John Howard Lawson's
"The War and the Intellectuals" (c. 1964)

LeRoy Robinson

"The War and the Intellectuals" is the apparently tentative title of a chapter in one of several versions of John Howard Lawson's unfinished, unpublished autobiography, begun when he was 70 years old.

The present article is a summary of "The War and the Intellectuals", and, even though quotation marks are not used, closely follows Lawson's own language, as well as his structure.

Historians of the literature of the United States will find this summary useful for 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.

"The War and the Intellectuals"

Randolph Bourne, one of the few American writers who spoke out against the participation of the United States in World War I, denounced "the willingness of the American intellect to open the sluices and flood us with the sewage of the war spirit." At the height of the war hysteria in the United States, Bourne wrote: "There is work to be done to prevent this war of ours from passing into popu-
lar mythology as a holy crusade."

Bourne died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, unaware that his view of the so-called war for democracy would be accepted in a few years, young American intellectuals serving in the armed forces doing more than their share in exposing the myth of a holy crusade. These young men in Europe, thinking their dangerous thoughts and discussing their indignation among themselves, felt they were enemies of a mass delusion propagated by such powerful interests that it could not be attacked. If any of them had been told that in a short time they would be honored for their ideas that seemed so immoderate, they would have been astonished and probably angry that their rebellious temper could be held so lightly by the dominant culture.

These young American in the war were unconscious or half-conscious carriers of ideas that could not be suppressed. Their work later reflected forces already at work when Bourne castigated American intellectuals who supported the United States' government's war effort. In May 1918, Eugene Victor Debs stood on a platform at Cleveland and called for support of people who declared their opposition to the war: "Stand by them; fight for them; go to jail or to Hell for them... They are writing their names in fadeless letters in the history of mankind." 

In Europe, the young Americans who would later become well-

3) Lawson himself was one of these young intellectuals; but he, like many of them, did not serve as a member of the armed forces, but as an ambulance driver.

known writers were insulated from Debs and the people he defended. Some rumor of Debs, arrest and trial may have reached them, but it had no bearing on their situation or their feeling about the war. Bourne's call for intellectual responsibility would have seemed to them courageous at the time but irrelevant. They were not interested in assuming responsibility and saw no chance of doing so.

Karl Radek, addressing "The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers," attempted to explain John Dos Passos' attitude toward the war. Radek referred to mutinies in the French army in the spring of 1917. Radek said that even Dos Passos ("the outstanding American revolutionary writer") "overlooked the hurricane which swept through the French army."

Lawson was intrigued by the word "overlooked" (which may have been a bad translation of a more sensible Russian word), which, taken with another loaded word, "hurricane" (an exaggerated description of the occurrences of spring 1917), placed Dos Passos in a false relationship to events.

Radek offers a proper Marxist analysis of Dos Passos' failure: Dos Passos overlooked the activities of French soldiers in the spring of 1917 because he was lost "in contemplating the bubbles of protest rising up in the souls of petty-bourgeois intellectuals disillusioned by the war."

Radek's analysis compounds the offense of his exaggeration.

---

5) Lawson quotes from Radek's contribution to Problems of Soviet Literature, New York, 1934, p. 79.

6) Lawson, a close friend of Dos Passos for twenty years, never considered the latter a revolutionary writer.
Obviously, bourgeois values had shaped Dos Passos' life and mind. It was a matter of world-shaking importance that the first world war threatened those values and the civilization they had produced.

Dos Passos was not primarily interested in other petty-bourgeois intellectuals, outside his own circle of friends. The war introduced him to a world of experience outside the orbit of his bourgeois world. This new experience shocked his soul--not because he could keep it within the limits of his bourgeois understanding, but because he could not.

The soul--the petty-bourgeois soul no less then any other--is a delicate instrument. In belittling the soul, Radek also made nonsense out of class alignments, assuming that bourgeois culture could be dismissed in toto, and that the individual can dismiss it by turning his attention to matters he has "overlooked".

