John Andrews: 
Flight from the Machine

"God! if there were somewhere nowadays where you could flee."

—Martin Howe,
One Man's Initiation—1917
In John Dos Passos's novel *One Man's Initiation*—1917 (1920), the hero, in an outburst of anger and disgust at the tedium of his condition, blurts out: "God! if there were somewhere nowadays where you could flee."

These words, uttered with such desperation, are not only appropriate in the mouth of Martin Howe—the prototype of John Andrews in *Three Soldiers* (1921)—or even of Andrews himself; the outburst might equally apply to the many heroes and antiheroes in the modern American novel who see no way out of their predicaments other than through escape, whether from war or the crushing machine of the industrial civilization that has produced it. But if John Andrews's predecessor voices such a sentiment, then John Andrews himself would not only voice the sentiment but act upon it. For the musician-artist hero of *Three Soldiers* will ultimately rebel against the regimentation of army life by deserting that life—only to be brought back finally into custody to stand trial for desertion; and though there seems to be a qualified heroism about the gesture, the effects of that heroism are nullified by the army "machine," along with the anarchic individualism that originally impelled the heroic gesture. In this first comparatively successful novel, Dos Passos—in the guise of the aesthetic John Andrews—seems to say that, no matter how admirable or justified the individual's effort to escape regimentation, the individual himself will ultimately be crushed by it. This seems to be both the message and the protest of the author who wrote *One Man's Initiation*—1917, a message of protest that, in one form or another, Dos Passos has sounded throughout all his works—the nonfiction equally with the fiction.

*Three Soldiers* is dominated by one obsessive theme, which affects not only its technique and structure but saturates its tone. This theme, of course, is the crushing regimentation of military life. The men who are part of this life are simply un-
thinking automats that go to make up those interchangeable parts of the larger impersonal machine. Without the monotony, the drudgery, the tedium of army life in wartime—these are intensified when peace comes—Andrews's escape itself would be meaningless. Here, the escape is not an act of irresponsibility on the part of one individual toward his fellow men (though it may well be interpreted as that). Given Andrews's circumstances, it becomes almost obligatory; for it is not merely an act of impulse but a statement charged with the denial of all the values that the military mind—and in some instances its civilian counterpart—holds dear. In short, Andrews's escape is both a revolt and a statement of that revolt against the forces that would crush him.

The opening lines of *Three Soldiers* set the tone for the theme of the novel. Men are always lining up, exhausted from long hours of drilling and marching. A characteristic opening for a consistently large number of passages and chapters throughout the book might be: “The company stood at attention, each man looking straight before him at the empty parade ground.” Or: “The company was lined up for morning mess.” Or: “The men were lined up in the village street with their packs on, waiting for the order to move.” These and similar opening scenes reappear almost as incremental repetitions for this essentially contrapuntal novel. And the repetition, like the pounding of marching feet or the monotonous strokes of arms washing barracks windows, itself comes to express something of the obsessive leitmotif that runs through the book. *Arbeit und Rhythmus* is the phrase that repeatedly imposes itself on Andrews's thoughts as he washes barracks windows. "*Arbeit und Rhythmus*" the world of the army seems to answer back, almost as though the rhythm of Andrews's life might be struck off by a monster (or monstrous) metronome. Significantly, the musical composition that Andrews will be working
on at the time of his desertion—blown off the table, sheet by sheet, by a gust of wind—will be entitled “Soul and the Body of John Brown,” a hymn to freedom. Even the Stateside army camp where the three soldiers Fuselli, Chrisfield, and Andrews are stationed resembles a prison. Fuselli, on his way out of camp on an overnight pass (that smaller, sanctioned form of escape), briefly notes the camp fences, “surmounted by three strands of barbed wire.” Yet the town toward which he directs his footsteps has little more to offer than the smaller “town” within the barbed wire enclosure.

Whatever the obsessions Fuselli and Chrisfield harbor (the ambition to be a corporal in the first; the urge to kill a bullying non-com in the second), it is Andrews’s obsession that dominates *Three Soldiers*. His need to escape from the army has virtually become, even before he has gone overseas, an *idée fixe*. Regimentation is intolerable to Andrews (this is essentially the message of the novel). From the beginning he has had a low tolerance for restricting situations; and one can almost predict, given Andrews’s character and predicament, his eventual desertion. The qualities are all there; yet Andrews’s enlistment in the army, in the first place, is perhaps his first move toward a greater escape—from the larger industrial civilization that has threatened his selfhood. That he chooses the army to escape something that, by its very nature, can hardly be *worse* than army life, is one of the curious paradoxes of this work. For Andrews’s escape into the army reveals his own innocence in the face of his subsequent initiation into the realities of army life.

