Anglo-American Writers, the Communist Movement and the Spanish Civil War : the Case of Dos Passos

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Résumé

La guerre d'Espagne, moment privilégié d'engagement pour les écrivains anglo-américains, a joué un rôle ambivalent dans leurs trajectoires intellectuelles par rapport au communisme. De compagnon de route du stalilisme on passait, dans une évolution typique, par une crise de doute et d'identification avec une tendance gauchiste, pour aboutir à un refus total du communisme. Chez certains la guerre d'Espagne a précipité ce processus, tandis que chez d'autres elle l'a retardé. Pour Dos Passos, comme pour Orwell, tous deux témoins horrifiés de la répression stalinienne en Espagne, elle l'a précipité. Tandis que For Whom the Bell Tolls de Hemingway exprime dans l'ensemble la perspective d'un compagnon de route, Adventures of a Young Man de Dos Passos est en quelque sorte l'équivalent romanesque de Homage to Catalonia, puisqu'il dénonce le rôle des staliniens en Espagne. L'article analyse le roman de Dos Passos et le paradoxe qui veut que sa critique" soit pertinente mais sa qualité esthétique médiocre.

Abstract

The Spanish Civil War, a high point of «commitment» for Anglo-American writers, played an ambivalent role in their intellectual trajectories vis-à-vis Communism. A common pattern consisted of « fellow-traveling» with Stalinism, followed by a crisis of doubt, identification with a Leftist dissident tendency, and eventually total rejection of Communism. In some cases the Spanish war hastened, while in others it retarded this process. For Dos Passos — as for Orwell — the former occurred : both were revolted by the signs of Stalinist repression they witnessed in Spain. Whereas Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls is written on the whole from the perspective of a « fellow-traveler », Dos Passos' Adeventures of a Young Man could be said to constitute a novelistic equivalent of Homage to Catalonia, since it denounces the Stalinist role in Spain. Dos Passos' novel is analyzed and the paradox of its telling critique but poor esthetic quality is discussed.

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BY

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For Anglo-American writers the 1930s clearly represents a privileged moment in terms of « commitment », or active involvement in socio-political questions. And within this decade the Spanish Civil War — the period during which it was fought and the issues surrounding it — probably constitutes the high point, the crescendo of the writer's *engagement*. Like their European counterparts, English and American writers responded massively to the events in Spain triggered by Franco's *pronunciamiento* and military offensive. [1] Often, although not always, these authors were in some way and to some degree attracted to and involved with the international Communist movement. The involvement went back more or less far — and deeply — in the author's life, depending on the case. But in any case the response to the war was always closely bound up with the relation to Communism. Each affected the other : the prior relationship to

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Communism conditioned the way the war was experienced, and the experience of the war sometimes contributed to the triggering of a crisis in, and reappraisal of, the stance towards Communism.

Although intellectual trajectories are of course always highly individual, there are nonetheless several common patterns in the case of writers involved with Communism in the 1930s. At the most general level, a typical itinerary began with engagement, followed after a period of time by a crisis of doubt that usually led to disengagement or a radical redefinition of the initial *prise de position.* More specifically, a common evolution began with a Stalinist commitment — or « fellow-traveling » with Stalinism [2] — which then in the period following the crisis shifted to identification with Trotskyism or other dissident, *gauchiste* tendencies, and finally ended with a total rejection of all forms of Communism and espousal of one of the following : the apolitical « ivory tower », a form of non-Communist socialism, social democracy, liberalism, or a more conservative, Right-wing solution.

