

Hemingway in decline: Film version of *Across the River and Into the Trees*

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A film version of Ernest Hemingway's 1950 novel, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, set in immediately post-World War II Venice, was shot a number of years ago during the height of the COVID pandemic and first appeared in 2022. It is now available for streaming. The film was adapted from the novel by Peter Flannery and directed by Spanish filmmaker Paula Ortiz.

Across the River and Into the Trees was the first novel Hemingway had published since *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (set during the Spanish Civil War) in 1940, more than a decade earlier. The second imperialist war and many other traumatic events had taken place since the previous work, as well as numerous changes in Hemingway's personal and professional conditions. The book was poorly received in general, and, indeed, it is a weak, self-deluded and at times foolish book. It shows signs of a serious decline.

But a decline in what? Simply in Hemingway's skill as a novelist? Or something more? It is necessary to briefly consider his history as a writer and some of the challenges he faced.

Hemingway's first and very striking novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, was published a century ago this year (in October). The book considers the physical and emotional consequences of the First World War for a group of American and British expatriates living in Paris and traveling in Spain. It centers on Jake Barnes, whose war wound makes sexual activity impossible, Lady Brett Ashley, a twice-divorced Englishwoman who carries on various unhappy love affairs, and their at-loose-ends circle of friends.

Critic Edmund Wilson, the best writer on Hemingway, commented that what gave *The Sun Also Rises* its deep unity and disturbing effectiveness was the intimate relation between the medievalist festival in Pamplona, Spain, with its bloody running of the bulls and bull-fighting,

and the atrocious behavior of the group of holiday-making British and Americans who have come down from Paris to enjoy it. In the heartlessness of these people, in their treatment of one another, do we not find the same principle at work as in the pagan orgy of the festival? Is not the brutal persecution of the Jew as much a natural casualty as the fate of the man who is gored by the bull on his way to visit the bull-ring?

In this book, Hemingway is at his best, direct, concise and unsparing. Here, in his earlier collection of stories, *In Our Time*, and in the Nick Adams stories set in northern Michigan, the writer fought against what he thought of as psychological and other kinds of clutter, ornamental Victorianism and other literary "disorders." Hemingway was not the only artist who determined that official civilization and its culture as they had presented themselves had failed wretchedly, had proven a gigantic lie, landing the population in the horror and slaughter of the First World War.

Words, Henry James ventured, "have, like millions of other things, been more over-strained and knocked about and voided than in all the long ages before." Hemingway, wounded and nearly killed in the war as an American Red Cross ambulance driver in northern Italy, took very seriously the notion that something stripped down, more honest was called for in every sphere of life, including poetry and prose.

Hemingway's terseness and understatement, influenced by literary figures as disparate as Mark Twain, Ring Lardner, Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound ("poetry-making equals condensation") and Gertrude Stein (and painters such as Paul Cézanne), as well as by his experience as a journalist in Europe (1920-1924), made a strong, even earthshaking impression on readers and critics at the time. Fellow writer Ford Madox Ford suggested that Hemingway's words "strike you, each one, as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook. They live and shine, each in its place."

Hemingway belonged to a generally left-wing generation of artists and writers. Academic Kenneth Kinnamon (in "Hemingway and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway*, 1996) is quite right to dismiss the various attempts by right-wing and liberal critics alike, to "discount" Hemingway's "interest in and understanding of politics." And it is probably legitimate to suggest that from "the beginning to the end of his adult life, he had deep sympathies with the left," but it is an exaggeration or a misunderstanding to add, "especially the revolutionary left." Kinnamon obviously includes the Communist Party and Stalinism, around which Hemingway circulated in the late 1930s, in that category. But even to suggest that, assuming the writer mistakenly associated the CP in the 1930s with Bolshevism, he was consistent in his support for a "revolutionary" trend to his last days would be a considerable overstatement.

Hemingway's views were more confused and diffuse than that. In a letter, in 1932, for example, he remarked offhandedly, "I suppose I am an anarchist," whatever he may have meant by that.

