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The Romance of Observing Conflict: John Dos Passos's *Orient Express* and American Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how John Dos Passos's *Orient Express: A Travel Memoir* (1927) reframes the Mediterranean as a site of modernist tension where history, politics, and identity intersect. Set against the geopolitical instability of the 1920s, Dos Passos's journey transforms travel into an exploration of postwar consciousness, capturing the Mediterranean as a landscape of ruins and revolutions rather than romance. Through a fragmented, impressionistic style, he attempts to expose the moral ambiguities of observation and the privileges of American mobility while simultaneously participating in them. Engaging with Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Susan Nance's analysis of American consumerist fantasies, and Douglas Little's definition of American Orientalism, the paper situates *Orient Express* within a lineage of U.S. writers who turned eastward to negotiate their nation's expanding global presence. Dos Passos is ultimately both a participant in and critic of the American gaze, crafting a travelogue that anticipates later disillusionment with empire and modernity. In essence, this is an argument that Dos Passos's Mediterranean journey functions as a modernist experiment in seeing where the observer's struggle for authenticity mirrors America's uneasy encounter with its own power.

KEYWORDS

John Dos Passos
The Mediterranean
American Identity
Travel Writing
The American Gaze

Introduction

The Mediterranean, a historically layered and complex region, was especially steeped in conflict, geopolitical upheaval, and cultural friction during the 1920s. Aaron W. Godfrey writes in his review of Abulafia's *The Great Sea* that "the dominance of the Sea's populations was like the Sea itself, constantly shifting direction" (608). In the same vein, the aftermath of WWI rendered the Mediterranean basin the main arena of political instability; empires declined, and new national identities emerged. The vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to various nationalist movements and colonial powers trying to fill it. The Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), for example, was marked by palpable conflicts over territorial and ethnic claims that reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape. The Russian Civil War (1917-1922) further exacerbated the Mediterranean's instability, leading to the exodus of White Russian émigrés, the vast majority of whom relocated to Mediterranean cities (Koenker 427). Soviet ambitions and ideological confrontations also significantly shaped the region's status quo.

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The 1920s also mark a period of American expansionism that appears, on the surface, contradictory. On the one hand, the U.S. had reaffirmed its hemispheric dominance through the longstanding Monroe Doctrine; on the other hand, it was starting to reimagine itself as a global power, gradually moving

beyond the Western Hemisphere. This shift towards a more outward gaze was obviously not innocent. As John Bassett Moore writes, the Monroe Doctrine began as a call for mutual non-intervention but, by the early twentieth century, had become a "distinctively American" justification for extraterritorial presence (32-33). Edward J. Renehan observes that "the methods and motivations of American diplomats deploying and defending [the Monroe Doctrine] have certainly changed," evolving from protective isolationism to opportunistic interventionism (110). As the Mediterranean itself was going through a period of friction between old empires and new nationalisms, the American presence beyond its borders signaled both ambition and uncertainty. The U.S. was not only recalibrating its role abroad but also grappling with its implications.

During this tumultuous period, John Dos Passos decided to embark on a journey through the Mediterranean, seeking to capture the essence of a region in constant change. His unusual travelogue, *Orient Express: A Travel Memoir* (1927), offers a unique American perspective on this space, its different regions, people, and ideologies. His itinerary – Venice, Athens, Batum, Constantinople, Baghdad, Tehran, Jerusalem, Cairo, and the Syro-Arabian desert – functions not merely as a string of exotic destinations but as a literary map of the Mediterranean's geopolitical fault lines. His journey is by no means arbitrary; it is organized around various schisms. The fact that he moves East rather than South or West is also not coincidental. The East, for Dos Passos, is not only the geographical Orient but a symbolic site of crisis, history, and ambivalence. His route parallels the fall of empires and the emergence of new political orders, and, more importantly, mirrors his own dislocation as an American individual attempting to reimagine the self and his identity through engagement with distant lands.

This article argues that John Dos Passos's *Orient Express* transforms Mediterranean travel writing into a modernist reflection on American identity, ambivalence, and authority in the aftermath of empire by aestheticizing the experience of political suffering and historical decay. Tracing his eastward journey across zones marked by conflict and ruin, Dos Passos constructs the Mediterranean as a romantic continuum of civilizations while simultaneously rendering it a fractured stage on which the American observer negotiates his position between privilege and disillusionment. Through fragmented narration, strategic political detachment, and recurring metaphors of motion, ruin, and spectacle, Dos Passos both participates in and critiques the Orientalist gaze, translating violence and instability into aesthetic form and exposing the uneasy boundary between witnessing suffering and consuming it as experience. The article ultimately contends that Dos Passos's "romance of observing conflict" marks a pivotal moment when American modernism turned outward, using the Mediterranean as a mirror through which to confront its own historical anxieties and ideological contradictions, as well as the ethics of looking.

