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The Hemingway Review, Volume 21, Number 1, Fall 2001, pp. 68-77 (Article)

Published by University of Idaho Department of English
DOI: 10.1353/hem.2001.0013



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OF ROCKS AND MARLIN:
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THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

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IT HAS LONG BEEN CLEAR that certain authors of the 1920s—I am thinking particularly of Fitzgerald and Hemingway—discovered existentialism in practice before it was theorized by the likes of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. They sensed without the help of formal philosophy that, as John Killinger puts it, “God is dead in our time, and the traditional ethic is invalid,” and that the only valid response is the “founding” of the “self” through “aesthetic and ethical” experiences (98–99). But as physicists know, vacuums have their own dynamics, and this is no less true of a vacuum of values. And it is true in turn that different perspectives on these dynamics and emphases on different aspects of them produce individual notions of what experiences most authentically found the self.

In this regard, we might even speak of “existentialisms” as they represent the various philosophical grids that help us parse particular 20th century fictions from distinctive angles. Kumkum Sangari, for instance, in “Touting the Void,” asserts that “Hemingway’s existential value structure depends heavily on subjective versions of authenticity and death similar to those developed by Heidegger,” and goes on to apply these—with essentialist reservations—to such works as *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Old Man and the Sea* (170). Stephen Croft, on the other hand, finds Karl Jaspers’s existentialist theory of tragedy highly applicable to *The Old Man and the Sea*, in particu-

lar Jasper's notion of the tragic hero whose "existence is shipwrecked by the consistency with which he meets some unconditional demand, real or supposed" (8).

What I wish to argue here is that the perspective and the prescription of Albert Camus—in particular, the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus*—have a unique value in this explicatory enterprise. Numerous commentators have rounded him up, along with the other usual suspects, by way of sketching a general existential framework; but few have developed his peculiar relevance at any length. Two exceptions are the articles of Uma K. Alladi and Wayne C. Holcombe. Alladi argues for parallels between the novels of Hemingway and Camus, with emphasis on a human alienation from real "feelings and emotions" and a lack of metaphysical orientation afflicting the 20th century (43). Holcombe develops various Camusian aspects of Hemingway's fiction, but insists on a crucial epistemological difference between the two authors—a point to which I shall return.

We might note, first of all, a pragmatic, hands-on quality in the existentialism of the 1920s novelists that corresponds to the way Camus so lucidly grounds his own analysis in the immediacies and urgencies of everyday human experience. For Camus, the nihilistic void functions as an inescapable generator of absurdity, undermining every human enterprise and thought by revealing its ultimate pointlessness and meaninglessness. He locates the only intellectually defensible response to this absurdity in acts of rebellion that maximize available life and its intensity, even as the cosmic futility of these acts is kept uncompromisingly in mind.

Fitzgerald describes a dynamic much like this as he looks back with rueful nostalgia at his life in the 1920s, ten years before his crack-up, and reflects on his personal philosophy of those days:

One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.... I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to succeed.... If I could do this through the common ills—domestic, professional, and personal—then the ego would continue as an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last. (69–70)

It is, of course, “gravity,” as a *reductio ad absurdum* deep in the scheme of things, that Camus’s Sisyphus battles in pushing his boulder up the hill, and that inexorably brings the boulder back down to the value-negating nihil where he began his struggle. Between these negations, provisional values have their brief moments as underwriters of a heroic significance, however doomed, that humanity forces on the scheme of things.

The Sisyphean protagonists of Hemingway face this gravity as a vortex of random, quasi-malignant forces that constitute a steady—and ultimately effective—resistance to dreams of love and achievement. The rebellion of those initiated into this dark gnosis by experience centers on the assertion of such provisional values as honor, courage, decency, generosity, and stoical fortitude—in other words, the code. This assertion—embodied constantly in actions—is a way of establishing an island of human dignity in the middle of the cosmic mess without losing sight of the certainty that the island will eventually be overwhelmed.

