



## From Constantinople to the South Caucasus: Deciphering the urban landscape in John Dos Passos’s travel memoir “Orient Express”

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines a highly-regarded but little-studied work of the major American novelist John Dos Passos, the travel memoir *Orient Express* (1927), the account of a 1922 journey from Constantinople, through the South Caucasus and through Iran and Iraq to the Levant. Situating *Orient Express* within the development of Dos Passos’s distinctive brand of experimental, modernist prose culminating in the *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–1937), attention is drawn to the visual and auditory landscapes of the text. Dos Passos’s use of various modernist devices in his portrayal of Near Eastern cities – including the use of overlapping perspectives, interacting planes of light and color, the observer-in-motion and the superimposition of real and imagined city landscapes – approach what has been termed the “proto-cubist” or “proto-expressionist” effect typical of his urban American novels. *Orient Express* is also characterized by its unique auditory landscape, a patchwork of overheard speech which prefigures Dos Passos’s mature conception of a fragmentary, “objective” art in which authorial agency consists primarily in ordering various strands of external discourse. These verbal and material planes, image and history, intersect in a crucial meditation on material artifacts abandoned by their owners in the wake of the Red Army’s invasion of Georgia, which reflects a conception of the “the writer’s vital role in opposing the dehumanizing impact of mechanization,” and provides important context for the much remarked-upon transition in Dos Passos’s political views toward the end of the 1930s.

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## Introduction

John Dos Passos (1896–1970) was regarded in his day as one of the foremost and most innovative representatives of a distinctively American modernist literature just emerging into significant international repute. In 1938, Jean-Paul Sartre went as far as to name Dos Passos “the greatest writer of our time.” While this judgment is predicated to a certain degree on Sartre’s “high premium on social realism,” stemming from an essentially political conception of art which the contemporary critic may not share. Dos Passos’s prose also holds considerable interest strictly in terms of its formal qualities (Maine, 1997, p. 3).

One might say that in Dos Passos’s works of the 1920s and 1930s are brought together all of the major aesthetic currents of the era: imagist principles cultivated since the 1910s by Ezra Pound, the blending of the author’s lyrical voice with the raucous uncertainty of postwar American city life which we find in F. Scott Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup>, William Faulkner’s narratological innovation in terms of both “multivocality” and stream-of-consciousness technique (Nowac, 2018, pp. 4–5), and Ernest Hemingway’s brand of laconic and carefully observed literary reportage inseparable from firsthand experience. It need not be supposed, however, that Dos Passos was an assimilator of various influences rather than a source of formal innovation in his own right. To take one example, John Steinbeck’s use of extranarrative “Interchapters” in *The Grapes of Wrath*, has its precedent in the “Camera Eye” and “Newsreel” segments of *The U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930–1937) These recurring, brief digressions (more often than not privileged and panoramic reflections in Steinbeck, while in Dos Passos’s works they bear a marked element of the particular, if not the grotesque), whose relation to the main narrative has been likened to the interplay between a classical Greek chorus and the action on the stage (Ross, 1932, p. 102) become a means for the two authors to “compress the energy of their disenchantment into small powerful units of information which force the reader into a broader, deeper level of contemplation on the conditions under examination” (Dunbar, 2003).

The object of our present study is one of Dos Passos’s earlier works, the travel memoir *Orient Express*, which relates a journey taken under the auspices of the Near East Relief Foundation through the Balkans to Constantinople, from Constantinople to the South Caucasus, and thereafter through Persia and on to Baghdad and Damascus. Comparison with passages published in Near East Relief circulars from the year 1922 indicates that although the *Orient Express* did not see publication until 1927, the text consists largely of the author’s original travel notes and reports, and therefore may be said to precede his first urban American novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) (Dos Passos, 1922, p. 1; Dos Passos, 2015, pp. 48–49).

