

THE NEED OF HEMINGWAY

Adriana CHIRIACESCU*

"The great thing is to last and get your work done and see and hear and learn and understand; and write when there is something you know; and not before..."

By this creed and his whole work, Hemingway captured the imagination of his generation of readers more completely than any other writer of the 20th century. He made himself a legend and his publication of a new novel a real event. By his special freshness and power, he is considered, indeed, as one of the makers of a new type of American fiction, and this reputation has survived through the changing fashions and interests of the years. However, over the years, there have been voices bringing objections to his work: that it would be immoral, dirty or even disgusting, that it would have no social relevance or that it would be an "exotic" one, conveying only few ideas or ideas that are not relevant to modern life.

The objections refer to his work as a whole, and his work must be considered as such when these objections are refuted and rejected because – to an uncommon degree – his work forms a continuous whole, one part explaining and interpreting another part. There are, of course, changes between early and late work, showing an increase in self-consciousness and a move from what had been simple and instinctive to something that became calculated and elaborated. (See: "In Our Time"; "The Sun Also Rises"; "A Farewell to Arms"; "To Have and Have Not" a.s.o. up to "The Old Man and the Sea"). The whole work proves Hemingway's creed: he wrote about a "special world", exotic or not, but it so happened that he knew that world from his own experience; he also wrote about it because that world best dramatized for him the issues and questions that were his fundamental worries; that special world had for him a kind of symbolic significance.

The world he writes about is undoubtedly a violent one, but the obsession with this world was not Hemingway's invention. Violence – as a reality of society – had appeared in literature long before his time, in the 19th century; and it continued in the 20th. Tennyson or Housman, Hardy or Zola, Dreiser, Conrad or Faulkner are only a few among those who can be mentioned in this respect. So, when Hemingway wrote his first works, the cheerless vision about life and society had already started to trouble the literary circles, being a characteristic of modern literature.

With Hemingway, violence can be discovered under various circumstances: it may be part of a hard-drinking and promiscuous life ("The Sun Also Rises"), it may be a presence of the chaotic and brutal world of war ("A Farewell to Arms", "For whom the Bell Tolls", parts from "In our Time", some stories), it may be recognized in the world of sports ("Fifty Grand", "My Old Man", "The Undeclared", "The Snow of Kilimandjaro", "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber") or it may be represented by the world of crime ("The Killers", "The Gambler, The Nun and the Radio", "To Have and Have Not"). And even if the subject of a story is not included into one of these categories, a desperate risk, and behind it, the shadow of physical or spiritual ruin is present and unavoidable in his work.

In fact, this cult of violent experience grew in time in Hemingway's work, as he achieved publicity as the big game hunter, the catcher of big fish, and the roamer into the wilderness of the earth, as he gathered more material from a life intensely lived.

* Reader, Department of Germanic Languages, A.S.E. Bucharest

We have said before that for Hemingway the world around him is turned into the world discovered in his work, which has a certain symbolic significance; it is the world with “*nothing*” at its centre, as a version of a naturalistic view of life.

Here, those analysing Hemingway’s work point out one of his recurring symbols: viz. that of the sleepless man, the man obsessed by death, by the meaninglessness of the world, by nothingness, (the symbol is at its highest in the story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”), the man tormented by insomnia.

Another recurring symbol is that of the violent man, the tough man, experienced in the hard world he inhabits, apparently insensitive to its hardships. (See characters like Frederik Henry, Robert Jordan, Harry Morgan, the big-game hunters, the bullfighters, the pugilists). This man faces defeat or death, taking a great risk in his confrontation with the “nothing” of the world. The interesting thing is that the two symbol heroes – the sleepless man and the violent one – are complementary symbols, phases of the same process, of the same quest for meaning in the world: the former is the man musing only upon nothingness, upon chaos - either moral or of any other nature - the latter is the man taking action, engaged in an effort to discover human values in the same chaotic, naturalistic world.

So, the typical Hemingway hero is the man aware, or in the process of becoming aware of “nothingness” – with death being the “great nothing” – but taking violent risks and confronting, in dramatic terms, the issues of this “nothing”.

