John Dos Passos and George Orwell:
Intersecting Lives, Parallel Politics and Writing

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Abstract

Today, vast space separates the political and literary legacies of John Dos Passos and George Orwell. Orwell dominates American culture, transcending partisan political classification as a champion of human rights and anti-totalitarianism, filling summer reading lists in K-12 schools, and shaping political speech from the White House to city council. Dos Passos, who occupied the first rank of American letters in the 1930s, has fallen into obscurity in the United States, categorized as an ideologue man of the Left or the Right, or a rusted literary naturalist. Critics' narrow political and literary strictures have trimmed his legacy to bits.

Dos Passos and Orwell, however, share much in common: Outsider youths at elite schools, horror at empire, brave defenses of Republican Spain, profound appreciation for political revolution's violent ends, distaste for political orthodoxy, and lifelong commitment to individual rights. They met briefly in Spain and Dos Passos remembered it to his death. Dos Passos saw in Orwell a rare honest man in an age of political betrayal, and it is likely Orwell saw the same in Dos Passos.

Keywords

Communism, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, José Robles, Spanish Civil War.

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Orwell and Dos Passos Meet in Spain, 1937

1 For all their shared political and literary values, Orwell and Dos Passos only met once in-person—during the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps the most accurate account of the meeting's logistics comes from the letters and memoirs of an American husband and wife, Charles and Lois Orr, living and working in Barcelona in early 1937. Dos Passos himself disparaged his notation of the meeting's basic details in his posthumously published final novel, *Century's Ebb: The Thirteenth Chronicle*, where he retold meeting Orwell in a fictional format. "They settled in two chairs in a corner," said Dos Passos, using "Jay Pignatelli" as his alias while casting the story as fiction. "The Englishman uttered his name in a low voice. Jay scribbled it on a corner of his notebook and promptly forgot it" (Dos Passos, *Century's Ebb* 94).

2 The Orrs were young socialists. Charles worked as editor for the POUM's English-language bulletin, *The Spanish Revolution*, and broadcast English-language news on Radio POUM. According to the Orrs' accounts, Dos Passos met Orwell sometime between April 25 and 28, at the office of Andreu Nin, Secretary of the POUM, a section of anti-Stalinist Spanish communists. The office was on Las Ramblas, the main boulevard through the Barcelona city center. Charles Orr, at the POUM's behest, had arranged for Dos Passos to interview Nin. Eileen O'Shaughnessy, Orwell's wife and Charles's secretary, helped set it up. At the time, Orwell was serving in the POUM militia at the Aragon front; like many Americans who emigrated to Spain to fight, Orwell believed in the anti-fascist, anti-Franco cause. He happened to be on leave and in Barcelona visiting Eileen. From his wife, he knew that Dos Passos was in town on business. According to Charles Orr, Orwell asked Eileen to ask Charles to somehow arrange a meeting between Dos Passos and the young British writer. "I arranged that he should meet Dos Passos," recounts Orr, "in the hallway in front of Nin's office, where they chatted for a few minutes. I wanted to invite him to accompany us in. But who was I, to drag this husband of my secretary, this militiaman—in his baggy, tan coverall uniform—into a private interview? So we just left Orwell standing in the hallway … Orwell waited half an hour, sitting on a bench, until we reappeared, and he was able to speak with Dos Passos for a minute or two again" (Charles Orr 180).

3 Unfortunately, Communist secret police raided Orwell's Barcelona hotel soon after his meeting with Dos Passos, so it is likely Orwell's side of the story remains locked in Russian archives in Moscow (Orwell, *Orwell Diaries* xix).

