

INTRODUCTION

This study undertakes an inside/outside look at the feminine in relation to John Dos Passos and his works. First and most importantly, I suggest that Dos Passos' finest fiction – the texts up to and including his acclaimed trilogy *U.S.A.* – manifests a social consciousness that consistently and provocatively accommodates gender as a fundamental category of social analysis. Second, I assert that the literary, political, and personal pressures shaping Dos Passos' reputation reflect contemporaneous invocations of the “feminine” as a means of disparagement. The contrary forces of these internally generated and externally imposed ideologies of the feminine reveal much about both Dos Passos and the cultural currents of his times. Moreover, since this study positions itself within the broader concerns of Dos Passos' ongoing literary reputation, it necessarily exposes certain vagaries of past versions of literary history as well as our own continuing critical-cultural biases.

Indeed, the particular slant of this book is the result of my heightened awareness of Dos Passos' odd position within the canon of American letters, where he is frequently acknowledged as a “major writer” but only infrequently discussed in the company of his better-known peers. Even in the 1930s, at the apex of his career, he was often considered too experimental for the proletarian camp and too political for the modernists, evincing a resistance to standard categorizations that has resulted in extended marginalization by an academy that has never been able definitively to classify him. (Kenneth Lynn has referred to his finest novels as “*sui generis*” [“Introduction” 17].) Unlike most of his contemporaries, whose avant-garde postures have been folded into the mainstream of literary modernism, Dos Passos has retained his outsider stance, ironically living out his own valorization of nonconformism. Although he is frequently mentioned in general studies of the period, acknowledged as an innovative narrativist and the most celebrated artistic figure of the American Left, his vision

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is virtually never perceived as central to an understanding of American modernism, a fact that has prompted Linda Wagner to ask whether we are somehow “embarrassed by” or “at odds, critically” with Dos Passos’ aesthetics (“DP: Some Directions” 204). Regularly absent from typical American literature syllabi and the subject of a relatively small number of critical studies, Dos Passos can be considered a canonical modernist only in the very broadest sense, despite the recent assertion by Thomas Strychacz that his work implies a complicity between the writer and a “legitimizing readership” of professional critics, thereby consolidating its status as serious art and ensuring it a place in literary history (160). If Dos Passos’ novels do aspire to such a position, their success is somewhat dubious, for although this author may be acknowledged as an important literary figure, he is no longer an important literary figure whose works are read.

The reasons for this equivocal standing are complex. The problem of genre, for instance, plagues Dos Passos. His trilogy *U.S.A.* (*The Forty-Second Parallel* [1930]; *Nineteen Nineteen* [1932]; *The Big Money* [1936]), the work universally viewed as his best, employs a curious montage of fiction and nonfiction achieved through the alternation of four very different narrative devices, making it difficult to account for within the standard, discrete rubrics of “literariness.” This elaborate structure, together with the work’s sheer length (nearly 1,500 pages), also resists the “cut-and-paste” appropriation through which the academy typically formulates its version of a literary period. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, for instance, perhaps the most influential proprietors of the American literary canon, are reduced to including merely a few sections of *U.S.A.* (one each of Newsreel, Camera Eye, Biography, and fictional narrative) as representative of Dos Passos’ oeuvre. This type of literary amputation is particularly harmful to a work such as the trilogy, which depends for its effect on an intricate and long-range interplay among various interconnecting elements. Yet for teachers seeking to introduce students to *U.S.A.*, the alternative – teaching the work in its entirety, or even teaching one volume of it – is equally impractical, given not only its length but its allusiveness. Indeed, such an undertaking would require nothing less than a crash course in early twentieth-century American history, including the specifics of labor relations and the politics of World War I as well as the biographies of numerous political and social figures. (In his later years Dos Passos recalled: “[Hemingway] always used to bawl me out for including so much topical stuff. He always claimed that was a great mistake, that in fifty years nobody would understand. He may have been right; it’s getting to be true” [“Interview” 285].)

