THE ART OF FICTION NO. 44

JOHN DOS PASSOS

Shortly after John Dos Passos had completed the three volumes of *U.S.A.* in 1936, Jean-Paul Sartre observed that he was "the greatest writer of our time." In 1939, a *New Masses* reviewer attacked his novel, *Adventures of a Young Man,* as "Trotskyist agitprop." Neither statement set a pattern for later estimates of Dos Passos, although they suggested the extremes with which his earlier novels *(Three Soldiers, Manhattan Transfer,* and *U.S.A.)* and then his later ones *(District of Columbia, Midcentury)* have been accepted. Dos Passos has also run to extremes in his experiences: from the *New Masses* to the *National Review,* from the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service to an assignment for *Life* in the Pacific Theater, from Versailles to Nuremberg, from incessant travel to the quiet of his grandfather's farm.

Despite all these contradictions and despite even the autobiographical thread in his work, he has been a writer of unusual detachment. He is still asked, as he was in the twenties: "Are you for us or against us?" He has also been unusually industrious, having published eighteen books since *U.S.A.* He works too hard and too steadily to spare much time for answering questions about himself.

Dos Passos was interviewed in 1968 on his farm, Spence's Point, on the Northern Neck of Virginia, a sandy, piney strip of land between the Rappahannock and the Potomac. The state highway in from U.S. 301 passes turnoffs to the birthplaces of Washington and Monroe. The windy, overcast June day didn't hold enough threat of a storm to keep the writer, his strikingly handsome wife, and the interviewer from swimming in the Potomac before proceeding to anything else. He spoke easily about what he was doing currently or was soon about to do but turned talk away from what he had done years before by short, muffled answers, a nod or chuckle, and a quick switch back to fishing in the Andes and flying down the Amazon from Iquitos. The interview took place in a small parlor of the late eighteenth-century house.

He is a tall man, conspicuously fit. He is round-faced, bald, wears steel-rimmed glasses, and is much younger than he appears to be in recent photographs. Characteristically, his head is pitched forward at a slight angle in an attitude of perpetual attention. He speaks a little nervously and huskily, with a trace of the cultivated accent his schoolmates once thought "foreign." Although it seemed that nothing could ruffle his natural courtesy, he was uncomfortable about what he called "enforced conversation." The tape recorder had something to do with this, but it was more obvious that he simply did not enjoy talking about himself. Hesitations aside, he was completely willing to say exactly what he thought about individuals and events.

—*David Sanders, 1969*

INTERVIEWER

Is this the same farm where you spent your summers as a boy?

JOHN DOS PASSOS

This is a different part of the same farm. When my father was alive, we had a house down at the other end, a section that has been sold, which is now part of a little development called Sandy

Point, that string of cottages you saw along the shore. We've been here for more than ten years now, but I don't get to spend as much time here as I would like to because I still have a good deal of unfinished traveling.

INTERVIEWER

Has this polarity between Spence's Point and your traveling had any particular effect on your writing?

DOS PASSOS

I don't know. Of course anything that happens to you has some bearing upon what you write.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps it once led you to write that the novelist was a truffle dog going ahead of the social historian?

DOS PASSOS

I don't know how true that is. It's the hardest thing in the world to talk about your own work. You stumble along, and often the truffle dog doesn't get to eat the truffle . . . he just picks it up.

INTERVIEWER

Have you become the social historian at the expense of the artist?

DOS PASSOS

There's just no way that I can tell. I have to do what I'm interested in at the time, and I don't think there's anything necessarily inartistic about being the historian. I have great admiration for good history. All of my work has some certain historical connotation. Take *Three Soldiers*. I was trying to record something that was going on. I always felt that it might not be any good as a novel, but that it would at least be useful to add to the record. I had that idea when I began writing—with *One Man's Initiation*—and I've had it right along.

INTERVIEWER

Always, then, you have been observing for the record?

DOS PASSOS

Very much, I think.

INTERVIEWER

It must have been difficult to remain simply an objective observer.

DOS PASSOS

Possibly, but I think I've tended to come back to center. I'm often carried away by emotions and enthusiasms for various ideas at one time or another, but I think the desire to observe, to put down what you see as accurately as possible, is still paramount. I think the critics never understand that because they always go on the basis that if a man writes about Mormonism he must be a Mormon, that if he writes about Communism he must be Communist, which is not necessarily true. I've usually been on the fence in partisan matters. I've often been partisan for particular people, usually people who seem to be getting a raw deal, but that's a facet I share with many others.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that when you began observing you were a "half-baked young man" out of Harvard. Have you had any recent thoughts about that education?

