

## TOWARDS A UNITY OF DOS PASSOS'S AND HEMINGWAY'S AESTHETICS IN *THE SPANISH EARTH*

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### Abstract

This article argues that *The Spanish Earth*, as the first and only artistic collaboration between John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, represents a unique fusion of their different aesthetics. In doing so, it aims to show that all the drama surrounding the production of the film has come to obscure the essential unity of the work itself. The following, then, shows that despite the fraught circumstances, Dos Passos and Hemingway were able to put their aesthetic differences aside for their mutual love of Spain, even as the production itself would paradoxically lead to their falling out.

**Key words:** Dos Passos, Hemingway, *The Spanish Earth*, Spanish Civil War, film, aesthetics.

### Resumen

En este artículo se propone que *The Spanish Earth*, la primera y única colaboración artística entre John Dos Passos y Ernest Hemingway, representa una fusión excepcional de sus diferentes concepciones estéticas. Al hacer esta propuesta, esperamos demostrar que todo el dramatismo que rodeó la producción de la película ha venido a oscurecer la unidad esencial del trabajo en sí, ya que, a pesar de sus tensas circunstancias, creemos que tanto Dos Passos como Hemingway fueron capaces de dejar sus diferencias estéticas a un lado a favor de su común amor por España, incluso si la producción paradójicamente llevara a su desavenencia personal.

**Palabras clave:** Dos Passos, Hemingway, *The Spanish Earth*, Guerra Civil Española, cine, estética.

Recent years have seen a good deal of interest in the period that John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway spent together during the Spanish Civil War. For all the liberties it takes with the source material, some credit must nonetheless be given to Stephen Koch's *The Breaking Point* (2005), which helped to bring out the sheer drama of the period. Koch's stylized narrative was later followed by Hans-Peter Rodenberg's article "Dear Dos/Dear Hem: A Turbulent Relationship in Turbulent Times" (2010), which offers a more balanced account of what happened between the two in Spain. Finally, there is also the recent HBO production *Hemingway and Gellhorn* (2012), in which Hemingway's deepening

conflict with Dos Passos adds another layer to the drama in the Spanish portion of the film.

Different as they may be, in style as well as genre, all of these accounts of the period nonetheless have one thing in common: they tend to focus on fracture and discord. To be sure, this is hardly surprising, since the relationship between the two writers did break down under the most dramatic of circumstances, never to recover. In a complex tangle of the personal and the political, the two clashed over the issue of Stalinist influence in the conflict, brought to a head by the disappearance and subsequent execution of Dos Passos's friend José Robles, at the apparent hands of Republican forces. The episode left both writers with bitterness that lasted a lifetime, communicating their resentment over the years through thinly veiled portraits of each other in their writings. Yet compelling as their rift was and still remains, it has to an extent also come to overshadow the actual work that Dos Passos and Hemingway accomplished in Spain—that is, as part of their collaboration on the *Spanish Earth* documentary project in 1937.

This article revisits *The Spanish Earth* not from the point of view of rupture and discord, but rather—and perhaps oddly enough—from the perspective of harmony and unity. As the first and only artistic collaboration between Dos Passos and Hemingway, *The Spanish Earth* may in fact be seen as a unique combination of their different aesthetics. The following, then, aims to show that all the drama surrounding the production of the film has come to obscure the essential unity of the work itself.

As a point of departure, and to equally function as a framing device, let us turn to biographer Carlos Baker, who in a revealing formulation once described the different attitudes with which Dos Passos and Hemingway approached *The Spanish Earth*:

Dos wanted to concentrate on the privations of everyday life in a typical village of Old Castille, where living conditions were almost incredible to foreign eyes. Ernest, while far from discounting the humanitarian aspect, wanted pictures of attacks, gun emplacements, bombardments, and destruction. (305)

Although Baker leaves it only implied, these attitudes also seem to capture the more general aesthetic differences between the two authors: while Hemingway believed that moments of intense force or pressure could be revelatory of the human as well as the historical condition, Dos Passos favored a distinctly more longitudinal approach to socio-historical matters, often focusing on the level of everyday reality in his work. In the case of Hemingway, we may think of the great, cataclysmic events in the novel that he would go on to write about Spain (i.e. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*): El Sordo's last stand, the executions at Ronda, the eventual destruction of the bridge—even when the earth moves for Robert and Maria. These are all moments of intense meaning and emotional impact that stand out in the narrative, demanding the reader's attention. Writing to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925, Hemingway explained that "war is the best subject

of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get" (176). In other words, the reason why war is such a good subject to him is because it both produces and magnifies these intense moments. For Hemingway, then, it is desirable to speed up the action and cut through the commonplace in order to get to these decisive events, which in many ways seem to structure his fiction.

