John Dos Passos and the Modernist Epic of Dialectical Totality

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I. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre once lauded John Dos Passos as "the greatest writer of our time" (69). What Sartre said was not hyperbolic praise because Dos Passos was, without a doubt, one of the most acclaimed and highly respected writers of his generation both at home and abroad. However, after this peak of his career, Dos Passos' reputation as a professional novelist has waned gradually, whereas his colleagues, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, have remained the focus of literary criticism. After the 1940s, his works have stayed outside the main debates of literary criticism. Although it is hard to explain fully the decline of Dos Passos' literary reputation, we can suggest a few reasons from two points of view: the political and the aesthetical. From the political aspect, his political conversion from radicalism to conservatism, according to some critics, made him lose his left-wing followers. From the aesthetic point of view, the dominance of apolitical formalism, such as the New Criticism and Russian Formalism, for a considerable period of time, especially during the Cold War, has contributed to the negligence to his works, since, to some formalist critics, they are still too much politically and socially affiliated. Moreover, the alleged inferiority of his later works, compared with the earlier ones, has not much helped his literary reputation.

However, a revitalized appreciation of John Dos Passos' works, the earlier major novels of his radical period in particular, has surfaced recently on several critical fronts. We can attribute the rise of interdisciplinary and cultural studies to the resurgence of Dos Passos' literary reputation, because these studies, which regard literature as one of the socio-cultural practices, have inspired many readers and
critics to engage new perspectives for the study of his fictions. Moreover, the new interests in the radical novels of America, usually written from the 1920s to the Great Depression, are, in part, responsible for the revival of Dos Passos' novels, especially his *U.S.A.* trilogy. As part of the revitalized appreciation, this essay engages a perspective of dialectical totality in interpreting his novels from both socio-political and aesthetical dimensions. Thus, first of all, after defining the place of John Dos Passos' novels in terms of radical modernism, this essay will take a refreshing look at the somewhat anachronistic notion, dialectical totality, since the notion offers the theoretical base of defining his novels as the modernist epics of radical modernism. Then, by bringing back Lukacs' argument about the epic in relation to the novel, I will explore the epic-like features of his novels. With a mention of Franco Moretti's "modern epic," this essay will be concluded.

II. A Novelist of Radical Modernism

Despite John Dos Passos' uneven and tumultuous career as a professional writer, a radical as well, the dialectical synthesis by literary text between the politics of American radicalism and the aesthetic techniques of modernism effectively defines the novels of John Dos Passos, especially his critically-acclaimed major novels produced during the early decades of the twentieth century. Throughout his career as a professional writer, he had shown his deep rooted socio-historical consciousness, which eventually propelled him into fervent political activism. Dos Passos' sympathy with revolutionary radicals rooted in his principle of individual liberty against the repressive institutions of industrial capitalism.1) It is well known that during his lifetime, Dos Passos' political stance changed dramatically from his earlier far-Left radicalism in the 1920s, when he took part in leftist organizations and radical journalism, to his later years of conservatism during which he supported the Communist witch-hunting of the House Un-American Activities Committee led by Senator Joseph McCarthy.2) Despite the drastic shift of his political stance, he had kept his socio-historical concerns as the principal motif for his creativity all along until his death in 1970. There are some controversies concerning the relation of Dos Passos' political trajectory to his artistic creation. However, it is nearly impossible to separate his political activism, whether it is radicalism or conservatism, from his artistic representation, since, like many modernist writers, he thought art is a powerful form of political resistance against the oppressive status quo of modern capitalist society.


2) My argument concerning Dos Passos' biography is indebted to Townsend Ludington's *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* and Virginia Spencer Carr's *Dos Passos: A Life*. 

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