DOS PASSOS

I got quite a little out of being at Harvard, although I was kicking all of the time I was there, complaining about the "ether-cone" atmosphere I described in camera eye. I probably wouldn't have stayed if it hadn't been for my father, who was anxious for me to go through. At that time, the last of the old New Englanders were still at Harvard. They were really liberal-minded people, pretty thoroughly independent in their ideas, and they all had a sort of basic Protestant ethic behind them. They really knew what was what. I didn't agree with them then, but looking back on them now, I think more highly of them than I once did. But that essentially valid cast of mind was very much damaged by the strange pro-Allied and anti-German delusion that swept through them. You couldn't talk to people about it. When the war started in the summer of my sophomore year, I was curious to see it, even though theoretically I disapproved of war as a human activity. I was anxious to see what it was like. Like Charley Anderson in *42nd Parallel,* I wanted to go over before everything "went belly-up." When I got out of college in the summer of 1916, I was anxious to get started in architecture, but at the same time I was so restless that I had already managed to sign myself up in the volunteer ambulance service. My father was determined to put that off, so we kind of compromised on a Spanish expedition, and I went to Madrid to study architecture. Then my father died in January of 1917, and I went ahead into the ambulance service. I suppose that World War I then became my university.

INTERVIEWER

Especially because you were in the ambulance service?

DOS PASSOS

. . . You *saw* the war. I don't know if it was on the more or less seamier side of combat, but in the ambulance service you did have a more objective point of view toward war. After all, the infantryman must be carried away by the spirit of combat, which is quite different from sitting around and dragging off the wreckage.

INTERVIEWER

What remains with you now about the First War—thinking back on it?

DOS PASSOS

Much of it I don't remember, really because I wrote about it; when you write about something you often never think of it again. I do remember little snatches of experience. The smells. They seem to linger on in the memory—the gas smells, the almond smell of high explosive, latrine and body odors. A terrible time, there has never been such a series of massacres, but all of us were glad to have seen it and survived it. In the ambulance corps, my capacities were largely concerned with driving a car without dumping people into ditches. As for the troops, they had an ambivalent feeling about the corps. Where they saw us in greatest volume was where an attack had been planned and was going to be mounted and a lot of people were going to be killed. They must have thought us a collection of scavenger crows.

INTERVIEWER

Did you go through this time thinking of yourself as a writer?

DOS PASSOS

I never felt I wanted to be a writer . . . I didn't much like the literary world as I knew it. I studied architecture. I've always been a frustrated architect. But there are certain periods of life when you take in an awful lot of impressions. I kept a good diary—very usual sort of thing—and I was consistent about putting down my impressions. But I had no intention, really, of being a writer then. It may have been Barbusse that got me going. Or more likely something to keep the dry rot from settling in the brain. Robert Hillyer and I began what we called the Great Novel, or more simply the GN. Our schedule then at the front was twenty-four hours on, twenty hours off, and I remember we worked on the novel in a cement tank that protected us from the shelling. We wrote alternate chapters. I sent the manuscript up to the University of Virginia the other day. I didn't dare look at it.

INTERVIEWER

You mention the novels of Barbusse. Was it *Le Feu,* in particular, which made an impression?

DOS PASSOS

It impressed us a good deal at the time. It was the first of the novels that gave a picture of the massacres of World War I. He had a very good ear for the conversations of those involved. His other things weren't really very much. They were cultish works, like Rolland's *Jean-Christophe,* which impressed so many of us in our college days. One had to make a reassessment. I met Barbusse a number of times in Russia afterward. It was rather horrible: he was a combination of evangelist and Communist, and by that time he had become a mere mouthpiece for the Party.

INTERVIEWER

Then, after the war, you were at the Versailles peace conference?

DOS PASSOS

Not really. Sometime in the winter after the armistice they established a thing very much like the G.I. Bill. If you were a college student or a recent graduate, you could go to any university you picked over there, and I picked the Sorbonne. So I was around in Paris, I guess, from February to June of 1919. Of course, that was the peace-conference period, and I talked to a lot of people connected with it in various ways. Most of them were observers. No, I wasn't taking notes on it.

INTERVIEWER

The question of combining politics and fiction has engaged a good many critics, often drawing from them the notion that it's very difficult to mix the two.

DOS PASSOS

Well, I don't know. Recently, I've been calling my novels contemporary chronicles, which seems to fit them rather better. They have a strong political bent because after all—although it isn't the only thing—politics in our time has pushed people around more than anything else. I don't see why dealing with politics should harm a writer at all. Despite what he said about politics in the novel being "the pistol shot at the opera," Stendhal also wrote contemporary chronicles. Or look at Thucydides. I don't think his history was at all damaged by the fact that he was a political writer. A lot of very good writing has been more or less involved in politics, although it's always a dangerous territory. It's better for some people to keep out unless they're willing to learn how to observe. It is the occupation of a special kind of writer. His investigation—using blocks of raw experience—must be balanced. Sartre in his straight, plain reporting was wonderful. I can't read him now. A writer in this field should be both engaged and disengaged. He must have passion and concern and anger—but he must keep his emotions at arm's length in his work. If he doesn't, he's simply a propagandist, and what he offers is a "preachment."

