

“WRITING SO FIERY AND ACCURATE”:
THE RADICAL BIOGRAPHIES OF DOS PASSOS’
U.S.A. AND THE WORK OF POLITICAL
MOURNING

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The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in the summer of 1927 constituted a turning-point in John Dos Passos' life, an emotional and political watershed. It was not—as some critics have mistakenly asserted—the moment at which he entered the radical Left. It was, rather, the moment at which he registered, with an inescapably personal urgency, the political loss entailed by the Red Scare.¹ In the years that passed between the immigrant anarchists' initial arrest in 1920, at the height of the Palmer Raids, and their execution in 1927, Dos Passos had evolved from admiring observer of the anticapitalist movement to committed activist. During these years, he had established himself not only as a prominent young novelist, but also as a radical journalist in the tradition of John Reed. In 1926 and 1927, he worked for the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee, devoting his prestige and talent as a writer to the campaign to save their lives. He had met both men, had sat next to them in the jails at Dedham and Charlestown, had heard them describe their dreams of an egalitarian society. When they died in the electric chair, he experienced their execution in an acutely personal way. He identified with their idealism and

¹ This article is adapted from chap. 5 of Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 123-173, which offers a more extended treatment of the radical biographies of *U.S.A.* For a detailed account of Dos Passos' experience of the Red Scare of the 1910s and 1920s, which entailed the government-sponsored repression of the anticapitalist political movements with which the author strongly identified, see chap. 4 of *Mourning Modernity*, 95-122.

their vulnerability. Having placed his own energy and resources in the balance, he now felt the slightness of his own agency and the power of the interests he had presumed to oppose.

Sacco and Vanzetti became, for Dos Passos, the symbolic representatives of the entire anticapitalist movement that had been crushed in the course of a repressive decade. These men, he wrote, had become "huge symbols" and "part of the world struggle between the capitalist class and the working class." He called the period of their prosecution and execution "seven years of agony of the working class." In an essay written before their deaths, he described them as representative figures of the anticapitalist continuum that he so much admired: a continuum of disparate political institutions and formations, with differing strategic emphases, but unified by a shared commitment to building an economic and political alternative to capitalism. He explained that they were participants in a political community comprised of "anarchists, syndicalists, socialists of various colors. The Russian Revolution had fired them with new hopes." In rendering their political outlook, Dos Passos emphasized not particular sectarian or institutional loyalties, but the underlying emotional and moral impulses that motivated their radicalism—the yearning for forms of freedom made impossible by the capitalist economic system, the desire for a less alienated way of life. He described Sacco's "anarchism" this way: "He loved the earth and people, he wanted them to walk straight over the free hills, not to stagger bowed under the ordained machinery of industry." Vanzetti's "anarchist-communist" politics—which was "less a matter of labels than of feeling, of gentle philosophic brooding"—stemmed from "the hope [...] that somehow men's predatory instincts, incarnate in the capitalist system, can be canalized into other channels, leaving free communities of artisans and farmers and fishermen and cattlebreeders who would work for their livelihood with pleasure, because the work was itself enjoyable in the serene white light of a reasonable world."² When they were put to death in the Charlestown jail, Dos Passos experienced it as the literal and symbolic culmination of an entire radical generation's suppression; it was this vulnerable, utopian aspiration that the "capitalist class" was systematically, and effectively, destroying.

² Dos Passos, "An Open Letter to President Lowell," *Nation*, 24 Aug. 1927; "Sacco and Vanzetti," *New Masses*, Nov. 1927; and "The Pit and the Pendulum," *New Masses*, Aug. 1926; all rpt. in Donald Pizer, ed., *John Dos Passos: the Major Nonfictional Prose* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988) 97-98, 99, and 85-91. Subsequent references to this collection will be cited as *MNP*.

In the weeks following the execution, Dos Passos felt that writers on the Left had a responsibility to respond to this repression. "It is up to the writers now to see to it that America does not forget Sacco and Vanzetti as soon as it would like to." He went on to insist that

Sacco and Vanzetti must not have died in vain. We must have writing so fiery and accurate that it will sear through the pall of numb imbecility that we are again swaddled in after the few moments of sane awakening that followed the shock of the executions. America must not be allowed to forget. All the elements on the public stage who consider themselves alive and who are considered alive, college professors, writers, labor leaders, prominent liberals, protested that they were mighty shocked and that *if* the state of Massachusetts went ahead with the executions...Workers all over the country felt their blood curdle at the thought. Well, it has come to pass. Well, we have protested. Our blood has curdled. What are we going to do now?³

Dos Passos' personal answer to this question was to do what he did best: he began work on a new novel. This literary enterprise, which evolved over the next ten years into the *U.S.A.* trilogy, was an explicit response to the Sacco and Vanzetti execution—and to the decade of anti-Red hysteria and repression. It was an attempt to mourn a political loss. That work of political mourning was complicated (as such work usually is), because Dos Passos' grief was accompanied by much anger and bitterness. He hoped to extend into the future the traditions for which Sacco and Vanzetti stood, but his hope was alloyed by stirrings of despair. *U.S.A.* would enact this difficult effort to grieve. From the outset, he set himself the task of producing that writing—"so fiery and accurate"—that would prevent Americans from forgetting the suppressed traditions of democratic anti-capitalism.

He undertook this task of political memory most directly in the biographical prose-poems dispersed throughout *U.S.A.* More than half of the biographies in the trilogy's first two volumes are devoted to American anticapitalist radicals who suffered the repression of the Red Scare. These radical biographies are among the richest and most ambitious expressions of the tradition I have called elsewhere the "modernism of mourning."⁴

³ Dos Passos, "Sacco and Vanzetti" 99. Ellipses here, and in all quotations, appear in the original text. My own editorial elisions will be marked with bracketed ellipses ([...]).

⁴ See *Mourning Modernity*, chap. 1 & 3.

Here, Dos Passos reflects on the losses suffered by the American Left during these years—and mourns in a way that facilitates an ongoing political commitment and a forward-looking project of radical tradition-building. In order to pursue this project, Dos Passos invented a new literary form, the modernist biographical prose-poem. These brief, poetic sketches, as we will see, document the hard facts of political repression during the Red Scare and enabled Dos Passos to identify the social causes of his loss and the objects of his anger. They also provided a means for making conscious what he had lost in the destruction of this political movement. Through these memorials, he sought to name the libidinal sources of anticapitalist aspiration in America: the fundamental psychic and emotional impulses that had animated the radical movement—and that might yet be taken up by all those seeking to reduce the injustice and alienation of modern life.

I. The Method of Dos Passos' Biographies: Modernist Mourning as Political Tradition-Building

Taken together, the ten radical biographies of *U.S.A.* constitute a collective portrait of the anticapitalist movement of the teens as Dos Passos saw it. In *The 42nd Parallel*, he celebrates Eugene Debs, the leader of the Socialist Party; Big Bill Haywood, the standard-bearer of the I.W.W.; Charles Steinmetz, the immigrant socialist inventor; and Robert La Follette, the radical Senator from Wisconsin. *1919* contains biographies of two Wobbly martyrs—Joe Hill, the famed organizer and songwriter who was executed by the State of Utah, and Wesley Everest who was lynched during the Centralia Massacre of 1919. It also includes the biographies of three socialist intellectuals—John Reed, the revolutionary journalist; Randolph Bourne, anticapitalist cultural critic; and Paxton Hibben, a little-known diplomat and writer. The last of the radical biographies appears in *The Big Money* and treats Thorstein Veblen, whose writings had a formative influence on Dos Passos' own socialist vision.

