

A CLASH OF CERTAINTIES,
OLD AND NEW:
FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
AND THE INNER WAR OF
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

MICHAEL K. SOLOW

INTRODUCTION

While writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway reflected on the task in a letter to his Russian translator, the literary critic Ivan Kashkin:

in stories about the [Spanish Civil] war I try to show all the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and examining it from many sides. . . it is very complicated and difficult to write about truly. . . . I would like to be able to write understandingly about both deserters and heroes, cowards and brave men, traitors and men who are not capable of being traitors. We learned a lot about all such people. (*SL* 480)

Hemingway's ambition—to encompass a new level of understanding—is echoed in the novel through the ceaselessly questing mind of Robert Jordan, a former professor who, we are told, once wrote a book about Spain, and plans to write another:

He would write a book when he got through with this. But only about the things he knew, truly, and about what he knew. But I will have to be a much better writer than I am now to handle them, he thought. The things he had come to know in this war were not so simple. (*FWTBT* 248)

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The passage implies that during the Spanish Civil War what Hemingway *thought* he knew and understood about the world underwent a significant evolution that was “not so simple.” The author’s inner war of contending perspectives found expression in his longest, most complex novel. This essay, a study of Hemingway’s worldview as expressed in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, will reveal the nature of that evolution, which can be seen as a clash of certainties—old and new.

A decade earlier, Hemingway had written of desertion and escape from the madness of war—in favor of love—in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), the fight against fascism, pitted against love and individuality, emerges as a blunt necessity for which the central character pays the ultimate price. Certainly, World War I and the Spanish Civil War were two extraordinarily different wars; even so, the idea of individual sacrifice in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* is a radical departure from Hemingway’s earlier thought—such as his sternly articulated stands, seen in his essays and letters from the 1930s, in favor of isolationism and of the artist’s need to take an apolitical stance.

This context helps account for dissonant, ambiguous patterns within *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—patterns that reflect the author’s inner war of certainties. The novel’s representation of such conflicts has frequently troubled critics. In the political realm, some have argued over whether the book is anti-Loyalist or pro-Loyalist, whether it succeeds or fails in handling the explosive politics of Spain’s Civil War, or whether it may simply be apolitical, after all.¹ More recently, critics have come to view the novel as near-absurd or nihilistic. For example, Linda Wagner-Martin notes “the almost nihilistic severity” of the novel’s “moral tenor” (“Intertextual” 182), while Rovit and Brenner cite the book’s conclusion, where Jordan’s “bravery” prevails in “an absurdly meaningless event within the desperate flow of a losing war” (127). Yet these readings do not tell us *why* the author places his ardently antifascist protagonist in a predicament that can justifiably be interpreted as absurd or nihilistic, or located at any number of other points along the political spectrum.

Such disparate responses suggest that, in Hemingway’s hands, the nature of war often lies in contradiction itself. The long narrative continually provokes dissonances: Jordan’s internal monologues are dizzyingly rife with points and counter-points; the “right” side is responsible for the most horrific atrocity; Fascist soldiers are humanized while some among the Loyalists are betrayers. As Hemingway noted, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* he was “examining it [the war] from many sides.” So many sides, in fact, that a

reader can end up feeling disoriented. Is the book pro- or anti-war? Heroic or anti-heroic? The novel has the power to make the reader hate war or wage war, abhor politics or embrace its aims, at times from page to page.

I believe that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an incitement to wage a particular war *while* hating war in general, a response that mirrors the author's wrestling frame of mind. Hemingway's own journey from an anti-political isolationist into a political advocate, from a pro-Loyalist subsequently disillusioned with elements of "the cause," yet always steadfast in his anti-fascism—sheds light not only on Jordan's fate, but on his creator's narrative project and maturation as an artist.

II.

While Hemingway seemed almost fatally attracted to war zones, during the 1930s—in the continuing aftermath of World War I—his view was vehemently anti-war. In "Notes on the Next War," a September 1935 essay for *Esquire*, Hemingway predicts that a new European war will begin within three years, but spends most of the piece arguing for individuals to refuse to participate in "the great fallacy of war": the "only way to combat the murder that is war" is to unmask the "criminals and swine" who impose it, so that an "honest man" will "refuse to be enslaved into it" (*BL* 209–210). A few months later, writing about Mussolini's brutal incursion into Ethiopia in an *Esquire* article titled "Wings Always Over Africa," he sounded a nearly pacifistic tone, calling war "stronger than any of the evils it is composed of can ever be" (*BL* 234).² Hemingway's anti-war rhetoric was clearly in service to his isolationism at the time; in "Notes on the Next War" he also wrote: "We were fools to be sucked in once on a European war and we should never be sucked in again" (*BL* 212).

