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The Camouflage of the Sacred in the Short Fiction of Hemingway

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Abstract

This essay examines the short fiction of Ernest Hemingway in the light of Mircea Eliade's notion of the camouflage of the sacred and the larval survival of original spiritual meaning. A subterranean love pulsates beneath the terse dialogue of Hemingway's characters whose inner life we glimpse only obliquely. In the short play ("Today Is Friday") and four short stories ("The Killers," "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," "Old Man at the Bridge," and "The Light of the World," discussed here, light imagery, biblical allusions, and the figure of Christ, reveal a hidden imaginary universe. This sacral dimension has been largely overlooked by critics who dwell on the ostensible spiritual absence that characterizes Hemingway's fiction.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway; Mircea Eliade; short story; the sacred

Ernest Hemingway's short fiction deserves to be viewed in light of Mircea Eliade's notion that "the camouflage or even occultation of the sacred and of spiritual meanings in general characterizes all crepuscular eras" (*Autobiography* 153). In the short play ("Today Is Friday") and four short stories ("The Killers," "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," "Old Man at the Bridge," and "The Light of the World") discussed here, light imagery, biblical allusions, and the figure of Christ, reveal a hidden imaginary universe. This sacral dimension has been largely overlooked by some critics who fail to see the subterranean love that pulsates beneath the terse dialogue of Hemingway's characters.

Born into a devout Christian family, Hemingway grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, a town with so many churches that it was known as “Saint’s Rest.” As an adolescent, Ernest rebelled against the moral strictures of his parents, ridiculing his mother’s religious material as “moron literature” (McDaniel 21, 40). Although he distrusted sonorous pieties and theological abstractions, Hemingway acknowledged that he learned to write from the Bible (Maurois 49). The biblical influence was not confined to style, for Christian imagery permeates his fiction. Deep down, Hemingway remained a Christian, such as in his reluctance to write on Sundays because it brought bad luck (Hotchner 149).

Hemingway’s fiction, like life, remains elusive and inchoate. We glimpse the inner life of the characters only obliquely. In an interview, Hemingway explained this fragmentary characterization: “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven eighths of it under water, for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg” (qtd. in Plimpton 34). This fictional technique is a distinct feature of modernism which Peter Faulkner describes as part of the historical process of disassociation from nineteenth century assumptions that posited “a stable relationship in which the writer could assume a community of attitudes, a shared sense of reality” (1).

In the late nineteenth century, the literary sense that we are transcendently connected to one another, which had reached its apotheosis in the novel, finally began to unravel. Matthew Arnold expresses a consequent feeling of loss in the final verses of “Dover Beach” (1867):

the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (517-18)

Hemingway's first collection of stories, *In Our Time* (1925; expanded edition 1930), conveys, like "Dover Beach," a sense of violence and chaos. It borrows its title from a passage in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Give us peace in our time, O Lord" (Maurois 43). In one vignette, the narrator repeats the name of Jesus amidst the shelling, holding it close like a talisman:

While the bombardment was knocking the trench to pieces at Fossalta, he lay very flat and sweated and prayed oh jesus christ get me out of here. Dear jesus please get me out. Christ please please please christ. If you'll only keep me from getting killed I'll do anything you say. I believe in you and I'll tell every one in the world that you are the only one that matters. Please please dear jesus. The shelling moved farther up the line. We went to work on the trench and in the morning the sun came up and the day was hot and muggy and cheerful and quiet. The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody. (*Collected Stories* 109)¹

The narrator alternates between upper and lower case letters when he invokes the name of Jesus Christ as if mediating between intimacy and respect. His brush with death is an experience both physical and spiritual, at once degrading and uplifting. The image of Jesus would continue to permeate Hemingway's fiction.

The presence of the sacred in Hemingway's first book was not readily apparent to his parents. Clarence Hemingway promptly returned his copies of *In Our Time* to the publisher while Grace Hemingway, in a letter to Ernest, called it "one of the filthiest books of the year." She nonetheless added, "I love you dear, and still believe you will do something worthwhile to live after you" (qtd. in de Koster, "Biography" 25). Indeed his next collection of stories, *Men Without Women* (1927), contained some of his best short fiction, including "The Killers."

