come to think, especially since my trip to Spain, that civil liberties must be preserved at every stage."

He now believed that Communism was death to liberty and that the New Deal of President Franklin Roosevelt was part of a design by leftists to remake America into a communized state. He permanently alienated his leftist audience in 1939 with his autobiographical novel *The Adventures of a Young Man*, attacking American Communism. That was the year Stalin signed his pact with Hitler, identifying the Left with Fascism. His leftist audience abandoned him and his sales declined. After his political reversal he reversed his writing priorities as well, becoming less interested in art than in politics, and the quality of his work also declined, losing his literary audience.

AGRARIAN CONSERVATIVE

During World War II, Dos Passos was a war correspondent. His great loss came after the war in an auto accident, when his car struck a parked truck—killing his wife Katherine and blinding him in one eye. After the war he supported conservatives including Senator Joe McCarthy, Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon. Some 20 years after covering strikes and trials for *The New Masses* he was writing for *The National Review*, the staunchly conservative magazine of William F. Buckley. He remarried and settled on his father's farm in Virginia. In one of his later novels, *Most Likely to Succeed* (1954), his old Communist friend John Howard Lawson is the model for the villain. That same year he published a study of Thomas Jefferson, identifying himself with the agrarian pastoral tradition rather than with the City.

DEATH

Dos Passos died in 1970, more appreciated in socialist Europe than in the United States and more conservative than his corporate attorney father had been. Today *U.S.A.* is read mostly by nostalgic Leftists. America did not fall. Within 9 years America emerged from World War II as a superpower and its capitalist economy boomed for the next 30 years, raising the standard of living higher than the human race had ever attained. It was the Soviet Union that failed. It was tyrannical Communism that failed repeatedly throughout the 20th century wherever it was imposed by force, murdering over 110 million people in the process. *U.S.A.* remains impressive for its panoramic scope, for passages of social history and for technical innovations, but its vision is reductive and proven false. America is far from being a land of losers. Even the author rejected his own politics in the trilogy within a year of its completion. Dos Passos is buried near his home in rural Virginia.

Michael Hollister (2015)

OVERVIEW (1936)

"Sometimes in reading Dos Passos you feel that he is two novelists at war with each other. One of them is a late-Romantic, a tender individualist, an esthete traveling about the world in an ivory tower that is mounted on wheels and coupled to the last car of the Orient Express. The other is a hard-minded Realist, a collectivist, a radical historian of the class struggle. The two authors have quarreled and collaborated in all his books, but the first had the larger share in *Three Soldiers* and *Manhattan Transfer*. The second, in his more convincing fashion, wrote most of *The 42nd Parallel, 1919* and *The Big Money*....

Dos Passos's early books are by no means pure examples of the art novel. The world was always painfully real to him; rarely symbolic. From the very first he was full of pity for the underdogs and hope for the revolution. Yet consider the real plot of a novel like *Three Soldiers*. A talented young musician, during the War, finds that his sensibilities are being outraged, his aspirations crushed, by society as embodied in the American army. He deserts after the Armistice and begins to write a great orchestral poem. When the military police come to arrest them, the sheets of music flutter one by one into the spring breeze; and we are made to feel that this ecstatic song choked off and dispersed on the wind—like many others—is the real tragedy of the War.

Some years later, in writing *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos seemed to be undertaking a different type of novel, one that tried with no little success to render the color and movement of a whole city. But as the book goes on, it comes to be more and more the story of Jimmy Herf (the Poet) and Ellen Thatcher (the Poet's wife), and the poet is once again frustrated by his wife and the World: after one last drink he leaves a Greenwich Village party and commits an act of symbolic suicide by walking out alone, bareheaded, into the dawn. It is obvious, however, that a new conflict has been superimposed on the older one: the social ideas of the novelist are, in *Manhattan Transfer*, at war with his personal emotions. The ideas are now those of a reformer or even a revolutionist; the emotions are still those of the *Yellow Book* and the *Harvard Monthly*. Even in *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919* and *The Big Money*, that second conflict persists, but it has become less acute. The social ideas have invented a new form for themselves and have drawn much closer to the personal emotions. Considered together—as they have to be considered—the three novels belong to a new category of American fiction....

The truth is that the art novel and the collective novel as conceived by Dos Passos are in opposition but not in fundamental opposition: they are like the two sides of a coin. In the art novel, the emphasis is on the individual, in the collective novel it is on society as a whole; but in both we get the impression that society is stupid and all-powerful and fundamentally evil. Individuals ought to oppose it, but if they do so they are doomed. If, on the other hand, they reconcile themselves with society and try to get ahead in it, then they are damned forever, damned to be empty, shrill, destructive insects like Dick Savage and Eleanor Stoodard and J. Ward Moorehouse....