Discontent in the French army in 1918 was not a hurricane. Dos Passos and Lawson and others overlooked it because they were cut off from any knowledge of it.

But there was a more serious barrier in their minds. They could

---

7) John Howard Lawson's first drama in modern idiom was entitled Souls. See my "John Howard Lawson's Souls (1915)", The Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 59-2, No. 154, September 1979. In his introduction to his unfinished autobiography (c. 1964), Lawson writes: "I have consulted my soul in deciding to write this book". Earlier in this same introduction he refers to his talk at the funeral of Theodore Dreiser (January 3, 1946): "I cannot suppose that my optimistic rhetoric brought peace to his soul." It is not generally known that between 1906 and 1910 John Howard Lawson, still a young boy, was deeply devoted to Christian Science. See my "John Howard Lawson: Childhood", Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 19, January 1978.
not imagine the rebel-artist merging his anger with the anger of the people. They could not even want it, because it would violate the precious sensibility they were determined to protect. It would force them to accept modes of action and conflict which they could not comprehend or trust.

When the young American intellectuals in the ambulance service first heard of the Bolshevik Revolution, they were excited by an event which was outside their catalogue of historical possibilities. But that unexpected chapter of history took place in a distant land under conditions that were alien to them.

John Reed was there in Russia and reported about crowds marching under the Red flag, singing "The Internationale". Lawson and his friends wished they were there in Russia with Reed, but merely as an adventure, not as an action to which they pledged their lives. They could not imagine ourselves marching with people who were so close to us that our fates were linked, in the familiar cities of our own country.

At the time the events in Russia did not cut deeply into the emotions of Lawson and his friends, but the war did. The war posed an insoluble dilemma; they wanted to escape, but there was no escape, either from the war or from the society that produced it. Their conduct, in 1917 and 1918, was an accurate reflection of their state of mind: They thrashed around in an inconclusive effort to avoid involve-

8) In 1928 Lawson's play "The International" (including the singing of "The Internationale" in Italian) was produced by the New Playwrights Theatre. In March 1967 Lawson wrote an introduction to a new edition of John Reed's 10 Days That Shook the World.

9) In 1937 Lawson did imagine such a march in his drama Marching Song.
They felt no obligation to declare their opposition to the war. Their obligation was only to themselves. Their obligation was to the integrity of their own minds. Since they could not offer any effective opposition, they had to treat the war as a grotesque adventure. They mocked military authority, but they avoided tangling with it. They preferred mockery to martyrdom.

When United States armed forces arrived in France, the volunteer ambulance units with the French troops were to be transferred to the American army. The transfer was not compulsory, however, and Lawson and his friends could choose to return to the United States. In September 1917 they received letters of thanks from the French general under whose command they had been, and they went to Paris with orders to arrange transatlantic transportation.

Lawson and his friends ignored the orders. They remained in Paris, illegally, for two months of revelry. They began to form a cohesive group. Lawson, Dos Passos and Robert Hillyer were the most articulate members; there were four or five others who shared their views.

They lived in the Latin Quarter. No one bothered them. Their ambulance corps uniforms were light blue; American military police thought they were French aviators; French military police thought they were some strange brand of Americans.

In November, after the Italian army’s defeat at Caporetto, the American Red Cross decided to send an ambulance unit to Italy. This was a publicity gesture to show solidarity with the Italians. Drivers with military experience were needed, and Lawson and his friends

---

10) Lawson does not give their names. Throughout the parts of Lawson’s autobiography that I have read he frequently refers to Dos Passos as “Dos.”
volunteered to serve in Italy.

In his novel 1919 John Dos Passos tells the story of their journey, in twenty ambulances, through France and along the Riviera and across Italy to Milan. The fantastic incidents described by Dos Passos occurred because their mood encouraged bizarre happenings. In every town they drank immoderately. They wandered the streets. They sought out small bars and dens of vice in search of excitement.

