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"A Few Practical Things": Hemingway's Syntheses

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This paper is an attempt to get a glimpse at Ernest Hemingway's literary method. By merging regionalist and cosmopolitan literary approaches, by blending modernist experimental style with epic moral values of his "code", and by boiling down conventional time into a relevant "present" moment, Hemingway's novels and short stories create a synthesized manual for simple human survival in the harsh world of the 20th century. This, it is argued, is the reason for their exceptional success across the lines of conventional reception categories.

*It is not enough of a
book, but still there
were a few things to
be said There were
a few practical
things to be said.*

Ernest Hemingway, *Death in
the Afternoon*

The final aim of Ernest Hemingway's literary quest can perhaps be glimpsed from his letter to the man he held in great esteem, Bernard Berenson, one of the great art historians:

You know that fiction, prose rather, is possibly the roughest trade of all in writing. You do not have the reference, the old important reference. You have the sheet of blank paper, the pencil, and the obligation to invent truer than things can be true. You have to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable and also have it seem normal and so that it can become a part of the experience of the person who reads it. Obviously, this is impossible and that is probably why it is considered to be valuable when you are able to do so. But it is impossible to hire out or contract to be able to do it, as to hire out to be an alchemist.¹

¹ Letter to Bernard Berenson, September 24, 1954, Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1981, p. 837.



Aiming at the impossible which has to be made possible is then Hemingway's half-mocking definition of his *métier*. And indeed, it is this quest for literary goals almost transcendental that places Hemingway in a paradoxical and very sparsely populated interstice of our age: his works became classics even during his life. It is a rare case in the twentieth century literature that a writer taken seriously by critics, including the academic ones, reached several million readers in his own country only.²

This can be best illustrated by the publishing history of the short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Initially it appeared complete in *Life*, something that this magazine never did before, in the issue of Sept. 1, 1952, which was sold in 5,318,650 copies within 48 hours. But the hard-bound Scribner's edition published later also sold in more than a million copies.³ In 40 years, from 1932 to 1972, Hollywood made 14 movies based on Hemingway's work. One could claim that there wasn't such a charismatic literary figure since Lord Byron, well known as a great artist *and* a public personality.⁴ Hemingway's influence on subsequent literary works, not only in America, is also obvious and considerable. It seems that the opinion of pundits and postmen, professionals and amateurs, became one in this case. But what made this blend of the so-called sacred and profane possible in these modernist works?

For starters, Hemingway used to borrow from many sources. "It was no new thing for me to learn from everyone I could, living or dead ..." ⁵ he said to George Plimpton in an interview.⁶ His early borrowings, especially from Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, enabled him to avoid some of the beginner's mistakes, and prevented him from losing his bearings. These circumstances made it possible for him to start where others stopped, using the results of the experiments of his contemporaries or his ancestors, integrating procedures which were up to then considered incompatible, synthesizing. What made these syntheses viable was his American pragmatism, the need to judge things by their results only, avoiding abstractions, one of his unacknowledged debts to his home town, Oak Park, a respectable Chicago suburb.

² The following novels by Hemingway were sold in more than a million copies in the U.S: *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*. Out of six paperback novels sold in 1972 in the U.S. in more than 150,000 copies three were by Hemingway. See Philip Young, "Hemingway Papers, Occasional Remarks", in ed. B. Oldsey, *Ernest Hemingway, the Papers of a Writer Hemingway*, Garland Publishers, New York, 1981, pp. 139-147.

³ Cf. Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, Scribner's, New York, 1969, pp. 504-505.

⁴ Cf. Scott Donaldson, *By Force of Will*, The Viking Press, New York, 1977, p. 3.

⁵ George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction XXI: Ernest Hemingway" *The Paris Review*, No. 18, Spring 1958, p. 73.

⁶ But in a manuscript note scrawled at the back of an envelope dated Dec. 31 1927 he wrote: "Imitate everybody, living and dead, relying on the fact that if you imitate some one obscure enough it will be considered original... Education consists in finding sources obscure enough to imitate so that they will be perfectly safe..." Fragment catalogued as no. 489 in the Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts.