Preludes and Departures: A Young Mind on the Move

To read Dos Passos is to read an author who was never quite at home. Born in 1896 out of wedlock to an affluent Baltimore lawyer and a Virginia woman of genteel Southern lineage, Dos Passos spent his formative years moving across countries, languages, and identities (Ludington 2-3). He was initially named Jack Madison, adopting the Dos Passos surname only after his parents' eventual marriage (Ludington 3). From an early age, he was immersed in a transatlantic upbringing – living, studying, or traveling in the U.S., England, France, Portugal, and Italy – a lifestyle that helped nurture in him what Blanche Gelfant calls a sense of

"homelessness" as he moved from place to place "always going somewhere but never finding home" (Gelfant 134). Granville Hicks similarly emphasizes how Dos Passos's cosmopolitan education and early travel experiences, particularly in Europe and the Mediterranean, fostered a restless intellectual temperament that would later manifest in his writing and politics (85-86). This formative condition of rootlessness – geographical, emotional, and ideological – would become the core of Dos Passos's literary persona: an observer always in motion, rarely at rest, and never quite at home in the world he documented.

Dos Passos had homes, and he *was* an American, but he had no stable sense of belonging. In *U.S.A.: The 42nd Parallel*, he writes from the "Camera Eye,"[1] "I wished I was home but I hadn't any home" (*42nd Parallel* 197). This self-conscious admission of lingering displacement finds earlier resonance in his prose reflections in *Orient Express*, not through narrative continuity, of course, but through a recurring existential orientation. Watching the world slip by from the window of a train, he writes, "I feel as if I were a spy behind the lines of an enemy country" (*Orient Express* 43). This internal pause – quiet and disoriented – is symbolic of his fragmented selves: not quite at home in motion, not quite absent. This reflective persona, as a traveling recorder of details, has one foot in the real and the other in narrative performance, a reminder of what Susan Nance calls "playing Eastern" (16). This contradiction is at the heart of Dos Passos's personal life and travel writing alike.

Educated at Choate and later Harvard (Chamberlain 191), Dos Passos's elite schooling did very little to dampen his anti-elitist leanings. He studied architecture at Harvard but drifted toward literature, art, and politics. While there, he began publishing in the *Harvard Monthly*, revealing a growing hostility towards the mechanization of life (Hicks 86). In his editorial, "A Humble Protest," he declared war on industrial modernity, which he called "a silly claptrap of unnecessary luxuries" that destroyed "the arts of life and the arts of creation" (Hicks 86). The Dos Passos of the 1920s was not the conservative writer he would become in the 1950s; he was instead a man disgusted by war, which might explain his obsession with documenting conflict in *Orient Express*; he was also skeptical of capitalism and enamored with revolutionary ideals as Alfred Kazin writes, "Dos Passos certainly came closer to Socialism than most artists in his generation" (220). This almost-Socialist, wide-eyed young man would go on to volunteer in WWI as an ambulance driver – alongside Hemingway and E.E. Cummings – and see firsthand the bureaucratic carnage of modern warfare (Chamberlain 192).

The accumulation of his skepticism toward modernity, intensified by his wartime experiences, is perfectly exemplified in *Orient Express*, where he becomes a chronicler and critic of postwar civilization as well as a participant in it. He writes, "Thousands of lives have been given and taken… a generation levelled like gravel under a steamroller to break the tyranny of Things, goods, necessities, industrial civilization" (38). This line, excerpted from a longer contemplative paragraph in *Orient Express*, encapsulates Dos Passos's grim view of the modern world, a world consumed by materialism and violently reordered by ideologies that promised liberation. His witnessing of post-revolutionary Russia, with its broken ideals and hollow victories, serves as an archetype for his portrayal of a reckoning with the twentieth century's betrayals. In *Orient Express*, Dos Passos does not merely observe the aftermath of revolution; he chronicles the cost of trying to remake the world through grand narratives. His anti-capitalist ideas are not abandoned, but tempered by a sense of futility, by a realization that, whether under capitalism or communism, people remain crushed beneath the gears of industry.

However, for all his sharp critiques of modernity and the systems that feed it either in the Mediterranean or in the U.S., Dos Passos rarely turns the lens on himself. The very ability to observe, to move freely across borders and revolutions, is enabled by his American passport, his Harvard education, and his inherited social mobility – privileges that allow him to contemplate the ruins of the Old World from a somber and safe remove. This contradiction in

Orient Express, also part and parcel of most American travelogues, always remains an evident irony. As Nance argues, "Eastern personae were… vehicles for satire, tales of the surreal, masculine posturing, feminine power, or stories of magic and plenty presented by an authoritative person seemingly foreign to the United States" (28). While Dos Passos mourns the flattening of generations "like gravel" (38), he himself floats above the destruction, restless but untouched, critical yet protected. In this way, his cynical, satirical perception of the decline of a world overrun by materialism carries with it the very luxuries he claims to detest.

