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<th>JOHNN HOWARD LAWSON'S &quot;A Haystack in France&quot; (c. 1964-1967)</th>
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“A Haystack in France” is the apparently tentative title of a chapter in one of several versions of John Howard Lawson’s unfinished and unpublished autobiography, itself variously and tentatively titled.¹)

The present article is a summary of “A Haystack in France” and, even though quotation marks are not used, closely follows Lawson’s own language, as well as his structure.

Historians of American literature will find this summary useful in understanding the life and work of John Howard Lawson, who, among important American writers of the 20th century, remains comparatively unknown.

Footnotes will alert literary historians and critics to certain aspects of Lawson’s experience that may require further elucidation.

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“A Haystack in France”

On an autumn afternoon in 1917, John Howard Lawson and John Dos Passos sat together on a haystack in a field in France. They had just purchased notebooks and pencils in a nearby village. Dos Passos began to write a novel, Lawson began to write a play.

It was a peaceful day. The landscape was charming and orderly, suggesting centuries of fruitful toil. The hay gave off a fresh smell. There was an orchestra of insects.

On the horizon guns rumbled, the Front only a short distance away.

The ambulance unit of which they were members had been

¹) Susan Amanda Lawson, John Howard Lawson’s daughter, has permitted me to read two, sometimes three, versions of Lawson’s unfinished chapters (dealing with his life up to the mid-1930s) which she herself may have edited.
sent back behind the lines to rest after having participated in the French army’s capture of Dead Man’s Hill and Hill 304.

When the United States entered the war in Europe, John Howard Lawson had joined the volunteer ambulance service with the French forces. He did so to avoid the military draft. He was opposed to the war, but his convictions were not strong enough for him to risk going to prison by evading the draft. His education had taught him to conform. His family situation made conformity necessary: public refusal to serve would have jeopardized his father’s position as Reuter News Agency’s General Manager in the United States and Canada. Lawson’s father agreed with him that he should avoid the dangers of the infantry.

Lawson sailed for France in June 1917. On the ship Chicago he met John Dos Passos. They spent six weeks in training with their ambulance unit then they drove to the Verdun front.

Their unit consisted of twenty ambulances, each in charge of two men. In the early morning darkness of August 20, they followed blindly as the infantry moved forward.

The road was littered with damaged vehicles. And with corpses of horses. And of men. Lawson’s ambulance became separated from the others; he did not know whether he was ahead of the advance or behind it. The smell of dead horses and dead men became the bitter-sweet smell of mustard gas. Lawson put on his gas-mask and drove on. Eventually he found a dressing station. Wounded men were pushed into the slots for stretchers in the ambulance. He drove back, bumping through shell-holes.

The light of dawn showed what had been the wood of Avocourt had become a wasteland.

Most of the wounded men in the ambulance were dead on arrival. Lawson made the same journey a hundred times. In his ambulance unit however no one was wounded or killed.

Lawson and Dos Passos had become close friends. Their intellectual kinship was strengthened by their brief encounter with

2) In 1919 Dos Passos bases the character of Ed Schuyler on Lawson.
the war—and was strengthened by it. The world they had known was changed. They tried to register that change by writing.

For them, as for many others, the war was an end and a beginning. The shock of battle was not its lasting effect. Their encounter with death deepened their sense of life. Their sense of life was exclusively cultural. Their attitude toward art was changed and intensified.

Lawson and Dos Passos had identical feelings about art. They had reached their conclusions by different routes. Lawson was two years older, already scarred by his precocious adventure in the commercial theatre. He seemed younger than Dos Passos in many ways, however, and learned more from Dos Passos than Dos Passos learned from him.

Their backgrounds had certain similarities. Each of them had an over-privileged childhood. Each had lacked the benefits of a family or community milieu. Dos Passos’ European childhood in luxury hotels in Europe, his 1916 stay in Spain, his Harvard education, all gave him a sophistication that living in New York and attending Williams College had not given Lawson.