Hemingway's first synthesis is the integration of literary regionalism with the use of the international theme⁷. Theodore Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson would be seen as adequate representatives of regionalism in the 1920s: they wrote about America and more or less recognizable Americans, unlike the cosmopolitans, like Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James, for instance, who had to situate their protagonists in the past or at least somewhere in Europe to be able to see them clearly. Regionalists could conditionally stand for the spontaneous in literature, for the romantic and naturalist rebellion against literary conventions, the Whitmanesque "barbaric yawp". The cosmopolitans, on the other hand, are steeped in culture and tradition, believing in perennial axioms which define life and literature, and so could, conditionally again, be classified as classicists, according to T. E. Hulme's definition⁸. These two categories fit American literature very well, since it was from its beginning torn between a longing for tradition, a need to lean upon an older civilization on the one hand, and the necessity of independence and originality, appropriate for a new continent and for a superpower in the making, on the other hand.

Hemingway's novels and short stories seem to bridge this gap and reconcile these opposites. Obviously Europe is the venue in most of his works, but it is more a state of mind than a definite geographic locus, in spite of many realistic and persuasive physical details. European ambiance as well as Europeans themselves are used by the writer as some kind of measuring stick, a criterion to judge American life and relationships, since Hemingway's main protagonists are nearly always Americans. Europe as a touchstone of American reality rather than a geographic fact is the kind of Europe that appears in one of Hemingway's earliest short stories, unpublished up to now, curiously entitled "Cross-roads, An Anthology"⁹, probably written in 1921,

It is obviously an echo of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), not in its title only, consisting of short fragments with names of characters as subtitles, but in prose. One of the fragments entitled "Billy Gilbert"¹⁰ tells of a soldier's return. Gilbert is a Native American who volunteered in World War I before the US entered it, and so he fought very bravely in a Scottish division in Europe. After returning at the end of the war to his home town, a small place in the American West, his formal Scottish uniform and especially his kilt look ridiculous to his townsmen and eventually make them angry. An Indian in a short skirt seems to them intolerable, un-American, maybe also because Gilbert's

⁷ Cf. Philip Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin", ed. Harold Beaver, *American Critical Essays*, Oxford University Press, London, 1959, pp. 280-286. He talks about Hemingway on pp. 284-285, showing he is not quite sure into which of his two categories he would put Hemingway.

⁸ T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism", *Speculations, Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1958, p. 116.

⁹ Typewritten six-page version of an unpublished short story catalogued as no. 347 in the Hemingway collection, J.F.K. Presidential Library.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that this name appears in an early Hemingway's letter of Sept. 16, 1916, while he was still in high-school in Oak Park, Illinois, written to Emily Goetsman. Billy Gilbert in the letter is also a young Native American from Michigan Hemingway used to know.



wife had run away with another man while he was in Europe, keeping the world safe for democracy. Instead of receiving a hero's welcome, Billy Gilbert has to leave town, scorned by those who know nothing about either Europe or the war. Walking down the road, not knowing where he is bound for, Gilbert whistles a famous World War I song alluding to a place in Ireland, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", thus perhaps unconsciously exposing and protesting against the narrowness and xenophobia of his provincial home town whose residents refuse to acknowledge the very existence of other people and different mores. Gilbert is the first of many Hemingway's characters whom Europe makes aware, but not happy.

In his later work the European ambiance serves as a background to certain cognitive discoveries of the protagonists about themselves and their country. This is probably the reason why Hemingway himself claimed that he could write about Paris only when he was somewhere else, in the same way as he could write about Michigan only in Paris¹¹. From a certain distance it is easier to note and understand the essential characteristics of America he wanted to write about: from close by one can only see details that need not be crucial. But for all this he would only be a follower of Henry James or E. M. Forster, who used the differences between America and Europe, or England and India, to indicate and underline the psychological and emotional dilemmas of their protagonists had he not added modern violence to the "international theme", perceived not only in the form of violent death in the war or so-called peace, but also in covert but maybe more painful methods of physical and psychological violence. Such is the sketch of the Greek refugees running away from Turkey in the collection *In Our Time*¹², the image of Fascism in the story "Che Ti Dice la Patria?"¹³ from the collection *Men Without Women* (1928), or the portrait of humiliation realizing the sudden lesbian transformation of the protagonist's beloved in "The Sea Change"¹⁴, from the collection *Winner Take Nothing* (1933). Such fusion of the international theme and very realistic descriptions of violence and hypocrisy of modern life appears also in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), not only in Bill Gorton's story of the Vienna boxing match, but also in the description of the unequal fistfight between Pedro Romero and Robert Cohn¹⁵. Numerous similar examples can be found in the novels *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

In late Hemingway, in the novel *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), there appears a significant variation of this approach: the international theme here becomes

¹¹ Cf. Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1964, p. 7.

