

Mea Culpa, Dos: A Reconsideration of John Dos Passos

by Samuel Hux (June 2015)

Almost forty years ago I reviewed John Dos Passos's last (and posthumously published) novel, *Century's Ebb*, which was subtitled *The Thirteenth Chronicle*. In the 1950s Dos Passos began arranging retrospectively his novels as "Contemporary Chronicles"—with *Chosen Country* (1951) as the first, the trilogy *U.S.A.* falling fourth, fifth, and sixth, *Midcentury* (1961) as number 12. *Century's Ebb* rounds out the story of Jay Pignatelli, who was the hero of the first chronicle and a thinly disguised John Dos Passos. I doubted that it could alter the reputation of Dos Passos, writing that "the critical credit of his novels of the Twenties and Thirties rises and falls, but it is still those novels one thinks of. In literary conversation 'Dos Passos' still means *Three Soldiers*, *U.S.A.*, perhaps *Adventures of a Young Man*, not *The Grand Design* or *Most Likely to Succeed* or even *Midcentury*—the latter clearly intended in method and substance to rival *U.S.A.*"—which remains pretty much the case now forty years later.

The Library of America has rightly canonized *U.S.A.*, published a collection of travel writings and odds and ends, and in a third volume reproduced *One Man's Initiation: 1917*, *Three Soldiers*, and *Manhattan Transfer*. O.K. *Manhattan Transfer* is the birth of Dos Passos's practice of creating a novel with a million protagonists, and *Three Soldiers* belongs in a class of war novel with Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Cummings's *The Enormous Room*. But *One Man's Initiation*? Dos Passos saw no reason to include it in his "Contemporary Chronicles"—and he was right. Don't expect *Midcentury* or *Century's Ebb* to receive Library of America canonization, nor any of the other post-*U.S.A.* novels. The axis of liberal literary journalism and the English departments won lopsidedly the war of opinion decades ago, and its view is now just cultural common sense. "Everybody knows. . ." as the song lyric goes. For which I did my little bit.

A snotty little review I wrote. "I should say straight away that *Century's Ebb* is not a very good book; it would not reward serious interest. . . were it not the last gesture—I assume—of its author"—suggesting that we can thank god there are no more manuscripts in the offing. Noting, correctly, that it is a *roman à clef*, I dismissed that sub-genre with pompous disdain, "in my book a trivial form of literature, if an elevation of gossip." A clever bit

of diction, but absolute nonsense. I could go on, but “Must I do so? and must I ravel out / My weaved-up folly?”

I have an uncomfortable feeling, *which I hope is not an actual memory, which I hope is the effect of present guilt*, that I knew when I wrote the review that I was wrong. This much is clear: It was relatively early in my career, I was flattered that so famous (then) a magazine as *Saturday Review* was asking me to contribute, to judge an old lion of American letters, and the only reason *SR* would have known of me was that I had written essays for fairly well-known left-wing journals. This much is foggy: I must have known, therefore, that a leftist slant was more or less (more than less) expected of me. This much is the guilty feeling—pray God not a real memory, please!—that I delivered, served up what was expected, drunk with ambition.

I am not so idiotic as to think that I contributed in any significant way to the decline in the reputation of John Dos Passos. No matter what the novel-reading public thought, by 1975 his critical reputation had been in a slow tailspin for which a turkey like his 1943 tale of a Huey Long-ish pol, *Number One*, is insufficient explanation. In fact, the turkey was well-received by critics as respected as Howard Mumford Jones and the poet Horace Gregory, and in 1957 he received the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ Gold Medal for Fiction, so the Dos Passos name still carried its magic and it was only by the ‘60s that Dos Passos’s crimes caught up with him. But by the time of his last chronicle he was paying in English departments and little magazines and critical circles for his betrayal of American literature by his move to the right.

At any rate, by the time I came along, and fell in line, Dos Passos was the ex-radical who had sold out to *National Review* (and all that that signified), whose *U.S.A.* trilogy—*The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), *The Big Money* (1936)—along with *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) constituted his only real legacy, whose *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939) should have warned us that he was now politically unreliable, and whose post-war novels served only to remind us of how great he—when “one of us”—once was.

Well. . . .

I have recently read (in most cases re-read), in order, all thirteen of the novels Dos Passos designated “chronicles.” What follows is not exactly a critical argument, certainly not a detailed one. It is, I must admit, a series of *assertions, proclamations*. Harold Bloom gets away with asserting, proclaiming, all the time. But I am not trying to practice literary criticism *ex cathedra*. I am only trying to entice the reader to consider or reconsider both the earlier and later Dos Passos fictional canon.

