

**'This man is looking  
for a gesture':  
John Dos Passos's  
Transcultural and  
Transnational  
Views about History  
and Literature in  
*Rosinante to the  
Road Again***

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# 'This man is looking for a gesture': John Dos Passos's Transcultural and Transnational Views about History and Literature in *Rosinante to the Road Again*

## ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary essay analyzes John Dos Passos's travel book *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) from a Jamesonian perspective, focusing on the implicit dialectical interaction between creativity and the totality of history, the role of the modernist utopian illusion and the quest for return to an Edenic past, the cosmopolitan expatriate individual as a fundamental part of a historical context, and the implications of the literary form in relation to a concrete textual tradition or movement. For this purpose, the analysis draws on Jameson's *The Modernist Papers* and *The Political Unconscious* to establish a dialectical criticism that investigates how the literary form is engaged with a material historical situation. Therefore, the Spanish socio-historical reality depicted in *Rosinante* becomes a symbol of Dos Passos's search for the return to the mythic Arcadia. In his transcultural and transnational quest for the Spanish gesture, Dos Passos was searching how to define his own unstable hybrid modernist identity in the context of Spanish history and literature. As a result, *Rosinante* becomes a sort of paradigmatic modernist epic in which the American writer experiments with the literary motif of the journey as a form of self-exploration. His temporary expatriate condition, and the reality of being an American with Portuguese

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roots, determined his need for a more Edenic and epic culture far from the limitations of the American urban industrialization and materialism.

**Key Words:** John Dos Passos; *Rosinante to the Road Again*; Fredric Jameson; Spain; Spanish history and literature; modernism.

## 1. TRAVELLING ACROSS CULTURES: DOS PASSOS'S UTOPIAN ILLUSION AND THE EPIC NARRATIVES IN *ROSINANTE TO THE ROAD AGAIN*

In *The Modernist Papers* (2007), Fredric Jameson refers to John Dos Passos's modernist approach toward the fictional space as a "discontinuous literary cross-cutting." (167) The American cultural critic and theorist alludes to the author's transversal and dialectical relationship between creativity and the totality of history. In fact, Dos Passos showed a utopian commitment with ideological radicalism in his literary aesthetics, and in his historical and political views of America and Europe. In this regard, Jun Lee draws attention to the fact that "as a modernist he tried to connect his aesthetic creativity to the totality of history in a dialectical way, since the perspective of totality is the core of his political radicalism as well as his art." (18) In his quest for the totality of history, Dos Passos needed to internationalize his experience and creativity to connect them to the historical context like some modernists who expressed in their artistic creations a deep sense of loss and despair for their society. This was the case of the expatriate members of the Lost Generation, namely T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Ezra Pound. They sought to internationalize their literature and lived in European urban centers such as London and Paris to show their disillusion and despair with the materialist ideas of human progress and the invisible role and place of the artist in contemporary life. In my view, distance became a metaphor of their alienation and the urge to convey a de-centered perspective was a crucial aspect of their modernist poetics. Therefore, crossing cultural and ideological frontiers was at the core of their artistic experience.

Even though Dos Passos was never considered an "exile because he was born uprooted to any plot of ground," and he embarked "on a search for congenial soil and climate for new ground on which to stand or in which to grow" (Wrenn 19), I think that he shared most of the expatriates' experiences and visions of life and art, and became "an archetypal artist of the Lost Generation." (Lee 98)

His journey of discovery to Spain in 1916 inspired the travel book *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922), which is a series of narrative chapters and essays on his experiences in the villages and cities, and an insightful literary analysis of Spanish poets such as Jorge Manrique, Joan Maragall, Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado. In *Rosinante*, Dos Passos put Madrid and other Spanish cities on the map of the global scope of modernism in his quest for the modernist cosmopolitan subject and initiated, at the same time, a very fruitful transatlantic dialogue between American and Spanish literatures. For this purpose, he wrote an innovative modernist epic, in which his fictional

heroes, Telemachus, Lyaeus, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, are searching for the transcendental and abstract totality of life. This holistic approach can be found in many of the colorful sections of the travel book which shows Dos Passos's experimentation and intense interaction with prose, poetry, and painterly descriptive techniques. Such experimentation illustrates the author's relevant involvement with modernist poetics in his ground-breaking and "discontinuous literary cross-cutting."

In this sense, Ezra Pound's famous avant-garde exhortation "Make it New" is clearly reflected in the rhetorical techniques employed in *Rosinante*, as it is an experimental travel book that departs from the classical linear descriptions of this kind of texts, introduces the fictionalization of the protagonists, and uses a discontinuous and fragmentary narrative structure. Thus, Dos Passos's fictional alter ego, Telemachus, becomes a "wanderer in search of a father" (Pizer 144) and an epic hero who undergoes an initiation journey of transformation and spiritual awakening in the Spanish society. For this reason, the author structures his interpretation of contemporary Spain on the parallel mythic pairs of Telemachus and Lyaeus<sup>1</sup>, and of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza: "Telemachus and Quixote constitute the life of the intellect and spirit, Lyaeus and Panza that of the body and the senses." (Pizer 142) In this way, the classical Spanish culture offered the American writer the opportunity to explore in depth the significance of *Don Quixote of La Mancha's* protagonists in order to reevaluate the complex meanings of the wandering hero from La Mancha and his squire, an aspect that was characteristic of high modernist poetics.

