

A Second Act for Dos Passos And His Panoramic Writings

By DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

Anyone who tried to find some of John Dos Passos' classic novels and travel narratives in recent years would have had to look long and hard. Many of his books had been out of print for more than six decades, and even now his work is rarely taught in American literature courses.

Yet after years of neglect, Dos Passos' reputation is once again on the rise, and next month, the Library of America is publishing a new two-volume collection of his writing.

"Dos Passos came nearer than any of us to writing the Great American Novel, and it's entirely possible he succeeded," Norman Mailer said from his Provincetown, Mass., home last week, referring to Dos Passos' masterwork, the U.S.A. trilogy. "I can only say, from my own point of view, that no novel I read while in college stimulated me more, astounded me more and showed me what a thrilling inner life was there for anyone gifted enough to be a major American novelist."

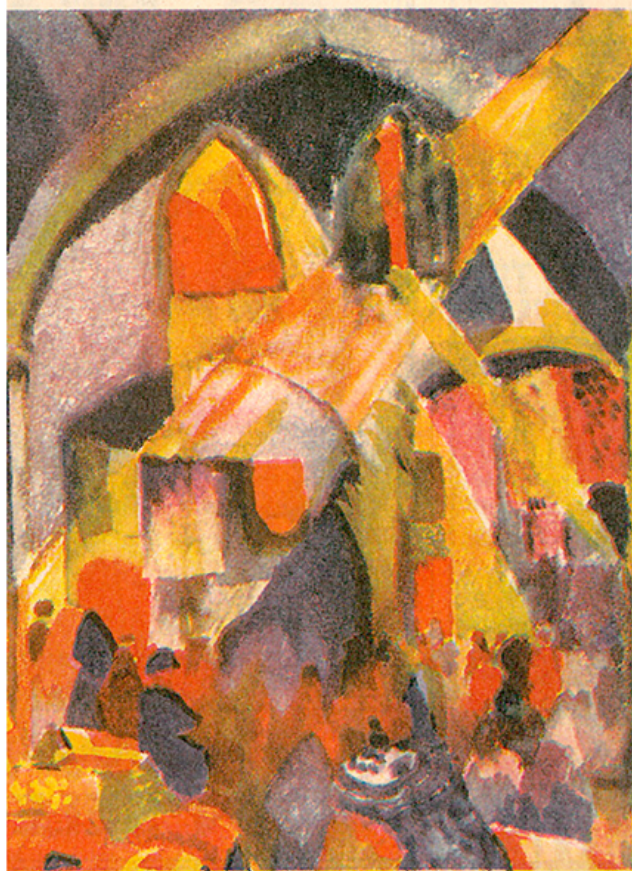
Dos Passos' centennial in 1996 is what first inspired the re-evaluation. The Library of America then reissued the U.S.A. trilogy — "The 42nd Parallel" (1930), "Nine-



teen, Nineteen" (1932) and "The Big Money" (1936) — as a single volume.

"We received a surprising, extraordinary response from this publication," Max Rudin, the publisher of the Library of America, said. "It became one of our better sellers."

Meanwhile, American Heritage magazine asked



Watercolors painted by John Dos Passos on a trip to the Middle East, chronicled in his "Orient Express."

Daniel Aaron, a professor of English at Harvard, to assess the trilogy's importance. He called it the plum candidate for Great American Novel status. "'U.S.A.' inspired many imitations, not the least by Dos Passos himself after his radical passions had chilled, but none matched its energy and glow," Mr. Aaron wrote.

But if Dos Passos' experimental complexities are responsible for his powerful prose, they are also responsible for his eclipse from the popular imagination. "U.S.A." offers no memorable characters like Jay Gatsby or Nick Adams, and it's an utterly despairing book. Praising Dos Passos' modernist technique, the critic Alfred Kazin once explained that the hero of his fiction was not a person but an abstraction, "a conveyor belt carrying Americans through some vast Ford plant of the human spirit."

Enamored of Theodore Dreiser's naturalism and James Joyce's modernism, Dos Passos tried to morph the two traditions. Various scholars have labeled his literary style collage, panoramic, expressionistic, cinematic and super-naturalistic. What has been called his newsreel technique, which interwove topical events and real people like J. P. Morgan, the Wright Brothers

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and Franklin D. Roosevelt, managed to capture the frenetic drumbeat of 20th-century America in its dawning decades.

While "U.S.A." is Dos Passos' best-known work, Mr. Aaron and Townsend Ludington, the editor of the new Library of America volumes and author of "John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey" (E. P. Dutton, 1980), argue that his 1925 satiric novel, "Manhattan Transfer," deserves similar praise. After reading it, Sinclair Lewis declared Dos Passos had created a "whole new school of writing." New Yorkers groaned over the condescending descriptions of them as "cave dwellers," but Europeans embraced "Manhattan Transfer," in Ernest Hemingway's words, as "a spiritual Baedeker to New York." One character thinks of New York as having a "sky of beaten lead that never snows," while another closes down his shop, posting a sign: "WE HAVE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE!"

That bleakness is characteristic of Dos Passos' work. As a student at Harvard, he grew obsessed with the war that was destroying Europe. In 1917, just after his father died, he left the United States to study in Spain, followed by service in the ambulance corps in France and Italy. His grisly trench-warfare experiences would forever haunt his fiction and his life.

