Past and Present in “Cat in the Rain” and “Old Man at the Bridge”

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The theme of historical change is not a major topic in Ernest Hemingway’s writings. The author’s sense of history is not particularly acute. The more remarkable it appears, then, that there is an emphatic contrast between past and present in two of his finest short stories. In “Cat in the Rain” and “Old Man at the Bridge,” bygone days stand in irreconcilable opposition to the world of actuality. The two narratives allude to this confrontation of epochs without explicitly discussing historical developments. Rather, they create an atmosphere of nostalgia, a blurred – perhaps even faulty – recollection of former times. A sense of irretrievable loss informs these superbly compact texts, a tension between then and now, between traditional life and the modern experience. The past meant security and stability, the present is volatile, de-centered, unpredictable.

Still, this historical antithesis is far from simple. It is not shaped after the commonplace notion of the old Indian chief caricatured in Hemingway’s “Fathers and Sons,” whose philosophy goes: “Long time ago good. Now no good” (498).1 Hemingway’s outlook is more sophisticated. In his works, the state of modernity is represented ambiguously, as a loss of certainties, but also an exhilarating condition of independence and risk, of individualism and autonomy. Existentialist freedom has two faces in the author’s texts, depending on minute shades of mood and situation. In this indeterminacy, his narratives resemble the trick pictures of Gestalt psychology, which may be perceived as either figure or ground: the novels and stories depict modern autonomy as the daring challenge of unconfined self-projection – or as paralyzing doubt and futility, as spiritual emptiness and the brittleness of social and emotional bonds. This latter aspect is most vivid when accompanied by the above-mentioned sense of loss and nostalgia. I propose to read “Cat in the Rain” (1925) in the light of works like The Sun Also Rises (1926), “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927), “The Sea Change” (1933), and particularly the writer’s posthumously published unfinished novel The Garden of Eden (1946-1959).2 The author’s technique of textual minimalism and his strategic omission of comprehensive information necessitates
such a form of analogizing. In all these narratives, we find a similar chain of motifs: rootless cosmopolitan characters traveling without real destinations; hedonism as a manner of experimentation and distraction; young women wearing their hair short; and the crises of personal relationships, indicating a general collapse of values and orientation. The “lost generation” of expatriates live transient lives, temporarily sojourning in provisional places like hotels, bars, railway stations, cafés. Restlessly they try on new ideas, styles, ways of living: journalism, poetry, story or novel writing; wine, brandy, aperitifs, long drinks; boxing, fishing, skiing, bullfighting; short-lived affairs, marriage, love triangles, lesbian episodes. Women have short-cut hair, like boys (flappers, garçonnnes). Enigmatically, they cross the sexual borderlines – drifters, protean beings with multiple identities. This is stimulating and exciting in several respects, but it also heightens the general impression of nervousness, incoherence, and a lack of secure footing.

This context serves to highlight the historiography of antagonistic life-styles in “Cat in the Rain.” The chief character and narrative focus of the story is the nameless young American woman (called “wife” or “girl”). She and her young husband have not been married for long and are yet in the midst of a marital crisis – which in Hemingway’s works is invariably also a crisis of existential uncertainty and impasse. The couple is having a brief stopover in a nameless North-Italian seaside resort, in February perhaps, clearly very much ‘out of season.’ In the midst of their nomadic traveling, they have come to a precarious halt – in a, of all places, decent, traditional, well-managed old-time hotel. (In those days, Rapallo had a somewhat faded, antiquated charm.) The central location and shining façade of the hotel are expressly mentioned in the story. The padrone is a courteous hotelkeeper of the old school whose care, dignity, and self-respect point to the pleasant, well-mannered deportment of former times. He stands in marked contrast to the purposeless young woman who lacks a firm framework of existence – she has only her narcissistic mirror-image to observe and her vague yearnings to cherish. As is characteristic for her type and class, she is able to express dissatisfaction merely by nagging and complaining, like a spoiled child: “‘I want some new clothes,’” “‘If I can’t have [...] any fun,’” “‘I want it to be spring’” (170). The padrone appears a father figure to her; meeting him makes her feel like a little girl: youngish, but somehow of importance.

At present, however, she is outside any family alliances. When she sees the cat under their window and wants to ‘rescue’ it, her husband offers help, but does not make a real effort and keeps himself uninvolved. His part in the narrative is not fully developed, and so some recent readings have found him to be a selfish, unconcerned brute. One critic, for example, speaks of the husband’s “callousness” and “immaturity” (Stewart 72). Considering Hemingway’s overall world of characters, though, this does not seem to be justified. The text gives us the young wife’s perspective for the most part, but refrains from any sort of idealizing or sentimental attitude. The husband’s dispassionate “‘Shut up’” is not a sharp rebuke, but at closer consideration equals something like “Stop it” or “Give yourself a break”. The young man finds his girl-wife attractive (“You look pretty darn nice,” 169), but does not think much of her fits of bored caprice and cannot take seriously her shallow and short-lived crises.