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Most of the critical analyses on *Rosinante* have explored it from different perspectives and theoretical stances: the great impact of Spain in Dos Passos's work (Zardoya; Montes; Marín Madrazo; Ludington), the influences and traces of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in this early work (Marín Ruíz; Villar Lecumberri), the representation of the Modernist expatriate imagination (Pizer), and the importance of the text as a testing ground for later aesthetic experiments (Juncker). However, this interdisciplinary essay represents a shift in focus on Dos Passos's *Rosinante* in the sense that it is my intention to analyze it from a Jamesonian perspective, exploring the implicit dialectical interaction between creativity and the totality of history, the role of the modernist utopian illusion and the quest for return to an Edenic past, the cosmopolitan expatriate individual as a fundamental part of a historical context and, finally, the implications of the literary form in relation to a concrete textual tradition or movement.

<sup>1</sup> Lyaeus is an epithet of Dionysus/Bacchus which were Greek and Roman mythological variations of the same god. Lyaeus is traditionally considered the lord of exuberance, fertility and drunkenness. Besides, he freed people from care and anxiety.

The classical Spanish culture offered the American writer the opportunity to explore in depth the significance of *Don Quixote of La Mancha's* protagonists in order to reevaluate the complex meanings of the wandering hero from La Mancha and his squire, an aspect that was characteristic of high modernist poetics.

In Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), dialectical criticism is the main methodological framework that the critic develops within his complex and influential theories. This critical approach is based on the idea that literary works are always part of a larger structure or a concrete historical situation. Then, in a duality based on the external and the internal conformation of a text, a dialectical criticism will seek "to unmask the inner form of a genre or body of texts and will work from the surface of a work inward to the level where literary form is deeply related to the concrete." (Selden 114) As for the role of the literary text and the artistic artifact in modern societies, Jameson demonstrates that it is inextricably bound up with a larger whole, and part of a historical situation. Therefore, from a Jamesonian perspective narratives always respond to history and are ideologically conditioned and utopian, and in most cases project an ideal future. In general, as for the role of the work of art in society, Jameson suggests:

It is clear that the work of art cannot itself be asked to change the world or to transform itself into political praxis; on the other hand, it would be desirable to develop a keener sense of the complexity and ambiguity of that process loosely termed reflection or expression. To think dialectically about such a process means to invent a thought which goes "beyond good and evil" not by abolishing these qualifications or judgments but by understanding their interrelationship. (223)

In this way, the Jamesonian critical background will enable me to establish a dialectical criticism that investigates how the experimental fragmentary form of *Rosinante* is also deeply engaged with a specific historical situation and how Dos Passos poses his aesthetic, political, and literary ideas from a comparative perspective in a fruitful translinguistic and transcultural literary dialogue between the United States and Spain. Likewise, the Spanish idealized vision depicted in *Rosinante* becomes a symbol of Dos Passos's quest for the return to the mythic Arcadia and a "counter image to a world destroyed by its devotion to the false gods of modernity" (Pizer 141) previously depicted in *Three Soldiers* (1921); but it also provides a compensation for the loss of his homeland, a quest for transformation, and the eradication of the money-making culture which he clearly rejected. In this light, Jameson emphasized the role of purification that most modernist fiction had in an attempt to separate literature from the dissatisfaction and disillusionment of the existing capitalist order, so that it could embody "the great Utopian idea of a purification of language, a recreation of its deeper communal or collective function, a purging of everything instrumental or commercial in it." (*The Modernist Papers* 8) Similarly, it is my contention that *Rosinante* represents the Jamesonian quest for purification, and it might be explored as the symbol of Dos Passos's utopian illusion about an ideal future, in contrast to the despair and disillusion that he represented in all of his major novels. As a result, the Spain depicted in *Rosinante* symbolized for the writer the original fullness and "the true gods of the past still potent." (Pizer 141) Nevertheless, as the writer evolved in his literary career, a deep change was depicted in his fiction, a clear image "of the disintegration of America, symbolized by his concept, the two nations in a dialectical tension with his utopian vision of one community where people live together in harmony and are allowed to have their own opportunities of self-realization." (Lee 197)