INTERVIEWER

Let's recall how you observed things when you were among the first American writers to see the results of the Soviet revolution. Did you speak the language?

DOS PASSOS

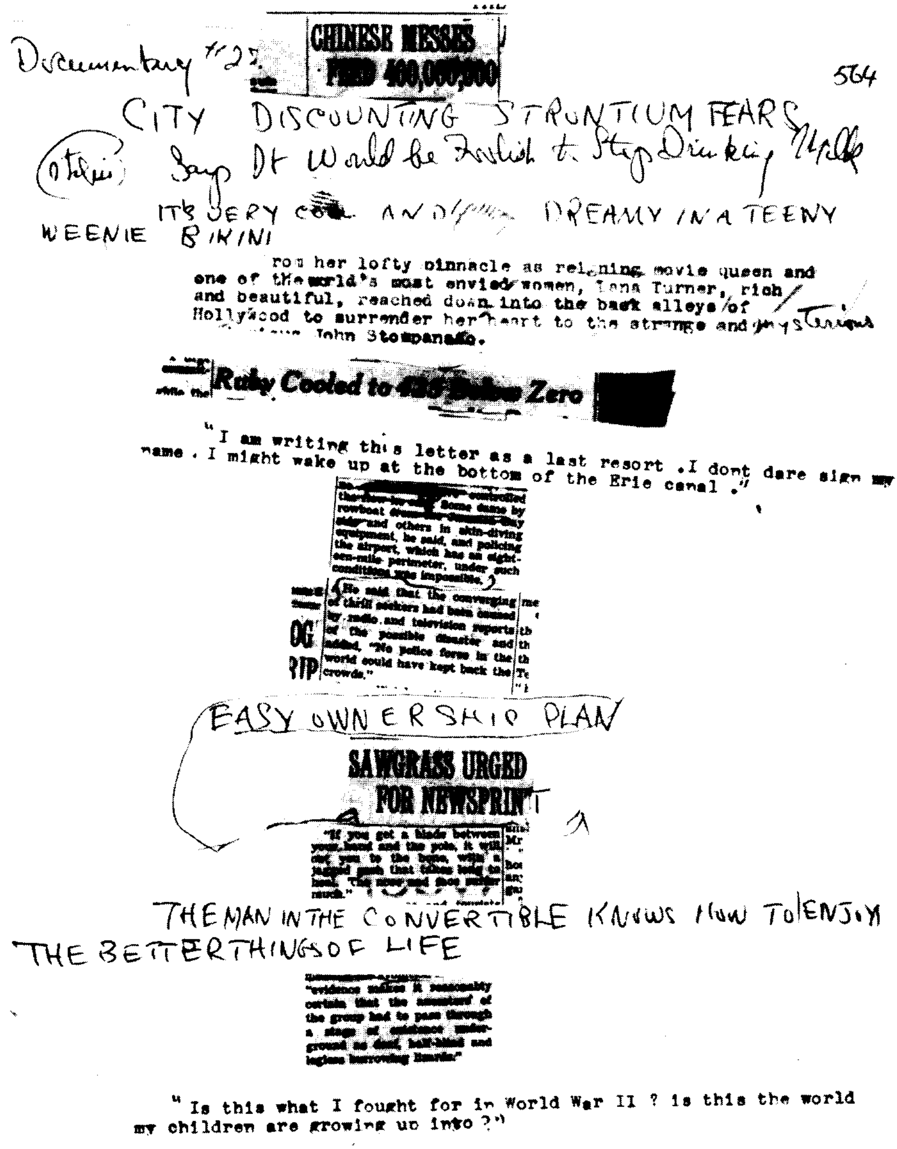
I learned French at an early age, and Spanish, and Portuguese. I tried Russian, but I didn't do very well with it. I used to get a special kind of headache over their verbs.

INTERVIEWER

Just how impressed were you on those first visits?

DOS PASSOS

My first glimpse of the Red Army was in 1921–22 when I was with the Near East Relief in the Caucasus. At that time it still



Documentary #2

564

CHINESE MESSES
FEED 400,000,000

CITY DISCOUNTING STRONTIUM FEARS

(Italics) Says Dr Would be Foolish to Stop Drinking Milk

IT'S VERY COOL AND DREAMY IN A TEENY WEENIE BIKINI

rom her lofty pinnacle as reigning movie queen and one of the world's most envied women, Lana Turner, rich and beautiful, reached down into the back alleys of Hollywood to surrender her heart to the strange and mysterious John Stompanato.

