

## The Change of Hemingway's Literary Style in the 1930s: A Response to Silvia Ammary\*

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Silvia Ammary's article is a valuable contribution to the critical debate about Hemingway's highly self-reflexive portrait of the artist as a failure. It aptly grasps the nostalgic tone of much of the author's writing, it takes a commendably corrective stance against earlier readings which give a negative view of the female character or take her portrait as proof of the author's male chauvinism, and it argues convincingly against such earlier readings which have seen the ending of the story in a positive light, regarding it as a triumphant, epiphany-like moment in which the soul of the dying artist finally reaches a moment of transcendent perfection. In the face of an overwhelming amount of scholarship which looks at the story from a biographical angle, the article represents a laudable attempt to re-focus our attention in new-critical fashion on the text itself, thus following the principle to D. H. Lawrence's famous dictum that we should never "trust the artist" but the "tale." I would argue, however, that in the present case a radically intrinsic approach is apt to unduly limit the perspective on the text.

Before coming to that point, I would like to refer to other parts of the article's argument which I would hesitate to agree with. For one thing, this concerns the connection between Frost's poem and Hemingway's story. I agree that in both texts the theme of nostalgia is predominant, and it makes sense to argue that for the lyrical I of "The Road Not Taken" the "other path remains simply an illusion, an

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\*Reference: Silvia Ammary, "'The Road Not Taken' in Hemingway's 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro,'" *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 123-38.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debammmary01813.htm>>.

abstraction" (124) because the speaker has indeed no idea whatsoever of the "unlived life" he would have lived had he taken the other road. With the writer-figure in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," however, the case is different in so far as he has actually lived the life he remembers in fragmentary form in the italicized passages of the text. We can imagine these passages as imaginative writing exercises which dramatize the dying Harry in his failing attempts to activate once more his lost potential of artistic creativity. These writing exercises are indeed marked as pathetically autistic attempts as they are no longer able to reach a real audience, but rather than talking of "scenes of the unlived life" (131), it would be more adequate to talk of an 'unwritten life.' In contrast to a character such as, for example, John Marcher in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" who simply forgot to live while he was continuously expecting some terrible thing to happen, the protagonist in Hemingway's story has actually gone through the experiences he remembers, but failed to make the right use of them, which—according to Hemingway's self-proclaimed artistic ideal—should have been "to put down what really happened in action" (*Death in the Afternoon* 2).

A related point concerns the article's argument about Harry's role as an "unreliable narrator" (130; in fact, Harry is not the narrator of the story but a reflector figure). Here again, one can agree that Harry is "projecting his frustrations and regrets on his wife" (130), but the matter appears to be more complex, as Harry is shown as constantly wavering between projection and self-insight. Looking at the dynamics of the interior conflict enacted here, it is also questionable if one can really argue, as the article does, "that Harry never really had any talent as a writer" (130). Granted that Harry is indeed an unreliable reflector figure, his unreliability has its limits, which is the case, for example, when he reflects on how "he had traded away what remained of his old life" ("The Snows of Kilimanjaro" 62). The overall image which emerges throughout is indeed that of a person whose "old life" had a quality of "real" and "true" experience (key concepts in Hemingway's idea of artistic authenticity) which was lost at a

certain point of his life. As Tino Müller aptly puts it in a recent study: "We gather that his career has been marked by an ever-growing discrepancy between his ideal of writing things 'well' and his tendency to squander his talent for quick financial success" (247). It is here where I think that at least a brief glance at the biographical context would have been in order. Without falling into the biographical fallacy of identifying the protagonist and the author, there seems to be ample evidence that "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" is a highly self-reflective exploration of the dilemma in which Hemingway found himself at the time when he wrote the story in his double role as public celebrity on the one hand and literary artist on the other.

My final and most important point concerns the article's statements about Hemingway's literary style. While it is accurate to characterize the style of the story under discussion as heavily introspective, the assertion that this is a feature that opposes "the typical Hemingway style" (130) rests on a one-sided view of the author's methods of literary production. The terse, laconic style, marked by a strict economy of language and following the "rule of objectivity" (130) and the particular way of handling the 'iceberg technique' are indeed characteristic of much (though not all) of the author's early work of the 1920s, yet the facts are that "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," along with other works of the same period, indicates a remarkable change in Hemingway's literary style which began in the 1930s. From that time on, the author's style became increasingly lengthy, introspective, self-reflexive and wordy. Both "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," the two most famous stories Hemingway wrote in the 1930s, are considerably longer than those he wrote in the 1920s, and both feature protagonists which are engaged in elaborate reflections and self-reflections.