U.S.A. is a great trilogy. It always has been, nonetheless, over-praised. The fictional narratives survive intact that made *U.S.A.* seem so bravely "experimental": the tedious "Newsreels" and the prose-poem "Camera Eyes." Dos Passos was so enamored of the prose poem that he ends the trilogy with a screed called "Vag" (for vagabond). I admit that I do not cherish this "form"—the only successful prose poems are, it seems to me, those which are quite unintentional, like the first paragraph of *Moby Dick*. This habit of breaking into incompetent pseudo-verse tries my patience when it happens occasionally in *Midcentury* (1961)—again to end the book—and less so in *Century's Ebb*. And if the "Documentaries" in *Midcentury* are not tedious as are the "Newsreels" in *U.S.A.* it is because they tend not to be mere unattached headlines and news fragments but are for the most part historical mini-essays, as are the "1937," "1939," "1948" and such in *Century's Ebb*, which serve some coherent purpose. Dos Passos should have settled in the trilogy for the brief biographies of historical figures which provide flesh to the fictional narratives and are a delight in themselves: political figures like Eugene Victor Debs, Bob LaFollette, Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, intellectuals like Randolph Bourne, Thorstein Veblen, artists like Isadora Duncan, Frank Lloyd Wright, to mention but a few. He was right to keep up that sub-genre in *Midcentury* (Douglas McArthur, Sigmund Freud, Walter Reuther, Robert Oppenheimer, and others) and *Century's Ebb* (I wish to hold off identifying them until later on).

I am perfectly happy for *Most Likely to Succeed* (1954) to be ignored: a satirical tale about a fellow-traveling dramatist who I sincerely hope is dying on the ambiguous last page. Same with the supposedly autobiographical *The Great Days* (1958)—in which no one who admires Dos Passos will recognize the protagonist. Let these two turkeys join *Number One* in obscurity. But *Adventures of a Young Man*, which appeared a year after the publication of the great trilogy and ended the left's endorsement of Dos Passos, dramatizing the adventures of a young activist, Glenn Spotswood, from the American labor wars to his death in the Spanish Civil War, betrayed by Communists, is as close as Dos Passos ever got to real classical tragedy, and deserves much better treatment than it has ever received. And if a better novel about the New Deal—and a more informed one whatever the reader's political disposition—has been written than *The Grand Design* (1949) I have never heard of it. *Chosen Country* (1951). . . I prefer to hold off comments about this book for a bit later. But considering again his last two "chronicles," *Midcentury* and *Century's Ebb*, if *U.S.A.* deserves canonization, they do no less.

In truth, *Midcentury* when it appeared signaled a brief recovery of Dos Passos's credit before the steep decline set in. This epic of labor and capitalism was found by the *New York Times* reviewer to be "one of the few genuinely good American novels of recent years," indeed was the equal of *U.S.A.* Nonetheless, there has been no reissue of the book since the early 1960s

paperback. It is now long forgotten. *Century's Ebb*, however, never had the slightest celebration (as opposed to a practical critical use which I will shortly turn to). It is the epitome of Dos Passos's critical decline.

This is really a shame, for the virtues of the last chronicle are manifestly manifold. Forget Dos Passos's infatuation with the prose poem. His strengths were always a sure hand at narrative, and, more than any American novelist of his time, and maybe since, an extraordinary historical sophistication. And *Century's Ebb* is the best combination of his two strengths. There are three fictional threads interwoven throughout: the autobiographical Jay Pignatelli story told in third person (why the Italian name substituting for the Portuguese I have never understood), the embezzler Danny DeLong's first person narrative, and "The True Believers," in which we follow the life of liberal apparatchik Paul Edwards. (The DeLong story, to my mind, is the one real weakness of the novel: the historical thief Eddie Gilbert on whom Danny is based is too insignificant for the attention Dos Passos wastes on him.) The biographical narratives, which in other novels are subsidiary to the fiction, are here equally as prominent as the fictional narratives. George Orwell. John Dewey. Senator Joe McCarthy. Wendell Willkie. John Foster Dulles. The rocket man Robert Hutchings Goddard. Henry Wallace. George Eastman the Kodak man. Lee Harvey Oswald. Malcolm X. It is even possible to think of them as "characters" just like the "novelistic" ones. This is, then, an historical novel in an obvious sense. And in another sense as well.

If Stephen Koch is right—and I do not doubt in the least that he is—great swatches of the Pignatelli narrative are not simply "autobiographical fiction"—by which I think we mean fiction based *very loosely* on a writer's own experience—but instead are the *very tight* transcription into fictional terms of actual events with little leeway given to the poetic imagination. *The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of José Robles* (2005).