Within these trajectories, the Spanish Civil War played a highly *ambivalent* role. Historically it coincided with the Moscow show trials, which began in '36 and continued sporadically during the course of the Spanish war. The Stalinist terror and repression that was visible as the tip of an iceberg in these trials, was present in Spain as well, on the Republican side — and at least partially visible for those who had eyes to see it. Consequently, for a number of writers the Spanish Civil War contributed — *along with* the Moscow trials — to lead them to question their original commitment; it represented a key moment of the crisis in their relation to Communism. Yet for others the war functioned in the opposite way : as a diversion which postponed until later facing up to the implications of the Moscow trials. In the war situation many felt that the military efficiency of the Communists, the fact that only the Soviet Union was supplying the Republic with weapons and aid, and the need above all else to defeat fascism, justified working closely with the Communists and refusing to criticize them so as to maintain the strength and unity of the anti-fascist front. As a result, many writers willingly closed their eyes to certain things they witnessed or heard about, and put « in parenthesis », so to speak, their doubts and objections concerning the Communists.

In terms of these two contradictory functions of the Spanish Civil War, these is a whole spectrum of particular itineraries. At one end of the spectrum we might place Malcolm Cowley, a Stalinist fellow-

traveler who defended (albeit with some qualms) both the Moscow trials and Communist tactics in Spain, and who continued firmly to maintain the same basic position until his break with Communism as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum we would locate Stephen Spender, who went to Spain as a recent CP member (having joined the Party in spite of his disagreement with the Moscow trials), who published an article immediately upon return from his second trip critical of Communist domination of the International Brigades, but who continued to defend the Communist position on Spain as a whole up to the Hitler-Stalin pact. Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Cowley, we would place Orwell and Dos Passos, both of whom immediately and thoroughly denounced the overall role played by the Comintern in the Spanish conflict.

Dos Passos — the author we will focus on here — stands closer to Orwell than to any other Anglo-American writer involved in the war. Like Orwell he was already critical of the CP when he came to Spain, and their common opposition to it took the form of a Leftist dissidence with affinities to Trotskyism (although by no means strictly speaking Trotskyist). [3] Orwell was rather closely associated with the ILP — the Independent Labour Party in Britain — and Dos Passos was loosely related to the group of New York intellectuals around *Partisan Review*. [4] Both became convinced while in Spain that the Comintern had come to be as great an enemy of the working class as capitalism itself. Both immediately published works testifying to what they had learned in Spain : Orwell, the superb *Homage to Catalonia*, and Dos Passos several articles [5] and a novel entitled *Adventures of a Young Man*. Indeed it might be said that — at least up to a point — Dos Passos' *Adventures* constitutes a novelistic equivalent of Orwell's essay, expressing in fictional terms themes developed discursively in *Homage to Catalonia*.

The similarities stop there, however; important differences separate the two writers as well, the most encompassing and significant one being that Orwell remained an oppositional socialist until his (early) death, whereas Dos Passos moved eventually to the far right wing of the American political spectrum as a supporter of Barry Goldwater. Yet in spite of the divergences, there was clearly a marked affinity between the American and the British author at the moment of the Spanish war, one that Dos Passos was aware of when he met Orwell briefly in Barcelona just before leaving Spain. [6]

The other relevant association with respect to Dos Passos and the

Spanish Civil War — but this time one of contrast rather than affinity — is with the author of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Although *Adventures of a Young Man* does not, like Hemingway's novel, take the Spanish war as its sole subject — the latter in fact comes into play only in the last 30 pages — the war fulfills a crucial function in it. It is the *dénouement* that brings what preceded it into focus and establishes the ultimate meanings of the novel as a whole. Thus Hemingway and Dos Passos, having experienced the war directly, each attempted to deal with it in fictional terms. But Dos Passos' novel stands totally opposed to the other in terms of its political vision.