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," the white hunter Wilson functions in a similar way as Harry in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" as an unreliable reflector figure. Hemingway's technique of privileging the perspective of that figure while withholding any inside view into the thoughts and emotions of the female character is also

reminiscent of the point-of-view technique in Henry James's "Daisy Miller" (1878). Rather than representing the reflector figure as the mouthpiece of the authorial message, both stories expose that figure as a phoney, self-complacent and self-righteous character. In Hemingway's story, this trait shows itself, for example, in Wilson's stereotyped male chauvinist 'recipe knowledge' about American upper class women:

They are, he thought, the hardest in the world; the hardest, the cruelest, the most predatory and the most attractive and their men have softened or gone to pieces nervously as they have hardened. Or is it that they pick men they can handle? [...] He was grateful that he had gone through his education on American women before now because this was a very attractive one. ("Francis Macomber" 8)

As a more detailed analysis could show, Wilson's numerous reflections and self-reflections, like Winterbourne's in James's "Daisy Miller," can be read as attempts to rationalize the self-doubts caused by the encounter with a woman who threatens his sense of male superiority.<sup>1</sup> Like James, Hemingway leaves it to the reader to detect the self-justifying tone in an introspective passage such as the following:

He, Robert Wilson, [...] had hunted for a certain clientele, the international, fast, sporting set, where the women did not feel they were getting their money's worth unless they had shared a cot with the white hunter. He despised them when he was away from them although he liked some of them well enough at the time, but he made his living by them; and their standards were his standards as long as they were hiring him.

They were his standards in all except the shooting. He had his own standards about the killing and they could live up to them or get some one else to hunt them. He knew, too, that they all respected him for this. (26)

By the end of the 1930s, Hemingway's fictions also focus more and more upon the constructive potential of language. In sharp contrast to the earlier work, where the word 'talking' was regularly used as a signifier of non-authentic forms of self-expression, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), and *The Old Man*

*and the Sea* (1952) are narratives in which the act of talking, both in its monological and its dialogical forms, is fore-grounded as a life-sustaining and self-stabilizing force.

This radical shift in Hemingway's conception of language is most conspicuous in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. With Robert Jordan, the novel features a character who during the three days of his life undergoes a veritable 'talking cure.'<sup>2</sup> In that process, the storytelling activities of the mother figure Pilar are of particular importance. By her storytelling, she encourages others to tell their stories and thus helps them to overcome the traumas of their repressed memories. Thus, her elaborate eye-witness account of a massacre committed by the Republicans against their Fascist enemies enables Robert Jordan to articulate his repressed memory of a lynching ritual he once witnessed in his early childhood. The therapeutic function of talking is further underlined by numerous scenes in which the protagonist talks to himself, sometimes even rendered in the form of an internal dialogue between two inner voices ("him" and "himself"). That way, the novel dramatizes an inner development in which Robert Jordan is finally able to overcome his sense of self-alienation.

In a similar way, *Across the River and into the Trees* features the last days of Colonel Cantwell, an aging war veteran suffering from a severe heart condition. The actions of the protagonist appear as parts of an elaborate ritual in preparation of his death, and in that ritual the talks he has with his lover Renata, with himself or with his lover's portrait in her absence play a significant role. These talk rituals can be seen as stations of a 'journey into the interior,' resulting in a 'catharsis' which prepares for the death journey indicated by the title motif.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, it is Manolin who plays a similar role as Renata in *Across the River and into the Trees*. Here, it is the talk rituals with his disciple and younger alter ego which give the title hero Santiago the energy to live on in the face of failing luck. In his lonely fight with the swordfish and the sharks it is the talks with himself or with Manolin and other imaginary listeners, but also certain formulas repeated in a litany-like fashion such as "A man can be destroyed but

not defeated'" (103) by which he motivates himself to keep on fighting. And when he returns to the village in a mood of total defeat it is once more the 'talking cure' of the boy which gives him new hope: "'He didn't beat you. Not the fish.' [...] 'Now we must make our plans about the other things'" (124). And by repeatedly appealing to the old man's responsibility as his mentor, he provides him with an additional reason to live on: "'[...] we will fish together now for I still have much to learn.' [...] 'You must get well fast for there is much that I can learn and you can teach me everything. [...]"' (125-26). While the reader may even suspect that such words are mere fictions, what the story nevertheless celebrates is their life-sustaining power.