The particular figures whom Dos Passos chose to include in this pantheon of early twentieth-century radicalism reflect the breadth—and the narrowness—of the author's own political identifications. Dos Passos was clearly concerned to include figures who would represent the ideological heterogeneity and fluidity of the anticapitalist continuum before and during the First World War. Toward this end, the biographies include anarchists, syndicalists, communists, and socialists of various kinds. Many of these

figures were Marxists, but many were also rooted in indigenous, non-Marxist, anticapitalist traditions, from Populism to Edward Bellamy's Nationalism and the Single Tax movement of Henry George. The portraits reflect certain kinds of sociological diversity, which Dos Passos clearly valued in the movement. He includes foreign- as well as native-born radicals: two of the ten are immigrants, and two more are the children of immigrants. Although most of these figures were born to the working class, several were middle-class radicals like Dos Passos himself. Most rose to prominence, either as labor organizers, radical political figures, or intellectuals, but Dos Passos was concerned also to include the obscure rank-and-file Wobbly martyr, Wesley Everest, and the relatively unknown Paxton Hibben.

The exclusions enforced by this pantheon are as significant as its inclusions. The complete omission of women from the tradition is particularly striking, as is the "whiteness" of Dos Passos' portrait of the Left—which excludes not only African-Americans and non-European immigrants, but also Jews and emigrants from southern- and eastern-Europe. Although it is true that most American radicals of the teens were, in fact, native-born—and that the movement did not have the racial and ethnic diversity of the Popular Front Left of the 1930s—Dos Passos presented a narrower picture of the movement than his own experience warranted.⁵ It is, for example, remarkable that Dos Passos did not write a biography of Emma Goldman, who had been one of his radical heroes in the teens – and a more direct influence on his political vision than many of those whom he did include. Clearly, he sought to canonize those figures with whom he felt most deeply identified, in whom his libidinal investments (conscious and unconscious) were most intense and whose loss was for him most acute. He focused on men who, in some respects, resembled himself (intellectuals are represented, for example, in disproportionately large numbers) – and women tend to be objects in their stories: occasions for male action and the focus of male desires and fears.

⁵ On the demographics of the radical movement in the teens – a majority of whose members were native-born – see David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (1955; Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967) chap. 1, 2, 6 & 7; and James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (NY: Monthly Review, 1967) chap. 2 & 4. Michael Denning has emphasized the nativist tendencies of U.S.A. and Dos Passos' relative lack of interest in immigrant and non-white constituencies within the Left: see “The Decline and Fall of the Lincoln Republic: Dos Passos's U.S.A.,” *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Verso, 1997) 163-200.

The gender and ethnic narrowness of his selections embodies a constriction of identification characteristic of many white male radicals of his generation.

Considered together, these ten biographies constitute a personalized memorial to the victims of the Red Scare. They delineate the social processes by which the disparate formations of the anticapitalist Left were destroyed. All of these radicals are crushed under the weight of external repression. Each of the prose-poems tells a story of constraint, disappointment, frustration, failure and defeat. Generally following a two-part trajectory, each traces the rise and fall of a single figure. In the first part, Dos Passos describes the path that brought each man into the movement, the material and emotional sources of his radicalism, and the context in which his aspirations achieved political embodiment. In the second part, he describes the ways in which these aspirations were thwarted, the careers destroyed, the hopes defeated. Most dramatically, the biographies of Joe Hill and Wesley Everest recount the tales of men who, like Sacco and Vanzetti a decade later, were murdered for their radical commitments.⁶ In the case of the political and labor leaders—Debs, Haywood, and La Follette—Dos Passos was concerned to show that men who successfully articulated the interests and dreams of millions of working-class Americans were ultimately silenced, marginalized, and separated from their constituencies: all are vilified by the press and by mainstream political forces; Debs and Haywood are isolated and broken by incarceration; Big Bill is ultimately driven into exile and death in the Soviet Union.

The fate of the intellectuals is less dramatic, but while their repression is more subtle, it is no less effective. John Reed is repeatedly prosecuted and jailed. Bourne too is harassed by spies, sees his manuscripts confiscated, and has increasing difficulty finding publishers for his work. Veblen, despite the international prestige of his anticapitalist economic analysis, is driven into increasingly obscure university posts and ever greater isolation. While Steinmetz is cynically celebrated by the publicity men at General Electric as the "magician" who invented the electrical transformer (the vast profits of which make him GE's "most valuable piece of apparatus"), his commitment to building a socialist society is patronized, contained, thwarted. Whether these men are actually murdered, simply

⁶ While Dos Passos and many others saw them as martyrs to the radical cause, it should be noted that Hill at least, like Sacco and Vanzetti, was officially accused of other crimes.

jailed, or ground down by harassment, whether they are actively censored and silenced, or merely marginalized institutionally and isolated personally, they are all defeated. As a group, these biographies illustrate the destruction of a large and varied political movement. Taken separately, each indicates, in microcosm, the price paid by individuals for this repression.

Dos Passos was attempting in these biographies not simply to record, but also to mourn, this history of political defeat. This required, in the first place, a clear acknowledgement of what had been lost. Dos Passos wanted his readers to remember what America's "governors and owners" wanted the nation to forget: the democratic and egalitarian anticapitalist movement that the Red Scare had systematically destroyed. After the Sacco and Vanzetti executions, he had insisted that it was "up to the writers" to prevent such a forgetting, and these biographies were among his principle acts of memorialization. This commemoration was imperative because, as Dos Passos emphasizes throughout these sketches, one of the central ideological tasks of the Red Scare was to obscure and erase the memory of the defeated radicals, particularly after their deaths. So, for example, he notes at the end of Wesley Everest's biography that the coroner lied about the cause of the Wobbly's grisly death, and that while the government had "buried" his comrades in "Walla Walla Penitentiary," Everest's corpse was buried "nobody knows where" by the vigilantes who murdered him. If Everest lies in an unmarked grave, other radicals die abroad, either in exile like Haywood, or in revolutionary service like Reed, equally forgotten in their own nation. The official record of Hibben's life in *Who's Who* (which Dos Passos juxtaposes, in ironic counterpoint, with his own account),⁷ makes no more mention of his politics than do the P.R. men who control the public image and legacy of Steinmetz. There is a particular pathos for his biographer in the fact that Veblen is so bitterly isolated and despairing by the end of his life that he does the work of censorship and suppression himself, asking in his own will that "no tombstone, slab, epitaph, effigy, tablet, inscription or monument of any name or nature, be set up to my memory or name in any place or at any time." Dos Passos' biographies explicitly set out to mark these unmarked graves, to remember the forgotten men. "But we will remember," he says of La Follette; "but his memorial remains" he insists of Veblen.

⁷ George Knox has noted Dos Passos' use of the *Who's Who* entry in "Dos Passos and Painting"; rptd in *Dos Passos, the Critics and the Writer's Intention*, ed. Allen Belkind (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971) 261.

Like all works in the modernism of mourning, these biographies enact a process of grieving that is forward as well as backward looking. Through them, Dos Passos seeks to identify what he has lost so that disappointed yearnings can be renewed. He returns repeatedly to individual experiences of political failure and loss so that that he can reconstitute those disappointed aspirations within an ongoing emancipatory tradition. As these biographies suggest, the work of mourning takes a particular form when the object of grieving is a political movement. Under these circumstances, the thing that has been killed need not remain dead. A collective tradition that has been destroyed in a particular manifestation can be renewed through the agency and memory of those who are still living. Dos Passos figures this renewal in various ways. At times, he represents it quite literally as a project of reanimating the dead. After describing Randolph Bourne's premature death, for example, Dos Passos assures us that "If any man has a ghost/ Bourne has a ghost." At other moments he reminds us of unfinished work left behind by these defeated radicals: of the "undelivered speech" left on La Follette's desk when the Senate had become "a lynching party" and "wouldn't let him speak"; of the fact that when Bourne died, he was "planning an essay on the foundations of future radicalism in America." The unspoken words are there for us to hear, he suggests; the work remains for us to take up in the present.