Unlike the system of World War II, under which soldiers were discharged on the basis of an accumulation of earned service and combat points, the method of discharge in World War I seemed as arbitrary as it was haphazard. Duty in the Army of Occupation in Germany for an indefinite stay might
easily have become—and, indeed, in some instances did become—the doughboy’s fate. This was the predicament in which John Andrews and large numbers of his comrades-in-arms found themselves when the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the feelings of near-hopelessness and futility that assailed them for, ironically, surviving the war. If they were going to survive the peace, then it would be up to each of them to make good his own escape—either through “chains” of command or, if necessary, through illegal manipulations. And so for John Andrews at the termination of hostilities,

life would continue to be this slavery of unclean bodies packed together in places where the air had been breathed over and over, cogs in the great slow-moving Juggernaut of armies. What did it matter if the fighting had stopped? The armies would go on grinding out lives with lives, crushing flesh with flesh. Would he ever again stand free and solitary to live out joyous hours which would make up for all the boredom of the treadmill? He had no hope. His life would continue like this dingy, ill-smelling [railroad] waiting room where men in uniform slept in the fetid air until they should be ordered out to march or stand in motionless rows, endlessly, futilely, like toy soldiers a child has forgotten in an attic. (pp. 228–29)

*Three Soldiers* is the story not only of John Andrews but of Andrews’s friends, Privates Fuselli and Chrisfield. These two share with Andrews the need to escape. But each harbors this need for quite different reasons: Chrisfield deserts after killing a non-commissioned officer who had continually bullied him; Fuselli contracts a venereal disease and, by default, “escapes” his own confrontation with combat; and John Andrews makes his own bid for freedom, though it is foredoomed from the beginning.

As early as the first chapter in *Three Soldiers*, there is al-
ready that foreshadowing of the theme that will run through the book. Fuselli, in identifying himself with a soldier who had punched an officer in the jaw and is now hunted by the military police, weaves a fantasy of empathy in the snug warmth of his barracks cot:

How cold and frightful it must feel to be out of the camp with the guard looking for you! He pictured himself running breathless down a long street pursued by a company with guns, by officers whose eyes glinted cruelly like the pointed tips of bullets. Somebody had said there'd be promotions soon. Oh, he wanted so hard to be promoted. It'd be so swell if he could write back to Mabe and tell her to address her letters to Corporal Dan Fuselli. (pp. 16-17)

Here, of course, Fuselli's escape fantasy is ambiguously composed of two halves of a reverie: he too would like to punch a supercilious lieutenant in the jaw, but he sees himself as a fugitive fleeing the security of army routine. Yet if he can stay in the army and get a promotion—another sanctioned form of escape—he will have achieved the best of both worlds. However, since Fuselli spends his time daydreaming rather than acting, his progress toward a greater freedom is inevitably doomed. Instead of fulfilling himself, either as a corporal (which he becomes for a short period) or as an escaper in the manner of Andrews and Chrisfield—a fulfillment of sorts, dubious as it is—Fuselli, by a series of declensions, descends from the medics into something called the "optical detachment," after which he is reassigned to a labor battalion for having contracted V.D. Permanent kitchen police will be his lot, a purgatory he will have to endure until the end of his enlistment.

Chrisfield, too, occasionally escapes through daydreams:

He thought of the spring on the plains of Indiana and the mocking-bird singing in the moonlight among the flowering
locust trees behind the house. He could almost smell the heavy sweetness of the locust blooms, as he used to smell them sitting on the steps after supper, tired from a day's heavy plowing, while the clatter of his mother's housework came from the kitchen. He didn't wish he was back there, but it was pleasant to think of it now and then, and how the yellow farmhouse looked and the red barn where his father never had been able to find time to paint the door, and the tumble-down cowshed where the shingles were always coming off. (pp. 139–40)

Thus, Chrisfield's "escapes," up to his final desertion, are enacted through memory: the memory of his home back in Indiana, the barn, the fields, and so on. Yet Chris eventually does make good his escape when he later kills an NCO who had constantly bullied him. Chrisfield's escape thus becomes a kind of thematic paradigm for the novel, for it has only further served to convince us that the urge to escape is not limited to sensitive, aesthetic Harvard men like Andrews but, more pointedly, includes even semiliterate farm boys.

Yet it is John Andrews, perhaps the most important member of the trio, who seems to come nearest to being a representative escape-hero. He is not simply an escape-hero but a man who possesses all of the essential characteristics of the Dos Passos hero—the romantic rebel against regimentation, the sensitive young artist-opponent of all repression. For in spite of its apparent concern with army life, Three Soldiers is only incidentally a novel about World War I. One might even suggest the subtitle "A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Soldier," for the novel shows us a young musician-composer seeking refuge from all that would cramp his creative powers both as artist and as individual. Andrews thus becomes the symbol of the artist forced to suppress his nature in the face of the regimented life that would crush that nature. If we look back to Martin Howe of One Man's Initiation—1917, Andrews is a step for-
ward from his predecessor of the earlier, less successful, attempt to depict the artist crushed by society. Like Martin Howe, John Andrews also yearns for a place to which one could flee. In Andrews's case, however, the artist in him does finally manage to break through the outer husk of the soldier, so that the artist as individual might make good his escape. Like Howe, Andrews dreams of finding a place of refuge from the things that would thwart his creative drives.

