

Summary

This essay examines Hemingway's *The fifth column*, a play he wrote in Madrid during the fall of 1937 while that city was under bombardment. The essay aims at clarifying the motives behind Hemingway's involve-

The Price of Duty

in Hemingway's

The Fifth Column

ment with the Spanish Civil War and at illuminating the significance of that involvement to his artistic development.

Resumo

Este ensaio analisa a peça denominada A quinta coluna, escrita em Madrid por Ernest Hemingway, durante a Guerra Civil Espanhola. O ensaio procura esclarecer os motivos do envolvimento político/ideológico do escritor norte-americano, assim como o significado desse envolvimento para a sua carreira artística.

O Preço do Dever na Peça de Hemingway *A Quinta Coluna*

Der Preis der Pflicht in Hemingways *Die Fünfte Kolonne*

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From January, 1937 to October 1940, when *For whom the bell tolls* appeared, Ernest Hemingway's thoughts and energies were focused in one way or another on the Spanish Civil War. As head of the Ambulance Corp Committee of the American Friends of Spanish Democracy, he contributed time, money, and the prestige of his reputation to the Loyalist cause. Through writing, money, and technical assistance for the battlefield scenes, he contributed to two documentary films, *Spain in flames* and *The Spanish earth*. As an in-

defatigable promoter of the latter film, he presented it to the Writer's Congress at Carnegie Hall (accompanied by one of his very rare formal speeches), to a group of Hollywood celebrities (from whom he got \$17,000 for ambulances), and to President Roosevelt in the White House. Under contract with the North American Newspaper Alliance, he made four trips, each of several months duration, to Spain over a two year period, reporting his experiences in 28 dispatches. His other contributions to the literature of the Spanish Civil War include a three-act play *The fifth column*, a series of angry anti-fascist essays for the short-lived American periodical *Ken*, four semi-autobiographical short stories concerning besieged Madrid during the spring and fall of 1937, and finally *For whom the bell tolls*, perhaps the best novel about the War in any language (Capellán, 1985, 241-44; Baker, 1969, 313-16).

The motivation for Hemingway's involvement with the War was far from simple. Angel Capellán in *Hemingway and the Hispanic world* strongly defends him against accusations or insinuations that his allegiance to the Loyalist cause was not serious and energetic enough, arguing that his commitment was thorough and genuine and founded on a deep love for Spain (243-44). Scott Donaldson, on the other hand, suggests that Hemingway's motives for going to Spain were not entirely altruistic, noting that he carried with him credentials and a generous dollar-a-word contract from the North American Newspaper Alliance. Moreover, he was escaping domestic troubles, he planned to resume a liaison with Martha Gellhorn, and he hoped to gain material for his fiction from close observation of war (100). Although Communists and fellow travelers actively courted Hemingway's support during the thirties and praised his apparent shift from political

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neutrality to "social consciousness." Carlos Baker provides convincing evidence that he never capitulated to Marxism (1969, 276-82). Donaldson suggests that, "by and large, it was the tide of events rather arguments of 'the persuaders' than the accounted for his seeming drift to the left" and that insofar as the motivation of his involvement in the Spanish Civil War was political, "it derived from two consuming hatreds: of fascism and the horror of modern war" (99-100). Hemingway recognized at least five parties on the Republican side and admitted the difficulty in understanding and evaluating them (Baker, 1956, 228). Perhaps his years of assiduously avoiding politics had left him unprepared for coping with a situation as complex as that in Spain. In any case, he had no party. He favored the Popular Front, mainly because he agreed with its approach to conducting the War and because it provided him the kind of inside information he valued. "I like Communists when they're soldiers," he once said in a political argument in Madrid, "but when they're priests, I hate them" (Baker, 1969, 330). The truth is that his reasons for going to the war in Spain were political only in a qualified sense. In more significant ways they were humanitarian, personal, and artistic.

As a way of clarifying the motives behind Hemingway's involvement with the Spanish Civil War and at the same time illuminating the significance of that involvement to his artistic development, I wish to examine *The fifth column*, the play he wrote in Madrid during the fall of 1937 while that city was under bombardment.