Kinnamon argues that "Hemingway's culminating statement in the mid-1930s on revolution, politics, and writing is surely 'Old Newsman Writes: A Letter from Cuba'" (published in *Esquire*, December 1934). In that piece, Hemingway asserted that the

world was much closer to revolution in the years after the war than it is now. In those days we who believed in it looked for it at any time, expected it, hoped for it—for it was the logical thing. But everywhere it came [except in Russia] it was aborted.

Hemingway's explanation for the various "abortions" was far too simplistic, "If you study history you will see that there can never be a Communist revolution without, first, a complete military debacle." While such devastating defeats have played a role at times in the development of

objectively revolutionary conditions, the most critical questions, which always involve leaderships, parties, programs and theoretical struggles, were a closed book to Hemingway, as they were for most artists. History is not at all the sort of automatic process he envisioned.

There is no indication that Hemingway ever seriously paid attention to the conflict between Stalinism and Trotskyism, the national-opportunist and entirely unrealizable program of “socialism in one country” versus the project of world socialist revolution.

In “The Long Shadow of History: The Moscow Trials, American Liberalism and the Crisis of Political Thought in the United States,” David North summed up the outlook of the artistic and academic milieu. North explained that the Depression transformed the political and social climate in the US, pushing considerable portions of the American intelligentsia to the left. Its liberalism was

not based on clearly defined political and economic conceptions. It was as amorphous as the term itself, which generally meant nothing more than a vague commitment to the gradual improvement of social conditions and the curtailment of corruption in urban politics.

The rise of Hitler and other right-wing forces convinced these intellectuals that bourgeois democracy faced collapse. At the same time, the Soviet bureaucracy, frightened by Nazi Germany, adopted an orientation toward the democratic imperialist powers, Britain, France and the US. The Stalinists began aggressively to court liberal and radical intellectuals, while the American CP’s politics took on an increasingly liberal coloration, exemplified by its support for Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.

The sudden interest in the USSR did not make revolutionaries of the various writers and artists. As Trotsky noted in 1938, a “whole generation of ‘leftist’ intelligentsia has turned its eyes for the last ten or fifteen years to the East and has bound its lot, in varying degrees, to a victorious revolution, if not to a revolutionary proletariat.”

Hemingway, in his inevitably distinct fashion, fell into this general category. In the late 1930s, he loosely operated in the Stalinist orbit. He covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist and strongly supported the bourgeois Spanish Republican government and the Popular Front. Hemingway’s weakest side came into play here, his quasi-cynical, “tough guy” stance, which largely functioned to provide justification for Stalinist *realpolitik*. His play *The Fifth Column*, although not openly a calumny against left-wing opponents of the capitalist Republic and its Stalinist backers, takes at face value the latter’s claims about the fascist “enemy within.”

The hero, though an Anglo-American, is an agent of the Communist secret police, engaged in catching Fascist spies in Spain; and his principal exploit ... is clearing out, with the aid of a single Communist, an artillery post manned by seven Fascists. The scene is like a pushover and getaway from one of the cruder Hollywood Westerns. It is in the nature of a small boy’s fantasy. (Wilson)

In the name of practical politics, Hemingway worked with Soviet military advisers and agents from Stalin’s secret police in Spain. For the same reason, he concealed the Stalinists’ execution of leftist José Robles, a friend and translator for fellow American novelist John Dos Passos, who was working at the time with Hemingway on the film *The Spanish*

Earth (directed by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens). Hemingway claimed that such killings were “necessary in time of war,” and Dos Passos denounced him.

However, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, published in October 1940, is more skeptical toward and critical of Stalinist policies and tactics. In turn, Stalinist cultural spokesmen like Mike Gold accused Hemingway of “slander.”

With a certain degree of wishful thinking, Wilson was pleased to note that “Hemingway the artist is with us again; and it is like having an old friend back” and that the writer had “dropped off the Stalinist melodrama of the days of 1937, a way of thinking certainly alien to his artistic nature.”