In that story, Hemingway withholds knowledge from the reader, limiting our view of his characters. Two hitmen, Al and Max, enter a diner to await their intended victim, a former boxer named Ole Andreson. Their speech has a sinister banality. Michael F. Moloney states that "Hemingway's fictional world, whatever its locale, is the deadly, stale, monotonous world of modern positivism and modern industrialism from which all spiritual leaven has been removed, and he is consistent in giving

a universal flatness to the speech of his characters" (184). However, the spiritual is not so much removed as camouflaged in "The Killers."

We detect the spiritual in the image of light that is embedded in the intimidating words of the mobsters:

"This is a hot town," said the other. "What do they call it?"
"Summit."
"Ever hear of it?" Al asked his friend.
"No," said the friend.
"What do you do here nights?" Al asked.
"They eat the dinner," his friend said. "They all come here and eat the big dinner."
"That's right," George said.
"So you think that's right?" Al asked George.
"Sure."
"You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?"
"Sure," said George.
"Well, you're not," said the other little man. "Is he, Al?"
"He's dumb," said Al. He turned to Nick. "What's your name?"
"Adams."
"Another bright boy," Al said. "Ain't he a bright boy, Max?"
"The town's full of bright boys," Max said. ("Killers" 216)

Behind the brazenness of gangsters lies the anomie in towns across the United States and the communal malaise of those who "eat the big dinner," a phrase that recalls the last supper of Christ. The repetitive speech of Al and Max underscores their banal and interchangeable quality (Lamb 190-91). However, the reiterated phrase "bright boy" also prefigures young Nick Adams as a light in the ethical darkness of Summit, a Chicago suburb whose name anticipates Nick's moral stature.

The killers tie up Nick and the cook but depart after Andreson fails to appear for dinner. After being freed, Nick ignores the cook's admonition not to get involved and runs to the boarding house where Andreson lodges. The imagery reinforces a sense of Nick as a bearer of light: "Outside the arc-light shone through the bare branches of a tree. Nick walked up the street beside the car-tracks and turned at the next arc-light down a side-street" (220). Nick finds Andreson lying in bed, staring at the wall. Gripped by a tragic expectancy, Andreson registers no surprise when Nick warns him that two men intend to shoot him. The light

imagery recurs when Nick returns to the diner: "Nick walked up the dark street to the corner under the arc-light, and then along the car-tracks to Henry's eating-house" (222).

Neither George, the cook, Nick, the hitmen, nor the reader, knows why Andreson has been marked for death:

"Did you tell him about it?" George asked.
"Sure. I told him but he knows what it's all about."
"What's he going to do?"
"Nothing."
"They'll kill him."
"I guess they will."
"He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago."
"I guess so," said Nick.
"It's a hell of a thing." ("Killers" 222)

Andreson appears to know but he tells Nick nothing about it. In an unpublished manuscript, Hemingway commented that "The Killers" "probably had more left out of it than anything I ever wrote" (qtd. in Johnston 247). The reference to hell in the final line of the above passage is more than a colloquialism. It expresses despair and explains Nick's resolve to leave town:

"I wonder what he did?" Nick said.
"Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for."
"I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said.
"Yes," said George. That's a good thing to do."
"I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."
"Well," said George, "you better not think about it." ("Killers" 222)

Robert E. Fleming notes the confusion and disorientation of the characters in "The Killers." When Al and Max ask for dinner, George explains that it was only five o'clock and that dinner would be served at six. The killers point out that the clock says five-twenty, but George tells them that it is twenty minutes fast. The retort of one of the killers, "Oh, to hell with the clock," hints at his spiritual ambience. Upon leaving Hirsch's boarding house, Nick bids "Mrs. Hirsch" good night, only to learn that the woman is Mrs. Bell who looks after Mrs. Hirsch's place. Nick then

returns to Henry's eating house where George – not Henry – runs the diner (Fleming 40).

The characters, like the reader, grope about in a figurative darkness akin to the one in "Dover Beach." Kenneth G. Johnston observes that "The Killers" was originally titled "The Matadors" and was completed in Madrid in May 1926. Although he identifies various parallels between the *corrida de toros* and Ole Andreson's inevitable death (247-248), Johnston fails to note that Andreson's first name resembles the shout of praise "Olé" that is bestowed on *toreros*. Ole Andreson's opaque self-absorption recalls Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi's Urdu poem "Blindfolded Bull":

Hide thicker
Than the whip. Does the pain
Never penetrate his bones?
He merely twitches
His ears
Friendless under the hot sun.
Why doesn't he charge
With his black-tipped horns
And rip open
The bellies of his tormentors –
Trample them
Under his torn hooves?
Instead
He flogs himself
With his own tail –
Acolyte in a dark cave –
Sacrificial buffoon.