In his modernist, biographical prose-poem, Dos Passos developed a literary form that enacted this complex work of political mourning and tradition-building. In appealing at the time of Sacco and Vanzetti's death for a writing at once "fiery and accurate," Dos Passos gestured toward the duality that he went on to cultivate in these biographies. Impelled by a powerful documentary impulse, they provide an "accurate" representation of actual lives and historical events. By recording painful facts that the nation's dominant "myths" sought to hide from view, Dos Passos hoped that he might "sear through the pall of numb imbecility" in which the American people were "swaddled" by the capitalist-controlled mass-media. The prose-poems are works of non-fiction, resting upon Dos Passos' substantial biographical and historical reading.⁸ But they are not conventional works of documentary history. Refusing the detached tone of

⁸ In the course of his research, Dos Passos read—and reviewed—some of the more conventional recent biographies of the figures whom he included in *U.S.A.* These reviews attest to Dos Passos' scholarship, and they offer revealing, more prosaic, early explorations of these historical figures. See, for example, "Edison and Steinmetz," *New Republic*, 18 Dec 1929; rpt. in *MNP* 123-27.

scholarly objectivity, they are "fiery" in the sense that they are saturated with the passionate, subjective investments of their author.⁹ Nowhere in the trilogy does Dos Passos communicate more explicitly his own political sympathies and moral judgments: his admiration for the traditions of American radicalism and his contempt for the violent hypocrisy of government-sponsored repression conducted in the name of democracy and freedom. The biographies are also suffused with the author's feelings of loss, betrayal and rage. Even as they are accurate documentary accounts, then, they are also polemical, partisan, and intensely personal. This fusion of accuracy and emotional expressivity is responsible for their success in performing the work of social mourning. Identifying for Dos Passos the nature of his loss and the social forces that had produced it, they allowed him to direct his grief and anger at their respective objects.

The representational method of the biographies operates simultaneously at two levels. On the simplest and most readily apparent plane, they offer highly-compressed factual narratives of the lives and political careers of these figures. We are generally told, for example, where and into what sort of family each man is born and when he dies. The milestones and turning points of his political development, as well as the nature of his successes are recorded, as are the kinds of repression to which he is subjected, and the circumstances of his political defeat. These narratives are studded with facts: the date on which the Centralia Massacre took place; where Steinmetz attended school; the names of the magazines that would and wouldn't publish Bourne's articles. The recording of historical details contributes to Dos Passos' project of mourning and political memory: as he said after Sacco and Vanzetti's execution, "Every detail must be told and retold."¹⁰ But the factual accounts are also subject to extraordinary compression. Because an entire life is told in two or three pages, every detail has been carefully selected. The resulting logic is essentially poetic:

⁹ This modernist documentary technique—factually "accurate," yet suffused with "fiery" subjective investments—is also evident in other Left documentary experiments of the 1930s. See e.g. James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (rpt New York: Ballantine, 1969) in the literary domain, and the photographs of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange in the domain of visual representation. On the complexity of documentary practice in the 30s, see Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon" and Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story," *Documenting America: 1935-1943*, Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds. (U of California P, 1988), as well as William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (NY: Oxford UP, 1973).

¹⁰ "Sacco and Vanzetti" 99.

virtually every fact or detail takes on the status of a metaphor, and the metaphors have been arranged so as to constitute a small number of expressively potent gestures. On this second level, through the dense pattern of fact-based metaphors, Dos Passos struggles to reveal the libidinal roots of anticapitalist aspiration. He attempts to represent the ways in which his figures' political commitments originated in certain primary impulses—toward social connection, toward aesthetic and sensual pleasure, and toward self-expression—all of which he saw as thwarted in capitalist society. This strategy marks a persistent effort to humanize the radical experience: to make his reader feel the pulse of socialist and anarchist aspirations, to capture the underlying forms of desire and pleasure, vulnerability and pain, from which they spring. In these prose-poems, Dos Passos attempts to identify what is at once most fundamental and most enduring in the radical impulse: to represent the idealistic resistance to capitalism and the longing for a more egalitarian, more solidaristic, and more liberatory form of social organization. Because of his method, Dos Passos' own desires and motivations are often fused with those of his biographical subjects and political predecessors. This blending of subjectivities lies at the very heart of the tradition-building project: it is the literary enactment of an aspiration that is thwarted in one life, but continues to live in another, and is extended to the reader for affirmation.

II. "Lover of Mankind": Socialism as Brotherhood

The first of *U.S.A.*'s biographies offers a portrait of Eugene Debs—a man whom Dos Passos saw as a symbol of the anticapitalist political continuum of the teens, and who had been one of his heroes from the time Dos Passos first entered the movement in the summer of 1917. A careful analysis of this biography will enable us to see Dos Passos' "fiery and accurate" method at work and to identify elements of his libidinal account of the sources of radical aspiration.

Like most of the prose-poems, the biography of Debs has a two-part narrative structure—describing the rise, and then the fall, of a radical career and personality. As in many of the sketches, the first part of this biography begins with what might be described as a brief introduction: a few opening lines that seek to place Debs' origins according to a set of geographical, sociological, historical, and cultural-psychological coordinates.

Debs was a railroadman, born in a weatherboarded shack at Terre Haute.
 He was one of ten children.
 His father had come to America in a sailingship in '49,
 an Alsatian from Colmar; not much of a moneymaker, fond of music
 and reading,
 he gave his children a chance to finish public school and that was
 about all he could do.¹¹

These introductory sentences—apparently simple, declarative and factual—are already operating on two levels, unfolding two distinct but related stories. On the first level, Dos Passos is laying the historical groundwork for a factual tale about Debs' political career. The opening sentence tells us Debs' occupation and enough about the circumstances of his birth to fix his sociological position as a member of the Mid-Western working class: a manual laborer, born in a "shack." This first gesture also participates in the conventional radical iconography of Debs as the quintessentially American, native-born socialist leader. In the early 30s, when anticapitalist radicalism was being denounced as "foreign" and "un-American" (as it had been earlier, and would be later), Dos Passos and others found it strategically valuable to emphasize that the Socialist Party—and its leader—had emerged from American soil and experiences. But Dos Passos immediately qualifies and complicates this familiar image of the radical-from-Terre-Haute by emphasizing the immigrant origins of Debs' father. More specifically, he goes out of his way to place Debs' familial origins within the history of European Enlightenment revolutions, by implying (somewhat deceptively) that Debs' father was part of the wave of refugee revolutionaries who fled Alsace and other strongholds of radical Republicanism after the suppression of the revolution of 1848.¹² Dos

¹¹ Dos Passos, *42nd Parallel in U.S.A.* (1936; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 25. All references in this chapter are to this edition of *U.S.A.* and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *42P*.

¹² This kind of shorthand revolutionary contextualization is characteristic of Dos Passos' biographies, and suggests the insistence of the tradition-building imperative. He commonly weaves these lines of tradition, both domestic and international, even when they are tangential to the central biographical subject. In the biography of Steinmetz, for example, he goes out of his way to tell us that the inventor's first employer was "a German exile from fortyeight"—just as he reminds us here of the significance of Alsace in 1849, despite the fact that Debs' father was not actually a refugee from the revolution. For more information about Jean Daniel Debs' actual motivations for emigration, see Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982) 9.

