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# The Engineer's Bookshelf

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## Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway has published his long-awaited novel about the Spanish Civil War, and I have asked Mr. William Van O'Connor, a member of the Department of English, to write the review that appears in this column this month. Mr. O'Connor did his undergraduate work at Syracuse University and all of his graduate work at Columbia University. He is a recent addition to our Department of English.

Mr. Hemingway has long been a favorite author of mine. I recall so well the time when his writings were first called to my attention; it was with the publication of "The Sun Also Rises" in 1926. Slight as that story was, it gave great promise of things to come. Nor did Mr. Hemingway disappoint his reading public; for the war novel to end war novels arrived two years later. With all its defects, "A Farewell to Arms" still holds top rank in American literature.

However, I shall let Mr. O'Connor tell about the new novel, "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS, by Ernest Hemingway (Scribner's, \$2.75).

It is not important that the setting of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is in Spain, that the tragic hero is an American named Robert Jordan, that the war is viewed from the Republican side, that the characters—Pilar, Pablo, Maria and others—are striking and vibrant people. Nor is it particularly important that the style of the book is the work of an accomplished artist. The real significance of the book, in terms of contemporary intellectual and social history, is that in it the American mind can be seen in the act of throwing off despair, in the act of returning to a nineteenth century faith in man's ultimate good will and nobility. The story tells us, by implication, that the post war generation has recovered its balance, that in their middle years the men of this generation have discovered the necessity for having faith. On the surface Hemingway has written a novel of the Spanish war, actually he has added another document highly pertinent to the temper of our time; it is an act of faith in

**Mankinde;** And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.—John Donne

Great geysers of yellow liquid must have fountained around the dejected figure of the soldier returned from the first World War, the member of the first of the lost generations. Later pages and pages of academic jargon, somewhat better based, were written about the second of the lost generations, the victims of the depression world. And now, obviously, society

is about to serve as midwife at the birth of the third of the lost generations. At this opportune moment the central figure among the disillusioned ex-soldiers tells America that he has found his *credo*.

After Gertrude Stein told Hemingway that his was a lost generation many books were written wherein cynical heroes walked in the rain muttering and swearing to themselves. It was "delightfully" decadent. (Perhaps there is a strong masochistic strain in us, a desire in each of us to endure and to dramatize our suffering.) Not having great economic problems to solve, men paused during the twenties to look at themselves. Psychologists told us what "made us tick." We saw ourselves as victims of complexes, hormones, genes and machines. Nineteenth century faith in the nobility of man was dead. The authors of the period picked man apart, opened his mind with a scalpel and proved to their satisfaction that he was a mean, petty, selfish, little animal. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his *The Modern Temper*, described these and other aspects of the period. But October 1929, changed all that; a curtain was drawn on the 'twenties.

Asked a short time ago if he could have written *The Modern Temper* in 1940 Krutch, in effect, said, "No. When men are fighting for their lives they don't pause to be critical and introspective." It was not long after the turn of the decade before authors—one may cite, for example, Sherwood's *The Painted Desert* or Anderson's *Winterset*—were attempting to reconcile themselves and their audiences to a new mode of life, harder but more invigorating.

In the latter half of the 'thirties novels and plays and poems were written with a central interest in rational, self-sacrificing tragic heroes. Key Largo, Tom Joad, Abe Lincoln, to take the more recent of them, exemplify the type; their stories reflect the new temper. But for some reason Hemingway did not catch up with the new era. He seemed as dated as Oscar Wilde. Even as late as last year his play, *The Fifth Column*, had to be rewritten by a producer before it could be made palatable for a Broadway audience. The original hero had to be made over, changed from a selfish, cynical egoist into a tragic hero who finds that his life can take on meaning and significance only in the giving of himself to a great cause. To the casual observer Hemingway seemed "washed up." Max Eastman had his face punched for parodying one of Hemingway's titles as *Bull in the Afternoon*. Hemingway has been a long time in growing up. But the extended process of gestation through which *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has gone,

has been, in the long run, worth waiting through. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, one can see that this book, if only we could have noticed it before, was augured in the work of the earlier, younger Hemingway.