¹² E. Hemingway, "Chapter II", *In Our Time*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1925, [p. 23].

¹³ E. Hemingway, *Men Without Women*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1974, pp. 70-81. It is interesting to note that the Penguin edition capitalizes the title of the story in the Contents in an Anglo-Saxon way, as I did in the text.

¹⁴ E. Hemingway, *The Fifth Column and the First Forty Nine Stories*, Scribner's, N. Y. 1938, pp. 495-499.

¹⁵ Cf. E. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Scribner's, N.Y., 1954, p. 71 & pp. 201-202.



even more complex. The protagonist, the disillusioned and cynical colonel Cantwell, although he knows Italy well from World War I in which he was wounded, cannot quite understand the bitterness of his Italian boatman who takes him to a duck hunt in 1945, until he learns that the boatman's wife and daughter were raped by their "liberators" – probably American soldiers. So even the sophisticated cosmopolitan colonel who quotes Dante, Byron, and Browning, even d'Annunzio, and tells the story of a German cat and dog who eat a German soldier, roasted by the allied napalm bombs, cannot quite understand the modern world. What are the chances then of his American driver who compares the St. Mark's cathedral to a large movie theater, or of an American writer – it has often been suggested that this is a merciless portrait of aged Sinclair Lewis – who reads the guide-book, a Baedeker, in the dining room of Hotel Gritti, looking for clues who are the famous Venetians who come there to dine? Undoubtedly, one of the uses of synthesis of cosmopolitanism and violence in this novel was to confront Americans with the impression they make on people from other parts, illustrating in a modern way the famous Henry James' dictum that it was "a complex fate to be an American"¹⁶. It was becoming more complex still, and Hemingway tried to illustrate the extent of its complexity.

The second synthesis in Hemingway's writing connects the modernist stylistic ideal of permanent experimentation in fiction with epic moral values of his "code". He started as a modernist, and his poems, short stories and novels, at least up to World War II, contain rhythmic prose like in Gertrude Stein, stream of consciousness as in Joyce or Virginia Woolf, reverse symbolism like in T.S. Eliot, shifting time patterns like in Joseph Conrad or William Faulkner. Nevertheless, Hemingway uses these, essentially stylistic instruments in a different way from most modernists.

Modernist literary techniques are mostly used by artists to portray the complexity of modern existence, which could not be any longer authentically presented by traditional realistic means. However, modernist literary texts are most often portraits of the modern world's disintegration, the emotional and moral confusion with the prevalent taste of alienation, hopelessness and desperation. In the words of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, modern art is an "escape from the human world"¹⁷, and so the subject of art stops being life which is supplanted by the portrait of an idea. The grayness of Kafka's ambience and the moral confusion of his faceless characters, although they occasionally appear very realistic, are a conclusive example of the hyperbolic portrayal of reality in modernism. Modern writers also often tend to reject the traditional moral values and attitudes, but do not even try to replace them with something else, leaving their characters valueless. So Joyce's Stephen Dedalus from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,

¹⁶ A letter to Charles Eliot Norton from 1871, quoted in F. J. Hoffman, *The Modern Novel in America*, Henry Regney & Co, Chicago, 1963, p.247.

¹⁷ Jose Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art", *Literary Modernism*, ed. by Irving Howe, Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, Conn, 1967, p 89.



for instance, instead of traditional human values like love or friendship chooses silence, exile and cunning as his leading ideas, and rejects not only the communication with Ireland but with humanity as well, in the name of art which should be the higher version of communicating.