Although it has been described as “far more brilliant and evocative than his later travel books,” and “ranking with the best work in this genre by Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh” (Davis, 1962, p. 17). *Orient Express* has merited remarkably little critical and

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<sup>1</sup> A classic example in this regard is the prologue to Fitzgerald’s 1920 novella *May Day*, where the romantic unity of the young author’s vision of New York gives way to the celebratory tumult of the crowds, reaching an almost feverish pitch in an endless succession of clauses: “So gaily and noisily were the peace and prosperity impending hymned by the scribes and poets of the conquering people that more and more spenders had gathered from the provinces to drink the wine of excitement, and faster and faster did the merchants dispose of their trinkets and slippers until they sent up a mighty cry for more trinkets and more slippers in order that they might give in barter what was demanded of them...” (Fitzgerald, 1964, p. 141).

scholarly attention, occasioning only passing mention in surveys of Dos Passos's work and almost nothing in the way of isolated study. Turning to this relatively unexamined text, we will inspect two interrelated areas of interest, both involving the author's evocation of the texture of urban environments: first, the development of the principles of imagery which would characterize Dos Passos's subsequent "major" work, and second, the auditory or verbal landscape of the text as it relates to the author's conception of the tide of history around him, the ongoing genocide of Greeks and Armenians<sup>2</sup> and the victorious advance of the Kemalist and Bolshevik revolutions. These verbal and material planes, image and history, intersect in a crucial meditation on material artifacts abandoned by their owners in the wake of the Red Army's invasion of Georgia, both reflecting and elucidating the author's persistent criticism of industrial society.

### Real and imagined cities: principles of imagery in *Orient Express*

Possibly as a consequence of an apparently rather hurried itinerary completed under almost invariably trying and uncertain conditions, it is rare in *Orient Express* for any given port of call to occasion more than a passing sketch; as often as not a town or landscape is glimpsed only at a distance, from the deck of a ship or through the window of a cramped train carriage. More probably, however, this succinct and somewhat estranged mode of presentation constitutes the realization of a particular aesthetic vision – or at the very least it may be said that Dos Passos makes a virtue of necessity in this regard. In a curious and thorough study of the "painterly qualities" of Dos Passos's prose, George Knox observes the influence of Robert Delaunay's Orphic paintings of 1910–1911, "a number of abstract views of the city, as seen through his open windows," on the illustrations in *Orient Express* (Knox, 1964, p. 27).

The critic is here referring to the author's own paintings reproduced in the first edition of the book – Dos Passos was a serious practitioner of the visual arts. However, the same "through-the-window world" of "upreaching masses and interacting color planes," characterized by the "use of pure colors as structural elements" which Knox sees extending from these paintings to *The Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* novels may be remarked in the text of *Orient Express* as well. "We were coming down from the hills into an irregular basinlike valley at the end of which the streaky white peak of Ararat soared on two great strongly-etched curves above the bluish mass of the mountain. In the foreground for a moment were the roofless stone walls of a village; from behind one of the huts drifted up a little white woodsmoke from a campfire, but nowhere in the entire landscape of tortured hills and livid white alkalai plains was anything alive to be seen. Then a squall that for a long time had been gathering up indigo fringes above the mountains to the west swept across and hid everything in oblique sheets of rain and hail" (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 46).

Among other elements of this striking verbal landscape, it is worth noting that the dynamism of the scene hinges on the observer's distance from and motion relative to the objects described—the variable foreground and the almost instantaneous disappearance

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<sup>2</sup> The annihilation of the Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian populations of the former Ottoman Empire between 1894 and 1924 has been convincingly described as a "thirty-year genocide," a continuous policy of religiously-motivated extermination pursued by the successive regimes of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the CUP, and Mustafa Kemal (See Morris and Ze'evi, 2019).

of the landscape behind the storm are both due to the author's vantage from the window of a moving train.