I want to use *The Old Man and the Sea* as my extended case in point because it captures this struggle with a peculiar simplicity and lucidity that stem from a drama stripped to its essentials—a lone man who is, like Sisyphus, engaged in an isolated, repetitive struggle that must end in defeat, but who refuses the escape of some ultimate religious consolation. The relation between the profound simplicity of Santiago’s ordeal and the clear assertion of certain values is the burden of Joseph Petite’s observation that “Santiago, plain and unsophisticated, is man in the natural state, a perfect subject for this trial. He has only the strength of his spirit and his determination to sustain him. The fishing episode here is... a crucible, a battle where the issue is whether a man wants badly enough to struggle to assert his own existential value” (162). That the physical immediacies of human struggle can be used to illustrate the cosmic pathos of the human situation is a precept central to the aesthetics of both Camus and Hemingway. This parallel is especially striking when we consider Camus’s concluding section, where he quotes Homer’s description of Sisyphus as “the wisest and most prudent of mortals” (88) and goes on to give us his own grippingly visual vignette of Sisyphus in the underworld:

[O]ne sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the

stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands.... A face that toils so close to stone is already stone itself. (89)

Hemingway's old fisherman Santiago also bears stigmata that are an outward and visible sign of an inward grace under pressure—an existential pressure that includes a perpetual sentence to labor and loss: "The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles on the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropical sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert" (9–10). Just as the body of Sisyphus has taken on the nature of the earth and stone with which he struggles, so the body of Santiago represents a constant organic reaction with the sun and the sea and the sea's creatures that are his tireless antagonists. At the same time, however, they provide both the setting and the challenges that give his victories—however provisional and short-lived—their existential significance.

His skin cancer, ironically, mirrors this duality. It is the result of neutral cosmic processes that appear malignant or malevolent in their assault upon the well-being of the organism, but are in another sense "benevolent" in what they force the organism to become through overcoming them. This is the source of Wallace Stevens's poignant apologia for human suffering in "Esthétique du Mal," a suffering unable to understand how the cosmic indifference that "rejects it saves it in the end" by elevating human fate to the level of tragedy (2.21). The "blotches" on Santiago skin thus serve as badges of existential courage. So also the ancient "deep-creased scars" on his hands like "erosions in a fishless desert." The scars actually illustrate his provisional triumphs as a lone fisherman over the sea's adversarial forces, but these minor victories do not add up to a lasting, determinative victory in the "fishless desert" of an absurd universe. Even Santiago's shirt serves as a symbol of his heroically futile struggle. It is described as "being patched so many times that it was like the sail and the patches were faded to many different shades by the sun" (18), a comparison that achieves full significance when we recall that the patched sail is described as looking, when furled, "like the flag of permanent defeat" (1).

The particular defeat on which the novel focuses, the catching of the huge marlin that will be devoured by sharks, is obviously Sisyphean in its combination of prolonged, repetitive, painful struggle and the clear-eyed knowledge of that struggle's ultimate futility. Camus's conqueror, an absurdist hero and spokesman, phrases it pungently:

I esteem the individual only because he strikes me as ridiculous and humiliated. Knowing that there are no victorious causes, I have a liking for lost causes: they require an uncontaminated soul, equal to its defeat as to its temporary victories. . . . I establish my lucidity in the middle of what negates it. I exalt man before what crushes him, and my freedom, my revolt, and my passion come together then in that tension, that lucidity, and that vast repetition. (64-65)

Santiago's struggle is at its most lucidly Sisyphean when he battles the sharks, who have more or less infinite reserves of numbers, energy, and vicious determination. Driving a harpoon at the first, he hits it "without hope, but with resolution and complete malignancy" (102). Having lost the harpoon in this encounter, he continues to improvise weaponry from materials in the boat in the face of hopeless odds: "Now they have beaten me, he thought, I am too old to club sharks to death. But I will try it as long as I have the oars and the short club and the tiller" (112). Having lost the battle, with the marlin reduced to pure skeleton, he spits scornfully into the ocean and says to the sharks at large, "Eat that, *galanos*. And make a dream you've killed a man" (119).¹ He then puts the episode behind him and sails home, reflecting insouciantly on what it means to be beaten: "It is easy when you are beaten. And what beat you, he thought. 'Nothing,' he said aloud. 'I went out too far'" (120).

The word "nothing" has a particular existential resonance in Hemingway's fiction, most explicitly in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," where *nada* is a specter of pointlessness and meaninglessness inseparable from the human condition. To go out "too far," beyond safe, familiar waters, is to encounter *nada* in all its life-denying force. And to battle this force unavailingly again and again without yielding to despair is the essence of absurdist heroism. As Camus says of Sisyphus, "his scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid

for the passions of the earth" (89). And, again, "Sisyphus...powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition.... The lucidity that was to crown his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (90).