Before his Mediterranean journey, Dos Passos's post-war publications show how much the war had affected him. *One Man's Initiation* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921) were grim, angry novels that did not romanticize the battlefield (Hicks 87). "Tyranny, exploitation, and purposelessness" – these were the words Hicks used to describe what Dos Passos observed in war, not heroism or sacrifice (87). What Dos Passos brought back from the frontier was not necessarily trauma in the conventional sense, but something more complex: a permanent sense of cynical irony and of the violence programmed into every human encounter. *Orient Express*, then, functions as the literary reconciliation of his lived experience and the rest of the world; it is an account "of a man whose sympathies are constantly broadening" (Chamberlain 193).

When Dos Passos set out on his 1921 Mediterranean journey that would become *Orient Express*, he was in his mid-twenties, at the height of his revolutionism. The world was disoriented, and so was he. He had not yet become the disillusioned anti-communist who would defend the Vietnam War decades later (Maine 16). At this moment, he was still writing with a head full of socialist ideas, a heart full of revolution, and a passport that let him drift from Venice to the desert with ease. This is part of what makes the travelogue so significant to the career of a voice that defines American literary exploration in the 1920s. Dos Passos, the revolutionary leftist who rejects materialism, is also Dos Passos the privileged observer, whose American nationality gives him access to otherwise closed-off zones of conflict.

Even as an American citizen, Dos Passos was deeply interested in Madeira as his grandfather emigrated from it in 1830 (Ludington 1). He visited Madeira three times and described it as "a tiny town buried in a deep gash in the mountains… I could spend a century in Madeira" (Gonçalves de Abreu xv). His close connection to this island shows that his selective Mediterranean affinities cannot be ignored. This specific town, obviously, was not just part of the Sea for him; it was a site of ancestral nostalgia, layered histories, and contradictions. In *Orient Express*, however, his tone is strikingly different. Almost every page contains a portrayal of some rotten, destroyed, decrepit, poor, or unsightly scene. This contrast, stemming from personal investment and emotional resonance, shows how Madeira resists his broader disillusionment with the Mediterranean world. It also ultimately highlights his uniquely American Orientalism. Said did not have him in mind as he wrote, "The Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (21). Dos Passos is inside it, but he simply cannot see it.

Gelfant argues that Dos Passos is "obsessed with the elusiveness of identity… a young man dislocated in his society, self-questioning, uncertain, unnerved, and estranged" (134). The same sense of estrangement is present in *Orient Express*, not only in what is represented but in what is omitted. The narrative voice he employs rarely offers reflection or clarifies emotion; instead, the reader is offered a plethora of scenes and images to interpret. Even as a young man, and therefore relatively naïve, Dos Passos produced an account far removed from traditional romantic tourism: a fragmented travelogue by an American author trying to break free from the certainties of his national identity.

In addition to maintaining a uniquely idiosyncratic voice, Dos Passos's work is significant for how closely it mirrors the disillusionment of his generation. His postwar writing – not that there was much of it before the war – reflects what his contemporary Malcolm Cowley describes as a "period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created" (xxii). This

was a well-educated generation, driven by an obsession with finding meaning but haunted by displacement, thus earning the apt label "The Lost Generation." In the 1920s, Dos Passos mingled with the likes of Hemingway and Fitzgerald – even developed a close friendship with the former (Coggin) –, but unlike them, he did not write about Paris as an expatriate haven. He opted instead to write about Batum, Baghdad, Tehran, and the desert as gateways through which his modern American imagination would clash with empire, the East, the Orient, conflict, and poverty.

The East-bound American Observer

Before Dos Passos sets foot in the Mediterranean, his sense of direction is given importance from the beginning. The opening chapter is titled simply "Eastward," and the route he aims to take is immediately wrapped in poetic observation: "The Madeira is all drunk up […] the wind is carrying spring eastward […] to quicken the thrusting sprouts in weedy cemeteries in Stamboul" (4). This movement eastward is not merely physical but also symbolically significant: the East is already a surreal, exotic destination, laden with the remnants of empire, war, and death. His reliance on images of the East from the beginning underscores his literary intention to use the space and the concept to create his own version of the Mediterranean, his own imagined place of contradiction and collapse.

Dos Passos's focus on the East highlights an unconscious portrayal of the imaginative East-West division, the notion of a split Mediterranean, which is not a terribly novel idea, as it is deeply rooted in Western thought. As Edward Said famously argues, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3), and part of that restructuring has always involved drawing clear lines in the literary sand: East versus West, Islam versus Christianity, civilization versus backward barbarism. Dos Passos is evidently unable to entirely escape this intellectual paradigm, even if he challenges it with irony and a modernist detachment from the powers that be.