4 Dos Passos was in Spain trying to help the family of his dear friend and Spanish translator José Robles, who had been helping the Republican cause but was recently missing and now presumed dead. Dos Passos tried to secure an official death certificate for Robles, so his widow Márgara could collect the life insurance payout due to her through her husband's professorship at Johns

Hopkins University. Given Dos Passos's intricate knowledge of Spanish politics and his lifelong respect for Orwell, it is likely we can trust his nonfiction account of the substance of their conversation, found in an obscure but significant summation of his political journey, *The Theme is Freedom*, published in 1956. "It was only later," tells Dos Passos, "that I discovered that one of the Englishmen I met at the Barcelona hotel was George Orwell, a man for whom I have come to feel more respect with each passing year" (Dos Passos, *The Theme Is Freedom* 145). In particular, he spotlighted their shared outlook on Spanish politics:

> We didn't talk very long, but I can still remember the sense of assuagement, of relief from strain I felt at last to be talking to an honest man. The officials I'd talked to in the past weeks had been gulls most of them, or self-deceivers, or else had been trying to pull the wool over my eyes. The plain people had been heartbreaking. There's a certain majesty in innocence in the face of death. This man Orwell referred without overemphasis to things we both knew to be true. He passed over them lightly. He knew everything. Perhaps he was still a little afraid of how much he knew. It was the difference I'd felt so often in the earlier war when I'd been a nameless ambulance driver instead of a goddam campfollower. The men at the front could allow themselves the ultimate luxury of telling the truth. It was worth the dirt and the lice and the danger and racket of shellfire to escape the lying and the hypocrisy and the moral degradation of the people in the rear. Men who are about to die regain a certain quiet primal dignity. Orwell spoke with the simple honesty of a man about to die. (Dos Passos, *The Theme Is Freedom* 145-46)

Orwell was a newcomer to Spain when he arrived for the first time in December 1936, full of brio for the Republican cause and eager to enlist in the military resistance to Francisco Franco. He knew neither the Catalan nor Spanish languages, and undoubtedly had difficulty learning the labyrinth of Spanish politics at such a disadvantage (Horn, *Letters from Barcelona* 177). When he met Dos Passos, Orwell was a young writer full of promise but short on achievement and reputation. Before leaving for Spain, he had learned that his nonfiction book, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), had secured a publisher, but it was years before fame.

5 In contrast, Dos Passos had studied Spanish language, art, architecture, poetry, and politics since 1916 and enjoyed high political and literary reputation in the country in 1937. He had devoted his 1922 collection of essays, *Rosinante to the Road Again*, to the country's history and culture. In 1931, Ernest Hemingway had written to Dos Passos: "You are the great writer of Spain" (Hemingway 342). In December 1936, *The Big Money*, Dos Passos's novel published that year, had become a bestseller and was due for translation into French, Italian, Hungarian, and German (Vaill 94).

6 Yet, Dos Passos and Orwell's kinship was strong and immediate upon meeting in Barcelona. They were both young, idealistic, anti-imperialist, anti-ortho-

doxy, romantic men of the Left at the beginning of one of the worst years of their lives.

Before the Spanish Civil War: Young Men of the Left

7 Parallels abound between Orwell's and Dos Passos's early lives. Dos Passos was seven years older than Orwell—a good deal less than a generation apart. In fact, the similarities between their upbringings make an argument for counting them as cohorts in the Lost Generation. Orwell simply took those rites of passage a few years later.

8 Foremost, Dos Passos and Orwell enjoyed elite educations at boarding schools and then selective universities. Orwell attended St. Cyprian's and then Eton; Dos Passos attended Choate and then Harvard. Dos Passos's first formal schooling was at Peterborough Lodge in the London suburbs, as his father, John Randolph Dos Passos—known informally as 'John R.' —hoped his son would go on to Oxford or Cambridge. John R. was a devoted Anglophile; according to his son, "although proud of his Portuguese extraction he never ceased to believe that the Anglo-Saxon tradition of law and representative government was the only possible basis for the development of a worldwide Christian civilization" (Dos Passos, The Best Times 11). But after only six months at Peterborough, the

9 Dos Passos family moved to America (Townsend Ludington, *Odyssey* 21-22). Orwell and Dos Passos would look back on their school years with frustration and rebellion. Dos Passos visited Choate at least once in his adulthood but never reconnected with Harvard. In his memoirs, *The Best Times*, he recalls bullies taunting him at Choate, calling him "Frenchy and Four-eyes and the class grind." He did find one good friend at Choate, Franklin "Skinny" Nordhoff; the two went camping and caught rodents, snakes, and frogs. Dos Passos even kept a pet raccoon at Choate for company (Ludington, *Odyssey* 25). According to Orwell's biographer Bernard Crick, "the posthumously published account of his prep school days, 'Such, Such Were the Joys,' is so unhappy and so horrific a picture of institutional despotism that some have seen it, rather than the political events in Europe of the 1930s and 1940s, as the origins of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (Crick 2). Orwell explains in "Why I Write," that from the beginning his "literary ambitions were mixed up with the feelings of being isolated and undervalued" (online).

