

Writing War:
John Dos Passos' *One Man's Initiation*

The initiation experience that forms the central premise of John Dos Passos' first published novel and that has held such powerful sway over subsequent readings of his early career was largely a fictional one. Dos Passos suffered no wound—neither literal nor figurative—nor did he experience the kind of transformation that is the central feature of many World War I narratives. Instead, the idea of a personal initiation was one that he embraced in order to lend greater authority to his own words at a time when words themselves seemed to have lost much of their referential quality.

During the Atlantic crossing from New York to Bordeaux, Dos Passos composed a poem that, for all of its affectation, still conveys something of his own expectations of the war. "I have no more memories," he wrote. It is "As if a gritty stinking sponge / Had smeared the slate of my pale memories, / I stand aghast in a grey world . . ." (Ludington 86). The passage is suggestive of that disruption of time that Samuel Hynes writes of in his recent study of imaginative responses to the war (xi-xii). In the lives of individual participants, the war was a change "so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before" (xi). Certainly Dos Passos seems to have undergone such a change. Soon after his arrival in France, he confessed, "I've never experienced anything quite like the strange break with everything past that has seemed to come over me since that sleepy quiet trip . . ." (qtd. in Ludington 88). What is significant about these statements, however, is that they suggest Dos Passos was undergoing a kind of initiation—a revision of self—before he had experienced his first bombardment and before he had carried his first casualties. In fact, Dos Passos looked to the war to justify a break with his past that intellectually and emotionally he had already made.

The fact that Dos Passos' war-time initiation has not been seriously questioned before now¹ suggests just how firmly fixed in our collective imagination is the idea of the generative power of war. In a revealing choice of words, Reed Whittermore writes, the war "gave [Dos Passos] his first two novels," as if war itself were a creative force capable of replacing the author all together (159). It was not Dos Passos that wrote the war, some would have us believe, but quite literally the war that wrote him. Stanley Cooperman argues, "it was the Great Crusade which gave to American literature an art not simply 'influenced' by war, but in a vital sense created by it" (vii). Though not often stated so directly, the point is implicit in much of the critical comment on Dos Passos' war experience. As Granville Hicks has put it, "the war was the first of the critical—one might almost say traumatic—experiences that can be picked out as the turning points of Dos Passos' career" (87). In a curious collapse of meaning, however, Hicks qualifies his own assertion of war-time trauma even as he proposes it. We might *almost* speak of Dos Passos' traumatic experience of war, except—of course—we can't.

While the weeks that Dos Passos spent shuttling wounded to aid stations behind the lines brought him quite close to the front and, on occasion, exposed him to shell fire and gas ("the real thing," he calls it in *One Man's Initiation*), his experience differed significantly from that of the front-line soldier.² French *brancardiers*, or stretcher bearers, did the work of retrieving the wounded from the battlefield and would bring them to a *poste de secours* near the front lines. Dos Passos and the other drivers in his unit would pick up the wounded there and then drive them to a more fully equipped field hospital further behind the lines. While it was certainly hazardous duty, it was nothing like the experience of writers such as Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, conditioned as they were by months of trench warfare. Reading Dos Passos' letters from this period, one gets little sense of deeply felt horror or revulsion, often just the opposite. "I've been enjoying my work immensely," he wrote in August, soon after carrying his first casualties (Ludington 92). A week later, he added, "I'm much happier here, really in it than I've been for an age," and, on another occasion, he confessed simply, "I enjoy the life vastly" (Ludington 98, 99).

These statements, and others like them, have not been given much weight in our readings of Dos Passos' war experience. Instead, we have approached the weeks he spent in France, and later in Italy, with such a heightened expectation of horrific change that we have been unable to question that reading even when—as in Hicks' case—our own words give us pause. We expect war to refashion the self. We expect it to turn boys into men, to open our eyes to man's capacity for violence and to his capacity for selfless acts of sacrifice. What it more clearly did, however, was it lent credibility to Dos Passos' words. Just as Hemingway's wound justified both his swagger and his stylistic innovation, the war justified Dos Passos' own representation of events. While war may not give us—readymade—novels or poems, certainly it authorizes them. (We only need to consider the outpouring of all manner of war-time narratives to recognize the validity of the point.) Those critics who have had difficulty understanding why one so opposed to the war would willingly become a participant in that war only need to recognize what type of war experience Dos Passos sought. He went to France, quite simply, to write the war.