He was just as definite about the problem of writers mixing with politics. In another *Esquire* piece, "Old Newsman Writes," from December 1934, he chastised fellow writers:

If . . . you want to abandon your trade and get into politics, go ahead, but it is a sign that you are afraid to go on and do the other, because it is getting too hard and you have to do it alone and so you want to do something where you can have friends and well-wishers. . . . instead of working all your life at something that will only be worth doing if you do it better than it has ever been done. (*BL* 185)

Hemingway's position was that a writer must devote himself to writing and stay aloof from political or personal involvement—writing from above the fray. In “Monologue to the Maestro,” published in the October 1935 issue of *Esquire*, he advised a young writer, “Watch a fight, an argument. . . don't think who is right. . . as a writer you should not judge. You should understand” (BL 219). In a letter from this period to friend and fellow writer Harry Sylvester, Hemingway wrote “When I write I try to have no politics nor any religion nor any friends nor any enemies but to be. . . impersonal” (qtd. in Reynolds 243).

These extracts reveal a man who eschews politics and reviles war while continuing to exalt individualism and the aesthetic value of detachment. At the same time, the Hemingway making these pronouncements was drifting out of the mainstream and into professional trouble. Critics who had once flocked to him were now flailing him. The critical community, dominated by Leftists, had branded Hemingway as an elitist, citing his devotion to safaris, deep-sea fishing, bullfighting, and celebrity as evidence of insensitivity to a society traumatized by the Depression. In the mid-1930s, Hemingway had not published a major novel since *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, and his intervening work—the nonfiction books *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*—had failed both with critics and the general public. Granville Hicks summed this up in *New Masses* in November 1936: “[Hemingway's] concern with the margins of life is a dangerous business. In six years, Hemingway has not produced a book even remotely worthy of his talents” (23).

To make matters worse, Hemingway's second marriage, to Pauline Pfeiffer, was troubled. They lived well due to Pauline's trust fund and a favorite uncle's largesse, renovating a lovely old home in Key West and vacationing at a Wyoming ranch near Yellowstone, with an African safari and trips to Europe in between. Despite living the good life, Hemingway's mood during this period was increasingly foul. He was likely to strike out verbally at friends and even physically strike detractors. Michael Reynolds writes about the year 1936—of his “dark moods” and “erratic,” “malevolent” behavior, “full of self loathing.” Hemingway was, in short, “deeply unhappy with his writing career, angry with critics, and under pressure to produce a successful novel to redeem himself” (Reynolds 228). Hemingway's 1935 short story, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” suggests the degree to which he was in crisis. A mortally injured writer, on safari in Africa, looks back on his life and is filled with tortured regrets about what he hasn't

written, partly blaming a socialite wife who has blunted his artistic prowess by letting him live indulgently. The biographical parallels were painfully obvious.

In the summer of 1936, when war broke out in his beloved Spain, Hemingway was in critical need of artistic and personal redemption. He yearned to be in the thick of the civil war, as though sensing that some answer to his troubles might be found in that tormented place. In September, he wrote to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, "I hate to have missed this Spanish thing worse than anything in the world but have to have this book [*To Have and Have Not*] finished." (SL 455) He would temporarily set that book aside to go to Spain, jumping at the chance when the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA) asked him to write a syndicated column from the war zone for its 60 newspapers. The fact that his new mistress and fellow writer Martha Gellhorn would secretly accompany him made the trip even more enticing. Although Hemingway comprehended the Fascist threat and was sympathetic to the Loyalists, he initially claimed a detached, observant stance. He wrote again to his friend Sylvester in early February 1937, "The Spanish war is a bad war, Harry, and nobody is right" (SL 456). Four days later, he wrote to his mother-in-law about his intentions as a correspondent: "I would like to try to write anti-war war correspondence that would help keep us out of it [the larger European war] when it comes" (SL 458). But his engagement in the Spanish war in 1937 would, as biographer Linda Wagner-Martin puts it, be "a true turning point for his life and art" (*Literary Life* 127).

In fact, there were *two* significant turning points during the Spanish war. The first was a sharp turn toward political advocacy, fully depicted in William Braasch Watson's article, "Joris Ivens and the Communists: Bringing Hemingway into the Spanish Civil War." Watson chronicles the author's "transformation. . . into an active and at times outspoken partisan and propagandist" and provides a case study of Hemingway's early war experience, including both his revulsion at the Fascists' tactics of "all-out war," including attacks on civilians, and his influential relationship with Joris Ivens, the documentary filmmaker.³ As Watson writes: "Hemingway's] entrance into the war shaped his views of the war, shaped his political orientation during the war. . .and. . .shaped the manner in which he tried to extricate himself from the dilemmas his political involvement had created for him" (2).