Confining ourselves strictly to the political level, we would claim that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* expresses, in novelistic terms, the perspective of a certain kind of fellow-traveler with official Communism — that is, with the politics of the Comintern in Spain. In it, although the French Communist leader of the International Brigades, André Marty, is revealed to be a grotesque and sinister fool, he only serves as a foil for the Russians — Golz, Karkov, Kashkin, etc. — who appear as intelligent, effective and courageous soldier/leaders representing the best hope for the Spanish Republic to survive. Moreover, Hemingway caricatures the other Leftist groups that the Comintern harassed and eventually bloodily put down : the Anarchists and the P.O.U.M., a dissident Communist group close to — but not identical with — Trotskyism. The Anarchists that appear in the novel are drunken and filthy clowns whom Pilar — one of the most positive characters in the book — thinks are a dangerous menace to be « destroyed ». And the P.O.U.M. is the silly — not even dangerous — perpetrator of a putsch attempt (the official Communist explanation for the street fighting in Barcelona in May '37, originally set off by themselves). The protagonist Robert Jordan's stance is typical of the non-Communist — and apolitical — fellow-traveler of Stalinism. He finds the propaganda and ideology of the Russians entirely foreign to his way of thinking, and some of their methods questionable, but he admires them tremendously as fighters, and, as he tells one of them : « My mind is in suspension until we win the war ».[7]

The contrast between this portrayal of the Spanish conflict and that in *Adventures of a Young Man* could not be more complete. Coming at the conclusion of Dos Passos' novel about a young American idealist who becomes a revolutionary in the '20s and '30s, the war in Spain is the last cause to which the protagonist commits himself. It comes as the last hope of a disillusioned activist who joined the C.P.U.S.A., became increasingly critical of its politics, left it and

joined one of the dissident Communist « splinter » groups. Immediately upon arriving in Spain this young man by chance meets an Anarchist Mexican worker he once knew in Texas, who tells him in his own English : « Here several different kinds of war. We fight Franco but also we fight Moscow [...] If you go to the Brigada you must not let them fight us. They want to destroy our collectives. They want to institute dictatorship of secret police just like Franco. We have to fight both sides to protect our revolution » [8] When the young man — Glenn Spotswood — goes to the International Brigade he there encounters another acquaintance from Texas : Jed Farrington, son of an eminent judge, who was an independent radical when Glenn first met him but who subsequently became a Party member. Jed is now a battalion commander in the Brigades, and clearly enjoys both war and exercising authority over other men. When Glenn mentions his Mexican friend — with whom Jed had worked politically in Texas — Jed warns Glenn to stay away from him « or any of his kind... uncontrollables... The minute the fascists are cleaned out we'll have to clean out these boys ». « But don't they represent a good part of the working class ? », Glenn asks. Jed replies : « Our business is to win the war [...] they are interfering with our winning the war, see ? My only hope is we won't be forced to clean 'em out before we win the war. We've cleaned out some of the worst of 'em already » (p. 308). For Jed the war must be won by and for the Party, not the working class as a whole.

Jed becomes suspicious of Glenn himself, and rumors begin to spread that he is a Trotskyist. He is subsequently arrested and interrogated by Comintern agents of the « special brigade » as it is called, among whom is an American he had met in New York after he had become a dissident. He is accused of being « one of the channels of communication engaged in actively preparing the Barcelona uprising » (of May '37), which has occurred since his conversation with Farrington (p. 315). He learns that the Mexican Anarchist was « shot for armed resistance in Barcelona the third of May » (p. 317). Glenn is imprisoned while the agents await orders in response to their report. As he waits in prison, the fascists attack nearby and draw close. He composes a « mock heroic testament » on the wall in which he bequeaths « to the international working class my hope of a better world » (p. 319). In the final scene, as the fascists are on the point of taking the village where the prison is, the American agent releases Glenn, but tells him that he should take some water to the men on a nearby hill who are still holding out against the

fascists : « 'Somebody's got to go. We can't', he said. Glenn understood » (p. 321). He agrees to go, understanding that the mission is highly dangerous, and is in fact killed as he executes it. Thus, although the agents send him to what they know to be almost sure death — both as a convenient way of ridding themselves of a dissident and so as not to have to go themselves — Glenn freely and knowingly accepts the task, and his death is a suicide as well as an example of the turpitude of the Comintern. It combines in a single act both an expression of total despair on the part of Glenn in saving the working-class movement, and an illustration of the tactics that are destroying it — both the effect and its cause.