Ruby Cooled to [illegible] Below Zero [redacted]

"I am writing this letter as a last resort. I dont dare sign my name. I might wake up at the bottom of the Erie canal."

the [illegible] controlled. Some came by rowboat [illegible] and others in skin-diving equipment, he said, and policing the airport, which has an eighteen-mile perimeter, under such conditions was impossible.

He said that the converging of thrill seekers had been cued by radio and television reports of the possible disaster and added, "No police force in the world could have kept back the crowds."

EASY OWNERSHIP PLAN

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FOR NEWSPRINT

"If you get a blade between your hand and the pole, it will cut you to the bone, with a jagged gash that takes long to heal. The [illegible] much."

THE MAN IN THE CONVERTIBLE KNOWS HOW TO ENJOY THE BETTER THINGS OF LIFE

"evidence makes it reasonably certain that the ancestors of the group had to pass through a stage of existence underground as deaf, half-blind and legless burrowing lizards."

"Is this what I fought for in World War II? is this the world my children are growing up into?"

Manuscript page of *Midcentury*. From originals in the University of Virginia Library, the Bettmann Archive, Inc.

seemed very hopeful that they would develop something that would be leaning forward instead of backward. You may remember having read in *Orient Express* how hopeful I felt upon observing that the pawnshop in Baku seemed to be going out of business. And, then, probably the period when I was in Leningrad and Moscow in 1928 was the time when I was very much on the fence because I tried to avoid politics entirely on that visit. I'd been working with the New Playwrights—Gold, Lawson—in New York, and I was very much interested in the theater. The Russian theater was still quite good, and so there was a great deal to see. I didn't know at that time that its development was just about coming to its end. Often things you think are just beginning are coming to an end. I spent about six months there in 1928. Even then it was a much more open period than any they had since except possibly the early part of the Khrushchev regime. People were still being introduced as Trotskyites, although Trotsky was in exile. Stalin hadn't really attained power the way he did after the purges. Most of the Russians I knew then were connected with the theater, and a few of them would shake their fists when they passed his picture. This was in '28. They already hated him. They knew more about him than I did. All those people disappeared in the purges.

INTERVIEWER

Would it be fair to say that at first you thought the Soviet experiment held some sort of promise for the individual?

DOS PASSOS

Yes, I thought it might. I always felt at that time that the Soviets might develop into something like the New England town meeting, but of course they became entirely different, something more like the boss-controlled conventions at home.

INTERVIEWER

What were your literary influences at this time—during the twenties?

DOS PASSOS

The futurists, Ungaretti in Italy in particular. I wasn't taken at all by D'Annunzio. He was a little too rhetorical for my taste. Then I admired Pío Baroja, the Spanish novelist, and Rimbaud, of course, and Stephen Crane, particularly *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets,* in which Crane has a terribly good ear for conversation and the way people put things.

INTERVIEWER

Did Hemingway read Barbusse?

DOS PASSOS

Not as far as I know. Ernest and I used to read the Bible to each other. He began it. We read separate little scenes. From Kings, Chronicles. We didn't make anything out of it—the reading—but Ernest at that time talked a lot about style. He was crazy about Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel." It affected him very much. I was very much taken with him. He took me around to Gertrude Stein's. I wasn't quite at home there. A Buddha sitting up there, surveying us. Ernest was much less noisy then than he was in later life. He felt such people were instructive.

INTERVIEWER

Was Hemingway as occupied with the four-letter word problem as he was later?

DOS PASSOS

He was *always* concerned with four-letter words. It never bothered me particularly. Sex can be indicated with asterisks. I've always felt that was as good a way as any.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think Hemingway's descriptions of those times were accurate in *A Moveable Feast*?

DOS PASSOS

Well, it's a little sour, that book. His treatment of people like Scott Fitzgerald—the great man talking down about his contemporaries. He was always competitive and critical, overly so, but in the early days you could kid him out of it. He had a bad heredity. His father was very overbearing apparently. His mother was a very odd woman. I remember once when we were in Key West Ernest received a large unwieldy package from her. It had a big, rather crushed cake in it. She had put in a number of things with it, including the pistol with which his father had killed himself. Ernest was terribly upset.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had an equivalent sense of competition with your fellow writers?

DOS PASSOS

No, not at all. I've always thought you should concentrate on paddling your own canoe. Ernest's jealousy of Scott was really embarrassing—because much of it was at a time when Scott was going through a horrible experience in his own life. He was writing stories like "A Diamond As Big As The Ritz"—out of a state of mind which had so little to do with his literary energies.