During that first trip, Hemingway fearlessly accompanied Ivens's film crew to the front lines and ultimately penned an ardent, pro-Loyalist nar-

ration for the resulting propaganda piece, *The Spanish Earth*. In the film, narrated by Hemingway, he declaims: “fighting together, we shall win a new, strong Spain,” and “the fight to be allowed to live as human beings.” As the film shows a soldier going into battle the narrator says, “Before him, all the great unknown. . . men walk across to death and by their presence prove this stretch of earth is ours.” In contrast to previously voiced certainties, Hemingway had suddenly found a war worth promoting and dying for.

On 4 June 1937, *The Spanish Earth* premiered at a meeting of the American Writers’ Congress in Carnegie Hall and Hemingway—now back in the United States—gave a speech to a packed audience. The speech showed how far he had come from his pre-Civil War perspectives. Hemingway was no longer the detached observer, the isolationist, nor the anti-war polemicist. He could now say, of fighting and dying in a war against Fascists, “It all makes sense no matter what the cost in dead and wounded. . . when you know what the men are fighting for” (52). The film was screened for the Roosevelts at the White House, and Hemingway accompanied it on a trip to Hollywood, successfully raising funds for ambulances. This self-professed writer “without politics” was now imbued with the cause.

However, this sudden, passionate turn would temporarily disrupt Hemingway’s aesthetic compass, damage his artistic credibility, and even lead to questionable ethical choices. Later that same year, during his second trip to Spain when there was a lull in the fighting, he wrote the highly partisan play *The Fifth Column*. The drama tells the story of Philip Rawlings, a war correspondent who leads a secret life as an agent for the Republic’s shadowy anti-Fifth Column agency, called the Seguridad. As John Raeburn has chronicled, Hemingway was probably motivated to write the play by a number of factors—Broadway fame and monetary reward among them—but not the least was his “nakedly if not avowedly propagandistic” intention “to marshal support for the Spanish Republic among an influential elite” (15). Recently revived at New York City’s Mint Theater, the play is still troubled by wooden dialogue, thin characterizations, and dull dramatic pacing. But its very departure from Hemingway’s later narratives of the same war makes it a revealing foil.

In contrast to the way Hemingway would develop *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, three elements in the play are worth noting: its blinkered “party line” propaganda, its treatment of Fascist characters, and the trite nature of its rhetoric. Philip Rawlings’s connection with a secret security force is based

on the actual activities of the pro-Stalinist S.I.M. agency. Hemingway portrays this agency as doing the necessary, rough work of rooting out Fascist sympathizers but this is, as Raeburn points out, a “Machiavellian” papering over of the vast bulk of S.I.M.’s activities, which were to eliminate anti-Stalinist activists on the Loyalist side by falsely accusing many of them of Fascist collaboration (15). Philip Knightley asserts that Hemingway knew about such activities and suppressed the knowledge in his news dispatches, only revealing it after the war in his novel (213–214). Because Hemingway believed that only the Soviet-backed Communist leaders within the Republic could provide the discipline to win the war, he engaged in outright misrepresentation during the war, showing “an indifference to [the issue’s] moral dimensions” (Raeburn 15). Moreover, his treatment of the few Fascist characters in *The Fifth Column* is one-dimensional, in stark contrast to the humanistic way he would portray enemy soldiers in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in the play they are fit only for torture and death. Finally, there is the play’s mission-soaked rhetoric about the fight against fascism: “You do it for all men. You do it for the children” (*TFC* 79). Even Hemingway knew at the time that the play was weak—to attract less attention, he had his publisher include it with his first forty-nine short stories in an omnibus volume—and later wished he’d never written it. But *The Fifth Column*’s many flaws reveal Hemingway’s evolving sensibility when contrasted with the work he began to produce just over a year later.

Hemingway’s next turning point is less well-documented than his journey from anti-political aesthete to intensely pro-Loyalist partisan. Raeburn notes that this next transformation, “from a propagandist with Stalinist intentions into a political novelist of the first magnitude,” has been left largely “uncharted” by biographers (16). Was this change triggered by a single event or a series of them? A definitive answer is beyond the scope of this article, but what is certain—given the entirely different tone of the short stories and novel he produced as the Loyalists finally lost the war—Hemingway did undergo an evolution that altered the partisanship of *The Fifth Column*.

Through much of 1938, Hemingway publicly maintained his staunch, pro-Republican stance in dispatches. One dispatch—his 28th for NANA, perhaps too stridently political for the publishing syndicate—was written in April 1938 but remained unpublished until 50 years later. In it, he paints a zealous picture of Republican troops’ bravery and “solid and unshaken” morale, but sounds a rather desperate, bullying note: “Anyone who thinks

the war in Spain is over is a fool or a coward. A great fighting people...will not be defeated that easily. But she must have planes and guns [a message aimed at the U.S.]; and she must have them at once" ("Hemingway's Dispatches" 88). He did get a similar message published that summer, in pieces written for the new political magazine, *Ken*, and in a tract for *Pravda* published on 1 August 1938, once again evading atrocities on both sides when he contrasted the Fascist "murders" of civilians with the untarnished humanity of the Loyalists: "You did not see one act. . . of barbarism." ("Humanity" 118). In an 11 August 1938 article for *Ken*, published as the Loyalists were fighting a lost cause, Hemingway makes a last-ditch effort to persuade the U.S. government to support the Spanish Republic, but his argument is no longer based on idealism or even anti-fascism; instead, he appeals to greed: ". . . why not sell [munitions] to both sides. . . But all sales should be for cash and the cash should be gold" (BL 292–293).

