REVISTA *LUMEN ET VIRTUS*
ISSN 2177-2789
VOL. I Nº 3 DEZ/2010

THE MANY DEATHS OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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http://lattes.cnpq.br/3799897454430594

RESUMO – Este ensaio constitui-se de uma compilação comentada sobre as várias mortes, simbólicas e/ou reais, do escritor norte-americano Ernest Hemingway, com destaque para seu falecimento oficial em 1961, para sua experiência de quase-morte no *front* italiano em 1919, para sua morte simbólica e desaparecimento da academia americana contemporânea e para sua morte ficcional pelas mãos de outro autor em 1995, entre outras. Para o fim de melhor compreender suas mortes, são abordadas informações pertinentes sobre sua vida, obra e carreira principalmente conforme adaptação de palestras ministradas pelo professor Arnold Weinstein (2003) da *Brown University*.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Hemingway; morte; vida; carreira.

ABSTRACT – This essay is an annotated compilation of the various deaths, symbolic and/or real, of North-American writer Ernest Hemingway, with due highlight to the official passing in 1961, to his near-death experience in the Italian *front* in 1919, to his symbolic death and disappearance from the contemporary American Academy, his fictional death by the hands of yet another writer in 1995, among others. So as to better comprehend his death, relevant information about his life, works and career are provided mainly as adaptations from Brown University Professor Arnold Weinstein's lectures on Hemingway (2003).
KEYWORDS – Hemingway; death; life; career.

North-American writer Ernest Hemingway was a man of many deaths. On July the 2nd 1961, with the help of a shotgun, he took his own life on an episode that would canonicaly be known as his official death. As history shows, it was not the first time it would happen, and certainly, it would not be the last.

In 1995, through the hands of Elvis *aficionado*, professor Bill Henderson, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in the shape of a comical novel, conveniently entitled *I Killed Hemingway*, the author presently investigated passed away one more time.

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Henderson's novel was not exactly a smash hit on sales and its reception by the reading public was lukewarm, nevertheless, it gathered fairly positive criticism by renowned magazines and newsapers such as the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Los Angeles Reader* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Another important death has been taking place on the reading lists of English courses in American universities. Several reasons can be hypothesized as to why Hemingway's name is simply vanishing from the focus of interest in the academic scenario of his country. According to Brown University professor Arnold Weinstein, Hemingway has become, from the contemporary point of view, "unforgivably politically incorrect" (2003) and he is a figure that, in a more striking way than what happened to Sherwood Anderson, "has disappeared from the reading lists of English courses in American universities" (2003). Reasons for this are not hard to discern, though.

One of the explanations revolves around the *macho* of Hemingway's *ethos*, which seems to be, in today's perspective, quite hard to accept. Bullfighting and war, as the crowning moments of human life; drinking, hunting, fishing, boxing, gambling, and fornicating, as the appropriate ways of measuring someone's valor or quality; is something that many people are no longer readily open to embrace. As it is commonly, and colloquially said, it "sticks in the throat" of many contemporary readers.

Current intellectual interests and ideological arrangements are more inclined in the direction of seeking the so-called 'long dumb voices' – dumb in the sense that they have not been heard, or at least have not been met with proper attention, and have been, therefore, marginalized, politically, socially, and canonically. Following this line, current academic literary research, most of the times, seeks to rewrite traditional literary history so as to include the voices of women writers, immigrant writers, or ethnic groups or the so-called 'minority' groups (EAGLETON, 2003) creating, thus, an environment which generates little curiosity and even less patience with Hemingway's *ethos*. Thus, the reasons for his academic death do not seem really all that difficult to discern. How many people really go to the woods for trout fishing or to a bullfight to find out the metaphor for what life really portends, as Hemingway would pose?

Not all seems outdated in Hemingway, though. The contemporary concern and cult to the body is present with an important role not only in his works but also, as we will see, in his life. When one look at pictures of him, one can normally see a man with a fabulous body, notably a terrific physique that meant a great deal to him; so much so that many people who had actual contact with him have claimed that his suicide was related to the failing powers of his body,

which was something he did not seem ready to deal with. Today we live in a sort of culture that also fetishizes the body, with all the issues of diets and gym and plastic surgeries. Interestingly, the concept of immortality, consciously or unconsciously, seems to be what lies behind our culture's paranoia with weight just as much as it laid behind Hemingway's *ethos*.