INTERVIEWER

If we may return to your novels, is characterization particularly difficult in such a novel as *42nd Parallel* where J. Ward Moorehouse, who seems to personify the whole system being indicted, might be taken—I believe he has been taken—as based on Ivy Lee, the man who actually started the field of public relations?

DOS PASSOS

Well, Ivy Lee did have something to do with Moorehouse because I met Ivy Lee in Moscow—I've forgotten what he was doing there—when I was writing the book. We were at the same hotel. I was trying to learn Russian, a very painful process, and so it was quite a relief to find someone to talk English to. I had several rather interesting conversations with him. I think it was in the fall of '28, but I'm not sure what hotel it was. The Metropole? Anyway, I had done the first few chapters of *42nd Parallel* before I went, and then J. Ward Moorehouse was just emerging. I think those conversations with Ivy Lee probably had something to do with his completed portrait. Then, also, I knew quite a few advertising men in New York.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose a much more direct characterization of an actual figure occurs in *The Great Days*, doesn't it, with Roger Thurloe modeled as he is on Forrestal?

DOS PASSOS

That's closer to being an effort to produce a characterization of a living person, I think, than most of the others. I had met Forrestal a couple of times, but even so the characterization is pretty far off. I think if I had actually intended to do Forrestal, I would have done him as one of those portraits in *Midcentury*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find it difficult to read anything written about your work?

DOS PASSOS

I never do, if I can help it. I know it has a bad effect on fellow writers. People sometimes send me articles about myself, and I bundle them off after a while to the University of Virginia for the professors to mull over. Occasionally I look at things, but I've generally managed to avoid stuff written about my work because there just isn't time to fuss with it. I don't think I've lost very much sleep by what you would call the critical reception of my work. I've been very fortunate in a way. If a thing is knocked in one place, somebody else may like it somewhere else. *The Great Days* was very much ignored in this country, but it went quite well in England and in Germany. I wouldn't have been able to make a living without the international market.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the considerable disparity between criticisms here and in Europe of your work over the past twenty years, or at least since *U.S.A.* was so well received in both places?

DOS PASSOS

I haven't followed it very much. I think there are a lot of American critics who try to pretend that I don't exist at all. They haven't read much of the stuff, and so they really don't know. When you do historical things, say, like *The Men Who Made the Nation,* a totally different set of people review it from those who review so-called fiction. There's this strange schizophrenia in American publishing between fiction and nonfiction, and so people who review nonfiction have never read any of the fiction. It works both ways.

INTERVIEWER

How much of the hostile American reception dated from *Adventures of a Young Man* in 1939, with the cues from left-wing reviewers?

DOS PASSOS

A certain amount, but still *Three Soldiers* was greeted with hostility all the way back in 1921. Of course I think they were wrong on *Adventures of a Young Man* because I don't think my position was so much changed. Politically it was, but from a human point of view I don't think it was so different.

INTERVIEWER

How have these differed in your orientation? The political and the human point of view? In going from *U.S.A.* to *District of Columbia* to *Midcentury,* have you, in effect, gone from big money to big government to big labor?

DOS PASSOS

To a certain extent, I think, yes. At different periods one seems more drastic than the other.

INTERVIEWER

It's a procession which points, perhaps, to this human consistency in your work.

DOS PASSOS

I think it probably does because I think that's what motivates it. It's a fact that I have tried to look at it from the point of view of the ordinary man, the ordinary woman, struggling to retain some dignity and to make a decent life in these vast organizations.

INTERVIEWER

In almost all of your work, then, there has been some opposition between individuals and systems?

DOS PASSOS

Always, yes. We've gone through a period when the industrial society has been very rapidly solidified. The communist way is just one way of solidifying. What it seems to me they have done is to take the capitalist system and kind of freeze it, including a great many of its less agreeable characteristics, freeze it and turn it over completely to bureaucratic control.

INTERVIEWER

I've always wanted to know how *Manhattan Transfer* was written—more than *Three Soldiers* or the other two early novels which more directly follow your experiences. When you wrote *Manhattan Transfer,* were you trying to create an entirely new kind of novel? Or were you building from definite precedents?