Meanwhile, his private letters from 1938 reveal a different perspective. Back in May, he had written to his editor Maxwell Perkins, indicating—in a guarded way—what he hadn't written in his articles: "will have quite a lot to write when this all over. Am very careful to remember and not write it in dispatches. . . What stuff there is" (SL 467). By October, in Paris writing short stories, Hemingway was a bit more explicit with Perkins, referring to the "carnival of treachery and rottenness" on both sides of the war (SL 473). At the same time, he confessed to Arnold Gingrich, his editor at *Esquire*, that: "Things are so foul now, that if you think about them you go nuts. So am just writing now. . . . A writer has to write and beyond all other things it can make you feel good when it comes out right" (SL 473).

The letter to Gingrich was sent along with the manuscript of a short story, "Night Before Battle," that demonstrates Hemingway's turn from his propagandistic ways. In the story, a writer, one Edwin Henry, and an American volunteer named Al who believes he will die on the front lines the next day, spend a night on the town in Madrid. At the end of the evening, they congregate in Henry's hotel room with some mercenary aviators and play craps. After Al leaves, one of the mercenaries hears Henry mention Al's pitiful pay and says, "I guess he's nuts all right. Or has he got politics." "He's got politics," says Henry. "'Oh well,' he said, 'That explains it.'" The narrator later remarks about Al: "I guess somewhere inside of himself he was angry, very angry. You get angry about a lot of things and you, yourself, dying uselessly is one of them" (CSS 459).

The author's cynicism and anger are palpable now: "having politics" is

equated with mental illness, and dying for the Loyalist cause is “useless.” Hemingway had apparently come full circle—from apolitical certainty to political idealism and back again—though in the novel he began a few months later, he would attempt to square that circle, creating a story in which his partisan protagonist would die in a paradoxical manner: both meaningfully and in maddening futility, as the author’s certainties—both old and new—went to war.

III.

A 1947 essay by George Orwell about Tolstoy offers an important insight into the crucial nature of aesthetic stance. Orwell examined Tolstoy’s character late in life, when he became a religious extremist. Such people, said Orwell:

will, if they can, get inside [someone’s] brain and dictate his thoughts for him in the minutest particulars. . . . Creeds like pacifism. . . . which seem on the surface to imply a complete renunciation of power, rather encourage this habit of mind. . . . And the more you are in the right, the more natural that everyone else should be bullied into thinking likewise. (16)

Before the war, Hemingway—as we’ve seen—was an anti-political isolationist who tried his rhetorical best from the pulpit of *Esquire* to bully readers into thinking along his lines. In 1937, he adopted a revised creed as a Loyalist supporter, using his prestige and talent to try to convert the world with propagandistic ardor—in dispatches, film, speeches, and his play. These positions, while they appear poles apart, can also be seen as two sides of the same coin: the coin of self-righteous certainty. But none of these certainties panned out; the world slid inexorably into war and the Spanish Civil War was lost despite Hemingway’s best—if flawed—rhetorical efforts.

Most biographers have characterized Hemingway’s postwar attitude as disillusioned (Baker, Reynolds). But this would only account for the downbeat, cynical tone of his short stories from late 1938. As Allen Josephs has posited, the semi-autobiographical short stories may have “purged the real war” from Hemingway’s system, so that he could write more imaginatively (38). Clearly, Hemingway’s wartime political commitments had led him astray as an artist. He had wandered quite far when he wrote *The Fifth Column*. And, as his Spanish Civil War short stories indicate, he was initially in a mood to reject his own bullying partisanship. But to ascend to

greater aesthetic heights, he had to progress beyond both partisanship and disillusionment.

He started writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in March 1939, and the work clearly exhibits another turn of mind. In the novel, Hemingway reclaimed a certainty from his pre-Spanish Civil War days: his belief in and practice of aesthetic detachment. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he renewed this aesthetic stance and even intensified its impact by using omniscient narration from multiple perspectives for the first time in a major novel. Hemingway's first-person presentations in his post-World War I novels, with their focus on individuality, have been displaced here by a collective voice. The narrative technique represents an enlargement of perspective that speaks to an enlargement of the author's artistic self, one in keeping with the John Donne epigraph that provided the book's title.