When Dos Passos goes to Spain in 1937, primarily to make a film, *The Spanish Earth*, with Ernest Hemingway, he discovers that one of his oldest friends—José Robles, Spanish citizen, professor at Johns Hopkins, recently working for the Republican government—has been arrested. While trying to care for Robles's wife and son, pursuing leads to Robles's fate, Dos Passos discovers that Robles has been executed as a fascist spy, which charge Dos Passos knows, and history knows, is a lie. Wanting justice, Dos Passos will not roll over and will not shut up. His old pal Hemingway is no help, no solace, convinced either that Robles was indeed a fascist or that if he wasn't he was one of the unfortunate eggs that make up the revolutionary omelette. Disappointed in Papa and disgusted with Communist perfidy, Dos Passos has nothing else to do with either. *The Breaking Point*.

Koch's method, or part of it, which I can imagine objections to although I have none, is to assume that the narrative of Pignatelli in Spain in *Century's Ebb* is thinly disguised autobiography and to quote and paraphrase the narrative as such: indeed, changing the names "Jay Pignatelli" to John Dos Passos, "George Elbert Warner" to Ernest Hemingway, and "Ramón Echevarria" of course to José Robles. In other words, Koch uses Pignatelli-in-Spain as nothing less than actual history, as evidence of what actually happened, period. The result is not only a picture of Communist mendacity and moral retardation, but a picture of Hemingway as political opportunist and/or dupe, a fool (the worst kind: one who has achieved foolishness), a cad, a moral trimmer, and all-around (no other way to put it) son of a bitch. Had Hemingway lived long enough to read *Century's Ebb* he would have been enraged. But no matter: he lived long enough to read *Chosen Country*.

Although it was published in 1951, Dos Passos chose to call *Chosen Country* the "First Chronicle" since the events begin with the birth in 1848 of Pignatelli's father James. (Dos Passos's father, John Randolph Dos Passos, was born in 1844: close enough.) By 1951 Dos Passos had almost fifteen years to think about Hemingway's behavior in Spain—and Hemingway had equal time to distort the Spanish days, often implying that Dos Passos had left Civil War Spain as a coward. Dos Passos's treatment of "George Elbert Warner" in this novel was enough to enrage Papa Hemingway. Which suggests that Papa had a strong paranoid side.

Some biographical tangles: Dos Passos's first wife, Katharine Smith Dos Passos, and Hemingway were longtime friends from their youth in the Midwest; although she was six years his elder, they may have been sexually intimate in their Michigan summer days, a rumor here, a suggestion there, but Townsend Ludington in his biography *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (1980) rather doubts it; Dos and "Katy" met in 1928 while both were visiting Hemingway in Key West. While *Chosen Country* is, among other things, a celebration of the love between Dos and Katy, Dos Passos plays fast and loose with the autobiographical details, much more so than in *Century's Ebb*. In sections which read like casually connected novellas until they eventually coalesce, we follow Jay Pignatelli's childhood, a privileged bastardy, which amounts to Dos Passos's memoir; Jay's years at Harvard and Harvard Law (Dos Passos the writer becomes Pignatelli the lawyer—perhaps a kind of loving obeisance to his father); a summer's visit with a college pal to Michigan before the American entry in the Great War, where he meets "Lulie Harrington" (and is clearly smitten) and "Georgie Warner"; Jay's return east and then further east to Europe as an ambulance driver since his eyesight keeps him from service with the army; Lulie's young adulthood as a professional woman (advertising) in Chicago, as bedrock to her brothers and her brothers' friend George Elbert Warner; Jay as "Officer of the Court," lawyer defending not too successfully imprisoned anarchists, which case leads him to Chicago where

his near-forgotten passion for Lulie is rekindled along with—thanks to the example of Communist meddling in the defense—a renewed faith in the old-fashioned American promise; Jay’s and Lulie’s marriage.

Since Dos Passos did not meet Katharine Smith or Hemingway in Michigan back in the day but in both cases only years later, since George Elbert Warner is never identified in the episodes after the war as a novelist but as a cub reporter on a Chicago paper and as an ex-Marine captain rather than (like Dos Passos) an ambulance driver, since only in *Century’s Ebb* long after Hemingway’s death is George Elbert Warner *inescapably* Ernest Hemingway, then why does Hemingway think Warner is his picture? Well it is of course, but why does he think so? The best answer I can think of is that when Hemingway the reader met on the page this likeable but untrustworthy, charming bad boy, middle-class scamp bordering on juvenile delinquency though always amusing, he must have recognized in the character and the character’s behavior someone very familiar. There are other answers the reader can find in the text—which I strongly recommend he or she read. Not for the sake of the Hemingway question, which in spite of Papa’s enormous ego is a relatively minor factor in the novel—but for the sake of a fine aesthetic experience.

I have not been kind in my remarks so far to the liberal literary intelligentsia. I have not been careful not to make them too sweeping. I have had in mind primarily the garden-variety critics in the English departments and the middling to small-fish literary journalists such as. . . well. . . myself in *Saturday Review*. But not the really distinguished (a minority of course!). Edmund Wilson, for instance, never allowed his political differences with Dos Passos to warp his critical intelligence: he liked *Chosen Country* very much indeed. Even if he did not go as far as Archibald McLeish, who thought it Dos Passos’s best novel. With which I agree. What are its virtues?