Lawson had scattered knowledge of avant garde trends. Dos Passos gave him his first keen awareness of the aesthetic revolution

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3) See my “John Howard Lawson’s Introduction to Broadway” (Kyushu American Literature, No. 20, 1979).

4) Lawson’s mother died when he was seven years old, but he was fortunate to have mother-surrogates in Elizabeth Ferm Byrne at the Children’s Playhouse in New Rochelle and in Florence Young at the Halsted School in Yonkers. See my “John Howard Lawson: Childhood” (Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Nagasaki University, Humanities, Vol. 19, January 1979).

5) Lawson had some experience of luxury hotels himself, e. g., in the summer of 1906 he kept a Journal “Places Visited While Traveling in Europe” and on May 27 noted: “I like the Metropole much better than the Cecil, but I think I like the New York hotels better than either of them.” On February 22, 1907, he attended an art auction in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. (In beginning his autobiography at the age of 70 Lawson may have somewhat exaggerated the sophistication of Dos Passos relative to his own.)
that had been in progress for over ten years. 6)

In politics, too, Dos Passos was far beyond Lawson. Dos Passos was not a systematic political thinker (he was not a systématique person), but he took it for granted that intelligent persons, certainly self-respecting artists, must oppose the stupidities of bourgeois society. 7)

Lawson knew there was something wrong with bourgeois morality and tried to write about it in *Standards*. 8) He had speculated mildly about socialism. 9) But he had not formulated a creed of rebellion that had any substance to it.

Lawson's conversations with Dos Passos made him review his

6) But early in 1913 Lawson and his sister Adelaide saw the world-famous post-Impressionist Show at the 69th National Guard Regiment Armory. And in *Williams Literary Monthly*, May 1913, he wrote "Art for Cube's Sake": he defended cubism, futurism and impressionism. e. g., "the Cubist does not attempt photographic representation but tries to interpret life, giving life more spiritual significance, from the fullness of his own personality." Lawson identified himself with this new movement in art. See my "John Howard Lawson at Williams College" (Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 20, No. 1, September 1979).


8) *Standards*, finished in March 1915, was produced in the autumn of 1916 but failed. In *World Drama* (1949) Allardyce Nicoll says: "*Standards* might easily be considered the strongest of the sentimental social dramas of its period in its criticism of a do-nothing ministry and an interventionist imperialism." *Standards* has never been published. For a summary see my "John Howard Lawson: The Early Years II" (The Keiei to keizai, Vol. 57-2, No. 147, December 1977).

9) At Williams College Lawson was a member of the Socialist Club.
own memories—Shakespeare, college, the Armory Show, his love affair with Berenice Dewey, sullen prostitutes, his vision of the theatre and the stupidity of show business. He began to see that his experience showed that he had moved ignorantly among potent forces. As his recognition of his ignorance came to him, he came to No Man's Land, and a concatenation of forces exploded around him.

Lawson was still ignorant. His encounter with history made him angry and insecure. He had no key to history. He knew the sickness of the age, because he saw men dying of this sickness, but he could not diagnose the illness or prescribe a cure.

Dos Passos was a little more exposed to history. He was more aware of causes and processes. He shared Lawson's feeling that they stood almost alone against gargantuan forces. Art was a release and a safeguard.

Their differences in temperament and training determined their choices of themes as they wrote on the haystack that autumn afternoon—choices that charted the course of their work for many years. Dos Passos began One Man’s Initiation as a direct response

10) On June 16, 1906, at Stratford on Avon Lawson sat in Shakespeare's chair. In March 1906 he had seen Richard Mansfield in King Richard III. In November 1906 he saw Hamlet and Julius Caesar. In February 1907 he saw Twelfth Night, in March 1907 As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice, Othello and Hamlet. In one part of his autobiography he writes: "For me the heart of life was Shakespeare. Other cultural events were incidental and became relevant as aspects of the emotional universe that Shakespeare opened to me... I acquired a feeling for theatre, not as make-believe but as ritual and wonder... Shakespeare introduced me to people making enormous and often fatal moral decisions...All that I grasped at the time was their gargantuan vitality and their fateful acceptance of responsibility for their actions." Lawson never lost his enthusiasm for Shakespeare and in The Hidden Heritage (1950) includes chapters on Hamlet, Coriolanus and The Tempest.