In immediate contrast, we may then think of how Dos Passos's war novels contain very little actual fighting. Instead, the focus is elsewhere: the debilitating effects of army socialization, the anxiety produced by wait and worry—even boredom. "In a war, you spend a lot of time waiting around," Dos Passos once commented about his own experiences during World War I, and this seems more than evident in a novel like *Three Soldiers* ("Contemporary Chronicles" 238). More specifically, Dos Passos's fiction also seems to directly challenge some of the underlying aesthetic tenets of Hemingway's writing. In a well-known article on *1919*, the middle volume in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, Jean-Paul Sartre discusses how Dos Passos often treats ostensibly great events in his narrative with a sense of irony. As an example, he cites Dos Passos's depiction of the World War I armistice, where the character Eveline Hutchins focuses on fairly mundane things in what is a moment of genuine historical significance. As Sartre reads the passage, finding it representative of a broader thematic: "The great disturbing phenomena—war, love, political movements, strikes—fade and crumble into an infinity of little odds and ends which can just about be put side by side" (90). Indeed, what Sartre points to is in fact a repeated pattern throughout the *U.S.A.* trilogy: whereas Hemingway speeded up the action to get to his treasured moments of meaning, Dos Passos seems to virtually pass them over—if not even undermine their significance. Perhaps Sartre's formulation can furnish us with a terminology to understand the essential difference between the two writers: whereas Hemingway was interested in the great disturbing phenomena of human existence, Dos Passos was more concerned with its odds and ends—that is, the stuff of everyday life.

These two attitudes seem fairly incompatible, even incongruous, and hardly the best foundation for any kind of artistic collaboration. And indeed, at first impression, *The Spanish Earth* undeniably appears polarized, half of it being focused on military engagement, while the other half is concerned with rural life. As the film opens, the narrative is first anchored in the titular Spanish earth, as we are introduced to the village of Fuentedueña and their attempt to construct an irrigation system. Gradually, viewers are exposed to the fighting, and the link between the two narrative planes is constituted by Julien, a boy from the village fighting at the front. Based on what we know about their respective aesthetics, it would be easy to imagine the village plotline as conceived by Dos Passos and the "grace under pressure" thematics we frequently see in the fighting scenes as originating with Hemingway. Recent research, however, has cast new light on the narrative origins of the film. In *Hemingway's Second War: Bearing Witness to the Spanish Civil War* (2011), Alex Vernon reveals that the village plotline, and thus also the twofold narrative structure, actually predated the involvement

of both Dos Passos and Hemingway. Instead, it seems to have emerged from early discussions within the Contemporary Historians collective, primarily between director Joris Ivens and Archibald MacLeish. Still, however, it is clear that Ivens and MacLeish were in need of the expertise that Dos Passos and Hemingway could bring in order to translate their ideas into a coherent narrative. Vernon reproduces a 1937 telegram from MacLeish to Ivens, whose form as well as content signal urgency: “HEMINGWAY AND DOS CAN SUPPLY SOME SORT [OF] NARRATIVE CONTINUITY,” he wrote, adding that “DOS SHOULD ARRIVE IMMEDIATELY” (qtd. in Vernon 87). Once Dos Passos arrived in Spain, he and Hemingway then spent five weeks filming. During this time, it is clear that the two naturally gravitated towards the parts of the production that interested them the most—that were most in line with their aesthetics. Thus, as Vernon documents, Dos Passos spent the majority of his time in the village, while Hemingway mostly followed Ivens on the battlefield. In other words, although the narrative outlines were already in place when Dos Passos and Hemingway joined the project, the two arguably reinforced them through their presence, as if working on different parts of a collaborative manuscript.

