Hemingway's *Use of Impressionism*

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It is said that Hemingway paid much attention to the emotional impact of his work. This awareness is pervasive throughout his work. He stated that he tried to capture a "fifth dimension" in his prose ; not only the ordinary dimensions of exposition and description, but the full quality of the emotional experience as well.[1] It was his own psychic wounds from his own past experience which he was trying to depict. In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), he succeeds in following a piece of advice which he had once offered to his friend and fellow novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald who is the author of the *The Great Gatsby* (1925). According to Carlos Baker, critic known for his definitive biography of Hemingway, he argued, "If something has hurt you badly, you must find a way of using it in your writing. You had better not moan and complain about past or present difficulties or personal misadventures. Instead you must use your misfortunes as materials for fiction. If you can write them out, get them stated, it is possible to rid yourself of the soreness in your soul."[2] This is precisely that sentiment stated by Wordsworth in "Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood" :

> To me alone there came a thought of grief :
> A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
> and I again am strong.[3]

Thus, many say that this work should be approached biographically. It is obviously based on young Hemingway's experiences in World War I as an ambulance driver on the Italian front and his love affair with the nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky.[4] It also mirrors his disillusionment with any attempt to find dignity or human happiness in a world which crushed any and all abstractions which it created. He even states that, "the fact that the book was a tragic one did not make me unhappy since I believed that life was a tragedy and knew it could have only one end."[5] Thus, while a biographical reading of *A Farewell to Arms* would give a correct interpretation of the way Hemingway felt, it focuses the reader's attention away from the work towards the poses which "Hemingway the Great" often assumed. But Hemingway was against biography precisely because it would focus attention away from his work while he was alive. He wanted to be known "in his work"[6] and he entered wholeheartedly into every book he wrote. "Besides it [his work], nothing else mattered."[7]

Such biographical readings overemphasize the philosophy of the writer and underestimate technique. As Kenneth Burke, American literary critic who is best known for his rhetorically based analyses of the nature of knowledge and for his views of literature as "symbolic action," has stated, "the great influx of information has led the artist to lay his emphasis on the giving of infor-

mation—with the result that tends more and more to substitute the psychology of the hero (the subject) for the psychology of the audience."[8] In his analysis of the ghost scene in *Hamlet* he shows that the psychology working is not that of the hero, but that of the audience. Form for Burke is "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite."[9] This is what happens throughout *A Farewell to Arms*, except that it is not so much of a creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor as a foreshadowing. In any event, without recourse to biography it is possible to demonstrate Hemingway's technique of illustrating these emotions.

First, let's examine in a general way how Hemingway's technique works, a technique which has parallels in Shklovsky's "defamiliarization" technique. It is the purpose of art to provide us with a feeling of things as they are immediately felt, and not in the way that they are generally perceived by people. One of the techniques and purposes of art is to render things and people less familiar to our perceptions, to generate difficulty in perceiving what they are, and to expand the difficulty of such perception because the actual process of perception is seen as a type of beauty in and of itself and one which must be prolonged. In other words, art is a method of observing and feeling the interior and natural aesthetic of an object or person. The object in and of itself has no importance, only the inner aesthetic of it. The author first gets very excited (or depressed) about something, someone, or some action. Subsequently he becomes totally involved in this object so that his own emotions are interwoven with one another. Then, when introducing this object in his art he only uses one aspect or impression of it which corresponds to his emotional conception thereof. It is impossible to say whether the artist really sees it this way or if he is presenting it to us for this desired effect. We all know that when describing one person to another person we will dwell on some aspect of the described person's appearance or action which corresponds to our emotional response to him. Hemingway uses this idea to an even greater extent. People, things, and actions become grotesque, and tend to be described by one distinguishing feature. For example, Catherine Barkley is described solely in terms of her hair and neck. In Hemingway's work these single distinguishing features are emotionally charged. As an artist, he is the medium between object and reader picking the details of objects to be described and giving it an emotional charge. The first person narrative facilitates this task. This first person narrative by Hemingway does not mean that we must use biography to analyze and critique him but that it is a means for the reader to easily identify with the emotional handles he attaches to things and actions.

One may argue that this technique is common to all artists, but it is striking in Hemingway because of the degree to which it is used. Often he will describe to you only one thing about something and highly charge it emotionally. For example, the only thing he may tell about an action is that the sun is shining but he emotionally loads this sunshine so that the reader knows it is splendid and great. Obviously, there is more to this than merely a condensed style or cablese.