Yet another death of considerable importance took place in 1919 when Hemingway, less than twenty years old, volunteered to serve as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross with the American Field service in the Italian front (MORITZ, 1971). There, he was wounded, and that wound would represent some sort of important death to him. That wound was, in some sense, the origin of all of Hemingway. That was when his life began. He later described that wound as a sort of extracorporeal experience, the *lost generation* plot:

> There was one of those big noises you sometimes hear at the front. I died then. I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body, like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew all around and then came back and went in again and I wasn't dead anymore (WEINSTEIN, 2003).

That wound absolutely stamps his work. It is the initial and probably permanent trauma that accounts for much else in his life. It is a wound that he recounts, over and over, in several of his stories, e.g., in a *A Farewell to Arms*, the protagonist Fredrick Henry is wounded in a campaign which mirrors exactly the one that Hemingway was wounded in; in *In Our Time*, the same kinds of events reoccur; Jake Barnes who, in *The Sun Also Rises*, has been emasculated, is impotent because he was also wounded in the war; besides these there are still many other variations throughout his works. This wound has become part of the core of Hemingway's vision. It represents his "initiation from innocence to experience, from self to world, from America to Europe, from reality to pain" (WEINSTEIN, 2003). It is going to be replayed not only in his fictional characters but also in his life. And when it does not happen naturally, he makes it happen, in every kind of plot that he can manage, whether via bullfighting, boxing, war, hunting, or fishing, the figurative wound makes him seek these situations that may allow for the possibility of an existential encounter with himself, particularly to test his body - that physical body he so much adores and that allows him to meet his fate, to assess his force, to measure his power, with all the violence, all the brutality - the way he likes it.

Out from literature and into his personal life, there are horrible stories of how much he sought these violent interactions. Stories told by people who have lived somehow with him. For instance, there is one about some people in Havana, who went to ask him a question or ask for an autograph, and he supposedly put on brass knuckles and chased after them trying to knock

them down (WEINSTEIN, 2003). Naturally there is gossip and there are rumors, but aside from the innuendos, sources have revealed him to be a remarkably vindictive, jealous, and competitive person – what ultimately overflows to his writing.

The very own Sherwood Anderson, to whom he owed a great deal (SPILLER, 1955), suffered from his public put downs. There are also episodes that might be construed as nasty vendettas in his published work. In *A Moveable Feast* (2006a) – published posthumously but written in the 1950s about his expatriate life in the 1920s – there are underlying stories about Fitzgerald's measurements, more precisely about Fitzgerald's genital measurements. The story tells us that Fitzgerald had confessed to Hemingway, while they were driving together through France, that Zelda had told Fitzgerald that he was not equipped, in other words, that he was not built in such a way as to give a woman satisfaction. In this little story Hemingway, acting as big brother – though he was, in fact, younger than Fitzgerald - goes into the men's room with him and examines Scott and gives him a little lecture about how it is not the size of it in repose that matters but when it is engaged and this sort of thing.

In the short story collection *In Our Time*, there is also a vicious account of a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Elliot – whose names are homonymous to a tale in the collection – that in fact was based on acquaintances that were called the Smiths, whom Hemingway knew and who were very decent to him. Here are the first lines of the story:

> Mr. and Mrs. Elliot tried very hard to have a baby. They tried as often as Mrs. Elliot could stand it. They tried in Boston after they were married and they tried coming over on the boat. They did not try very often on the boat because Mrs. Elliot was quite sick. She was sick and when she was sick she was sick as Southern women are sick." (HEMINGWAY, 2010c).

And it gets worse. In the end it becomes a story about how Mr. and Mrs. Elliot sort of had separate bedrooms and Mrs. Elliot had a female friend with whom she slept in bed with and all. Hemingway changed the name to Elliot because he couldn't say straight out the Smiths, but with his own sort of intuitive powers he was also referring to the famous Elliot, the T. S. Elliot and his own marriage to Vivian (WEINSTEIN, 2003).

