

1953

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### Recommended Citation

Paul, Sherman. "Hemingway's Symbols and Myths." *New Mexico Quarterly* 23, 2 (1953). <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol23/iss2/20>

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Sherman Paul

## HEMINGWAY'S SYMBOLS AND MYTHS

**T**HE FIRST book-length studies of Hemingway<sup>1</sup> try to re-align him with the viable literary traditions of our time. Neither, however, seizes the opportunity to give a balanced account and thereby capture that larger audience of Hemingway readers who have not followed the little magazines, and who need a rounded view. Mr. Baker and Mr. Young, perhaps unknowingly, write with a sense of urgency, trying, I think, to bring Hemingway criticism up to the advanced positions of that of Faulkner and Fitzgerald. They are *aficionados* who must build their Hemingways from scratch, who feel the need to erect his stature from new ground. As a result, both of their books share a fault that is increasingly common in American criticism: the curse of the need for originality is so much upon them that they overlook many of the valid insights of others and force a personal perception into the whole truth.

The result of such critical necessities is that, surprising as it may seem, the two studies have little in common. Their only basic point of resemblance is the one critic they do not overlook: both glean their leading insights from Malcolm Cowley's perceptive introduction to the *Hemingway Portable*. Cowley's valuable contribution for Mr. Baker was his recognition of the fact that Hemingway belonged, not with the naturalists, but with Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, "the haunted and nocturnal writers, the men who dealt in images that were symbols of an inner world." Not only does this insight enable Mr. Baker to establish Hemingway's Americanism, but it gives him the informing motif

<sup>1</sup> *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, by Carlos Baker. Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 1952, xix, 322 pp. \$4.50. *Ernest Hemingway*, by Philip Young. New York and Toronto: Rinehart, Rinehart Critical Studies, 1952, viii, 244 pp. \$3.00.

of his book: Hemingway the symbolist. His book is a full-scale charting of "the intricate and emotionated substructure" of Hemingway's art—what he calls the *sabidurian* imagery that gives the "dusky knowledge," the inalienable earth-wisdom of man. He presents his Hemingway in the fourth and fifth dimensions.

Mr. Baker's concern is with the larger meanings or morality of Hemingway's achievement. These he finds beneath the narrative surface, in the patterns of symbolism; and the symbolism is his warrant for asserting that Hemingway is not a wastelander, nor a spokesman for the lost generation, nor the "archpriest of violence." Hemingway is the spokesman for health, not sterility and decay. Mr. Baker discovers the symbolic pattern that supports this view in *The Sun Also Rises*, in the polar values represented by Montparnasse and Burguete, the plain and the mountain. One is the moral atmosphere of decay and corruption, the other of health and joy. The plain bespeaks Gertrude Stein's "You are all a lost generation"; the mountain sustains the knowledge that behind the change and vanity of the plain the earth abideth forever. This pattern is frequent in Hemingway's major work—the Italian plain vs. the Abruzzi and Switzerland in *A Farewell to Arms*; the plains and the mountains of Tanganyika in *The Green Hills of Africa* and the African stories; the mountain fastness of Spain in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—so frequent that Mr. Baker suggests as the motto of Hemingway's work Psalm 121, "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help." And the values they represent are everywhere in Hemingway, catalogued by Mr. Baker as Home and Not-Home. Home is the cluster of good values: peace, love, health, the natural, God—the heights. Not-Home is *nada*: rain, war, death, obscenity, pain, disease, irreligion—the lowlands.

This is an interesting insight, as are the parallels with the *Odyssey* in *The Sun Also Rises*, and with *Romeo and Juliet* in *A Farewell to Arms*. But Mr. Baker repeats this pattern without

widening or deepening its implications. At the circumference of his insight, where he handles details, the scheme becomes fuzzy. The problem that proves most difficult for him, and on which he expends almost the entire chapter on *A Farewell to Arms*, is Hemingway's women. Oddly enough and more frequently than not, Home involves boys-without-women: unless the women are wholly devoted and serving the hero's needs—women like Catherine, Maria, and Renata—they are Circes, turning men into swine, the instruments of *nada*. Women have a large place in Hemingway's preoccupation with courage and death; what that place is has never been fully explored, but it is Hemingway's special attitude towards women that enforces a remark of Harry Levin, that Hemingway has not passed beyond the ephebic code. To defend Catherine, as Mr. Baker does, as a heroine in the established Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, only begs the question. That tradition included dark as well as light ladies. And Hemingway's preference for the light ladies, the ideal ones—or his preference for Trudy above all others—is close to the adolescent chivalry of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Adams, men who in other ways prefigure the Americanism of Hemingway's work.