The night in Genoa seemed more loaded with emotion than other nights. Dos Passos describes the oil-ship burning in the harbor:

"The town was all marble. Every facade that faced the sea was pink with the glow of the fire." Dos Passos has an American sailor in a bar say: "The whole Goddamn war's a gold brick." Then they "plunged out again into the empty marble town, down dark lanes and streets of stone steps with always the glare on some jutting wall overhead...Excited and drunk, they walked on and on through the town: 'By God, these towns are older than the world'."

The sensations of Lawson and the others supplied the drama: The flaming ship was a symbol of the senseless war. The town was a hive of unknown people. Figures emerged from darkness; they spoke words that expressed Lawson's own feelings about the idiocy of the war; then they disappeared.\(^{11}\)

When Lawson and his friends in the American Red Cross ambulance unit reached the Italian front, they were billeted in a beautiful moldy palace, its walls covered with faded frescoes. There, on the venetian plain, there was almost no work for the ambulance drivers. There were no towns in the neighborhood. They could not obtain passes to visit Venice. They were demoralized, too demoralized to do much writing.

\(^{11}\) Here Lawson adds: "Nothing happened...it was in our minds."
This broedom lasted for six months. Then they were given a ten-day leave.

Lawson was so eager for adventure that he decided to travel alone. He looked for monuments—and for women. He promised to meet Dos Passos and their other friends at Paestum.

Lawson had the usual dull adventures.

On the night before his meeting with his friends, he stayed in Salerno; the next morning he started to walk to Paestum. He thought he could cover the twenty-four miles in seven or eight hours. He was bored with the road, so he walked along the nearby beach.

Suddenly an old man rushed out of a house, made threatening gestures at Lawson, and hurried away. He soon returned with soldiers. They all thought Lawson had landed from a German submarine. Lawson thought they were going to shoot him on the spot. He was taken into custody. By nightfull it was all cleared up. A heavy rain began.

It turned out that the old man had an old carriage. He drove Lawson to Paestum.

They arrived in Paestum long after midnight, but together they went from one tavern to another in search of Lawson's friends. When they found them, the old man joined them. The old man was garrulous and he made a magnificent story out of Lawson's capture by the soldiers and his release.

They all roared with laughter, and they continued drinking all night. Then, still drunk, they went to see the ruins at Paestum.

Lawson was moved almost to tears by the Temple of Neptune, the first great example of Greek architecture he had ever seen.

Lawson retained a poignant memory of Paestum; it was the last of the care-free existence of him and his friends. When they returned
to Rome (by train), a change that none of them had anticipated occurred.

Paestum continued to have a great deal of meaning to Lawson for another reason: the last communication he ever received from Dos Passos came from there in 1938--a postcard with the Temple of Neptune on one side, on the other: "It's just a little more than twenty years ago that you suddenly appeared here in a horse cab under the most extraordinary auspices. The Temple's still doing well."

Lawson interpreted that postcard as a final effort by Dos Passos to restore a friendship that had been immeasurably valuable to both of them. But their break was irrevocable. Lawson was aligned with the Left. Dos Passos was moving to the Right. When Dos Passos returned to the United States in 1938, he did not get in touch with Lawson. They apparently never spoke to each other again.

Lawson and Dos Passos were driven apart by political storms that stirred the troubled air even in 1918. Then they thought they could weather any trial together. The first intimation that politics might impose hard decisions on them came when they returned to Rome from Paestum.

Dos Passos had earlier written a letter in French to a friend of his in Madrid, then a center of espionage. Italian censors took a special interest in Dos Passos' letter and turned it over to the American Red Cross.\(^{12}\)

12) After he wrote this passage, probably sometime in 1964, Lawson did receive at least one more communication from Dos Passos: in 1967 Dos Passos sent him a copy of his newly published memoirs *The Best Times.*

12) Lawson's files contained a typed copy of the letter by Dos Passos, with penciled notes by the censor and comments by officials of the Red Cross. While Lawson was working in the Rome office of the Red Cross, he took this document from the office files.
In 1919 Dos Passos includes a guarded account of this incident, which Lawson considered very important. Dos Passos' letter to his friend in Spain was an exact statement of an intellectual posture which is less clearly projected in Dos Passos' novels.

