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## **THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL: SEXUAL/ TEXTUAL POLITICS IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *THE GARDEN OF EDEN*<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

*Ernest Hemingway's posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden* is a text rife with competing desires, especially those between heterosexuality, homosexuality, and androgyny. It is a novel that also rehearses its author Ernest Hemingway's ambiguous feelings concerning masculinity and androgyny. Through his writer-protagonist David Bourne, Hemingway dramatizes not only his personal desires and fears about sexuality, but also how "writing" can provide a solution for such insecurities.*

**Key words:** *Hemingway, sexuality, textuality, masculinity, androgyny, homosexuality, Oedipus complex, psychology.*

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<sup>1</sup> Please note: This essay is a version of a talk given at the University of Athens, Greece.

One of the structuring dynamics of Hemingway's posthumous novel involves textual warfare, two counter-narratives that stand in figuratively for the struggle, or "agony," that the writer-hero David Bourne must endure, or given his name, "bear," in his fight to maintain an unadulterated masculinity. There is the text that his wife Catherine forces him to write, which is essentially a record of their journey into androgyny, and there is the antidotal counter-text of David's African story in which a boy becomes a man in a man's world. A kind of psycho-autobiography, it a text rife with conflictual desires that rehearses more transparently than any other its author's anxieties and insecurities concerning gender, most particularly Hemingway's attraction to, and repulsion from, androgyny. In short, the novel dramatizes more clearly than any other Hemingway text the fact that what has often been read as a chauvinistic misogyny in Hemingway's oeuvre can be read as an over-compensation for, and a flight from, an attraction to androgynous relations. Allied to this biographical motif, indeed a crucial aspect of it, is the subtext of how writing as a gendered space of masculinity acts as the Redeemer in this story of the Fall.

It is this latter aspect of *The Garden of Eden* on which I want to focus here, but it must be pointed out that this is an extremely rich text that lends itself to numerous interpretive strategies for the Hemingway scholar. There is the controversial relationship between the 1500 page manuscript and the published text; there are the biographical determinants—sisters, wives, lovers, rivals—that are woven into the fabric of the fiction; and there are the various threads of the novel that beg feminist treatments, most especially Catherine's role as Hemingway's most aggressive woman, so threatening indeed that the text must condemn her to "madness"; and, finally (although this does not exhaust the possibilities), *The Garden of Eden* can be read as a kind of meta-fiction. It is Hemingway's most self-reflexive novel, considering time and time again its author's philosophy of composition, and this is allied to the theme I have just mentioned of writing, or "work," as a prophylactic against despair.

It is also a text that comprises several journeys, both literal and figurative. There is the literal journey that the newly-married couple David and Catherine Bourne takes across France and Spain; there is as well their sexual journey into transgressive gender-relations, including the triangular relationship with the erstwhile lesbian Marita; and there are the necessary excursions that David takes into Africa as a way back to his father. All these journeys from innocence to experience are framed by Ernest Hemingway's journey into self, or, more appropriately, "selves." One cannot help but feel that this latter journey served as a kind of cathartic confession, if only to himself, of the complexity of his sexual fears and desires. In this way, he has his alter-ego David Bourne speak for him: "He started in again on the new and difficult story and worked attacking each thing that for years he had put off facing" (*The Garden of Eden*, p.123).

Hemingway's personal journey and how this is interconnected with his various texts, including the unpublished manuscript of *The Garden of Eden*, has been exhaustively treated elsewhere. In this short essay, it is the published version with which I will be dealing. Despite the shortcomings of the much abbreviated published text, and there are many, it nevertheless affords a consistent dramatization of what I am primarily concerned with here: that is, the triangular dynamic between David Bourne, his wife, and his "work." My reading is a less "personal," or biographical one, but rather I will treat the novel more as a text that dramatizes, or allegorizes, the subject's (in this case David Bourne's) negotiation of gender positions in its precarious journey into and through Culture. Indeed, it can be read as a kind of Lacanian psycho-drama, of the vicissitudes of the subject as it negotiates its way through the registers of the Imaginary and Symbolic, from a state of plenitude, through narcissistic wounding and dis-integration, to an eventual and complete restoration of "self."

As befits such a psychoanalytic allegory, there are various triangulations of desire in the text—that between David, his wife Catherine, and Marita; between homosexuality, heterosexuality, and androgyny; and the one that I am emphasizing here: that between writing (or "work" as

David Bourne calls it) as a masculine space of integrity. To complicate the issue even further, there is the triangulation of this latter struggle with the temptation to taste the fruit of androgyny by the Eve in this text, and the concomitant fear of emasculation which is figured as the inability, or deflection from, the necessity to write. In 1934, Hemingway wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald the following:

“Forget your personal tragedy. We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt use it—don’t cheat with it . . . All we are is writers and what we should do is write. Of all people on earth you needed discipline in your work and instead you marry someone who is jealous of your work, wants to compete with you and ruin you. It’s not as simple as that and I thought Zelda was crazy the first time I met her and you complicated it even more by being in love with her and, of course, you are a rummy. But you’re no more a rummy than Joyce is and most good writers are . . . All you need to do is write truly and not care about what the fate of it is.”