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As it has been previously observed, *Rosinante* can be studied from the political and literary perspectives as an example of Dos Passos's early experimentation that embodies the spirit of American radicalism and the aesthetic techniques of modernism. Therefore, it should be explored as the symbol of the writer's idealized vision of literature in a concrete textual tradition and as the paradigm of his early expectations about a more harmonic future for America which was unavoidably connected to the exploration of other countries and cultures. For this purpose, he makes inter-textual allusions to the classical epic narratives, *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*, from a modernist perspective. Related to this, it is important to highlight that "epic narratives focus on a crisis in the history of a race or culture," (Peck and Coyle 31) and they are always concerned with crossing cultural frontiers. Thus, for the writer the crisis in which American civilization was immersed had to be explored by crossing literary frontiers, incorporating the deeds of epic warriors and heroes from other cultural contexts. This is how other modernist writers—T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound chief among them—approached the epic conventions in their literature. In other words, their modernist creativity was based on the crossing of cultural and ideological frontiers. Then, for Dos Passos the epic journey becomes a cross-cultural experience to learn a lesson, change, and later return home after he had achieved self-knowledge, transformation, and the exploration of new cultures and ways of life. In fact, he was restless for travel all his life and believed in travelling as a personal experience of discovery and learning, but his deep sense of social uprooting and displacement had also a significant role in his urgent need for having the perspective of another land.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he appreciated solitude, independence, and the personal enrichment he found in the exploration of diverse cultures and in the opportunity of looking at his own with a certain critical distance and without prejudices or attachments. As a result, his journeys in many different countries all over the world became for the writer transcendental processes of personal metamorphosis which provided a great opportunity for exploring his adventurous spirit and never-ending curiosity. As Donald Pizer has cleverly noted, "he sought in his depiction of a foreign culture to explore in striking new forms the meaning of his own." (137)

<sup>2</sup> There might be also other significant biographical reasons for his need to travel. Dos Passos grew up in European exile as his father was married back in the United States to Mary Dyckman Hays who was not his mother. As his biographer Townsend Ludington has observed, "His first lonely years seemed like a hotel childhood... he felt like a double foreigner... A man without a country" (A Sort of Family Feeling 121).

## 2. DOS PASSOS'S EPIC JOURNEY IN SPAIN AND CERVANTES'S *DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA*


Dos Passos discovered Spain in 1916 when he still was a young man full of illusions and expectations about the Old World. His journey to southern Europe also included his painful experience in France as a volunteer ambulance driver during the First World War. The writer's antiwar views and emotional crisis emerged rapidly in the form of writing and he fictionalized his disappointment in *Three Soldiers* and in many of the poems of *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922), where his lyrical voice emerges openly with a desperate tone to save the world from the deceptions of the great warlords. In the novel, the reader has the opportunity of facing the emotional effects of the European conflict which were devastating for the majority of modernist writers. Thus, these authors concluded that it was the epitome of the human atrocities, the hideous ugliness and the confirmation that history was coming to an end; as a consequence, modern life was confusing, terrible, and futile. His anti-war novel shows a deep sense of loss, despair, disaffection, and a direct questioning of materialism and the evils of industrialism in American society from its very roots.

Moreover, during that period of his life, the American writer suffered a personal crisis which appeared in part from his Freudian response to his father's values, and the deep sense of displacement he felt from the vital uncertainties of his childhood and early adolescence. As a result, his disappointment with the contradictions of the American economic system, the sense of social uprooting, and the war experience unchained his need to search for an alternative vital experience. In this manner, his discovery of Spain became a sort of positive personal catharsis (Piñero Gil 2015) in a crucial period. Even though his first stay was less than four months, "He had learned a great deal, not only about Spain but also about himself," as Ludington has noted (316). Similarly, the Spanish experience played a central role in Dos Passos's development of his cosmopolitanism as a writer and "it was the most important factor among many in shaping Dos Passos's ideas and forming the way he saw the world." (Ludington 313) Hence, for the writer the Iberian Peninsula was an Arcadian or idyllic society compared to the industrialized European and American countries. Likewise, during his visits to Portugal, he was also able to appreciate his own ancestry and was eager to compare and contrast its culture and traditions that he described as "having a certain mildness, a lack of the racial and ideological fanaticism that has brought our civilization to the verge of destruction... the more I study it the prouder I am of my Portuguese inheritance." (Ludington 133)

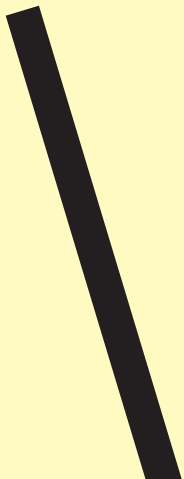
Nevertheless, historian Daniel Aaron has observed that Spanish social and cultural idiosyncrasies had a greater impact in Dos Passos's imagination:


Dos Passos's ancestral roots in Portugal were next door to Spain, whose greatest literary works, such as *Don Quijote*, had a tremendous effect on him, as did the nation itself, with its proud history; its varied, striking landscape; and its national traits of an almost anarchistic individualism and a notable, if not always successful, defiance of oppressive authority. (Ludington 314)






**For Dos Passos the epic journey becomes a cross-cultural experience to learn a lesson, change, and later return home after he had achieved self-knowledge, transformation, and the exploration of new cultures and ways of life.**