The style Dos Passos adopts in *Orient Express* – poetic, descriptive, and highly observational as it is – gives the reader the sense that they are embarking on a fictional narrative rather than a record of personal travel. He writes in the early pages, "The eastbound American goes back through the portals of doom into the empty restaurant where in the arctic stillness a lone waiter stands beside a table teetering like a penguin" (5). This is an interesting persona he had created to describe a fellow traveler he was observing while waiting for the train: the east-bound American, an indirect reference to himself. At this point in the narrative, he is describing the beginning of his travel before reaching the Mediterranean. The words he chooses to use to describe a restaurant in Ostend significantly shape the reader's perception of what is to come. The "portals of doom" foreshadow the war-torn countries he is about to visit. His Orient is not the typically exotic space depicted in British travel narratives, but a complex and unstable zone of suffering, survival, and division.

This figure of the east-bound American represents both a continuation and an interruption of the Orientalist gaze. On the one hand, he participates in the cultural tradition of traveling abroad to discover the exotic, the unknown, and dangerous other, to participate in "that American tradition of extravagant and sumptuous creativity" (Nance 26). And again, this might be an unconscious endeavor on the part of Dos Passos, as Douglas Little defines American Orientalism as a subconscious version of British and European Orientalism, marked by geopolitical fantasies and anxieties that seeped into American popular culture and thought from Europe (13). Susan Nance further confirms this as she argues that Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consumed Orientalist literature as part of a dream of escape, a fantasy of leaving behind industrial modernity for a land of romance and sensuality (6). The

Orient offered a space to enact specific American dreams, even to fulfill "the promise of consumer capitalism" (Nance 114). On the surface, Dos Passos is quite aware of this and occasionally mocks it in the travelogue. When he refers to Venice as "the Coney Island of Coney Islands… built for goggle-eyed westerners out of the gaudy claptrap of the east" (6), he simultaneously participates in and critiques the American consumerist appetite for Eastern spectacle.

At the same time, he is clearly influenced by the political realities of the post-WWI zeitgeist, which further complicates any simplistic East/West binary. His Mediterranean, his Orient, is not an entirely imaginary stage but a real, war-torn geography: a space of revolutions, famines, and failed empires. This leads him away from the romantic picture that Said critiques, the "living tableau of queerness" watched but never involved (Said 103-104), and towards a grittier realism. In *Orient Express*, the Orient serves as more of a site of crisis rather than just fantasy, filled with what he calls "roads […] under the terrible bloodrange moon of Asia" (13), a description in a section titled "Massacre" preceding another titled "Assassination." This is a landscape lit not by mystical glow but by symbols of violence and displacement. His grotesque description is more than a stylistic departure from romanticism; it reflects an ideological discomfort with Western voyeurism. This East cannot be watched from a distance, as this portrayal shows how encroaching and unsettling it is.

This tension between aesthetic detachment and political awareness is where Dos Passos tries to situate himself. This does not mean that he consistently employs the same narrative voice. Little notes that by the 1920s, the U.S. was inheriting Britain's role in the region, both economically and ideologically; even as it pretended to be anti-colonial, America projected power eastward (Little 21). Dos Passos is not necessarily going along with this American sentiment, at least not overtly or even consciously, but neither does he stand entirely outside of it. The east-bound American travels to the Mediterranean with the gaze of a literary documentarian battling his own demons. However, he is also followed by the specter of his American national identity, epitomized in his passport. He is, after all, always perceived by the locals he encounters as an American, as a representative of an imposing superpower.

Although his style is admittedly poetic and tends to elicit feelings from the reader rather than being matter-of-fact and guide-like, it allows for the tone of authority that Dos Passos ultimately aims for. In other words, it makes it easier for him to indirectly establish himself as the knowledgeable traveler amongst the vast number of novice tourists, especially when one considers the rarity of his commentary. Edward Bliss Reed writes in *The Yale Review*,

> Dos Passos has the modern restlessness, and his book is kaleidoscopic, one sensation following another in rapid succession. […] These descriptions are authentic; the writer can put a mood in words – the sense of infinite calm one has at times in the East, the feeling that the life one sees is but a pageant and a dream. (605)

The term "Kaleidoscopic," meaning complex and constantly changing, aptly defines what Dos Passos does in the narrative. He sees the Mediterranean and the East as a fragmented and rapidly shifting place, and he mirrors that image through an equally multifaceted style. This literary style is one of the tools he uses to be perceived as authentic and, eventually, to command authority through his discourse. Authenticity, or rather the ability to "put a mood in words," aligns with Michel Foucault's idea that discourse shapes and controls the interpretation of reality (Foucault 217).

