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Hemingway and the Ritual

Katsuaki Watanabe

“Killing is not a feeling that you share,”¹ Hemingway says proudly in *Green Hills of Africa*. What distinguishes him among his contemporary writers is that he is ritualistic about “death-seeking.” He takes a ritualistic attitude toward outdoor sports such as fishing, hunting, and bullfighting. The trout must be fished in a certain accurate way in an appropriate river; the kudu must be patiently pursued and killed cleanly; the bull must be properly thrust with a sword so that a bullfighter may become one with the bull at the moment of truth. These dangerous sports mean to Hemingway not only an artistic approach to death, but the indispensable rites which he has to perform alone for his own sake. What role, then, do the rituals of killing wild animals play in his inner world? What do Hemingway’s protagonists achieve through the rites? If we try to throw light on these essential problems, it would be useful to begin by examining his view of God.

Hemingway remarks: “I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death.”² This observation chiefly derives from his experience of the face-to-face confrontation with violent death on the battlefield, where he picks up the fragments of human bodies exploded by the shells and he observes men die like animals.³ Wounded in Italy, he learns that no man is to be exempted from mortality and that the modern situation is explained by no other words than “violent death.” Hemingway, who is not particularly pious in a Christian sense, establishes himself as a writer in full conviction that the traditional views of God are futile in our time.

In *The Sun Also Rises* Jake’s perfunctory prayers in a cathedral make it clear that there is no spiritual communication between God and man, because God is entirely indifferent to man’s unreasonable predicament

that is represented by Jake's sexual wound in the war. Frederic in *A Farewell to Arms* feels the sterility of God's grace when the lives of Catherine and their child are deprived of him all at once despite his earnest prayer. Furthermore, Frederic intelligibly explains an evil impersonal force by comparing the human conditions to those of a swarm of ants that run about on a burning log. The desperate movements of the ants threatened by the fire symbolize man's activities in trying to escape from the destructive force of nothingness, and Frederic's ruthless attitude stands for the disappearance of God. Once Hemingway is convinced that God is dead in our time, he cannot but face, as Carlos Baker puts it, "a Something called *Nothing* which is so huge, terrible, overbearing, inevitable, and omnipresent that, once experienced, it can never be forgotten."⁴ Hemingway's protagonists who flinch from darkness and need light at night, are frequently haunted by this overwhelming nothingness, called *nada* in Spanish. For Hemingway *nada* is the brutality of life, absolute darkness, and the vast cosmic nothingness which a dead God left behind.

When a man acknowledges his fundamental solitude in the universe, he has the alternative of yielding to *nada* without resisting it, or establishing the separate identity of himself at his own risk. If he takes the former course, he is sure to lose his dignity as a man, his uniqueness as an individual, and the meaning of life. On the contrary, if he is determined to reconstitute his life at the crucial moment, there is a possibility that he may transform desperate situations into rare opportunities for his rebirth. He may open his eyes to authentic life which he has never been conscious of in the trivial round of daily existence.

Putting a high value on this awakening attained by facing death, Hemingway intends to seek deadly danger. John Killinger mentions in *Hemingway and the Dead Gods*: "for life to continue to have meaning, the death experience must be repeated again and again. The tension must be maintained...."⁵ If life has meaning and the sense of authentic personal existence is heightened only in contrast to death, then how can man repeat the death experience? Hemingway searches for the death experience by means of a ritual of killing vigorous fish or wild animals. He puts himself in deadly danger in confrontation with energetic creatures, and at the same

time he endeavors to execute them cleanly with a view to his own renewal, triggered by the impact of death. To deal with death requires the most careful practice of the most precise methods or procedures, otherwise man will fall a prey to death. Therefore, killing wild animals assumes ritualistic qualities.

The rites of killing animals apply to three activities: fishing, hunting, and bullfighting. In the beginning, the rite of fishing is depicted in *Big Two-Hearted River*. The burnt-out town in the opening scene is a barren landscape of Nick's mind, where everything is burnt out and devastated by the force of nothingness. Getting away from there, Nick goes to the river to heal his spiritual wound by means of the rite of fishing. He is meticulously neat in arranging everything for fishing as well as in making the tent. After he fishes the trout, he breaks their necks and enjoys killing them:

Holding him near the tail, hard to hold, alive, in his hand, he whacked him against the log. The trout quivered, rigid. Nick laid him on the log in the shade and broke the neck of the other fish the same way. He laid them side by side on the log. They were fine trout.⁶

He perceives a profound ecstasy in seeing the trout quivering. The moment they die, he awakes to his genuine life and is born again through the vivid vitality of the quivering trout. It may safely be said that Nick executes the trout as a sacrifice to his renewal.