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It is my contention, however, that such pragmatic factors are less significant than other, more theoretical, ones. After all, if one really wanted to introduce students to Dos Passos' typical style and thematic concerns without the burden of *U.S.A.*'s historical specificity, then *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) – the novel immediately preceding the trilogy, and also highly acclaimed – offers an able vehicle, one that accommodates itself rather nicely to the more “universal” demands of standard modernist rubrics. But *Manhattan Transfer* is, if anything, even less critically familiar in the 1990s than *U.S.A.*, judging by the number of studies that consider it.¹ Dos Passos' rather uncertain reputation, then, seems to be based on something other than the inaccessibility of his work. Surely the most popular explanation concerns his altered political perspectives in the years following the publication of *U.S.A.*, when his pronounced conservatism, reflected in subsequent writings, almost certainly abetted the rapidly diminishing influence of the earlier, leftist-leaning novels. (As one commentator put it after Dos Passos' death, “What went wrong” is that “Dos Passos went Right” [Epstein 63].) For one thing, it caused those who admired the more liberal agendas of *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* to turn against him, perhaps permanently and negatively affecting the future readership of all of his writings, at least among readers who expected a unified literary-political perspective. But it is perhaps more significant that Dos Passos himself, having become a Goldwater Republican in the 1950s, ironically participated in the very “anti-Red” movement that helped ensure that the Right as well as the Left would have reason to abjure him. Lawrence H. Schwartz has shown, in his study of Faulkner's critical reputation, that the anti-Marxian sentiments of New Critics such as Allen Tate effectively squelched the academic reception of Dos Passos and others: despite his assertion that Dos Passos was a “good” sort of “social-minded” writer, Tate felt that the Marxists in general “had done much to disorganize an entire generation, which might otherwise have been prepared to carry American literature through the apathetic crisis of the war” (Tate 611–12; partially qtd. in Schwartz 77). Schwartz argues that the “context of postwar cultural readjustment” in the 1940s and 1950s was “explicitly anti-Communist” and that the rise of the New Criticism that Tate and others represented was accomplished at the expense of “socially conscious literary traditions” (5).² Although Dos Passos would have deplored the kind of pigeonholing that consigned *U.S.A.* to the dustbin of Marxist-inspired propaganda, he nonetheless aired virulently anti-Marxian opinions of his own in such later novels as *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), thereby fanning the flames of the very controversy that threatened the critical acceptance of his best writing.

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And yet such narrowly political perspectives on both the man and the reception of his works seem to account rather too neatly for a sensibility that was more than merely political, in the partisan sense. As one critic has put it, Dos Passos was “a *cultural* satirist, one who looked beneath the surface of daily life and beyond political machinations to uncover the social and psychological consequences of contemporary life” (Masteller 24, my emphasis). Recent scholarship moves beyond the traditional preoccupation with the specifically political strain in Dos Passos’ work, highlighting instead his broader relations to psychosocial, epistemological, and aesthetic paradigms (e.g., Martin; Strychacz; Shloss). Similarly, my study begins with the assumption that Dos Passos in his best fiction was primarily interested in broadly cultural phenomena, of which politics formed only one part. Consequently, while acknowledging and exploring the ideological ramifications of his participation in leftist movements in the 1920s and 1930s, I seek ultimately to situate him within a broader context than a Marxist or anti-Marxist one.

Specifically, that context concerns a web of contemporaneous social, literary, and political perspectives that persistently encoded cultural values in gendered terms. Within the interlocking discourses surrounding modernism, mass culture, and proletarianism, Dos Passos and his works were implicitly and explicitly aligned with a pejorative effeminacy, consigning them to a rhetorical margin that has yet to be explored in relation to his literary reputation. Although the author’s sociopolitical affiliations and even his personal demeanor played important parts in this metaphorical feminization, it is the threat posed by his novels, which fail to conform to the masculine (or even misogynistic) bias of his time, that proves most telling. It would, of course, be entirely inaccurate to call Dos Passos a “feminist” writer in the sense in which we use the term today,³ but his appropriation of the feminine as a site for radicalist challenges, together with his attempt to historicize women, to give them voice, place, and legitimacy in his rendering of the national consciousness, place him squarely within a discourse that addresses the function of the feminine in both modernist and socially radical terms. Indeed, Dos Passos’ major works reveal a marked, if sometimes problematic, attention to female representation, and they explore the female simultaneously as a representative socialist construct reduced to symbolic victim and as an elusive “Other” imbued with a potentially powerful cultural resistance. Significantly, contradictory attitudes toward women were an integral aspect of the leftist camps with which Dos Passos was frequently, if often imprecisely, aligned; his mixed figuration of the feminine, then, reflects a contemporary conflict that may mark one of the most impor-

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tant ways in which his major novels truly spring from the proletarian tradition of the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ Yet his ultimate distance from that tradition is signaled perhaps not so much by his official break with the organized Left (and his fictional disparagement of it in *The Big Money* and later works) as by his thoroughgoing philosophical consideration of gender as a significant and enduring aspect of social life. For Dos Passos, a critique of the ideological mechanisms sustaining capitalism necessitated an interrogation of the gender relations that contribute substantially to cultural imbalances of power, an emphasis that was not evident in the more exclusively class-oriented radical discourses of his time. Notions of the feminine, then, have enormous interpretive relevance for this writer, and are central not only to our valuation of him within the larger rubric of American literary and social history, but also to our understanding – to use Cary Nelson’s phrase – of the “cultural work” his texts perform.

