

For whom the Bells toll

E.Hemingway

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To be in a war means that you have to face death. This is an unnatural state most men would naturally evade, and hence can only be suffered stoically and voluntarily if there is some transcendent reason for it. Therein lies the great attraction of war, the opportunity it affords for transcendence of the petty self, realizations of which usually are referred to as heroism.

Robert Jordan is an American volunteer in the Spanish conflict of the 30's, a defining movement for those coming into age at the time. Jordan does, not surprisingly, show some characteristics of the author himself. He is a male of approximately the same age, mid-western with Michigan roots. We follow him and the band of guerillas to which he is attached for his last four days of life. His mission is to blow up a bridge at the start of an Republican offensive, the consummation of which the reader eagerly looks forward to, with no real assurance it will happen on the page. What ensues is more or less five hundred pages of transport, mostly devoted to bickering between Jordan and his Spanish comrades, and a few retrospectives. In addition to this there is the sexual element, the infatuation of a young girl, who haplessly finds herself in the crowd. Jordan is granted the gift of love, the consummation of which literally makes the earth move, an event so rare as to only happen in the life of an individual two or three times, if at all, as the gipsy woman Pilar tells him. Pilar is the only character that is fully drawn and comes to real life, the others are but shadows, whose names incidentally pop up without making an identifying impression.

Part of the books reads like a D.H.Lawrence pastiche. None of the crisp prose for which Hemingway otherwise is being lauded. As an author he faces a serious technical problem, how to present a sustained conversation in English, which obviously is conducted in Spanish. The solutions he offers are not convincing. Sometimes Spanish expressions are introduced, only to be translated later ¹, but far worse though is the consistent use of 'thy' and 'thee', and constructions like 'I obscenity you'. The real forte of Hemingway, his ability to evoke mood and landscape with a few well-chosen words, do at times shine through, but not as much as one would have hoped. There are references to pine-needled forest floors, to snow falling, and most of all a very evocative glimpse of Valencia before the war, of the ox-driven carriages on the beach, and making love in a hotel room with the venetians blinds drawn and the music of the streets seeping in.

Not very much happens in the novel, except for a few flash-backs on an execution of fascists in a small village, to a half-bungled train bombing, comparing notes with a clever Russian journalist at Gaylords in Madrid. The novel fails to really give a sense of the civil war, except from one rather restricted angle of the guerilla band. Hemingway covered it,

¹ One cannot help speculating whether it would not have been an exciting idea to make the Spanish intrusions more and more extensive, thus educating the reader without his or her connivance

but what did he really experience? Hardly the kind of action he depicts, maybe mostly gossip in run-down hotels safely away from the front. Hence those parts of the novel are the ones that really come to life. Here he is more on his turf, trying to talk tough on basic issues of what is really going on. What is really going on? Did Hemingway have a real clue, beyond the obvious fact that war is cruel and does terrible things to the guilty and the innocent alike. The novel is supposed to get at those truths that cannot really be got by argument and historical documentation, only by being evoked taking the trust of the reader for granted. In this case I must admit to a certain disappointment. It might have made a stir when it was published, and for an author of practical sense, this is what primarily matters. But to posterity it has faded, and worse, it contains little which is of documentary interest.

May 12, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*