Let us remain with that image, of Dos Passos and Hemingway working away at different parts of the narrative: one at the center of action, the other on the apparent margins of the story. Again, it suggests polarization, as if the two men’s vision of the work could not have been more different. Yet as a finished work, *The Spanish Earth* in fact sees evidence of a reconciliation between their opposing aesthetic views, combining as it does Hemingway’s passion for the “great events” with Dos Passos’s interest in the small drama of everyday life.

In reel 2 of the film, there is a sequence that begins in familiar Dos Passos territory, illustrating how a soldier’s life is not spent solely on the battlefield. Accordingly, we see images of soldiers performing everyday tasks and whiling away the time, as they await their next orders. To be sure, this is the type of material that Dos Passos mines in his war novels, extracting from it themes of alienation and deadening routine. In his narration, however, Hemingway endows these mundane activities with a certain stoic nobility: “When you are fighting to defend your country,” he comments, “war as it lasts becomes an almost normal life: you eat and drink and sleep and read the papers.” But later in the same sequence, something strange happens that threatens to upset this display of wartime dignity. For suddenly, a barbershop on wheels—a *peluquería*—enters the army encampment, and while bombardments are heard in the close distance, we see soldiers getting a shave and a haircut. The resulting juxtaposition becomes fairly absurd, in that personal grooming would seem a low priority at a time of war. Certainly, it stands out as being less essential than the basic daily activities that Hemingway enumerates in his narration: eating, drinking, sleeping, and reading. As such, we can assume that Hemingway had little to do with the barbershop part, since it seems to undercut the point made in his narration. Neither would the inclusion of this detail seem expected of director Ivens, considering his communist sympathies. Surely keeping up one’s personal

appearance would seem woefully bourgeois under the circumstances? Instead, the grooming segment suggests the hand of Dos Passos, as it seems typical of the ironic detail he tends to insert in his fiction, often as a point of contrast to the historical. For example, when the character Mac gives a speech for the Zapatistas at the height of the Mexican revolution in *The 42nd Parallel*, the actual contents of his delivery is all but passed over in favor of detailed descriptions of the ensuing night on the town, focusing on the particularities of food and drink. The result, as Sartre also extracted from his example, is trivialization: the use of ironic detail implicitly questions the depth of Mac's political commitment, which will later be proven correct as the character settles down into a life of comfortable domesticity. In the case of *The Spanish Earth*, however, the appearance of this Dos Passos signature does not produce the expected sensation of irony—it does not deflate or trivialize the scene—and it is arguably the result of Hemingway's commanding narration. For, in combination with Hemingway's delivery, the sequence instead comes to say something about the length to which the Republicans are ready to go in order to preserve their normality of life—to keep Franco's aggression from changing their lives, even down to its most minute details.

Another negotiation of Dos Passos's and Hemingway's aesthetics may be found in reel 5 of the film, which gives voice to a number of ordinary people as they are shown evacuating Madrid. In an act of narrative ventriloquism that blurs the lines between documentary and fiction, Hemingway proceeds to imagine the inner thoughts and feelings of the people captured by the camera. "Where will we go? Where can we live? What can we do for a living?" Hemingway narrates, from the point of view of a family shown abandoning their house. "I won't go; I'm too old," he then intonates as the camera settles on an elderly lady. "But we must keep the children off the street," he then adds in contrast, giving voice to the whole community.

Hemingway's interest in ordinary people—the faces in the crowd—appears as unusual, almost anomalous, in the context of his work as a whole. For rather than being plain or run-of-the-mill, Hemingway's characters naturally tend to stand out, much in the same way as do the narrative peaks in the stories of which they are part. The result, of course, is some of the most iconic figures in American literature. They never recede into the background, nor blend into the crowd, and most importantly, they never become symbols. In 1932 correspondence with Dos Passos, Hemingway in fact underlines the importance of the latter: "Keep them people, people, people," he advised his friend on writing characters, "and don't let them get to be symbols" (354).

Dos Passos, however, would not have been easily swayed, because in marked contrast to Hemingway, he had always been interested in ordinary people and character types in his fiction. "Here are people who jostle you on the street day by day," a contemporary advertisement for *The 42nd Parallel* read, underlining the fact that Dos Passos's characters are common types, drawn from everyday life (repr. in Turner 128). In fact, a frequent criticism is that his characters are too ordinary—even flat. But this was part of his aesthetic

conviction: “The business of a novelist,” he once wrote, is “to create characters . . . and then to set them in snarl of the human currents of his time” (“The Business of a Novelist” 160). This is also why his characters had to be plain or ordinary, so they could better reflect or perhaps rather embody those general currents. As a consequence, however, this mode of characterization often leaves his protagonists with little in the way of inner life. Of course, Hemingway’s characters are not the most expressive—but they never appear flat, since we are at all times made to feel their emotional depth, through intimation and inference. In Dos Passos’s characters, however, there is, as one critic put it, “nobody much at home” (Whipple 90).

