FIREARMS IN THE WORKS OF HEMINGWAY AND MAILER

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BY NOW IT IS MOUTHING A TRUISM TO POINT OUT THAT FIREARMS have played an iconic role in American history. Starting with this axiomatic assumption, one finds that guns are virtually ubiquitous in the works of those two peculiarly American authors, Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer. Sometimes mere accoutrements or plot devices, they are more often significant thematically and symbolically.

Occasionally, serendipitous connections between the two authors present themselves. The best example of these may be the case of the 6.5 mm. Mannlicher-Carcano rifle. At the outset of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway describes how

> the troops were muddy and wet in their capes; their rifles were wet and under their capes the two leather cartridge-boxes on the front of the belts, gray leather boxes heavy with the packs of clips of thin, long 6.5 mm. cartridges, bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though they were six months gone with child. (4)

This crucial passage foreshadows the thematic connection of rain, pregnancy, war and death in the novel, notably that of Catherine Barkley, which makes *Farewell* so clearly a naturalistic work.

The 6.5 mm. Mannlicher-Carcano, standard issue for the Italian army throughout the first half of the twentieth century, was subsequently sold cheaply in large numbers through mail-order houses worldwide. One of these rifles, equipped with a 4-power scope, was ordered by Lee Harvey Oswald in

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1963, forty-five years after the 1918 setting of Hemingway's *Farewell*, and used to assassinate John F. Kennedy, as elaborated upon in Mailer's *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995). This death of monumental, tragic proportions was brought about by the use of a $10 gun. Also in *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederick Henry feels faintly ridiculous in obeying the regulation that a uniformed officer be armed with a pistol even when out of combat (148). Yet after his convalescence in Milan he uses his pistol (of unspecified caliber, but described as "regulation") during the next campaign to shoot one of two sergeants for disobedience and desertion (204). The point of the passage, one of many emphasizing the anti-heroic message of the novel, is that Henry and the enlisted man Bonello (who administers the *coup de grâce*) are so inured to death in war that they are entirely dispassionate about it.

Most clearly parallel to this scene is the opening of *An American Dream* (1965) in which Stephen Richards Rojack kills four German machine-gunners with his .30 caliber M1 carbine. Portentously set under a full moon, the episode illustrates Rojack's capacity for lethal violence and his perception that murder has a sexual aspect to it (Mailer, *American* 3–6). Yet, in a later passage in the New England woods with his wife Deborah, he is shamed by her superior ability to hunt small animals with a .22 rifle, another of the scenes that illuminates the constant competition in their intense love/hate relationship: "And in fact she was an exceptional hunter. She had gone on safari with her first husband and killed a wounded lion charging ten feet from her throat, she dropped an Alaskan bear with two shots to the heart (30/06 Winchester)" (35).

Moving to the beginning of Mailer's career, it is obvious that every character in *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) is issued regulation small arms: the officers with caliber .45 ACP Model 1911A1 pistols, the enlisted men with 30-06 M1 Garand rifles (as distinguished from Rojack's smaller M1 carbine) or .45 Thompson submachine guns. Perhaps the most crucial episode in which one of these weapons figures is late in the book, during the abortive attempt by I & R platoon to climb Mt. Anaka, when Red Valsen rebels against Staff Sgt. Croft's leadership and is forced to obey at gunpoint: "Croft . . . unslung his rifle, cocked the bolt leisurely. . . . It was worthless to temporize. Croft wanted to shoot him" (695–6). When Red capitulates, it signals the end of all resistance to Croft, which is emblematic of the allegorical conclusion by Mailer that reactionaries would dominate post-war America and which emphasizes the novel's pessimistic message, its naturalistic bias.

If war is the most obvious arena in which guns figure, it is not hard to find the others: hunting and, in urban civilian life, criminal pursuits. The most striking of the latter occurs in Hemingway's great story, "The Killers," and Mailer's 1984 murder mystery, *Tough Guys Don't Dance.* In the former, the two hit men, almost robotic in their mindless, inexorable commitment to a job that must be done, pursue their prey, ex-boxer Ole Anderson, with a chilling, leisurely assurance and sawed-off 12 gauge shotguns. In the first cinematic version of the story (1946), a classic *film noir* with Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner in their first starring roles, the killers (one of whom is William Conrad, later of TV "Cannon" fame) use more pedestrian Smith & Wesson Model 10 .38 Special revolvers. As in Hemingway's story, Ole Anderson, in true naturalistic fashion, passively awaits his death.

In *Tough Guys Don't Dance,* several of the seven violent deaths are carried out by the three matching .22 automatic pistols bought by Meeks Wardley Hilby III, including his own suicide and that of his *doppelgänger* Lonnie Pangborn. These parallels in death echo the sexual parallels in the lives of these characters and the novel presents a sexual nexus in which virtually every character is attached carnally to several others.

In a more significant book, *The Executioner's Song* (1979), the career criminal Gary Gilmore traffics in guns and murders with one. He is inept with the .32 automatic he uses in his two cold-blooded assassinations, for he shoots himself in the hand after the second murder, and the bleeding wound casts immediate suspicion upon him and leads to his quick capture by the police. This episode is in line with Gary's failures throughout the book and his entire life.