10 Dos Passos and Orwell were well-traveled young men with strong affinities for England and Europe, and an appreciation of their small place in a global community. Orwell, born in British India in 1903 as Eric Arthur Blair, began life with a sense of the enormity of the British Empire. Dos Passos lived a significant portion of his boyhood in Belgium, where he learned French, and his father often wrote him letters in French. Before Dos Passos began Harvard, his father sent him on a Grand Tour of Europe and the Near East, where he visited

England, France, Italy, Egypt, Greece, and Istanbul, then known as Constantinople. Though Dos Passos eventually put down roots in America and started a family there, he always felt a stranger. Certainly, his surname proved unpronounceable to most. In his autobiographical novel, *Chosen Country* (1951), Dos Passos calls himself a "double foreigner … A Man Without a Country" (26).

11 After university, Dos Passos and Orwell spent more time outside England and the United States, exposing themselves to foreign languages, literatures, histories, and politics in the hopes that it would enrich their writing and out of sheer curiosity. From 1922 to 1927, Orwell served as a police officer in the British colony of Burma, now known as Myanmar. He resigned the service because, in his words, "I could not go on any longer serving an imperialism which I had come to regard as very largely a racket" (Crick 129). He poured this sentiment into his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934). "So at the end of his *Burmese Days*," writes Orwell biographer Bernard Crick, "a specific hatred of imperialism is clear which he soon turned into a general critique of autocracy of any kind" (Crick 131). Dos Passos shared an anti-imperialist stance, evidenced by his satire towards it in the U.S.A. trilogy. The first pages of the work begin with a mournful reference to U.S. involvement in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines: "There's been many a good man murdered in the Philippines/ Lies sleeping in some lonesome grave" (Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* 3).

12 Dos Passos spent the 1920s constantly on the move, painting, drawing, and writing. Some of his most significant travels were in the Near and Middle East, where he visited Georgia, Armenia, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. He crossed the Syrian Desert, observed the aftermath of the Greek-Turkish War, climbed the Caucasus, explored Persia during the rise of Reza Kahn, and recorded the creation of Iraq by the British. "With the name of Allah for all baggage," Dos Passos writes in *Orient Express* (1927), his nonfiction memoir of the journeys, "you could travel from the Great Wall of China to the Niger and be fairly sure of food, and often of money, if only you were ready to touch your forehead in the dust five times a day and put away self and the glamorous West" (Dos Passos, *Orient Express* 70).

13 Dos Passos and Orwell also both benefited from stays at the "University of Paris"—the strong fellowship of expatriate artists in Paris in the 1920s that included Louis Bromfield, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. Though Orwell did not arrive in Paris until spring 1928, when Dos Passos was in New York City and Key West, he drank from the same creative springs while in the arts capital among expatriates. Orwell biographer D.J. Taylor likened the experiences of the two writers in Paris (Taylor 94). At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Dos Passos had been climbing the rungs of the U.S. literary world for almost twenty years and enjoyed a good view from the top. After gaining critical acclaim with *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *Manhattan*

Transfer (1925), John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy, first published as a complete set in January 1938, placed the Portuguese-American author in the first rank of American letters alongside Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Lewis called *Manhattan Transfer* "a novel of the very first importance," and "more important in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar, Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses*" (Ludington, *Odyssey* 241).

14 On August 10, 1936, Dos Passos appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Literary critic T.K. Whipple said in 1938, "How close does 'U.S.A.' come to being a great American novel? That it comes within hailing distance is proved by the fact that it has already been so hailed; indeed, it comes close enough so that the burden of proof is on those who would deny the title" ("Dos Passos and the U.S.A." 89). That same year, critic Lionel Trilling said, "U.S.A. . . . stands as the most important American novel of the decade, on the whole more satisfying than anything else we have" ("The America of John Dos Passos" 93). The critic Alfred Kazin called U.S.A. "one of the great achievements of the modern novel" (Kazin 353).