Not only Nick, but Jake and Bill go fishing at Burguete in *The Sun Also Rises* for the purpose of healing the harm of their unfruitful lives in Paris—a spiritual wasteland. Jake is excited to see the trout jumping out of the water one after another making the same splendid arc. He fishes a big trout, bending the rod almost double, and like Nick, “he banged his head against the timber so that he quivered out straight.”⁷ At last he catches six trout which are all “about the same size,” and he lays them side by side “all their heads pointing the same way.”⁸ The prizes of the ritual must be put in order, so that he may retain excitement. Then he washes them in the cold water, thankfully praising their beautiful color and firm bodies. At the climax of the rite he catches a glimpse of immortality in the pure figures of the trout which he packs neatly between the layers of ferns.

In the second place, hunting is a rite of killing in which a man intentionally precipitates himself into danger in confrontation with a wild animal without worrying beforehand. *Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* is a typical example of a man's awakening attained by the ritual of hunting. All of a sudden, in the middle of hunting a buffalo, Francis loses fear and feels wild unreasonable elation he has never experienced before. From the very moment of this pure exhilaration, it begins to assume ritualistic features in that he chases the buffalo to kill it cleanly. All his attention is intensely focused on killing it, in expectation of the ecstatic moment when his renewal might be realized, but the administrator of the ritual always has to run the risk of death. Thus Francis, who is shot by his wife, is, in a sense, a tragic priest who dies as a martyr in the midst of this dangerous rite.

Hemingway refers to his philosophy of hunting in *Green Hills of Africa*. As long as hunting is creative destruction, it should be controlled by the rules of the "code." Accordingly, arbitrary killing, mass killing, and killing for the sake of killing are forbidden. It is necessary that a hunter should have a firm reason for killing the animal and know why killing is better than not killing. Since the animal he tries to kill is not an enemy but a partner of his ritual, he must select a beast worth killing. And once he decides to kill it, he has to execute it perfectly with his knowledge, skill, and desire harmoniously focused on this purpose.

The third rite of killing is bullfighting, which has more ritualistic qualities than fishing or hunting. In *Death in the Afternoon* Hemingway states clearly: "I believe that the tragedy of the bullfight is so well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual."⁹ The bullfight is a ritual of a man's encounter with a wild bull which is seeking to kill him in the ring. This encounter is a peculiar occasion never to recur, and the bulls that have been in the ring before are not allowed to reappear. Once a bull appears in the ring, it is doomed to be killed: "Bullfighting is based on the fact that it is the first meeting between the wild animal and a dismounted man. This is the fundamental premise of modern bullfighting."¹⁰ The formal bullfight is not a sport in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word but a tragic rite by reason of the certain death of the bull. And it is not a slaughter, because

the formal rules of the "code" demand that the matador should be an artist who kills the bull aesthetically. He is not only required to be familiar with many techniques such as how to detect the bull's peculiarities, how to use the cape, and how to thrust the sword, but also obliged to elevate them to the level of a graceful art.

In *The Sun Also Rises* Romero is described as a pure classic bullfighter. Unlike other bullfighters who twist themselves, raise their elbows, and use a technique to give a fake look of danger, he has no tricks, no mystifications, and no coarseness. He composedly moves with his line pure and exposes his body to the horn, increasing the amount of danger of death as much as he wishes. He completely dominates the bull with his perfect knowledge and faculties when he prepares the bull for the killing. Running the risk of death in the bullring, he faces the ultimate fact of death and administers the solemn rite in an aesthetic way. Romero, unlike Cohn, does not look up at Brett for approval. He does not mind the presence of the crowd who judge his performance and all his attention is devoted to his esoteric ritual:

Never once did he look up to ask if it pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him he did not do it for her at any loss to himself. He gained by it all through the afternoon.¹¹

He kills the bull, not because he is forced to kill it, but because he desires to kill it. Jake, a *aficionado*, notices that Romero is "a great killer" who loves to kill the bull. If Romero exults in killing the bull, it is certainly because besides a sense of glory, the killing provides him with a creative opportunity to exchange death for life. The instant he thrusts the sword between the shoulders of the bull, he becomes one with the bull. He deprives it of its vigorous life and absorbs its vigor. As the very man who causes the bull's death, he can momentarily share the eruption of the desperate vital power with the bull, and he tries to absorb it, not to let the bull die a meaningless death. The momentary eruption of the vital energy of the dying bull immediately triggers Romero's rebirth, so that he perceives spiritual tension, a pure catharsis, and a feeling of life and death. In the closest proximity to death, life and death are highly intensified

and authentic life is revealed.