When he does enter the urban landscape, Dos Passos retains the same characteristic painterly abstraction, distinguished by broad perspective, hard lighting, and bold strokes of vivid color. We may observe here a version of the "proto-cubist" or "proto-expressionist" effect typical of the *U.S.A.* novels whereby "Dos Passos dissolves the city into motifs, into color planes in the shapes of squares, triangles, rhomboids, and trapezoids which interpenetrate to convey kaleidoscopic and spectral effects" (Knox, 1964, p. 27). In Constantinople the highest pitch of abstraction is reached in descriptions of the city's crowds: "Faces are smooth and yellow like melons, steely like axes, faces are like winter squashes, like deaths heads and jack o'lanterns and cocoanuts and sprouting potatoes. They merge slowly in the cruel white sunlight, brown faces under fezzes, yellow faces under straw-hats, pale northern faces under khaki caps—into one face, brows sullen and contracted, eyes black with suffering, skin taut over the cheekbones, hungry lines about the corners of the mouth, lips restless, envious, angry, lustful. The face of a man not quite starved out" (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 18).

This effect of superimposition extends the urban geography itself, as the natural surroundings of the city interpenetrate its visual expanse, creating a single overlapping geometry: "Sudden plane-shaded lanes that snatch occasional unbelievable blue distances of sea or umber distances of hills seen through the tilting and delicately carved tombposts of Turkish cemeteries." And yet, even amid the impressionistic touches, the sprawl of buildings and uncertainty of boundaries, there is still something of a draughtsman's exactitude underlying Dos Passos's description of a city's physical situation: "Old Tiflis, dust-colored with an occasional patch of blue or white on a house, is loosely sprinkled in the funnel out of which the copper-wire river pours into the plain" (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 38).

In Yerevan, the sense of space is inflected by the constant presence of Mount Ararat, visible from "every little eminence," glimpsed through a boxcar window, or "standing white and cool and smooth like a vision of another world" over a crumbling station wall in whose shadow an assortment of women and children are slowly dying of starvation and disease (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 48–49). The ancient mountain's "aloof white glitter" serves as a kind of silent commentary on the wretched human drama playing out in its shadow, which provokes no overt authorial remark and leaves the "Eastbound American" externally unmoved. It is not incidental that Ararat's otherworldly and imperturbable presence should be so closely linked with one of the book's grimmer anecdotes, a haggard old man's theft of a scrap of bread from a dying boy.

Despite these overlapping perspectives and the fragmentary point of view of an observer in motion, the city itself is rarely disembodied or fully abstract; the author's tendency to seek patterns and paint in broad strokes rarely, if ever, usurps the physical reality of his surroundings. As Frohock remarks, "his interest is in the object itself, how it looked or felt or smelled. He is collecting images." Rather than metaphor and rhetoric, the critic sees in *Oriental Express* and the 1922 poetry collection *Pushcart at the Curb*, first and foremost "the image-maker's eye at work" (Frohock, 1948, p. 77). Dos Passos's sentences are saturated with sensory information: the "fragile savor" of a potted basil plant on a café table in Constantinople amid the "smell of tobacco and charcoal and anis," the sound of zither music and "discordance of many hostile languages," the torments of bedbugs on the Batumi-Tiflis express and the burning of the eyes and nose and throat

brought on by the insect powder vainly deployed against them, “the sickly smell of dung and ditchwater” in refugee-crowded Yerevan (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 17, 34–35, 48).

On occasion all of these sensory currents unite into a haunting poetic totality. Lying in bed in Tiflis, half-consciously attending to scraps of conversation from the next room, the author registers his surroundings: “[T]he uneasy smell of a summer night came in through the open window with a sliver of moonlight. The street outside was empty and dark, but from far away came the sound of a concertina. The jiggly, splintered tune of a concertina was limping its way through the black half desert stone city, slipping in at the windows of barracks, frightening the middleaged people who sat among the last of their Things trembling behind closed shutters, maddening the poor devils imprisoned in the basement of the Cheka, caught under the wheels of the juggernaut of revolution as people are caught under the wheels in every movement forward or back of the steamroller of human action” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 40–41).