While it was all to the good that Hemingway had begun to acknowledge Stalinist corruption and criminality, that hardly settled political matters. He was further disoriented, like many of his fellow left intellectuals, by the Second World War, which he and they tended to interpret or passively accept as a type of “people’s war” against fascism. Hemingway griped about this or that US or British military commander or strategic line, and Roosevelt himself (a “Paralytic Demagogue”), but the individually malicious comments tended to remain in inverse proportion to actual opposition to the imperialist status quo as a whole.

To his credit, Hemingway never became a cheerleader for the Cold War or sang the praises of American democracy, remarking in a letter to William Faulkner in 1947, for example, “Things [have] never been worse than now.”

But what comes across most strongly in *Across the River and Into the Trees* and other works of the last 15 years or so of his life is the dissolution of the left intellectual milieu in the postwar epoch, the milieu on which Hemingway, far more than he would have cared to admit, leaned on and fed off. To a certain extent, this had a “biographical” character, the demise or moral disintegration of that intelligentsia’s personnel. F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940, James Joyce and Sherwood Anderson in 1941, Gertrude Stein in 1946. Theodore Dreiser, whose painstakingly detailed realism Hemingway of course firmly rejected, met his end in 1945. John Dos Passos had turned sharply to the anticommunist right and Ezra Pound was stigmatized as a strident supporter of Mussolini-style fascism. The anti-Stalinist “New York Intellectuals” as a group, including Wilson, were well on their way to making their peace with American imperialist democracy.

To paraphrase Wilson’s later reaction to Hemingway’s death, far more than a “corner” of his generation “had suddenly and horribly collapsed.”

Isolated and feeling “abandoned,” a figure like Hemingway, still a self-styled maverick, was appalled by the emergence of McCarthyism, the Cold War and the “Iron Curtain,” the national security state, but unable to grasp or seriously oppose those developments, or make his revulsion and disapproving view of postwar life a meaningful part of his art. This was an objective, generalized problem, but the writer was not in a position to grasp that.

As a result, Hemingway was largely thrown back on himself, his intuitions and his feelings about himself, his life, his artistic career, his memories, his “honor” and reputation as a writer, much of all that distorted, magnified, malformed, by disappointment and crushed or semi-crushed hopes.

The limits of his intense “objectiveness,” facticity, separated from a broader view of society and history, made themselves sharply felt. A powerful subjectivism and often incoherent self-absorption filled up a good deal of the space.

Wilson had suggested in 1935 that as soon as Hemingway spoke in his own person, “he seems to lose all his capacity for self-criticism and is likely to become fatuous or maudlin” and that “among his creations, he is certainly his own worst-drawn character, and he is his own worst commentator.”

Across the River and Into the Trees, although it is not pure and simple autobiography, suffers from that defect among others. The new film adaptation tacitly acknowledges certain of the book's inadequacies. It borrows the novel's basic framework but little else. The dialogue is essentially rewritten.

The story, in both novel and film, centers on hard-bitten US Army colonel Richard Cantwell (Liev Schreiber), who returns to his beloved Venice shortly after the end of World War II. He previously spent time in the city during the First World War, when he seems to have fought with the Italian army, and at other times as well. Cantwell is a transparent Hemingway stand-in.

In Ortiz's film, Cantwell is warned by an army doctor (Danny Huston) in an opening sequence that his heart condition is essentially incurable and that he needs "to be in a hospital. ... They'll retire you. Something they should have done a long time ago. Your heart is beating on borrowed time, Richard."

Cantwell refuses the advice, determined to make one final duck-hunting trip and visit old haunts (and old friends) in Venice. He also, we discover, and this is one of the ways in which the film diverges from the novel, plans to use his final days to investigate a Nazi mass execution in 1943 and find where his son, one of its victims, is buried.

The "grizzled" Cantwell battles his driver, Jackson (Josh Hutcherson), who has orders not to let the seriously ill colonel out of his sight. Cantwell insists on being driven to Venice and on Jackson's leaving him alone. He encounters a young countess, Renata Contarini (Matilda De Angelis), from a formerly wealthy family and 30 years younger than he. They develop a friendship wandering through Venetian backstreets and eating and drinking in various establishments.