While recovering from his wound in a military hospital, Andrews spends most of his time reading. Characteristically, though he reads Flaubert, he does not read the realistic *Madame Bovary*; instead he prefers the aesthetic *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, with its lush prose and its idealization of history. Besides, where *Madame Bovary* would lead Andrews back into prosaic reality, perhaps forcing him to identify with Emma Bovary’s flight from that reality, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* will prove a temporary, if synthetic, form of escape from his own brand of reality. Andrews, in a sense, is a bookish Lieutenant Henry, but unable to define (as Henry is able to) the split between principles and reality. Further, while the aesthetic Andrews is a yearner and a dreamer, Hemingway's hero, as we shall see in chapter 5, prefers not to dream or think but to act. When Andrews has his fantasies about leading his company into mutiny, he knows that, after all, his mood is made up largely of the stuff of rhetoric and fantasy. Dos Passos says of him: "His mind [would flood] itself with rhetoric that it might keep its sanity" (p. 241). Hemingway's hero, on the other hand, *must dismiss* all rhetoric from his mind, the better to retain his sanity. Furthermore, Andrews, in playing out the role of the antihero, paradoxically transforms himself into something of a hero—as do so many antiheroes; for his heroism lies in his will to fight the entire military machine, regardless of the odds against winning the battle.
Even though Dos Passos apparently intended *Three Soldiers* to be a story involving the adventures of all three main characters—Fuselli, Chrisfield, and Andrews—the novel eventually becomes John Andrews’s story; and before we are halfway into the book, Andrews has become its pivotal character.

Since Andrews is apparently the most sensitive and articulate of the three soldiers, it would appear logical that he would be the “lens” through which a more focused view of the predicaments of all three might be seen. Andrews, by degrees, not only grows into the viewpoint character but gradually assumes the stature—and the burden—of the main character; for in his resemblance to Dos Passos himself, he seems most capable of presenting this struggle of man against the machine in its most articulate light. His futility is not merely that of the soldier-hero sensitive to the abuses of military life; his is the perceptive eye that can see life as an extension of the industrial civilization that partly promotes that futility, where men are “wind-swept atoms” carried along by forces greater than themselves.

There seem to be at least four, largely unconscious, steps that Andrews takes toward making his final escape. The first of these—paradox that it may appear to be—is his enlistment in the army in the first place. Like so many young men of his generation who joined ambulance units and Red Cross detachments in 1917-18, Andrews sees the army, and more fuzzily the war itself, as a Great Adventure. When he embarks on the troopship for France, he is still imbued with those Homeric legends acquired at the university: he will sail off to prove his mettle in the lists of manly courage. In the instance of Fuselli there is the ironically inverted (and perhaps inadvertent) Homeric parallel: Fuselli’s girl, Mabe, back in San Francisco, is a drab Penelope, but a Penelope who, unlike her original, eventually does surrender to a home-front suitor.

But for Andrews, escape into the army proves to be no escape at all. He attempts to escape from the aesthetic confines of
Harvard into what he believes will be a more exciting life, but he is disillusioned when he recognizes that he has merely traded one dissatisfying existence for another. Subsequently he applies for transfer into the school detachment, which will enable him, after the war, to attend lectures at the Sorbonne: this is Andrews's second step in his progress toward his final escape. Even here, however, the school detachment proves something less than stimulating; and so Andrews—perhaps momentarily forgetting his status as a soldier—takes an unofficial leave to visit friends in the Paris suburbs. This might perhaps be considered Andrews's third step toward his final escape, another of those unofficial leaves that have all the earmarks of his true intentions: to rid himself completely of the military life. But thus far these are only gestures. It is while Andrews is enjoying his period of "truancy" from the school detachment that he is apprehended by the military police and thrown into a disciplinary labor battalion; from there he will make his fourth (and final) escape. If the first three steps toward his final escape are largely vague, unplanned, half-conscious efforts, the fourth and final one is not. His escape from the labor battalion is a conscious desertion from the army itself.