Mr. Baker bypasses the problems that infringe on the author's personality. His tact has been assured by his soliciting Hemingway's help and approval. And so he has lost the advantage of considering the symbol-user as a man as well as an artist. Instead, he turns away from the deeper issues of the symbolism to Hemingway's stature as artist, a stature that is determined by his success with symbolic communication. Here he finds Hemingway unequivocally great, the equal of James and Faulkner, and in point of mythological method, greater than Eliot and Joyce. For Hemingway, he says, ". . . developed a mythologizing tendency of his own which does not depend on antecedent literatures, learned footnotes, or the recognition of spot passages." One wonders, then, why Mr. Baker is at such pains to explain

the allusions of Hemingway's work. It is undeniable, however, that the plain and the mountain, the river, the gulf-stream, and the swamp are *sabidurian* images and that Hemingway has been able "to endow natural phenomena with an emotional significance." This is indeed a mark of his distinction, in much the same way that the tragic view of the transience of man and the permanence of nature which Mr. Baker sees emerging in the later work is the sign of his maturity.

Mr. Baker is a benevolent critic and his *Hemingway* is a worshipful book, so adulatory that his prose often recovers the author's ground or echoes him. His account makes Hemingway's achievement in symbolic communication a single-handed victory. He minimizes the influences that necessarily contributed to his growth; he delights in the stoic morality and victory the style represents and, above all, wants to assure us that Hemingway's work is "the most truly 'original' writing in . . . twentieth-century fiction." By establishing Hemingway's greatness as artist, however, he is not only trying to remove the slander of irresponsibility, but indirectly to modify the somewhat-true legend of the man. But the morality without the man is too simple, for the morality of style, as Mr. Young shows, is the man's control and self-therapy. It was first of all a private need: the materials it controlled, that violent world Melville called the man-of-war world, has made it the true register of America from Melville's time to ours.

This is what the tough-minded and evaluative study of Mr. Young shows us. Mr. Young uncovers as much of the man as he can, proceeding from another of Cowley's insights, that Nick Adams is Hemingway's "earliest and most personal hero." Going farther, he explores the subsequent "Hemingway heroes" and their intersection with the career of the author. He begins by treating *In Our Time* as a novel with Nick Adams as the central character. Nick's initiation (up in Michigan and in the wars) to violence, pain, death, and emotional complexity is, according to

Mr. Young, the seed-bed of everything Hemingway has written. The later Hemingway heroes are merely stages in Nick's education and maturation, and their experience bears out Melville's proposition that although the outer world seems formed in love, the invisible world is formed in fright. For the Hemingway hero is the true brother of Redburn and Ishmael: he is wounded physically and psychically; sensitive, the shock of evil sears his essential emotional and moral innocence, turning him away from home and society in rebellion against respectable lies. He is haunted—here is the reason Hemingway stands with Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville—by the violence and evil, and drinks to kill the dream. But the shock is really a trauma, bringing with it the compulsion to reenact and conquer it. The style and the content of Hemingway's writing are the ways in which he has done this. For the style is a way to control the painful dream, letting it in in manageable fragments; and the content of reappearing violence is the dream that must be mastered by Hemingway the hero and the man. Mr. Young makes that identification as solid as anything short of direct confession can, with Col. Cantwell returning to Fossalta di Piave where Lt. Henry and Ernest Hemingway were wounded, with Robert Jordan and a middle-aged Nick Adams pondering the suicides of their fathers. And, of course, there is Harry in *Kilimanjaro* and Cantwell in *Across the River* who are sizeably Hemingway for all the differences between art and autobiography which Mr. Young acknowledges.

That the Hemingway hero does not enact the Hemingway code, at least not in the beginning, is another valuable perception. He learns the code from the "code hero"—an array of undefeated characters from Pedro Romero to Wilson—but in time the two merge in Robert Jordan and Santiago. This merger is in effect Hemingway's victory over death and portends his possibilities as a writer with a vision larger than fright. In *The Old Man and The Sea*, Mr. Young believes that Hemingway has routed the fright, that he "has said the finest single thing he has ever had to

say . . .": man-of-war world though it is, the men who endure it, who, like Santiago, love the very forces against which they contend, turn inevitable defeat into dignity.

There are parts of Mr. Young's book that make good points, but with too much circumspection and patness. He could have treated Hemingway's "wound" without rummaging Freud, for his evidence is good enough by itself. And in discussing the influences on Hemingway's style, though the parallels with Crane, Bierce, Norris, and Twain are good and needed pointing out, he need not have drawn the lines so tightly that, for example, Crane as a man becomes an earlier Hemingway. This is also true of the finest thing Mr. Young has to add to our knowledge of Hemingway: the resemblances between Nick Adams and Huck Finn. This is a fruitful insight, giving Hemingway his place among those American writers who have written a recurrent myth of the American experience, the myth of the lost paradise, the fall from innocence. But Mr. Young stays too close to his insight, not only finding point-by-point parallels in Huck and Nick, but in Twain and Hemingway. It would have been better, I think, to have extended that insight to Hawthorne, Thoreau, James—and especially to Melville, where the parallels are still more significant. Such an approach would perhaps provide better ways to measure Hemingway's vision of the man-of-war world of our time, where the attainable felicities are few and joy garnered from struggle.

Meanwhile, however, these studies are important for establishing Hemingway in the American tradition of tragic vision—in the deeper swamp where symbol and myth angle for the darker truths.