Indeed, in attempting to reveal another dimension to Dos Passos’ career, one that highlights gender as well as class issues and thus provides an alternative to traditional political readings of his work, I attempt to reposition the author and his fiction not as an exception within typical definitions of modernism, but as particularly emblematic of, as Nelson puts it, “the diverse competing discourses” of a “literary field” that was “both constituted and divided against itself” (26). In his 1989 study, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945*, Nelson calls for a complete overhaul of our conceptions of American literary modernism, arguing that our understanding of the period has been misleadingly shaped by an emphasis on competing binarisms such as that between the “genteel tradition” and “a formally experimental but politically disengaged modernism” (22). Although I cannot claim to have undertaken a project of the scope Nelson describes, I believe that Dos Passos offers a particularly fruitful example of the more complicated dynamics that Nelson articulates as definitive of modernist impulses. Indeed, Dos Passos’ writings – popular assessments of his time notwithstanding – reveal his resistance to taking sides in a literary war that seemed to revel in such oppositions as experimental–genteel, socially conscious–politically disengaged, and modern art–mass culture. In contrast, he embraced dualisms, in many cases alienating both sides, in order to scrutinize not only the dualisms themselves, but also the very nature of a society that persists in creating them. Even though he did not escape the trap of articulating binarisms of his own, his finest art was nevertheless particularly reflexive in its constant scrutiny of itself, and in its effort – notably in *U.S.A.* – to form a checks-and-balances system that would correct for certain overdetermined impulses. Such

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a motivating instinct was unusual in his time and makes Dos Passos an instructive example of the alternative modernism that Nelson sets forth as well as a suggestive forerunner of an even more reflexive post-modernism.

Nelson's study is one example of the ways in which shifting concerns redirect the critical agenda, providing a matrix from which a reconsideration of Dos Passos might spring. Up to this point, no single critical approach has been able adequately to accommodate this problematical writer, whose often dubious relation to modernism, radicalism, and historicism has forced readers to perform critical somersaults in an effort to account for the apparently conflicting strains in his work. Perhaps it is only now, when we have available to us the rhetoric of poststructuralist theory, with its concern for the difficulties arising from various but simultaneous subject positions, that we can find a way to talk about Dos Passos' apparent slipperiness among various types of discourse. The critical movement away from the question "What does the text mean?" and toward an exploration of its various signifying modes and their subtle interactions is especially pertinent to the intricate formal composition of *U.S.A.* and can help us to articulate the many ways in which this text is, as Nelson puts it, "constituted and divided against itself." Similarly, the postmodern awareness of the constructed nature of the boundaries between the "literary" and the "nonliterary," partially manifested through the new legitimacy accorded to cultural studies, makes Dos Passos' literary investment in popular culture (including such elements as journalism, advertising, and pop music) seem not only justified but interesting, a mark of positive differentiation rather than a liability.

But while such critical attitudes can be useful in elucidating Dos Passos' texts, there is also a pertinent danger for proletarian literature in the strict poststructuralist reduction of all literary artifacts to the status of mere "text" and "discourse," since the philosophical basis of proletarian literature assumes that texts "speak" not to themselves, but to real people whose material circumstances can be dramatically affected as the result of reading them. Moreover, proletarian writers would certainly eschew the pragmatist approach of such critics as Stanley Fish, who asserts "the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings" (305).⁵ The popularity of *U.S.A.* among various leftist groups in the United States and abroad, together with its vilification by anti-Marxist groups, is sufficient to suggest the possibility that an individual text may be perceived by virtually all readers (or certainly a large majority) as imparting a particular ideological agenda with the potential of evoking, albeit within broad parameters, a particular type of response.