DOS PASSOS

Three Soldiers had just raised quite a stir and had quite a considerable sale. I seem to remember writing some of *Manhattan Transfer* in Brooklyn, in a room on Columbia Heights that looked out on the harbor. I don't know how this question can be answered. I was trying to get a great many things in to give a picture of the city of New York because I had spent quite a while there. I was trying also to get a certain feeling in. Precedents? I don't think so. I never went in much for theories of that sort. At the time I did *Manhattan Transfer*, I'm not sure whether I had seen Eisenstein's films. The idea of montage had an influence on the development of this sort of writing. I may have seen *Potemkin*. Then, of course, I must have seen *The Birth of a Nation,* which was the first attempt at montage. Eisenstein considered it the origin of his method. I don't know if there were any particular origins for *Manhattan Transfer* in my reading. *Vanity Fair* isn't at all like it, but I'd read *Vanity Fair* a great deal, and I'd read eighteenth-century English stuff. Perhaps *Tristram Shandy* has certain connections. It's all subjective, while, in my stuff, I was trying to be all objective. Sterne made up his narrative out of a great many different things. It doesn't seem to have much cohesion, but if you read the whole book, it adds up to a very cohesive picture.

INTERVIEWER

What about the reception of *Manhattan Transfer*?

DOS PASSOS

One critic called it "an explosion in a sewer." Probably the person who helped the book most was Sinclair Lewis, who wrote a very favorable review.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of plan did you have for *U.S.A.* when you began writing it?

DOS PASSOS

I was trying to develop what I had started, possibly somewhat unconsciously, in *Manhattan Transfer*. By that time I was really taken with the idea of montage. I had tried it out in *Manhattan Transfer*—using pieces of popular songs. By the time it evolved into such compartments as the camera eye of the *U.S.A.* trilogy it served a useful function—which in that case was to distill my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described. My hope was to achieve the objective approach of a Fielding, or a Flaubert, particularly as one sees it in Flaubert's letters, which are remarkable. In the biographies, in the newsreels, and even the narrative, I aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting views—using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier.

INTERVIEWER

You eventually closed down the camera eye—though *Midcentury* is the same as *U.S.A.* in its other formal aspects.

DOS PASSOS

After a while, you feel more in control of your subjective feelings. I didn't think that I needed it by then.

INTERVIEWER

Was *U.S.A.* a trilogy to begin with?

DOS PASSOS

No, it started to be one book, but then there was so much that I wanted to get in that it got to be three books very soon . . . before *42nd Parallel* was finished.

INTERVIEWER

Did you begin with the idea of just taking the years up to the war?

DOS PASSOS

No, I had the basic idea for the whole thing. It started with what I didn't then call a contemporary chronicle; I do call it that now because it seems a useful label. I think, if I can remember back, I started *42nd Parallel* with the idea of publishing a series of reportages of the times. I don't think I thought of the book as any sort of a novel. I thought of it as a series of reportages in which characters appeared and reappeared. It was to cover quite a long period.

INTERVIEWER

I've often wondered why some of them, like Richard Ellsworth Savage or Vag, didn't reappear in *District of Columbia* or *Midcentury*.

DOS PASSOS

I decided to try to close that group down. You have to make a fresh start every now and then.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to add the portraits to *U.S.A*? Did you get much editorial advice on this book?

DOS PASSOS

Eugene Saxton, first at Doran and then at Harpers, was a very friendly editor, but I don't think anybody gave me any advice. If they did, I doubt if I took it—I guess because I've been very hard to convince. I've always been very grateful for what they've been able to point out about misspellings and bad construction, but as far as the *gist* of things is concerned I've not been much moved. It's awfully hard to say how I came to add the portraits. I was trying to get different facets of my subject and trying to get something a little more accurate than fiction, at the same time to work these pieces into the fictional picture. The aim was always to produce fiction. That's why I was completely unable to understand the fiction, nonfiction dichotomy. I was sort of on the edge between them, moving from one field to the other very rapidly.

INTERVIEWER

Critics might drop labels altogether when they take up *U.S.A.*?

DOS PASSOS

It would be a good idea to look at it a little more objectively without preconceived ideas. That wouldn't mean that they would necessarily have to like it, but I think they would have a better basis for criticism.

INTERVIEWER

In connection with research, is a social life with literary people useful?

DOS PASSOS

Almost never. I hear a good deal more nonliterary conversation. Certainly useful to me in my line of work. I read very little. Yet the language does change—mostly through television and teenage jargon—and it's very hard to keep up with it. Knowing a younger generation helps. An academic community is pretty dreary, but the students, of course, are an interesting quantity. They come down from the University of Virginia and deliver themselves of the current doctrine. As do my daughter and stepson. It's very valuable. Word of mouth provides the great texture, not research.

INTERVIEWER

Incidentally, what is your opinion of the students of the New Left?

DOS PASSOS

Many of them seem to be going through something rather like a tantrum. An odd paranoia sweeping the country, I don't know exactly why . . . a mass hysteria . . . a combination of the St. Vitus's dance of medieval times and the Children's Crusade . . .

INTERVIEWER

What about other forms of activity? In the twenties you maintained a great interest in the theater.