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I certainly agree with Aaron's view because in *Rosinante*, Dos Passos not only tested his beliefs about the kind of individualism he was looking for in America, but it was also a radical way of approaching life and politics which was far beyond the limits of capitalist society. The epic journey he initiated in Spain became a sort of quest for the Promised Land in which he discovered a colorful society full of positive aspects in a colorless world; thus the travel book is deeply engaged with a concrete social reality. With regard to Dos Passos's decision to articulate his Spanish experience with Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in mind, it seems that the novel was for Dos Passos the perfect representation of the literary archetype of the dreamer and the motif of the epic journey that crosses cultural frontiers. In fact, he was fascinated with the novel and had read it more than nine times, the last time in Spanish. Besides, he also intended to study it in depth because he believed that, among many other things, it represented the palimpsestic Spanish history and that significant aspect could help him in establishing the connections between both cultures. In this sense, it is important to draw attention to the fact that Dos Passos belongs to a remarkable tradition of American writers who have established an inter-textual dialogue between their fiction and *Don Quixote of La Mancha* from the American Renaissance to Postmodern literature: Washington Irving, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac and Paul Auster, among others.<sup>3</sup>

In order to explore the connotations and intertextual implications of the novel in Dos Passos's travel book, it is pertinent to analyze the title of the book, as a paradigm of the writer's quixotic vision of his epic journey in Spain. To begin with, *Rosinante* is Don Quixote's old nag, his faithful companion and doppelgänger. In fact, the old hidalgo considers it of foremost importance to find a proper name for his steed before his first adventure:

Four days were spent in thinking what name to give him, because (as he said to himself) it was not right that a horse belonging to a knight so famous, and one with such merits of his own, should be without some distinctive name, and he strove to adapt it so as to indicate what he had been before belonging to a knight-errant, and what he then was. (Chapter I)

According to Howard Mancing, "Rocinante becomes one of the most important and most comic figures of the novel" (618). Therefore, we might conclude that Dos Passos chose the name of *Rosinante* for his travel book as a literary homage to one of the most significant Western epic novels and more specifically to the protagonist horse who symbolizes the union between the heroic knight and his steed, his master's virtues and the idea of coming back to the road to defend the helpless and destroy the wicked. For instance, Telemachus discovers a horse on his way to Toledo and immediately shows his affection and recognition of the heroic animal protagonist:

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<sup>3</sup> These authors reveal their debt to Miguel de Cervantes's novel in the genesis of their fiction or in their metafictional essays in the following works: Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and *The Tales of the Alhambra*; Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; William Dean Howells's "The Spanish Student" and *Criticism and Fiction*; Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*; Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* and *Losing Battles*; William Faulkner's *Light in August*, *Moses* and *The Sound and the Fury*; John Steinbeck's *The Wizard of Maine*, *Travels with Charley*, and the Prologue to *East of Eden*; Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*.

Telemachus got up on his numbed feet and stretched his legs. "Ouf," he said, "I'm tired." Then he walked over to the grey horse that stood with hanging head and drooping knees hitched to one of the acacias.

"I wonder what his name is." He stroked the horse's scrawny face.

"Is it Rosinante?"

The horse twitched his ears, straightened his back and legs and pulled back black lips to show yellow teeth.


"Of course it's Rosinante!"

The horse's sides heaved. He threw back his head and whinnied shrilly, exultantly. (38)


Likewise, Dos Passos's alter-ego shows his attraction to Don Quixote because the wanderer hero embarks on an idealist journey of self-discovery and embodies an indestructible chimera which is grounded in a quest for a new utopian dream of human regeneration: "Gentleman, it is a little ridiculous to say so, but we have set out once more with lance and helmet of knight-errantry to free the enslaved, to right the wrongs of the oppressed." (37) It is well-known that Dos Passos showed a striking nostalgia for a golden age during his youth that was based on a primordial social harmony in which people could survive without the constraints of the materialist society. In other words, he struggled between the old and the new and the loss of innocence in his early literature in what could be described as a quixotic attitude. In this sense, he also identified the fictional character's idealism with what he defines as one of the most extraordinary virtues of the Spanish people: "The Spaniard, like his own don Quixote, mounted the warhorse of his idealism and set out to free the oppressed, alone." (45) As a result, his journey into the heart of the Spanish landscape, culture, and its peoples was embedded in a utopian illusion that foregrounded the interaction between creativity, history, and the role of purification of literature. With this ideological background, the impact of Dos Passos's Spanish experience was so deep that he had to share his discovery with Dudley Poore, one of his many American college friends, when he was about to return to Madrid: "I am mad about Spain—the wonderful mellowness of life, the dignity, the layered ages." (qtd. in Ludington 110)

### 3. ROSINANTE TO THE ROAD AGAIN AS A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

As I have argued before, Dos Passos's *Rosinante* can be considered a historical narrative from a Jamesonian perspective in the sense that the writer establishes a dialectical representation of history in an international context. In order to achieve this interaction, he analyzed the complex layers of Spanish history and the social influence of the different civilizations and concluded that this fact was a fundamental feature in the construction of a solid society. In other words, the palimpsestic history was an alternative to the capitalist dissolution of history. In one of the many conversations he has in *Rosinante* about the multicultural heritage of Spanish culture, one of his friends observes:



**Dos Passos analyzed the complex layers of Spanish history and the social influence of the different civilizations and concluded that this fact was a fundamental feature in the construction of a solid society.**



Spain, he said, is the most civilized country in Europe. The growth of our civilization has never been interrupted by outside influence. The Phoenicians, the Romans-Spain's influence on Rome was, I imagine, fully as great as Rome's on Spain; I think of the five Spanish emperors;-the Goths, The Moors; all incidents, absorbed by the changeless Iberian spirit. (31)

Related to the historical context, *Rosinante* is Dos Passos's first publication of European reportage that clearly had ideological implications about his cosmopolitan identity as an American modernist writer and intellectual. But paradoxically this personal analysis had to be achieved abroad during those years in which he was on the road and immersed in a deep cultural exploration in the lands of Castile, La Mancha, Madrid, Andalusia, Toledo, and the Mediterranean coast. The exotic Spain was for the writer the perfect place for this transformation, a kind of peaceful refuge in which he could reflect on his own country from a distance with the necessary detachment to be really critical about his complex American identity. Similarly, it was the social milieu where he found the raw materials from which he crafted his experimental fiction. In this sketchy narrative he is seeking understanding of himself through self-exile. Moreover, it is an intriguing self-exploration journey through which he discovers a positive value system in Spanish culture that contrasts with "the materialism and moral narrowness of American life." (Pizer 149)

From a rhetorical perspective, *Rosinante* consists of seventeen essays and narrative segments Dos Passos wrote in a fragmentary form with the recurrent leitmotif of the journey as a quest of discovery. For Pizer the text "is a significant expression of what can be called the Modernistic expatriate imagination." (137) The travel book opens in Madrid, which was one of Dos Passos's favorite cities, with a vivid reference to one of Plaza Santa Ana's cafés: "He sat on a yellow plush bench in the café El Oro del Rhin, Plaza Santa Ana, Madrid, swabbing up with a bit of bread the last smudges of brown sauce off a plate of which the edges were piled with the dismembered skeleton of a pigeon." (1) Each of the seventeen sections of this fragmented travel book is a detailed impressionistic word painting of Spanish society, culture, ideology, art, history and literature. In my view, Dos Passos's fragmented style is related to the complexity of Spanish culture and society as well as his desire to represent the valuable information he gathered during his intense journeys. One of his most distinctive rhetorical strategies was the direct interaction with ordinary people he met on the road, and in the villages and cities. In fact, the book has five sections titled "Talk by the Road" in which the author uses an interactive dialogical structure with a polyphonic interplay of various characters' voices which contributes to a fruitful exchange of ideas. Those conversations were essential materials which showed his interest in how Spaniards lived in a particular historical moment as political subjects and how they expressed themselves about it. As a result, even though he had a very idealized image of Spanish social reality, he was also interested in investigating the Spaniards' response to the political situation as part of a larger structure or of a historical situation.

In section two of *Rosinante* Telemachus has a long dialogue with a donkey boy about the significance of productive work in Spain: "Not on your life, in America they don't do anything except work and rest so to get ready to work again. That's no life for a man. People don't enjoy themselves there." (11) Throughout the conversation, Dos Passos cleverly contrasts two radically different lifestyles and how the individual's vision and experience is really significant for his own

study. Once more, the writer gives voice to a peasant who has a very clear vision of life even though he is young and innocent; his testimony is very helpful as he is able to articulate the importance of his independence and the real value of time in a hedonistic life:

On this coast, señor inglés, we don't work much, we are dirty and uninstructed, but by God we live. Why the poor people of the towns, do you know what they do in summer? They hire a fig-tree and go and live under it with their dogs and their cats and their babies, and they eat figs as they ripen and drink the cold water from the mountains, and man-alive they are happy. They fear no one and they are dependent on no one; when they are old they tell stories and bring up their children. You have travelled much; I have travelled little, Madrid, never further, but I swear to you that nowhere in the world are the women lovelier or is the land richer or the cookery more perfect than in this vega of Almuñécar...If only the wine weren't quite so heavy. (16)

In the same way, Dos Passos foregrounds the conflict between Andalusian peasants and landowners, showing a distinctive capacity to analyze in depth the injustice, poverty, and economic slavery those workers suffered in Cordova. The writer became familiar with the political turmoil of the city, the strikes of farm-laborers and the fact that the region had been under martial law for months: "we talked about the past and future of Cordova;" (53) "many of the peasants had never dared vote, and those that had had been completely under the thumb of the caciques, the bosses that control Spanish local politics." (56) In his permanent need to denounce social injustices and protect human dignity, the writer also criticized the evils of industrialism and the enslaving effects the system had for the American working classes:

Under industrialism the major part of human kind runs in a vicious circle. Three-fourths of the world are bound in economic slavery that the other fourth may in turn be enslaved by the tentacular inessentials of civilization, for the production of which the lower classes have ground out their lives. Half the occupations of men today are utterly demoralizing to body and soul, and to what end? (Lee 98)