Passos thus seeks to draw simultaneously on nationalist and internationalist impulses within the American Left: to reinforce the image of Debs as the standard-bearer of an indigenous American socialism and to remind us that the American Left was enriched by, and was inseparable from, international and multi-generational radical movements.

On a second level, these terse opening sentences begin to lay down the fact-based metaphors through which Dos Passos will unfold his account of the sources of Debs' socialist aspirations. The first sentence sets up a symbolic tension that will prove significant between the "railroad" and the "shack"—between the expansive energy and mobility associated with the male world of work on the one hand and the constrained space of domesticity on the other. The second sentence tells us that the decisive psycho-familial fact of Debs' childhood is that he is one among many siblings. Identified as a brother first, and only secondarily as a son, Debs will, on Dos Passos' account, prove to be the visionary of brotherhood—a man who seeks to bring into being a society founded upon fraternity and solidarity, and who tragically confronts the obstacles (both psychological and material) to such a bonded community of peers and equals. In the third sentence, characterizing Debs' father, Dos Passos begins to establish a central opposition between the economic realities of capitalist society and the yearning for full self-expression. Telling us that Debs' father was "fond of music and reading" and that he was "not much of a moneymaker," Dos Passos suggests that while this preference for aesthetic fulfillment over "moneymaking" may have been a matter of temperament or choice, the father has bequeathed the conflict to his children, since his lack of money means that it was "all he could do" to let them "finish public school" before the imperative of work put an end to the opportunity for education. The rest of the biography will interweave these three metaphorical strands, exploring Debs' dream of fraternity as a means of achieving the material conditions for universal self-realization—and exploring the failure of that dream in the face of fears embedded in, and symbolized by, a conventional domesticity.

After these opening lines, Dos Passos proceeds to tell the story of Debs' rise from teenage railroad-worker to Socialist candidate for President of the United States. I will quote here the remainder of the prose-poem's first half, because I want to offer the kind of detailed close-analysis that Dos Passos' biographies deserve but rarely receive.¹³

¹³ The paucity of careful textual analysis is one of the most remarkable features of U.S.A.'s critical history. A rare example of a sustained close-reading of one of the

At fifteen Gene Debs was already working as a machinist on the Indianapolis and Terre Haute Railway.

He worked as a locomotive fireman,
clerked in a store

joined the local of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, was elected secretary, traveled all over the country as organizer.

He was a tall shamblefooted man, had a sort of gusty rhetoric that set on fire the railroad workers in their pineboarded halls

made them want the world he wanted,
a world brothers might own
where everybody would split even:

I am not a labor leader. I don't want you to follow me or anyone else. If you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of the capitalist wilderness you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into this promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else would lead you out.

That was how he talked to freighthandlers and gandywalkers, to firemen and switchmen and engineers, telling them it wasn't enough to organize the railroadmen, that all workers must be organized, that all workers must be organized in the workers' co-operative commonwealth.

Locomotive fireman on many a long night's run,
under the smoke a fire burned him up, burned in gusty words that beat in pineboarded halls; he wanted his brothers to be free men.

That was what he saw in the crowd that met him at the Old Wells Street Depot when he came out of jail after the Pullman strike,

those were the men that chalked up nine hundred thousand votes for him in nineteen-twelve and scared the frockcoats and diamonded hostesses at Saratoga Springs, Bar Harbor, Lake Geneva with the bogy of a Socialist president. (42P 25-26)

At the factual or documentary level, this passage is characteristically efficient in its production of a clear and highly selective portrait of Debs' career. Leaving aside facts that might impede the basic gesture (such as Debs' early service as a mainstream state representative), Dos Passos tells the story as the evolution of a working-class radical's vocation: from machinist, to rank-and-file member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, to secretary of the local, to traveling organizer, to the leader of the famous Pullman strike (a landmark event, of course, in the history of

biographies ("Body of an American") can be found in William Solomon, "Politics and Rhetoric in the Novel in the 1930s," *American Literature* 68.4 (Dec. 1996): 799-818.

American labor, which made Debs a national figure), and finally to the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party who won nearly a million votes in 1912.

Alongside this factual narrative, Dos Passos also offers a libidinal account of Debs' socialism as rooted in his commitment to brotherhood. His vision, according to Dos Passos, is of "a world brothers might own/ where everybody would split even." This is a more complex proposition than it might first appear. Dos Passos is not simply suggesting that Debs' feeling of fraternity leads to the desire for a general social solidarity. More specifically, he implies that, for Debs, the bond to other men leads to the desire for *collective ownership* ("a world brothers might own") and for *material equality* ("where everybody would split even"). A few lines later, the ramifications of this basic fraternal impulse are elaborated further, as Dos Passos insists that Debs "wanted his brothers to be free men." To acknowledge a man as one's brother, that is to say, is also to want him to be free. What emerges here is Dos Passos' intuition that, at least for Debs, the feeling of fraternity was itself the root of the commitment to freedom, equality, and collectivity. Although these formulations are so deceptively simple that one might well read past them as obvious, they are in fact remarkable. They refute in the simplest terms a dominant strand of liberalism (in which freedom is commonly understood to be at odds with the values of equality and community), as well as the American tendency to assume that a more or less atomized individualism is the foundation of freedom. I do not mean to suggest by this that Dos Passos is offering an argument in political theory: he is attempting not so much to prove a necessary relation between abstract political values, as to provide an evocative account of the emotional and temperamental proclivities that enabled socialists like Debs to experience liberty, equality and collectivity as a unified social ideal. It is for this reason that Dos Passos entitled the biography "Lover of Mankind": for it is, indeed, an exploration of a particular kind of love—a libidinally charged connection to others—that, according to Dos Passos, inspired Debs to believe in the desirability of a more solidaristic and egalitarian form of social organization that would enable "brothers to be free men."

The passage I have quoted insists that Debs' fraternal impulse—his "love of mankind"—also expresses itself through an intensely, and irreducibly, democratic politics. Initially, Dos Passos emphasizes that Debs is a great orator whose "gusty rhetoric" inspires his working-class listeners with his own vision of brotherhood: "he made them want the world he wanted." Coming from Dos Passos, who was always fearful of

and hostile toward demagogues, there is something potentially ominous about this formulation, suggesting as it does the disturbing capacity of a speaker to impose his will, to "make" others want what he wants.¹⁴ Raising this possibility in order to dispel it, however, Dos Passos hastens to distinguish Debs' capacity for inspiration from the desire for manipulative power or hierarchical authority. Significantly, the only words actually quoted from Debs in the first half of the biography are his explicit rejection of hierarchical leadership. Debs declares that he is "not a labor leader" in the sense that he does not want his brothers "to follow [him] or anyone else." He warns that "If you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of the capitalist wilderness you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into this promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else would lead you out." These words articulate the conviction (deeply shared by Dos Passos) that, as a matter both of principle and practical strategy, the labor movement (and the socialist movement that had grown from it) must not reproduce the pervasive model of hierarchical leadership and passive "followers." If the goal was to build "a world brothers might own," then the movement must be one of "brothers" and "free men" not "leaders" and "followers." While this model places a premium on active agency and individual responsibility, these values are not articulated at the expense of solidarity or community. In the next sentence, Dos Passos emphasizes that Debs' fraternal impulse entails an appeal to both: "That was how he talked to freighthandlers and gandywalkers, to firemen and switchmen and engineers, telling them it wasn't enough to organize the railroadmen, that all workers must be organized [...] in the workers' co-operative commonwealth." Even as Debs addresses the railroad workers as men capable of rejecting the role of "followers," he also calls upon them to reject all narrow constraints on their spirit of solidarity. He urges them, for example, to reject the craft unionism that separated skilled workers (firemen, switchmen, engineers) from one another and from the unskilled (freighthandlers, gandywalkers). He calls upon them to embrace the expansive socialist vision of a "co-