Reed's reference to the East as "infinite calm" or "a pageant and a dream" reflects the typical romanticized perspective, similar to Dos Passos's portrayal. Nevertheless, Dos Passos's definition of the East is more nuanced and dynamic; it goes beyond a stationary setting of

ancient cultures and beautiful landscapes. He walks that fine line between maintaining a link to reality and unconsciously conjuring his American-ness. The following comparison serves as a good example of this nuance: as mentioned before, he compares Venice to Coney Island, a traditional American destination for entertainment and amusement. By doing this, he underscores the city's superficial appeal to tourists; he is also attempting to uncover the grittier, more "authentic" reality of "tidewater smell, rotting piles and mudflats" (6). Dos Passos further compounds that by using the term "Midway of history", a clear reference to the Midway Plaisance in Chicago,[2] which suggests that the city has been turned into a historical spectacle, a gaudy repackaging of what used to be, masking the true essence of Venice and the Mediterranean.

The East-bound American in the Crossfire

Orient Express is filled with references to ongoing and past conflicts and wars, emphasizing Dos Passos's intense awareness of, if not obsession with, the political and social turbulences in the countries and nations he visits. This is perhaps due to his recent struggles in the war. His travels through the Mediterranean revolve almost exclusively around the visible and invisible scars of war that are omnipresent throughout the text, from the ruins of old civilizations to the contemporary turmoil that defines much of the 1920s geopolitical landscape. Using his unique style and detailed descriptions of the cost and political complexities of these conflicts, Dos Passos attempts to challenge, in his own way, conventional, romanticized perspectives.

Dos Passos's vivid descriptions are, of course, based on the decrepit reality of the Mediterranean so soon after WWI. It is his unwavering interest in them throughout the narrative, however, that stands out as the author's driving force. He writes in the early pages, "perhaps most of [the people of Batum] went in the war under the grinding wheels of so many invading and occupying armies, the Russians, the Germans, the British, the Turks, the Georgian Social-Democrats and lastly the Red Army" (29). This tallying of successive colonial powers not only emphasizes the ever-changing, cyclical nature of war and conflict, but, more importantly, shifts the focus to the area's identity as an eternal battleground where the oppressor and liberator tend to change places every decade or so. The phrase "grinding wheels" compounds the extent of his fixation on war: it is crushing, inescapable, and impersonal.

Although Dos Passos tries to focus on, or at least highlight, the nuance of conflicts and cultural differences in the Mediterranean, he seldom engages in conversation about them. When a Greek girl asks him why he would want to learn Turkish and ends her question with, "you must side with the Greeks; you mustn't learn Turkish" (12). The question remains, why didn't he provide a direct answer to that obviously subjective question, and thus keep the dialogue going? He chooses instead to pontificate to his readers in the following paragraph about his reasoning as opposed to relaying his answer to the girl. "There was something in that wave of the hand of the soaring of minarets and the cry of muezzins and the impassive eyes of the elderly Turkish gentlemen in white vests sitting so quiet beside rejoicing Greeks in the Jardin de Taxim. There are reasons for learning Turkish" (12). By not engaging with the girl's request directly, he eludes the political and cultural implications of subjectivity, of favoring one group over another in a space known for historical tensions. Instead, he creates an ambivalent, poetic explanation that allows him to maintain his veneer of objective observer. Through these narrative choices, he ultimately seeks to create a persona for his readers: the objective chronicler of the heterogeneous, conflict-ridden Mediterranean.

Beyond that, by ending the passage with "There are reasons to learn Turkish," Dos Passos hints at a more profound understanding only accessible to him, which he chooses not to divulge.

This adds to his persona as the worldly, knowledgeable, east-bound American, but it remains a vague assertion that shows his hesitation to fully engage with the intricacies of the region's clashes. This retreat into abstraction is a recurring element throughout the travelogue as he avoids direct confrontation and instead offers his readers a romanticized, albeit indifferent, representation of the Mediterranean.

In "observing" the Greco-Turkish conflict and its aftermath, Dos Passos cannot help but manifest and ultimately critique his own American-ness and what the U.S. stands for in the world arena during this period. He quotes another Greek voice, "The news must be sent out, continues the archbishop; the world must know the barbarity of the Turks; America must know" (19). The archbishop's petition for the U.S. to be informed draws attention to the significance of American public opinion and foreign policy in influencing international narratives. By including this quote, Dos Passos portrays the U.S. as a powerhouse during the post-WWI period while also revealing the underlying assumption that America serves as the primary arbiter of moral authority in global conflicts. This is an excellent example of how the travelogue attempts a poetic documentation of change in the Mediterranean, while also actively shaping the perspectives and potential actions of a powerful American society.

On the other frontier of the Greco-Turkish conflict, Dos Passos offers an almost cinematic description of the Turkish side, emphasizing an instant of religious intensity and not necessarily political or cultural points of view:

> His body erect, his eyes staring straight into the sunlight, his hands raised level with his beard in the attitude of prayer, the new mollah shouted a prayer full of harsh ringing consonants and brazen upward cadences. … [the Ameen] 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. (16-17)

The depiction of this scene shifts the reader's attention from the polarizing political discourse of the Greeks to the firmly established cultural and spiritual traditions of the Turks. This subtle choice by Dos Passos brings one back to that nuance and ambivalence previously mentioned. As opposed to what the archbishop would like this east-bound American to believe, he chooses to ground this scene in the history of Constantinople, the history of Islam, and of the Mediterranean.