The setting of the play is the Hotel Florida on the Plaza de Callao just off the Gran Via of Madrid. This is where Hemingway was living when he wrote the play. During the period of writing, he tells us in his preface, the hotel "was struck by more than thirty high explosive shells" (v). The protagonist, Philip Rawlings, a correspondent secretly engaged in counterespionage for the Loyalists, is a projection of

Hemingway himself. Baker notes the autobiographical parallels and points out that in some of the scenes he used a virtual replica of the room he was occupying at the time (321). The emotion in the play, insofar as it derived from Hemingway's actual experience, was transformed into art without benefit of any sort of Wordsworthian recollection in tranquility.

The fifth column, as critical consensus clearly manifests, is not a success. Perhaps Hemingway was unable to use his material effectively because he was too close to it — he generally allowed his experiences several years to settle in his mind before he tried to write about them — or maybe the main problem was that, although he was a master of dialogue and dramatic situation in the novel, he had not equipped himself with the special techniques and craftsmanship that work for the theater demands. Some believe the real value of *The fifth column* lies in the way it served to purge Hemingway of his intense involvement in the fight against fascism so that in *For whom the bell tolls* he was able to write with the maturity and proper aesthetic distance which made that novel great.

At first, while his experience in Madrid was fresh in mind, he had high expectations for the play and was disappointed at having to publish it before it had appeared on stage. He compared the situation to that of "sending a horse to the dog-meat cannery when you had expected it to win the Kentucky Derby" (Baker, 1969, 333). Later, however, he said, "I think *The fifth column* is probably the most unsatisfactory thing I ever wrote.... It was an attempt to write under what you could honestly call impossible conditions. After it, and after we were beaten in Spain, I came home and cooled out and disciplined myself and wrote *For whom the bell tolls*" (Baker, 1969, 6). The play had a brief run on the New York stage during the spring of 1940, with Franchot Tone in the leading role, and then remained unstaged until a reasonably successful television

performance in 1960.

The play's central conflict places Philip's commitment to his counterespionage work, as dangerous and unsavory as it is, in opposition to the attraction of Dorothy Bridges, a Vassar and Junior League-formed spectator of the War who would like to take him and leave the upheaval in Spain for the delights of travel around the continent: steeplechases and fine dinners in France, shooting in Hungary, surfing on the beach at Melindi, and similar pursuits of the idle rich. Although Philip is sick of the war and fed up with his sordid role in it, he ultimately tells Dorothy, "You can go. But I've been to all those places and I've left them all behind. And where I go now I go alone, or with others who go there for the same reason I go" (83). Critics uniformly agree that this love versus duty theme is inadequately realized. Dorothy's vacuity undermines the plausibility of her being a genuine temptation, and the cause at stake is so vaguely defined that talk of it fails to transcend the kind windy praise for bravery and abstract ideals that Hemingway himself taught us in his earlier work to mistrust. The play, according to John M. Muste, contains "a stoic posturing in the face of danger and hardship which almost parodies such earlier Hemingway heroes as Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry" (64). In his 1939 review, Lionel Trilling made the illuminating observation that *The fifth column* was written by Hemingway the "man" rather than Hemingway the "artist": "Hemingway the 'artist' is conscious, Hemingway the 'man' is self-conscious: the 'artist' has a kind of innocence, the 'man' a kind of naivety; the 'artist' is disinterested, the 'man' has a dull personal ax to grind; the 'artist' has a perfect medium and tells the truth even if it be only his truth, but the 'man' fumbles at communication and falsifies" (123).

Whatever its strengths or weaknesses, *The fifth column* tells us more about Hemingway than about the war in Spain, and it is more =

interesting for what Hemingway intended it to express than for what it actually does express. The real subject of the play, the subject even more fundamental than the struggle against fascism, is encompassed in two concepts that oriented Hemingway's mind set and consequently his artistic vision: duty and nostalgia.

Duty is the more familiar concept to readers of Hemingway's fiction. It underlies the notions of code behavior and "grace under pressure" that inform so much of the commentary on Hemingway's life and writing. In Hemingway's world, battlefield conditions — both literal and metaphorical — predominate, and conventional ideals and traditional spiritual values are without vitality. Duty takes the place of such ideals and values — not a sense of duty to God or country or partisan cause but rather a sense of duty to self. Consequently, duty became for Hemingway an end in itself, an ultimate value to replace the traditional absolutes that seemed in his age no longer creditable. To behave with courage, integrity, and dignity — to fulfill these duties to self — was a way for the individual to generate meaning and purpose in an otherwise painfully bewildering and purposeless world. Naturally, this metaphysical sense of duty became individuated in Hemingway's life and writing as allegiance to particular principles and causes, notably to the profession of writing itself, but underlying these specific occasions for duty — for example, the Loyalist cause in Spain — was that fundamental need for life-ordering and life-justifying purpose. His fascination with war and military strategy is largely explained by the fact that in this arena duty is so clearly primary.

