

Green Hills of Africa

E. Hemingway

July 1, 2006

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is cheating. This is Hemingway conversing an Austrian in a camp in the bush. He is out in Africa hunting big game, obsessed, to the consternation of the Austrian, by bagging a big kudu bull, before the rains will overtake him and he will need to evacuate.

The book, a cheap pocket-book edition¹ from the mid-fifties, with yellowed musky-smelling pages, has been in my parents library as long as I can remember. At the time it sold for 35 cents² and on its cover there is a view of an elephant with a snow-capped mountain in the background, as well as an inset of a portrait by rugged Hemingway with a white beard. On the back there is garish praise for the author as indestructible adventurer and the most vital man of our times. Recalling with pleasure the few out-doors episodes in *The sun also rises* I have been long meaning to read it to get a fuller dose of that pleasure. But promises and anticipations are not always fulfilled and this particular one not at all. The result is a rather tedious description, occasionally coming to life in certain pastoral episodes, but failing to do justice to the main point of the book - the exhilaration of the hunt.

According to the author, the usual caveats about imaginary persons and events, have no place here. The work presents real events and real people presented in the form of a novel. This is chiefly done by throwing the reader in the middle of the action, rearranging the chronological flow by extended flash-backs, (with the more or less intended effect of confusion); as well as inserting a lot of hard-boiled dialogue, with little narrative sense and many *non sequiturs*. Furthermore another concession to the imaginary form of the novel is the vagueness of time and place and other factual aspects, which a more straightforward documentary would have satisfied the readers curiosity. There are references to the Rift Valley and Mount Kenya, but aside from that there are few pointers. A conventional novel usually contains love, in this novel there is nothing of it, except a possible hint that the wife that the author has brought along will fall for the handsome Colonel Pop, the knowledgeable guide of the expedition. But of this nothing beyond the readers imagination is presented. Hemingway is serious, or to be more exact, takes himself seriously; he is not, as he points out in a note on the flap, out to write the merely conventional, but to present the truth, whatever it may be.

There are certain things that are private and as such hard, not to say pointless to convey. The pleasures of private gratification as such are of course universal and legitimate subjects of writing, in contrast to the tedia of their details, which often have no significance

¹ Permabooks, long since defunct no doubt

² 39 c in Canada

beyond that of the authors fond recollection. Happiness is an evasive thing, often confused with mere well-being. Thus when you try to convey it, it evaporates in the process of being articulated and leaves behind just a sticky residue of animal satisfaction. Happiness to Hemingway is to explore the African bush. He dreams about settling down in one small 'country'³ as of yet untouched, in order to get to know it intimately. He muses that when a man finds a land he was not brought up in but feels at home in, he is destined to go there. Africa then is his destiny. To hunt then becomes a means of intimate exploration, not unlike that of sexual caressing, and the kill the orgasmic conclusion. And just as by sexual predation, accumulation is important to fix in memory a succession of ephemeral moments, making trophies matter. The head, the horn, the skin; the rest one supposes is left to rot. And also why there is a competition between the baggers, the bigger the bull, the more virile the man. Because for reasons never divulged, the rule of the game is to get the bull, the cow is taboo⁴.

In the early decades of the 20th century Africa was a vast playing ground for the rich and vulgarly adventurous. A white man of insignificant status back in Europe, like the Austrian encountered above, would in Africa be king. Hemingway enters in the fray with gusto, no qualms about the political incorrectness of big game hunting, compunctions of which I presume had just started at the time of his adventures in the early thirties. Seeing in the soft ground the deep footprints of an elephant, he muses that many thousands years ago Mammoths roamed the country-sides of present day Illinois. America is an older continent than Africa, here the big game still survives, but for how long? Everything the white man touches is destroyed. So with America, which once was a continent of the future, but no more. The natives live in harmony, take and give, but machines only take and give not back, and soon enough, he speculates, soils will erode and the game will dry out, but this will be on a time-scale longer than that of the individual, and he paints out to himself the perfect picture of contentment. To settle down in order to hunt and to read and to write and to drink. What else is there to life? Simple pleasures, and as all pure pleasures self-centered and ultimately sad. And also it bespeaks a solipsistic point of view. The world is here merely to distract you, and when you are gone, the hell with it.

A book may date, in fact most books do, and it is hard nowadays to get very excited about the excitements of the author. But as a book dates it sheds its individual literary value, which mostly (maybe entirely?) is in the eyes of the individual reader and the public in which he is a part, and instead takes on the more durable quality of a document. So what does it tell us about Africa in the thirties? It is to a large extent an untouched virginal land, sparsely populated by pre-historic tribes. The 20th century has invaded by its lorries (occasionally breaking down as that of the aforementioned Austrian stranded in Hemingways hunting-camp pressing the author for literary gossip and obiter dicta) and guns, but still the black man walks in the bush, almost naked, save for some cloth and a spear, his young wife trotting along with lovely exposed pear-shaped breasts. The natives exist as objects of visual beauty and as potential loyal servants, and those who do not

³ 'country' as in 'country-side', meaning small area

⁴ This causes problems when Hemingway is to hunt sables, a type of antelopes he has never seen before, and thus has to be verbally instructed

comply to these categorizations could as well be shot along with the game⁵.

Hemingway for all of his bravado, is sensitive. Or maybe rather his sensitivity causes him to act as one. To kill provides him with a peculiar sensation, that both sickens him as well as excites him. He rationalizes his murders that in the big scheme of things they matter little, and in fact big-game hunting has had a marginal effect on the African fauna compared with the ensuing population explosion, and that the animals he kills would have fallen prey anyway. But he wants the kill to be clean, it is a humiliation to merely graze and wound, condemning an innocent creature to pain and suffering and eventual demise at the hands of hyenas, pulling out its intestines while it is still alive⁶. Much of the narrative is devoted to stalking the animal that got away, looking for the specks of blood bearing witness to its agonized escape. Sometimes he is lucky, panting heavily by the exertion of a steep hill in the back-breaking heat of a midday sun. Sometimes he is not.

Hemingway reads Tolstoy in the bush and marvels at the man and the writer. Tolstoy knew war, and war is the ultimate experience, and thus the supreme challenge to the writer as well as the source of any triumph he may have. Hunting is a kind of war, and no writer but Tolstoy has made the excitement of a hunt more palpable⁷. In comparison with the master, Hemingway fades, although he tries very hard. Maybe he tries harder to write about his hunts, than to hunt them. Unlike Tolstoy.

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⁵ Hemingway's irritation at a certain David Garrick is palpable enough. Due to the elliptical style of the author, the name is thrown in without proper introduction, misleading the reader to confuse its bearer with that of a white colleague. The subsequent treatment of him by the author is thus puzzling, until he dons a plume of ostrich feathers, and his inferior status as a native is no longer in doubt.

⁶ M'Cola, his native assistant, laughs his head off at a hyena grazed by a gut-shot, pulling at its own intestines, eating them with gusto

⁷ I remember the summer of 1975 at a conference in Williamstown in western Massachusetts. I was reading *War and Peace*. Before breakfast, after breakfast, in recessions between talks, and during the long hot evenings. The hunts made you turn the pages very quickly as the protagonists rushed and raced into the woods, adrenalin rising.