There was, however, one important difference from the old days: his aesthetic detachment was no longer wholly apolitical. Although Hemingway turned with obvious dismay from the corrupt Stalinist tactics he had once championed, he was writing the novel in 1939-40 just as the Nazis were rolling out their vicious campaign to rule Europe. Fascism he could not abide; its imperial ambition and violence against civilians repulsed him. Hemingway was most articulate about Fascism's assault on freedom of expression. "A writer who will not lie cannot live or work under fascism," he thundered, in the Carnegie Hall speech (52). Fascism threatened the free flow of ideas and the hegemony of the artist. To Hemingway, nothing could be as vile. The terrifying nature of Fascism and the need to fight against it became his one politically transcendent certainty.

At the same time, this rediscovery of detachment allowed Hemingway deeper access into Keats's negative capability, famously expressed as: "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." In addition to its steadfast antifascism, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is rife with ambiguities and a dialectical attitude, pitting old certainties against new. The novel gives powerful voice to the evil that is war and to the primacy of love, for example, ideals clashing against the necessity of killing and the need for individual sacrifice to assure collective freedom. Working from the far side of disillusionment, with his bullying propagandistic tone silenced, Hemingway attained a new level of maturity in his art, a greater ability to encompass his new understanding of the human condition.

Recognizing that a nearly ceaseless clash of certainties in *For Whom The*

Bell Tolls is one of its defining textual characteristics helps illuminate some of the novel's more perplexing elements as well as its sometimes disorienting character. A close look at the two best-known episodes of the book will help unpack this perspective: Pilar's story of the Loyalist atrocity, and the death scene of Robert Jordan.

IV.

Chapter 10 of the novel consists of the long, gripping and gruesome tale of "the start of the movement" in a small town. Pilar, "the woman of Pablo" who leads the guerilla band, tells the story to Robert Jordan. Pilar quotes one of the townsfolk, who says, "We thresh Fascists today. . . and out of the chaff comes the freedom of this pueblo" (*FWTBT* 107). The "threshing" of so-called Fascists starts with a group of local soldiers but turns into the brutal, protracted slaying of landowners and shopkeepers and the town's Catholic priest. What begins with some sense of justice quickly degenerates into "cruelty" and "drunkenness" (116); Pilar admits that the Loyalists became a "mob" (122) and concludes, "I thought we have begun badly" (129). Pilar's story has been compared to what happened in the village of Ronda, in 1936, when 500 people were thrown over a cliff. By lavishing such attention on subject matter he had once suppressed for political reasons, Hemingway overthrows a previous certainty, finally narrates a painful truth and in doing so may be said to have made a kind of atonement.

In Chapter 11, Robert Jordan ruminates at length on what he has just learned from Pilar. He has heard of such atrocities before, but has never truly felt them until now: "Pilar had made him see it in that town" (*FWTBT* 134). Pilar's narrative has the power of detached art to make another "see" what is true. Next, Jordan's thoughts turn exceedingly grim when he equates the atrocity with a fundamental character defect in Spaniards, one which could be read more broadly as an observation about politics and human nature:

Of course they turned on you. They turned on you often but they always turned on every one. They turned on themselves, too. If you had three together, two would unite against one, and then the two would start to betray each other. Not always, but often enough for you to take enough cases and start to draw it as a conclusion. (135)

Typically though, in the book's dialectical pattern, Jordan excoriates himself for thinking this way. Finally, Jordan concludes by affirming the transcendence of Hemingway's new certainty: "The first thing was to win the war. If we did not win the war everything was lost" (*FWTBT* 136). In other words, despite the atrocities, despite the bleak view of political betrayal and violence in human nature, the necessity of opposing Fascism is paramount.

Pilar's story of the village atrocity also signals a moral problem that has reverberations throughout the text. The problem can be stated as the point of friction between Hemingway's old anti-war certainty in which all killing is wrong and his new certainty of anti-fascism in which some killing is justified. Both are allowed a voice in the text.

Clearly, the type of killing depicted in Pilar's story is immoral and the personification of this is Pablo, who as Pilar says has become "a ruin" (*FWTBT* 90). Now a dangerous drunkard who weeps in the night fearing death and an eternity of retribution, Pablo was the ringleader responsible for the deaths in the village and for blowing up a train, among other incidents. Yet, as the novel opens, he is only interested in maintaining his hideout and taking care of his horses. In a later exchange, Pablo confesses:

If all had killed the Fascists as I did we would not have this war. But I would not have it happen as it happened. . . it was barbarous. . . I would be happy except for those people I have killed. . . If I could restore them to life I would.
(208–209)

Nothing, not even the novel's credo, can justify for Pablo the overwhelming guilt and moral hazard of indiscriminate killing.