As much as he loved Spain and detested fascism, the ulterior motive for his involvement with the Spanish Civil War was a desire to be close to the war experience, in which the price and rewards of duty are dramatically delineated. This is intimated in Stephen Spender's review of *The fifth column and four un-*

published stories of the Spanish civil war: "He was expected to write about war because war was his obsession. To him it was a pure condition of being, transcending even his loyalty to the Republican side" (537). It is also suggested by the quarrel between Hemingway and Dos Passos over the filming of *The Spanish earth*. Dos Passos wanted to emphasize the plight of the common people; Hemingway was far more interested in the military aspects (Baker, 1969, 300). Moreover, his trips to Spain afforded Hemingway significant opportunity to exercise his own capacity for duty and pay the price duty exacts. In the preface to *The fifth column, and the first forty-nine stories*, he says,

In going where you have to go, and doing what you have to do, and seeing what you have to see, you dull and blunt the instrument you write with. But I would rather have it bent and dulled and know I had to put it on the grindstone again and hammer it into shape and put a wheatstone on it, and know that I had something to write about, than to have it bright and shining and nothing to say, or smooth and well-oiled in the closet, but unused. (vii)

A considerable weakness in *The fifth column* results from the way his experience in Spain in 1937 energized his deep-seated preoccupation with duty, but, being still too close to the experience and also lacking seasoned skills for writing plays, he was unable to transmute his emotions into an artistic form that would evoke similar emotions in his readers.

The second concept at the heart of Hemingway's artistic vision, nostalgia, is less frequently recognized and appreciated. Nevertheless, as Wright Morris once observed, Hemingway's "subject", pushed to its extremity, is nostalgia (25). Remembering was a principal satisfaction for him as a man and a primary wellspring for him as a writer. His workroom, as George Plimpton describes it in his well-

known Hemingway interview, reveals "an owner who is basically neat but cannot bear to throw anything away — especially if sentimental value is attached." One book case has an odd assortment of mementos — broken toys, insignificant knick-knacks — a collection much like "the odds and ends which turn up in a shoebox at the back of a boy's closet." It is evident to Plimpton, though, that these tokens, as well as the trophies decorating the walls, have value growing out of their association with a special person, place, or experience in the past. "It cheers me to look at them", Hemingway says (21). Hemingway valued physical activity and sensory experience — travel, outdoor sports, eating, drinking — and a good part of the pleasure of such things for him was reflective, a pleasure in remembering. Malcom Cowley said of him: "Ernesto never learned that you can't go back. He always tried to go back" (Cowley interview). And of course this joy in remembering was a large part of his motivation as a writer, and he clearly recognized the value of such remembering for a writer. He advised his brother Leicester, an aspiring young writer, "Try to remember everything about everything" (Leicester Hemingway, 156).

Nostalgia often serves in his writing as the key to what a man is. It seems to constitute what we call the self, for in terms of Hemingway's naturalism, a man is what he has experienced — what he remembers — and nostalgia seems to be the process by which the most meaningful of those experiences are selected to be actively remembered. In order for a man to be in control of himself, he must be in control of his memories. This explains the frequent and important juxtaposition of duty and nostalgia in Hemingway's fiction. The character, in order to fulfill a duty, must keep the potent attraction of nostalgia in check. Nostalgia can be a source of comfort and stability in times of stress, as when Santiago in *The old man and the sea* remembers his youth during his battle with the great fish — the beaches of Africa

and his victory in the arm wrestle with the strong black man in the tavern at Casablanca — or when Nick Adams, struggling with the effects of shell shock, fishes in his memory the favorite trout stream of his boyhood. But nostalgia must never become an avenue of escape or a cause for dereliction of duty.