This transition from immediate impressions to a spectral and panoramic view of the city is typical of *Oriental Express*, where the real urban landscape often coexists with an imagined one, whose sources are the author’s inner eye and self-conscious imagination. Docking outside of Trebizond, “Eastbound American” is momentarily given over to fantasy: “Trebizond, one of the capitals of my childhood geography, a place of swords and nightingales and purple-born princesses in a garden where the trees grew diamonds and rubies instead of flowers, a lonely never-to-be-rescued princess bright and cold and slender as an icicle guarded by gold lions and automaton knights and a spray of molten lead and roar and smoke of Greek fire” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 27).

The real Trebizond, however, defies inspection; amid rumored “reprisals” against the Greek and Armenian population of the town<sup>3</sup>, the passengers are not permitted to disembark from the ship and they remain anchored at the mouth of the bay. Straining his eyes for any hint of what is unfolding “under the white mask of walls and domes,” and finding none, the Dos Passos falls instead to “wondering” at the “dull vermilion cliffs zigzagged with inexplicable white staircases climbing up from the sea and stopping suddenly in the face of the cliff.” The repetition of this same image at the end of the sketch and the section heading “Inexplicable Staircases” produce the impression that the cliff-side staircases are a cipher whose meaning the author is trying to discern, the key to the unseen tragedy unfolding in this “pink and white town built on arches, terracing up among cypresses, domes and minarets and weather-gnawed towers against a mother-of-pearl sky” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 26–27).

Dos Passos’s romantic imagination and tendency to seek keys of historical meaning in his visible surroundings are also reflected in a section titled “The Crescent,” in which the author observes prayers in the mosque of Bayazid. The atmosphere is charged with the militancy of the ascendant Turkish state. A mullah rises to deliver a prayer “for the

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of the 1915 extermination of the Armenian population of the Trebizond (Trabzon) *vilayet*, see Morris and Ze’evi, 2019, pp. 181–186. The continued presence of any significant Armenian population in Trebizond as of 1922 is uncertain. After the Russian army liberated the town in 1916, “about five hundred Armenians suddenly emerged from caves in the mountains” and together with other returning survivors and children reclaimed from Greek and Turkish families reestablished a community there. However, after the Russian retreat, Ottoman forces reentered the town in 1918. According to contemporary reports from the UK National Archives, “the subsequent atrocities ‘rivalled those of 1915’”; men and boys were drowned en masse in the Black Sea, “while women and girls have been handed over, even more extensively than before, to Moslem families” (Morris and Ze’evi, 2019, pp. 186, 545).

army in Anatolia,” a prayer “full of harsh ringing consonants and brazen upward cadences” in a “voice like warhorns and kettledrums” and the “Ameen” of the assembled crowd swells to a roar which “shook the great dome as the domes of the churches must have shaken with the shout of the fighting-men of Islam the day Constantine’s city was carried by assault and the last Constantine killed in his purple boots” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 17). The inference is plain: with Asia Minor once again hanging in the balance between Islam and Christendom, Dos Passos reads in the fervor of the assembled crowd an irresistible tide which will once more, this time irrevocably, overwhelm and sweep away the remnants of an ancient Christian heritage.

The imagined city superimposed upon the visible is not confined to the realm of Byzantine romance. As in the Tiflis nocturne quoted above, the author’s eye habitually travels from his immediate and perceptible surroundings to corners of the city far less accessible to the sight of a traveler passing through<sup>4</sup>. The suppositional quality of these vivid presentations of a foreign city’s interior life is made clear at the outset of one monumental sentence in which Dos Passos undertakes to describe, almost in one breath, the full expanse and texture of Constantinople: “*If one could only follow* (emphasis. – Makaryan/ Toghramadjian) back into the steep dilapidated streets where the black wooden houses overhang, and women with thick ankles look down with kohl-smearred eyes at the porters who stumble under their huge loads up the uneven steps...” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 18, emphasis added).