DOS PASSOS

The theater didn't suit me really. I can't sit up all night. Everything in the theater is done after midnight. I lived in Brooklyn at the time, and we always finished so late that I had to walk back home across the Brooklyn Bridge. I never got home before three A.M. and being someone who's never been able to sleep later than seven in the morning, I just couldn't keep up the schedule.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever run across Hart Crane on those walks?

DOS PASSOS

He was very much a night animal. I used to try to get him to go home to his bed for a change. I'd get him there all right, but then he'd hide in the entry and dart out again.

INTERVIEWER

He used to prod his creative impulse by writing to the noise of a phonograph turned up full volume.

DOS PASSOS

Yes, I've heard that. For me it would be too distracting . . . pleasure and pain equally divided. I find that simpler things get me going—diaries, for instance, especially if they turn up in old trunks . . .

INTERVIEWER

What is your ideal set of working conditions?

DOS PASSOS

All you need is a room without any particular interruptions. Some things I've done entirely in longhand, but now I tend to start chapters in longhand and then finish them on the typewriter, and that becomes such a mess that nobody can transcribe it except my wife. I find it easier to get up early in the morning, and I like to get through by one or two o'clock. I don't do very much in the afternoon. I like to get out of doors then if I can.

INTERVIEWER

You get all of your work done before you go swimming?

DOS PASSOS

Yes. Down here that's my regular routine.

INTERVIEWER

How much revising do you go through?

DOS PASSOS

I do a lot of revising. Certain chapters six or seven times. Occasionally you can hit it right the first time. More often, you don't. George Moore rewrote entire novels. In my own case I usually write to a point where the work is getting worse rather than better. That's the point to stop and the time to publish.

INTERVIEWER

How did *District of Columbia* become a trilogy?

DOS PASSOS

Adventures of a Young Man came by itself, and the Spottswood family seemed to need more development. I began with the younger brother, went on to the older brother, and finished with the father. It worked out backwards.

INTERVIEWER

Was Glenn Spottswood's predicament in *Adventures of a Young Man* anything like your own in the later thirties? By his predicament I mean Glenn's feeling that he had been deceived while he worked on the Harlan County Defense Committee, the Scottsboro Boys Defense Committee, all of his encounters with the Communists.

DOS PASSOS

I wouldn't have known about conditions in Harlan County or what was behind either Defense Committee if I hadn't been through those experiences. I wouldn't have known how to describe them. Of course, I think you always have to have a little seed of personal experience, although it's often a very small seed, to produce the real verisimilitude, which is what you are looking for.

INTERVIEWER

In *Number One,* the novel about Glenn's older brother Tyler, there is an account of the third-term convention. Had you admired Roosevelt before that occasion?

DOS PASSOS

Yes, I certainly did. I thought he did very well all of his first term. I voted for him a second term, and then I regret to say that I voted for him for his third term. Now I think it would probably have been better for the country if Willkie had been elected, if anybody else had been elected, because it would have broken up the continuity of Roosevelt's extraordinary machine in Washington. I think Roosevelt would have come down as a really great president if he had only served two terms. I think he had done all the good he had in him, and there was only harm left. In that third term, the consolidation of the federal government really was the rebirth of bureaucracy, which had shown its head under Wilson and then faded away. That's what *The Grand Design* is about.

INTERVIEWER

It seemed to me that Roosevelt dominated that book, if not all of *District of Columbia,* in much the same way that Wilson did *1919*.

DOS PASSOS

I think so, although I fairly intentionally kept him behind the scenes. At that time I had done quite a bit of reporting around Washington. Reporting has always been an important part of my career. Between books, I've always done a few reporting jobs.

INTERVIEWER

One political question seems inescapable. In many of your books since the war, you write of the "abominable snowman" of international Communism, of having been among the first to see him, and having kept on seeing him through all of the crises, alliances, and thaws. Do you see him as clearly today?

DOS PASSOS

It's very hard to tell. It's almost impossible to have any view of present-day international politics without having a double standard of judgment. Our development and that of the Soviet Union have many things in common except that the Soviet Union is motivated by this tremendous desire for world conquest, more active sometimes and at other times less active. It may be that the people of Russia are not very much motivated by this passion for expansion anymore. I'm not sure whether they ever were. I would like to know. I mean I don't think the mass of people is motivated at all because it's so hard for them to reach any conclusion. They are doped with ideology.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever thought of going back there to check on it?

DOS PASSOS

It would be hard to. There might come a time when it would be interesting to go to Russia, but I don't think that time has come yet. I think there are certain phases of the development of Russian society which are on our side. Some Russians might be among our best allies because some of them really want much the same things that we do. But those particular people are helpless in the bureaucratic setup. Pasternak was a good example, I think, with his curious book, *Doctor Zhivago*. It seemed so much a voice from the past, like something of Turgenev's coming back to life. It was very attractive to me because it showed a side of the Russian people which I've had great sympathy with. It showed that that side of the Russian mind, that nineteenth-century humanism, still existed. Of course, Pasternak was quite an old man. Still, as long as they teach people to read and write and allow them to read nineteenth-century Russian literature, there are going to be more Pasternaks.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read many contemporary American writers?