Since he willingly participates in the act, Glenn's death cannot be construed as a political assassination. However, it does represent the ultimate — and ultimately damning — incarnation of the lethal *irresponsibility* of Communist politics such as we see it at work in the rest of the novel, an irresponsibility that leads them to be the cause — in the larger, mediated sense — of much unnecessary suffering and death. Earlier in the novel Glenn goes to Harlan County as a CP activist to organize the miners. The events take place during the so-called « Third Period » of the Comintern — the period of ultra-sectarianism that treats all other progressive forces as « social-fascists ». The narrative develops a chain of events culminating in the death of one miner and the serious wounding of another in a prison escape attempt; although the Communists are not — as in the case of Glenn's death — the *direct* cause of the tragedy, there is no doubt that the ultimate blame lies with the Communists' overall political stance and the actions that have flowed from it.

Thus the universe of the novel, and the section on the Spanish conflict in particular, reveals the ultimate — mediated but also unequivocal — responsibility of the Communists in the unnecessary loss of human life. But Dos Passos' personal experience in Spain had involved witnessing a case of direct, unmediated responsibility. When he arrived he discovered that a Spanish friend — José Robles — had disappeared. The latter had been working in the Republic's Ministry of War, and had been in constant contact with the Soviet advisers there. Dos Passos eventually found that his friend was dead; he pursued the case and began to piece together the story. As he recounted it in an open letter to the *New Republic* (July, 1939) : « In the fall of '36 friends warned him that he had made powerful enemies and had better leave the country. He decided to stay. He was arrested soon after in Valencia and held by the extralegal police under condi-

tions of great secrecy and executed in February or March of the following year [...] My impression is that the frame up in his case was pushed to the point of execution because Russian secret agents felt that Robles knew too much about the relations between the Spanish war ministry and the Kremlin and was not, from their very special point of view, politically reliable [...] Of course this is only one story among thousands in the vast butchery that was the Spanish civil war, but it gives us a glimpse into the bloody tangle of ruined lives that underlay the hurray for our side aspects ».[9] This incident was the crowning blow for Dos Passos in his already deteriorated relations with official Communism. As he suggests at the end of his open letter, he saw the Robles affair as simply one among many. Glenn's arrest in *Adventures* is undoubtedly presented as a parallel case to that of Robles; for, although Glenn finally wills his own demise, we are led to believe that if the Comintern agents had had time to receive their orders from above, those orders would have called for execution. Indeed, within the novel — although not in the Spanish section — we find allusions to unmediated murder, in the form of an account by a character returning from the Soviet Union of the purposeful starvation of the peasants in collectivization, and the mass liquidations taking place in the mid-thirties.

Adventures, then, pictures the Spanish war and the Communists in a way that brings it close to the discursive message of *Homage to Catalonia*. However, there are also significant differences in Orwell's and Dos Passos' portrayals of the war, stemming both from differences in their personal experience of it and in the evolution of their general perspectives. With respect to their experience of the war : Orwell arrived in Spain in December '36, and did not leave until late June '37. He participated in the conflict as an ordinary soldier in a P.O.U.M. unit, was severally wounded in the trenches, and personally witnessed — indeed was a victim of — the suppression of the P.O.U.M. in Barcelona. Dos Passos, on the other hand, entered Spain in early April '37 as a non-combattant observer intending to make a film. Horrified by the Robles incident and by other signs of what he considered treachery by the Communists, he abridged his stay, leaving after only a few weeks, at the end of April. Thus Orwell's war experience was considerably wider and deeper than that of Dos Passos. Most importantly, Orwell was in Spain in late '36, before all signs of the initial revolutionary spirit had been erased. For in the months immediately following the fascist uprising workers and peasants had taken power and established revolutionary