15 Dos Passos, moreover, leveraged that fame to strengthen his voice behind leftist political causes, including justice for Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant anarchists convicted of murder in 1921 and executed in 1927. Their deaths reinforced Dos Passos's thinking that writers and artists should be engaged in political activism; he called political indifference "sinister" (Ludington, *Odyssey* 264).

16 Orwell and Dos Passos, however, for all their leftist passion, eschewed orthodoxy and institutions, running against the current of the times. In the 1920s and 30s, writers could curry favor with the British and American literary establishment and perhaps earn better book reviews by continually affirming socialism or communism without reservation. It was easy to believe in revolution when few writers in New York City, London, or Paris had actually seen Russia. "The amount of influence the Communists have had on the liberal in-gangs that have made a hash of non-partisan literary criticism in this country would make an interesting study," Dos Passos said in 1970 (Lynn online). In 1938, he wrote, "The Marxist critics are just finding out, with considerable chagrin, that my stuff isn't Marxist. I should think that anybody with half an eye would have noticed that in the first place" (Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle* 516). Even in 1926, though, when Dos Passos was at his most radical on the Left and in the full flower of youthful idealism, he despised groupthink. That year, he joined the executive board of the *New Masses*, a publication with many communist writers. In the June 1926 issue of the magazine, he wrote, "I don't think it's any time for any group of spellbinders to lay down the law on any subject whatsoever. Particularly I don't think there

should be any more phrases, badges, opinions, banners, imported from Russia or anywhere else. Ever since Columbus, imported systems have been the curse of this continent. Why not develop our own brand?" He added, "I'd like to see a magazine full of introspection and doubt" (online). In 1932, when the editor of the *Modern Monthly* asked Dos Passos if writers should join the Communist Party, he responded: "It's his own goddam business. Some people are naturally party men and others are natural scavengers and campfollowers. Matter of temperament. I personally belong to the scavenger and campfollower section" (Hicks 23). Lionel Trilling said in 1938 that Dos Passos "pins no faith on any force or party—indeed he is almost alone of the novelists of the Left (Silone is the only other one that comes to mind) in saying that the creeds and idealisms of the Left may bring corruption quite as well as the greeds and cynicisms of the established order" ("The America of John Dos Passos" 95).

17 George Orwell's transcendence of political labels and general commitment to human rights is far better known in academia and popular culture than Dos Passos's. A recent editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* notes Orwell's "contempt for left-wing 'orthodoxy sniffers,' as he called them, and for British fellow travelers of the Soviet Union" (Cowley online).

After the Spanish Civil War

18 The Spanish Civil War was tragedy and turning point for Orwell and Dos Passos. POUM leader Andreu Nin, the subject of Dos Passos's interview in April 1937, was soon after arrested, tortured, and executed in a Stalinist purge. In May of that year, Orwell was serving with the POUM on the front line near Huesca, when he took an enemy sniper bullet to the throat. When the Stalinist section of the Spanish Loyalists declared the POUM and its militia illegal, Orwell "spent the following nights trying to sleep in the ruins of bombed-out buildings and tried to blend into the Barcelona crowds during the day" (Martinez de Pisón 209). Dos Passos never served in combat but regularly reported on the front lines. As freethinking writers and anti-Stalinist dissidents, they were both fortunate to leave Spain with their lives. Orwell and his wife left Spain on the 23rd of June, one day after the Republican government of Spain, led by Juan Negrín, created a Special Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason, which probably would have convicted them both for their connections to the POUM and the British Independent Labor Party (Martinez de Pisón 210).

19 In his essay "Why I Write," Orwell explains that "The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it." At his first opportunity, he documented his horror at the Stalinist purges and other sectarian violence on the Left in Spain in a nonfiction account,

Homage to Catalonia (1938). Though given the socialist and communist sympathies of the British literary establishment, finding a publisher proved difficult. Victor Gollancz, editor of the Left Book Club in London rejected the manuscript without reading it. Once published, it sold poorly.