In *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), the metaphorical juxtaposition of over-armed Texans hunting in Alaska, and the parallel depredations of the U.S. Army upon the population of Vietnam is best expressed in the passage where DJ lists at length the battery of guns brought on the hunt, especially by his father, Rusty:

> Which brings up Rusty, who travels like a big-ass hunter. . . . yeah, he got for instance a .404 Jeffrey on a Mauser Magnum action with a Circassian walnut stock, one love of a custom job by Biesen with Zeiss Zielklein 2 1/2X on Griffin & Howe side mount for Gun #1. Gun #2 is Model 70 Winchester rechambered to .300 Weatherly Magnum, Stith Bear Cub scope, birds'-eye maple

> stock, etcetera. . . . Gun #3 is Winslow Regimental Grade 7 mm. Remington Magnum with FN Supreme 400 action and Premium Grade Douglas barrel, ivory and ebony inlays in the stock, basket weave carving on both sides of the forearm and pistol grip, Redfield Jr. mounts, Redfield 2 X –7 X variable scope. (79–80)

Despite this impressive array of weaponry, Rusty selfishly fails his son by his lack of a sportsmanlike hunter's ethics. Later in the novel, it is only by divesting themselves of all weapons and other equipment that DJ and his best friend Tex Hyde are able to experience a transcendent oneness with nature.

In a similar situation but without the devastating irony, Hemingway equips the title character in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" with a 30-06 rifle and 220 grain solid slugs for lion and Cape buffalo. The professional hunter, Robert Wilson, based on the famous Philip Percival with whom Hemingway had hunted in Africa, carries a "shockingly big-bored" .505 Gibbs "with a muzzle velocity of two tons" (138). Here, Hemingway makes an error in nomenclature and physics, since muzzle *velocity* is measured in feet per second, and muzzle *energy* in foot pounds. Yet the .505 Gibbs, a highly specialized big game hunting rifle of which only eighty were ever manufactured, presents a very impressive picture in the mind's eye. Finally, in one of the greatest examples of controlled ambiguity in literature, Macomber's wife Margot, "shot at the buffalo with the 6.5 Mannlicher" (153), killing her husband. This 6.5 mm Mannlicher (a fine sporting arm quite different from the rough, mass-produced Mannlicher Carcano of *Farewell* and *Oswald's Tale*) is the instrument of a death which lives forever in the shadowy ambiguity of Margot Macomber's true intent, and which brings to a close the short, happy, existential life of the protagonist.

Part One of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) opens with an action sequence in which two politically opposed groups of Cubans kill each other with, among other guns, a 9mm. Luger, a 12 gauge shotgun, and a .45 Thompson submachine gun. Later in the same section of the book, the protagonist Harry Morgan, a modern pirate like his namesake Henry Morgan (1635?–1688: a Welsh buccaneer in the Caribbean, later acting governor of Jamaica, 1680–82) carries out the dangerous mission of transporting (and double-crossing) illegal Chinese immigrants with the aid of a fairly standard but versatile battery consisting of a Winchester 30-30 lever action carbine, a

12 gauge pump shotgun, and "the Smith and Wesson thirty-eight special I had when I was on the police force up in Miami" (Hemingway, *To Have* 44).

In Part Two, Harry is badly wounded in his right arm, which he subsequently loses, by the gunfire of law enforcement agents while smuggling liquor from Cuba. But in Part Three, the longest and most intense section of the book, he (literally) single-handedly kills, with his Thompson submachine gun, four Cuban revolutionaries escaping from a bank robbery. And yet, a true existential character trapped in a naturalistic world, he mutters with his dying breath this credo: "No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance" (225).

Many guns figure prominently in the 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* perhaps most significantly the Smith and Wesson .32 revolver handed down by Robert Jordan's grandfather, a veteran of the American Civil War:

> It was a single action officer's model .32 caliber and there was no trigger guard. It had the softest, sweetest trigger pull you had ever felt and it was always well oiled and the bore was clean although the finish was all worn off and the brown metal of the barrel and the cylinder was worn smooth from the leather of the holster. (Hemingway, *For Whom* 336)

After Robert's father commits suicide with this gun (like the author's own father), although the revolver is lovingly described, Robert Jordan disposes of it in a memorable flashback by dropping it into an eight hundred feet deep lake (337). In the main action of the novel, Jordan is armed with an automatic pistol and a submachine gun, both unspecified as to caliber or manufacture. But other guns are more clearly defined: the Lewis gun of which the guerrilla band is so proud but whose obsolescence disappoints Jordan, and the 9mm Star pistol with which El Sordo carries out his "suicide" ruse on the fascists surrounding him in his last stand. Finally, Robert Jordan, waiting to make *his* last stand at the novel's conclusion, grasps his submachine gun and thinks, "I have fought for what I believed in for a year now. If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it" (467). Here, as with Harry Morgan, the firearm is an extension of the individual's capacity to resist evil forces and fight with existential heroism for the good.

Firearms play minor roles in other Hemingway novels and stories: the shotguns Col. Cantwell uses in the opening duck-hunting sequence of *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950); the .357 Magnum carried by Thomas Hudson in *Islands in the Stream* (1970) and the Thompson gun used to shoot sharks in that novel; the shotgun used by the father in "A Day's Wait" to dispense death to quail while his beloved son is lying in bed at home mistakenly expecting his own death. Finally, the last gun for Hemingway was the "double-barreled Boss shotgun with a tight choke" with which he took his own life (Baker 563).

What, finally, can we say about the role of guns in the works of Hemingway and Mailer? They are virtually ubiquitous, sometimes mere everyday equipment, more often objects of profound symbolic and thematic significance. But always, as in life, they loom as instruments that amplify the individual's influence on the world around him. Whether used to hunt game, commit murder, or fight for a political ideal, every gun is a tool that extends the power of the existential human will in a world that would attempt to render it impotent.

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