In the modern American novel of escape, the perennial symbols of that rebellious urge are frequently railroad stations and the trains that depart from them. We see such scenes running through American fiction either as sustained scenes or as quick glimpses (usually at the beginnings or endings of novels). Andrews on his way to Paris and the school detachment indulges in the following reverie:

He was thinking how all the epochs of his life seemed to have been marked out by railroad rides at night. . The gusts of cold night air when he opened the window and the faint whiffs of steam and coal gas that tingled in his nostrils excited him like a smile on a strange face seen for a moment in a crowded street.
He did not think of what he had left behind. He was straining his eyes eagerly through the darkness towards the vivid life he was going to live. In six hours he would be in Paris. Every mile the train carried him away from things past. (pp. 268-69)

For Andrews, however, Paris is a symbol of liberty in more ways than one. Besides its conventional libertarian and cultural connotations, Paris for Andrews stands for personal liberation. As the train enters the suburbs of the city, "Andrews felt a crazy buoyancy bubbling up in him. The rumbling clatter of the train wheels sang in his ears. He threw himself on his back on the dusty blue seat and kicked his heels in the air like a colt" (p. 270). Even the imagery here is heightened by the comparison with a colt set free, kicking the turf from his hind hoofs. When Andrews leaves his rifle and cartridge belt—symbols of servitude—behind on the train, he has, if prematurely, already said goodbye to the army, made his own separate peace with the life that the rifle and the cartridge belt represent. For though Andrews's new freedom is not a complete freedom from the army, it still has its own intoxicating effects on him. When the train arrives in Paris and Andrews alights, every nerve and fiber in his body is alert:

He was free now of the imaginings of his desire, to loll all day at café tables watching the tables move in changing patterns before him, to fill his mind and body with a reverberation of all the rhythms of men and women moving in the frieze of life before his eyes; no more like wooden automatons knowing only the motions of the drill manual, but supple and varied, full of force and tragedy. (p. 289)

Yet as Andrews will discover, his freedom is as illusory as it is short-lived, and the leash he is still attached to remains a leash whose length will only extend as far as army regulations will permit. But in the heady air of his new freedom, he forgets
that he is still a soldier, subject to military regulations. The machine, though momentarily stilled, is ready to come alive when the need arises, to crush the troublesome particle between its cogs.

When Andrews does make his escape—initiating it with a plunge into the Seine River—he does so almost as a part of a dream rather than as a result of a planned action, even though the dreamlike manner of his escape is still part of his larger, consciously laid plans for it. Although he has often pondered over desertion, when he does finally desert, it comes almost as an act of momentary impulse, dictated ultimately by his earlier conscious planning—much like Huck’s, in Twain’s novel. In its impelling pressures it anticipates the escape that Lieutenant Henry will make when he plunges into the cold swift current of the Tagliamento in *A Farewell to Arms*, for whether it be the Seine in Andrews’s instance or the Tagliamento in Lieutenant Henry’s, the effects are identical in their ritualistic significance: the rivers serve as the means for the baptismal experiences of both Andrews and Henry. Further, like Henry, who changes into civilian clothes, John Andrews places the seal on his baptismal act by changing from his army uniform into the clothes of a bargeman, apparel conveniently furnished by a French barge family. Thus, literally and symbolically, Andrews has taken a plunge not only into the Seine but into another life; and the change of clothing most graphically represents the change in his career from soldier to civilian. Thus, the rebirth—represented by his change of clothing—is complete, short-lived as it is.

Yet even the abortive gesture of his escape, symbolized by the scattering of his pages of music by gusts of wind, will remain a gesture. For the reality that comes to John Andrews at the end of the novel negates the entire purpose of his escape, and he is returned to pay the penalty for that strong but unsanctioned
impulse. Yet we cannot say that the negation is complete, since there is a residue of meaning in the gesture itself. Although Andrews is eventually recaptured and returned to his outfit, he has at least tasted freedom. No matter what the machine may do to him now, it will never again be able to take away his supreme moment of rebellion and his triumph in that moment; for Andrews's liberation, long before his recapture and return to his outfit, has been an inner liberation, a liberation of soul. Just before that recapture, he tells one of his fellow deserters: "It's funny, Al—I'm not a damn bit scared any more. I think I'm free of the army" (p. 407).

Finally, before his recapture, in his talk with Genevieve Rod, his French girl friend, we get not only Andrews's credo but the belief that Dos Passos himself has held onto through the years of his own growth, a growth that transcended his own involvements in political causes of the moment:

"It seems to me that human society has been always that, and perhaps will be always that: organizations growing and stifling individuals, and individuals revolting hopelessly against them, and at last forming new societies to crush the old societies and becoming slaves again in their turn." (p. 421)

When John Andrews utters these words, we can hear another John talking—Dos Passos. Virtually until the day he died, Dos Passos continued to speak out against those "slave societies" no matter their shade or political complexion. And it was this that earned him and his work many detractors as well as admirers.

1. John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers* (New York, 1921), p. 12. Copyright by H. Marston Smith and Elizabeth Dos Passos, co-executors of the estate of John R. Dos Passos, and used with their permission. All further quotations are from this edition.