There is much of Fitzgerald and Zelda in *The Garden of Eden*. The former’s homosexual anxieties and their connection with writing, or at least the inability to write, his wife’s descent into madness, and what Hemingway saw as her jealousy of her husband’s creative powers, are echoed in David and Catherine Bourne’s relationship. But the point I wish to note here is that in the text according to Ernest Hemingway, most especially the text under present discussion, writing is the antidote to “hurt,” to loss, a self-protective and reactive gesture against the dis-integration of selfhood, and most particularly, the threat of what one critic has termed in relation to Scott Fitzgerald as “vocational emasculation.” It has been noted by more than one commentator that the Hemingway text is more often than not structured around the three significant W’s: War, Women, and Wounds. This trinity is again a structuring element in *The Garden of Eden*, even if the warfare is more of a textual/sexual nature, and that David Bourne’s “wounding” is more psychological than physical. For this reading of *The Garden of Eden*, I would like to suggest

yet another significant W: how the notion of "Work," or "Writing," stands in as a form of redemption in relation to such hurting.

David Bourne, Hemingway's alter-ego, becomes the victim of such a narcissistic wounding, and the *published* version, ostensibly in the third-person but filtered through David's consciousness, is primarily a narrative of his struggle to restore his integrity. However, when we meet him and his wife in the first chapter they are living in an Edenic world of plenitude, a Lacanian "Imaginary" (what is Lacan's master-narrative after all except a re-telling of the biblical myth?), in which there is no self-consciousness, no mirrors, no work, just "being." This is a world of unity, of fusional logic, wherein the subject (the "*je*") identifies with its "*moi*" or authentic self, completely at one with its desires. This is an economy structured by dual relationships and primary drive modes, most particularly in this Garden, by the oral and scopic. It is a space of unmitigated hedonism, or *jouissance* in Lacan's terms: "There was only happiness and loving each other and then hunger and replenishing and starting over" (14). But this is another "happy Garden state" that were best experienced without a mate. Catherine "twins" her husband by having her hair cut short as well as assuming the male position in their new sexual experimentation, thus symbolically emasculating him. After only eighteen pages of published text, their story as *les enfants du paradis* is over, and at the close of the first chapter David marks this lapsarian phase as an over-determined sense of loss: ". . .and his heart said goodbye Catherine goodbye my lovely girl goodbye and good luck and goodbye" (18). So they move, albeit reluctantly, (not unlike Milton's protagonists) into a more social sphere, into the realm of triangular relationships of desire, into what (to extend the psychoanalytic allegory) Lacan calls the Symbolic, a realm premised on "loss" or "lack." In this economy, structured by a differential logic and marked by "laws," "taboos," and "belief systems," the subject undergoes a necessary "splitting." This is "necessary" because that immediacy of the body and its appetites (what we witnessed in the first chapter of the novel.) can never be eliminated entirely, yet there is the necessary introjection of cultural law, of conscience, of what Catherine comes to call David's "Puritan" streak. His fear that

their private “Imaginary” world would be made “public,” that Catherine would eventually “show the dark things in the light,” does indeed come to pass and in order to counteract further wounding of the “Self,” David turns to what he calls his “work,” his writing.

Yet not any old writing will do, because as the two settle down with Marita into their *ménage à trois*, a conflict arises between Catherine’s desire to have her husband textualize their strange journey into androgyny (what is referred to in the text as the “narrative”), and his more urgent need to salve his narcissistic wounding by writing manly stories about his childhood in Africa. This conflict of textual production comes to a crisis in Chapter 23 of the published novel. Catherine is anxious that David finish their story, while he has been moving further and further away from that narrative and deeper and deeper toward his father in the counter-narrative of the elephant hunt in Africa. In response to her pressing him, David replies that he “just didn’t want to get the work mixed up,” and Catherine responds in the following ironic fashion: “But it’s you who mixed it up,” “Can’t you see? Jumping back and forth trying to write stories when all you had to do was keep on with the narrative that meant so much to all of us. It was going so well too and we were just coming to the most exciting parts. Someone has to show you that the stories are just your way of escaping your duty” (190). Although these two counter-texts have several motific similarities—they are Blakean journeys from innocence to experience, as well as Conradian excursions into darkness, and both are essentially stories of betrayal—David Bourne sees his real “duty” as lying elsewhere. For him, these adversarial texts demarcate an essential difference between his ambiguous role as feminized lover, indeed the prostitution of his talent, whereas the story about Africa is an account of that prototypical triangulation of desire, the necessary Oedipal drama that every subject must negotiate in order to secure its gender position.