In all his novels – in one form or another – as well as in many of his stories, this typical hero can be discovered against the background of the “*nothing*” – that of a deteriorating civilization, of wars, of death, in fact the background of that type of society and culture which is the modern one. Has Hemingway a pessimistic vision of that society?

It has been repeatedly said that the typical Hemingway hero faces defeat or death, that he is a loser, but out of this defeat and death he usually manages to save something. In other words, his loss is not complete. Looking at this hero and at his defeat, the unprecedented message left by Hemingway comes out, a message to be taken and grasped by the generations to come: his heroes, although coming from the common strata of society, are neither impostors or traitors, nor compromisers or cowards; they are simple individuals, human beings confronting defeat. It has also been said that the fact that stays important for them is that, at the moment of their defeat, they realize that the attitude they take, in their stoic endurance, is their kind of victory, they being, in fact, defeated on

their own terms; maybe, in some way or another, by their behaviour or reactions, they have courted this defeat. But, for sure, they have succeeded in maintaining the ideal of themselves, a model of how a man should act and behave, the model they have lived by. This is their victory; they represent the notion of a code, the notion of honour that makes an individual be distinguished from others who merely follow their impure interests and imperfect impulses being, as Hemingway says, “messy”.

Almost each novel or story can be an example in this respect: So, Frederik Henry (“A Farewell to Arms”) learns from his inevitable defeat the lesson of lonely fortitude when arising from the waters of the flooded Tagliamento, Robert Jordan (“For whom the Bells Toll”) is happy lying wounded behind the machine gun and covering the escape of his friends, the old bullfighter (“The Undeclared”) continues his fight under the shouts of the crowd until he and the bull are dead; Francis Macomber (“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”) learns the lesson that the code of the hunter demands that he must go into the bush after the animal he has wounded, Brett (“The Sun Also Rises”) gives up Romero whom she loves because she knows she will ruin him, and the examples could continue with the famous words that Santiago (“The Old Man and the Sea”) utters: “a man can be destroyed but never defeated”, words that serve as a motto of Hemingway’s whole work. In the end the defeat turns into a victory, a victory of a moral ideal.

Here we discover Hemingway’s *first important response* to his world, a response that indicates the necessity of a moral attitude in life, of a rigorous moral code. This code has to be defined and maintained by each individual, in hope that it would give him a meaning to life, that otherwise seems to have no meaning at all.

At the same time, Hemingway’s world is a disordered one, (wars, fights, crimes) but in contrast to it, his characters – although violent – show a fidelity to a code, to a discipline, to a style: it is the discipline of the soldier, the technique or style of the sportsman or of the hunter, or even the code of a gangster who has his own tough ethics. By their self-imposed discipline, code or style, they make an effort – it does not matter how limited it is – to set right the incoherence and disorder of their own life, and by doing it, to set right the disorder in the world. In this way, Hemingway endows his characters with a certain gallantry, a sense of honour and a sort of recklessness which reminds one of the aristocratic traits of the romantic hero. By doing so, he achieves their uplifting from their common status, to a superior level.

This is Hemingway's *second response* to his world indicating the necessity of striving to achieve order and discipline in the world around. Even in the face of defeat and frustration, ethics and a style of living in good order will be landmarks in the quest for a meaning in life.

There is another aspect worth discussing in Physical nature - whether meadows, forests and lakes of America, the arid landscape of Spain, the grandeur of Africa or the vastness of the ocean - is presented with splendid vividness, giving his work the freshness and purity mentioned above. His heroes sink into this nature and live their singular and true moments of happiness in the midst of the violence around them; and this is Hemingway's *third response* to his world: only by becoming one with nature, man can discover his real and absolute but short moments of happiness. With a civilization running down - in Hemingway's view - the sustained quest for meaning and certitude,

was a necessity in a world that seemed to offer nothing or very little of that sort.

Forty years have passed since Hemingway's violent extinction, and we still feel the need of Hemingway, to give us some hope, to offer us the image of a long-expected chance.

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