Darkness and light imagery also pervades "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," a short story from the collection *Winner Take Nothing* (1933). A deaf old man finds refuge from loneliness at a café somewhere in Spain. We view the old man from the perspectives of a young waiter who sees the old man as a nuisance because he tends to linger at the café past closing time, and from that of an older waiter who understands the deaf man's need for solace. Sean O'Faolain traces the narrative movement in this story:

The camera is angled, at a distance, on a café-front; it closes in on an old man, who says only two words; it passes from him to the two waiters; it

ends with the middle-aged waiter, and it rests longest on him. With him it becomes a ray entering into his soul. Age, death, despair, love, the boredom of life, two elderly men seeking sleep and forgetfulness, and one still young enough to feel passion, cast into an hour and a place whose silence and emptiness, soon to become more silent and more empty still. (112)

Hemingway lends a rich ambiguity to the opening dialogue by not identifying which waiter speaks which lines:

“Last week he tried to commit suicide,” one waiter said.
“Why?”
“He was in despair.”
“What about?”
“Nothing.”
“How do you know it was nothing.”
“He has plenty of money.” (“A Clean” 288)

Warren Bennett notes the multiple meanings of “nothing” in this dialogue (73). The word might mean “nothing of consequence” if money and survival are the only problems other than those that we invent for ourselves. “Nothing” might also denote meaninglessness or an existential void.

The older waiter watches the old man leave the café and walk down the street, somewhat drunk but still dignified. Alone in the dark, closed café, the older waiter reflects:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain clearness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*. Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name thy kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada*. Give us this *nada* our daily *nada* and *nada* us our *nada* as we *nada* our *nadas* and *nada* us not into *nada* but deliver us from *nada*; *pues nada*. Hail nothing full of nothing is with thee. (“A Clean” 291)

The *nada* passage echoes the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (*Matthew* 6: 9-13)

The final line of the *nada* passage recalls the Ave Maria: "Hail Mary full of grace. / Our Lord is with thee." The final words of the Ave Maria prayer encapsulate the elegiac mood of "A Clean Well-Lighted Place": "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death" (qtd. in Saward 163).

Sheldon Norman Grebstein views the *nada* passage as a "bleakly unfunny parody of the Lord's Prayer" (164). John Killinger similarly interprets the passage as a parody of the Ave Maria and the Paternoster (14). Although it is mimetic, the *nada* passage does not fit the narrow dictionary definition of parody since it never verges on humor or ridicule. Nor does the passage appear to solely encompass a broader sense of parody as ironic inversion because here the sacred is veiled as non-belief. As Eliade explains, "The 'sacrality' of the sacrifice of Isaac was camouflaged. . . in its 'absolute negative': a crime. . . In our time religious experience has ceased to be recognized as such, for it is camouflaged in its opposite – non-spirituality, antireligion, opaqueness, etc." (*Journal III*: 32).

The *nada* passage exemplifies what Eliade terms the "matter of the larval survival of original spiritual meaning, which in this way becomes *unrecognizable*" (*Autobiography* 153). Because they fail to understand this, critics tend to misinterpret the *nada* passage, as does Steven K. Hoffman:

The character's deft substitution of the word *nada* for all the key nouns (entities) and verbs (actions) in the Paternoster suggests the concept's truly metaphysical stature. Obviously, *nada* is to connote a series of significant absences: the lack of a viable transcendent source of power and authority; a correlative lack of external physical or spiritual sustenance; the total lack of moral justification for action (in the broadest perspective, the essential meaninglessness of *any* action), and finally, the impossibility of deliverance from this situation. (175)

Within the context of the story, however, the despair of the old waiter does not annul the meaning of his actions. The café is a surrogate for companionship for the old man, and keeping it open a little longer is an act of kindness, Christian or not. The old waiter's tragic lucidity and insomnia reflect the collective predicament of those who understand and feel. In the words of Wallace Stevens: "And one trembles to be so understood and, at last, / To understand, as if to know became / The fatality of seeing too well" ("The Novel" 458).