(1) For one thing the novel is graced with the absence of those long prose-poem set pieces: Dos Passos has simply accepted his strength as a story teller and incorporated a Melvillean poetic prose into the body of the narrative; the book is beautifully written. Indeed, it really should be read aloud. (2) Alternating with the Jay-Katy chapters are sections which have the look of the short biographies in his more familiar novels, but are actually altogether different. Two are about Jay’s father “Dandy” and his “Petite Mère” (like Dos Passos’s actual parents not married, John Randolph Dos Passos trapped in a tragic marriage but assuming total responsibility for his patient beloved and their offspring). The others are evocations of what appear at first to be representative American types of the period but who become secondary but significant figures in the Jay-Katy chapters. If some Dos Passos novels seem to pull in too many directions (is this mini-biography or that “Camera’s Eye” or t’other

“Documentary” casual digression or necessary historical grounding or what?), *everything* in *Chosen Country* is integrated into a coherent purposive whole. (3) While essentially a love story (I should note that four years before its publication Katharine Smith Dos Passos died in an auto accident, Dos Passos driving) it also as its title suggests obviously intended as a socio-political statement. *However*. . . . If a jury could be found which had no preconceptions of Dos Passos I’m sure they could not identify him as liberal, social-democrat, or conservative, as Democrat or Republican. The ignorant prejudice that the old radical became a right-wing hack writer as he veered right is absurd. (4) A good read—after all what a novel is supposed to be before anything else. The characters are simply bloody-well interesting and the narrative details and sweep riveting. Assuming a reader without attention disorder it is hard to put down.

No one need think as highly as I do of *Chosen Country*, or of *Century’s Ebb*, to consider the possibility that Dos Passos’s reputation needs revisiting. I do not mean by this merely that The Library of America’s effective dismissal of the later novels is short-sighted and unjust, for I go much farther than that. William Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald, and Hemingway are generally considered the holy trinity of American novelists who came to aesthetic maturity in the 1920s and ‘30s. Wiser critics will add Willa Cather (even though she started out a bit earlier) to make a quartet (over the dead bodies of radical feminist critics). What about Dos Passos? He rarely makes the short list. But of the quartet only Faulkner and Cather are his superiors. Fitzgerald and Hemingway are not. Fitzgerald wrote one masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby* of course. Hemingway wrote two, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; try *The Sun Also Rises* in your mature years as I did recently: I found it unreadable. For all my reservations about *U.S.A.* (“It has always been. . . over-praised” I wrote some pages back), it is Dos Passos’s one sure masterpiece, if primarily because of its massiveness and its author’s ambition: maybe not one of the three constituent novels is a master work, but the accumulative effect is undeniable, the whole greater than its parts. Then add to this mountain range ten other “contemporary chronicles,” seven of which are equals or near-equals of the three in *U.S.A.* and you have an oeuvre which only Faulkner and Cather can equal or surpass. (Harold Bloom might envy me the sweep of that assertion.)

And if a novelist is more than the novels—which I think is the case—is a figure and presence in his or her own right, so that he or she compels our attention even after the reading is done, then Dos Passos need take a back seat to none of the other four. He was as brave as Hemingway, but without the self-dramatization which makes some wrongly question Papa’s intestinal fortitude. He was without the cranky liquored charm of Faulkner or the sad romance of Fitzgerald, but he was their intellectual superior, just as smart as Cather with her steel

trap of a mind. No writer knew the mythic South as well as Faulkner, her fictional Midwest reveals Cather's historical imagination, but I have already remarked upon Dos Passos's "extraordinary historical sophistication"—which was limited to no single region or continent. He simply *knew* more history than any American novelist who comes to mind. It is not a consideration of this essay, but he published as an historian almost as often as he did as a fiction writer. And related to the fact of his immense historical learning is the fact that he was the most educated of the lot. Not because he went to Harvard while Hemingway was lucky to have gotten out of high school and Faulkner dropped quickly out of Ole Miss, for Fitzgerald was a Princeton boy. But while one senses that Fitzgerald was just that, a Princeton boy and fraternity swell, Dos Passos was a Harvard *student* (who never stopped studying), one upon whom that intellectual experience was wasted no more than Cather's University of Nebraska was wasted upon her. And when one surveys the work of these four it becomes obvious that only Dos Passos's novels might be considered not only intelligent fiction but a kind of intellectual history as well.

John Dos Passos, the later novelist as well as the already respected earlier, is just too big to miss, unless critics are intent upon doing so, as has been the case for far too long.

Samuel Hux is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

To comment on this article, please click