20 Dos Passos returned to America in May 1937 or thereabouts. He arrived still hurting from the Robles disappearance case and the thousand barriers to solving it. To add to the sting, Hemingway warned him that should Dos Passos print the truth of the internecine warfare in Spain, the New York literary establishment would destroy his reputation (Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle* 496). Nevertheless, he published all he could on the Stalinist infiltration of Republican Spain and wrote in deeply emotional terms. First was a July article in *Common Sense*, "Farewell to Europe," where he settled on the United States as the once and future beacon of democracy and criticized the governments of England, Spain, and France. That fall, he wrote to John Howard Lawson, writer and friend, "you think that the end justifies the means and I think that all you have in politics is the means; ends are always illusory" (Dos Passos, *The Fourteenth Chronicle* 514). Then he published a fuller autobiographical account of the Spanish betrayal in the novel, *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939).

21 Had Dos Passos and Orwell met again after 1937, they surely would have found kinship again, though Orwell stayed on the Left and Dos Passos moved right steadily. The moment one of them broached the topic of Spain, they would have spoken from a common plane of political disillusionment and personal despair. Perhaps they would have been amused by their reversal in literary fortunes since their first meeting, too, as Dos Passos steadily declined in reputation after *Adventures of a Young Man* while Orwell steadily grew in stature after *Animal Farm* (1945) seized the world's imagination. In fact, Dos Passos wrote to Orwell to praise him for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) (Crick 509). Perhaps they would have corresponded more or crossed paths in-person had Orwell not died from tuberculosis in 1950.

Orwell and Dos Passos Today

22 Orwell and Dos Passos today inhabit different continents of literary reputation. Orwell is one of the most popular writers in the world, attracting constant attention in American academia, politics, and popular culture. He is widely taught in America at the K-12, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Literary scholars, politicians, and journalists lionize him as a visionary and prophet whose crusade for individual liberty defies the political spectrum. A recent editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* by Jason Cowley, editor of the *New Statesman*, claims Orwell "was neither on the left nor the right"; instead, he was "a kind of border stalker, moving across ideological divides, cussedly

independent, forging his own way" (online). References on TV and film to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* are especially common. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is on its way to becoming a new television series (Kanter online). In December 2020, a downloadable computer game adaptation of *Animal Farm* was released. Orwell's book sales are strong, too. When Trump was elected U.S. president, sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* soared (Charles online).

23 Orwell's rapid ascent to global phenomenon began during the Cold War, when he became a symbol for American and British propaganda. With CIA and British intelligence support for what they interpreted as an anti-Soviet message, his books inundated the world and enjoyed translation across a massive spectrum of languages. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, a Cold War-era CIA organization, "did not leave the canon untouched, but rather helped to shape it, define it, regulate it, administer it, co-opt part of it, and in some cases silence and marginalize writers" (Rubin 8). The U.S. Army published *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in serialized format in its German magazine *Der Monat*, while the Congress for Cultural Freedom published the novel internationally in *Encounter*, *Preuves*, and *Tempo Presente* (Rubin 42). Meanwhile, British intelligence, acting via the British Foreign Office, sponsored the translation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* into Farsi, Telugu, Malayalam, Greek, and Vietnamese (Rubin 37). Additionally, the Foreign Office, through a division called the Information Research Department, financed *Animal Farm* cartoon strips, including translations for a vast league of cities, including New Delhi, Rangoon, Eritrea, Bangkok, Saigon, Caracas, Lima, Mexico City, Karachi, Ankara, Cyprus, Bogotá, Reykjavík, Rio de Janeiro, Singapore, Colombo, Ceylon, Benghazi, and Montevideo. By 1955, ten years after publication of *Animal Farm*, the British government had bought the rights to translate the novel into Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Finnish, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Indonesian, Latvian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also saw a generous translation blitz, courtesy of the Foreign Office. Further, the CIA's Office of Special Projects commissioned a 1954 animated feature film adaptation of *Animal Farm* and distributed it globally with help from the British government (Rubin 43-44).