This peculiarly disembodied perspective wanders on from the waterfronts and sailors’ cafés of Galata to the bazaars “where in the half-darkness under the azure-decorated vault Persian and Greek and Jewish and Armenian merchants spread out print cloths and Manchester goods which an occasional beam of dusty sunlight sets into a flame of colors,” the “ruined palaces along the Bosphorus where refugees from one place or another live in dazed and closepacked squalor,” the lavish Pera apartments of “Greek millionaires and Syrian war-profiteers,” and finally to “the yards and doorways where the Russians sleep huddled like sheep in a snowstorm” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 19).

What is striking in all of this is the assurance – and lively detail – with which Dos Passos depicts scenes which he has only intuited, perhaps heard described or glimpsed in passing. The confessedly speculative, provisional quality of these seemingly documentary presentations is of great significance; rather than assume the posture of a knowing observer, Dos Passos presents the city as an enigma whose full contours can only be gestured at, not unraveled or explained. The parentheses opened by the conditional “if only one could follow” come to a close nearly three hundred words later: “...somewhere some day one might find the core, the key to decipher this intricate arabesque scrawled carelessly on a ground of sheer pain” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 19). The city and the historical processes inscribed upon it form a covert pattern whose full significance is beyond the comprehension of a passing traveller, if, indeed, it is comprehensible at all.

### **Eavesdropping on history: The verbal landscape of *Orient Express***

Among all the sensory effects of Dos Passos’s prose, perhaps the most important is its distinctive verbal landscape, a patchwork of overheard voices and chance reports

<sup>4</sup> Despite the tempting association between this device and the “Camera Eye” sections of the *U.S.A.* novels, the immediacy and stream-of-consciousness style of the latter, in which the verbal necessarily supersedes the visual, renders any comparison tendentious.

which comes to displace any notion of a unitary authorial voice. There is an marked progression from the academic, inward quality of *One Man's Initiation*, (1917), whose protagonist, a sensitive American ambulance driver on the Western Front, recalls passages from Shelley and Blake even on the battlefield, “spends his off-hours contemplating a ruined abbey and dreaming of the Middle Ages” (Davis, 1962, p. 10) and engages in philosophical debates in which all parties involved express themselves in full paragraphs, to the “Bakhtinian heteroglossia” of *Manhattan Transfer* with its “many voiced, often disrupted text, offering a verbal parallel to harmonically unresolved music” (McParland, 2020, p. 80). This tumult of disparate voices rises to a crescendo in the *U.S.A* novels, where “fiction is disassembled into smaller narrative units and further reconstructed into fragmented passages in order to create conflicting views on the narrated events that would allow [the author] to keep his subjectivity at bay” (Tucan, 2022, p. 112).

In *Orient Express* we find Dos Passos approaching his mature conception of a fragmentary, “objective” art in which authorial agency consists primarily in ordering various strands of external discourse. While the first-person text displays a unified lyrical sensibility, Dos Passos rarely indulges in sweeping historical or philosophical mediations, nor, for that matter, provides much in the way of direct exposition of recent events. Almost all information concerning the course of the Greco-Turkish War, the Bolshevik consolidation of power in the South Caucasus, and continuing depredations against the remaining Christian minorities of Asia Minor arises organically from a tissue of speech in multiple languages, varying in comprehensibility and coherence, which surrounds the author on his journey eastward: hearsay from other Westerners, statements of principle from local parties, unattributed rumors, scraps of press and so forth.