A further indication of the fundamental change in Hemingway's literary method is that since the 1930s more and more of Hemingway's works make use of writer or artist figures as a meta-fictional device to reflect upon the problematic of artistic creation. This begins with "Fathers and Sons" (1933), the final story in the Nick Adams-cycle, which features the middle-aged Nick Adams driving around in his car in the company of his son and reflecting on his problem of being as yet unable to write about his own father; and it continues with the figure of the writer *manqué* in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and with Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a teacher of Spanish who goes to Spain among others with the intention to write a book about his experiences in that country. Of Hemingway's posthumously published works,<sup>3</sup> *Islands in the Stream* (1970) returns to the motif of the artist *manqué* in the character of Thomas Hudson, a once successful and famous painter now suffering from a painful loss of artistic creativity. In *The Garden of Eden* (1986), which features a writer-figure (David Bourne) obsessively searching for the psychological depths of artistic creativity, this self-reflexive tendency reaches a new level. Other than in *Islands in the Stream* and similar to "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the process of artistic reflection and creation is directly dramatized. Furthermore, the action of the novel and the inlaid story are thematically linked in *mise-en-abyme* fashion (cf. Nagel). With its pointedly meta-fictional narrative structure as well as with its anti-

essentialist, (de-)constructive concept of identity which finds its expression in the gender- and race-related games of identity-metamorphosis, *The Garden of Eden* can even be said to anticipate a postmodernist sensibility.

Why then do critics still continue to talk about "typical Hemingway style," disregarding the evidence of the author's late work? I would argue that this is partly Hemingway's own fault. With his rigid economy of language and representation, manifested in a technique of radical reduction of abstract formulas and the concentration on significant concrete objects functioning as indirect indicators of unspoken inner feelings or states of mind, he developed in his early work an artistic technique which was in line with the most prestigious artistic conceptions of early modernism such as T. S. Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative" and the imagist notion of "making it new" (Ezra Pound) and was thus able to establish himself in a prominent position in the literary field of the time. Once established in that position, he started to capitalize on his earlier success by a strategy of inflationary self-marketing, using, for example, non-fiction works such as *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) to propagate a method which he could no longer follow in his literary practice.<sup>4</sup> Yet encouraged by the author's self-explications, critics continued to look at his work in the light of the theoretical standards he had set up by his programmatic pronouncements, with the result that they either overlooked the conceptual changes of his writing method or became disaffected with what they saw as a widening gap between the 'theory' and the 'practice.'

In other words, it seems that Hemingway's strategy of literary self-marketing brought him into a self-imposed dilemma. It may be that with the change toward a more introspective, self-reflexive and meta-fictional mode of writing Hemingway responded—consciously or unconsciously—to a gradual change in the literary climate, represented perhaps most pointedly by the Jewish Renaissance writers of the post-war years. This change announces itself, for example, in a diary novel such as Saul Bellow's apprentice work *Dangling Man*

(1944), whose first person narrator, a self-alienated intellectual waiting to be drafted, begins his journal with a manifesto-like attack upon the kind of fiction of which Hemingway had made the claim of being its most prototypical representative:

[...] to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiledness. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy [...] is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, a closemouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hardboiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.

If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine [...]—and I do not feel guilty of self-indulgence in the least. (Bellow 7)

Ironically, Bellow's first-person narrator is here celebrating the kind of fiction which Hemingway, as yet unrecognized by his contemporaries, had already started to write. Seeing him on the monument he had set up for himself by his strategy of self-marketing, many readers and critics remained fixed on looking at the figure on the monument instead of judging the author's later work against the background of the changing trends within the literary field. It can be assumed that this fixation ultimately had a detrimental effect to a fair and adequate evaluation of that part of Hemingway's *oeuvre*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For 'revisionist' readings along this line cf. Hutton; Baym; and my Hemingway monograph (110-121).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. my Hemingway monograph (132-160) and my article "Psychodrama und 'Talking Cure,'" which focuses on that particular aspect.

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed analysis of Hemingway's posthumous writings cf. Burwell.

<sup>4</sup>I have outlined these ideas in a more elaborate way in my monograph on Hemingway and in a more condensed form in my article "Zur Selbstdekonstruktion der Moderne. Das Beispiel Ernest Hemingways in den dreißiger Jahren."

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