self-government in areas they held. This process was eventually halted and then reversed by the Communists and their moderate allies. Orwell's moving description of the true egalitarianism and fraternity in Barcelona in the early period before the turn of the tide, forms an effective counterpoint to his account of what follows. This first moment of *Homage to Catalonia* is entirely missing from *Adventures*, as was pointed out to Dos Passos by the wife of the Spanish writer Arturo Barea, to whom he had sent a copy of the book. She wrote : « I am afraid that the end [of the novel] is only too possible; but it is a pity that your young man could not have that great impression of a simple mass solidarity which I had in Madrid of the very first months — that experience which has helped me to resist the deep bitterness I felt, of course, when they began to hunt me down ». [10] It is that same experience of human solidarity that made of Orwell — in spite of the later encounter with Communist terror — *more* of a socialist rather than less of one when he returned from Spain, whereas Dos Passos was already fast moving away from a socialist perspective altogether.

Thus, although just before the war Orwell's and Dos Passos' political stances were similar, after it a significant divergence exists. Whereas *Homage* — as well as letters and other pieces written in the same period [11] — are still solidly to the Left of the Communists, *Adventures* betrays an evident ambiguity. As we have seen, Glenn's point of view to the end is precisely that of a Leftist dissident Communist critical of the CP in the name of an authentic revolutionary impulse and a self-determining working class. But Glenn's rhetoric is made to sound as hollow, cliché-ridden and out of touch with realities as that of the official Communists; and he falls into a deep despair that culminates in suicide. Thus his position is implicitly placed in question, and is certainly not to be identified with Dos Passos' own. Moreover, another point of view is counterpoised against that of Glenn. Paul Graves, Glenn's friend since adolescence, becomes a biologist and comes to incarnate the scientific spirit as Dos Passos conceives it : curiosity, open-mindedness, pragmatism, and the experimental bent. Paul at first sees the Russian Revolution as a social experiment the results of which are not yet in. Then he spends a year in the Soviet Union running agricultural stations, and witnesses the Stalinist terror campaign. He returns home convinced that the experiment is a failure, and tells Glenn : « The New Deal's got the five-year plan knocked for a row of red squares as a social experiment [...] I've only been home four days but it seems to me that

the country's changed a hell of a lot [...] I think we are going to have the kind of country where guys like us can do useful work [...] The revolution's happened; kid, it's all over » (p. 285). What follows is a debate between the New Dealer and his Leftist friend. The arguments are simply juxtaposed; nothing is clearly resolved. But particularly in the light of the novel's demonstration of the *non-revolutionary* state of mind of the American working class, Paul Graves' side in the dispute is distinctly more compelling.

It seems safe to assume, then, that Dos Passos had already abandoned his socialist commitment at this point, and was passing through a phase of at least sympathetic interest in liberal New Dealism. But his politics continued to evolve. During World War II he grew increasingly critical of Roosevelt, and by the late forties had concluded that New Deal liberalism led only to corruption and illegitimate concentration of power in the hands of a government bureaucracy. In the fifties he became a Cold Warrior who condoned McCarthyism, and in the sixties an enthusiastic supporter of Barry Goldwater.

In *Adventures* Dos Passos' political mutation has barely begun; yet in the light of subsequent developments it may be possible to explain the striking paradox of this novel. For as we have demonstrated, the representation of the Spanish war in it highlights certains realities that remained at least partially hidden from view for many participants and observers, but which many willingly chose to ignore. It focuses on the rotten underside of the war on the Republican side, revealing aspects of the event that the leading historians of the war — notably Hugh Thomas, Pierre Broué and Emile Témime [12] — later showed to have played an essential role in the conflict. Yet despite the veracity and pertinence of the critique, *Adventures* has generally been recoggnized — and not only by Communists or fellow-travelers who condemned it mainly on political grounds when it first appeared — to represent a considerable fall-off artistically in relation to Dos Passos' previous work — and masterpiece — *U.S.A.* In *Adventures* Dos Passos abandons the experimental forms used in *U.S.A.* — the newsreel and camera eye sections, the kaleidoscopic, multifaceted structure of the whole, etc. — and reverts to a rather traditional, single narrative line that recounts in chronological order the life of an individual protagonist. But even as traditional narrative the novel is weak, particularly in terms of its characters, many of whom are lifeless caricatures. Although not uniformly poor — the

section on Glenn's childhood, for instance, is relatively successful — there can be little doubt that *Adventures* is a minor piece of writing.

