

Dear J.¹,

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John Dos Passos, *Teheran, The Bath Of The Lion*, 1922. Watercolour on paper, dimensions unknown. Courtesy: the artist, Open Road Distribution.

Over the last months, I have gotten obsessed with travel memoirs. In the beginning I thought it was the redundancy of the form that was soothing in a time so utterly unpredictable, with most texts simply reiterating the same thing with different words (trauma at home, desire for adventure, individual soul-searching). But then I realized it was something else I was attracted to. In a few of the books I ended up reading, there were scenes that managed to compose the kind of hallucinatory experiences you might know from being somewhere you don't belong, or residing where the boundaries between inside and outside are so extremely firm.

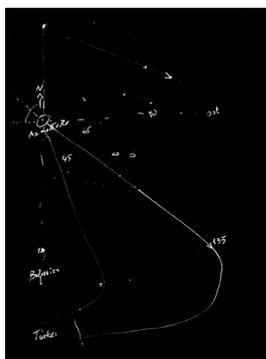
Of the books I was indulging in, John Dos Passos' *Orient Express* (1927) went furthest. Caricaturing himself as 'the American traveling from West to East and from North to South,' he documents his travels in 1921 from France to Tiflis, Teheran, Baghdad and Damascus after serving in World War I. What he witnesses is the massive recalibration of the geopolitical power balance: The slow but violent dissolution of century-old territorial organizations such as the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent struggles for decolonization. He observes how the infrastructure of nation-states is put into place; how national anthems are being composed. He sees how cholera is raging in Armenia, how the threat of the proletarian revolution looms over the colonizers in Turkey, how the experience of possibility is both uplifting and a threat.

There is one particularly hallucinatory scene that functions a bit like an allegory or metaphor or something in between and made me think of your own story of fleeing from East Germany to West Germany by swimming from Bulgaria to Turkey. The scene starts with Dos Passos sitting in the American Bar in Baghdad, drinking Japanese beer, eating Saratoga chips, surrounded by fellow Americans discussing investment possibilities in the region. With the vast balcony of the bar overlooking the Tigris, he realizes that the boats floating on the biblical river are based on the ones with which Caesar had crossed the Rhine two millennia earlier. Still processing these overdeterminations of colonialism, the 'representative of the Screaming Eagle', Dos Passos' designation for the American consul, invites him to accompany him to his summer mansion outside of Baghdad.

After a lavish dinner and more conversations around real estate opportunities, they set out to drive back to the city the next afternoon. However, in the middle of "desolate mud-flats and rubbish-heaps," somewhat "saturated with the Bible" and "seared by the cursing tongues of the Hebrew prophets," they lose their way and their Ford runs out of gas.² Dusk is approaching with its threat of robbers, and Dos Passos and the consul's servant Abdullah decide to go on a quest for a tin of petrol. But even after the sun sets, navigation remains impossible: "There were stars, but they didn't seem to give any light. A cool dusty wind occasionally blew in our faces, a wind that smelled of nothing. Through vacancy from which shape and colour and smell had withdrawn as a snail withdraws into its shell we walked and walked."³

There is something about the simplicity of Dos Passos' inability to navigate this unknown landscape I remember being drawn to: "For a long while we followed the road until it disappeared and left us stumbling over the jagged surface of the plain again. This was discouraging."⁴ After hours of straying around, they located a tin of petrol and managed to return to where they had left the Ford and the consul: "We shouted and yodeled. The yelling packs of dogs answered us from the horizons. Abdullah picked up a water-melon rind. The car had gone. Undoubtedly this was where it had been. Slowly, with a sense of gathering doom, he pieced together the whole melon. We strained our eyes to make it out in the starlight. Yes, it had the markings of the melon the Consul Sahib had been eating when we left him. The car had gone, carried off by raiders, maybe."⁵

I'm wondering what it means that this scene made me think of your story. When Dos Passos traveled from the West to the East, getting lost in the plain fields outside of Baghdad, it was part of a promise, of old empires breaking apart, creating a



J.R., *Astronavigation Map*, 2012. Ballpoint pen on paper, 21.0 x 29.7cm. Courtesy: J.R.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *Linger On Your Pale Blue Eyes*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist.

¹ J. is the character in *Linger On Your Pale Blue Eyes* (2016) who fled East Germany in 1969.

² John Dos Passos, *Orient Express*, 1927, New York: Harper & Bros, p. 138.

³ *Ibid.* 138.

vacuum to be filled by utopian aspirations. When you took off in Ahtopol in Bulgaria on September 18, 1969 around 8pm to swim through the night all the way to Turkey, arriving the next day at 11am, the great moments of decolonization of the 1920s were resurfacing under the guise of new political alignments. In a way, the vector of your movement was symptomatic for how political energy traveled at this moment in time, with organizations like the “Third World” exporting the struggles of the Global South and East to the West. That is, the vector of your story expresses what Dos Passos had hoped to find on his travels.

In a chapter towards the end of the book, he tries to write something of a conclusion and legitimize his obsession with traveling, this drug for which “you have to constantly increase the dose.”⁶ He finds his explanation in the poetry of Blaise Cendrars, the “international vagabond” and modernist poet and translates parts of his poem “La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France”.⁷ Somewhere in between a review, a comment, and a meditation on the nation-state, the chapter titled “Homer of the Transsiberian” formulates a multiplicity of possible tones and voices: Situating himself to be writing on a balcony in a hotel in Marrakesh, it starts with a dream-like episode of him visiting the Paris world exposition in 1900 as a four-year old. He remembers a massive immobile train he was being led into, a prototype of the Trans-Siberian wagon, smelling “of fresh rubber, of just-bought toys, of something varnished and whirring and oily. [...] The engine whistled. No, don’t be afraid; look out the window. We were moving. No, outside a picture was moving, houses slipping by, bluish-greenish hills. The Urals.”⁸ It’s the very same landscape Cendrars would see five years later when he traveled to Moscow to witness the failed 1905 revolution that would be transfigured into the backdrop for his poem on the apocalyptic scenes of war and revolution, of death and hunger.

Something about the idea of the immobile train is beautiful. I think for Dos Passos its capturing something about the contradictions traveling entails under modernity’s greatest invention, the nation-state: “Out of the Babel of city piled on city, continent on continent, the world squeezed small and pulled out long, bouncing like a new rubber ball, we get what? Certainly not peace.”⁹ In its own way, the nation enacts boundaries while it affords movement, it compresses space while it hierarchizes time, it comes out of a desire for autonomy while it produces war, it homogenizes while it differentiates. Maybe that paradoxical situation is what made me think of your story, of how your quest for navigation is ultimately a study of light. Or, as you put it, “the darkness that we perceive of the heavens is this light that, though traveling towards us, cannot reach us.”

Pujan



John Dos Passos, *Baghdad, The Bazaars That Burned*, 1922. Watercolour on paper, dimensions unknown. Courtesy: the artist, Open Road Distribution.

⁴ Ibid. 139.

⁵ Ibid. 140.

⁶ Ibid. 195.

⁷ Ibid. 201.

⁸ Ibid. 192.

⁹ Ibid. 207.