The female protagonist of the story is cut off from all active participation. She remains, as it were, behind glass-panes. All she can do is look out of the window, gaze into the mirror, sulk, be moody and petulant. If, in her moneyed but feeble existence, she tries to do something, attempting to be helpful and caring, she is screened and safeguarded by
servants, and the goal of her efforts, the wet kitten, remains inaccessible. She fashions her longings into a little daydream about a polite, traditional world of yore, a belle époque like the American 'Gilded Age' ("[...]I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles," "I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel [...]. I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her" 169). She fantasizes herself into a serene and graceful environment, protected by firm rules, when dining tables were laden with candle-sticks and silver cutlery, testifying to a bourgeois life of peaceful domesticity. In those remote days, women used to wear their hair long and men theirs short; everybody had an unequivocal identity and a stable social position. Women twisted their hair into a bun, and in their elegant homes led lives which knew neither insecurity nor doubt, cats purring cozily in their laps. It is too simple to understand the wife's search for the kitten as no more than a metaphor of her wish for pregnancy (although child-bearing clearly may be seen as crucial to former female fulfillment). Rather, the cat, the well-stocked dinner-table and the dignified old-school hotel owner represent a static, neat, orderly world of the past. The young couple, on the other hand, travel light, going without household stuff or domestic animals. They embody the radically different modern form of an existence without any deeper ties.

6 The cat of our story, however, is an ambiguous, multi-faceted symbol. Purring in the housewife's lap, she signifies home and security; but straying about in the rain, she indicates homelessness and exposure. She mirrors the young wife, but is also her counter-image. She represents the American girl's wishes, but also her feeling of dislocation. The chilly season and the winter rain of the story's title carry multiple meanings, too. They point to the uncomfortable weather outside as well as the dreariness and ennui inside, and altogether they stand for the frigidity of modern life.

7 In our present text, the chief symbol for the alienated life-style of modernity is the girl's cropped hair – an unobtrusive but significant detail. The characteristic feature of literary symbolism is its double nature of being and meaning: the symbol is part of the realistic world of the text, and simultaneously transcends it by referring to an abstract field of ideas beyond. In Goethe's and Coleridge's conception, the symbol points to a universal context, but is also an empirical (if 'eminent') part of the textual reality. The particular represents the general 'summarily,' as a kind of abbreviation. That is why we may enjoy a literary work on a concrete plane without being aware of its symbolism – which is nevertheless there and secretly informs our responses, although we may recognize this only belatedly, in a second or third reading. In this manner, the girl's bobbed hair inherently belongs to the imaginative territory of the text, but at the same time represents a broader field of meaning: namely the loss of social belonging and identity. "Ha perduto qualche cosa, Signora?" the puzzled chamber-maid asks the American girl. This loss of attachment and orientation is the theme of the story.

8 The girl-protagonist with the boyish hairstyle has undergone the risk of blurring firm gender-boundaries. In Hemingway's writings, this is accompanied by, as may be seen in “The Sea Change” and The Garden of Eden, disturbing and confusing erotic adventures; they seem to include a kind of active, 'male' sexual behavior on the woman's part which is apt to undermine firm contours of identity. This is admittedly not the theme of "Cat in the Rain," but as a context it points to the spiritual muddle which engulfs the young wife of the story, and which forms the basis of her wish for long hair and for a more 'womanly' way of life ("I get so tired of looking like a boy," 169). Her pronounced desires are vague, arbitrary and unrealistic ("I want it to be spring," etc., 170). The girl's lack of
Self-awareness indicates that the loss of order and orientation is deep-rooted and irremediable. What is left is “a heap of broken images,” in the words of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land. There is no way back to the Good Old Times, as the ending of the story suggests: the attentive padrone sends the maid with “a big tortoiseshell cat” to the American girl – but this is not the cat she was looking for; it is full-grown and requires no loving care. “You can’t always get what you want,” as the song lyric has it forty-five years later. The snug, simple world of the past remains a dream, and Ersatz will not bring it back or make it real – particularly not Ersatz of Ersatz. The present is characterized by chilly, wet weather, deserted squares, falling dusk, bored listlessness, and frequently – though not in this work – by dazed distraction through alcohol, love-affairs, and dangerous sports.

