TOLLS OF WAR: MAILERIAN SUB-TEXTS IN *FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS*

LAWRENCE R. BROER

Hemingway's Second War: Bearing Witness to the Spanish Civil War
By Alex Vernon
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AT A PARTY FOR NORMAN MAILER, I pried the author away from a covey of adoring coeds long enough to ask him how he thought Hemingway, notoriously disdainful of politics, would have responded to his protégé's turn from straight fiction to the new journalism of *Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*. I was teaching both books and hoped to return to class armed with personal, invigorating insights from the author himself. Clearly annoyed at the distraction, Mailer replied, "What does it matter?"

Had I struck a nerve? Despite my enthusiasm for both writers, did Mailer interpret my remark as implied criticism? Never mind, if only indirectly, Alex Vernon's lively and carefully researched study of Hemingway's involvement in the Spanish Civil War reminds us of the political sophistication of both writers. Moreover, in Vernon's discussion of the way Hemingway's personal experience as a war correspondent fed and shaped the writing of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, we see Hemingway anticipating the New Journalism Mailer perfected—their mutual recognition of the fictional possibilities of and strategies for merging fact and fiction. Showing us how Hemingway's

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dispatches verge on becoming stories, how, for instance, he employs the second person as a way of bringing the reader along for the ride, Vernon accentuates the nature of literary truth both writers were after. Vernon describes Mailer and Hemingway as writers committed to "eye-witness" standards, yet journalistic writing whose "essence" is "not information" but personal truth, "optimistic, heroic, human interest work."

Vernon's discourse unfolds in three parts: discussions of Hemingway's early participation as war correspondent, his contributions to the Republican documentaries "Spain in Flames" and "The Spanish Earth," and Hemingway's evolved, more critical thinking about the war and the Spanish people as portrayed in *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* It is toward the latter that all else builds that constitutes Vernon's main achievement. Much of what Vernon tells us in the early chapters is well known.[1] But his examples of Hemingway's famous understated style in the author's reports to NANA, the North American Newspaper Alliance, "paradoxically objective and subjective," show us how the demands of reporting and Hemingway's fictional gifts work as one: pithy, incongruous juxtapositions that highlight the grotesqueness of battle—soldiers so mutilated "they did not rate stretchers," a decaying corpse whose left arm hangs "stiffly in air as if even in death he tried to make fascist salute," an old woman returning home from market, "one leg suddenly detached whirling against the wall of an adjoining house," a driver lurching from his motor car, "his scalp hanging down over his eyes, to sit down on the sidewalk." Hemingway's stark, unsentimental prose shocks us with horrors in the midst of the commonplace, even, Vernon says, "seeing beauty where one shouldn't." It challenges us "as gruesome photographs do, our repulsion to the obscene violence clashing with our appreciation of its perfected expression."

Central to Hemingway's intentions in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Vernon focuses on ways the journalism anticipates and explains the humanity and art of the author's Spanish novel. Eschewing easy dualisms, Hemingway's consistent reporting of the war as brutal and savage on both sides reflects his respect and sympathy for the common soldier, regardless of allegiance. Despite his fervent support of the Republican cause, Hemingway's portrayals of the suffering and even the heroism of Franco's fascists are no less admiring than those of the Republican fallen. He wishes somebody would turn over the bodies of the working-class and poor Italian infantry who died fighting for the wrong cause, to face and commune with mother earth, the source of

their lives and of their true allegiance. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan recognizes that the absurdity of war requires killing people labeled "enemy" that one otherwise might befriend, divided only by arbitrary political alignments. Andres reasons that if his father had not been a Republican, both he and his brother would be soldiers now with the fascists. Anselmo observes about the Fascists at the bridge, "I have watched them all day and they are the same as we are."

While both the journalism and the fiction stress the general inhumanity of war, Vernon credibly argues that understanding their difference illustrates not only the process of invention that transforms fact to fiction, but indicates marked moral growth on the author's part. While history and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* tell us that Republican soldiers were as guilty of cruelty and brutality as their fascist counterparts, Vernon explains that Hemingway's commitment to the Republican cause was so profoundly deep and personal that his journalistic accounts become not only deceptively optimistic but hyperbolic in their support. Like Mailer's Marxist theorist, William McCloud in *Barbary Shore*, Hemingway/Jordan believe that the war in Spain was a battle for civilization itself, the point on which the future of the human race might turn, and that winning the war there might prevent the war to come. Citing the following example as a synecdoche for Hemingway's "running optimistic commentary" on the entire war, Vernon refers to Hemingway's report about a battle certain to be lost: "Today, you see the extent and seriousness of the Government resistance. It is not over yet by a long shot, and one thing that has been learned in this Spanish war is that anything can happen and the experts are always wrong." Vernon concludes that what in his pro-loyalist dispatches and essays Hemingway truly understood about Republican betrayals and atrocities, and to what extent he might have turned to a more truthful cynicism, is a question for the ages. Neither is it possible, Vernon says, to determine the extent of the author's "blind acceptance" of the Republican, and sometimes the Comintern line, versus the deep insight and pragmatism of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

