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| Dos Passos, John (1896-1970) |
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| John Dos Passos was an American writer best known for his ‘contemporary chronicles’ of American life. His early novels, including *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the U.S.A. trilogy — *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936) — are considered classics of American Modernism, offering a complex and multifaceted portrayal of American society from the turn of the century to the Great Depression. The depiction of urban experience in these novels reflects the cinematic montage of Dziga Vertov, the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce, and the dynamism and simultaneity of Italian Futurism, among other influences.  In addition to writing fiction, Dos Passos was a dramatist, poet, historian, journalist, travel writer, painter, and translator. His first two novels, *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921), are harrowing and highly critical accounts based on his experience as an ambulance driver in the First World War. He published a collection of free verse, *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922), as well as translations of the modernist poetry of Blaise Cendrars. In the late 1920s he worked briefly as a director, playwright, and set designer at the Vsevolod Meyerhold-inspired New Playwrights’ Theater in Greenwich Village, where his associates included communist writers like Mike Gold and John Howard Lawson. |
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In the late 1920s he worked briefly as a director, playwright, and set designer at the Vsevolod Meyerhold-inspired New Playwrights’ Theater in Greenwich Village, where his associates included communist writers like Mike Gold and John Howard Lawson.  File: dospassos1.jpg  1 Cover of The 49th Parallel  The depiction of urban experience in these novels reflects the cinematic montage of Dziga Vertov, the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce, and the dynamism and simultaneity of Italian Futurism, among other influences. In addition to writing fiction, Dos Passos was a dramatist, poet, historian, journalist, travel writer, painter, and translator. His first two novels, *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921), are harrowing and highly critical accounts based on his experience as an ambulance driver in the First World War. He published a collection of free verse, *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922), as well as translations of the modernist poetry of Blaise Cendrars. In the late 1920s he worked briefly as a director, playwright, and set designer at the Vsevolod Meyerhold-inspired New Playwrights’ Theater in Greenwich Village, where his associates included communist writers like Mike Gold and John Howard Lawson.  Although he was in many ways a transatlantic figure, spending much of his youth abroad and travelling constantly throughout his life, Dos Passos’ novels are primarily concerned with American identity, history, and society. He wanted his novels to be more than just stories: they were a kind of reportage, tracing the rapid economic and social changes seen in America during his lifetime. Narrated from a detached, even mechanical perspective, the novels depict the struggle between an individual and the system, whether that system is the war machine, corporate capitalism, or (in later years) the Communist Party. The vision of America in his greatest work*, U.S.A*., is composed of four principal interlocking styles: ‘Newsreels’, which include newspaper headlines, popular song lyrics, and advertising jargon; ‘Camera Eye’ sections, offering subjective, stream-of-consciousness memories; biographical sketches of important figures in history (Woodrow Wilson, Henry Ford, the Wright Brothers); and fictional narratives that follow twelve characters whose paths occasionally cross, following the ‘six degrees’ logic that Dos Passos also employed in *Manhattan Transfer*. The numerous fragments of *U.S.A*. are sorted into these four streams, not unlike automobile parts in a Ford factory on parallel assembly lines. Eventually they come together to form a whole, a totalizing vision of the nation — albeit a nation divided into haves and have-nots, powerful and powerless.  Dos Passos’ success placed him in the company of other ‘Lost Generation’ writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. At his peak in 1936, the year that saw the publication of the last volume of *U.S.A. (The Big Money),* he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.  File: dospassos2.jpg  2 John Dos Passos on the cover of Time. Aug 10, 1936. http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19360810,00.html  However, his critical reputation declined sharply after the Second World War, partly due to his shift away from the radical leftist politics that had to a large extent defined his career. The decisive break came in 1937, when his friend and translator, José Robles, was murdered by Soviet agents during the Spanish Civil War. The dramatic event, which caused a permanent rift in the longstanding friendship between Dos Passos and Hemingway (both of whom were in Spain at the time), led Dos Passos to abandon the cause to which he had been so dedicated in the 1920s and 1930s. In later years he became an increasingly outspoken opponent of Communism and a supporter of American conservatives like Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon. In 1968, two years before his death, he looked back on his career as part of *the Paris Review’*s ‘Writers at Work’ interview series. List of Works: *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (1920)  *Three Soldiers* (1921)  *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922)  *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922)  *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)  *Facing the Chair: Sacco and Vanzetti* (1927)  *Orient Express* (1927)  *The 42nd Parallel* (1930)  *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932)  *The Big Money* (1936)  *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939)  *The Grand Design* (1949)  *Chosen Country* (1951)  *The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson* (1954)  *Midcentury* (1961)  *Mr. Wilson’s War* (1962)  *Brazil on the Move* (1963)  *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (1966)  *The Shackles of Power* (1966)  *The Portugal Story* (1969)  *Century’s Ebb: The Thirteenth Chronicle* (1970) |
| Further reading:  (Carr)  (Koch)  (Ludington)  (Maine)  (Dos Passos, John, and David Sanders) |