¹⁴ Dos Passos even ambivalently criticizes, for example, the Progressive demagoguery of William Jennings Bryan, whose "silver tongue chanted" "out of [his] big mouth" and whose "voice charmed the mortgageridden farmers" (42P 154-55). (It is this criticism that causes Dos Passos to treat Bryan as one of the political manipulators, rather than one of the radical heroes, in the biographies.) For Dos Passos' hostility toward vanguardism and anti-democratic practices within the socialist movement, see *Mourning Modernity*, chap. 4 & 6.

operative commonwealth" in which *all* workers (not merely railroadmen) would join together in building a solidaristic society committed to economic equality. As Dos Passos imagines it, the impulse of fraternity in Debs is outward-moving, seeking ever-larger and more inclusive community, even as it insists always upon the agency and autonomy of individuals. This is not merely a way of talking ("That was how he talked to freighthandlers"), but also a way of *seeing* others as "brothers" who might be "free men" ("That was what he saw in the crowd that met him ... after the Pullman strike"). And Dos Passos ends the first half of the biography by asserting that it is precisely Debs' capacity to see and to address men in this way that accounts for his degree of popularity: for "the men that chalked up nine hundred thousand votes for him in nineteen-twelve" are precisely the "crowd" in whom Debs saw his "brothers."¹⁵

To say that Debs' fraternal vision leads to a simultaneous insistence upon individual agency and an expansive solidarity is not to say that Dos Passos simply ignores the tension between these ideals. He is, in fact, centrally concerned with the problem of how to imagine a form of individual agency (a form of non-hierarchical leadership, in effect) that will not deform a democratic and collaborative community of equals. This problem is registered in a representational tension between the emphasis on Debs' exceptional capacity to inspire and the fraternal nature of his ideal. Through an evolving metaphor drawn from Debs' work as a locomotive fireman,¹⁶ Dos Passos both explores this tension and figures a

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the very end of this passage indicates that the wealthy are "scared" of Debs and of the "crowd" that might make him President. In this way, Dos Passos indicates that class-conflict is part of the context of Debs' socialism—but, interestingly, he places class hostility here on the side of the rich (who fear the "bogy of a Socialist President"), rather than in the minds of the exploited workers. In this portrait, Dos Passos is concerned above all to emphasize that Debs' socialism stems from the lyrical, utopian sense of fraternity which I have been exploring—and not principally from envy or resentment of the exploiters.

¹⁶ Dos Passos' persistent use of work-related metaphors in the biographies reflected a long-standing, materialist conviction that most people's sensibilities were decisively shaped by the work they performed. In 1919, for example, he cautioned a friend who was considering a career in business that "[a] man's mind is moulded by his occupation, willy nilly. The ideas of a shoemaker are those which are useful in shoemaking, the ideas of a banker are those useful in banking. Think what your mind will be like after forty years of exploiting other people." DP "To Rumsey Marvin," 15 Oct. 1919; *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (Boston: Gambit, 1973) 266.

utopian resolution. Immediately before the first invocation of Debs' vision, Dos Passos compares the socialist's oratory to the ignition of a fire: his language is "a sort of gusty rhetoric that set on fire the railroad workers in their pineboarded halls." This initial metaphorical rendering of Debs' inspirational power poses two problems. First, it emphasizes a certain distance and difference between Debs and the other workers, representing the socialist's "gusty rhetoric" as the external enabling cause or agent (the wind) that produces the "fire" of fraternity in the other men. Second, the image implies an ambiguous tension between the "fire" Debs creates and the flammable "pineboarded halls" in which the inspirational gathering takes place. The transmission of the fraternal impulse, in other words, threatens figuratively to destroy the context, or space, in which that fraternity is enacted.

When Dos Passos redeploys the metaphor a few lines later, this problem of an inequality (or a form of self-assertion) that threatens to destroy the fraternal project is resolved through a more complex version of the same figure: "Locomotive fireman on many a long night's run,/ under the smoke a fire burned him up, burned in gusty words that beat in pineboarded halls." Several things are important about this revision of the metaphor. First, Debs' vision of fraternity is now represented as stemming directly from the practical work that he shares with the other railroadmen: the "fire" of fraternity that "burned him up" is a metaphorical extension of Debs' actual work "on many a long nights' run," "under" the literal "smoke" of the locomotive. Second, Debs himself now "burn[s]" with the same fire that (in the first metaphor) has been lit in the other workers.¹⁷ This suggests a rejection of the hierarchical difference previously implied between orator and listener, external agent of inspiration and object of that inspiration. In an inventive twist, it democratizes the Romantic trope of the exceptional artist's unique blaze of inspiration, making Debs' oratory now the expression of the fire produced by a common experience. That fire—that vision of fraternity—is no longer something that Debs simply gives to others with his "gusty words"; rather, the words themselves issue from a blaze that arises from the workers' common activity. The fire

¹⁷ It is worth noting that there is a certain dark implication to this image of Debs being "burned up" by the fire of fraternity. The suggestion of self-destructiveness, which appears here as a subdued, minor theme in the imagery, becomes central in the last volume of the trilogy. Here, I want only to emphasize that this metaphor insists that Debs himself shares whatever risks (or destruction) may be entailed by his political vision.

"burns in" Debs' rhetoric because his words are themselves the roar of a fraternal blaze that the men build together, an expression of the utopian potential of their shared labor.

Finally, the fire (and the "gusty words" that are now, in effect, its flame) no longer threatens to destroy the "pineboarded halls." Rather, as Dos Passos builds more explicitly on the locomotive image, Debs' "gusty words" and the shared fire of fraternity now "beat" in the union halls just as the fire beats in the locomotive, carrying the train forward "on many a long night's run." Debs' inspiring language is an animating force, its potentially destructive power now productively controlled by a collective enterprise that need not be threatened by energies that it can harness toward its own ends. The "pineboarded halls" (which echo that earlier enclosure, the "weatherboarded shack" in which Debs was born) are no longer the fixed, fragile flammable containers of a fraternity endangered by the eloquence of its own spokesman: rather, they are figuratively transformed into the locomotive itself, hurtling through the night, impelled forward and outward by the explosive libidinal energies of the individuals who make up a revolutionary, fraternal movement.

The first half of the biography thus offers a documentary account of Debs' career as a labor organizer and political spokesman; and it explores Debs' socialism as rooted, above all, in a powerful fraternal impulse. The second half of the prose-poem tells the story of Debs' suppression during the Red Scare, and it explores the libidinal as well as historical causes of that suppression. The remainder of the biography reads as follows:

But where were Gene Debs's brothers in nineteen eighteen when
 Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta for speaking against war,
 where were the big men fond of whiskey and fond of each other, gentle
 rambling tellers of stories over bars in small towns in the Middle West,
 quiet men who wanted a house with a porch to putter around and a fat
 wife to cook for them, a few drinks and cigars, a garden to dig in, cronies
 to chew the rag with
 and wanted to work for it
 and others to work for it;
 where were the locomotive firemen and engineers when they hustled
 him off to Atlanta Penitentiary?
 And they brought him back to die in Terre Haute
 to sit on his porch in a rocker with a cigar in his mouth,
 beside him American Beauty roses his wife fixed in a bowl;
 and the people of Terre Haute and the people in Indiana and the people
 of the Middle West were fond of him and afraid of him and thought of him

as an old kindly uncle who loved them, and wanted to be with him and to have him give them candy,
 but they were afraid of him as if he had contracted a social disease, syphilis or leprosy, and thought it was too bad,
 but on account of the flag
 and prosperity
 and making the world safe for democracy,
 they were afraid to be with him,
 or to think much about him for fear they might believe him;
 for he said:
While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal class I am of it, while there is a soul in prison I am not free. (42P 26-27)