Outside the café, light isolates a young woman and a soldier passing by: "The street light shone on the brass number on his collar. The girl wore no head covering and hurried beside him" ("A Clean" 288). Although Hemingway tells no more about the girl and the soldier, the light on the brass number, as transient as the gleam of a firefly, tells us all we need to know. As J. Kashkeen observes:

Only a writer of Hemingway's rank can thus convey the most intimate, the most subtle moods by an accumulation of external details; not by the word which is powerless, but by an opposition of words; not by directly expressed thought which is inexpressible, by an impulse, by pulling a bell that is to reverberate later in the reader's mind; by a scrupulous selection of external and trivial things, i.e., in fact by straining to restrict his power to see. (qtd in Rubinstein 3)

Another short story from *Men Without Women*, "The Light of the World," foregrounds the light image in its very title which is taken from *John* 8:12. In that verse, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (184). The story's title is identical to that of a painting by Holman Hunt which Hemingway's mother donated, in memory of her father, to the Third Congregational Church in Oak Park in 1905. At the time, a local newspaper described the painting as follows:

The artist has represented Christ standing in the dead of night before a door. The hinges are rusted and the doorway is overgrown with ivy. Before the threshold is a tangle of weeds. A bat driven from the shadows is circling about. The savior bears a lantern in His left hand. His right is raised in the act of knocking. Upon his head is a crown of thorns. (qtd. in Griffin 104)

The story begins with a sentence that characterizes the meanness of the town (Lamb 35): "When he saw us come in the door the bartender looked up and then reached over and put the glass covers on the two free-lunch bowls" ("Light" 292). The nasty reception that the bartender gives the first person narrator and his companion, Tom, is not altogether undeserved. When Tom reaches for the free-lunch bowl, the bartender tells him to put it back, to which Tom replies "You know where" (292). This rejoinder begins a series of sexual innuendos in the story.

The young men appear to be hoodlums passing through a small town that is the very picture of desolation:

"What the hell kind of place is this?" Tommy said.

"I don't know," I said.

We'd come in that town at one end and we were going out the other. It smelled of hides and tan bark and the big piles of sawdust. It was getting dark as we came in, and now that it was dark it was cold and the puddles of water in the road were freezing at the edges. ("Light" 293)

Cold and darkness contrast with the light in the story's title to give the unnamed town a hellish quality. Critics sometimes overlook the spiritual implications of Hemingway's imagery. Joseph Wood Krutch, for instance, sees in Hemingway "a weariness too great to be aware of anything except sensations (qtd. in Frederic Hoffman 373). However, it is precisely through the senses, as apparent in the above passage, that Hemingway evokes the sacred.

At the waiting room in the train station, the narrator and Tommy meet several prostitutes and some men, including Indians and lumberjacks, one of whom is a homosexual cook. Two prostitutes reminisce about a boxer who died young and whom they call Steve Ketchel. Their words of have the effect of incantation or prayer:

"He was more than any husband could ever be," Peroxide said. "We were married in the eyes of God and I belong to him right now and always will and all of me is his. I don't care about my body. They can take my body. My soul belongs to Steve Ketchel. By God, he was a man."

Everybody felt terribly. It was sad and embarrassing. Then Alice, who was still shaking, spoke. "You're a dirty liar," she said in that low voice. "You never laid Steve Ketchel in your life and you know it."

"How can you say that?" Peroxide said proudly.

"I say it because it's true," Alice said. "I'm the only one here that ever knew Steve Ketchel and I come from Mancelona and I knew him there and it's true and you know it's true and God can strike me dead if it isn't true."

"He can strike me too," Peroxide said.

"This is true, true, true, and you know it. Not just made up and I know exactly what he said to me."

"What did he say?" Peroxide asked, complacently.

Alice was crying so she could hardly speak from shaking so. "He said 'You're a lovely piece, Alice.' That's exactly what he said."

"It's a lie," Peroxide said.

"It's true," Alice said. "That's truly what he said."

"It's a lie," Peroxide said proudly.

"No, it's true, true, true, to Jesus and Mary true." ("Light" 296)

When the cook points out that the boxer was named Stanley Ketchel, one prostitute abruptly tells him to shut up. The prostitutes appear to have created a fictitious love that is nonetheless spiritually true. Even though the prostitutes berate and humiliate one another, their yearning for love momentarily transforms the narrator into something more than a spectator:

"Leave me with my memories," Peroxide said. "With my true, wonderful memories."

