

ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND THE FAILURE OF NIHILISM



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“... au fond des querel les litteraires, il y a toujours une question philosophique.” — Emile Zola¹

Since virtually everything that *can* be said about Ernest Hemingway *has* been said, any further exercise in the analysis of his work really ought to offer some self-justification. While not claiming to voice any startlingly original insights into the work of the writer, I do hope to demonstrate the value — and validity — of that theory of art enunciated by Ayn Rand.² Rand defines art as a “selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments”.³ Those metaphysical value judgments can range from sophisticated, systematic and intellectual to the crude, haphazard and unconscious but they always manifest themselves in an artist’s “sense of life”, as she calls it. She continues:

The truth or falsehood of a given artist’s philosophy as such, is not an aesthetic matter; it may affect a given viewer’s enjoyment of his work, but

it does not negate its aesthetic merit. Some sort of philosophic meaning, however, some *implicit* view of life, is a necessary element of a work of life ... The fact that one agrees or disagrees with an artist’s philosophy is irrelevant to an *aesthetic* appraisal of his work *qua* art. One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist’s theme, the abstract meaning of his work ... then evaluate the means by which he conveys it — ie by taking *his* theme as criterion, evaluate the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life.⁴

However, we can go further, it seems to me. We can also examine the impact of an author’s specific sense of life upon the boundaries of artistic achievement open to him. For in my view Hemingway’s work constitutes a particularly graphic demonstration of the consequences, in this case detrimental, of an author’s fundamental view of himself and of existence.

I: Disillusionment

The dominant tone of Hemingway’s work was undoubtedly a sense of the bankruptcy of values, a quasi-nihilistic despair of finding any meaning or value in a “universe of chance”. It reflected in part the widespread disillusionment affecting so many intellectuals after World War I. Thus, in his illuminating study of the literary and intellectual world of the 1920’s, Frederick Jay Hoffman chose as his illustrative text for the section on “The War and the Postwar Temper” Hem-

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

ingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.⁵ This disillusionment was perhaps summed up best, however, by the statement of the protagonist of *A Farewell To Arms*, Frederic Henry:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain ... There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of places were all you could say and have their mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

The sense of a meaningless, uncaring — if not positively malevolent — universe was likewise conveyed in Frederic's musings on how he had once burnt a log full of ants and observed, like an unmoved Cod, their frantic efforts to escape. Man too, we are supposed to think, is ultimately doomed to the same sort of meaningless death as the ants. "You always feel trapped biologically", says Frederic to his lover Catherine. And to underline the point Catherine herself dies in an equally gratuitous manner, another biological accident — the result of childbirth and the fact of her narrow hips. "If people bring so much courage to this world," reflects Frederic, "the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure that it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."

I termed Hemingway's sense of life *quasi-nihilistic*, for there is some vague concept of metaphysical value present. Sometimes value is attributed to the realm of Nature — the wind rippling the corn field appears in almost everything he wrote as an image of life, of harmony, peace, and permanence. The existence of the peasantry, living in harmony with their surroundings also appears to have some metaphysical value attributed to it. And, of course, there is the famous Hemingway "code", the ethos of the "stiff upper lip" as exemplified most notably in the protagonists of *The Sun Also Rises*, those psychically or physically scarred individuals such as Jake Barnes, Bill Gorton, Count Mippipopolous, and Lady Brett.

If the world is unmistakably one of meaningless suffering and death, then one can — in the Hemingway worldview — at least maintain in the face of it a certain self-control and detachment. Like the matador's consummate skill and grace while confronting painful death it is, in Hemingway's view, this maintenance of dignity and self-control which constitutes the most and the best man can hope for.

II: Social Commitment

Hemingway did, of course, make forays into what some critics, usually those of marked socialist leanings, have seen and praised as "social commitment". Thus, although the ending of *To Have and Have Not* is still largely pessimistic, many have seen in it and in the last words of its dying, "rugged individualist" hero, a recognition of the necessity of social action to rectify the injustices of the corrupt status quo. "A man ... One man alone ain't got. No man alone now ... No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody ... chance."