The documentary content of this passage has been organized, once again, to produce an efficient singularity of effect: that at the very height of his popularity, Debs was arrested for his public opposition to U.S. participation in the First World War; that his prosecution and imprisonment were part of the massive government-directed assault on American radicalism (led by President Wilson), which also involved a sustained official campaign of jingoistic, anti-Red propaganda; and that, by the time Debs was released from prison, he had been effectively isolated from much of his working-class constituency, was broken in health, and never regained a significant political role in the years before his death.¹⁸ At this documentary level, Dos Passos offers a compressed and nuanced account of the social *causes* of Debs' political defeat and of the American Left's loss of its preeminent spokesman. Dos Passos thus directs his own anger—and that of his readers—at President Wilson, at the government's systematic policy of incarcerating dissenters, and at the ideological apparatus that successfully deployed a militarist nationalism to intimidate all those seeking economic change in the name of a more just and less alienated society.

But Dos Passos' task of mourning runs deeper than this. For he recognized that the suppression of Debs and other radicals was made possible not only by the actions of the government, but also by weaknesses within the Left itself, which failed adequately to resist the onslaught. In

¹⁸ The selectivity of this account is particularly revealing in one respect: in order to enforce his interpretive emphasis on Debs' betrayal and isolation, Dos Passos notably omits any mention of the fact that Debs earned about as many votes for the Presidency in 1920, while in prison, as he had in 1912.

order to mourn the destruction of American radicalism, in other words, Dos Passos also had to come to terms with his anger at the movement he had loved and lost. While the documentary strand of the Debs biography identifies the structures of government-sponsored repression, the libidinal strand that accompanies it focuses its attention—and its anger—on these deeper (psychocultural) failings within the movement itself. Facing this kind of ambivalence is one of the deepest obstacles to mourning—and the second half of the Debs biography seeks to meet this challenge. Having acknowledged the structures of external repression, Dos Passos seeks most strenuously to understand the fears that caused Debs' "brothers" to abandon him.

The second half of the biography is largely organized around the angry question, "But where were Gene Debs's brothers in nineteen eighteen [...]?"—and the implicit, polemical argument that the incarceration of Debs, and the destruction of the mass movement for which he was a spokesman, were enabled by a fear of solidarity within the working class. For Dos Passos asserts that the very people whom Debs saw and addressed as "brothers" were ultimately "fond of him and afraid of him and thought of him as an old kindly uncle who loved them, and wanted to be with him and to have him give them candy." This sentence makes no pretense of objective dispassion: it is saturated with a sarcasm that expresses Dos Passos' own anger, disappointment and judgment. It argues that the working people of the mid-West feel a deep ambivalence about Debs (that they are at once "fond of him and afraid of him")—and, more specifically, that underneath their fear lies a continuing desire for benign paternalism. Debs has seen and addressed them as brothers, but they "thought of him," in return, as an "old kindly uncle." He has offered them a vision of fraternity, but they want him "to give them candy." This last phrase is especially damning, for it suggests that Debs' "brothers" have more than accepted the passive role of "followers," wanting him not only to "lead" but simply to "give them" the good things they desire. Debs has warned them that if they "are looking for a Moses to lead [them]," they will "stay right where [they] are"—and Dos Passos suggests that the warning, unheeded, has come true. Yearning still for a hierarchical figure who will deliver the things they want, they have forsaken the promise of brotherhood and have declined the challenge of active individual commitment to collectivity and equality. As a result, the movement that might have enabled "brothers to be free men" has been broken. Having hardly glimpsed the "promised land," they have remained in "the capitalist wilderness."

The fate of socialism, according to this account, is the fate of a certain kind of desire. Dos Passos imagines socialism, as I have already suggested, as rooted in a fraternal impulse that is active, explosive, always outward-moving, seeking ever-expanding community, connection and solidarity. Its figure is a fire that does not consume or quench itself, that does not destroy the conditions of its possibility, whose burning is an animation, an expression of self and an invitation to others. The fear of socialism is imagined as a deformation of this desire, or a substitution for it of another kind of want: a yearning, instead, for a passive gratification that brings desire to an end, a yearning that Dos Passos associates not with mobility and social expansiveness, but with fixity, social limitation, and a cessation of energy.¹⁹ The desire for hierarchy is the principal form that this fear of fraternal libido takes: a desire not for active democracy but to "follow" where another "leads"; a desire not for the reciprocities of love, but simply to be "loved"; a desire for an avuncular dispensation of the kind of sweet, compensatory treats that pacify a child.

Even as Dos Passos marshals this incisive critique of the socialist movement he loved and mourned, he also succumbs to the temptation to displace his anger—and at least partially to obscure the object of his condemnation. This displacement takes the form of a misogyny that provides a different name for American radicals' fear of solidarity. The writer suggests, in short, that his comrades have evaded Debs' fraternal love because they have chosen to embrace a conventional, feminized domesticity. In response to the angry question, "where were Gene Debs's brothers in nineteen eighteen," Dos Passos replies, in effect, that they are at home with their wives. The ominous significance of this misogynistic logic evolves slowly over the course of the prose-poem's second half, as Dos Passos charts the deformation of an expansive, solidaristic desire

¹⁹ Dos Passos' account of the desire for and fear of socialism mirrors Freud's late drive-theory, which posits a conflict between Eros (the drive to form ever-greater, libidinally charged unities) and the death-drive (the impulse to eliminate all tension and excitation, to return to stasis). While Freud himself was conscious of the ways in which the drive-theory might be used to explain the movement for socialism, his temperamental pessimism made him cautious: see *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (1930; NY: Norton, 1989) especially 70-71 and 109. It fell to Left Freudians like Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown in the 1960s to explore in theoretical detail this psychoanalytic reading of socialism: see, respectively, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955; NY: Vintage, 1961) and *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1959).

(figured by him, and many others in his generation, as fraternal and therefore male) into a constrained domesticity, marked female. Speaking of Debs' "brothers," Dos Passos begins by asking: "where were the big men fond of whiskey and fond of each other, gentle rambling tellers of stories over bars in small towns in the Middle West [?]" This initial characterization offers a kind of homosocial male pastoral that gives a specific metaphorical form to the idealized fraternity evoked in the first half of the biography. It is an image of working-men together, enjoying simple pleasures (they are "fond of whiskey"), reciprocally exchanging affection (they are "fond of each other"), and sharing experiences through acts of self-expression (they are "rambling tellers of stories"). The second characterization is far more ambivalent. It metaphorically suggests the deformation and constriction of the fraternal impulse: they are now "quiet men who wanted a house with a porch to putter around and a fat wife to cook for them, a few drinks and cigars, a garden to dig in, cronies to chew the rag with/ and wanted to work for it/ and others to work for it." This second image is by no means wholly negative, for it contains many of the original impulses: these are still ordinary men, enjoying the simple pleasures of drink and "chewing the rag" with their "cronies"—and Dos Passos still insists on their inclination to "work" for their pleasures alongside "others." But as the scene has shifted from the public space of the "bar" to the private space of the "house," a new constraint and passivity emerge: the "big men" who were "rambling tellers of stories" have now become "quiet men" who, with an implicit aimlessness, "putter around." Moreover, and more importantly, as soon as a woman is introduced as a necessary presence within this domestic scene, male desire takes on a supine hierarchical character that notably collides with the assertion that these men "want to work for it." The role of this "fat wife" is simply to "cook for them," to perform the work that enables men to have their appetite sated without any exertion of their own. The characterization of the wife as "fat" is crucial to the symbolic structure Dos Passos is creating here: the woman in the domestic space is explicitly desexualized; she is represented not as an equal partner who shares and stimulates an active libidinal desire, but as a functionalized, quasi-maternal figure who (like the "old kindly uncle") brings a certain hunger to an end. Through this image, Dos Passos suggests that the same men who want brotherhood also want a domesticity that discourages the active, expansive, reciprocal and self-sustaining desire associated with fraternity, eliciting (and satisfying) in its place a yearning for passive gratification.