Alice looked at her and then at us and her face lost that hurt look and she smiled and she had about the prettiest face I ever saw. She had a pretty face and a nice smooth skin and a lovely voice and she was nice all right and really friendly. But my God she was big. She was as big as three women. Tom saw me looking at her and he said, "Come on. Let's go."

"Good-bye," said Alice. She certainly had a nice voice.

"Good-bye," I said.

"Which way are you boys going?" asked the cook.

"The other way from you," Tom told him. ("Light" 297)

The final line of the story – Tom's double entente – is a queer fusion of repulsion and invitation that echoes the narrator's words, "We'd come in that town at one end and we were going out the other" ("Light 293") and which recalls Kashkeen's description of "a bell that is to reverberate later

in the reader's mind" (qtd. in Rubinstein 3). The visit to the town is as depressing as a one-night stand.

Critics tend to overlook the light source in the above passage. Nicholas Canaday Jr., for instance, notes that neither the bar nor the train station provide the refuge of "a clean well-lighted place": "Not even a small area has been staked out against the nothingness. If this is the light of the world shining forth in these two places – as the title ironically suggests – then the boys had better keep on in the darkness" (76). Thus does Canaday miss the epiphany that unfolds the story.

The narrator and Alice bid "good-bye" to more than one another. The narrator's heart is momentarily lit by love that departs as quickly as it had come, for as Eliade observes:

The gods are par excellence travelers, visitors. Everything in the Cosmos can be transfigured; nothing is unworthy of receiving the 'visit' of a god: a flower, a stone, a wooden post. The universe is constantly being sanctified by means of an infinity of instantaneous epiphanies. . . . The gods do not take up residence anywhere in the world. The Spirit descends at anytime and anywhere, but it does not remain, it does not let itself be caught in temporal duration. The epiphany is par excellence momentary. Every divine presence is provisional. (*Autobiography* II 201)

Alice, whom Peroxide calls a "big mountain of pus" ("Light" 296), provides the narrator a vantage point for a clear spiritual view. Though the prostitutes provide a debased form of love, perhaps the only kind that some men will ever know, the redeemer hides in their corrupt putrefying depths.

Although he is the central figure of "Today is Friday" (1927), Jesus is not a character in this short play which takes place on the day of the crucifixion. Three Roman soldiers, speaking in colloquial American English, drink wine in an ancient version of a bar:

1st Roman Soldier – You tried the red?
2d Soldier – No, I ain't tried it.
1st Soldier – You better try it.
2d Soldier – All right, George, we'll have a round of the red. ("Today" 271)

The anachronistic dialogue is neither sacrilegious nor irreverent. Its purpose is not to trivialize or parody the crucifixion but to highlight its transhistorical significance.

The wineseller's name, George, not only recalls the Roman army officer who was martyred for refusing to renounce his Christian faith, but also happens to be the name of the man who runs the diner in "The Killers." George appears to dissemble before the soldiers. He seems detached and noncommittal when he declines the first soldier's invitation to comment on the crucifixion: "I'll tell you, gentlemen. I wasn't out there. It's a thing I haven't taken any interest in" ("Today" 272).

The third soldier is sickened by what he has just seen: the death of Jesus:

1st Soldier – Have a drink of it yourself. [*He turns to the third Roman soldier who is leaning on a barrel.*] What's the matter with you?

3^d Soldier – I got a gut-ache.

2^d Soldier – You've been drinking water.

1st Soldier – Try some of the red.

3^d Soldier – I can't drink the damn stuff. It makes my gut sour.

1st Soldier – You been out here too long.

3^d Soldier – Hell, don't I know it? ("Today" 271)

These last words confirm both that the third soldier had been out too long and that he has experienced hell. The gut-ache of the third soldier conjures the spectral presence of the Holy Spirit, for Jesus was given hyssop laden with wine vinegar just before he died: "Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit" (*John* 19: 29-30).

Christopher Dick observes that the first soldier uses theatrical language to describe Jesus' death, giving such examples as "He didn't want to come down off the cross. That's not his play" and "I was surprised how he acted" ("Today" 272). This language hints at the preordained nature of Jesus' death (Dick 199). As the anachronistic dialogue suggests, Jesus' crucifixion will be reenacted throughout the ages.

Beyond the soldiers' rough banter is the intimation that the person of Jesus is about to take on mythic proportions. In his laconic style, the first soldier praises Jesus's courage and forbearance on the cross:

Wine-seller – You were in bad shape, Lootenant. I know what fixes up a bad stomach.