And in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* critics have also seen an abandonment of what they term Hemingway's customary "philosophy of atomistic individualism and irresponsibility".⁶ Rather than declaring a "separate peace" as did Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, Robert Jordan confronted and accepted the issues of duty and sacrifice in spite of the surrounding social disintegration. Jordan comes to Spain as soon as the Civil War breaks out, and had, as he put it himself, "fought that summer and that fall for all the poor in the world, against all the tyranny, for all the things that you believed and for the new world you had been educated into." Yet Jordan becomes profoundly aware of the deceit and treachery and courage existing on both sides, of Communist duplicity, and of the fact that *his* values, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity ... Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" were hardly those of his allies. On the mission which ends in his death Jordan is well aware not merely of its danger, but of the fact that it was probably both insignificant in the long run and doomed to failure. However, he proceeds with his task, even when aware of his betrayal. For many critics this has been interpreted as the final message of the novel, the assertion of the value of idealistic commitment in the face of defeat and despair. Yet it is easy to overlook a profoundly pessimistic point, Jordan's observation that "If this war is lost all of these things [ie., Liberty, Equality etc.] are lost". The novel was written *after* the Civil War, and the war *had* been lost. At most, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can stand as a testament in support of commitment in the future. Hemingway wrote it at the start of the Second World War and it may well be a plea for commitment as a value in and for itself, with the bleak warning that the struggle could be fruitless.

III: Technique and Sense of Life

Simply delineating an author's sense of life and fundamental philosophy does, of course, constitute only the beginning of the critical task. For the realm of literary criticism, of objective aesthetic appraisal, it is necessary to describe and evaluate the *means* by which an author conveys his theme. In the words of Ayn Rand, taking the author's theme as criterion one must "evaluate the purely aesthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he pro-

jects (or fails to project) his view of life".⁷ However, the nature of an author's sense of life remains a fundamentally important issue, not only in determining one's personal, emotional response to his work, but in determining the degree of his objective and *general* literary achievement. My analysis of the achievement and failure of Ernest Hemingway will demonstrate, I hope, exactly why this should be so.

In evaluating Hemingway as a writer Lionel Trilling has indicated one fruitful line of approach. In his essay "Contemporary American Literature In Its Relation To Ideas".⁸ Trilling has commented on the curious failing of so many American novelists, a failure of *intelligence*, of the intellectual grasp of problems. Regarding Hemingway, Trilling perceived "a deficiency of conscious mind, an inadequacy of the talent of disquisition".

Maxwell Geismer, in *Writers and Crisis*, also partially formulated this point when he commented specifically on Hemingway's intellectual failure in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The latter he judged far inferior to similar European novels like Malraux's *Man's Fate*, Silone's *Bread and Wine*, and Koestler's *Darkness At Noon*. These works were, in Geismer's view, "filled with penetrating insights in the patterns of social crisis, the gains and losses worked by such crises upon the human temperament ...".⁹ Indeed, in contrast Hemingway's intellectual stature *does* appear strikingly less than that of his European contemporaries. There is simply no adequate exploration throughout his work of the issues with which he is fundamentally concerned, no analysis of the personal crises of his characters or of the crisis of values which he, and so many of his contemporaries felt. Rather, all we find is a suffocating atmosphere of self-pity, and, alternatively, emotional repression. Can the sort of internal monologue delivered by Frederic Henry in *A Farewell To Arms*, which we have already quoted, seriously he considered as anything other than immature, self-pitying, and essentially vacuous? I for one can understand the exasperation which drove Wyndham Lewis to his withering denunciation of the Hemingway "hero" as a "dull-witted, bovine, monosyllabic simpleton, [a] lethargic and stuttering dummy", and of most of his characters as "puppets ... leaves, very violently blown hither and thither, drugged or at least deeply intoxicated phantoms of a sort of matter-of-fact shell shock."¹⁰