We have come a long way from the strong-willed heroes of the early nineteenth century... To Dos Passos the world seems so vicious that any compromise with its standards turns a hero into a villain. The only characters he seems to like instinctively are those who know they are beaten yet still grit their teeth and try to hold on. That is the story of Jimmy Herf in *Manhattan Transfer*; to some extent it is also the story of Mary French and her father and Joe Askew, almost the only admirable characters in *The Big Money*. And the same lesson of dogged, courageous impotence is pointed by the Camera Eye, especially in the admirable passage where the author remembers the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti....

American in developing from pioneer democracy into monopoly capitalism has followed a road that leads toward sterility and slavery. Our world is evil, and yet we are powerless to change or direct it. The sensitive individual should cling to his own standards, and yet he is certain to go under. Thus, the final message of Dos Passos's collective novels is similar to that of his earlier novels dealing with maladjusted artists. And thus, for all the vigor of *1919* and *The Big Money*, they leave us wondering whether the author hasn't overstated his case. They give us an extraordinarily diversified picture of contemporary life, but they fail to include at least one side of it—the will to struggle ahead, the comradeship in struggle, the consciousness of new men and new forces continually rising. Although we may seem to Dos Passos a beaten nation, the fight is not over."

Malcolm Cowley
"Dos Passos: Poet Against the World"
The Portable Malcolm Cowley
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 292, 294-95, 301-03
ed. Donald W. Faulkner

INFLUENCE

"It was after reading a book by Dos Passos that I thought for the first time of weaving a novel out of various, simultaneous lives, with characters who pass by without knowing one another and who all contribute to the atmosphere of a historical period.... Dos Passos, in order to make us feel more keenly the intrusion of group thinking in the most secret thoughts of his characters, invented a social voice, commonplace and sententious, which chatters incessantly round about them, without our ever knowing whether it is a chorus of conformist mediocrity or a monologue which the characters themselves keep locked in their hearts. Dos Passos has revealed the falseness of unity of action. He has shown that one might describe a collective event by juxtaposing twenty individual and unrelated stories. These revelations permitted us to conceive and to write novels which are to the classic works of Flaubert and Zola what non-Euclidean geometry is to the old geometry of Euclid."

Jean-Paul Sartre
The Atlantic Monthly (c.1940)

“One might say that a great many novels of the Second War are based on Dos Passos for structure, since they have collective heroes, in the Dos Passos fashion, and since he invented a series of structural devices for dealing with such heroes in unified works of fiction. At the same time they are based on Scott Fitzgerald for mood, on Steinbeck for humor, and on Hemingway for action and dialogue....One thinks of the other war novels—but sometimes they are the same books—that have utilized Dos Passos’ many devices for presenting a collective experience. He was using them to show that individuals are helplessly crushed by society, where most of the new novelists wanted to emphasize the resistance of good men to social pressures; often the borrowed devices ended by defeating the authors’ purpose.”

Malcolm Cowley
The Literary Situation
(Viking/Compass 1958) 41, 244

“Cummings, Dos Passos, and Hemingway: those three ambulance drivers, more than Fitzgerald, were the writers most admired and emulated by their younger colleagues during the postwar years, so that their special perceptions set a stamp on a whole period in American literature....One has to acknowledge...that his technical inventions soon reappeared in the mainstream of fiction. *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Naked and the Dead*, and scores of other American novels concerned with a collective event or with the fortunes of a group, large or small—a squad, a ship’s company, a village, a labor union on strike—have owed a debt to Dos Passos for solving some of their problems in advance.”

Cowley
A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation
(Viking/Compass 1974) 11, 83

“Without Dos Passos’ invention of his cinematic machine to record the momentum carrying an industrial mass society headlong into moral chaos, a good deal of our present sophistication in fiction, in the classy new journalism, even in the formal writing of American history, would not exist. Dos Passos was a writer whom other writers will always imitate without knowing it. He created a tight-lipped national style that was above all a way of capturing the million alternatives of experience in America.”

Alfred Kazin
An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 382

POLITICS

“I like to remember Dos Passos as I saw him from time to time in the middle 1920s....John Howard Lawson was a radical [later head of the Communist Party in Hollywood] and a friend; they had served together in a Red Cross ambulance unit and soon they would be working together at the New Playwrights’ Theater; but the others, it seems to me now, were merely allies in his crusade against a businessman’s culture. The allies were usually Marxists of a sort, willing to be guided by the Communist Party, whereas Dos Passos was a libertarian with a touch of anarchism....He looked forward to the 1930s, later to be called the Red Decade....