Yet the strongest voice in the novel against killing is the old man, Anselmo, the work's most devout and touching figure. The narrator calls him "a very good man" as we enter his thoughts while he observes soldiers at the bridge—"poor men as we are"—that he will be forced to kill eventually: "much of the time, this problem of the killing returned to him. . . I think any one doing it will be brutalized in time and I think that even though necessary, it is a great sin" (*FWTBT* 196–197). He hopes that after the war, "if we no longer have religion" there could be "some form of civic penance" to atone for the killing (196).

If Anselmo voices a convincing refrain for Hemingway's old certainties,

Robert Jordan voices the new certainty of justifiable killing. However, to justify killing Jordan must be able to hold difficult, even contradictory thoughts in his mind. After killing a member of the Fascist cavalry, he goes through the young man's letters from his mother, sister, and fiancée. This sets off a tortured interior monologue on the necessity of killing and its potential for evil—even when done for a righteous cause. Jordan ultimately concludes, “You must do it as a necessity *but you must not believe in it* [or] the whole thing is wrong” (emphasis added, 304).⁴

The pains Hemingway takes to humanize Fascist soldiers—especially Lieutenant Berrendo, who will be killed by a dying Robert Jordan a moment after the book ends—further complicates this torturous moral balancing act. The effect brings greater moral ambiguity to the idea of “justifiable” killing in wartime. Even as Hemingway underscores his anti-Fascist certainty, he simultaneously deplores the killing that necessarily accompanies it.

v.

Robert Jordan's death scene is certainly one of the most moving in 20th century literature. Yet, it has elements of a conundrum. Absurdity and tragedy share the stage in almost equal measure. As the critic James L. Kastely has put it, “the waste of human lives in the sacrifice almost makes the narrative's universe absurd” (201). In the scene, a great many forces and counter-forces are woven tightly together and clash with one another: love versus sacrifice, loyalty versus betrayal, fate versus choice, the primacy of the individual versus the collective struggle for freedom.

Whether a reader stays close to the text or pulls back to take a larger view of the narrative, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* generates a nearly overwhelming sense of futility. For instance, we know from page five—when General Golz admits to Jordan that blowing up the bridge is a suicide mission—that the entire project will probably result in his death. Signs and portents foreshadowing a bad end occur at a great many other points. Beyond his individual destiny, and with maddening irony, Jordan comes to realize that even if the band does successfully destroy the bridge, the enemy is already aware of the plan and the element of surprise is lost. The undercover guerilla Fernando reports enemy talk that there will be an attempt “to blow up the bridge” (82); Jordan sees Fascist planes flying overhead, two days before the planned attack and suspects they are his “mechanized doom” (87); El Sordo, the leader of a neighboring guerilla

band, says of the enemy that, "They know. Prepare too" (143). Yet Jordan does attempt to call off the attack until he has harder, more definite evidence of troop movements. By then, the emissary he sends through the lines to General Golz has been betrayed by his own side and can't get through in time. And so the now utterly futile attack moves forward.

Stepping back again from the text, many readers in Hemingway's day would also have recognized that this historically-based battle for Segovia turned out to be inconclusive to the war's outcome, a recognition that undercuts Jordan's hope: "What will happen in all the days that ever come can depend on what you do today" (*FWTBT* 432). A moment later, even Jordan calls this statement "pompous." Contemporary readers also knew too well that the Spanish Civil War had been lost for over a year when the novel appeared in 1940. So, in a larger sense, the actual outcome of Jordan's mission—from a *rational* perspective—is altogether moot.

Hemingway further intensifies the narrative's sense of futility when, in another irony, Robert Jordan is crushed under the very horse whose owner he shot dead the day before. In a moment that creates overwhelming pity, Jordan has to convince Maria, the woman he loves, to leave him behind—and, by her leaving, to preserve all that will remain of him. The novel strongly implies that Maria is pregnant with his child.⁵ "You are me now," he says, "Surely thou must feel it" (463). After this agonizing separation, a cascade of thoughts follows for Jordan: from fatalism, "I'm as well this way as any, he thought" (466); to regret, "I hate to leave it, is all. . . I wish there was some way to pass on what I've learned" (467); and finally back to the flawed military plan, "You were bitched when they gave Golz those orders" (469). All of these elements seem to emphasize the pointlessness of war: a battle lost, love destroyed, the unnecessary and wasted death of a committed young man. Yet if Hemingway were aiming for futility that would surely give the novel an absurd, or nihilistic, or at least anti-war cast. But how can this be, in the light of what we've established here as the author's one, clear new certainty—the primacy of freedom and the necessity of a fight to the death against Fascism?

Jordan's death scene—unlike the blowing of the bridge—is a textual concussion, an explosion of rational and emotional forces. The reader's frame of mind after this explosive charge may vary, given the powerfully expressed but clashing certainties Hemingway has strewn in its wake. In a rational sense, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can be read as an indictment of war, corrupt politics, and flawed humanity. However, I believe Jordan's

death operates on a deeper level to redeem emotionally what the novel rationally portrays as futile.