To his credit in this specific context, in portraying the Turks in this religious light, Dos Passos indirectly challenges the American tendency to reduce global conflicts into juxtapositions between good and evil, enemy and ally. He introduces his readers to a nuanced version of conflict and urges them to consider the various historical forces at play. In this way, he leads his audience towards a sentiment of self-reflection, of how American individuals perceive themselves and others in the context of global encounters and conflicts. Axel Korner writes in *America Imagined* that "Analyzing images of the United States in comparative perspective provides a key to the ways in which societies reflected upon their own past and future, how they experienced change, interpreted history, and fashioned ideas about selfhood and otherness" (3). Dos Passos not only complicates conflict but also critiques the image America holds so sacred of its global place; he attempts to defy the way America imposes its own historical narrative on foreign conflicts.

The Desert Frontier

After his time in Iraq and Baghdad, Dos Passos sets out for Damascus, but instead of crossing the desert in a motor, he joins a caravan. This decision is neither incidental nor simply

adventurous; it is an act of narrative defiance against speed, modernity, and ease. He makes a conscious choice to immerse himself in the hardships of the desert, in a premodern mode of travel that draws on both Orientalist myth and American frontier nostalgia. The journey, which unfolds in increasingly brief and fragmented diary entries, reflects a tension between his effort to observe like a detached American intellectual and his growing emotional, physical, and symbolic entanglement with the desert. His thirty-seven-day crossing becomes not only the longest continuous stretch of observation in *Orient Express* but also a pivot around which themes of identity, adventure, morality, and disillusionment revolve. That he chooses to document each stage as a numbered day betrays a need to anchor experience in measured, almost scientific increments – even as the space he moves through has always been imagined as a landscape that resists logic, progress, or conclusion.

Edward Bliss Reed aptly describes the part of the travelogue that covers this journey as "perhaps the best in the book; he had never been so happy, he says, as in the desert with men of the desert. Truly the spirit of adventure will not down" (605). As Reed and, probably, most readers have deduced, Dos Passos displays an undeniable tone of genuine enjoyment and appreciation for adventure through his literal and metaphorical exploration of conflict, death, and identity in this section about the cultural and historical significance of crossing the desert. From an Orientalist perspective, this is what Edward Said would call "imaginative geography and its representations" (49). Even though Dos Passos is not a typical Orientalist author with an oeuvre devoted to Othering the East, his narrative, in this context, does align with Said's idea of a literary construction of Eastern geographies through fantasy. His images of the desert hinge on his American-ness and that mythical frontier, where crossing the desert represents the discovery of the last uncharted territory, echoing traditional themes of conquest that the author would not directly accept based on the persona of detached observer he attempts to sell throughout the travelogue.

Before delving deeper into Dos Passos's portrayal of the desert, it is important to consider another significant American encounter with it, William Langewiesche's *Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert* (1997), a narrative that both complements and complicates Dos Passos's vision. While written decades apart and set in different regions of the broader desert expanse – Dos Passos crosses the Syro-Arabian desert, and Langeweiesche traverses the central North African Sahara –, they are symbolically and thematically connected through the American literary imagination of the desert as "a place of desolation, loss and servitude" (Bejjit 3).

Sahara Unveiled documents Langewiesche's journey through the Sahara Desert overland from the Mediterranean coast of Algeria to the Sahelian borderlands of Niger, following a southbound trajectory that slices through some of the most remote, politically volatile, and environmentally inhospitable terrains on the African continent. His route crosses the then conflict-ridden Algeria and onward into Niger's arid expanse, tracing the ghostly remnants of colonial roads, oil routes, and nomadic paths. Karim Bejjit writes, "Langewiesche approaches the Sahara with the prudence and reverence of a veteran traveler … [with an] unassertive and euphemistic narration" (9-10). The reverence here is an informed approach to an often-misunderstood space by authors and tourists alike. In this sense, Langewiesche constructs his own stark, practical, and dangerous desert. He frequently breaks from "euphemistic" descriptions to detail suffering, politics, and decay. He acknowledges, "Almost as far. Fight as I might, the desert would overwhelm me" (155). Where Dos Passos treats fatigue as part of a soothing rhythm of camel travel, only to be interrupted by the real drudgery of travel, Langewiesche views it as an existential challenge. Even though his "narrative displays caution in voicing any strong political views" (Bejjit 9), the Sahara seems to be a battleground of postcolonial failure and climate extremity.