Hemingway explains in *Death in the Afternoon* what takes place in the rite of bullfighting:

Now the essence of the greatest emotional appeal of bullfighting is the feeling of immortality that the bullfighter feels in the middle of a great faena and that he gives to the spectator. He is performing a work of art and he is playing with death, bringing it closer, closer, closer to himself.... He gives the feeling of immortality, and, as you watch it, it becomes yours. Then when it belongs to both of you, he proves it with the sword.¹²

The bullfighter is, in a sense, a priest who brings death closer to him and evokes the feeling of immortality for the sake of the spectator as well as for his own sake. The matador dominates the bull by playing with death, and at the same time he gives the crowd an excellent example of man's ability to dominate death in the bullring which is a miniature of the real world. Showing his contempt for death, he proves with the sword man's victory over death. And this triumph in the ritual makes a brand-new man out of himself and brings about a profound ecstasy accompanied by the spiritual rebirth. Bullfighting is "the faena that takes a man out of himself and makes him feel immortal while it is proceeding, that gives him an ecstasy as profound as any religious ecstasy."¹³

What requires emphasis, then, is that it is not God but a man himself who creates his renewal. Instead of dead God, the performer of this ritual plays God by presiding over the animal's destiny as God once administered man's destiny. With no God in heaven, man might as well intend to become his own creator in terms of spirit and establish a peculiar religion. When Hemingway attempts to be a Godlike creator of his new life, he finds that he must be a Godlike killer who deals in death. He says that one of the greatest pleasures of killing is:

.... the feeling of rebellion against death which comes from its administering But when a man is still in rebellion against death he has pleasure in taking to himself one of the Godlike attributes; that of giving it. This is one of the most profound feelings in those men who enjoy killing. These things are done in pride and pride, of course, is a

Christian sin, and a pagan virtue.¹⁴

In his rituals of killing, Hemingway ultimately seeks this acquisition of one of "the Godlike attributes"—a faculty of distributing death to creatures at will. As Ben Stoltzfus puts it in a clear-cut way, "to kill an animal is to momentarily and vicariously become God—He who gives life and who takes it away."¹⁵ Acquiring the divine qualities, the performer of Hemingway's rites becomes at once a great killer and a great creator who cleanly kills an animal and renews his own life.

On account of the disappearance of God, it is no use trying to hold communication with God, so Hemingway creates a god from man by the rituals of killing. He has finally taken the decisive step in elevating his philosophy of killing to the level of a religion. Nevertheless, it is clear that Hemingway's god is incompatible with orthodox Christianity. The peculiarity of his pagan god lies in the fact that it is created from man by means of the ritual, so that the man-god maintains its divinity only while the ritual is proceeding. Once the rite is over and death is given, the man-god is immediately forced to return to being an ordinary man. The feeling of immortality that is given at the end of the elaborate rite is easily lost, so the rite must be performed again and again. Thus, the lack of durability of the divinity is Hemingway's ultimate problem which he must confront inevitably in his literary activities.

It is not until he writes *The Old Man and the Sea* after a long stagnation of his creativity that he intensively comes to grips with this problem. When the old man hooks a marlin after eighty-four days' *salao*, he makes up his mind to share the fate of the fish and says: "My choice was to go there to find him beyond all people. Beyond all people in the world And no one to help either one of us."¹⁶ Steadily pulled by the fish, Santiago proceeds "beyond all people in the world," from the region of daily life into the realm of a ritual where no other fishermen nor boats are to be seen. Leaving the mundane world, Santiago has strayed off, as it were, into the vacant Kingdom of God. Santiago himself does not know where he is, but he notices that unlike an ordinary fish, the marlin he hooked is calmly, wisely and nobly towing his skiff. No longer does he have a consciousness

that he is the pursuer and the fish is the pursued. They are in the same circumstances in the sense that they have strayed off into the vacant Kingdom of God, where the marlin is not a mere fish or physical object any longer but a holy entity, and Santiago, who identifies himself with this noble fish, is not a common old man but a priest. With no God in the Kingdom of God, the holy fish and the old priest have to create a new god out of themselves by means of a ritual. If they attempt to revitalize the dead God and take "Godlike attributes" to them, they are required to be completely united with each other. Death is necessary before a rebirth. Therefore the priest must administer the rite of killing with the holy fish and it does not matter which one dies.