24 In his seventy-four years, Dos Passos wrote about forty books, but only three are taught with any frequency—usually at the undergraduate and graduate levels. These are *Three Soldiers*, *Manhattan Transfer*, and U.S.A. These titles are also his bestselling works and the works that receive the most interest from literary scholars. In today's news media, the Left and the Right sometimes claim his words to defend their arguments, but no political entity seems to trust his integrity fully after the Spanish Civil War, which prompted his departure from the Left and embrace of American conservative politics, including writing for William F. Buckley's *National Review* magazine. Dos

Passos endorsed William Z. Foster, the communist candidate for president, in 1932, but endorsed archconservative Barry Goldwater for president in 1964.

25 In the U.S. literary world, which thrives on classification as much as biology depends on taxonomy, Dos Passos often resides in the category of naturalism with Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris. Donald Pizer, currently one of the most revered Dos Passos scholars in the world, considers the author to possess naturalist and modernist styles (Pizer viii). Dos Passos knew and respected Dreiser. "From my youth I'd had great admiration for Dreiser," said Dos Passos in his memoirs. "It was the ponderous battering ram of his novels that opened the way through the genteel reticences of American nineteenth-century fiction for what seemed to me to be a truthful description of people's lives" (Dos Passos, *The Best Times* 206). Indeed, the naturalists' best works still bite with political satire today. Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel, *Oil!*, inspired the 2007 American film masterpiece, *There Will Be Blood*, giving the naturalists a moment in popular culture ("Blood and 'Oil!'").

26 In popular culture, in literary criticism, and in the classroom, however, the naturalists have mostly languished in dark corners, and Dos Passos may have suffered in reputation from his association with them. In his 1969 book, *Red, White, and Blue: Men, Books, and Ideas in American Culture*, literary critic John William Ward claimed that "USA is generally placed in the tradition of naturalism in our literature, but naturalism is one of those large abstractions which threatens to conceal reality rather than disclose it or define it" (Ward 123). In his 1974 collection of critical essays on Dos Passos, the most significant such collection ever published, editor Andrew Hook speculates that the naturalists lost reputation because their style failed to meet Henry James's standard of what a novel should look like. Therefore, by the James test, "they contributed nothing to the art of fiction. Even worse, they were suspected of an indiscriminate documentation of life rather than an imaginative and aesthetically satisfying enrichment of it" (Hook 3). As Pizer noted, Dos Passos was both a naturalist and a modernist, but he has not enjoyed the same canonization as other American modernists like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner.

27 The works of Dos Passos, moreover, have never been adapted to TV or film, depriving them of Hollywood's significant legacy-burnishing effect. From time to time, Dos Passos receives a positive reevaluation in the media. For example, in 2003, historian Douglas Brinkley celebrated a new Library of America collection of Dos Passos's writing. In 2019, *The New Yorker*'s Matt Hanson declared that *Nineteen-Nineteen* "has—perhaps unsurprisingly—aged quite well" ("What John Dos Passos's '1919'"). Writing for *The Paris Review* in 2020, Jennifer Schaffer said of U.S.A., "To say that it's a trilogy of 'renewed relevance' would be to suggest the story of America has ever been otherwise"

("Quarantine Reads"). But in the main, Dos Passos is as forgotten to American literature and politics as Orwell is remembered.

28 Orwell's contemporary eminence is so ubiquitous it can smack of predestiny, but Orwell scholar John Rodden deftly argues that literary legacy is a fickle thing and subject to prevailing political winds and artistic trends. In *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, he notes that many of Orwell's contemporaries on the Left, including Dos Passos, shifted their politics over the years—some by a few degrees and some by vast turns of the wheel. "Orwell's early death," Rodden notes, "has meant that many intellectuals of his generation have assumed the right to speak in his name as his generation's spokesman." Yet, had he lived longer, Orwell might have gone in any number of directions politically. "What is likely," Rodden asserts, "is that, had he lived, it would not have been so easy to claim him as an all-purpose patron saint. Nor, surely, would he have been turned, by the mid-1950s, into a 'media prophet'" (Rodden 272-273).