This definition of Hemingway's technique makes him an impressionistic writer. This school is named after that of the impressionistic painters who felt it was more important to retain the impressions an object makes on the artist than meticulously to present the appearance of that object by precise detail and careful, realistic finish. They were especially concerned with the use of light on their canvases. They suggest by delineating the salient features of an object with a few strokes

that they were more interested in atmosphere than in perspective or outline. Instead of painting a tree, as Lewis Mumford said, they painted the effect which a tree has on the viewer.

Thus, in literature :

> The movement had its counterpart, writers accepting the same conviction that the personal attitudes and moods the writer were legitimate elements in depicting character or setting or action. Briefly, the literary impressionist holds that the expression of such elements as these through the fleeting impression of a moment is more significant artistically than a photographic presentation of cold fact. The object of the impressionist, then, is not to present his material as it is to the realist but as it is seen or felt to be by himself in a single passing moment. He employs highly selective details, the "brush-strokes" of sense-data that can suggest the impression made upon him or upon some character in the story or poem.[10]

This painting analogy is useful to demonstrate the difference between Hemingway's technique and Shklovsky's "defamiliarization." It is not just presenting an experience in a different way, but through his art the impressionist tries to give you the same emotion or feeling. Hemingway often deviates from a strict impressionistic stance because he tells you this is great or this is horrible and does not just manipulate the details. But by and large this is his dominant technique.

Thinking back over *A Farewell to Arms* I have come to realize that complete descriptions were not given of any people. All soldiers, for example, are described in terms of their headgear. In describing an inexperienced and defeated regiment passing him, he states : "Most of the helmets were too big and came almost over the ears of the men who wore them."[11] All one over sees of the Germans is their helmets gliding ghostly behind a hedge, and then their uniforms and stick bombs as the bicycle troops passed down the road. The wide hats of the idealistic young battle police are all that are described, besides their voices, as they shoot officers for desertion during the retreat from Caporetto. And finally when they do reach Switzerland after rowing all night, the alpine hats of the Swiss guardia di finanza are seen by Frederic Henry as yellow.(p.276)

Other people in the novel are painted with equally single minute images, particularly the doctors. The fine, quick surgeon's hands of Rinaldi are stressed. The incompetent doctors in Milan who are unsure of their diagnosis are depicted with beards and as being unsure in touching Frederic Henry. However, the competent Dr. Valenti is described as always being in a hurry, with an upturned moustache, and a sure hard touch.(pp.97-99) When Catherine Barkley dies in the hospital the doctor is first seen beside the cylinders and with a mask on.

One may well ask why this is not symbolism of the sort found in *Moby-Dick*. First, the use of the first person limits the wider possible meanings of the symbol. Then, besides the definitive brushstroke, Hemingway attaches an emotional value to the object. For example, when he is making love to Catherine he only gives a few images such as cool white sheets and hair. But he tells

the reader over and over that it is good. Thus, the "brushstrokes" that he gives are emotionally modulated.

The other reason why the impressionistic glimpses in the work are saved from symbolism is because they are carefully orchestrated throughout the work to produce emotional impacts corresponding to the philosophy of the work. What Hemingway is saying as his philosophical point in the work has been well documented by the critics. They have noted Catherine's remark that, "You always feel trapped biologically,"(p.139) and the famous passage about abstractions like sacred and glorious not meaning anything anymore, and that finally only the names of places have any dignity.(p.185) They have also noted how the dog and the garbage can outside the hospital Catherine is dying in function as an objective correlative. Frederic found there was nothing in the can for the dog except coffee-grounds, dust, and some dead flowers.(p.315) This is Hemingway's philosophical view of the world in the book.

But what makes it art is the way his impressionistic views of objects, people, and action reinforce the action to bring home to the reader the full emotional impact of the philosophy. The story is simple and direct and can be summed up easily. An American ambulance driver on the Italian front, Frederic Henry, falls in love with a beautiful nurse, Catherine Barkley. Frederic is wounded and is nursed back to health by Catherine. Catherine becomes pregnant and Frederic returns to war. During the retreat from Caporetto Frederic narrowly escapes being executed for being an officer in a retreat and afterwards he and Catherine escape by night to Switzerland where they lead an idyllic happy life until it is time for the child to arrive. They then go down to the hospital, Catherine and the child die in childbirth and Frederic walks away in the rain.