The difference in tone and circumstance does not mean that the two authors have opposing views of the desert, as their common narrative ground speaks to a continuation in American literary exploration and consciousness. Dos Passos, writing in the early twentieth century, views the desert with a degree of reverence shaped by the American frontier myth. His is a desert where "men of the desert" (Reed 605) represent a noble simplicity, untouched by capitalist excess. Langewiesche, on the other hand, writes of a world in which such myths have evolved. He presents his interactions with locals in a subdued "almost self-effacing tone," prioritizing these human encounters over any detailed engagement with the surrounding landscape (Bejjit 9). For him, the Tuareg are not exotic sages but embattled survivors of oil geopolitics and fractured states. He quotes the Tuareg rebel Mano Dayak's *Touareg, La Tragédie* [3], "Colonization hurt us enormously, but we have known worse since then" (204). The desert, in this account, has already absorbed the violence of empire, and it remains. His reverence stems from the way the resilience of the natives shapes the greatness of the space.

Dos Passos's diary tone constructs a kind of passive witness: he is not the doer, but the one to whom things happen. Langewiesche compounds this by translating the tragedies of others and consequently questioning his own position as an outsider bearing witness. Dos Passos's desert adventure partially remains within the structure of a romantic narrative while observing war and conflict. Langewiesche adds to that tradition with his account of war, water shortages, and conflicts over oil. He writes, "It was as if the Sahara had refused to be reduced to oil" (16). The terrain resists its reality and insists on being harsh and uneven. Both texts betray the same American impulse: to write a desert, to narrate its silence, and to find in it a reflection of the self.

Susan Nance examines how the representation of the East in American popular culture was deeply connected to the rise of consumer capitalism. She also rightly critiques the reductionist application of Edward Said's Orientalism in the American context, highlighting the nuanced relationship between the East and the U.S. as rooted in consumerism rather than in typical imperialist aspirations.

In combining both Said and Nance's approaches to the topic, one could easily see a pattern emerging in Dos Passos's narrative, especially in the desert. He constantly alludes to the influence of *Arabian Nights* on his perception not only of the East but also of the Mediterranean in general. He writes, "Trebizond, one of the capitals of my childhood geography, a place of swords and nightingales and purple-born princes in a garden where trees grew rubies and diamonds instead of flowers…" (27). He juxtaposes his imaginative, nostalgic expectations with the stark, deserted reality of present-day Trebizond. "The real Trebizond […] defies inspection; amid rumored 'reprisals' against the Greek and Armenian population of the town" (Makayran and Toghramadjin 97). Later during the desert adventure, he comically uses the same *Arabian Nights* imagery, "Rode with the fat sheikh, who kept producing legs of chicken out of his saddlebags" (100). The influence of the East on American identity and the tendency to imagine and construct geographies are clearly important driving principles in Dos Passos's desert adventure, thus exposing his unconscious American-ness even further.

Right before embarking on his desert odyssey, Dos Passos sets the tone for one of the main themes of the adventure. He hears some shots fired and hears an Arabic word that, in his opinion, sums up all that was happening,

> the word dead, Miut, I recognized because coming up from Baghdad we passed the body of a Hindoo boy beside the road lying on its back with a stony smile, and Jassem had come back to the car from looking at it, had shaken his beard and said, Miut, and we had driven on. (96)

This stark reminder of mortality and the chilling detachment with which it is described foreshadows the image of the desert Dos Passos will cross, construct, and reconstruct: a space where death is an omnipresent companion. Although this may seem at face value as a concise introduction of harsh realities, it is also a romanticized version of what would otherwise simply be a trip from point A to point B. Starting the journey with death, in an oddly similar style to how it is done in *Arabian Nights*, glamorizes the danger surrounding crossing the desert, venturing forth into the perilous unknown.

Despite his choice to paint the journey as a perilous endeavor haunted by the specter of death, Dos Passos creates moments of idealistic romanticism in the desert, using the old American premise of finding freedom and simplicity in a nomadic existence rather than the complexities of modern life. He sends his valuable watch by plane instead of taking it with him through the desert; he has very little money on him: "I tried to explain that I was fakir, a poor man, and had no floos of any sort, but he would not believe me" (107); and he enjoys the fact that he has no responsibility, "like being a dervish or a very small child" (101), as he puts it. However, as stated above, Dos Passos's shift in tone and demeanor after a while reveals a central theme throughout the text: the romantic notions of adventure, freedom, and discovery are constantly undermined by the physical realities and psychological fatigue of the journey.