Amid the somewhat frantic gaiety of Allied-occupied Constantinople, there are confused and contradictory reports of the progress of the war in Anatolia. A party of Greek officers celebrate a recent victory at Eskişehir which has sent the Kemalist army into retreat (Passos, 2015, p. 11). Yet soon afterwards among the hubbub of English conversation in a bar alongside the Bosphorus, the author overhears British military staff describing “how at Eski Chehir the Turkish army sank into the ground and came up behind the Greek lines” (Passos, 2015, p. 23). A Greek archbishop speaking fastidious, “slightly lisping” French in mixed company at the Pera Palace Hotel warns of new deportation orders at Samsoun, precluding massacre (Passos, 2015, p. 13).

Six Turkish army doctors emerge on the deck of the Black Sea steamer *Aventino* and in the course of a standoffish conversation name their final destination as Ankara, which in their speech becomes identified with an austere pan-Turkism set against the cosmopolitan decadence of Constantinople with its “riffraff” of “old people, beggars, Armenians and Jews.” “We will make Angora our capital,” they declare. “We were not made to live in cities. Our life is in the fields and on the plains. If they drive us out of Angora we will go back to the great plains of central Asia, where we came from” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 26).

There is in this speech the same suggestion of brutal resolve matched against Byzantine pomp and decay sensed earlier in the Bayazid Mosque, foreboding the outcome of a struggle already decided by the time of the book’s 1927 publication. There is a conspicuous hopelessness in “little Mr. Moscoupoulous throwing up his pudgy hands” in an outdoor café to hold forth on Aristophanes, Homer, Demosthenes, and Turkish ignorance and “brigandage,” with his endless refrain “*sans connaître les classiques...*” while surrounded on all sides by impassively smoking old men in turbans and “young men in fezzes of a new bright red exchanging witticisms” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 19–20).

Massacres against the Armenians are not so much an object of curiosity and rumor as a basic fact of life: in the very first pages of the book, in the dining car somewhere between Serbia and Greece, the author meets an Armenian “whose mother, father and three sisters were cut up into little pieces before his eyes by the Turks at Trebizond.”<sup>5</sup> In the vicinity of Alexandropol, Dos Passos allows himself a rare touch of direct exposition: “The last Turkish attack, in 1920, had wiped the country clean; not a house intact in the villages, no crops, even the station buildings systematically destroyed, and everything movable carted away. Ghengiz Khan and his Tatars couldn’t have laid waste more thoroughly” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 45). The traces of Armenian dispersion carry past the Caucasus; Dos Passos’s driver from Iran to Baghdad is an English-speaking Armenian of unspecified origin who wears “a thinly disguised English officer’s uniform and feels as his the triumph of the Cross and the Allies over the turban and the Hun” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 79).

It is clear that the historical theme of most pressing interest to Dos Passos – both the traveller of 1922 and the author of 1927 – is the wind of change unleashed by Bolshevik revolution. In Constantinople, the final act of the Russian Civil War, the collapse of the Southern Front, is everywhere in evidence: the curbs are lined with “Russian refugees, soldiers in varied worn uniforms that once were Wrangel’s army, selling everything imaginable out of little trays slung about their necks” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 12). An American voice keeps insisting “I was the last white man outa Sebastopol... Agricultural machinery’s my line” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 22). The advance of the revolution into the South Caucasus is expressed by similarly indirect means. Dos Passos reproduces for the reader’s benefit a disjointed two-page missive published in the *Pera Presse du Soir* by the widow of a Moussavatist official lately assassinated in Constantinople, with its assertion that “at Baku the power is in the hands of Armenians who have adopted the Bolshevik platform” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 14–15).

With reports of “three divisions of Bolos” sweeping through Armenia, British officers speculate that Kemal has promised Constantinople in exchange for Soviet military assistance (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 23). Possibly the most poignant expression of the collapse of an old world is an entirely mute one: at the end of a night of dubious “international vaudeville” entertainments, against a backdrop of rouged and powdered women and the jingling of a mechanical piano “a onelegged Russian soldier stands against a lamppost, big red hands covering his face, and sobs out loud” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 13). The same image recurs itself to the author as he mentally reconstructs scenes of Constantinople in a rare languorous moment on the deck of the *Aventino* (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 24–25). The imagined city exists in memory as well.