“Old Man at the Bridge” (1938) is an utterly different kind of story as to its theme and narrative mode. But it also comprises an aspect of the temporal arrangement of the two world stages of Then and Now. The text of “Old Man at the Bridge” even surpasses the former piece as to brevity, condensation and suggestiveness. The setting is a pontoon bridge near Amposta in the Rio Ebro delta. The time is that of the decisive military victories of the nationalist troops in the Spanish Civil War (April, 1938). The defeat of the Republicans is close at hand. The nationalist army is about to attack from the south, from Vinaroz. The Republican troops retreat from the exposed front sections south of the River Ebro. Together with them, many civilians make their way out of the region, forming a northward-bound flow of refugees. Men and vehicles have to pass the provisional bridge. It is Easter Sunday, presumably late morning. War disregards religious customs and holidays. The lead-colored sky is low. The first-person narrator of the story seems to be a Republican fighter of the International Brigades, operating all by himself. His task is reconnoitering (“it was my business to [...] explore the bridgehead beyond,” 78). His mission, however, is not clearly explained, in the author’s typical narrative manner of concentration and omission (“I did this and returned over the bridge,” ibid.).

The story’s composition of space and motion is an admirable example of Hemingway’s art. At first, the scene is governed by tumultuous hustle: “Carts staggered up,” “trucks ground up and away,” “peasants plodded along.” The I-narrator is also mobile in an unspecified way (by motorcycle or some other sort of vehicle? – the author’s stylistic economy leaves this kind of guesswork to the reader’s powers of visualizing the events). The speaker is a combatant and military specialist; consequently, he is free from feelings of panic and is capable of disciplined, level-headed vigilance. Gradually, the crowded turmoil of the scene subsides (“There were not so many carts now [...]” 78). Talking to the exhausted old man, the narrator perceives attentively the “few last carts” rolling towards the bridge. And finally we read, in menacing verbal repetition: “[...] now there were no carts” (79). The theatre of war is cleared; at any moment, disaster is going to strike (“[...] listening all the while for the first noises [...]”).

This impending doom is never particularized, only ominously referred to as “it”: “the trucks [...] heading out of it all,” “they [the old man’s animals]’ll probably come through it all right” (italics added). We read that the fascist troops are advancing, we hear about their artillery and about the looming danger which is in wait for the old man’s animals, but are not given full information about the situation. Hemingway’s narrative vignette remains fragmentary, a snippet, a glimpse of one short moment in the catastrophic upsurge of war. In the last sentences of the story we learn, as a final intensification of the menace, about the superior air-power of the enemy. The tight-lipped narrator holds back
any comment of his own, which gives the more weight to his few pressing words urging the old man to move on: “‘This is not a good place to stop’” (79), “‘If you are rested I would go’” (80). As with other dialogues in Hemingway’s writings, the reader has to work out for him/herself the affective underside of this conversational exchange, has to sense the imminent crisis, the nervous tension close to breaking-point. There is no authorial voice to tell us unmistakably what to think. The story describes a timeless moment of standstill between two stages of hectic bustle and uproar, between retreat and attack, reconnaissance and hurrying back; a vibrating moment of calm before the storm breaks loose. The provisional bridge between the river-banks – passage of escape now, but soon the center of the fighting – is the precise symbol for this stage of suspense.

The fatigued old man from San Carlos de la Rápita, eight miles south of Amposta, is placed in the midst of this treacherous quiet. He cannot walk any further. He is dressed in his Sunday best, or may be a widower (he is wearing “black dusty clothes”). He belongs to the traditional rural class of peasants, like the other refugees who are uprooted and overwhelmed by warfare. The old man is part of a static world of kinship, neighborhood, and family clans (“‘I know of no one in that direction,’” 79), a world which is close to nature, relying on a customary subsistence economy, including the keeping of goats and – again – cats. Pigeons, too, have been in his care (the conventional emblem of peace and love). In this contented, bucolic world, there was also room for the elderly and the simple-minded. Now this customary life is breaking up dramatically. The old man is so confused and exhausted that he has not even the strength for emotional reactions (“He looked at me very blankly and tiredly,” “he said dully”). Apathetically, he remains behind the throng of refugees and will be crushed by the juggernaut of military action – as his goats will be. Again, the bridge symbolism is significant: he is incapable of ‘passing’ to a new and more flexible form of existence (“There was nothing to do about him,” 80). The narrator cannot help him; he has assignments of his own, and the old man is not fit for a fresh start elsewhere. He himself seems to be aware of this. His immobility gives the impression of self-surrender, of a half-conscious death-wish.

It is important for the configuration of the story that the narrator, in his role as cosmopolitan (American volunteer in the Spanish Civil War) and war specialist (“my business”), is part of the military scene and of the modern sphere of the text. He belongs to the world of machinery, fire-arms, strategic knowledge, mobility, not to the backward-looking rural world of standstill and imbeddedness in nature (“taking care of animals”). His conversation with the old man is friendly and compassionate, and he is taking his time for the talk, tuning in to the simple man’s way of thinking – attentively observing the enemy territory, however – but he does not belong to his historical sphere and tradition-oriented mentality. The collision of epochs, then, is not only present in the war events, in the confrontation of a technological civilization with pastoral life, of destruction with reproduction, but also in this personal encounter with an old man.