#### 4. "THE EYE OF A PAINTER AND THE EAR OF A POET": *ROSINANTE TO THE ROAD AGAIN* AS A TRANSCULTURAL TRAVEL NARRATIVE

From a rhetorical perspective *Rosinante*, like the poetry collection *A Pushcart at the Curb*, shows an impressive emphasis on visual imagery. According to John Dos Passos Coggin, the writer "always had the eye of a painter and the ear of a poet." (8) In particular, the author was aware of the importance of verbally representing the perceptual information in the absence of visual input. In other words, it seems as if Dos Passos really had a deep need to paint the Spanish picturesque images he was describing visually throughout the different sections of *Rosinante*. In fact, he also left a visual testimony of his sensorial perception of the Spanish landscapes in the form of a series of colorful watercolors and canvases as he was also an accomplished painter who created over four hundred artworks during his lifetime. In addition, Dos Passos absorbed from the avant-garde painters of his time elements of Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism. The extreme

modernity of his early watercolors from the countryside of Spain shows how he opted to combine elements from different styles and textures. There are many relevant examples of his sensorial way of depicting the landscapes, as when he visited the Mediterranean island of Mallorca:

We sat looking at the sea that was violet where the sails of the homecoming fishing boats were the wan yellow of primroses. Behind us the hills were sharp pyrites blue. From a window in the adobe hut at one side of us came a smell of sizzling olive oil and tomatoes and peppers and the muffled sound of eggs being beaten. We were footsore, hungry, and we talked about women and love. (91)

In *Rosinante*, Telemachus, the wandering character, becomes a sensorial observer who merges with the landscape and its people. In this process, he learns through the sensorial perception to encompass the enormous variety of sensory experiences he found in Spain. Thus, the nomadic character is always accompanied by Lyaeus, who is a faithful counterpoint, a *ficelle*, that inevitably reminds the reader of the special relationship Don Quixote and Sancho Panza develop through their long and adventurous journey. The mythical couple represents for Dos Passos the duality of the Spanish character:

- Telemachus ----- Don Quixote.
- These characters symbolize the intellectual life, a never-ending quest for adventure, and the need to embark on learning adventures.
- “Don Quijote, the individualist who believed in the power of man’s soul over all things, whose desire included the whole world in himself.” (24)
- Lyaeus ----- Sancho Panza, the *ficelle*, a character who is a confidante and provides the reader with significant information about the main protagonist.
- These characters represent the body, the senses, and a hedonistic approach to life.
- “Sancho, the individualist to whom all the world was food for his belly.” (24)

Dos Passos was also intrigued by the word “*lo flamenco*” which was, in some way, related to the Spanish folkloric world and the sensorial experience. In a long conversation with his friend Don Diego, the narrator insists on the meaning and cultural implications of the expression: “In Spain, we live from the belly and loins, or else from the head and heart: between Don Quixote the mystic and Sancho Panza the sensualist there is no middle ground. The lowest Panza is *lo flamenco*.” (17) The response emphasizes the idea of an affective and artistic culture with strong social bonds that rely on the communal experience of music and dancing.

One of the most striking aspects of the mythical couple’s journey is that it becomes a personal fictional narrative of Dos Passos’s complex relationship with the powerful and successful image of his father John Randolph Dos Passos. In *Rosinante*, the American writer explores his childhood and adolescence as an immigrant, as a fatherless child who dreams about finding the roots of his origins: “Telemachus had wandered so far in search of his father he had quite forgotten what he was looking for.” (1) His successful father embodied the values of the American dream: material progress, social regeneration, and social mobility. However, Dos Passos soon detected



the historical tensions of the American Dream and its deep historical contradictions. Therefore, in Spain and from a distance, he was able to see the disturbing proximity of dream and nightmare and the effects of the loss of innocence in American society. As an expatriate in Spain he discovered “what he was prepared to find in an older and mainly unindustrialized culture, just as a few years afterwards many American artists would find in Paris the freedom they believed lacking in America,” as Pizer has observed (139). Moreover, in Spain, he found his real self: “I am very happy...walking about here in these empty zigzag streets I have suddenly felt familiar with it all, as if it were a part of me, as if I had soaked up some essence out of it.” (130)

## Dos Passos really had a deep need to paint the Spanish picturesque images he was describing visually throughout the different sections of *Rosinante*.