### “The Twilight of Things”

As though in sympathy with his temporary milieu, the destitute Russian emigrés and anxious Greeks and Armenians of Constantinople, Dos Passos suppresses an apparent exhilaration at the accelerating torrent of revolution until he arrives on the shores of the

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<sup>5</sup> This description suggests that the unnamed Armenian passenger was orphaned not in 1915, when the Armenian men, women, and children of Trebizond were separated for military deportation and murdered at a distance from the town, but rather in October 1895 when Turkish mobs “initiated [a] massacre without provocation,” shooting or hacking Armenians to death “in the street, or sitting quietly at their shop doors” (Morris and Ze’evi, 2019, p. 74).



“Red Caucasus,” the port city of Batumi. This exhilaration is not unmixed with a maturer sense of tragedy, a consciousness that history holds more disappointment than relief in store, and that every episode of revolution or reaction – “every movement forward or back of the steamroller of human action” – is first of all as suffering, the dissolution of individual human lives. But in Georgia, conscious as he is of the plight of the “poor devils” in the Cheka prison whose stench is perceptible well beyond its outer walls, and recognizing the new order’s origin in the “soggy bleeding chaos of civil war and revolution” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 34), Dos Passos nonetheless identifies in Bolshevism an unprecedented potential for human liberation. The nature of this potential is expressed most directly in an extended meditation on the physical artifacts left behind and “trampled underfoot” in the wake of recent upheavals.

Through the window of a cracked shopfront in Batumi, the author regards a hodgepodge of antiques and everyday necessities: “two silver Georgian sword scabbards,” “a pair of Dresden candlesticks,” “a pile of cubes of cheap soap,” Swiss watches, silver cups, spools of thread, pins, “an elaborate Turkish tabouret inlaid with mother of pearl,” and so on (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 28–29). There is no intimation of a hidden order in this odd assembly of obsolete luxuries and modest commodities, no elegiac reflection on the history of particular items, as, for instance, in W. G. Sebald’s works, where discarded and abandoned objects come to stand for forgotten lives, with their “dislocation and uncanny presence as remainders mak[ing] the traces of their former uses and human attachments visible” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 169). Rather, this “forlorn conclave” is characterized by its sheer obsolescence and utter lack of relation to human values; interest in these objects seems pitiable at best, contemptible at worst. The proprietor of the secondhand shop displays the “furtive snarl of a dog disturbed on a garbage pile,” and overheard bits of conversation between bargain-hunting Westerners – “five cents apiece in American money, what do you think of that?,” “Major Vokes bought a necklace in Batum and it turned out to be paste” – unmistakably convey a shallowness of spirit (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 26, 40).

Meanwhile, the local people, who in the author’s estimation simply lost the will to continue “trundling cherished objects into hiding-places” in the face of one invading army after another, now “lie all day on the pebbly beach in front of the town, with their rags stripped off them, baking in the sun,” and passing through the streets “never stop to look enviously at objects that perhaps they once owned” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 29–30). This is hardly a utopian condition—the Georgians’ languor, akin to “the delicious sleep they say drugs men who are freezing to death,” is a consequence of destitution and half-starvation. But in the sunsoaked forgetfulness of Batumi or in the young people of Tiflis “strolling about without restraint in this empty world like children playing in an abandoned house” there is a promise of a new existence, free of material constraint and artificial convention (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 40).

In the abandonment of the forms of everyday life, Dos Passos sees not only the “apathy” brought on by years of affliction and loss, but a promise of a more authentically human future: “a generation levelled like gravel under a steamroller to break the tyranny of Things, goods, necessities, industrial civilization” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 38). Under Batumi’s somnolent exterior there are signs of a more youthful and vigorous way of life: in the section titled “Proletcult” “a foolish enough play, an Early-Victorian sob-story” is acted and received with such untrammelled conviction that the author is moved in spite of himself and the undernourished and overworked secretary of the Adjara school system speaks in appealing words that seem “dug out of the soil” of a new

educational order where practice takes precedence over theory, study of the arts coexists with instruction in useful trades, and students learn in close proximity to nature: “the young children must be all the time in the fields and the forests, among the orchards where there are bees” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 31, 32).