Robert Jordan is an American, willing to sacrifice his life for Spanish freedom. Despite Hemingway's earlier isolationist certainty, this time he has made his protagonist a fellow countryman and an interventionist, signaling to his audience that there are larger struggles beyond our borders for which honorable people are willing to fight and die. Throughout the novel, Jordan delivers his anti-fascist creed repeatedly in thoughts and dialogue, as when he tells Maria how his fellow Americans can be made to understand the struggle, "We can educate the people so that they will fear fascism and recognize it as it appears and combat it" (*FWTBT* 208). Just before the battle for the bridge, Jordan again appears to address the novel's American audience:

remember this that as long as we can hold them here we keep the Fascists tied up. They can't attack any other country until they finish with us and they can never finish with us. . . if we get planes from America they can never finish with us. Never, if we get anything at all. These people will fight forever if they're well armed. (432)

This is, of course, a retrospective view of an already lost war and an echo of Hemingway's polemical writings, but at the time *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was released, with the world being drawn into a life and death struggle against Nazism—and with America still on the sidelines—it was clearly meant to drive home the lessons of the near past; lessons that Hemingway the war correspondent could not get his country to act upon. Perhaps now, working in his true medium and using all his powers of story and emotion, he could succeed. As Kastely puts it, Hemingway "offers an account of the history [of the Spanish Civil War] that places the Fascist victory as a local suppression of freedom in the context of a larger narrative of the human desire for freedom" (204).

Certainly there is a tense, ironic gap between what we know as audience and what Jordan knows as a character. While we may have lost any rational belief that blowing the bridge will contribute to a successful cause, we also know Jordan never loses his slim shred of remaining hope. This is expressed in the death scene, in the interstices of its text of futility. In Jordan's final moments, he still hopes that the attack on Segovia might suc-

ceed—it was, after all, that hope which kept him from abandoning the attack—yet he’s realistic enough to know success is unlikely, saying, “If this attack is no good, another one will be” (*FWTBT* 468). Note the unconditional nature of the future tense—“*will be*”—a way for the author to aver that although Spain has been lost, “another one”—another battle to remain free—will save us. And in the absolute final moment of Jordan’s life, as he is losing consciousness and considers suicide, he forces himself to wait for the advancing cavalry, to gun them down, and destroy their pursuit of Maria and the others:

And if you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer [Berrendo] that may make all the difference. One thing well done can make— (470).

At that moment, the cavalry come into view and we have heard the very last of Jordan’s thoughts. After all the dissonance, here is a simple, declarative thought to end it all: the certainty that an act of sacrifice on behalf of others, even an act of justifiable killing, can save lives, and by extension, save a world from oppression. This conclusion may not eradicate all the futility, but I believe it does supersede it.

In a dimension beyond text, Hemingway counters the futility, irony, and darkness that haunt the death of Robert Jordan. The novel is dominated by Jordan’s interior monologues: we have lived through the incessant, dialectical play of Robert Jordan’s mind. The engaged reader internalizes Jordan’s quest for truth; his diligent, painfully honest struggle to comprehend a self and world caught in the dirty politics of war, his fight to understand its complexity, to shed self-deception, and above all to “keep it accurate” (*FWTBT* 466). When, at the end, Jordan wishes he could share what he’s learned, what is it? “There’s no *one* thing that’s true,” he thinks. “It’s all true” (467, original emphasis). Like Hemingway, Jordan in his final moments has reached a more encompassing vision, moving beyond the endless dialectics to a mystic certainty that all opposites are one.

Hemingway’s achievement is the reader’s intimacy with this individual’s death, an identification with Jordan so closely felt that his death creates real grief for an honorable soul who has died for the sake of human freedom. Such grief overthrows any rational apprehension of futility and can move us to act worthily on behalf of the honored dead. Such grief can move us to wage a particular war.

VI.

With this alchemy uniting us in both agony and purpose with Robert Jordan, while despising the futile ironies and dark view of human nature that caused his death, Hemingway has written a book that is anti-war even as it strenuously endorses the struggle against Fascism, despite the deadly absurdity of the circumstances. The novel's tortured conflicts come into sharper view when we recognize how Hemingway's old, dearly held beliefs clashed with the world's brutal new realities—although this only emerges after we have moved through a narrative with the power to disorient, as the author ruthlessly applies his craft to make us feel the jarring concussions of war. Hemingway's old certainties, such as isolationism and an abiding hatred of war, conflict with the new certainty of Fascism's global threat to human freedom. Politics and politicians—even those on the “right” side—are still corrupt and not to be trusted, yet cynicism must not overthrow the larger project. War and its attendant killing, while “necessary,” are nonetheless inherently evil and must be performed with the most precise sense of moral purpose. The reality of war is that honorable people will be victims of betrayal and fate, and that even love, “the most important thing that can happen to a human being” must be sacrificed—in this case—for a greater good (*FWTBT* 305).

