

## The Sun also rises

*E. Hemingway*

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Hemingway is studied simplicity. Simple dialogue, simple descriptions, yet so effective. I first encountered the book in a Swedish translation, given to me for Christmas by my maternal uncle. I was at the time too young and inexperienced to get it, although unused as I was at the time to read adult literature, I recall it intrigued me. I must have read the English original in my twenties, then I ought to have been mature enough to get it, after all the protagonists are not that much older than me, still I am unsure whether I really got it even then. What I remember most vividly though is the depiction of the fishing trip in Spain. It impressed me a lot and I think this was what I really liked best. How did he do it? Now this second (or third?) time I read it, I get it better. A little bit like watching an exciting movie in your teens and then watching it again as a more knowledgeable adult. The excitement was to a large extent due to a lack of explicit understanding. What is it all about? A femme fatale - Brett Ashley, pursued by many men who believe that they are in love with her. The protagonist, obviously modeled on Hemingway himself, is too wise and cynical to join in the fray, and besides there are hints that due to some war-time injury he is out of the competition. A certain wealthy Jewish guy, thoroughly nice and earnest and all money and Princeton, falls for her, enjoys her favors, has his vanity tickled, but then cannot understand why he is being dropped. In other words he is a fool, and by pursuing her beyond the due date of the fling, he makes an even greater fool of himself. This is hinted at by the hard-boiled dialogue, which mostly is concerned with inanities in order to convey the tedium of real life. You are of course supposed to read between the lines, and the exercise is only mildly taxing, hence rewarding to the many (no wonder he had a large following, so large indeed that the relevant Swedish committee was pressured into registering a recognition). But as noted above, the most intriguing part of Hemingways prose is his ability to evoke a mood and a location with only a few crude brush-strokes. How does he do it? This clearly makes for a closer rereading.

There is a lot of so to speak transportation going on, and that is real life of course. But how to make this transportation vivid and engaging, providing if not outright and immediate excitement at least the kind of incipient excitement that comes with anticipation. His rendering somehow reminds me of my own travel-reports, blow by blow accounts, when short impressions are haphazardly thrown at the reader. One certainly gets the feeling that he depicts events of real life and that he has jotted down a few notes in a book to jog his memory and as he is writing he is desperately jogging his mind for what was really going on. When you travel everything washed by you, how to arrest it. So there are some general remarks on impression and also, and this is the masterly touch, recollections of pointless inanities, such as the presence of a big cockroach, or the red lettering on a banner; just the kind of things you would come up with, would you be pressed to provide a report on what happened (and also the kind of things you might write down in your notebook in order that it would not slip you). Now this appears quite artless and seems very easy to do; on

the other hand it is in the nature of a mature artist painting in the style of a child. It is far more difficult than it appears. It has to be simple and hurried, elaborations so tempting in writing fiction, when there are no immediate checks to stick to the facts, should be avoided, as should poetic digressions, another purple temptation. His the Moveable feast which is a evocation of events that actually happened to him, edited and smoothed, reads more like fiction than his fictional dramatization of some expatriates trying desperately to having a good time in the teeth of having a rotten one. The protagonist goes to San Sebastian to relax and get away from it all, going on swims at the beach. Those innocent excursions, so pointless but in their very pointlessness being so true, so authentic. They do not really advance the plot, except of course to mark time, and marking time is of course part of the plot itself.

So there is short, simple but poignant dialogue, some of it rather hilarious. You would not mind taking part in it. There is also a lot of drinking, too much of it than what is good for the livers of the characters (except that fictional characters have no livers). Drinking seems to be an obsession, as does eating. Drinking, eating and shooting the bull, so to speak, make up the obsessions of the day, giving it shape and purpose. Add to that the evocation of locale, something that is not achieved by long painterly descriptions. Lawrence would have spent more time on it, more words, and maybe succeeding in conveying it more sensuously, but Hemingway succeeds by the very sparsity of his brushstrokes. It is like a sketch, when taken in all together, without scrutinizing its parts, it is very convincing. Subconsciously the imagination takes the hints and makes up something far fuller than is actually mediated. But when looked carefully, not as a whole, but as to techniques, what comes across is something quite different, random strokes on white paper, crude and barren. Reading the novel you actually get the feel of crossing a border, of entering a Spain somewhat cruder and more primitive, and hence far more exciting than France itself. How is this done? By the indication of random looking details, A combination of some general description with some telling details. Now I do not believe it is done deliberately, I suspect it is done subconsciously. Just as if you had to write a travel report based on intermittent jottings and occasional recollections. How would you do it yourself? Your imagination is never complete, what always strikes out are a few seemingly irrelevant details. Now serve those details, not necessarily irrelevant, but as if they were. Then you closely fake the real thing. And as everybody is obsessed what is authentic, interest is maintained.