Maybe led by the rudiments of small-town morality carried along all the way from Oak Park, Illinois, Hemingway never wholly accepted this modernist manner. He uses modernist stylistic methods, but carefully avoids the gray modernist hopelessness. He manages that by presenting his characters and their metaphysical dilemmas in an ambiance much less depressive than usual in modernist works. This is one of the reasons for a kind of misunderstanding on the part of certain readers: they tend to identify with the ambiance of the novel, without taking into account the sordid fate of characters who often only vegetate in this seemingly grand scenography. But even in *The Sun Also Rises* the traditional epic values of the young Spanish bullfighter Pedro Romero are contrasted to the hopeless "emancipation" of American bohemian protagonists: in a romantic manner the closer a character is to nature the more morally superior he (or she) is. Hemingway often presents characters facing imminent defeat, but some of them are even at that moment full of courage and dignity. On the verge of downfall they are, for instance, surrounded by friends, proving they are not abandoned or pathetic in their defeat, like the bullfighter Manuel Garcia from the short story "The Undefeated" from *Men Without Women*¹⁸. But the most prominent example of the integration between modernist literary techniques and epic morality is of course the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* throughout which one can always feel glimpses of love, friendship, and trust, in spite of an ironically complex military situation, human weaknesses and unnecessary death caused by them.

Hemingway maintains such an attitude even in novels which are usually considered to be full of bitterness and desperation, like *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Through all the social injustices of depression America and the imbecile military blunders of World War II one can clearly see sexual love as the steadfastest link of a disintegrating world, supported by portraits of solidarity and friendship through the characters of captain Willie and Grand Maestro. Social criticism or anti-war orientation might be the primary motifs in these works, but the fate of characters is not defined by them, in other words, they are not described schematically, as class or caste representatives only: both Harry Morgan and colonel Cantwell are left with a redeeming dignity, which makes them, so far it is possible in modernism, tragic. Like William Faulkner in some of his books and public appearances, Hemingway tries to prove that stylistic modernity is not incompatible with the traditional function of literature to inspire, ennoble and encourage, reminding of essential human invincibility.

It is obvious that literary portraiture of moral triumph, even in defeat, appeals to the reading public. The other reason of public approval could be the immediacy of Hemingway's

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, pp. 7-43.



literary focus, his emphasis on the cosmic importance of the "present" moment which is exposed to the mind's eye of the reader. He is always engaged in creating a hypothetical moment of the "present". As Tony Tanner remarked, the eye for Hemingway is a stylistic device, "vision in action"¹⁹, and so the reader always feels the importance of the "present" moment in which the protagonist is situated, rather than the defining influence of the past or the future. This moment one should use to the fullest: this is already realized by one of Hemingway's first protagonists, Nick Adams, who in the posthumously published short story "The Last Good Country" claims to have learned: "there was only one day at a time and that it was always the day you were in. It would be today until it was tonight and tomorrow would be today again. This was the main thing he had learned so far".²⁰ This feeling for the decisiveness of the moment in which one exists, unlike all other moments, can be best seen in the position and words of Robert Jordan, the hero of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* when he, very late in the day, discovers love: "Now, *ahora, maintenant, heute*. Now, it has a funny sound to be a whole world and your life".²¹ Capsulating a whole existence into a moment is not only a modern self-defense mechanism, but also a third kind of Hemingway's synthesis: together with his "easy" sentence it enables the reader to identify not with the character but with the moment in which the character is situated, with the landscape and events the character sees, making a literary experience immediate and authentic.

But the reader might accept Hemingway literary world as close to his own also due to the elemental quality and simplicity of its presentation of human lives. So it is not only a matter of style but of subject matter as well. Hunting, fishing and bullfighting as the backdrop of Hemingway's novels and short stories have long put off the critics who considered them as activities archaic and unsuitable to modernist art, unlike common readers who have perhaps instinctively recognized them as metaphors of elemental human activities, the essential blend between work and play which therefore de-alienates and brings humans closer to their origin.

Hemingway's exceptional degree of acceptance by the readers cannot, however, be explained only as either the result of skill in using literary procedures, or by clever choice of a suitable theme. Modern readers must have found in his work something resembling a truthful image of the time in which they lived, as well as of themselves. In a time when ideals have almost completely disappeared, in which hypocrisy and lies keep triumphing, and the measure for success is almost exclusively monetary, the readers might have liked Hemingway's "anti-intellectualism", his rejection of abstractions as mere phrases without meaning, but also his acceptance of sense-perception as a criterion. This is perhaps best

¹⁹ Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wander: Naivety and Reality in American Literature*, Cambridge U. P, 1965, p. 246.