Finally, by struggling with previous certainties that either did not reflect new realities or were a betrayal of his artistic gifts, Hemingway awakened to a fuller sense of conscience, was able to dig deep inside and recover his balance, his talent, and his genius for the truth of human experience. While his old Spanish Civil War comrades may have seen *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as “disloyal,” they were misguided by a retrospective view. Hemingway did reject the corrupt Loyalist politicians and the “right” side's unjustifiable killings—along with his own transgressions. However, he never wavered from the fight for human freedom no matter how he complicated matters by clothing it in a dark view of humanity. At the center of the novel, we live and die by the side of Robert Jordan, an honorable outsider who is paradoxically both hero and victim, a man who sacrifices himself for a just cause in spite of every reason, including love and betrayal, to abandon it. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway tells a cautionary tale for his age and all ages: that we must abhor war, only pursue it in the most extreme, most justified of circumstances, and even then zealously guard ourselves against its corrupting evils.

NOTES

1. Some Leftist critics and former comrades of Hemingway considered the book a betrayal of “the cause.” Alvah Bessie, a noted writer and Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteer, wrote:

Hemingway’s talent and the personal support he rendered to. . . the Loyalist cause were shockingly betrayed in his work, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. . . The novel in its total impact presented an unforgivable distortion of the meaning of the struggle in Spain. (vi)

Elements of the novel could certainly be read as a repudiation of Hemingway’s earlier, uncritical stance as a champion for the Loyalist side. However, other pro-Loyalists saw spirited defense of their cause in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Baker 356).

James L. Kastely’s article, “Toward a Politically Responsible Ethical Criticism,” provides a particularly trenchant framework for understanding the novel’s politics and ethics:

[A]lthough some readers have seen the novel as political (Beach 89), most readers have felt either that the novel was without politics (Benson 158; Broer 95; French 123; Hovey 170); or that Hemingway could not handle his political material (Sheridan Baker 109; Bessie 7–15; Geismar 79–80; Young 106); or that Hemingway could not make this material work in the literary form in which he shaped his tragic understanding (Thorne 535). (Kastely 210)

On the contrary, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—as Kastely puts it—is “obsessed” with “comprehending the fundamental conflict between political duty and ethical responsibility.” For Kastely, Robert Jordan’s journey ends in ethical “integration”: “life is finally ambiguity and conflict, and seeing it accurately is not a call to dispassionate observation but to ethical and political responsibility.” (203)

2. The full context of this quotation is a passage recalling the disgust of Italian officers from the first World War: “Many officers hated war then as since you can hate nothing; not tyranny, not injustice, not murder, not brutality, not the corruption of the human soul; for war has the essence of these blended together. . . until it is stronger than any of the evils it is composed of can ever be” (*BL* 234). In the earlier *Esquire* essay, “Notes on the Next War,” Hemingway hammered away at his audience, describing in gut-wrenching detail all of the ways a man can die or be horribly injured in war—e.g. “the slamming clang of high explosive on a hard road and find your legs are gone above the knee” (*BL* 210)—implying that nothing can justify an individual’s tragedy. While Hemingway was never a pacifist in the purest sense, at the time he had what might be termed pacifistic leanings, and even later clung to an ideal that the horrors of war might someday be brought to an end (see note 4, below).
3. Watson does not mention the powerful effect on Hemingway of meeting American and European volunteers willing to die in the cause of a free Spain.
4. Hemingway echoed this crucial point in the introduction to his anthology, *Men at War* (1942): “We must win it by never forgetting what we are fighting for, in order that while we are fighting Fascism we do not slip into the ideas and ideals of Fascism” (xii). He also wishes that this second World War might be the true “war to end war”: “You have to win it and get rid of the peo-

ple that made it and see that, this time, *it never comes to us again*. We who took part in the last war to end wars are not going to be fooled again. This war is going to be fought *until that objective is achieved*; if it takes a hundred years if necessary, and no matter whom we have to fight to gain that objective in the end" (xxi, emphasis added). Before Spain, he had argued that individual refusal could make war impossible. Once in Spain, he awoke to the implacable threat of Fascism and the inevitability of a necessary war, but nonetheless a "war to end wars."

5. The differences between the death scenes in *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* are striking. Frederick Henry, the reluctant deserter, loses his lover and stillborn child in childbirth. Robert Jordan, the victimized hero, dies to save his wife and unborn child. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the escape from war into life and love, only to end in death, seems like an end to hope. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan's death is a call to sacrifice in order to keep hope alive. The rending nature of these deaths lies at the very core of their respective eras.

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