

REJOICING CITY THAT DWELT CARELESSLY: FROM *ORIENT EXPRESS* TO GROUND ZERO

by

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As we turn the pages of John Dos Passos' short travel book *Orient Express* (1927), his eight paintings, each reproduced on a page of its own, compel our attention. Almost all the paintings are impressionistic, with red, white, yellow, and orange predominating, and convey just how much of Dos Passos' Near Eastern trip was through deserts and oases, usually under a burning sun.

The author's narrative too is mostly impressionistic. We experience events, but not fully, and analysis is rare and usually fleeting. There is much terrain for the author to cover; he is overwhelmed by sensations and experiences; his verbal record is intermittent, and his visual one has only tenuous connections with the text.

We note that most of his paintings appear timeless. The costumes, the houses, the streets, the bazaars, the oases, the rugs could be from hundreds of years back. Despite Dos Passos' choice of subject matter for these paintings, it is clear throughout the text that he has a strong sense of history, though in his paintings he has chosen to emphasize the near-stasis of the area.

Dos Passos embarked on the Orient Express train from Venice in July 1921. After disembarking in Constantinople, he proceeded to the new Soviet republics on the Black Sea, where he witnessed unforgettable poverty, starvation and disease, all growing out of World War I. Afterwards he traveled in a Soviet railway boxcar to the border of Persia, and the next day took a train to Tabriz. From there he went in a dilapidated four-horse carriage to Teheran, then by automobile and train to Baghdad, where he arranged to travel on by camel caravan to Damascus. Dos Passos' narrative substantially concludes with his arrival in that city.

In March 1923 he wrote a friend that he was planning to write a "novel about New York and go-getters and God knows what besides." That novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, appeared in 1925. Although *Orient Express* was published two years after the novel, the Near Eastern experiences preceded *Manhattan Transfer's* writing, and by their contrast with his experiences with New York, influenced the novel's form and content.

On the train from the Soviet Caucasus to Iran Dos Passos became friends with "the Sayyid," an Iranian who was returning to his country after completing studies in a German medical school. Dos Passos in *Orient Express* describes him as a strong proponent of political and tech-

nological change in Iran. In a railyard in Nakhtchevan, the author hears him "holding forth on Pan Islam and the resurrection of Persia." Later, in Iran, the Sayyid tells Dos Passos that he is the son of a "mujtahid, a very holy man," and if he had not gone abroad to study, he might have been a mollah, not a physician. Though not a Baha'i, he believes that all prophets have a bit of truth, and thinks highly of the Baha'is. "But the poor people," the Sayyid says, "were very ignorant and fanatic and believed whatever the mollahs told them."

For Persia to be a great nation it must industrialize, the Sayyid says. "I tried to tell him," Dos Passos adds, "that the life of an industrial worker in Europe and America was not all beer and skittles, and even wondered whether those people hammering away at their copper pots, miserably underpaid as they were, might not get more out of life than, say, the steelworker in Germany, for all his moving pictures and bierhalle with which to amuse himself."

Later, in Baghdad, an old Arab explains to Dos Passos that Great Britain and France had not acted according to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. "The American must tell his countrymen that the people of Iraq would continue to struggle for their freedom and for the principles announced by Sheikh Washiton and Meester Veelson." The Arab people would not, he says, be deceived with kings kept in power by the English.

Dos Passos' subsequent trip by camel caravan to Damascus lasted thirty-seven days. Protected by Jassem er Rawwaf, an Agail Arab who was a leader of the caravan, he survived raids by brigands which could have cost him all his possessions, if not his life. During the journey a discussion of America developed among the Agail. Some of their people had been there and reported that it was a place full of money. "I made a great speech," Dos Passos writes, "and said that if I had any sense I would live in the desert with the Agail and never go back; but they took it as a compliment and did not understand."

New York City, the subject of Dos Passos' 1925 novel, was the epitome of American industrial capitalism—the nation's financial, trade, and cultural center. The population in the city was huge, the anonymity unsurpassed, the economic competition hectic, the pace hasty, and the contrasts between rich and poor glaring. Dos Passos' book about New York is a collective novel, with scores upon

scores of characters, many of whom appear infrequently, or only once. It covers twenty years of the city's history, beginning around 1900.

Although Dos Passos has a painter's eye for the lights and colors of the city, his emphasis is overwhelmingly on the society itself. The novel depicts the post World War I depression, the conformity that business success requires, the quiet and sometimes noisy desperation of countless people, the crooked actions of business and political leaders, the insipidity of the commercial theater, and the deportation of anarchists by the Federal government.

The third and final section of the novel begins after the end of World War I, and the period covered is nearly contemporaneous with that of *Orient Express*. Part I of that section, titled "Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly," has Jimmy Herf, the leading character, returning from overseas married to Ellen Thatcher, a beautiful young actress. Herf is an idealistic journalist, but no one will pay him to write about society and events as he sees them. Since he is a "failure," Ellen abandons Herf and agrees to marry the rising, dishonest politician George Baldwin. At the close of the book a penniless Herf abandons New York, desiring simply to get away from the city.

The novel again and again foretells Nemesis for New York. Thus in "The Burthen of Nineveh," the final section of the novel—immediately following a section titled "Skyscraper"—a tramp in a park says to two boys:

"Do you know how long God took to destroy the tower of Babel, folks? Seven minutes. Do you know how long the Lord God took to destroy Babylon and Nineveh? Seven minutes. There's more wickedness in one block in New York City than there was in a square mile in Nineveh. . . ."

On September 11, 2001, the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly suffered an attack, not from Bible-citing activists, but by Muslim suicidals. And the twin towers of the World Trade Center were reduced to "Ground Zero." Muslim elements like those who, according to the Sayyid, would believe whatever the mullah told them are vastly more dangerous today, in a shrunken and more technological world, than their counterparts could have been in 1921. As we ponder Ground Zero we spy not poetic justice but a zany conundrum.¹

Rereading *Orient Express* after September 11, we wish that Dos Passos had interrogated the Sayyid closely about those ignorant fanatics and their mullahs—were the mullahs calling for jihads? If so, against whom? But he had capitalist industrialism, not Near Eastern mullahism, on his mind in 1921.

And with adequate reason, as his "biography" of Henry Ford in *The Big Money* later demonstrated so memo-

rably. Nor is capitalist industrialism anything to cheer about today; e.g., its incessant advertising denies our intellects and fogs our spirits. No writer has evident answers to our problems, but Dos Passos' *Orient Express* and *Manhattan Transfer*, though of lesser magnitude than *U.S.A.*, can still give us light.

Notes

1. In contrast, the television evangelist Jerry Falwell two days after the attack said that God had allowed America's enemies "to give us probably what we deserve." Falwell later apologized. *Washington Post*, September 14, 2001, p. C03; September 18, 2001, p. C04. Both citations are from the World Wide Web.