Cantwell is troubled, at times tortured, by his wartime experiences. Renata is being pushed by her mother into a union with a rich aristocrat. Her youthful company offers the older soldier some temporary respite from his painful memories and the prospect of imminent mortality. He philosophizes about war, love, Venice, hunting and other subjects. "Across the River and Into the Trees" is taken from the supposed last words of Confederate general Stonewall Jackson and is a poetic metaphor for death.

In the original novel, the scenes between Cantwell and Renata are painful to read. There are pages and pages of self-aggrandizing dialogue, with Cantwell-Hemingway boasting about his knowledge of art, food, wine, military strategy, Italy, etc. Rather unpleasantly, the 50-year-old Cantwell addresses the "nearly" 19-year-old Renata, as "Daughter." This sequence is typical.

"Did you ever have a daughter?"

"No. I always wanted one."

"I can be your daughter as well as everything else."

"That would be incest."

"I don't think that would be so terrible in a city as old as this and that has seen what this city has seen."

"Listen, Daughter."

"Good," she said. "That was fine. I liked it."

"All right," the Colonel said and his voice was thickened a little.

"I liked it, too."

"Do you see now why I love you when I know better than to do it?"

"Look, Daughter. Where should we dine?"

"Wherever you like."

He smiled and his eyes were as kind as they ever were, which was not too kind, as he knew. But there was nothing now that he could do about it except to try to be kind to his last and true and only love.

It's simply floundering, pointless writing.

Cantwell is one of those individuals, as Hemingway fantasized himself to be, who knows the best wines, bars, restaurants, women, places, who associates with the most intriguing and connected people, who has the "offbeat" knowledge and information to do everything interesting and unusual. The "know-it-all," "done-it-all" character in the book (and film) is as tiresome as people like this are in real life.

Philip Rahv, in a scathing review in *Commentary* (October 1950), asked,

why is this colonel of the regular U. S. Army, who on the face of it is no great shakes as a worldly character, treated in the luxurious Venice hotels and bars with the minute deference usually reserved for the celebrities of international café society?

There was nothing to gloat about here, which Rahv did to a certain extent, this was the sad decay of one of America's greatest writers.

The best descriptions in the novel are those of the duck shoot, where some of the old Hemingway appears.

The film version removes the sexual relationship between Cantwell and Renata, but doesn't have much to replace it with. Again, mostly boring talk about food, wine. She promises him a tour of the city. She asks about his "dream for the future."

"Tell me your dream. Please tell me."

"Perfect duck shoot. Dawn on the lagoon. The still air. Gun's perfectly balanced. Wings whispering. Infinite possibilities. That's what I dream about. To infinite possibilities."

Hunting ducks is not everyone's idea of "infinite possibilities."

There are a few jabs at war, the military ("War is business, son. And the US Army's the biggest business in the world," and "In our army, the men at the very top never see combat. They don't care much for those of us who have"). The filmmakers add the Nazi massacre, which of course is a legitimate element, but not particularly well developed.

Cantwell-Schreiber is meant to be terribly stoical, staring death in the face and so on, except that the actor makes such a meal of it, gritting his teeth and groaning, it doesn't feel like stoicism at all, but very much like a healthy load of self-pity.

And he performed magnificently during the war, apparently!:

Well, [he was talking about] how you saw combat in two world wars. He called you a hero. Truth, sir, he didn't need to tell me anything. Whole army knows about you. ...

You are the famous Colonnello Cantwell. ...

The colonel is a war hero. We have a lot to thank you for in this country. You have saved us. ...

Have you killed a lot of men?

Yes, I have.

I'm sorry.

And:

Don't be.

In sum, *Across the River and Into the Trees* is a far cry from Hemingway as “Gauge of Morale,” as Wilson described him in 1939. Wilson argued,

Going back over Hemingway's books today, we can see clearly what an error of the politicians it was to accuse him of an indifference to society. His whole work is a criticism of society: he has responded to every pressure of the moral atmosphere of the time, as it is felt at the roots of human relations, with a sensitivity almost unrivaled.

Hemingway's “barometric accuracy” was one of the cultural victims of the defeats and tragedies of the late 1930s. His best work remains.



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