At this point, “Cat in the Rain” should be included in the discussion again. It is significant that in the two stories the static world of the past is evoked only in connection with a discontented middle-class girl or a stupefied old man (or a disgruntled Indian chief elsewhere). It is presented as a counter-culture of communitarian security which, however, has no deeper insights to offer to the author’s so-called ‘code heroes’ who profess an ideal of masculine self-sufficiency and individualistic freedom. In both narratives the old world is conjured up as a nostalgic fantasy, but it remains, in characteristic ambivalence, the domain of Victorian housewives and picturesque
peasants. The young American fighter of “Old Man at the Bridge,” on the other hand, seeks “that ever mysterious event called contact” (79). His mirror-image is the “enemy;” this antagonist is, as it were, the scout’s double in determination and soldiership; on him the American’s attention focuses, for all his concern about the unfortunate civilians. Consequently, the narrative leaves out all political issues (“‘What politics have you?’” – “‘I am without politics,’” ibid.;) and similarly, the text does not consider if the narrator might possibly do something for the helpless old man. The war-game is dead earnest, but at bottom it has no moral or historical message to impart. The young man lives a life of unfettered modernity, and the reader is not meant to call this into question.

Both stories, “Cat in the Rain” and “Old Man at the Bridge,” seem to play dubiously with a mood of nostalgia which they themselves do not take quite seriously. One deals with a melancholy which lacks existential confirmation; the other suggests a critique of war and violence whose impact, however, remains superficial and without real consequence, as it comprises many elements of thrill and fascination. The young men of both stories are uninvolved observers, stoic witnesses (‘expatriates’ in an unexpected double meaning). By their perspectives, the reader’s attitude to the historical polarity of the texts is guided. Through their eyes we regard the confrontation of past and present with nihilistic indifference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The old Indian’s original statement is more graphic: “Long time ago good, now heap shit” (Selected Letters, xii).

2. The setting of The Garden of Eden is mainly Southern France, in the 1920s. The novel was begun in the 1940s, revised and roughly concluded in the 1950s, but never completed to the author’s satisfaction. A heavily cut version was published by Scribner’s in 1986. See, e.g., R. E. Fleming, (129-58), and R. M. Burwell (95-128).

3. For further reading, see J. DeFalco (1963), J. J. Benson (1975), P. Smith, (1989); J. J. Benson (1990), and S. Donaldson (1996). No extensive commentaries on the two stories treated here are to be found in the volumes edited by S. F. Beegel (1989) and P. Smith (1998).

4. For biographical aspects, see Carlos Baker (105-107). For “Old Man at the Bridge”, see ibid. (327-328). See also C. M. Oliver, and B. Kert (133-134).

5. Cf. Erika and Klaus Mann, who write in their ‘anti-Baedeker’ travel guide that Rapallo is “old-fashioned,” “peacefully bourgeois,” “very much nineteenth-century” (172, my translation). Hemingway’s impression was downright unfavorable: “The sea is weak and dull here and doesn’t look as though there was much salt in the water. The tide rises and falls about an inch. When the surf breaks it sounds like someone pouring a bucket of ashes over the side of a scow. The place ain’t much” (Selected Letters, p. 79). Hadley and Ernest Hemingway’s hotel was the Splendide (Baker 158). The 1922 Treaty of Rapallo (an agreement between Germany and Russia which caused much international alarm) was negotiated at the Hotel Palazzo Imperiale.

6. In an earlier version of the text, the wife was given the name ‘Catherine.’ Pet-forms are ‘Kitty’ and ‘Cat.’ ‘Kitty’ is also the girl’s term of endearment for ‘kitten.’ The name ‘Catherine’ is present, too, in Hemingway’s novels A Farewell to Arms and The Garden of Eden.


ABSTRACTS

The two stories are based on a time scheme which confronts customary life and the modern experience. In “Cat in the Rain,” the American girl dreams nostalgically about a ‘womanly’ lifestyle in an old-fashioned, well-ordered world of yore. The couple’s restless traveling, on the other hand, without household things and domestic animals, represents the modern form of existence, individualistic and without deeper ties. The chief symbol of the incoherence of modernity is the young wife’s boyish haircut, indicating a lack of stability and reliability - but also highlighting the daring challenge of unfettered self-projection. Similarly, the exhausted peasant of “Old Man at the Bridge” stands for a static culture of kinship and embeddedness in nature, which is about to be destroyed by modern mechanized warfare. The first-person narrator of this story is part of the modern sphere, too: a cosmopolitan fighter who basically belongs to the realm of machinery and mobility, not to pastoral life and to a tradition-oriented mentality. When all is said and done, Hemingway’s protagonists are thrilled by modern uprootedness, freedom, and nihilism, and they do not take seriously the nostalgic hankering for the Good Old Times.

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