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Significantly, the dangers inherent in applying poststructuralist philosophies to proletarian literature also highlight the philosophical commonalities of proletarianism and feminism, since feminism has similar cause to lament the reduction of literary artifacts to webs of discourse that have little or no relation to perceived reality. Indeed, both proletarianism and feminism take as their premise the idea that literature and culture are essentially political in their ramifications for social and material conditions in the world, and both see the literary as another site for the reification of power struggles. Of course, certain camps of feminist critics, led most conspicuously in the United States by Elaine Showalter, have also objected to poststructuralist practices on the basis of their perceived status as “male” approaches, making the “post-structuralist feminist” into a “rhetorical double-agent, a little drummer girl who plays go-between in male critical quarrels” (35). Yet, as Janet Todd points out, the opposition that Showalter establishes between (French) theoretical and (Anglo) sociohistorical feminist approaches embodies several uninterrogated assumptions, including the ideas that sociohistorical feminist criticisms are somehow unrelated to theoretical approaches developed by men, and that theoretical approaches are neither political nor feminist (39–44). In choosing to combine poststructuralist maneuvers with sociohistorical approaches – acknowledging a potential relation between Dos Passos’ texts and perceived reality, even if that relation is sometimes difficult to discern precisely – I take the opposite tack from Showalter and appropriate a more inclusive and pluralistic attitude toward critical tools. Specifically, in attempting to combine poststructuralist investigations into Dos Passos’ uses of language with an awareness of his works as cultural documents that have historical grounding and significance, I echo a position taken by Tzvetan Todorov, which seems especially conducive to an exploration of Dos Passos’ aesthetics. In discussing what he sees as the “antihumanist” bases of deconstruction, pragmatism, and Marxism, Todorov argues for what he calls “critical humanism,” an approach that, even when it assumes a poststructuralist posture in its specifics, nevertheless acknowledges more broadly a connection between literature and the world and recognizes “the relevance of values” (190). Even more appropriately, my study can be considered, in the terms set out by Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, as a “materialist-feminist” study, one that combines the materialist and historicist concerns of traditional Marxist approaches with the emphasis on “ideas, language, and culture” that is more commonly the province of poststructuralist feminist criticisms. Newton and Rosenfelt assert that materialist-feminist criticism “is skeptical of the isolation of language and ideas from other realms of struggle,” a posi-

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tion that Dos Passos surely shared, perhaps emblemized by his literary use of the Sacco–Vanzetti protests in which he was, in real life, an active participant. Newton and Rosenfelt also point out that materialist-feminist criticism “frequently takes the form of discussing ideology,” and I borrow from them my working definition of that term, which they adapt from the work of Louis Althusser: “a complex and contradictory system of representations (discourse, images, myths) through which we experience ourselves in relation to each other and to the social structures in which we live” (“Introduction” xix–xxi; cf. Althusser, especially 153–59).⁶

But although certain poststructuralist principles and feminist approaches facilitate a reinterpretation of Dos Passos’ aesthetic, it is perhaps the more specific studies of proletarian literature that have recently set the particular stage for reconsidering his literary and cultural value – studies that, taken together, suggest the academy’s newly emerging awareness of the significance of radical American texts and their fascinating, if problematic, relations to narrative ideology, feminist consciousness, and traditional concepts of modernism. Texts that were once considered extracanonial, dismissed as too political for the rubric of a modernism that required no justification, are now taken seriously as a body of works that form a distinct challenge to that rubric, and that force new articulations of a literary field that is seen as increasingly multifarious. For instance, in *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (1991), James F. Murphy challenges the standard narrative (first articulated in the 1930s and repeated by recent historians such as Alan Wald) concerning the alleged controversy between the younger 1930s writers of the *Partisan Review*, who were said to value literary experiment and artistic freedom, and an older guard, represented by the *New Masses*, who came to symbolize the perspective that proletarian art should serve purely political rather than aesthetic ideals. Murphy demonstrates that the controversy within leftist groups in the 1930s concerning the political versus aesthetic purposes of art was a lively and involved one, and that its lines were not drawn nearly so sharply as the *Partisan Review* camp and many subsequent historians would have us think. Indeed, he shows that Granville Hicks, pillar of the *New Masses*, frequently endorsed the narrative experimentalism of Dos Passos and others, thus revealing as false one of the standard binarisms that literary history has codified as an integral element of modernist canon formation: the “political” aesthetic of realist transparency, used for the purposes of propaganda and thus associated with tendentiousness, versus the “literary” ideal of narrative experiment, defined as essential to true art and identified with freedom (“Introduction”). Murphy’s proj-

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ect, in calling into question not only the specific attitudes toward leftism and literature that continue to affect our perception of proletarian works, but also the creation of binary oppositions that function as restrictive and reductive means of determining literary value, builds on the work of Cary Nelson and opens up new possibilities for reconsidering the potential coherence of what have long been perceived as contradictions in Dos Passos' novels.

Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991), while of course not dealing directly with Dos Passos, nevertheless offers useful insight into the relationship between proletarianism and gender issues in texts of the 1930s.⁷ Rabinowitz's book asserts a constitutive "genderedness" to leftist literary projects that both reflects and reinforces the "absent presence of gender" in the political arena of the Communist-inspired movements of the decade (18). Analyzing the extension of the Marxist model of base and superstructure to the realm of the literary-critical, a formulation initiated by the Marxist critic Philip Rahv, Rabinowitz observes: "Power flows from the public spheres of history (controlled and determined by men) to the private spheres of literature (produced and consumed by women)." Although she readily admits that this reading is "wildly reductive," she also argues that "the gendered implications of this model were not lost on either male or female writers" of the period (19–20). Rabinowitz, of course, uses these observations as a context for her subsequent discussion of the manner in which women's radical novels accommodate gender as a political category; her assertions, however, suggest much about the delicate interplay between the constructed realms of the historical and the literary, and the theoretical and the practical, as well as the masculine and the feminine – all operating within, but also outside of, Marxist sensibilities. For Dos Passos, whose major novels further problematize these oppositions through their additional preoccupation with the realms of the public and the private, Rabinowitz's work has particular relevance. Although perhaps on a less ambitious scale, his texts address the issue that she ascribes to female proletarian novelists: "the problem of finding a narrative form capable of addressing the complexity of class and gender as mutually sustaining representations" (177).

But it is the recent work of Barbara Foley, notably in *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993), that most compellingly validates socially committed writers such as Dos Passos (to whom Foley devotes generous space) by positioning them within a late twentieth-century theoretical perspective centering on "the discursive strategies by which marginalized subjects articulate selfhood and challenge dominant cultures." Acknowledging

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that some proletarian novels “employ archaic representational strategies” and/or “pursue a transparent realism that seems aesthetically and philosophically naive,” Foley nevertheless argues for their “enduring interest and value” to American society (as opposed merely to literary history) and asserts that, in literary-critical terms, these works can sharpen current thinking about subject positions, which frequently highlights gender and race but neglects class (viii–ix). In setting up the general and specific contexts within which writers like Dos Passos might be reassessed – such as the perspectives on race and gender that informed leftist literary projects; the parameters within which leftist intellectuals discussed the purposes of proletarian art; and the specific forms and strategies employed by proletarian novelists – Foley attempts to carve a niche for these works within the confines of current literary-critical agendas, hence lending them legitimacy even as she reaffirms their fundamental status as oppositional texts.

For Dos Passos, the critical articulation of an entire literary field that both opposes and co-opts mainstream literary and cultural values can only mean increased legitimacy. Admittedly, however, such legitimacy may carry a high price tag, as renewed popularization of Dos Passos’ works would almost inevitably result in a metaphorical blurring of the particulars of his political and social perspectives, historical and cultural specificity frequently becoming the detritus of literary-critical accommodation. The highly allusive (some would disparagingly call it “dated”) nature of *U.S.A.*, for instance, is unusual even among proletarian literature and suggests its especial vulnerability to reduction via totalizing literary paradigms that might foreground its commonalities with similar texts but that would be compelled necessarily to downplay its intense sociopolitical specificity. This, in my view, prompts what continues to be the salient question for Dos Passos studies: how to situate the author’s major works in relation to familiar poles of the American literary canon while still retaining the radical force of those aspects that have systematically barred him from full-fledged membership in that canon. The problem is complicated by our tendency, as late twentieth-century critics, to valorize aspects of Dos Passos’ work that suit our current priorities, necessitating the corrective impulse of, as Foley points out, a kind of “historical relativism” that is not only difficult to achieve but also threatens to flatten any potential insight to be gained from apparently anachronistic critical stances (215–16). Foley offers no real answers to these problems, other than her attempt to acknowledge them openly and counterbalance them through alternative strategies, yet that attempt marks one of the most useful aspects of her study: her constant scrutiny of her own critical approaches, a scrutiny that reveals the difficulties inherent in addressing 1930s rad-