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NOTES

Spain and the Hemingway – Dos Passos Relationship

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WHAT Scott Donaldson and Donald Pizer have called the “long,” “extremely close,” and “complex” relationship between Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos ended, as did many of Hemingway’s friendships, with deep bitterness.¹ Several things soured the relationship: Pizer notes especially the friction engendered after Katy Smith married Dos Passos in 1929—she had been Ernest’s girlfriend during his days up in Michigan—and by each man’s seeking to exorcise certain of his own demons at the expense of the other. The immediate cause of their breakup in 1937 was their disagreement in Madrid about events during the Spanish Civil War. Hemingway, elated by his involvement with the Republican cause and by his sense of being an insider, refused to believe Dos Passos’ assertion that the Communists were guilty of murderous political scheming. Dos Passos, convinced that the Communists had secretly executed his close friend José Robles, felt betrayed and quickly left Madrid after an unpleasant encounter with Hemingway. The two authors later met briefly in Paris when Dos Passos and Katy were about to board a train to leave. The three exchanged heated words; Hemingway raised his fist as if to hit Dos Passos, then turned away abruptly, and the break was complete.²

Deeper than the bitter disagreement about the Civil War—or perhaps the root causes of it—were the matters of which author knew Spain better and how each viewed its ritual aspects. Such

¹ “Dos and Hem: A Literary Friendship,” *Centennial Review*, 29 (Spring 1985), 163; “The Hemingway-Dos Passos Relationship,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 13 (1986), 111.

² For a fuller discussion of the entire episode, see, for example, Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1980), pp. 365–74.

issues were especially irritating to Hemingway, who wanted to be the expert about whatever interested him. The much-traveled Dos Passos had more than once been first to some place about which Hemingway later became an authority. Dos Passos, for instance, had traveled through Florida and visited Key West in 1924, four years before Hemingway first journeyed there in 1928. Dos Passos, however, made no claim to Key West. He had enjoyed it; he talked to Hemingway about it, and Hemingway quickly appropriated it after he and Pauline arrived in April.³

But Dos Passos would not—could not—defer to his aggressive friend about Spain. However much Hemingway wanted to be the authority, he could not eradicate the other's earlier experiences. Dos Passos had first lived and traveled there during the fall of 1916 and early 1917 after his graduation from Harvard and had lived there again for nearly eight months from August 1919 to April 1920. In 1922 he published a volume of essays about Spain, *Rosinante to the Road Again*. All this was before Hemingway's first trip to Pamplona in 1923.

Then, too, their visions of things Spanish differed. Nothing reveals this more than a letter Dos Passos wrote in French to a friend of his, Germaine Lucas-Championnière, in September 1919. He was at that moment in Madrid, having made his way on foot and by train down from St. Jean de Luz just over the border in France. "Mademoiselle," he began in his utilitarian French,

The manner of a bullfight is the following.

There are moments in the life of a Spanish city when one notices that everyone follows a particular street, when everyone presses and jostles, that all the *landaus*, the *berlines*, the *coupés*, the *voitures de place*, the taxis, the limousines, the handcarts, the old women who sell the marvellously Greek jugs of water, the vendors of melons, of grapes, of fruit, the cats, the dogs and the pigeons, that the entire population goes in one direction. It is the hour for the bullfight. One enters, as in the last act of Carmen, sits down, and thinks about the struggles of the Roman gladiators, with disgust and scorn one looks at the reddish sand of the arenas, the wooden barricades painted red and yellow which protect the spectators, the barred gate through which enter the Christians, no, the bull.

³ Ludington, p. 231; Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Scribners, 1968), pp. 191–94.

One shrugs his shoulders. One is accustomed to all that. Then things begin.

Sound of a trumpet. Two men in black, holding themselves with great difficulty on handsome horses which prance in the crushing light of the amphitheater, enter, circle, and salute, with a magnificence spoiled a little by the difficulty they have in holding themselves on their horses, before the royal box. Then the picadors and the matadors, the teams of mules that are going to pull off the corpses, enter in procession and salute the box empty of great personages. They are dressed in all colors, red, orange, purple, and the gold lace glimmers in the strong sun. Again the trumpets, and the bull enters, black, immense, leaping like the bulls that the cavemen painted in the beginning of the world in the caves of Altamira. This is not a battle, it is a ritual, a sacrifice which is carried out. One immolates a horse or two on the horns of the bull, and the disembowelled horses twist in grotesque attitudes on the sand reddened by the strong light. Then, with a superb gesture one puts the banderillas in the back of the already tired bull. Then there is a fierce cry of joy from the trumpets, the matador sets himself in the prescribed position and plunges the length of the sword into the thick and bloody neck of the bull. The bull hangs out his tongue from which drips frothy blood, and he turns his head from one side to the other in a bestial and fascinating manner like that of a little dog asking for some sugar. The matadors with their capes of red, green, and purple make a circle around him. He falls and rolls on the ground and becomes small and dirty on the sand of the arena. The teams of mules enter cheerfully and drag away the corpses to the sounds of bells and the snapping of whips. Another trumpet. The red, green and purple cloaks take their places, and it recommences.

It must have been a little like that that hundreds of bulls were sacrificed to the great gods at Knossos or Mycenae, or before the high walls of Ilion.

It is stupid, it is ugly, it is splendid—it is like a jumping contest or like the Russian ballet—But the nerves of the twentieth century, accustomed as they are to streams of blood spilling on the earth, find all that an interesting but disagreeable sensation.

I am enroute to Malaga. . . .

Au revoir

John R. Dos Passos⁴

⁴ The letter, along with several others, was given me by Mlle. Lucas-Championnière when my wife and I visited her in Paris in 1974. It is published here with the permission of Elizabeth Dos Passos. The translation is mine, and I have tried to render in English

Other than proving that Dos Passos saw a bullfight four years before Hemingway did, the letter shows Dos Passos' eye for detail. The ritual is well enough known to us today; in 1919 it would not have been. More important, it reveals Dos Passos' sardonic sense of humor that became satiric in his best work. After his experiences as an ambulance driver in France and Italy, he had seen enough blood and guts not to be enthralled by the ritual aspects of a bullfight. This was the same attitude that made him attack war in *Three Soldiers*—which was germinating when he wrote the letter—and in one of his most moving pieces, "The Body of an American," which closes *1919*, the second volume of the trilogy *U.S.A.*

Not so for Hemingway. The bullfights for him became symbolic action that caught as nothing else could, once World War I had ended, the violent and deadly nature of man's struggle in an alien world. "The only place where you could see life and death, *i.e.*, violent death now that the wars were over," he declared in *Death In the Afternoon*, his guide to bullfighting published in 1932, "was in the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it." So he traveled there and discovered that "the bullfight was . . . far from simple" and that it gave him "a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality."⁵

If Dos Passos ever wrote about a bullfight in his work, I am unaware of it. Certainly he never did in the Hemingway manner. And therein, as I have tried to show, lay one cause, long submerged, of the friction that grew between them. The shy Dos Passos, diffident when around Hemingway, was quietly scornful of a Spanish ritual that was as significant to Hemingway as anything of the sort ever was. The fact, as well as Hemingway's awareness of Dos Passos' long-standing familiarity with Spain, contributed to the collapse of their friendship. Afterward, each would attack the other in writing, and the breach between them was final.

the tone the letter has in French. Dos Passos was not entirely fluent; on the other hand, he wrote easily and fast and used words that demonstrate a fairly extensive vocabulary.

⁵ *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribners, 1932), pp. 2, 3, 4.