Probably the most satisfactory explanation for this paradox, and answer to the question why Dos Passos' novelistic powers began to fail him *at precisely this point* (he in fact was never again to write novels of the stature of *U.S.A.*), would be that as a result of his Spanish experience Dos Passos began to lose touch with the complexities of the social and historical world which had always been his primary subject-matter. [13] Spain was the straw that broke the camel's back; it pushed Dos Passos to a total, violent break with Communism, now identified with something like absolute evil. He became convinced that he had learned a simple, all-important truth and that his mission was to reveal it. It was no longer necessary to scrutinize the baffling multiplicity of the world, since he already held the secret. Henceforth his primarily didactic purpose (as in the later historical works, aimed at glorifying indigenous American democracy) in the service of increasingly simplistic, black-and-white conceptions of reality, could not but have a devastating effect on the writing of creative fiction.

This loss of touch with the complexity of socio-historical reality is already prefigured in Dos Passos' relation to the Spanish war. For his precipitous departure from Spain, in disgust, after only a few weeks, amounts to a refusal to delve deeply and broadly into that reality, which after all had many other aspects than the one he had discovered. His leaving, then, foreclosed the kind of fruitful engagement with reality that alone could have made of *Adventures* a rich fictional exploration of the Spanish Civil War.

NOTES

1. On the response of American writers, see Allen Guttmann, *The Wound in the Heart : America and the Spanish Civil War,* New York : The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

2. On fellow-travelers and the relationship of writers to Communism, see David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers,* London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973 ; and Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left,* New York : Harcourt, Brace and World 1961.

3. For detailed treatment of the political evolutions of Orwell and Dos Passos, see their principal biographies : Bernard Crick, *George Orwell : A Life,* London : Secker and Warburg, 1980, and Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos : A Twentieth Century Odyssey,* New York : E.P. Dutton, 1980.

4. See Alan Wald, « Revolutionary Intellectuals : *Partisan Review* in the 1930s », in *Literature at the Barricades : « The American Writer in the 1930s »,* ed. R.F. Bogardus and F. Hobson, Alabama : Univ. of Alabama Press, 1982.

5. « Farewell to Europe », *Common Sense,* VI (July, 1937) ; and « The Communist Party and the War Spirit », *Common Sense,* VI (Dec., 1937).

6. See Ludington, *op. cit.,* p. 373.

7. Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* London : Granada, 1976, pp. 118, 219, 220-21. I have argued elsewhere that Malraux's *L'Espoir,* although in a very different way, also transmutes into novelistic terms the perspective of a fellow-traveler : see Robert Sayer, « *L'Espoir* and Stalinism », in *Witnessing André Malraux : Visions and Re-visions,* ed. B. Thompson and C. Viggiani, Middletown, Conn. : Welseyan Univ. Press, 1984.

8. John Dos Passos, *Adventures of a Young Man,* Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1939, p. 305.

9. *The Fourteenth Chronicle : Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos,* ed. T. Ludington, Boston : Cambit, Inc., 1973, pp. 527-29.

10. Ludington, *op. cit.,* p. 397.

11. For documentation see Crick, *op. cit.,* conc. ch. 10, and ch. 11.

12. See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War,* London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961 ; and Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *La Révolution et la guerre d'Espagne,* Paris, Ed. du Minuit, 1961.

13. Granville Hicks comments on this phenomenon, but without relating it to the Spanish war, in « The Politics of John Dos Passos », in *Dos Passos : A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. A. Hook, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice Hall, 1974.