The full significance of this embrace of domesticity is only revealed in

the following sentence, where Debs' own home-coming is described:

And they brought him back to die in Terre Haute
to sit on his porch in a rocker with a cigar in his mouth
beside him American Beauty roses his wife fixed in a bowl.

Because the preceding sentence has ended, "where were the locomotive firemen and engineers when *they* hustled him off to Atlanta Penitentiary," the pronoun at the beginning of this new sentence is disturbingly ambiguous: its implied reference is to "the locomotive firemen and engineers"—but the grammatical referent is the unspecified official "they" who have "hustled him off" to jail. As a result, Debs' "brothers," who have turned fearfully from the expansive fraternity of socialism to the passivity of a feminine domesticity, are now ambiguously associated with the very men who have taken Debs to jail. The domestic retreat to which they bring him is figured, in turn, as an affective equivalent of the jail itself. Home is where he is brought, explicitly, "to die." It is the end and antithesis of mobility, energy, and the movement outward to new connection. The "railroadman" who "traveled all over the country as organizer" is now relegated to a "rocker" on the domestic "porch." The unquenchable fire of fraternity that "burned" in his "gusty words" and that "set on fire the railroad workers" is now parodically reduced to the cigar that silences him. The presiding spirit of domesticity, the desexualized wife, now tellingly "fixe[s]" flowers "in a bowl," just as Debs himself is fixed, stationary and silent, in the domestic space. Heaping up the ironic signifiers, Dos Passos insists that these flowers, which decorate Debs' confinement, are "American Beauty" roses—an emblem and reflection of the jingoistic patriotism in the name of which Debs has been incarcerated.

Through these images, Dos Passos thus explores and expresses a deep anger at the socialist movement he had loved and lost. He condemns, above all, the willingness of American radicals to turn away from the difficult and exciting challenge of equality and solidarity. He partially displaces this anger through a conventional (if peculiarly socialist) misogyny, implying that his male comrades' embrace of hierarchy is somehow, to some degree, the fault of women: that a desexualized, feminized domesticity (and the "fat wife" who embodies it) has lured them away from the promise of fraternity and socialism. The importance of this misogyny must not be underestimated. For Dos Passos, as for many male radicals of his generation, the socialist promise of a "fraternal" solidarity often rested (unconsciously as well as consciously) on the exclusion of

women – an exclusion that had devastating consequences for a movement that imagined itself as forging an inclusive solidarity. In this particular context, as Dos Passos sought to mourn the failures of the Left, he deployed that misogyny in ways that shielded male radicals from the full force of his anger, shifting blame in part onto women who were constructed as seductive outsiders.

This misogyny creates, however, only a *partial* displacement – for it does not wholly obscure the central object of Dos Passos' critique. He focuses his anger most directly and persistently at male radicals and at their fear, which has made Debs' imprisonment possible. It is they who have consigned him to the passivity, constraint, and isolation of a libidinal condition whose end is death. Above all, Dos Passos condemns their continued yearning for hierarchy. For here lies one of the most remarkable insights of the Debs biography, and of Dos Passos' political mourning: that hierarchy (including patriarchal authority) leads to a libidinal diminution, a weakening, of all—leaders as well as followers, those raised to dominance as well as those who accept their own subordination. Because his brothers fear fraternity, they have placed Debs in a hierarchical position of authority (as "leader," "uncle," father-figure)—and yet this elevation does *not* make Debs more powerful. Rather, it reduces him to precisely the same state of passivity, silence and constraint to which the "brothers" have fearfully reduced themselves. By making him the "kindly uncle" who "give[s] them candy," they also make him the childlike figure on the porch who is tended by his maternal wife. The same ambiguous effect is also present in the treatment of the wives themselves, who are at once made into subordinates (servants) and into superiors (maternal figures who have the power to satisfy the passive men who wait for their service). Dos Passos insists here on a deeply egalitarian insight, even as he himself partially evades and vitiates it by his own uneasy misogyny: that hierarchy weakens. When people fear the challenge and the emotional intensities of equality, and turn instead to the apparent safety and ease of hierarchical relationships imagined as benign, they thwart the libidinal possibilities of their own lives and of those whom they have constructed as "leader," "uncle," father, mother.²⁰ Dos Passos goes on to

²⁰ Roughly the same story was told a generation later, by two other psychologically-oriented socialist writers, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. Elaborating Freud's allegorical account in *Totem and Taboo* within an explicitly socialist framework, Marcuse and Brown both argued that the "revolution of the sons" is always undone when they seek to elevate one of their own into the vacated position of

suggest that, in the grip of this fear, Debs' "brothers" can no longer remain open to the expansive, egalitarian impulse for which he speaks. They must close themselves off to "the gusty rhetoric" that formerly "set [them] on fire." The fraternal vision that Dos Passos has described as an animating, self-renewing blaze that "burned" in all the men, they now perceive as a contagion that threatens to stigmatize and destroy them: "they were afraid of him as if he had contracted a social disease, syphilis or leprosy." Again, the metaphor is more complex than it looks. It contains, to begin with, an erotic component, in that the fear of socialism is now imagined as analogous to the fear of a sexually transmitted disease: syphilis. The sexuality purged from the domestic space suddenly reappears here in the fears of Debs' "brothers." Having turned to a desexualized domesticity as an alternative to a threateningly intense form of solidaristic desire, they now perceive that desire to be a "social disease" like those transmitted through illicit sexual connections.²¹ The relationship implied here between

the father. All the libidinal possibilities of solidarity and equality, they suggest, are destroyed in this single act. The deformation of a democratic socialism into an authoritarian Stalinism was already weighing on Dos Passos' mind at the time he composed *U.S.A.* (see *Mourning Modernity*, chap. 4)—and the preoccupation with this catastrophe in the later years of the century helps to explain its persistent importance to Brown and Marcuse. See Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, especially chap. 4, where he discusses the "element of *self-defeat* ... involved in this dynamic," as a result of which "every revolution has also been a betrayed revolution" (82-83). See also Norman O. Brown, particularly *Love's Body* (NY: Knopf, 1966), chap. 1, where he explains that "the history of Marxism shows how hard it is to kill the father" (8). While Marcuse and Brown largely replicate the patriarchal caste of Freud's original account of these dynamics, a later generation of feminists thinkers — including Gayle Rubin, Juliet Mitchell and Jessica Benjamin—have demonstrated the role of gender hierarchy in vitiating the emancipatory impulses of earlier psychoanalytic and socialist projects. In this context, see especially, Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (NY: Pantheon, 1988).