From the beginning, Dos Passos was well aware of the challenges inherent in making the war his subject. The months he spent in New York in the spring and summer of 1917 had exposed him to conflicting representations of the war's root causes and opposed interpretations of its meaning for the nation. Woodrow Wilson may have led the country into war in order to make the world safe for democracy, but for many American socialists his actions were seen as no more than an attempt to stimulate markets and protect J. Pierpont Morgan's loans to the allies. As Emma Goldman, that spokesperson for the radical left, put it, "The real issues . . . are nothing else but profits and conquests" (Goldman to Boyeson). For one who wished, as Dos Passos did, to write the war, this perceptual divide posed a significant problem. How could one even begin to write this war, after all, when the American people's perceptions of its fundamental nature were so sharply divided?

Those divisions, however, only made Dos Passos more determined to get it right. Soon after arriving in France, he wrote of his burden as that of telling the truth about the war (Landsberg,

Correspondence 53-54). "Don't believe the New York Times," he had warned Rumsey Marvin in June. In July he cautioned, "Don't believe what your prep-school teachers tell you," and finally in August the refrain became, "don't believe anything people tell you—ceptin' tis me—or anyone else whose really been here" (Ludington, *Fourteenth* 74, 88, 92).

Dos Passos' letters and diaries reveal the extent to which he struggled with the representational problems posed by the war. Even after Verdun, the horror uppermost in his mind was the distortion of language:

My God what a time—All the cant and hypocrisy . . . all the vestiges of old truths now putrid and false infect the air, choke you worse than German gas—The ministers from their damn smug pulpits, the business men—the heroics about war—my country right or wrong—oh infinities of them! Oh the tragic farce of the world.
(Ludington, *Fourteenth* 90)

Dos Passos' anger is not directed at those who are executing the war—not the enemy that shells him nor the military strategists who plan each movement—but, instead, at those who write the war. Their false words, he would have us believe, are worse than German gas, or, as he would put it later, "The ridiculous horror of war's actuality is less hateful than the lies," (Landsberg, *Correspondence* 71).

Again such statements pose a problem if we wish to argue Dos Passos underwent a transforming initiation as a result of his experiences at the front. To view the distortion of language as more hateful than "war's actuality" is to display a remarkable degree of callousness towards the very real suffering of the wounded and maimed he carried in his own ambulance. What such statements suggest is just how much his response to the war was an intellectual one.

Though *One Man's Initiation* reflects these concerns, it has not previously been read for what it reveals about Dos Passos' own evolving conception of his authorial role. Still, it is a novel deeply concerned with its own status as text. It is a novel that seeks to achieve a measure of that authority that words have lost amid the

rhetoric of the time. Central to that end, is the premise of Martin's initial innocence and his subsequent initiation. Like Dos Passos himself, Martin wishes to become "a new white page . . . clean and unwritten on" (45).³ The metaphor reinforces Whitemore and Cooperman's point that it is not the individual that writes the war but the war that writes him. If we accept the premise, then authorial authority is assured simply by insuring the cleanliness of the page, that is, the objectivity of the self. Despite the novel's promise of a perspective forged by the experience of war, however, Martin carries a way of seeing with him to France. Martin's cleansing—like Dos Passos' own—was only a rhetorical one. While his perspective may not be that of a Billy Sunday or the stereotypical Y-Man (just two of the objects of Dos Passos' ridicule), he is, nevertheless, unable to escape that subjectivity which the novel as a whole indicts.

Critical discussion of *One Man's Initiation* has not addressed this fundamental failing of Martin's, much less its consequences for Dos Passos' own development as a writer. Instead, Martin's initial innocence and subsequent initiation have been accepted by critics without reservation. Iain Colley describes Martin at the beginning of the novel as "a young man totally unscarred by disillusion" (27-28). Similarly, Michael Clark writes of "his prewar innocence" (64), while Robert Rosen argues that Martin moves over the course of the novel from a state of neutral objectivity—he calls it "detachment"—through the horror of war, to a new political awareness (10). It is important to recognize Martin's objectivity as one of Dos Passos' intentions—he clearly suggests that Martin undergoes the same psychic cleansing that he had himself hoped for—but it is equally important to recognize the ways in which the narrative fails to fulfill such an expectation.

As originally conceived, the novel did not begin with Martin headed for France at all but before the war, with his early childhood years. It was only very late that he decided to separate *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho* (the original title of the novel) at Martin's Atlantic crossing and retitle the war-time chapters *One Man's Initiation—1917*.⁴ Though the original beginning remains unpublished, those surviving chapters, nevertheless, bear a direct relationship to the published novel and

offer us important evidence of Dos Passos' own conception of Martin's character. When we consider Martin's early history (something few critics do), we discover that his story is less a story of war-time initiation than it is a kind of portrait of the artist as a young man.⁵ Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Martin is hardly an innocent, unscarred by disillusion; rather, his early life is a series of conflicts that shape both his political outlook and his creative sensibility.