What we know for certain about Hemingway's more evolved and honest political thinking in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* constitutes the most telling way the journalism bears on the fiction of both Hemingway and Mailer. While much of James Brookfield's 2009 overview of Mailer's work reflects a woefully superficial view of Mailer's literary gifts in general and his late work in particular, his praise of *Barbary Shore* evokes Vernon's primary argument in

Hemingway's Second War. Referring to the Stalinist agent McLeod's apologia for his political crimes during the Spanish Civil War, Brookfield observes that Mailer seriously addresses one of the most complex political phenomena of the modern world—the emergence of Stalinism, and the tragic schism in the minds of thinking people like William McLeod and Hemingway's Robert Jordan— torn between hopes for socialist reforms and the evolving barbarism of Russian political oppression. Brookfield evokes the agonizing inner war of both men when he wonders about the intense toll communism's contradictions took on so many who began their literary careers as idealistic people, "grappling" from the point of view of optimism born of socialist ideals, and bitter disappointment at its failures. Though unlike McLeod, Jordan claims not to be a real Marxist, yet he understands its dialectics well, and like the narrator of *Barbary Shore*, Mikey Lovett, he sympathizes with its capitalistic critique and humanitarian goals. As well, Jordan argues that the communists offer the "best discipline and the soundest and sanest for the prosecution of the war."[2]

McLeod's faith in the socialist ideals for which the war was fought registers when he says, "It is my hope that a revolutionary determination, the life of which has never been seen before will sweep the earth, and these theses, difficult, recondite, and often incomprehensible, will match the experience of even the most inarticulate peasant, so that the socialist theorist will once again find language to reach the many." If Jordan is less politically doctrinaire than McLeod, and certainly less garrulous, his hope for universal brotherhood, his commitment to the struggle for freedom and equality in Spain prove equally strong: He tells himself, "This ideal gave you a part in something you could believe in wholly and completely and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it. It was something that you have never known before but that you had experienced now and you gave such importance to it and the reason for it that your own death seemed of complete unimportance."

Ultimately, the failure of the wider human community McLeod and Jordan seek produces heartbreak and despair— the "toll" of which Brookfield speaks, the main subject of Vernon's book, and the primary drama of *Barbary Shore* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* Reflective of what Vernon calls the Republic's history of "internal dysfunction," the fractious acrimony and discord inside McLeod's boarding house and Jordan's mountain cave mirror the larger disharmony of temperamental, cultural, and political differences that dooms

the Civil War from the start, and that makes prospects for universal order and peace seem increasingly remote and naïve. Divided painfully by their own doubt, as McLeod puts it, Mailer and Hemingway's failed, despairing idealists face a similar crisis of faith: the effort to remain hopeful and loyal to dreams of freedom and equality, "love for every man our brother," versus feelings of defeat born of the divisive selfishness and disunity of those around them that augur the futility of the struggle. What results are extreme mental suffering and feelings of guilt, and the agonizing conflict of warring forces—cynicism and withdrawal versus love and engagement—that creates the powerful source of tension within both protagonists.[3]

When Vernon says it is as if Hemingway were battling his own "conscience," he identifies both Jordan's inner war and the special, even allegorical relationship of McLeod and his novelist socialist apprentice, William Lovett, a version of McLeod's younger self McLeod calls "conscience." Lovett senses McCloud across the hall staring at the ceiling as he does and dreaming his dreams. Just as within the psychic interplay of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan's more honest, self-critical, and hopeful self battles fatalism, an unnerving authoritarian manner, and proclivities to violence he feels he will have to atone for later, McLeod exists as a father-confessor figure to Lovett, from whom Lovett can always expect an honest response, whose kindly solicitations help Lovett heal psychic war wounds, fortify his idealism, sharpen his thinking, and encourage his work—the self-begetting novel we are reading. The more McLeod speaks of mental, moral and physical crimes of war that he shares with Lovett, the more Lovett remembers his own concealed transgressions. The analytical McLeod instructs Lovett in negotiating the space between "personal desire" and "political possibility." In turn Lovett listens to McLeod's own sins, rekindles McLeod's flagging socialist fervor—the part of himself that McLeod says remains hopeful as the "machine" grows bigger—and his devotion to the older, wiser man allows McLeod the grace to transmit, as McLeod says, "the intellectual conclusions of my life, and thus give dignity to my experience."

Rather than offer final solutions to their protagonists' inner war, the authors deny us the complacency of closure and provoke us to debate the struggle of conscience within ourselves. Like their characters, we are positioned in between what Lovett calls "an antipathetic past and a moot future." The futility of Lannie Madison in *Barbary Shore* reminds us of Mailer's warning in *Why Are We at War* that "Freedom has to be kept alive everyday of our

existence, because we can all be swallowed by our misery . . . become weary, give up." Evoking the gas chambers of World War II, Madison calls McLeod and Lovett fools for continuing to believe in a better world, concluding "there's no new world to make, for the world devours." All the characters of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Barbary Shore* are in fact broken in various ways and prone to defeatism. "Vast armies," McCloud says, continue to mount themselves toward endless war. Yet it is Jordan's and McLeod/Lovett's mutual existential faith in life as a process of becoming that sustains their belief in a saner, more orderly world.