11) Lawson suffered through an unhappy love affair with Berenice Dewey in the last part of 1913. For the story of this affair, see the biographical note in my "John Howard Lawson's A Hindoo Love Drama (1914)" (Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 22, No. 1, July 1981).
to their experience in war. Dos Passos was able to make quick records of his impressions, writing impressionistically with an extraordinary feeling for the sight and sound and texture of physical events. His few days in battle affected him vividly.

Dos Passos' response to war may also have been determined by the extent to which an attitude toward the war was defined in his thoughts before he encountered war. During his childhood in Europe, the probability of war was in the air, in the talk and intrigue and empty gaiety of the luxury hotels. At Harvard Dos Passos discussed the war with students and professors sensitive to its horrors, in varying degrees conscious of its causes.

Lawson had no such backlog of feeling. All that he understood about the war was gleaned from conversations with Dos Passos. Lawson could not organize his impressions of the battle of Verdun. He thought of his own life; he tried to understand himself in new terms.

Lawson started to write a play about a sensitive boy who comes from a small town in the Middle West to enter the chaos of New York. Roger Bloomer had the same theme and the same moral content that Lawson had approached in Standards. The boy-artist cries out against the wealth and power that rule the city, against the killers of the dream, the makers of wars.

The network of trenches that crossed Europe was related in Lawson's mind to the streets of New York. Roger Bloomer was him-but different from him in two essential ways. Roger Bloomer is hungry and alone, which Lawson had never been, and he comes from an environment which was wholly different from Lawson's—a dull, typically American, small town family. This showed how

12) As a "cable editor" at Reuter's New York office in 1914-1915 Lawson read innumerable news stories dealing with the war.
13) Lawson is mistaken. Roger Bloomer, as produced and published in 1923, does not at all cry out against the makers of wars. Lawson may be thinking of his early drafts of Processional, written in 1920 and 1921 while he was still working on Roger Bloomer; two of these drafts include anti-war themes.
deeply Lawson was affected by his own lack of American roots.

On the haystack, Lawson remembered the Iowa landscape he glimpsed from a train window nine years before. Although he knew nothing about the background, the play was about a country boy who goes to the city, one of the most ordinary phenomena of American life.

In attacking bourgeois conformity, Lawson had to attack it from the inside. He declared himself an artist-rebel and for the first time asserted his birthright as an American. This was his being, his personality; he had to declare it.

Lawson worked on Roger Bloomer for six years. As he changed, the play changed. Meanwhile, Dos Passos was preoccupied with the war, first in One Man's Initiation, then in Three Soldiers.

Although they chose different themes, they were moved by a similar impulse. Their rebellion was aesthetic, a sensitive rejection of the world's madness. Martin Howe, the central figure in OMI, is poetically aloof and idealistic. "Martin is not so much rebelling against the war as by his temperament he seems insulated from it." Martin insulates himself because his heart and nerves cannot bear the onslaught.

Lawson and Dos Passos were typical of many young intellectuals of their time.

Hemingway was different. He approached the war with a gravity and romanticism that were given sanction by his experience at Caporetto and by his wound. He found an emotional meaning in the war.

But for many others the war was senseless. Martin Howe says: "God! if there were somewhere nowadays where you could flee from all this stupidity, from all this cant of governments, and this hideous reiteration of hatred, this strangling hatred."

14) For evidence of some of these changes, see my "John Howard Lawson’s 1920 Draft of Roger Bloomer" (The Keiei to keizai, Vol. 60-2, No. 158, September 1980).