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HEMINGWAY AS A TECHNICIAN IN *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*

Keiko Fujie

For his great craftsmanship, Ernest Hemingway has been a critics' concern for more than a half century. Many of them praise him as an artist or an aesthician, but very few of seem to have really investigated. By focussing on the craft, especially on the skillful description of landscapes, this essay tries to approach one of Hemingway's masterpieces, *A Farewell to Arms*. I must make an apology that this will be rather rambling and so expansive as to contain a variety of related topics, but it begins with the meaning of the description of landscapes and develops into metaphor, simile, and symbolism touching upon premonitions.

Not only landscapes but also weather and climate; what the characters see or where they are; Hemingway details in this novel. The meaning of such objective reality is, first to establish background, second to create mood, then to suggest unstated emotion. *A Farewell to Arms* begins with the famous paragraph:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees.

The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the

road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterwards the road bare and white except for the leaves.¹

This is one of the numerous descriptions of landscapes and the very first one throughout the whole story. This delineates setting or indicates locale, and is serving as a general setting for the whole first part of the novel. Moreover, by its sombre tone; dust, falling leaves, bare road and so on, the paragraph establishes gloomy mood of doom, one of the dominant mood of this novel.

At the beginning of chapter 25, Frederick Henry returns from Milan to Gorizia after parting from his sweetheart, Catherine Barkley:

Now in the fall the trees were all bare and the roads were muddy. I rode to Gorizia from Udine on a camion. We passed other camions on the road and I looked at the country. The mulberry trees were bare and the fields were brown. There were wet dead leaves on the road from the rows of bare trees and men were working on the road, tamping stone in the ruts from piles of crushed stone along the side of the road between the trees.²

This passage, just like the former one, indicates where the character is and creates sombre mood. But it seems to me that there is more to it than that. What Frederick Henry sees are the bare trees, the brown fields, wet dead leaves, and so on. Those reflect Henry's mind; lonely, miserable: and convey his mind to the reader. His feelings are not discussed, but are suggested by the perception he reports.

Not only the scenic description, but Hemingway details Rinaldi's room, a hospital in Milan, a hotel in Milan, and other things. When Catherine is fighting for life in labor, Frederick Henry goes out to breakfast:

Outside along the street were the refuse cans from the houses for the recollector. A dog was nosing at one of the cans.

“What do you want?” I asked and looked in the can to see if there was anything I could pull out for him; there was nothing on top but coffee-grounds, dust and some dead flowers.

“There isn’t anything, dog, ” I said.³

Here again, the refuse can, its contents; coffee-grounds, dust and some dead flowers; and the dog suggest Henry’s feelings for the end of the happy life which he and Catherine shared and their love, Catherine’s death, and human fate at large.

Thus the details of objective reality, as I cited the two paragraphs for example, perform function of suggesting unstated emotion of the characters, and unconsciously conveying the emotion to the reader to elicit emotional response. This type of technique, T.S. Eliot calls “objective correlative.” He says: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”⁴ As Earl Rovit says,⁵ it would be too much to suggest that Hemingway learned from Eliot how to capture emotion in prose, but Eliot’s “objective correlative” makes an excellent definition of one of Hemingway’s major techniques.

The refuse can and its contents represent Henry’s mind and his mind is like the refuse can, or in the preceding paragraph, the bare trees represent Henry’s mind and his mind is like the bare trees. Thus the objective correlative essentially carries metaphoric and symbolic import. Sometimes it becomes

consistent and is fashioned into symbols, or it takes a form of simile or metaphor.

In the earlier part of the novel, Frederick Henry compares his flirtation with Catherine Barkley to a game:

She was looking at me in the dark. I was angry and yet certain, seeing it all ahead like the moves in a chess game.⁶

I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge, you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody had mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me.⁷

Henry's flirtatious mind is well reflected. The image of a chess game, in which players know what's coming next, and that of bridge, played for some stakes, are almost visible and well represent flirtation. The reader might have a picture in mind of duplicated images of games and those of flirtation.

Later, in the face of Catherine's death, Frederick Henry compares the human predicament to a baseball game: "They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you."⁸ Daniel Fuchs quotes this line and mentions Hardy in connection with this novel, asserting the President of the Immortals underlies the work: Henry is on a modest version of the President of the Immortals. There lies Hemingway's nihilism, says he.⁹ But he seems to be deceiving because, I think, Hemingway's nihilism lies not in the sentence but outside the sentence. The matter is the comparison with the baseball game. Human predicament is no more than a touch out of a baseball game. When looking Catherine's death in the face, the reader has an image of baseball game at most. It may sound even ridiculous to us spectators. We may call it spectator's irony. The meaning-

lessness is the very nihilism of Hemingway.

Next, Frederick Henry remembers a swarm of ants:

Once in camp I put a log on top of the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first towards the center where the fire was, then turned back and ran towards the end. When there were enough on the end they fell off into the fire. Some got out, their bodies burnt and flattened, and went off not knowing where they were going. But most of them went toward the fire and then back toward the end and swarmed on the cool end and finally fell off into the fire. I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whisky in before I added water to it. I think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants.¹⁰

Carlos Baker also touches upon Hardy: "If a Hardyan President of the Immortals takes any notice of them, He does little enough for their relief. He is like Frederick Henry pouring water on the burning campfire log – not to save the ants but only to empty a cup."¹¹ This also deceives. It is true that this is an inexorably tragic and fatalistically ironic story, but more characteristic is the spectator's irony. To a detached observer, a human life is no more than a baseball game or a swarm of ants. Hemingway expresses his view of life, that is, nihilism, by his great skill of metaphor.