[The third Roman soldier drinks the cup down.]

3d Roman Soldier – Jesus Christ. [He makes a face.]

2d Soldier – That false alarm!

1st Soldier – Oh, I don't know. He was pretty good in there today. (272)

Seemingly a banal exclamation, "Jesus Christ" here reveals one who heals physical and social illness. The Roman soldiers' dialogue traces a pattern of betrayal and sentimentality, one which is perhaps best expressed by the Urdu poet Munir Niazi in "The Stained Lights of My City":

Is there any cure
For the affliction
Of these people?

Perhaps this is
Their custom –
Their time-honoured way.

They choose the best
From among themselves
And crucify him.

Then for long afterwards
They weep over him.

This is how
They exonerate themselves
Of their crime. (22)

Jesus becomes manifest to those who strive to perceive him. Hemingway said, "As a weak leg grows stronger by exercise so will your faith be strengthened by the very effort you make in stretching it out towards things unseen" (qtd. in Raeburn 58).

The unseen presence of Jesus recurs in "Old Man at the Bridge" (1938) which takes place near the end of the Spanish Civil War. A first

person narrator describes the retreat of civilians across the Ebro River as they flee towards Barcelona:

An old man with steel rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, and men, women, and children were crossing it. The mule-drawn carts staggered up the steep bank from the bridge with soldiers helping push against the spokes of the wheels. The trucks ground up and away heading out of it all and the peasants plodded along in the ankle deep dust. But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any farther. ("Old Man" 57)

The image of dust conveys the old man's imminent death, as does the image of the bridge. Eliade describes the bridge as "that by which one passes from one modality of the real to another, from a certain condition to a different condition, from life to death, among other things" (*Journal III* 261). The unnamed narrator, apparently a volunteer fighter for the Spanish Republic, is about to cross a bridge in both a physical and metaphysical sense: "It was my business to cross the bridge, explore the bridgehead beyond and find out to what point the enemy had advanced. I did this and returned over the bridge. There were not so many carts now and very few people on foot, but the old man was still there" ("Old Man" 57).

The narrator learns that the seventy-six-year-old man has abandoned a cat, two goats and four pairs of pigeons because of the artillery bombardment. The enumeration of the animals suggests the biblical number seven which is associated with a day of rest, with the number of each species of animals that Noah carried in his ark, and with the number of days of the Great Flood recounted in *Genesis* 7. The old man fears for his animals, save for the cat. The narrator tries to reassure the old man that the animals will be fine and urges him to flee:

"If you are rested I would go," I urged. "Get up and try to walk now."

"Thank you," he said and got to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust.

"I was taking care of animals," he said dully, but no longer to me. "I was only taking care of animals."

There was nothing to do about him. It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing toward the Ebro. It was a gray overcast day with a

low ceiling so their planes were not up. That and the fact that cats know how to look after themselves was all the good luck that old man would ever have. ("Old Man" 58)

The sacral dimension of this story emerges in a seemingly incidental detail, namely, the allusion to Easter which commemorates the resurrection of Christ. Jesus is resurrected by the old man who suffers less from weakness and fatigue than from love for his animals. The narrator also resurrects Christ through his compassion for an old man whom he is unable to help and whose name he does not even know. Like the old man, the narrator must face death and has a bridge to cross. The little that we know about the narrator and the old man suffices.

Hemingway's short fiction epitomizes Eliade's belief that "literary creation unveils the universal and exemplary meanings hidden in men and in the most commonplace events" ("Literary Imagination" 19). That we still explore the submerged depths of Hemingway's characters in search of ambiguous miracle and fleeting transfiguration is a tribute to Hemingway's art of camouflage. Alluding to this art in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Hemingway said: "Things may not be immediately discernible in what a man writes, and in this sometimes he is fortunate; but eventually they are quite clear and by these and the degree of alchemy that he possesses he will endure or be forgotten" (196).

Notes:

¹ The richly evocative place name "Fossalta" is a compound of the Italian words "*fossa*," which means "trench" or "grave," and "*alta*" which means "tall" or "lofty." During the First World War, Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in northern Italy and was badly wounded at Fossalta di Piave. A priest anointed Hemingway along with other injured men who were awaiting evacuation (Baker, *Life* 45). After this near-death experience, Hemingway became very devout and would pray fervently to Our Lady and various saints (Buske 84-85).

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