It may not take the reader long to figure out the coincidence. What is also the case is that there is something uncanny in Hemingway's sense of spotting people's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Now we know that Elliot's marriage was not all that different from what Hemingway had described, with the conflicts and everything. Elliot's breakdown, which occurred at the time he was writing the Wasteland, had to do with the tempestuous and neurotic

relationship with his wife, Vivian, and with the conditions that were becoming intolerable to them. In some strange way, Hemingway hit right on the mark. Coincidentally or not, it seems that he absolutely knew. Interestingly, this is precisely the qualities fighters are made of, i.e., they can smell people's weaknesses. In any event, it gives us a peculiar view of Hemingway, that of a rather nasty writer, a writer who looks for vulnerabilities and goes after them. But, after all, who says that a writer is supposed to be a nice fellow and not to exploit his friends and acquaintances?

For this and for many other reasons it is imperative that Hemingway return to the scrutiny of the contemporary academic universe. After all, there is still so much to learn from him, for good or bad. Whether we like it or not, he is a monumental figure and his contribution to American and to world literature is fundamental, and his talent, undeniable. Even dead in so many ways he remains vital.

He took to American readers a vision of Europe and an understanding of the First World War unlike what they had ever seen. Surely there were many other writers who were doing the same thing (YOUNG, 1968), that is, bringing news from Europe – many of the great modernist writers of the moment were doing it, nevertheless his view was unique and he conveyed it to more readers than anyone else.

Besides, he did it with style. His very own innovative style, as a matter of fact. His style was responsible for shaping his career in the most interesting fashion. His first major text *In Our Time* - published when he was twenty-seven years old - marks a groundbreaking moment in literary history, mainly due to an unparalleled new kind of writing. In *In Our Time*, the clean journalistic style was seen for the first time in American literature. It meant to get to the essentials by getting rid of adjectives, by simplifying syntax and, above all, by freeing American literature from the, at times, over-ornate and baroque eloquence of the nineteen century, as it was found in Melville, in James, and if we think of it in mostly any of the British writers, even Dickens and Conrad are good examples, to name a few. No one in America had ever seen this simple, limpid, clear language before. Hemingway himself said, again with remarkable acuity, that all of American literature comes from a book called Huckleberry Finn (WEINSTEIN, 2003). Twain was the grandfather of this simple direct immediate language that Hemingway rightfully admired and that he transformed into something even more influential than Twain was ever capable of doing.

When we think of literature today, with all the minimalism, we must know that if we read Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason or Richard Ford and, if we tell our students in schools and universities to write simply and clearly and not to get too lost in over-ornate sentences, it probably is because of Hemingway's legacy.

Returning to *In Our Time* - the title of this collection was taken from the English common prayer book: "give us peace in our time, o Lord". Besides being a revolutionary text, it was also the perfect combination of short stories that had, in the most part, Nick Adams as main character – Nick, who was created in this book and whose career Hemingway would continued to trace in other works. Nick is a version of Hemingway as a boy (SPILLER, 1955). Nick's youth, in Michigan as well as in Europe during the war, is told in this collection of quite brief stories actually that are, in turn, cut and spliced in even briefer, usually a paragraph long, vignettes about the war or about other kinds of violence. They are an effort – quite successful I might add – to blend the personal, Nick's reminiscences, with the political and the ideological – the political not only seen in the war, but also in the shape of the political circumstances at the time in the United States.

Hemingway draws in his own experiences as a journalist. At the moment he is writing these stories there is a continuing war going on between the Greeks and the Turks. Here is a fine example of how the brief vignettes go:

> Water buffalo and cattle were hauling carts through the mud. There was no end and no beginning. Just carts loaded with everything they owned. The old men and women, soaked through (…) Greek cavalry herded along the procession (…) There was a woman having a baby with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation" (HEMINGWAY, 2010a).

The excerpt is from the vignette that antecedes the tale entitled *The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife*. In it, there is news of a world America did not know much about in 1925 (WEINSTEIN, 2003). Nowadays is fairly easy to know too much about war since we can watch live feeds, through television or the internet, of bombs going off halfway around the world in real time, but at that time Hemingway caught all that with his own distinctive linguistic style that conveyed flux, traffic, and process. This was the Hemingway vision. It was war seen up-close, along with the damages that it does to people.