As he wrote in his diary: "The grey crooked fingers of the dead, the dark look of dirty mangled bodies, their groans and joltings in the ambulances, the vast tom-tom of guns, the ripping tear shells make when they explode, the song of shells outgoing, like vast woodcocks — their contented whirr as they near their mark — the twang of fragments like a harp broken in the air — and the rattle of stones and mud on your helmet — and through everything the vast despair of unavoidable death of lives wrenched out of the channels — all for ludicrous tomfoolery of governments."

Dos Passos' bitter feelings about World War I are fully explored in his first two novels — "One Man's Initiation" (1920) and "Three Soldiers" (1921) — which are included, with "Manhattan Transfer," in the new Library of America volumes. Like other Lost Generation writers, he paints a devastating portrait of a civilization gone crazy because of hyperindustrialization and monopoly capitalism.

Although the antiwar books influenced later novelists, from Mr. Mailer to Joseph Heller, reviews for the books were tepid, and Dos Passos was accused of flaunting a degenerate strain of anti-American radicalism.

Also included in the new books are his travel writings. Dos Passos was an intrepid globe-trotter. "He liked to keep his impressions as fresh as possible," his daughter, Lucy Dos Passos Coggin, said recently from

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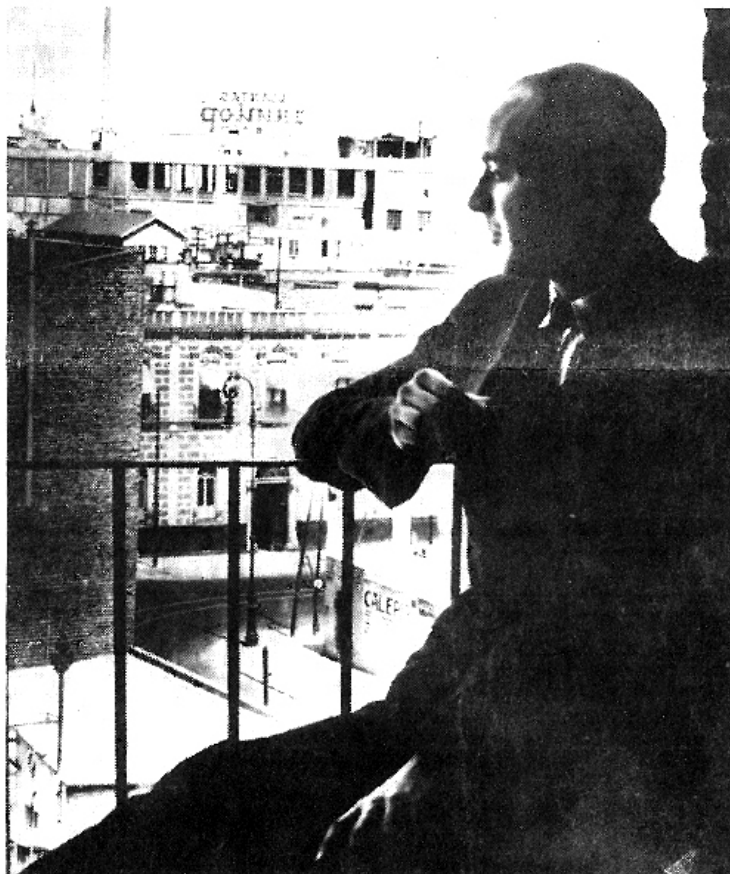
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John Dos Passos, in an undated photograph, and "Mogador," a watercolor he painted during a Middle East trip in 1921-22. His book describing the journey, "Orient Express," and other travel writings are being republished next month by the Library of America along with a volume containing three of his early novels.

her home in Richmond, Va. He made long trips to Easter Island, Brazil, Iowa, Cuba, Mexico, the Middle East and, during World War II, the Pacific Islands. "Travel honed his writing edge keenly and constantly," she added.

The travel book that is likely to trigger the greatest interest now is "Orient Express" (1927), the story of his remarkable 1921-22 journey to Russia and the Middle East, which included three miserable weeks spent in Baghdad, where the food was awful and his hotel rat-infested. He observed the creation of Iraq by the British, and wrote about Islamic fundamentalism, Babylon and living in desert terrain, where water is scarce. He grew a beard and wore Muslim robes, and eventually convinced the chief of British intelligence for the entire Iraqi region, Gertrude Bell, to help him travel some 500 miles across the Syrian Desert, from Baghdad to Damascus, by camel caravan. Comparing the trek to climbing Mount Everest, Dos Passos offers vivid descriptions of the region's sandstone cliffs, star-drenched skies, ancient prayers and Bedouin warriors.

He painted watercolors there, too, some published by the Library of America to correspond with the text. (From Sept. 25 to Dec. 7, the Marsh



University of Virginia Library

Art Gallery at the University of Richmond is hosting a show dedicated to his paintings and sketches.)

Much has been written about Dos Passos' intellectual odyssey from a pro-Communist who supported William Z. Foster for president in 1932 to a conservative who supported Barry Goldwater for president in 1964. But as the Library of America volumes show, Dos Passos, who died in 1970, was fairly consistent in his

libertarian convictions. His heroes in his later years were Walt Whitman, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Saul Bellow and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

"He was always against power," his daughter explained. "He didn't like labels and 'isms' because they fell short of describing a particular person. He never bought into credos, yet he was moderate in his own life and highly disciplined in his work."