The *Madrileños* shown evacuating their homes in *The Spanish Earth* are certainly caught in the currents of their time, if not pulled down into the whirlpool. But unlike Dos Passos, Hemingway imbues these characters with inner life, creating a unique combination between on the one hand dealing with ordinary people and on the other endowing them with a clear sense of depth and individuality. In one sense, they are symbols of civilian plight, but through the manner of presentation, they also become figures of flesh and blood. We see the lines in their faces, and through Hemingway’s narration, we are also made to hear their voices. The resulting effect, quite simply, is to grant these ordinary people a voice in history.

The film’s recognition of ordinary people caught in the wheels of history adds another dimension to Dos Passos’s and Hemingway’s collaboration, beyond that of the aesthetic. Because for all its novelistic qualities, *The Spanish Earth* is essentially a historical document; after all, the group behind the production styled themselves Contemporary Historians. This disciplinary self-identification bears to be taken seriously, for if transferred to a historiographic context, the different approaches taken to the film by Dos Passos and Hemingway may also be seen as corresponding to different methods of representing the past.

In *History and Truth* (1955), Paul Ricœur argues that the representation of history depends on the ability to build a coherent and continuous narrative out of what is vast, unruly, and often bereft of clear meaning. This entails separating what Ricœur calls “the decisive” from “the accessory,” in a process he terms “historical choice.” As he writes:

History, as it comes through the historian, retains, analyzes, and connects only the important events. . . . [T]he judgment of importance, by getting rid of the accessory, creates continuity: that which actually took place is disconnected and torn by insignificance; the narrative is connected and meaningful because of its continuity. (26)

Anticipating later ideas by Hayden White, Ricœur is here pointing to the methodological affinities between the historian and the novelist. In a similar way as a novelist may steer clear of anything not relevant to the thrust of the main plot, the historian leaves out the accessory to more meaningfully fasten the narrative around the decisive events. Basically, we might say, historians too

“speed up the action.” Yet as Ricœur laments, the consequence of this mode of practice is that the lives of ordinary people have received no place in history: “The [received] meaning of history,” he writes, “comes through the important events and men,” which has rendered the lives of the masses anonymous and left their possible agency unconsidered. In light of this, Ricœur goes on to imagine a different way of writing history—for, as he writes,

. . . there is another meaning that reassembles all the minute encounters left unaccounted for by the history of the great; there is another history, a history of acts, events, personal compassions, woven into the history of structures, advents, and institutions. But this meaning and this history are *hidden*. (100, emphasis in original)

*The Spanish Earth* unravels this history. It anchors the conflict in lived reality, in the experience of ordinary people, while still relating it to the great events of traditional historiography. In doing so, it connects Hemingway's great disturbing phenomena with Dos Passos's odds and ends, showing them both to be important in the understanding of history. This idea is suggested by the final scene of the film, which may be seen to offer a visual metaphor of the unification of Dos Passos's and Hemingway's different outlooks. Here, in a manner reminiscent of Vertov, scenes of Republican soldiers charging ahead after an important strategic victory are intercut with images from the village, showing the successful completion of the irrigation ditch. The juxtaposition implies a connection between the two levels of development: the irrigation system will replenish the Spanish earth, whose produce will in turn help to feed and sustain the Republican army. What the montage suggests, then, is that the efforts of ordinary people on the home-front, which Dos Passos insisted on including, are equally important to the analysis of the conflict as those dramatic scenes of battle which so captivated Hemingway.

In the end, the film shows that the different aesthetic views of Dos Passos and Hemingway were not incompatible, but that their combination could yield compelling results. The tragedy, then, is that by the time the film was shown in theaters, this aesthetic harmony had already been broken at the level of the personal. Nevertheless, we still have the film as a tantalizing evidence of the potential that a Dos Passos-Hemingway collaboration could hold.

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