In some ways, the letter contradicted the viewpoint of the (later) novels. In the letter, Dos Passos' attitude toward the war was more sharply defined than in his anti-war novels.

"I have lived in it (the war) for a year now, and many illusions have gone floating toward the River Styx. For everything concerned with intelligence, for art and for everything that matters in the world, the war--modern war, I mean—is death... Everywhere it seems to me, one finds only slavery—to industry, to money, in the name of business, the great god of the days... As for my own poor country, it seems to me that with the war and with the law requiring compulsory military service, liberty is extinguished for some time to come, and the triumph of plutocracy is assured."

The Italian censor noted, in English: "He rails against the military body...absolutely inveighs against the American military laws, etc..." The captain of the ambulance unit in which Lawson and Dos Passos and their friends were serving made a typewritten recommendation to his superior officer:

"My own strong opinion is that the writer should be dishonorably discharged. He belongs in the Section to a group of pacifists, some of whom are now in Rome... I have no sympathy for him. It is about time we had another object lesson... Of course, we have no reason for action in the case of the men with him, except that knowing their pacifist ideas we need not give them further employment in the Red Cross."

Dos Passos had been indiscreet in writing so frankly, but he

13) This is Lawson's translation from Dos Passos' French.
spoke for all of his friends. The issue was joined—but that was not at all what they wanted. They wanted to avoid trouble, to conciliate the Red Cross authorities.

Dos Passos was sent back to the United States. The documents in the case were forwarded to Washington for action. Lawson and the rest of their friends were dismissed from the Red Cross.

Within a few hours of his dismissal, Lawson was reinstated into the Red Cross, in a highly paid and responsible job. His change of fortune, which seemed hilarious to him and all of his friends, was due to the kindness of Major William Hereford, who was head of American Red Cross publicity in Italy. Lawson called on Hereford, whom he had never met, and told him of his earlier experience with Reuter's. Hereford was in need of experienced writers. He told Lawson to take his coat off and get to work.

Lawson gave Hereford a frank account of the scandal around Dos Passos' letter. Hereford listened carefully, laughed, and repeated his invitation that Lawson get to work.

Lawson, who was worried about Dos Passos, got three letters from him within a month:

The first, dated August 11, was from Bordeaux: Dos Passos was about to sail to the United States. He was sitting "in a most gorgeous cafe with large painted ladies in green and gold, and the sunlight scrumptiously hot and white outside—not so hot and white as the sunlight in Rome though." Dos Passos had been to Paris in an effort to straighten out his case, but "Nothing was of avail and followed by a cortege of curses I am going to America... I am in hopes that having thrown myself at the feet of Washington, I shall arise whiter and more patriotic than the lily and with the same attributes as to toiling and spinning."

The second, dated August 17, was from the boat: "Write me what you think about Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho" for a title" (of the novel Dos Passos
was then working on). Dos Passos says there would have to be "an addition to the
effect that the walls of Jericho still stand." Then there is a touch of the fantasy
which seemed essential: Dos Passos asked Lawson to go to the Parthenon and
"pour a libation to my name in gold wine of Frascati. I am about to enter the
Land of Promise."

The third letter was from Camp Crane, Allentown, Pennsylvania: The charges
against Dos Passos had been dropped, on condition that he enlist in the U. S. Army
Medical Corps: "The after accounts of my scandal are funny. It seems that my
aunt mobilized battalions of Senators, armies of Congressmen, who marched with
banners and counter-marched, who sent telegrams and made promises—but the tele-
grams didn't get to the telegramees and the thing thing fell rather flat..." Dos
Passos changes his mood: "I am glad I'm here. I have always been curious about
America—new my curiosity is being rapidly—o so rapidly—satisfied." Dos Passos
concluded this letter by admitting what he had been at pain to conceal, what the
ordeal cost him: "But I am safe—such a mantle of ennui as the world never saw;
it's warm and comfy, though—conducive to sleep and dreams."