Returning now to *The fifth column*, the duty motif is obvious, but what does nostalgia have to do with the play? Hemingway provides the clue in his preface, where he states that Dorothy's name "might also have been Nostalgia" (vi). The price of duty for Philip is not simply Dorothy, but nostalgia and all that concept meant for Hemingway. The principal failure of the play is the author's failure to embody fully and convincingly in Dorothy the very real enticements of nostalgia. Malcolm Cowley sensed this failure when he pointed out that beautiful Dorothy may be the symbol of Philip's nostalgia and might be a symbol for ours if we saw her in the flesh, but she is nothing of the sort in the play. "She is presented there as a chattering, superficial fool, a perfect specimen of the Junior Leaguer pitching woo on the fringes of the radical movement, with the result that she keeps the play from being a tragedy or even a valid conflict between love and duty" (1938, 197).

When *The fifth column* is viewed in the larger context of Hemingway's work, it is obvious that he intended to dramatize the conflict between duty and nostalgia as he understood these concepts in the imaginative reaches of his own experience. It is the conflict that so effectively informs such later works as *For whom the bell tolls*, *The old man and the sea*, and *Islands in the stream*. The play perhaps served as a trial run in which he learned, by failing, that he must understate the aspect of duty and accentuate the allure of nostalgia. In *Islands in the stream* for example, he devotes the first two parts of the novel to establishing in rich detail what nostalgia means in the protagonist's life. Then, in part three, a narrative of military action

in which duty is the crucial issue, he strategically counterpoints the action with nostalgic recollection. This provides not only a pulse or rhythm for the narrative, but movingly heightens the reader's appreciation of the price and value of duty, so that when the protagonist says, "Duty is a wonderful thing," the statement rings with some truth and significance. *The old man and the sea* likewise successfully establishes memorable nostalgic recollection as a foil to a powerfully understated portrayal of duty fulfilled.

The degree to which Dorothy fails as an embodiment of nostalgia is readily apparent when contrasted with the way nostalgia functions in *For whom the bell tolls*. Using 471 pages to describe the events of three days, Hemingway had ample space to create layers of nostalgic images revealing the protagonist's inner being and making his commitment to duty poignant. For example, his Montana youth is evoked in a passage like this: "He smelled the odor of the pine boughs under him, the piney smell of the crushed needles and the sharper odor of the resinous sap from the cut limbs.... This is the smell I love. This and fresh-cut clover, the crushed sage as you ride after cattle, wood-smoke and the burning leaves of autumn. That must be the odor of nostalgia, the smell of the smoke from the piles of raked leaves burning in the streets in the fall in Missoula" (260). And in addition to such evocative passages, Hemingway skillfully uses the flask of absinthe, or "giant killer", Robert Jordan carries with him as a symbol of nostalgia:

one cup of it took the place of the evening papers, of all the old evenings in cafés, of all chestnut trees that would be in bloom now in this month, of the great slow horses of the outer boulevards, of book shops, of kiosques, and of galleries, of Chaumont, of the Guaranty Trust Company and the Ile de la Cité, of Foyot's old hotel, and of being able to read and relax in the evening; of all the things

he had enjoyed and forgotten and that came back to him when he tasted that opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing liquid alchemy." (51)

In the final scene, in which he sacrifices his life for the sake of duty, he reaches for the flask and finds it gone. "Then he felt that much more alone because he knew that there was not going to be even that. I guess I'd counted on that, he said" (467).

This is Hemingway the "artist" writing, and the price of duty assumes a moving and even tragic dimension. The novel is art rather than propaganda. *The fifth column* is little more than melodramatic propaganda in which duty and its price remain vaguely defined. The comparison is instructive. Sympathy for a cause and first-hand experience and observation of dramatic life-and-death events are not enough by themselves to guarantee significant literary art. Such things as aesthetic distance, evocative images, and emotional nuance are also essential.

The fifth column has provided ammunition for the critics of Hemingway who complain that the notion that loyalty, bravery, and duty are the cardinal virtues and that physical action as the basis of the good life does not add up to a meaningful philosophy. But, as Tom Stoppard remarked in commenting on the play, Hemingway's philosophy should not be despised by ivory tower philosophers. "The force of a code of behavior, of a personal morality, is that philosophy does not account for it but is accountable to it" (26). The trouble with *The fifth column* is not the essential philosophy that underlies it but that the philosophy was inadequately incarnated, largely because of the pressure for leftist political commitment exerted upon Hemingway by the climate of the thirties and particularly the circumstances of the Spanish Civil War. □

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