Charles Taylor focuses on the "went out too far" passage to make a point closely allied to my own in his Nietzschean reading of the novel. In contradistinction to the Christian interpretation that finds a sinful hubris in transgressing appointed limits, Taylor emphasizes the life-affirming excess of a Dionysian mode that posits "the value of the heroic individual taking the greatest risks in order to achieve the greatest fulfillment." Santiago's "need to 'prove himself'" again and again is "the need to participate in life and affirm it in the highest manner possible by going far out" (642). Agreeing with Taylor, Christoph Kuhn points out that "Santiago's adventure has more in common with Nietzsche's notion of tragic affirmation of life than with the Christian themes of sin, punishment, and salvation" (224).

The absurd has its own temptations to heresy, and chief among these is hope, which is, in effect, a failure of lucidity and philosophical courage in the face of certain negation. Camus is at once both absolutist and full of human understanding with respect to this transgression. For him, the absurd world is "a world in which thoughts, like lives, are devoid of future. Everything that makes man work and get excited utilizes hope. The sole thought that is not mendacious is therefore a sterile thought" (51). And, again, "men who live on hope do not thrive in... [the absurdist] universe, where kindness yields to generosity, affection to virile silence, and communion to solitary courage" (53). But even the hard-core existentialist remains prey to hope as temptation, so basic is it to the human condition. Camus, reflecting on Dostoevsky's difficulty in expunging belief in some future life, concludes that the Russian ultimately arrives at the notion of existence as being both "illusory and...eternal" (83). "At this point I perceive," says Camus, "that hope cannot be eluded forever and that it can beset even those who wanted to be free of it" (83).

Santiago is afflicted by the same philosophical ambivalence. As the first shark attacks, he realizes from his Sisyphean experience that the struggle to come can have only one end: "The old man's head was clear and good now and he was full of resolution but he had little hope. It was too good to last, he thought" (101). He then drives his harpoon into the shark "without hope but with resolution and complete malignancy" (102). Even so, after fashioning a

makeshift weapon to replace the lost harpoon, he stares only at the undamaged part of the fish as though to nurture a stubborn optimism: "some of his hope returned. It is silly not to hope, he thought. Besides I believe it is a sin" (104-105).

The notion that not hoping may be a sin inverts the notion that not hoping is an existential virtue. What Santiago tentatively regresses to here is the Christian concept of despair as the unforgivable sin, a belief as deeply rooted in his Roman Catholic background as the belief in a future life is rooted in Dostoevsky's Russian Orthodoxy. But it is precisely such transgressions, according to Camus, that help the absurdist to clarify and fortify his position: "At the very conclusion of the absurd reasoning... it is not a matter of indifference to find hope coming back in under one of its most touching guises. That shows the difficulty of the absurd asceticism" (84). Thus, Santiago, aware that he is straying into apostasy with regard to his own experience, refines his position: "I have no understanding of it [sin], and am not sure that I believe in it" (105). Reflecting that there are people, i.e., priests, who are "paid" to think about sin, he concludes, "Let them think about it. You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish" (105).

This passage is cited by Wayne Holcombe as evidence for his thesis that the "Not to think about it" attitude of Hemingway's protagonists represents a sharp and significant divergence from Camus's injunction to keep the absurd lucidly in mind even as we strive against it (22). The thesis itself is well taken, in a purist sense, but we have seen that Camus himself allows for bouts of recidivism in the face of this merciless clarity. And in the case of this particular refusal to "think," the rejection of "sin" as a theological concept represents an underwriting of the absurdist metaphysic.

What we have here, and in other passages such as those where Santiago promises to say prayers when he is not so immersed in the task at hand, is a dialectic between the Christian negation of despair as a damning illusion and the absurdist affirmation of despair as a truth that opens the way to an authentic existence. We must reconsider Christian interpretations of Santiago's struggle in the light of this tension, and of Hemingway's privileging of its existential side. As Wirt Williams makes clear, anyone attempting to find a larger non-Christian dynamic in the novel—such as "naturalistic tragedy" or a "parable of art and artist"—must come to terms with a complex set of Santiago-Christ parallels, such as "the agony of his [Santiago's] back braced against the line (in the New Testament reference, Jesus' back against the

cross); the easing of the contact with a burlap sack (the cloak or robe); the raw rim his straw hat makes on his forehead under the scorching sun (the crown of thorns); the bleeding hands (the nail wounds); the forcing of his face into the raw dolphin (an act of communion); his hunger and thirst and the need to eat and drink to keep sufficient strength" (173, 177).