The superficial reader will smirk upon hearing that there always has been a deep romantic strain in Hemingway. If you scratch a cynic, it is said, you find a romantic underneath. In striving to answer the question, "What's it all about?" Hemingway has, at one and the same time, embraced Communism and Catholicism. It is fortunate, insofar as his personal success as a novelist is concerned, that a rigorously logical mind is not an essential tool of the novelist.

It is possible to go further, to say that Hemingway beneath his masculine posing—his interest in deep sea fishing, in bull fighting, in boxing—always has been a sentimentalist. *A Farewell to Arms* was blatantly so. Aldous Huxley, for example, could have caricatured this early Hemingway and could have given us a portrait of a little mind, a posing two-fisted muddle-head, drivelling little nothings about love, the emptiness of existence, and other inanities. Yet Huxley's strength is also his weakness, and Hemingway's former weakness has grown out of itself and has matured into strength. Huxley is all mind, no feeling; indeed, so much chilling intellect that each emotion may be watched in its incipency, in its growth and in its burning out—with no ultimate significance. Huxley's mind precludes his ever coming, unless in senility, to a faith in mankind. Hemingway's sentimentalities have gone, now in its place one finds faith and hope,—the necessary prerequisites to Periclean, Elizabethan or contemporary tragedy. The audience of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* will applaud Hemingway's beliefs, as it would deprecate Huxley's lack of faith.

The question as to which view is the correct one is academic and unnecessary. Maxwell Anderson, who learned his lesson through a series of autumnal failures on Broadway, no doubt, if asked, would give the palm to Hemingway. It may be, says Anderson, that progress is an illusion, but society does not want to believe that it is. The dramatist who hopes to write successful tragedy will cause his hero to choose, though it be at the cost of his life, the noble action in preference to the base, ignoble action. It pleases us, it spurs us on, to believe that we have latent nobility. The tragic hero—the Abe Lincoln of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, the Tom Joad of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Mio of *Winterset*, the Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—speaks for each of us, and in the moment of his speaking each of us becomes Hamlet:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason!  
How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how  
express and admirable! In action how like an angel!  
In apprehension how like a god.

Hemingway would write down his faith in less glowing phrases: his theme is the same.

The transition, which one sees as a *fait accompli* in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* then, has not come through a sudden changing of opinion, as an unmotivated, baseless altering of a philosophical outlook. It falls into a changing tradition. And there are many signs that the Hemingway of the lost generation, the post war walker-in-the-rain who had nothing but his body with which to find pleasure, if not meaning, in existence walks in shadow through the pages of this latest novel. Hemingway, as one with other authors in the 'twenties, tended to see love as a "sort of obscene joke." He delighted, only less gleefully than did Huxley, "to mock sentiment with physiology, to place the emotions of the lover in comic juxtaposition with quaint biological lore, and to picture," as Huxley specifically did, "a romantic pair 'quietly sweating palm to palm.'" The animalistic sex side of *A Farewell to Arms* and of the intervening books remains, in well pictured, and not always pretty, detail. But now love, romantic love, if one will, has found a place once again in contemporary American literature. The new Hemingway struggles for a moment with the Hemingway of yesterday. Robert Jordan tells Maria, the Spanish girl, that their love, despite death, is undying. (How far away is Robert Browning?) "As long as there is one of us there is both of us . . ." The obscenity of the story is thus dignified, purified, no longer lust but love. Such seems to be the import of the love story.

What of Robert Jordan's nobility? In the minutes preceding his death Jordan doubts the truth of the sentiments he had expressed (to Maria). Then, as though in triumph over himself, he repeats to himself that what he has said is true. Only for a moment is he tempted to cynicism: "Don't get cynical. The time is short and you have just sent her away. Each one does what he can. You can do nothing for yourself, but perhaps you can do something for another . . ."

The victory of the new over the old, of faith over rationalism, of hope over despair now is seen as complete. Hemingway has caught up with the world which seemingly had passed him by. The lost generation has found itself. Robert Jordan is the voice of the lost generation which has learned to hope. All that remains is to teach that faith, if that is possible, to the second and third of these generations.

—William V. O'Connor.

Prof.—What's all this?

Student—Those are my Mae West problems.

Prof.—Mae West?

Student—Yes, I done 'em wrong.