The climax of evocation is achieved by the fishing trip. The heat and the shade, the boiling water of the waterfall. The wine, carefully corked, submerged in a cold spring, the trouts gutted and packed with ferns. (Whatever happened to those trouts, we never learn, were they eaten and enjoyed, or were they simply thrown away? The very fact that we wonder, maybe even worry, is a testimony to the effectiveness of the evocation). Yet on repeated reading I must admit that the magic of the first has somehow faded. Maybe because I read it not as a reader but as a fellow writer trying to discover the joins and nails of the descriptions, not unlike the conoisseure scrutinizing a painting not for its message but for its provenance, thus exchanging an aesthetic appreciation for a forensic. What most readers probably recall from the book is the depiction of the fiesta and of the bull-fights. Here Hemingway is somewhat less successful, the intensity and delirium of the fiesta, with all that dancing and wine drinking and aggressive hospitality is acceptably conveyed, but

when it comes to delivering the inside dope on bull-fighting Hemingway somehow fails. His expertise is more fake than genuine, and he fails altogether to convey the brutality of the act, maybe because he tries a little bit too much. More restraint and he might have been more powerful; but clearly here he succumbed to the ever present allure of over-writing. Look at the horse when it is attacked, the characters are advised, but turn your head away afterwards if you do not want to get sick. This suggestion makes for effect, although it might be a tiny bit too explicit. It is indeed very hard to balance on that sharp edge to which the descriptive power of Hemingway depends.

The book ends more or less in mid-sentence. There is no summary of events to follow satisfying the curiosity of the literal reader. But how might such a one proceed? Let us make a try. The setting a bar in New York, two characters discussing briefly the roundabouts of the people in the novel ordering drinks from a black guy with false white teeth.

"What happened to that Jew, I forgot his name. Kahn maybe. Pretty stuffy type, dabbled as a boxer, I heard."

"You mean Cohn, Robert Cohn? He returned from Spain all dishevelled. Begged on his knees that his woman, Frances something, should take him back. She found the situation a godsend, she extracted all kinds of concessions from him. He was desperate. She got far more than she ever could have bargained for. They got married pretty quickly, returned to the States. He gave up writing, went into family business, settled somewhere in California. Children and all that.

"I be damned"

So fucking predictable. He was always so stinking conventional. Nice enough though, although not anyone one would take to. Contributed nothing, A kind of nonentity. A hanger on. Took himself too seriously. Belonged in another novel really. Not the kind you would ever want to dip into."

"And that woman, lady something, did she get divorced?"

"You mean her. You seem pretty well in touch. On top of things. Such ambition."

" I just want to keep myself informed."

"I do not really know. I guess so. She was the divorcing type, the kind of woman who loves to get married only in order to stir up the bitter excitement of termination, Anyway her husband probably wanted to get out of it as soon as possible."

"Was there no character by name of Mike Campell involved?"

\*You mean him? You are certainly keeping track of things. That was not serious. Never knew what became of him actually. Maybe he was the guy who was found dead in his hotel room. Did anybody ever have so many creditors. Maybe suicide or simple drink. Most likely the latter."

"But what happened. There was some guy James Born or some such name. Newspaperman of sorts."

"You mean Jake Barnes. I used to know him well ages ago. That guy Barnes did indeed take up with her for some time. Old friendship I would say. Brother and sister kind of thing. She was at a temporary low and he was always a sucker. The guy was impotent though. Something having to do with the war. Only half a man, and the half that counts for less to boot. She could not put up with that in the long run. Not even for much of a short run either, I daresay. Maybe they are still friends of sort. She is losing her looks but not her appetite. Lost cause if any. What about another drink?" **August 8, 2008**