DOS PASSOS

I don't get time for very much because I do so much reading of a research type in connection with things I am doing—documents. It's very hard for me to get time. I read Salinger with a great deal of pleasure, and I mention him simply because he has given me pleasure. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey* were very entertaining books. I read a certain amount of Faulkner, and I'm very, very fond of some of his writing. "The Bear" and *As I Lay Dying*. "The Bear" is a marvelous hunting story. I liked *Intruder in the Dust*. He reminds me very much of the old storytellers I used to listen to down here when I visited summers as a boy, when I would hide in the shadows so that I wouldn't be sent off to bed.

I'd listen till my ears would burst. I suppose what I like best in Faulkner is the detail. He is a remarkably accurate observer and builds his narratives—which sometimes strike me as turgid—out of the marvelous raw material of what he has seen.

INTERVIEWER

And Cummings's poetry?

DOS PASSOS

Oh, I've always enjoyed Cummings's poetry. I was very fond of Cummings personally. He was in college at the same time I was, I think a class ahead of me, and I saw quite a little bit of him there. We always met on much the same terms, although sometimes a year would go by when I didn't see him. He was the last of the great New Englanders.

INTERVIEWER

How does the work of some of the more committed left-wing writers of the thirties seem to you now? Michael Gold and Howard Fast, for example.

DOS PASSOS

Somebody credited me with a wisecrack about that time: Writers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your brains. Mike Gold wrote quite well. His first book, *Jews Without Money,* was a warm, human thing, very much influenced by Gorky, whom Gold admired greatly. Fast never interested me. His book on Tom Paine irritated me very much because I thought he completely falsified the picture. Generally, though, the writers who became CP members either stopped writing or became so boring nobody could read them.

INTERVIEWER

Have you known any of the communist politicians, rather than the writers?

DOS PASSOS

I had a long conversation with Earl Browder, to whom I took a great dislike. He was a horrible fellow. I've met Foster and didn't dislike him.

INTERVIEWER

Did you discover a great disparity between Browder and Foster, on the one hand, and John Reed on the other?

DOS PASSOS

Of course, I had a great deal of sympathy with John Reed. I thought he wrote very well, and I think I liked his writings better than I did him. The only time I ever met him he was giving a talk, maybe about Mexico. It was at Harvard when I was an undergraduate. There was something indefinably Harvard Brahmin in his manner that threw me off at the time. I was a very intolerant young man in a bashful and retiring sort of way in those days. I hated college boys. From what Louise Bryant said privately, I suspect that John Reed was pretty discouraged before he died.

INTERVIEWER

Have *you* been more optimistic about the world situation in the last five years or less so?

DOS PASSOS

It would be hard to say. I think I have probably become more so as I get older and a little less passionately involved, but then when they pull something like the operation in the Bay of Pigs, I become extremely pessimistic, particularly when nobody seems to understand its significance.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the academic treatment of modern literature?

DOS PASSOS

It seems to be rather confused, although I haven't followed it very much. The academic community is more likely to suffer from mass delusions than the general public. I don't know exactly why, but I suppose it's always been the case.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your own most recent writing is generally misunderstood in this country?

DOS PASSOS

I wouldn't say that. Some people misunderstand it, naturally. They always will. It would be absurd to expect them to understand things. Also, if you deal with matters that touch people, you must expect to cause pain; particularly, if you hit at some target that is close to the truth. It always causes pain, agony. Naturally, they resent it.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever thought that you have what has been called a Wayne Morse complex, an unwillingness to go along with a major party or major tendency?

DOS PASSOS

There is a type of mind that does tend to say, as Ibsen did, that the minority is always right. Perhaps I agree with Ibsen in that.

INTERVIEWER

Have you tried other artistic forms? Poetry, for instance.

DOS PASSOS

I did quite a lot of that . . . but it took a different form . . . it got into certain rhythmic passages in *U.S.A.* I do a little painting, a watercolor or so. The prose can get too highcolored; a watercolor gets that drained off.

INTERVIEWER

Do you enjoy writing?

DOS PASSOS

That depends. Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't.

INTERVIEWER

What is its particular pleasure?

DOS PASSOS

Well, you get a great deal off your chest—emotions, impressions, opinions. Curiosity urges you on—the driving force. What is collected must be got rid of. That's one thing to be said about writing. There is a great sense of relief in a fat volume.

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