Consider this entry in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s working notebooks: “Continents starving for want of coal finally get some but can’t digest it because it’s hard coal. After the war—hollow victory—they lost Montreal and it’s wet. Profiteers in daguerreotypes. Everybody tired of Yankee Doodle. Men seasick crossing the Delaware. Rammed her petticoat down cannon, she was restrained. British walked away with hands over their eyes.” Few readers, if any, I suspect, will recognize what was just quoted as a burlesque on the iconic figure of Molly Pitcher of Revolutionary War fame, and it is even less likely that anyone will recognize that its author is F. Scott Fitzgerald, who set it down, undated, in his notebooks. Least likely of all is the fact that the author of *The Great Gatsby* was burlesquing what was once the readily recognized telegraphic historical style pioneered by John Dos Passos (JDP).

Such has been the fate of this novelist—to have become pretty much a faded name from the past, but his most important literary work, the trilogy published under the covering title *U.S.A.*, has remained in print without interruption since it first appeared in 1939 and has most recently been enshrined in the Library of America series. That he was a dedicated, conscientious and outspoken observer of American society (at times, a very vocal social critic and political activist, as evidenced, for example, in his efforts (unsuccessful) on behalf of the Anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in the late 1920s. To the F.B.I. he was a public figure of interest who required watching, filing some of its information under the name “John Passos,” inadvertently echoing John Dos Passos’ joke at his own expense that his name could be translated in more senses than one, might echo a famous brand of scotch whiskey—“Johnnie Walker.”
The odd thing about Dos Passos’ literary reputation, as great as it was when he was numbered right up there with William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as the U.S.’s great modernists of the first half of the twentieth century, is that there have always been sporadic attempts to rehabilitate it. As early as the mid-1950s, while Dos Passos was still writing and publishing, the noted American teacher-critic Richard Chase was telling students that it was time to take another look at Dos Passos’ achievement. A bountiful edition of his journals and a sweepingly detailed biography by Townsend Ludington, along with a large biography by the distinguished biographer Virginia Spencer Carr, have garnered some immediate attention but have not brought about the “new look” at Dos Passos that Richard Chase called for. The most noteworthy exception in this matter is “The Lost Humanist Republic of John Dos Passos,” an essay by the poet-scholar Reed Whittemore, included in his *Six Literary Lives: The Shared Impiety of Adams, London, Sinclair, William, Dos Passos, and Tate* in 1993, a piece in which he offers the hypothesis that Dos Passos the writer was never able to reconcile his social and political interests with his attraction to art, an impossibility for him that came to be part of his reputation as a writer.

There are many reasons, one speculates, for this relative neglect of Dos Passos in American culture, especially as a novelist. His increasingly conservative thinking, as evidenced by his spate of books that put forth his take on American history, as well as, toward the end of his life, on Brazil (a book hated by the American poet, Elizabeth Bishop, who lived in Brazil for nearly twenty years and who did not personally dislike Dos Passos) and, notably, Portugal—a reprising largely of the official Portuguese history enjoyed by many during the years of the Estado Novo.

Significantly, it is not *The Portugal Story* that has brought renewed attention to Dos Passos on the part of the Portuguese. The existence of the John Dos Passos Cultural Centre on the proud Portuguese island of Madeira, which celebrates the writer’s Madeiran heritage and promotes a larger role for him in American literary history and culture, helps to fan the flame of Dos Passos’s sometimes flickering reputation.

This brings us in a roundabout way to the book under review, *John Dos Passos: Biography and Critical Essays*, which presents a selection of those papers read at an international conference on John Dos Passos held in Funchal, Madeira, in 2006, some of which, it is evident, have been expanded for publication. There are nineteen papers in all, grouped under three headings: (1) “Biographical Insights;” (2) “John Dos Passos: the American Modernist;” and (3) “Ideology, Social Critique, and Gender.” In the first grouping are pieces on JDP as “a major American Modernist;” “Portugal” as a factor in JDP’s “stream-of-memory;” the
Ernest Hemingway-JDP troubled relationship; JDP’s vision of history and war; JDP’s writing about the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Red Army in 1921; and JDP and the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The second group includes studies of Walt Whitman and JDP’s *Manhattan Transfer*; the New York flashes in the same novel; the question of journalistic objectivity raised by JDP’s “Camera Eye” pieces; and of parallels between JDP and the German writer Irmgard Keun. The last group includes pieces on the uses and misuses of satire in JDP’s early work; JDP’s fiction in the context of the “Anarchist City Novel;” ethnicity in JDP’s *U.S.A.;* the application of the tools of modern sociology to *Manhattan Transfer;* the ambivalent uses of the “vagabond” and the “vag” in *U.S.A.* and Claude McKay’s *Banjo;* JDP’s “radical biography” of Eugene V. Debs in *U.S.A.;* “migration” as a theme in *Three Soldiers;* female characters of the early novel *Streets of Night;* and JDP’s notions of masculinity in *Three Soldiers.*