From a very young age, Martin perceives his world differently from his parents and from other figures of adult authority. As a child attending mass, he fails to see God at that moment when the priest rings a bell and invokes his presence. Similarly, the conventional words of comfort that are spoken at the death of his grandmother strike him as equally empty. These early experiences (and others like them) help produce in Martin a skeptical predisposition towards language. When the country begins to prepare for war, he brings this well-formed skepticism to the rhetoric of preparedness. Sitting through one of his headmaster's formulaic talks, he can only smile to himself at the suggestion that the value of a man's life rests in his service to his nation. "A man who didn't know how to take orders," the headmaster tells Martin and his schoolmates, "would not be fit to give them. A man who couldn't discipline himself, and others, could never be of use to the nation" (I, 47).⁶

Martin's resistance to his headmaster's words is part of a pattern of resistance to conventional representations of the war. From the beginning, he opposes compulsory conscription and the United States' entry into the war (III, 33). He suspects that the Lusitania may have invited attack by carrying military armaments (III, 32), and, like Emma Goldman, he suggests on more than one occasion that the war is caused by the greed of militarists and business interests (III, 10; III, 41-42). His views are shaped less by his schooling, or the example of his parents (they only repeat the well-worn, patriotic banalities), than they are by the rhetoric of the anti-war and no-conscription movements. As Mrs. Travers, a family friend, tells him, "You're getting to be a regular socialist" (III, 35), to which Martin answers, "Say rather an irregular one" (III, 35). In

either case, however, the result is the same. The young Martin is hardly the innocent others have described him.

In dividing the original novel where he did (at the Atlantic crossing), Dos Passos shifted the focus of *One Man's Initiation* away from the development of Martin's creative sensibility to the larger historical event.⁷ Beginning with Martin on his way to the war allowed him to strip away Martin's early history and, with it, the accumulated baggage of his own fixed opinions. "The future is nothing to him," Dos Passos writes, "the past is nothing to him" (45). This suspension in time marks—for Martin, as for Dos Passos—a figurative cleansing that prepares the authorial self for the new impressions that the war will inscribe there. This self is remade, however, not out of the horror of war as the traditional initiation story would have it but, instead, remade in preparation for the act of writing.

Others that Martin encounters undergo no such preparation; instead, they continue to see the war in light of the stories and headlines that they have heard and read. The very first person that Martin meets on ship board is a young woman consumed by hatred for the Germans and eager to do her bit, as she puts it (47). Her use of the stock phrase underscores the lack of originality in her response to events. Her views have been so conditioned by the conventional war-time rhetoric, that she now struggles to make her experience conform to her own preconceptions. In this respect, she is the antithesis of that authorial self that the novel holds up as the ideal. To her limited imagination, the Germans are an innately evil people, while Martin, she assumes, acts out of a heroic desire to save France.

When Martin questions the reliability of the atrocity stories that are the basis for her rage, she can hardly contain herself: "True! Oh, of course it's all true; and lots more that it hasn't been possible to print, that people have been ashamed to tell" (47-48). Before relating a particular atrocity story she has heard, she insists,

"It's absolutely authentic, too. I heard it before I left New York from a girl who's really the best friend I have on earth. She got it from a friend of hers who had got it directly from a little Belgian girl, poor little thing, who was in the convent at the time . . ." (48)

Clearly Dos Passos is satirizing conventional preconceptions of the war, but he is also raising a more fundamental question about our own ability to ever know our world as it is represented in language. When Martin confesses that his own motive for enlisting in the ambulance service was “only curiosity” (47), he reveals his own need for a more stable truth grounded not in words but in first-hand experience.

Even after arriving in France, however, Martin continues to encounter those who would have their experience conform to a preconceived pattern. There is the lieutenant so eager to wear the Croix de Guerre that he fakes his own wounding (128-129). There is the ambulance driver who, after surviving a particularly dangerous shelling on an exposed road, says with satisfaction, “That’ll make a letter home” (145). Often, in fact, experience is made to conform to the stories one wishes to tell. While it is true Martin’s own movement over the course of the novel is towards a point of view grounded in direct experience, it is important to recognize that experience itself can be made to tell many stories.

The point is as true for Dos Passos as it is for the characters we find in his novel. For both, war is not only an historical event but also a verbal construct. Dos Passos’ own selection of details contributes to a highly particular representation of war, just as the young woman Martin met on shipboard was engaged in her own kind of representational act. Faced with the potential for such extravagant misrepresentation, Dos Passos denies his authorial presence all together. Like his autobiographical protagonist, he approaches his experience—he would have us believe—as a blank page. He brings to the war no preconception, but instead, opens himself to a flow of experience that will write the war through him.