Concerning symbolism, Carlos Baker makes an elaborate investigation into this problem. He finds *A Farewell to Arms* organized around two poles:

By a process of accrual and coagulation, the images tend to

build round the opposed concepts of Home and Not-Home. . . . The Home concept, for example, is associated with the mountains: with dry-cold weather; with peace and quiet; with love, dignity, health, happiness, and the good life; and with worship of or at least the consciousness of God. The Not-Home concept is associated with low-lying plains; with rain and fog; with obscenity, indignity, disease, suffering, nervousness, war and death, and with irreligion.¹²

And he argues that from the first sentence of this novel, this antipodal symbolism is set up. His insight into Hemingway's symbolism may be excellent but rather overelaborate. "The plain," Frederick Henry narrates in the second paragraph of chapter I: "was rich with crops; there were many orchards of trees and beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare. There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery." As early as the first chapter, Mr. Baker's antipodal symbolic structure becomes rootless. Moreover, Milan, where Henry and Catherine have a wonderful time of love, is in plain and Lausanne, the place of Catherine's death, stands on a series of steep hills. In detail, E.M. Halliday refutes him one by one.¹³ If so, thousands of readers may not be aware of the Mountain-Plain antithesis.

Or we may think the unsuccessfully searching dog, looking back to the refuse can scene, as representative of Frederick Henry himself,¹⁴ or the falling leaves and the dust of the opening paragraph, as representative of soldiers' inexorable doom as a whole.¹⁵

But the most striking one is, as generations of critics have remarked, rain; symbol of disaster. The rain begins in Milan just before Henry's return to the front after his recovery from the wound. The rain falls during the last dinner in Milan hotel, and on his way to the station. Steadily or intermittently,

throughout the retreat, Henry's desertion to Stresa, the rain continues. But after his reunion with Catherine, the rain stops. "Catherine was asleep and the sunlight was coming in through the window. The rain had stopped. . . ." ¹⁶ The night when military policemen come to arrest them, the rain begins to fall again. "That night there was a storm and I woke to hear the rain lashing the window panes." ¹⁷ Henry and Catherine escape in a boat to Switzerland in the rain. And they have a happy, tranquil life above Montreux. The idyllic life continues several months:

We had a fine life. We lived through the months of January and February and the winter was very fine and we were very happy. There had been short thaws when the wind blew warm and the snow softened and the air felt like Spring, but always the clear hard cold had come again and the winter had returned. In March came the first break in the winter. In the night *it started raining.* (italics not in the original) ¹⁸

By the repetitive use of rain so far, the readers have been prepared to recognize disaster symbol. In this sense, the rain works as a signal of disaster. ¹⁹ And some premonitions of doom have been inserted. "I'm afraid of the rain," says Catherine in the Milan hospital on summer night, "because sometimes I see me dead in it." ²⁰ And in fall, just before Henry returns to the front, they stay at a hotel in Milan. During a break in the conversation, the sound of rain is heard, and Henry quotes Marvell:

"And always at my back I hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near." ²¹

Soon after that, Henry goes back to the front and the disastrous retreat begins. He deserts the army to Switzerland and has a fine life with Catherine. But she is going to have a baby:

We knew the baby was very close now and it gave us both a feeling as though something were hurrying us and we could not lose any time together.^{2 2}

Giving an ominous presentiment to the readers by the use of the premonitions and the rain as signal or symbol of disaster, the story moves on to the final catastrophe, that is, Catherine's death:

But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.^{2 3}

Hemingway works toward symbolism by the repetition of rain. It is so repeated that it appeals to the readers' mind unconsciously and sometimes it works as a signal of disaster. Hemingway's symbolism needs no unnecessary and over-elaborate investigation. Only by the repetitive use of rain, which merges with overall naturalness of this work, Hemingway sets up his symbolism.

Objective correlatives essentially have interest not in how things are but in what the feelings are. But in this novel not all of the descriptions of objective reality suggest the unstated emotion and the objective correlatives melt into overall naturalness or verisimilitude of this work. Even the technique of rain-symbolism gives us no impression of invention. It sometimes fuses with the scenic background and is congruous with the verisimilitude of this work. It is an exaggeration to call Hemingway a symbolist. Hemingway writes things as they are with the sound of metaphoric and symbolic import underneath.

NOTES

- 1) Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1935), p. 7.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p.127
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- 4) Quoted in Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, p. 56, but originally from Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 92–93.
- 5) Earl Rovit, *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963), p. 45.
- 6) *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 24.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p.28.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p.252.
- 9) Daniel Fucks, "Ernest Hemingway, Literary Critic," in *Ernest Hemingway* edited by Arthur Waldhorn (New York: Mcgraw-Hill, Inc., 1973), p. 103.
- 10) *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 252.
- 11) Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (4th ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 101.
- 12) *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.
- 13) E.M. Halliday, "Hemingway's Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony," in *Ernest Hemingway* edited by Arthur Waldhorn, pp. 37–48.
- 14) Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Hemingway's Craft* (New York: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 155.
- 15) Masaharu Komura, *Hemingway* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1955), p. 68.
- 16) *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 193.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- 19) Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Rinehart, 1952). In p. 63, he says: "What is new in *A Farewell to Arms* is the consistent use of rain as a signal of disaster."
- 20) *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 100
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 256.