²⁰ E. Hemingway, "The Last Good Country", *The Nick Adams Stories*, Bantam, New York, 1973, p. 106.

²¹ E. Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Scribner's, New York, 1940, p. 160.



expressed by Frederic Henry, the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms*, in his famous monologue about abstract words²², as well as in his musings about the meaning of life in a box car of a freight train, right after his desertion: "I was not made to think. I was made to eat. My God, yes. Eat and drink and sleep with Catherine. To-night maybe".²³ The only possibility of a moral judgment left to Hemingway's protagonists, and to a number of his readers, is pragmatic: does something help in the struggle for survival. If it does, it is indeed moral. This is also the conclusion of the impotent protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises* Jake Barnes whose overwhelming problem is not to solve questions of ultimate meaning or lack of meaning in human existence, but to accept some common everyday situations: "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it".²⁴ If the "present" moment is of overwhelming importance, it is essential to know how to live in it, without any long-range plans. The perennial philosophical questions are less important there, since they demand the recognition of a time continuum which actually does not exist, and their answers, even if possible, tend to be completely irrelevant.

The literary truth of Hemingway's works, describing events "how it was" as he called it, his literary world which he saw as a mixture of terror and delight, a "wonderful nightmare",²⁵ all these were created by his specific attitudes to the world on the one hand and writing on the other. In his works he always tried to be comprehensive, but not in order to judge, merely to try to understand. He always fought against dogmatism of the others, but of his own as well. Addressing the Old lady, his archetypal representative of the petty bourgeois world view, in his bullfighting and history of art book *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) he puts it in this way:

Madame, rarely will you meet a more prejudiced man nor one who tells himself he keeps his mind more open. But cannot that be because one part of our mind, that which we act with, becomes prejudiced through experience and still we keep another part completely open to observe and judge with?²⁶

This built-in antidogmatic device is also a synthesis, combining seemingly incompatible elements, but this is what human brain often has to do. Its literary results, often obvious in the novels *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Across the River and Into the Trees*, must also appeal to readers who were in our time exposed to too many promising systems, political, artistic and sundry, which soon turned to nightmares.

The modern (and post-modern) age cannot be expected to contain such comprehensive, well-rounded and monumental literary worlds as are those of Homer, Chaucer, Dante, and Shakespeare, perhaps Goethe as well. Human experience has not only been frag-

²² E. Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Scribner's, New York, 1929, pp. 184-185.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁴ E. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Scribner's, New York, 1926, p. 148.

²⁵ E. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, p. 222.

²⁶ E. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, England, 1966 [1932], p. 91.





mented since then, that is balkanized, through wars and other doomsday scenarios, but also became covered by an almost impenetrable crust of cynicism. The great mythologies of the past do not unite any longer. Due to the unprecedented development of science modern man is less sure that he understands the little segment of the world he is living in, not to speak of a general view on existence, than the Greek from the age of Pericles. And this is where Hemingway's syntheses come in: he would have liked to tell his reader a few practical things about everyday living, without any attempt to reach universal solutions or general paths to happiness. Merging regionalism and cosmopolitanism through depiction of universal violence and hypocrisy, Hemingway exposes the unwillingness of the ordinary middle-class men and women in America, and the West generally, to recognize the nature of modern life. By blending modernist literary procedures with epic values of his "code", by compressing time into a relevant moment of the present, he creates in his works a kind of manual for simple survival, and survival is essential since it is a condition for the human possibility to change, with the help of literature. One could hardly find anything more "practical" than that.

"NEKOLIKO PRAKTIČNIH STVARI": HEMINGWAYEVE SINTEZE

Ovaj tekst je pokušaj ostvarivanja uvida u književni metod Ernesta Hemingwaya. Miješajući regionalističke i kosmopolitske književne prilaze, spajajući modernistički eksperimentalni stil sa epskim moralnim vrijednostima svoga "kodeksa", i svodeći uobičajeno vrijeme na značajni trenutak "sadašnjosti", Hemingwayevi romani i pripovijetke stvaraju sintetizirani priručnik za prosto ljudsko preživljenje u grubom svijetu dvadesetog stoljeća. To je, tvrdi se, razlog njihovog izuzetnog uspjeha koji nije ograničen uobičajenim čitalačkim kategorijama.