As the sun rises for the third time after he has sailed from the port, the fish starts to circle and the ritual comes to a climax. Like a bullfighter, Santiago thrusts the harpoon shaft and pushes all his weight after it. The very moment he feels the fish's heart, they unite perfectly and their renewal is accomplished. "Then the fish came alive, with his death in him,"¹⁷ and on the other hand, the old man who is almost blind from exhaustion feels faint and sick in the holy spray which the falling fish has just caused. He has undergone such an extraordinary experience that he is not disposed to believe what has happened:

At one time when he was feeling so badly toward the end, he had thought perhaps it was a dream. Then when he had seen the fish come out of the water and hang motionless in the sky before he fell, he was sure there was some great strangeness and he could not believe it.¹⁸

What he sees just before his eyes blur is the fish "hanging motionless" in the sky with its life culminating in the dying body. Then the holy fish turns into a symbol of eternity and Santiago who fastens this fish to his skiff, unites the eternal being with himself. Consequently he succeeds in acquiring the immortality that is one of God's prerogatives, and he becomes a man-god.

But the myth of Hemingway's god begins to assume a tragic tone when Santiago turns his skiff toward the land which is the region of temporality and limitation. If the man-god tries to bring out his great

prize—immortality—from the timeless Kingdom of God to the temporal world, inevitably eternity commences to be threatened by temporality and his great marlin is attacked by the sharks. It is at this moment when he realizes he should not have gone out too far. He senses that he cannot retain his great prize intact, but he refuses to be at the mercy of the sharks that demolish not only the body of the great fish but his triumph over mortality. In order to guard what he has achieved in his ritual he endeavors to fight against them, surmounting all difficulties. The ferocious sharks, however, appear one after another after the sun begins to decline and they completely devour the great marlin. The fact that the furious assault of the sharks happens at night contrasts sharply with the fact that the old man performs the rite of killing the holy fish in the sunshine in the morning. For Hemingway, the hot sun is indispensable to the ritual which abruptly causes a rebirth, and darkness represents nothingness. Accordingly, the great marlin is the symbol of immortality and the sharks represent mortality or *nada*. Thus, the signification of the story is that when Santiago attempts to take out immortality from the sacred realm to the mundane world, which is filled with nothingness, he cannot help exposing it to the inexorable attack of devouring *nada*.

As some critics insist, it may be possible to interpret this short masterpiece as a Christian allegory because of Christian symbolism, but Santiago is not the Messiah but an old man who is temporarily elevated to godhood through the ritual. All Hemingway did is to make use of Christian elements to emphasize that this story is a tragic myth of his peculiar pagan god. What attracts our attention is that in this story Hemingway takes a pessimistic view that his ritual does not provide an eternal catharsis. He cannot prevent nothingness from throwing an ominous shadow on what he has achieved through the rite. Like the ferocious sharks, *nada* raises its ugly head and comes to demolish the sanctuary Hemingway has struggled to establish by writing throughout his career. His literature begins with the fight with nothingness and the struggle does not cease on account of the lack of durability of his victory over *nada*. Therefore, the rituals must be performed over and over again, must not be neglected, so as to dissipate dreadful nothingness.

Hemingway's rituals of killing animals certainly make him attain a spiritual rebirth, win the feeling of immortality, in creating his own man-god, but his triumph over nothingness is momentary. After all, his god is neither more nor less than a man-god. Therefore it is tragic that he must perpetually continue to perform his rituals, because once he compromises with nothingness, it is then that he falls a prey to it. It seems as if Hemingway had been standing on the brink of a precipice, where he had the alternative of repeating his rituals or throwing himself into a dark abyss of death. In *Green Hills of Africa* Hemingway states: "Since I still loved to hunt I resolved that I would only shoot as long as I could kill cleanly and as soon as I lost that ability I would stop."¹⁹ Suppose that writing, which is a sort of ritual for him, has something in common with the ritual of killing animals: the decline of his ability to write is likely to make him stop writing. When mentally and physically he is compelled to cease performing his rituals, it is no wonder that he has no choice but to pull the trigger of his rifle on himself.

Notes

1. Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 120.
2. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1960), p. 2.
3. Hemingway mentions his view of the dead bodies as follows: "We agreed too that the picking up of the fragments had been an extraordinary business; it being amazing that the human body should be blown into pieces which exploded along no anatomical lines, but rather divided as capriciously as the fragmentation in the burst of a high explosive shell... The first thing that you found about the dead was that, hit badly enough, they died like animals." Ernest Hemingway, "A Natural History of the World," *Winner Take Nothing* (New York: Scribner's, 1961), pp. 100-101.
4. Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: the Writer as Artist* (4th ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 124.
5. John Killinger, *Hemingway and the Dead Gods* (New York: Citadel, 1965), p. 25.
6. Ernest Hemingway, "Big two-hearted River," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner's, 1966), p. 231.
7. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), p. 119.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
9. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

11. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, p. 216.
12. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 213.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
15. Ben Stoltzfus, *Gide and Hemingway: Rebels Against God* (New York: Kennikat, 1978), p. 60.
16. Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Bantam, 1965), p. 42.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
19. Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, p. 148.