In "The War and the Intellectuals" Lawson says the shadow of future fears and surrenders crossed the pages of Dos Passos' letters. Yet Lawson's strongest feeling as he re-read the letters was identification. His feelings and fears at the time (almost fifty years before) were the same. Lawson and Dos Passos and their friends were not interested in principled courses of action. No such courses were available to them. Their minds were not attuned to action. Their principles demanded only that they preserve their inner consciousness, their safety to dream.

That was what Lawson's new Red Cross job in Rome gave him. Major Hereford, Lawson's boss, had a rare quality—common sense. He decided at their first meeting that he trusted Lawson. Lawson set out to justify that trust. Lawson and Hereford worked
together in perfect confidence. Hereford appointed Lawson editor of the *Red Cross Bulletin*, an eight-page fortnightly tabloid. Lawson selected photographs, designed the layout, corrected proofs, arranged headlines, and wrote the main stories.

Lawson always respected craftsmanship and tried to work well on any job that he undertook, and he did so then. He was partly responsible for the policy of the newspaper. He studied Red Cross policy and carefully adhered to it. The *Bulletin* received high praise as one of the best Red Cross publications.

Lawson's wages in dollars were a fortune in lira. He spent it recklessly. He wandered the streets at night, looking for and finding strange companions, adventuring in strange places.

But he was punctilious about his work.

The contrast between his day-life and his night-life was a crass expression of a deeper conflict between his real desire to be a playwright and his temporary occupation.

But in the war everything was temporary. Decisions had to be deferred.

The Armistice changed everything.

The future became the present.

One November afternoon after the Armistice, Major Hereford and Lawson walked back and forth together on the roof of the Red Cross building in Rome. Hereford asked Lawson to join him in a public relations office he proposed to open in Paris. Hereford said that there would be close ties between American and French business enterprises after the war. He offered Lawson a good starting salary. He said both he and Lawson would be rich in a few years.

---

14) The main character in Lawson's *Success Story* (1928, 1932) becomes rich in a few years in the public relations business.
Lawson’s rejection of his offer hurt Major Hereford. Nevertheless, Hereford wrote a general letter of recommendation: "You have always been dependable, earnest, hardworking, carrying out orders faithfully, and, in addition, showing initiative that has resulted in numerous improvements and valuable suggestions."

Lawson had enjoyed working with Major Hereford, but he was eager to get back to his real task, creative writing.

The transition from journalism to creative writing was more difficult than Lawson had anticipated.

Lawson was entangled in contradictions. He did not want to return to the United States, but all his thoughts were centered on it, and Roger Bloomer, the play he had not touched for a year, was about America.

Yet Lawson believed that the only hope for art lay in Europe.

The conflict in Lawson between freedom and necessity had been held in precarious balance during the war. The war had provided the equilibrium. Lawson hated the war without doing anything about it. He also hated the society that had produced the war.

Now he had to do something about that society or be part of it.

Lawson escaped his dilemma in an intense emotional experience, which was not an escape at all, because it posed the same unresolved problem.

Lawson met Kathryn Drain, an American Red Cross volunteer who had came to Rome from France in the summer of 1918. They spent almost all of their free time together.

Lawson wanted a rich emotional life, but he feared marriage as a loss of freedom. He did not want to accept bourgeois conventions.

A few days after the Armistice, Lawson and Kathryn Drain
walked in the streets of Rome at night. The city was drenched in a silver haze. The city in the fog seemed eternally beautiful.

John Howard Lawson and Kathryn Drain went though what they thought was a psychic experience.

The singing of the flesh made them sure that Rome was their heritage, not New York or Chicago or Iowa.

They decided to live in Europe. They would find perfect freedom in love and art.

Was it an escape or an awakening? Lawson asks in 1964 and answers that it turned out to be both.

---

15) Lawson comments that the Eternal City then offered no hint of the changes that were latent in it—the Rome of Mussolini, the Open City of the Second World War, the Rome of La Dolce Vita. There was no threat like the flame that had cast a lurid light on Genoa a year before.

16) The main character or Roger Bloomor (1923) is an Iowan.