Beyond the seeming innocence of this authorial self is a novelist who is deeply opposed to the war and to conventional representations of the war’s reality and meaning. One does not escape one’s past by crossing the Atlantic, nor does Martin arrive at a state of innocence by lopping off his childhood years. The recurring patterns in Dos Passos’ own selection of details betray an authorial presence that Dos Passos cannot fully escape and that the novel cannot fully deny. Often seemingly objective description poses, in fact, a direct challenge to conventional ways of imagining

the war. In his graphic description of wounds and wounded, for example, in his questioning of the moral rectitude of his fellow soldiers, and in his highly sympathetic portrayal of the German enemy we can see evidence of Dos Passos' own firm convictions, those same convictions that his prefatory initiation was to have erased.

Certainly, one of Dos Passos' intentions was to offer a corrective to those idealized depictions of the wound that diminish its impact and thereby justify yet more suffering. The wounded that he describes with such attention to detail over the course of this novel are quite different from the wounded that war-time readers would have encountered in Red Cross loan drive posters, in magazine fiction of the day, or in the pages of their Sunday supplements.⁸ Martin's first encounter with a wounded soldier occurs unexpectedly in a Paris cafe soon after his arrival in France. He is sitting quietly, admiring the sights and smells of Paris, when his thoughts are interrupted by the sight of a woman helping a maimed soldier to the table next to him:

He found himself staring in a face, a face that still had some of the chubbiness of boyhood. Between the pale-brown frightened eyes, where the nose should have been, was a triangular black patch that ended in some mechanical contrivance with shiny little black metal rods that took the place of the jaw. (54)

Though this description is presented in a seemingly objective manner (only the phrase "chubbiness of boyhood" and the word "frightened" approach explicit interpretation), the soldier's disfigured face is a highly charged image that conveys in unambiguous fashion Dos Passos' own sense of the waste of modern war.⁹

Such is the case, as well, with the wounded that Martin encounters later in the novel. Often these wounds have a rawness about them that Dos Passos refuses to conceal from the reader:

Where the middle of the man had been, where had been the curved belly and the genitals, where the thighs had joined with a strong swerving of muscles to the trunk, was a depression, a hollow pool of blood that

glinted a little in the cold diffusion of grey light from the west. (71-72)

He is not interested in sanitized and neatly bandaged wounds but with those wounds that literally deprive men of their wholeness—the missing nose and jaw, the sunken depression where the genitals had been. These are not wounds that ennoble or otherwise elevate the self but are, rather, wounds that work only to diminish.

Similarly, the soldiers that Martin serves with display little of the moral rectitude that the popular press was often eager to grant them. Instead, they loaf, they drink to excess, they pass the time with local prostitutes,¹⁰ they play cards, pick lice, and criticize the government that has brought all this about. Far more disturbing, however, is the capacity for evil that a select few possess. We hear of an Englishman who places a live hand-grenade under the pillow of a wounded German prisoner (92). Another tells of bayoneting a German soldier who has raised his arms in a futile attempt to surrender (139-140). The atrocity stories are real, Martin discovers, but the actors have been changed.

The novel's most significant challenge to the conventional depiction of the war, however, comes in Dos Passos' insistence on the common humanity of the German soldiers. In this respect, too, the young woman that Martin met during the Atlantic crossing serves as a measure of the popular mind and illustrates just what it is that Martin must escape. She has unquestioningly accepted the war-time distortions of German character, and, in doing so, has become as hate-filled as the Hun of her imagination. In contrast, Martin's movement over the course of the novel is towards a point of identification with the individual German soldier, an individual separated from him by much more than trenches and barbed wire.

From his position in a *poste de secours*, he thinks about the enemy soldiers crouched in an advance listening post several hundred yards away. His imagination carries him across the torn ground to those men who have been the subject of so much vehement misrepresentation. He wishes he could know them and speak with them. As one of his companions puts it, "It is funny to think how much nearer we are, in state of mind, in everything, to

the Germans than to anyone else" (71). Late in the novel, Martin achieves something of the connection that he has hoped for. He comes upon a German prisoner who has been pressed into service as a stretcher-bearer. Martin watches as the man passes on the road, and he wishes he knew German so that he might speak to him. At that moment, an incoming shell suddenly cuts the man down. Martin runs to his side, and Dos Passos describes the scene this way:

Martin kneeled beside him and tried to lift him, clasping him round the chest under the arms. He was very hard to lift, for his legs dragged limply in their soaked trousers, where the blood was beginning to saturate the muddy cloth stickily. Sweat dripped from Martin's face, on the man's face, and he felt the arm-muscles and the ribs pressed against his body as he clutched the wounded man tightly to him in the effort of carrying him towards the dugout. (147)

In this novel so filled with the misrepresentations of language, Dos Passos loads this moment—when language is inadequate to the occasion—with a new measure of authority. The touch of this wounded soldier offers Martin a new and more immediate form of knowledge. He feels the weight of the limp body, the stickiness of the man's blood, his own sweat mingles with the sweat of this dying German soldier, and in that momentary connection, Dos Passos would have us believe, Martin moves past the rhetoric of war to a new level of experience. "The effort gave Martin a strange contentment," he writes:

It was as if his body were taking part in the agony of this man's body. At last they were washed out, all the hatreds, all the lies, in blood and sweat. Nothing was left but the quiet friendliness of beings alike in every part, eternally alike. (148)

The scene is an important one not only for the dramatic conclusion it offers, but also for its clear suggestion of a triumph over a corrupt language. The lies and the hate are all washed away, Dos Passos would have us believe, in this moment of shared

suffering. Once again, Martin undergoes an initiation that is characterized, first and foremost, as a cleansing of the self. But, once again, the novel fails to convince. As Lois Hughson has put it, it is all too easy. "Martin never hated the Germans, nor did he believe the propaganda about them." Put simply, "He has no bitterness to be erased" (50).

Instead, this fictive cleansing—like the first—brings him only to where he has always been. The war gave Dos Passos no changed perception, nor does his fictional protagonist come to any new awareness. I point out these tensions and contradictions not to level new charges at this apprentice novel but rather to draw attention to Dos Passos' efforts to establish his own authorial authority. The crisis in language that the war brought about posed significant challenges for one who wished, as he did, to write the war. In the end, his own authority as author was as much a narrative construction as the reality of war that his novel presents. □

Notes

1. David Sanders has recognized that "Dos Passos . . . acceded to at least some of his postwar vision without the shock of a mortar" (217), but he fails to develop the point.

2. Those critics who have been most accepting of the initiation reading have, at times, been guilty of other embellishments of Dos Passos' war-time experience. Virginia Spencer Carr, for example, describes Dos Passos' ambulance being splattered with the "fragments of men and horses," a remarkable detail, which would be even more so if there were any evidence that it ever occurred. Carr does not offer a source, nor does Dos Passos refer to any such event in any of his letters or diary entries from the time.

3. Rebirth is a common motif in Dos Passos' early novels. Like Martin Howe, John Andrews too experiences a figurative rebirth early in *Three Soldiers*: "His life before this week seemed a dream read in a novel, a picture he had seen in a shop window . . . Could it have been in the same world at all? He must have died without knowing it and been born again into a new, futile hell" (31).

4. It is worth noting Dos Passos chose to divide his novel at Martin's Atlantic crossing, the point that corresponds with his own figurative break with his past. In a letter to Dudley Poore, Dos Passos explained his decision saying, "The fourth

part of Fibbie never was part of him at all" (qtd. in Ludington 251). Even his division of the novel suggests the completeness of Martin's rebirth, a rebirth that is reflected as well in the name change from Fibbie to Martin.

5. Dos Passos was reading Joyce's novel during the period when he was at work on this novel. In July 1918 he wrote in his journal: "Finished for the second time James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist—pray God I shant start imitating it off the face of the earth . . . I admire it hugely . . ." (qtd. in Ludington 193).

6. All quotations from *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho* are from the unpublished typescript in the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia.

7. In her recent study of the role of the historical imagination in the American novel, Lois Hughson attributes much of Dos Passos' success as a novelist to his movement from biography to history (161).

8. Such graphic depictions of the wounded are rare in World War I narratives. The account of Henry Kingman—a fellow driver in Dos Passos ambulance corps—offers nothing like it. Those wounds that are present in popular representations of the war are seldom disfiguring ones. Instead the face reveals a poise and a still unscarred innocence, as in the drawings of the magazine illustrator F.R. Gruger. Typically the wounded have already received care (often from a young and attractive nurse), and the soldier now enjoys the benefit of a forced holiday.

9. The transformation of this human face into a mechanical device anticipates the heavy reliance on images of mechanization that dominate Dos Passos' second war novel, *Three Soldiers*.

10. The changes that were made to Dos Passos' manuscript before the novel could be published related not to the depiction of wounded or to the suppression of anti-war sentiment but rather to the sexual activity of the young soldiers. See the unexpurgated 1969 edition of *One Man's Initiation* (175-179).

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