Dos Passos in 1932 had joined with fifty-one other intellectuals in signing a manifesto supporting the Communist candidate for President, William Z. Foster, and the Communists welcomed him as one of their own; ‘Comrade,’ they called him, using their title of honor. They did more than welcome him, for in those days the Communists were looking for a famous writer who might strengthen their position in the cultural world by serving as the American Gorky. That was almost a political post, and they offered it in succession to a number of writers, including Edmund Wilson and Theodore Dreiser, both of whom declined the nomination. Now at last Dos Passos appeared to be the man they were seeking, and he was celebrated in one left-wing book (*The Great Tradition*, 1933, by Granville Hicks) as the towering novelist who had avoided the blindness and the compromises of James, Howells, and Mark Twain.

Meanwhile Dos Passos himself was becoming less and less revolutionary. He had dropped out of Communist-front organizations after a protest meeting in Madison Square Garden at which the Communists disgracefully howled down the Socialists. In the last volume of his trilogy, *The Big Money* (1936), the radicals turn out to be almost as devious as the conservatives and all the characters come to unhappy ends, no matter what their political opinions....In the early spring of 1937 he went to Spain with Hemingway...When they reached Valencia, Dos Passos heard that another friend of long standing, Jose Robles Pazos...had been arrested under suspicion of treason...then suddenly he learned that Robles had already been shot...Dos Passos became convinced, perhaps rightly, that the Russians in Spain had ordered the execution because Robles knew too much and might be undependable politically. It was a shock to the novelist's former beliefs and one from which he never recovered. From that moment he was willing to impute all evil to the Communists and, by extension, to anyone he suspected of furthering their designs....

His Capitoline [Hill] was now on the political right, toward which Dos Passos moved not faster but farther than others who once shared his radical opinions. Twenty years after signing a manifesto for William Z. Foster, he signed another for Senator Taft, then the most conservative of the Republican presidential candidates. Instead of reporting strikes and trials for *The New Masses*, he joined the staff of William Buckley's stoutly conservative weekly, *The National Review*. His name appeared on the same letterheads as those of prominent cold-warriors and drop-the-big-bombers. The change, however dramatic, was in some ways less fundamental than it appeared to be. Dos Passos from the beginning had been an individualist who distrusted bureaucracies of every sort. The bigger they were, the more he distrusted them, whether they represented big capital, as in his early novels, or big labor and the welfare state. 'Organization is death,' he had once repeated to himself in French, Latin, Greek, and Italian...Organized communism was death, he later came to believe, and still later the New Deal was death because he thought that its 'grand design' was to remake America into a communized state."

Cowley
A Second Flowering 74-75, 84-87

"Dos Passos was even in Russia just when certain days shook the world [1917, the Revolution]. The reissue of *Three Soldiers* [1932] was a tribute to Dos Passos's emerging reputation in the 1930s as a solidly 'social' novelist with distinctly radical views....But it was 1932, and American radicals were countering the national breakdown with militant new hopes of their own....The left-wing novelists of the thirties never matched Dos Passos...Nor was he so heavy-footed in the direction of Communism as Theodore Dreiser... 'Dos' was looking forward to a revolution in Europe....

Dos Passos was never a Marxist...He was always more 'agin the system' than *for* anything in particular except personal freedom and the 'working-class stiffs' whom he tended to romanticize....Dos Passos's scorn for the ruthless methods of American business, his growing regard for Jefferson and agrarian democracy, had less to do with political thinking than with his personal myths; he was always an upper-class man who had been deeply humiliated in childhood. Among the 'typical' Americans with whom he peopled *U.S.A.*, he remained a loner ruthlessly dramatizing a mass society that was without the slightest tinge of love. Dos Passos's digs at the Communist faithful at the end of *The Big Money* show that he was fast losing whatever sympathies he may have felt for Communist friends like John Howard Lawson....

In the feverish, overwrought Madrid of 1937, Dos Passos was horrified by the conspiracy of silence about [his friend] Robles's fate; he came to hate Communists everywhere and the nefarious statist philosophy he saw behind the New Deal. Dos Passos soon turned sharply right and wrote tracts, novels, biographies in an increasingly somber attempt to offer for the political salvation of a mass society the example of Thomas Jefferson and the aristocratic republicanism of the eighteenth-century Virginia planters. ...And despite his revulsion from the radical-as-ideologist, the Communist-as-policeman (at the end of *The Big Money*, the lonely Mary French identifies with a Stalinist orthodoxy to which she will fall victim), Dos Passos remained fascinated with the true dissenter...Although Dos Passos's sympathies, at least in *The 42nd Parallel*, were clearly with the radicals who were off the main track, he did not particularly like them.... Mass society now equaled America--and modern America was Dos Passos's adversary."

Kazin
An American Procession, 374-75, 379, 381-82, 384, 387

Michael Hollister (2015)