The “cool pungence of bees,” and “the order and sweetness of the hive”—characteristically, these persistent images arise from overheard speech—become a metaphor not for subordination of the individual worker to the system of production, but for self-sufficient and organic modes of life (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 34). The development of Dos Passos’s art follows a conception, present from his earliest essays onwards, of “the writer’s vital role in opposing the dehumanizing impact of mechanization” (Nanney, 2022, p. 9). Though this tendency may not be apparent at first blush—rather than retreating to into primitivism or pastoral, Dos Passos accepts as his artistic element the fragmentary, mechanized texture of modern urban life and mass media—it must be borne in mind that the author positioned himself not merely against American capitalism but against “all-enveloping industrialism” as such, which he views as an enemy of literature (Nanney, 2022, p. 10).

In *Orient Express* the anonymous heaps of “intricate paraphernalia, all the small fuzzy and shiny and tasseled objects that padded the walls of existence” are the embodiment of this hostile industrial order, which has rendered man “a sort of hermit crab that can’t live without a dense conglomerate shell of dinner coats and limousines and percolators and cigarstore coupons and eggbeaters and sewing machines” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 38).

This provides the occasion for a break of the author’s customary reserve, into overt poetic subjectivity and historicopolitical meditation. “We used to dream of a wind out of Asia that would blow our cities clean of the Things that are our gods,” he writes—and now he meets in the South Caucasus a “huge continual streaming wind” both real and figurative, a wind “so hard you can almost see it streaked like marble, a wind of imaginable expanses,” set against the petty avarice of Western attachés for the bric-à-brac piled behind dusty shop windows. The author does not prematurely rejoice but rather questions: “will the result be the same piling up of miseries again, or a faith and a lot of words like Islam or Christianity, or will it be something impossible, new, unthought of, a life bare and vigorous without being savage, a life naked and godless where goods and institutions will be broken to fit men, instead of men being ground down fine and sifted in service to Things?” (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 38–39).

Events, of course, would bear out the former suspicion rather than the latter hope. This provides crucial context for the much-remarked upon shift in Dos Passos’s political views. It can be supposed that what he found so deeply objectionable in communism was not merely the casual brutality which he witnessed in Spain,<sup>6</sup> but also the intensified rather than diminished subordination of culture and human individuality to the demands of industrial production.

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<sup>6</sup> Dos Passos was shocked in particular by the summary execution in 1937 of his old friend, the “left-wing aristocrat” José Robles, under spurious charges of Fascist espionage (Piepenbring, 2015).

## Conclusion

Dos Passos, for all his internationalism, was preoccupied before all else with finding literary techniques commensurate with what he viewed as the most salient problems of contemporary American life. In Iran the question finally emerges: what relation does this journey Eastward bear to the author's own essential concerns? "But what do I want to drag myself around the Orient for anyway? What do I care about these withered fragments of old orders, these dead religions, these ruins swarming with the maggots of history?" For an author concerned far less with yesterday than with tomorrow, it is the West that "is conquering," with "Henry Ford's gospel of multiple production and interchangeable parts" (Dos Passos, 2015, p. 70–71). The foregoing discussion indicates that Dos Passos is seeking more than to form an impression of the picturesque and decaying old world before it passes away under the remorselessly advancing pavement of the "Universal Suburb." *Oriental Express* is marked not only by a search for positive values, new and old, which might provide substance to the empty forms of American life, but also by a striking advancement in the techniques of perspective, urban imagery and multivocality which would prove essential to his novelistic representation of the fragmentary landscape of American mass culture.

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