Dos Passos's Last Word on Orwell

29 Despite their meaningful intersection during the Spanish Civil War, scholars rarely compare Orwell and Dos Passos or discuss them together in the context of Spain. Writing in 1986 for a French review of American literature, Robert Sayre likens the two. "At the opposite end of the spectrum from Cowley," says Sayre, "we would place Orwell and Dos Passos, both of whom immediately and thoroughly denounced the overall role played by the Comintern in the Spanish conflict. Dos Passos—the author we will focus on here—stands closer to Orwell than to any other Anglo-American writer involved in the war" (Sayre 265). In his 1972 book, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.*, Melvin Landsberg argued that Dos Passos's concern with American politicians' manipulation of language presaged *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Landsberg 192). He highlights a passage from *The Big Money* (1936): "America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul" (Landsberg 371).

30 Literary critic Christopher Benfey, writing in 2004 for *The New Republic*, asked a compelling question arising from such comparison: "Was Dos Passos an American Orwell, converted from youthful fantasies by the hard facts of twentieth-century total war?" ("Deserters"). Perhaps both authors' truest political compass pointed toward individual liberty, no matter the ephemeral movement or party or label that furnished it. Critic John Williams Ward argued as much in 1969:

> The shift from left to right may look contradictory, but I think is not. Dos Passos is a man always opposed to power. He saw power in the hands of capitalistic businessmen in the 30s and was, therefore, on the radical left; he sees power today in the hands of liberal intellectuals, allied with labor, and is now on the conservative right. I would, of course, stress the fact that Dos

> Passos is responding to his own sense of where power lies in our society; we can make sense out of his position, but to accept his position would require an analysis into the accuracy of his location of power. But Dos Passos has always been a negative function of power; that is, one finds him always at the opposite pole of where he conceives power to be. In this sense, he is more an anarchist, and always was, than a socialist or conservative. (Ward 126)

Alfred Kazin echoed this political assessment of Dos Passos, which mirrors what many have said about Orwell: "It is in this concern with the primacy of the individual, with his need to save the individual from society rather than to establish him in or over it, that one can trace the conflict that runs all through Dos Passos's work" (Kazin 344).

31 The two authors wrote similar mission statements for their lives. In his article, "The Writer as Technician," Dos Passos says, "American writers who want to do the most valuable kind of work will find themselves trying to discover the deep currents of historical change under the surface of opinions, orthodoxies, heresies, gossip and journalistic garbage of the day" (Dos Passos, The Writer as Technician, 82). In his essay, "Why I Write," Orwell explains that "What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art" (online). Looking back on his U.S.A. trilogy in 1959, Dos Passos made one his clearest descriptions of his political enterprise: "I can't see any particular virtue in consistency, but the basic tragedy my work tries to express seems to remain monotonously the same: man's struggle for life against the strangling institutions he himself creates" ("Looking Back on 'U.S.A.'").

32 Towards the end of his life, Dos Passos published one last statement on his shared values with George Orwell, in the form of a biographical section in *Century's Ebb* called "Towards 1984," revealing the kinship he still felt with him thirty years after the Spanish Civil War. Rather than sharpening his satirical blade, Dos Passos leads with compassion. "Acquaintances cut him on the street," Dos Passos writes, referring to Orwell's political shift after the Spanish Civil War. "In his old haunts Orwell found himself a pariah. He never flinched. He'd tell the truth if it killed him" (Dos Passos, *Century's Ebb* 63). The profile continues:

> All this while Orwell was at work on *Animal Farm*. He thought he had found his pulpit. In writing humorous fantasy perhaps he could say what he wanted without having people blow up in his face. He couldn't have been more mistaken. As Britain's brave ally, Communist Russia was in the good books again. It wasn't cricket to spoof the Soviet Union. Three publishers turned the book down in a hurry. (Dos Passos, *Century's Ebb* 65)

Dos Passos compliments Orwell, comparing him to the great satirist Jonathan Swift. Perhaps Dos Passos saw something of himself in Orwell. The two masters of satire dedicated themselves to writing the hardest truths of their times, no matter the political consequences.

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Biography

John Dos Passos Coggin is an independent writer based in Alexandria, Virginia. His poetry has appeared in *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Pangyrus*, and *The Blue Mountain Review*. He wrote an authorized biography of Florida governor and U.S. senator Lawton Chiles, *Walkin' Lawton*. He also co-manages the John Dos Passos literary estate and serves on the advisory board of the John Dos Passos Society.