Similarly, he became the Adamic hero par excellence, separated from his culture in search of a reality more substantial than that embraced by the materialistic society he had rejected. And as it has been mentioned before, Don Quixote, The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, “blunderingly trying to remould the world, pitifully sure of the power of his own ideal” (33) was one of Dos Passos’s favorite characters (Schwartz 188) and he incorporates this powerful mythical character in the travel book to create a modernist epic narrative based on his Edenic dreams and powerful experiences in Spain. Thus, the writer “made a significant contribution to the modernist revival of the epic as well as a desire for organic totality” (Lee 17) with the inclusion of one of the most influential novels in the Western canon. In this light, Dos Passos also followed the Poundian concept that considered the aesthetic to include a social purpose, something that is clearly reflected in the rhetorical techniques employed in *Rosinante*, as it is an experimental travel narrative that departs from the classical linear descriptions of this kind of texts and introduces the fictionalization of the protagonists. Therefore, Dos Passos’s fictional alter ego Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope, an observer, merges with the landscape and establishes a dialectical criticism between the Edenic Spain and the excesses of American society from a distance. Likewise, the old Spanish culture offered the American writer the opportunity to explore in depth the myth of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in order to re-evaluate the meanings of the wandering hero from La Mancha and his squire, an aspect that was distinctive of high modernist poetics. Therefore, *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote* serve as a literary map for Dos Passos. His reading of these classical epic narratives is that “of the map of a whole complete and equally closed region of the globe, as though somehow the very episodes themselves merged back into space, and the reading of them came to be indistinguishable from map-reading.” (Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* 167)

## 5. DOS PASSOS'S QUEST FOR THE "SPANISH GESTURE" AND HIS CULTURAL IMMERSION IN SPAIN

Dos Passos found in the Spanish society of the 1910s and 1920s "the full life of spirit in which the natural, the honest, and the good still existed" in the civilized world (Pizer 149). But he also discovered in his idealized image of Spain "a space that resisted capitalism, homogeneity, centralized nationality, and the devastation of modern war, all of which he saw as ingrained in American culture." (Rogers 77) For that reason, the fictional narrator's quest focused on what he described as the "Spanish gesture" embodied by two mythical individuals: the flamenco dancer Pastora Imperio and the baker of Almorox in Toledo. That village of La Mancha becomes a metaphor, a sort of Arcadia, and a vehicle for the expression of his essential beliefs: "men lived in harmony with nature, fulfilled in body and soul," (Pizer 140) and the fact that generations of individuals had had the opportunity to develop their own idiosyncrasies based on the anarchistic spirit which traditionally characterized Spaniards: "Spain is the classic home of the anarchist." (45) The writer was filled with admiration for this distinctive aspect of the Iberian personality but he was also faithful to the individual in a Thoreauvian way. In other words, he believed deeply in the transcendentalist writer's ideas on self-sufficiency, integrity, peaceful civil resistance against an unjust government, as shown in his open defense of the individual's right to dissent.

A similar point may be made about Dos Passos's interest in the Spanish historical background, "roots striking into the infinite past," and the connection he established between the palimpsestic history and the positive effects the layers of different civilizations had in that society. In other words, the writer believed that Spanish long history had an extraordinary impact on its paradigmatic social cohesion:

First came his family, the wife whose body lay beside his at night, who bore him children, the old withered parents who sat in the sun at his door, his memories of them when they had had strong rounded limbs like his, and of their parents sitting old and withered in the sun. Then his work, the heat of his ovens, the smell of bread cooking, the faces of neighbors who came to buy [...] In him I seemed to see the generations wax and wane, like the years, strung on the thread of labor, of unending sweat and strain of muscles against the earth [...] Everywhere roots striking into the infinite past [...] In Almorox the foundations of life remained unchanged up to the present. The strong anarchistic reliance on the individual man, the walking, consciously or not, of the way beaten by generations of men who had tilled and loved and lain in the cherishing sun with no feeling of a reality outside of themselves...Here lies the strength and the weakness of Spain. This intense individualism, born of a history whose fundamentals lie in isolated village communities—*pueblos*, as the Spaniards call them—over the changeless face of which, like grass over a field, events spring and mature and die, is the basic fact of Spanish life. (23-25)

At the same time Dos Passos's political insight was surprising. His remarkable capacity to show the world how centralism was one of the most significant political debates of Spanish society in the 1920s can also be appreciated in his brilliant analysis:

Spain as a modern centralized nation is an illusion, a very unfortunate one; for the present atrophy, the desolating restlessness of a century of revolution, may very well be due in large measure to the artificial imposition of centralized government on a land essentially centrifugal. (25)

It is important to note that the writer spent most of the time in Madrid, which became his center of operations. It was the city that most inspired his need for deepening in the “Spanish gesture” and in its lively streets and people. It was “his adopted city,” and, as he confessed many times, the capital was a complete sensorial experience: “Honestly. I’ve never been in such a musical city as Madrid, everything jingles and rings [...] I am quite settled in Madrid now, I feel as if I’d lived here all my life.” (Ludington 100-101) His cultural immersion underwent an unusual and intense adaptation to the customs and habits of the people of Madrid. As Bautista has pointed out, “Dos Passos felt fascinated by *chocolate*, the Sierra de Guadarrama, *botijos*, donkeys and mules, multicoloured shawls and the hours *madriñeros* keep.” (57) Nevertheless, he was also aware of the inevitable transformations of modern life and of how the Anglo-American influence was changing the city:

At present in Madrid even café life is receding before the exigencies of business and the hardly excusable mania for imitating English and American manners. Spain is undergoing great changes in its relation to the rest of Europe, to Latin America, in its own internal structure. (102)