This is a nocturnal, dream-like story (as it should be in any psychoanalytic allegory), about a boy coming to Oedipal terms with his father. It is the story of an elephant hunt on the manifest level, but its latent content reveals a tale of a night journey back to the Father and a scene

of symbolic castration and repression. "I will never tell anyone anything again" the young Davey vows after the huge remaining tusk of the elephant has been removed. Such an act parallels Catherine's emasculation of the mature David. Yet, despite the painful negotiation of this primitive terrain—indeed because of it—young Davey safely emerges from this heart of darkness as a secure post-Oedipal subject, and the older David who has been writing his Self out of his ambiguous gender position emerges from his writing room, what he calls "his own country," more secure in his masculine identity. "He had been happy in the country of the story and knew that it was too good to last and now he was back from what he cared about into the overpopulated vacancy of madness that had taken, now, the new turn of exaggerated practicality" (193). Catherine's "madness" is a punishment for her transgressive sexual behavior and is in opposition to that "sane" world of normative heterosexual, or perhaps more precisely, "homosocial" relations, a world that she must inevitably destroy by burning David's manuscripts. She sees this homosocial space, this "country" of men without women, this flight from androgyny, as essentially auto-erotic, indeed as an enclave of masturbatory practice. Speaking of David's serious "work," she puts it this way: "It's worse than carrying around obscene postcards really. I think he reads them by himself and is unfaithful to me with them. In a wastepaper basket probably" (215). Despite her instability, Catherine is, as it were, only mad "nor by nor west," and rightly reads David's excursions into his African territory as a flight from their sexual experimentation, while he sees it as a necessary prophylactic against the narcissistic wound that she has inflicted upon him. (There are, by the way, interesting parallels here with Hemingway's short-story "Mr. and Mrs. Elliott," in which the would-be writer Hubert Elliott, when confronted by his wife's and her friend's lesbianism, retires every night to his room to "write" and emerges in the mornings looking "exhausted").

There are hints in the published version, made much more explicit in the manuscript, that a crucial element in David Bourne's dilemma is his realization that his writing, his "creativity," *depends* to some extent on his excursions beyond the boundary (again his very name signifies this

idea) of a masculine integrity, into the country of transgressive gender relations. There seems to be a realization on his part, even if a reluctant one, of the need to put himself in touch with his “feminine side,” to use a cliché. The following quote from the manuscript makes this clear: “All that is left entire in you is your ability to write and that gets better. You would think it would be destroyed. By everything you have been taught it should. But so far as you corrupt or change that grows or strengthens. It should not but it has... All that you know is that you have written better, clearer, and *plus net*, he used the French phrase in thinking, as you have deteriorated morally.” (MS of *The Garden of Eden*.) David’s dilemma, then, is how to preserve his “integrity,” his wholeness, that narcissistic *moi* figured by the masculine province of his writing, while at the same time nurturing that “work” by participating in androgynous love. Such a state of affairs can only lead to a “splitting” of the subject, and David Bourne is very aware of this state of affairs. In the following passage, typical of the novel’s pseudo- third-person point of view, he comes very close to summarizing the tropes of division and the redemptive power of writing that I have been stressing: “He had not known just how greatly he had been *divided* and *separated* because once he started to work he wrote from an *inner core* which could not be *split* nor even marked nor scratched. He knew all about this and it was his strength since all the rest of him could be *riven*” (183, Emphases added.).

In the published version, this dilemma of divided selfhood is resolved neatly, perhaps too neatly, by Scribners’ editor Tom Jenks. After his mad, but repentant wife Catherine leaves, David is made whole again by the erstwhile lesbian Marita, now converted (absolutely?) to heterosexual love. Not only does this boy-girl help him reconstruct verbatim the stories Catherine has destroyed, but her potential agency due to her ambivalent gender promises a great future for David’s creativity. As if this were not enough (there is obviously a certain amount of wish-fulfillment going on in Ernest Hemingway’s day-dream), Marita realizes the necessity for David’s occasional flights into a purely homosocial space: “I want you to have men friends and friends from the war and to shoot with and to play cards at the club” (245). The closure of the published version,



coming as it does to a resounding chord of harmonious restoration (the final word of the text is “intact”), provides David Bourne once more with that (to coin a phrase) “virginal masculinity” that he had prostituted earlier in the novel. It is no coincidence that this recovery of selfhood is figured in the re-writing of those texts that his wife had previously destroyed. Just as she had attempted his in-scription into an ambiguously gendered space, so does his rewriting, his reiterative “scripting” of the African stories, allow him to retain or renew his integrity. Integrity. . . intact . . . integral. incorruptibility, inviolability, indivisibility—these are what have been at stake in this textual/sexual struggle.

In June 1948, Hemingway commented to an old friend on the theme of the novel he was currently writing: it is about “the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose.” Apart from the Judeo-Christian mythological implications (actually maybe because of them!), and the concomitant literary allusions (Marvell and Milton, to name a few), the thrust of this statement lies in its gender specificity and its categorical imperative. It is the male of the species that is doomed to be the “Fall-Person” and it is a *necessary* fall. In Hemingway’s textual world, women, or more often than not, “girls,” are a necessary evil, inflicting pain on their male counterparts, but only to provoke a reactive, creative response. In true Blakean, dialectical, fashion, such a “marriage” can only “hurt” the male protagonist into writing “*plus net*,” sharper, more effectively, in order to save his masculine soul.

## **Bibliography**

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