Jordan knows that he must make difficult moral choices that are always subjective and personal, what Kierkegaard calls the existentialist's "earnestness." He hates to leave this world but determines it is one worth sacrificing and even dying for.[4] In turn, McLeod declares that he depends upon "potentiality," that possibilities are limited only by the human mind. Despite that McLeod dies (like Jordan), in the words he scribbles at the bottom of his will he bequeaths to Lovett what the newborn writer calls the "rudiments of selfless friendship, the heritage of love and sacrifice" Jordan passes on to Maria: "And may he be alive to see the rising of the Phoenix." As a free man, virtually without a social or economic past, Lovett may author his own identity, which as narrator of Mailer's story is exactly what he does.

NOTES

1. Vernon's scholarship is prodigious and adroitly employed to bolster or to offer critical counterpoint to his own interpretation of the cunningly problematic moral issues of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. As a companion text to the war in general, I suggest the variety of critical perspectives in John Beals Romeiser's earlier, multifaceted study, *Red Flags, Black Flags: Critical Essays on the Literature of the Spanish Civil War (Madrid, Scripta Humanistica,* 1982*)*. Referring as they do to over 800 novels written from 1936 to the present, these essays attest to the extraordinary attraction the war has had for writers worldwide. The painful question these writers ask returns us immediately and in even a more broadly informed way to Vernon's book and to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: how in such a fratricidal, bloody, and agonizing war, Spaniards could have come to such extremes. Vernon has it right: "the analysis of it is never done." In my own discussion of the war in *Hemingway's Spanish Tragedy* (U. of Alabama Press, 1973), I discuss the way Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset and other prominent critics of Spanish culture explain the internal struggle taking place within the mind and heart of the Spaniard— a belligerent independence and aversion to authority and order that predetermined the tragic consequence of the war.
2. For an excellent discussion of the factual account of both writers' relationship to Soviet Russia, see Victor Peppard's "Hemingway, Mailer, and the 'Reds.'" (*The Mailer Review*, Fall 2010).

3. Vernon suggests that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, it is far more than the complexities of the Spanish Civil War to which Hemingway bears witness. Drawing from psycho-sexual studies by Mark Spilka, Carl Eby, Debra Moddelmog, and Kenneth Lynn, Vernon's concluding chapters, "Pilar and Maria," and "From Frederic Henry to Robert Jordan" extend these critics' argument that Henry's and Jordan's gender and sexual anxieties constitute the deepest, most personal and guarded part of the author's famous iceberg. Reading Henry and Jordan's feminine or androgynous feelings together, Vernon sees Hemingway seeking release from the strict gender boundaries of his conventional Oak Park upbringing, exploring buried homoerotic and incestuous desires that anticipate the taboo gender games of *The Garden of Eden*.
4. Contrary to this existential reading, Vernon suggests that by contriving to be killed, Jordan assumes an inauthentic pose, relieving himself of the necessity of further choice-making. The most original and startling aspect of Vernon's hypothesis is that compounding the toll of multiple wars, the author's emasculating gender insecurities contribute to the author's death wish, the "suicidal subtext" motivating both *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Rather than be "dragged reluctantly into fatherhood," Henry and Jordan commit suicide to avoid the complications of family life and "domestic entrapment" from which the Hemingway hero has always been in flight. Vernon cites Gerry Brenner's view that Henry commits suicide after he finishes narrating his story. Neither protagonist's relationships, Vernon says, will ever "fall prey to babies, nor to finances nor the numbing effect of ordinary life." In this vein Vernon disputes the conventional view of the novel's ending as ennobling. Citing Mussolini's definition of fascism as a belief in "holiness and heroism," Vernon suggests that Jordan's death not only removes him from actual social obligations, allowing him to avoid family life and all it might involve and symbolize, but ironically has a fascist tint to it. It follows that rather than redemptive, Jordan's relationship with Maria also has fascist implications, confirming a traditional gender hierarchy that undermines the cause of freedom and independence for which Jordan fights. The overthrow of the class system, Vernon posits, should mean the end of the patriarchal system as well. Jordan's voice "eclipses Maria's, excludes hers, silences hers," as he satisfies his own psychic needs. Though he suggests that Hemingway is warning the reader against accepting Jordan's "self-serving perspectives," Vernon is never timid about critiquing Hemingway's personal morality, objecting, for instance, to the author's "fetishing" of the "primitive" and "romanticizing" of Maria's erotic albeit spiritual animality. Vernon concludes this lucid, provocative study by asserting that connecting Henry's and Jordan's gender and sexual anxieties with their suicidal natures is only a hypothesis, agreeing with Thomas Strychacz and Allen Josephs that Hemingway's complex aesthetics require that we no more insist on one reading of this richly problematic text than another.

If I may venture an advertisement for myself, considering the turbulence of Mailer and Hemingway's work and inner life, along with Kurt Vonnegut's as the scene of constant warfare, Vernon's reference to Paul Fussel's line, "My war is synonymous with my life" would have made the ideal prescript for my forthcoming study of Hemingway: *Vonnegut and Hemingway: Writers at War* (U. of South Carolina Press, 2011).