Williams's solution is to consider the novel as "a deliberately constructed, three-tiered...fable" in which "the naturalistic, the Christian, and the art-artist modes are all constructed carefully enough to stand alone, yet are so tightly laminated that no joining shows" (174). I think it a workable solution, but would like to add a fourth mode—the existentialist—which ends up placing the Christian mode in a subordinate status.² As we have already seen, Santiago himself subordinates the Christian mode to the realities of the human struggle as he understands them. Ultimately, Christianity is not much more for him than a trove of sentimental relics, to which he occasionally returns in a moment of conditioned reflex. The formulaic "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" that he utters "mechanically" make him feel better, but he continues to suffer "exactly as much and perhaps a little more" (64–65). The prayers are momentary distractions, but ineffective anodynes for the relentless suffering that is his inescapable reality and demands his full attention. Camus's quotation from Alain is apropos here: "Prayer...is when night descends over thought" (48).

Santiago also has in his trove the religious "relics" of his dead wife—pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Virgin of Cobre that hang on the walls of his shack (16). Hemingway specifies that these walls are made of guano, "the tough budshields of the royal palm," but the more common meaning of "guano" inevitably reverberates here to suggest an elemental and excremental reality papered over by illusory hopes of transcendence (15). Santiago's admission that he is "not religious" and his dismissive relegation of belief in sin to priests with a commercial interest in it hint at a larger relegation of Christianity itself to the status of a sophistical bureaucracy, one that does not answer to the experiential immediacies of his life.

These considerations prepare the ground for applying an existentialist perspective to the novel's Christian allegory, which reaches its climax in Santiago's "crucifixion." Shouldering his heavy mast like a cross, he starts to climb up hill, but has to collapse in fatigue and then reshoulder the mast five times before reaching his shack. In Christian terms, of course, the crucifixion of Christ represents a definitive suffering that makes a definitive salva-

tion—including an eternity of compensating joy—possible. But it does so by way of a transcendental dynamic that the absurdist rejects as metaphysical illusion. In this world that is the only world, one bears one's cross again and again *ad absurdum* in repetitive acts of rebellion against the crucifying nihil. But the existentialist who refuses to abandon, in Camus's words, "his revolt and lucidity," who "has forgotten how to hope," discovers that "this hell of the present is his Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge. Abstract evidence retreats before the poetry of forms and colors. Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the abject and magnificent shelter of man's heart. None of them is settled. But all are transfigured" (39).

Similarly, the Santiago who stumbles up hill with the mast after yet one more defeat is the Santiago who had thought to himself earlier, during the battle with the marlin, "The thousand times he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time, and he never thought about the past when he was doing it" (66). It is an attitude that incarnates the Sisyphean rejection of metaphysical resolutions and its embrace of a *Realpolitik* that is actually a *Realmetaphisik*, a philosophy that locates a stark unresolvability deep in the scheme of things, and prescribes courage and dignity in the face of it.

NOTES

1. Eric Waggoner rightly recognizes the shark episode as an interpretational crux in his Taoist reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Here the reader must decide to lean toward an example of "Christian...martyrdom" or a "victory/defeat model"—or toward a Taoist harmonization of opposing forces (99). Waggoner makes a convincing argument for a Taoist element in Santiago's connectedness with the life of the sea and his acceptance of cyclical swings, but is less persuasive when he suggests that Santiago accepts the "rightness" of shark behavior" (101). After all, he attacks them with what Hemingway terms "complete malignancy" and tells them contemptuously to devour his spittle in the delusion that they have devoured a man. It would seem that in this instance the defiance of the defeated in the "victory/defeat" model is being evidenced—a reaction that fits well into the victory-within-defeat of the absurdist hero.
2. In this same connection, it seems to me useful to add an "existentialist" reading to the variety of readings—feminist, religious, heroic, psychological, etc. that Gerry Brenner summarizes as workable grids for *The Old Man and the Sea*. Brenner is concerned with demonstrating the suggestive ambiguities of the novel and its resistance to a monistic (what he calls a "mounted-on-rails") interpretation (102). My own critical bias (quite frankly pro-railroad) is that some interpretive grids are, in George Orwell's famous phrase, more equal than others because they spring directly from the writer's *Zeitgeist*

and from the conceptual constants of his/her corpus. Thus—for example—Christian allegory in Hemingway becomes an aspect (partly ironic) of existential allegory, rather than vice-versa.

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