Hemingway's own partial solution to the dilemmas of the "Lost Generation", the "Hemingway code", can hardly be considered a substitute for serious thought. The "stiff upper-lip" ethos imprisoned him within walls of his own making. He became in his own life as well as his art an incarnation of the myth of hairy-chested masculinity — to the point of self-parody. The self-conscious masculinity of Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River And Into the Trees* was the quite logical conclusion of the path that he, Hemingway, had

taken. The shallowness of thought in Hemingway, the typically immature confusion of masculine sexual normality with virtue, is apparent throughout all of his work. Just how seriously can one take an author who, in a supposedly "socially conscious" novel like *To Have And Have Not*, presents his wealthy and "bad" characters as universally alcoholics, homosexuals, drug addicts, or masturbators. All are in some way or another impotent, perverted, or frustrated. Needless to say, the ruggedly masculine hero, Harry Morgan, is apparently the only one who can provide a good lay.

IV: A Failure of Thought

Writing in *Men At War* of his love of *War and Peace* Hemingway criticised Tolstoy's "ponderous and Messianic thinking" and stated that he "learned from him to distrust my Thinking with a capital 'T'...". It was tragic that Hemingway came to this conclusion, for it was precisely some deeper thinking that his work needed. Hemingway, and the Hemingway code, manifest one of the worst forms of anti-intellectualism — that of the intellectual. "I was not made to think," declared Frederic Henry in *A Farewell To Arms*, "I was made to eat. My God, yes. Eat and drink and sleep with Catherine." It was hardly insignificant that Helen Gordon — of *To Have And Have Hot* — in her outburst against her husband, accuses him of having got his "dirty little tricks" out of books, or that she ends with the most abusive term she, or presumably the author, could think of — "You writer!" It was Hemingway's anti-intellectualism, his distrust of the very role and responsibilities of the intellectual, that makes his work so fundamentally unsatisfying and which prevented him from creating a truly great art.

V: Values and Literary Achievement

But if the limitation of intellectual horizons, the deeply felt distrust of the intellect, partly explains Hemingway's failure, can we not also trace that failure to something more fundamental, to the author's own "sense of life"? I think we can. Our basic question must be, how far can nihilism provide an adequate foundation for *sustained* artistic endeavour?

The answer is surely that it cannot. As D. S. Savage has pointed out:

[N]ihilism precludes the possibility of organic and interesting development. The Hemingway world is one of mechanical repetition, and in the series of Hemingway's nine or ten books there is no inward continuity to keep pace with the chronological sequence.¹¹

To put it crudely — to have read one Hemingway novel is virtually to have read them all! Hemingway created a distinctive protagonist and taciturn style which embodied his sensibility undeniably well. In this lay an undoubted literary achievement. But it was

an extremely limited one. Unable or unwilling to explore the issues with which he was concerned, he also failed to develop a broader, more fertile vision of life which alone could lead to sustained literary creativity. He thus said all he had to say, and did very much all he could do, in his first few stories and novels. The rest are repetitive in theme, derivative in style, and all thoroughly superfluous.

Robert Penn Warren, writing in the *Kenyon Review*, has defended Hemingway on the grounds that he “is essentially a lyric rather than a dramatic writer, and for the lyric writer virtue depends upon the intensity with which the personal vision is rendered rather than upon the creation of a variety of characters whose visions are in conflict among themselves.”¹²

Such an argument does contain an element of truth. The Hemingway “hero” remains essentially the same throughout the novels and most of the short stories. Jack Barnes, Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan, Nick Adams — all are cut from the same cloth. Few of the minor characters (with the possible exception of those in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*) ever take on much of the substance of real life. It is the brooding Hemingway sensibility which dominates each work. Likewise, the “Hemingway landscape”, from “Hills Like White Elephants”, through *The Sun Also Rises* to *Across The River And Into The Trees* remains very much the same, the mirror of the protagonist’s own psychological state. Richard K. Petersen, in a perceptive study of Hemingway’s style, has also pointed to the recurrence throughout his work of the imagery of the “cool, clean, light and well-ordered”, of objective terms rendered evaluative. The constant repetition of the “cool and clean” in *A Farewell To Arms* is especially striking: the “cool and clean” taste of the martinis in the hotel bar at Stressa, the “cold and clean” air coming through the window of Frederic Henry’s room at Gutingens, the railroad gondola car loaded with guns and smelling “cleanly of oil and grease”, and even the “clean smell of dried dung” in the barn in which Frederic and his companions hide during the retreat.