There are riches aplenty in this persistently earnest volume of essays that range widely in their focus and stress, from investigations into biographical identity and historical contextualization to forays into ideology, gender study, and sociology. Along the way, one encounters studies that reflect recent critical approaches such as the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and the various undetected (or at least under-stressed) social constructions of ethnicity and masculinity. Yet when all is said and done, the old question remains. Why does not John Dos Passos matter more in American literary, social and political history? Or, to put it another way, why has it been so difficult to define what it is about Dos Passos and his work that really matters. There have been a plethora of books, monographs, and essays over the many decades, but they have had relatively little effect in returning him to the high place he and his works enjoyed in the public conscience through the 1930s. Of course, his swing from the leftist politics of his novels through the trilogy *U. S. A.* to the right-wing “recantations” of his later, less memorable fictional products is the quick easy fix of an answer. What such an explanation fails to explain, however, is why Dos Passos does not satisfy readers, neither those interested in literature, nor those interested in history. They read his books once, one ventures, but those books do not bear re-reading. His “creds” are not those of the academic historian (or even the gifted amateur such as Edmund Wilson), nor those of the unquestionably successful writer of fiction. His “history” is vitiated by his always apparent ideological designs on his readers. His novels fail as novels at the point of character. His novels are replete with ideas (often very good ones) that seem to be always looking for characters to inhabit. They do not strike me as realized individuals who, along with everything else, have ideas. Hence Dos Passos’s failure, as I see it, to create
memorable characters larger than the stories that give them space. It is impossible to name a single one that ranks with Leatherstocking, Hester Prynne, Huck Finn, Edna Pontellier, Frederic Henry, Ethan Frome, Jay Gatsby, Caddy Compson, Holden Caulfield, Tom Joad, Jamil Crawford, Rabbit Angstrom, to name just a few.

Conflicted over his own ethnic identity—identities, really, that included an historical one—JDP had difficulty defining his own character. This may be one reason why reading his journals and letters and even poems gives more than one reader greater pleasure than working through his novels. These personal accounts tell us so much more about Dos Passos’s discontent with his self-perceived and never forgotten ethnicities. A second-generation-born American, his Portuguese grandfather having emigrated to the United States from the island of Madeira, Dos Passos was born out of wedlock but raised (to the age of fourteen or so) as a “Madison,” the son of Lucy Madison, who only later, as a widower, would marry her son’s father. That belated marriage served, among other things, to “legitimize” the boy, who then took on the surname of “Dos Passos,” as his very successful corporate lawyer father was called. All this created problems for the boy who grew up to become a famous writer in America, but never got over the stigma of his Portuguese surname “Dos Passos,” the meaning of which he mocked by translating it as “steps” or “walker.”

The question for me remains whether all the king’s horses and all the king’s men—to wit the use of the critical and ideological weapons at the disposal of today’s scholars and critics—put Humpty-Dumpty (in this case, the high-flying Dos Passos of the twenties and thirties) back together again. Is there out there in the future a slouching beast—rude or not—that will restore him to the heights enjoyed even today by his contemporaries Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald? We may be a far cry from the perhaps too hasty judgment of a Jean Paul Sartre, who, following the publication of U.S.A., famously declared that John Dos Passos was the greatest writer of our time. Still, that he is one of our truly significant modernists I do not doubt. It’s just that to this point we seem not to have the language to tell us why or the argument that will convince. If the Dos Passos situation is to change for the better, we shall have to have more books like John Dos Passos: Biography and Critical Essays.

Note
1 It is not unlikely that when in Three Soldiers Dos Passos named his autobiographic hero “John Andrews,” he is parodying his own name. Andrews echoes ‘andar,’ the common word in Spanish and Portuguese for the infinitive “to walk.”