²¹ The association of venereal disease with *illicit* sexuality (usually between frustrated men and prostitutes) is repeated with remarkable frequency in the trilogy's fictional story-lines. In *U.S.A.*'s other radical biographies, Dos Passos' persistently associates socialism with the desire for an active, unfettered (hetero)sexuality, and the rejection of socialism with a conventional bourgeois fear of sex. (See *Mourning Modernity* 149-169.) This pattern of representation significantly complicates Dos Passos' treatment of women. On the one hand, the desexualized woman (or the woman who is merely fearful of the ramifications of sex) becomes a persistent symbol for (and the active enforcer of) the constrained, repressive realities of bourgeois society. On the

socialist aspiration and sexuality deepens Dos Passos' libidinal account of socialism. For this fearful fantasy mirrors, through its negation, a positive intuition that pervades *U.S.A.*: that a socialist politics might be rooted not only in the desire for an expansive homosociality, but also in the longing for non-alienated sexual connections. (There are, of course, at least two kinds of sexuality repressed in this prose-poem: the heterosexuality purged from the bourgeois domestic space and the homosexuality towards which Dos Passos' representation of these passionate, exciting male bonds tends but that it never openly acknowledges.)²² Dos Passos insists here that Debs' comrades fear his invitation to socialism just as they fear the dangers of sexuality.

The imagined destructiveness of unfettered, undomesticated relations is fantasized most concretely in the reference to leprosy: a disease that, in literally eating away at the body, destroys and reduces individuals rather than augmenting them through connection. The metaphor dramatically distorts and reverses the initial utopian image of the locomotive fire, which animates without destroying and carries the men outward to new connections. Through a monstrous inversion, the logic of disease does indeed resemble the logic of solidarity. Both are transmitted to an ever-widening population through intimate contact and expressions of desire. To see socialism as a lethal and contagious disease is to see it as a force not of life but of death. From this fearful perspective, it appears not as the promise of equality, collectivity and freedom, but as the threat of destruction. To describe this impulse as a "social disease" is to capture the fear of stigma that surrounded socialism during the intimidating ideological campaign of the Red Scare ("on account of the flag/ and prosperity/ and making the world safe for democracy/ they were afraid to be with him"). Engaged in the strenuous work of mourning, Dos Passos here again reminds us that the losses suffered by American radicals were,

other, the possibility of a truly free society is equally associated with the possibility of women fearlessly embracing their own sexuality. Frequently, as in "Lover of Mankind," the ambivalence toward socialism that is explicitly explored in terms of male choices is also, in effect, acted out through representations of women that alternate—with a disorienting instability—between the explicitly misogynistic and the implicitly feminist. Janet Galligani Casey has discussed some aspects of Dos Passos' ambivalence toward femininity in *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

²² On the tension between the implicitly sexual caste of these male homosocial bonds between Left comrades and its disavowal in Dos Passos' representations see *Mourning Modernity* chap. 6.

indeed, the result of a vast ideological campaign—but burrowing deeper, in his grief and anger, he insists that these losses stemmed also from American radicals' fear of their own desires.

Enveloped in these fears—which were at once deeply psychological and eminently material—"the people of the Middle West" seek to separate themselves from the danger that Debs now represents. Like a sexual transgressor in a puritanical society, he must be cast out (especially by those who feel his transgressive desire in themselves). The bearer of a deadly disease, he must be quarantined. And because it is his words that carry the promise—or threat—of fraternity, the people are not merely "afraid to be with him," but even "to think much about him for fear they might believe him." To hear the words would be to open themselves again to the possibilities of a repressed desire; to "think about him" is to risk "believing" in the potentialities, political and personal, that have burned in all of them.

In the second half of the prose-poem, then, Dos Passos identifies with considerable subtlety the causes of his political loss and the objects of his anger. He sketches in brief strokes the political and ideological formations of the Red Scare that crushed leaders such as Debs. He had the courage to acknowledge also that the movement he had lost must share some blame for its own demise: that the hundreds of thousands who were active Socialists, and the millions who had sympathized with the movement ("the people of the Middle West" among them), had failed to resist the government's suppression of a democratic movement for social change. While there is some displacement of this anger through a conventional misogyny, Dos Passos insists that if the Left was to grieve for its losses fully, it must acknowledge most centrally its fear of its own desires – for equality, for solidarity, for unfettered and expansive connection.

Having acknowledged the depth and the objects of his anger, Dos Passos was able in the concluding lines of the prose-poem to fulfill the work of mourning, to perform rhetorically and substantively the quintessential gesture of the radical biographies. Here he regains access to his own psychic and political investments in a movement whose defeat he has factually documented and libidinally anatomized. He reminds the reader that the human possibilities that Debs embodied persist into the present, despite their past negation. Having insisted that Debs' contemporaries are afraid to "think much about him for fear they might believe him," Dos Passos proceeds to reassert precisely what they are too fearful even to think about: "for he said:/ *While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal class I am of it, while there is a soul in*

prison I am not free." This famous statement enacts one last time, now in Debs' own words, the solidaristic impulse—the "love of mankind"—that Dos Passos has identified as the affective root of his socialism. It is, above all, a declaration of solidarity, an assertion that he stands with all those who are vulnerable—to economic exploitation, in particular, and to the forms of criminalization that follow from economic vulnerability in a class society. Much of its power derives from the idealistic and performative character of the statement: from Debs' assertion not simply that he *is* a member of the lower class, but that as a matter of principle, of loyalty—of fraternal "love"—he *will always be* a member of that class, as long as one exists. The expansive and utopian character of the utterance is intensified by our knowledge that Debs' identification with "the criminal class" is rooted in his own experience of imprisonment. This lends a particular pathos, and an aura of indomitability, to his lingering, perpetual promise that "while there is a soul in prison I am not free." Just as the persistence of this declaration of solidarity survives his own incarceration, so too the expansive, outward-moving character of the solidaristic impulse survives the libidinal constraint imposed upon him by his comrades' fearfulness. For at the heart of his declaration lies an identification, an empathy, that refuses to be limited—by geography, nation, ethnicity or gender; even by time.²³ It expresses a love that perpetually seeks, and finds, new objects, new comrades.

The rhetorical structure here is as important as the content of the words. The entire second half of the biography consists of two complex, lengthy sentences. The first is an impassioned question—"But where were Gene Debs's brothers [...]?"—which creates a direct appeal to the reader, demanding that we establish an active relationship to the story being told, and assume the responsibility to reply. The second sentence ends by confronting the reader with the very words that Debs' own contemporaries have refused to hear. Having evoked the expansive, utopian potential of Debs' fraternal vision in the first half of the biography, and having insisted in the second that Debs' comrades betrayed that vision because they feared (as well as shared) it, Dos Passos then concludes by placing us in their position, reconstituting once again the crucial moment of personal and political decision. Here, Dos Passos says, are Debs' words: it is up to you,

²³ It is worth emphasizing that Debs' words imply no gendered restriction to this expansive solidarity. Dos Passos' own yearning for such an inclusive solidarity is, of course, persistently undermined by the limits of his own capacity for identification – as, for example, in the misogyny present in this biography and throughout the trilogy.

as it was up to them, to listen or not, to embrace or reject this possibility as your own. Depriving us of the luxury of not thinking or not hearing—of not remembering—he offers the opportunity of deciding anew. The eerie temporal-linguistic shift from the historical past tense of the biography to the present tense of Debs' utterance enacts in language the essential, difficult work of tradition-building: that something crushed in the past—an idea, a feeling, a libidinal impulse, a political aspiration—continues to exist in the present. Debs speaks, now, again: to us. It is the hopeful gesture, the gift, of a robust mourning. That which had been embodied in the dead socialist is reanimated, the betrayed ideal is recalled, the words remembered. A writer in political mourning over the Red Scare, Dos Passos recalls the lost hero and the betrayed ideal, not merely as a private memory, as a retreat from new relationship and new possibilities. Rather, the memory is proffered here as a means of reaching out from past to present, from author to reader, in the hope of extending and renewing a shared aspiration.

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Edited by

Maria Zina Gonçalves de Abreu
and Bernardo Guido de Vasconcelos

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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