Yet once we have identified the key Hemingwayesque images and motifs we know what to expect in each successive story. Hemingway’s artistic resources — his technique as a writer — are simply not rich enough to sustain indefinite interest. In that mania of modern criticism, hunting the symbol, some critics, of whom Carlos Baker is the most notable, have attributed a “controlling symbolism” to Hemingway’s work. Baker has perceived, for example, certain “elemental images” of the Mountain — “life and the home” — and the Plain — “war and death”.¹³ But if there is some general substance to such an interpretation, Baker’s case rests upon a misreading of the opening paragraph of *A Farewell To Arms*. As E. M. Haliday has pointed out,¹⁴ Baker is simply mistaken as to the positioning of mountain and plain, a fact which demolishes his case

for a *controlling* symbolism. However, even conceding a more general, less strict, validity to Baker’s view of Hemingway’s symbolism, might it not be better termed a controlling *cliché*? Hemingway’s symbolism of purity and escape can hardly be considered either especially original or illuminating. Similarly, his attempt in *The Old Man and The Sea* to create a more allegorical dramatization of his theme of “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” is marred by a crude, and most culpable, unilluminating, Christian symbolism. We are thus shown the old man struggling up the hill with his mast, staggering and falling, stretched out beneath its weight, or sleeping with his arms outstretched, as if on a cross, with his hands marked by the stigmata of his battle with the marlin.

Hemingway’s work must be judged, in my view, as a failure. The failure was undoubtedly an intellectual one. But more fundamental, surely, was the “question philosophique”. Hemingway’s failure to create truly great art can ultimately be traced to his sense of life. *It was a failure of nihilism*. For, as Nietzsche once observed:

[W]hat does all art do? Does it not praise? Does it not glorify? Does it not select? Does it not bring things into prominence? In all this it strengthens or weakens certain valuations. Is this only a secondary matter? An accident? Something in which the artist’s instinct has no share? *Or is this not rather the very prerequisite which enables the artist to accomplish something?*¹⁵

NOTES

1. “La Republique et la Litterature”, in *La Roman Experimental* (1880).
2. *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, New American Library, New York, 1971.
3. *Ibid*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 39, 42.
5. *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, The Free Press, New York, rev edn, 1962.
6. Edgar Johnson Farewell, “The Separate Peace: The Rejections of Ernest Hemingway”, *Sewanee Review*, July-September 1940; reprinted in J. K. M. McCaffery, ed., *Ernest Hemingway: The Man and His Work*, World Publishing, New York, 1950, p. 142.
7. Rand, *op cit*, p. 42.
8. *American Quarterly*, 1(3), Fall 1949; reprinted in *The Liberal Tradition*, Mercury Books, New York, 1964.
9. Quoted in McCaffery, *op cit*, p. 183.
10. In *Men Without Art* (1934), Russell and Russell, New York, 1964; this passage reprinted in J. Gallens, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of ‘A Farewell to Arms’*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970, pp. 81, 75-76.
11. *The Withered Branch*, Eyre and Spottiswood, London, 1950.
12. “Hemingway”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 9, Winter 1947, p. 28.
13. Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer As Artist*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 3rd edn, 1963.
14. “Hemingway’s Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony”, *American Literature*, Vol. 27, 1956.
15. *The Twilight of the Idols*, in Geoffrey Clive, ed., *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, New American Library, New York, 1965, p. 542, emphasis mine.