One way in which Hemingway gives an impressionistic view of the foregoing scene is with the weather. Catherine documented well the use of rain in the novel. It paints the emotional scene for almost every unpleasant scene in the book. Oftentimes the weather, and particularly the rain, is the only thing which Hemingway gives you besides the bare action. It is raining when he leaves Catherine to return to war after being wounded, the whole retreat from Caporetto is a rain-drenched debacle, and finally the coming of the rains signal the end of the idyllic time of happiness for Frederic and Catherine in the mountains. When the rains come the reader knows that Catherine is in dire danger and they must leave the cool, clean snow of the mountains for the lowlands, the hospital, and death.

Similarly, Hemingway uses sunlight to emotionally illuminate the good times in the book. He speaks of the sun while he is in love with Catherine at the hospital. It is present again when they have run away from the war and enjoy the winter in the cold white landscape of Montreux. Sunlight appears in the book whenever Frederic is having a good time ; sunlight illuminates the scene when he boxes or when he is in bed with Catherine.

Hemingway's use of alcoholic drinks is also impressionistic, and I don't believe any critic has ever commented on this. He often uses a drink as the only definite description in an action. He colors a particular alcoholic brushstroke with his emotion towards it to give the mood of the scene. He always comments on the effect of the drink : "It made me feel warm and good." During unpleasant times dark liquors and red wines are drunk. The nurse finds the beer-shaped kummel bottle with its sticky crystals when he has jaundice in the hospital. During the retreat

from Caporetto red barbera is drunk, and all other red wines are either rust-flavored from canteens, or are too old and have lost their flavor in the bottle. And finally he drinks beer with sauerkraut when Catherine is dying. Conversely, during pleasant times, clear clean liquor is drunk. Together the lovers drink iced white wines in their hotel room. Frederic always says he enjoys them. Catherine agrees. In the sun and snow of Montreux, and after crossing into Switzerland, they drink vermouth. At the hotel by the lake after deserting and crossing the Venetian plain, he drinks cool martinis to make himself feel civilized again. With count Greffi in the billiard room he drinks iced champagne.

Thus, by fitting these small emotional grotesques into an overall pattern, Hemingway achieves the sort of emotional curve to which Burke refers.[12] This is the form which is important in a Hemingway novel. By the use of select details in the first chapter, the whole emotional course of the book is foreshadowed. The reader is psychologically prepared for what is to follow, just as he is when it starts to rain and it comes time for Catherine's childbirth. It works splendidly in this novel because of the first person narrative technique and the unity of the emotions being conveyed—that of despair and isolation.

But in other works the limitations of Hemingway's technique becomes more obvious. It is not always appropriate to pick out one aspect of an object, give it a positive or negative emotional charge, and then string them together to achieve an artistic whole. I hope to show that this technique is powerful, but limited, as well as some of its inherent fallacies.

Notes

[1] Ray B. West, Jr., "The Biographical Trap" in *Hemingway : A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Weeks,(New Jersey : Prentice Hall, 1962), p.150.

[2] Carlos Baker, "Ernest Hemingway : *A Farewell to Arms*," in *Studies in A Farewell to Arms*, edited by John Graham,(Columbus : Merrill, 1971), p.30.

[3] Hazelton Spencer, *British Literature*,(Boston : Heath, 1963), p.61.

[4] Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway : A Life Story*,(New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p.43.

[5] Baker, "Ernest Hemingway : *A Farewell to Arms*" in *Studies in A Farewell to Arms*. p.31.

[6] Baker, "*Ernest Hemingway : A Farewell to Arms*" in *Studies in A Farewell to Arms*, p.31.

[7] Baker, "Ernest Hemingway : *A Farewell to Arms*" in *Studies in A Farewell to Arms*. p.31.

[8] Kenneth Burke, "Psychology and Form," in *Counter-Statement*,(Los Altos, Cal. : Hermes, 1953),p.32.

[9] Burke, p.31.

[10] Hibbard Thrall, *A Handbook to Literature*, (New York : Odyssey, 1960), p.238.

[11] Ernest Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p.33. All excerpts from this text hereafter are shown with a page or pages.

[12] Burke, p.36.

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