This alternation between romance and reality in the desert as experienced by an east-bound American is also evident in his interactions with his fellow travelers, particularly when he assumes, or is assigned, the label of the 'Hakim,' wise man. This status, which denotes power and authority, places Dos Passos on the pedestal of a figure of influence, much like his own country on the world map. Even though it is unclear where the title comes from, it is definitely ascribed to his American identity in one way or another. He confirms this by sarcastically lamenting, "That's the hell of being a Hakim and sitting in a crimson tent. Everything you do has political significance" (107). His attempt at downplaying his revered status and creating the impression of himself as an outsider, humorously rejecting the label of wise man, falls a bit short and instead highlights the nuanced dynamics of identity and power in a foreign land; his musings instead remind one of Orientalist bromides like that of 'The White Man's Burden.'[4]

Both *Orient Express* and *Sahara Unveiled* are built around the voice of the outsider, but it is the nature of that displacement that distinguishes Dos Passos from Langewiesche. Dos Passos positions himself as a passive traveler, someone merely swept along by others' movement. Yet paradoxically, the figure he becomes in the desert is not just a man among men, but "the Hakim," a symbol of knowledge and quiet authority. This performance of reluctant authority reflects what Nance identifies as a recurring pattern in American cultural representations of the East. She argues that Americans "played Eastern" not necessarily to dominate but to indulge in self-fashioning, to project ideals of abundance and leisure (21). Interestingly, many perceived these ideals to be aspects of Eastern life, while "the same vision [was] promised by the consumer capitalist ideology that would come to define the American dream" (Nance 2). In this tradition, Dos Passos becomes a character in a transnational fantasy: the American who sheds modern anxiety in the perceived simplicity of the East, of the desert. Even when he mocks the Kiplingesque tropes of imperial travel writing—calling the crowd at a station "characterless natives out of Kipling" (82)—he remains within the same visual economy. He may look down on Orientalism, but he does not quite escape it.

He employs this literary reference to avoid directly reducing the people in front of him to Orientalist stereotypes. He continues by seemingly critiquing Kipling's reductive vision of colonized people by arguing that Persian pilgrims, who, upon crossing "the magic line of British dominion," lose their "dignity of feature and gesture" (82). To him, they become mere "featureless natives out of Kipling" (82). Being featureless and characterless, in Dos Passos' American eyes, is a direct consequence of their engagement with British imperialism. This

further highlights his ambivalence through suggesting an underlying tension between his own romantic perception of these people and the colonial lens through which Kipling has historically depicted them.

Langewiesche, on the other hand, moves among people with names, faces, and traumas. He does not pretend to be above the political scene unfolding around him. Instead, he frames his presence in terms of tense proximity. "We Americans are not afraid to get our hands dirty!" says a Texan oilman he met through a native. By portraying this encounter with an individual who apparently epitomizes American brashness, he mocks it and also highlights his own role in observing suffering. The comment is powerful because it is true: Langewiesche is not a detached philosopher of the desert; he is immersed in its filth, its futility, and its postcolonial fallout. His subjects are Tuareg nomads, broken trucks, and Saharan survivalists; there is no crimson tent or dervish metaphor.

Both writers, however, embody American exceptionalism in one way or another. Dos Passos does so by attempting to refuse it but failing. Similarly, Langewiesche's deeply journalistic stance still relies on his position as a Western observer with mobility and exit routes, unavoidably insulated.

Conclusion: Mapping a Mirage

Dos Passos's *Orient Express* is a travelogue that serves as a fractured mirror of the 1920s Mediterranean world, filtered through the disillusioned, politically sensitized gaze of a postwar American observer. His writing is both poetic and unsteady, personal and distant, romantic and grounded in reality. At every stage of the journey, Dos Passos is in pursuit not only of experience but of meaning. What emerges is less a map of the lands visited than a meditation on history, identity, and contradiction. As this article has shown, the Mediterranean for him was not simply a sea or setting; it was a crucible where empire, revolution, and memory collided, and where a modernist American writer could test the limits of detachments, empathy, and narrative control.

The symbolic core of this article has been the desert. It is here, in his thirty-seven-day caravan, that Dos Passos seems to find something resembling clarity, or perhaps a mirage of it. His embrace of slowness, suffering, and danger in the desert reveals his desire to escape the tyranny of Western speed, of American consumerism, and of historical fatigue. And yet, even in the heart of the desert, his metaphors betray him. Bandits are filtered through Buffalo Bill, and sheiks resemble the characters from childhood fairy tales. His East is never quite free of the American gaze; his American exceptionalism remains an inescapable lens.

Endnotes

1. The "Camera Eye" in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is a stream-of-consciousness narrative device that captures his personal, subjective impressions and memories. For further reading, see Donald Pizer, "The Camera Eye in *U.S.A.*: The Sexual Center," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 26, no.3, 1980, pp. 417-30.
2. "Midway Plaisance." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation,17 Apr. 2024, https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Midway_Plaisance.
3. In this work, Dayak outlines the Tuareg people's plight and grievances against the Niger government. Mano Dayak was a prominent leader who played a significant role in the Tuareg rebellion during the 1990s. For further reading, see Baz Lecocq, "Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The 'Teshumara' Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 49, 2004, pp. 87–109.

4. The concept of "The White Man's Burden" originates from the 1899 Rudyard Kipling poem. It was originally written to encourage U.S. colonial intervention in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. The idea posits that white Europeans, and by extension Americans, had the responsibility or burden of civilizing "backward" non-Europeans.

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