## 6. DOS PASSOS’S TRANS-LITERARY DIALOGUE WITH SPANISH WRITERS

Dos Passos’s main literary aspiration in the capital was to establish a trans-literary dialogue with the most relevant Spanish writers. For this purpose, he got in contact with Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez and other authors whose works he wanted to translate into English. In fact, he attempted to imitate and made a poetic homage to the Castilian poet Machado in “Winter in Castile,” which is the longest and more Spanish section of *A Pushcart at the Curb* (Piñero Gil 36-37). It goes without saying that Dos Passos can be considered a Hispanist as he not only read Cervantes but became familiar with Baroja, Benavente Maragall, Manrique and Unamuno, among other Spanish writers: “He saw Spanish literature as a diverse assemblage of styles and ideas rooted in preindustrial artisanship rather than factory-driven commodification.” (Rogers 78) In this sense, his readings of the most significant authors of the 98 generation gave him a direct vision of the political and historical crises the Spanish writers were depicting in their work as a result of the War of 1898 that ended Spain’s colonial empire in the Americas. And he “essentially agrees with the nationalist line within Spain that ’98 is an exceptional generation,” as Rogers has observed (78).

Therefore, in *Rosinante*, Dos Passos not only makes “a complex fusion of travelogue, literary criticism, translation, autobiography, fiction, propaganda, and socio historical commentary” (Rogers 79); he also attempts to establish a trans-literary and transatlantic dialogue between American and Spanish literatures in his quest for the internationalization of the literary experience. Similarly, he encourages the American public to read Spanish literature in a very persuasive way:

If the American public is bound to take up Spain it might as well take up the worth-while things instead of the works of popular vulgarization. They have enough of those in their bookcases as it is. And in Spain there are novelists like Baroja, essayists like Unamuno and Azorín, poets like Valle Inclán and Antonio Machado...but I suppose they will shine with the reflected glory of the author of the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. (66-67)

In section XVI, Dos Passos also pays a tribute to Miguel de Unamuno, one of the leading intellectuals of the period who had been condemned to fifteen years' imprisonment for *lése majesté* (117), for an offence committed against the dignity of the reigning sovereign. With this reference, the narrator makes a statement about the right for freedom of opinion and expression that should prevail in any modern society like Spain. In the same way, Dos Passos shows his ideological proximity with the Spanish writer when he stresses Unamuno's resistance to the materialistic "modernization and Europeanization of Spanish life and thought." (121) The philosopher believed that Spanish society had to endorse the democratic political principles in order to be like other European societies. Furthermore, Dos Passos praises the philosopher's views on the chasm between faith and reason and the transcendental significance of each individual in essays such as "Del sentimiento trágico de la vida," (1913) "The Tragic Feeling of Life." Certainly, this is one of Unamuno's most influential essays and Dos Passos stresses its significance when he quotes a long paragraph on Don Quixote's idealism and the hero's importance in Spanish society:

What is, then, the new mission of Don Quixote in this world? To cry, to cry in the wilderness. For the wilderness hears although men do not hear, and one day will turn into a sonorous wood, and that solitary voice that spreads in the desert like seed will sprout into a gigantic cedar. (123)

## 7. CONCLUSION

Finally, it remains to say that in Dos Passos's *Rosinante* there is a synthesis between the spirit of American radicalism and the aesthetic techniques of modernism like the implicit dialectical interaction between subject and object, the representation of the cosmopolitan expatriate individual as a fundamental part of a historical situation, the modernist self-referentiality poetics, and, finally, the literary form deeply related to a concrete textual tradition or movement. As a result, the Spanish reality depicted in *Rosinante* becomes a symbol of Dos Passos's quest for the return to the mythic Arcadia, but it also provides a compensation for the loss of his homeland.

In his transnational quest for the Spanish gesture and for a utopian territory, Dos Passos was searching for a way to define his own unstable hybrid modernist identity and establish a dialectical interaction between his artistic subjectivity and his idealization of a new country. Thus, his spiritual journey in Spain was not similar to that of the American nineteenth-century conventional travelers or tourists; rather, his way of travelling and visiting Spain was based on his curiosity and preference for knowing the language, the literature, the food, the politics and, above all, the idiosyncrasy and the peculiarities of Spanish culture and history. In this way, *Rosinante* embodies Dos Passos's cosmopolitan modernist quest to internationalize literature, often making powerful connections between his literature and a broad range of literary myths, finding a more

meaningful modern culture. Likewise, it becomes a sort of paradigmatic modernist epic in the way in which the American writer experiments with the literary motif of the journey as a form of self-exploration and as a creative way of establishing an original transatlantic literary dialogue. His temporary expatriate condition in Spain, and the reality of being an American with Portuguese roots, determined, in some way, his need for a more Edenic and epic culture far from the limitations of the excesses of American urban industrialization and cultural materialism. Therefore, we might conclude that Spain became the country that inspired his rebellious spirit and innovative writing in a period in which he clearly devoted himself to radical politics and experimental modernism to construct a cosmopolitan subjectivity.

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