It is simply not the regular literary war account. It is not Kipling. There is no fancy military strategy. It is more similar to the reality of Crane's war, from *the Red Badge of Courage*, without the flare and the fireworks, though. But this does not mean Hemingway cannot do Kipling. He can. Here is an example:

> It was a frightfully hot day. We'd jammed an absolutely perfect barricade across the bridge. It was simply priceless. A big old wrought-iron grating from the

> front of a house. Too heavy to lift and you could shoot through it and they would have to climb over it. It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we **potted** them from forty yards. They rushed it, and officers came out alone and worked on it. It was an absolutely perfect obstacle. Their officers were very fine. We were frightfully put out when we heard the flank had gone, and we had to fall back (HEMINGWAY, 2010b).

The excerpt was taken from the vignette that antecedes the short story entitled *The Three Day Blow*. In it, there is the Kipling perspective, the high-minded military European officer perspective, with all the flare, the idealism, the heroism and the romance of war. This is the other look at war, the look from a distance, from a cold, unemotional distance. This is the view of literary *clichés* and of war slogans (WEINSTEIN, 2003). This is war where one constructs a barricade and bodies get in it and they get "potted".

Hemingway's career covered both views of war. As one can expect, the reception he got was consequently mixed. This particular collection I have been mentioning - *In Our Time* - was published in 1925; *The Sun also Rises* in 1926, and, for many people, those are the best Hemingway, because they are the cleanest and the sparsest of all the books he wrote (ROVIT, 1966). They stand out as bare modernist narratives with his very unique kind of clarity. People who do not like *The Sun also Rises* often think of it as mean spirited (ROVIT, 1966). It certainly does not charm everyone. As times passes his style gets looser, though. When one thinks of *A Farewell to Arms*, which was published only three years later, in 1929, it already is a more lush, a more romantic kind of narrative. The great love story he wrote, which is also the fictionalization of his own war experiences in the Italian front. The text was reviewed as "an attempt to regain the vigor, his themes and his aesthetic strength represent mainly a larger scale continuity of what has already been worked with in detail" (PUGLIA, 2007).

The 1930's are a kind of a bad decade for Hemingway. He does not write pieces that people are ostensively drawn to, like *Death in the Afternoon* and *To Have and to Have Not*. Novels that are not much regarded. *Death in the Afternoon* and *The Green Hills of Africa* are his classic treatises in bullfighting and hunting, respectively.

In the 1940's he reemerges as a major American writer with the epic account about the Spanish civil war with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The novel is about the idealistic love between Robert Jordan, the American volunteer in the Spanish civil war and the Spanish woman Maria. In this novel we see a politically engaged Hemingway, quite unlike the adventurous stories from the thirties. It is a book with great flaws in language. Hemingway tries to capture in English the

syntactic possibilities that are available in romance languages. Since you cannot say '*tu*' in English, he writes 'thou' and 'thee', with the proper early-modern English verbal agreements. He uses this concoction to try to reproduce Spanish or old Catalan style of speech. He uses the definite article before the character's proper names, like 'the Maria' or 'the Joaquín". For many readers this is hard to swallow.

In the following decade – the 1950s – he continues to write and publishes his much acclaimed novella *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952. He is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. *The Old Man and the Sea* is perhaps an effort to recapture that simple, limpid Hemingway of old (MORITZ, 1971). It is a story about being destroyed but not being defeated (WEINSTEIN, 2003), and it carries a lot of Hemingway's *ethos* with it.

After his 'official' death in 1961, his reading public had access to fascinating texts that were published posthumously, such as his *memoirs* from Paris in the 1920s – left complete but unrevised – *A Moveable Feast* is published in 1964; *Islands in the Stream* in 1970; *The Dangerous Summer* – a report about a trip to Spain in 1959 – published in 1985; and – the nowhere near finished – *The Garden of Eden*, in 1986 (OUSBY, 1992).

Hemingway is part of the expatriate group of American artists in Europe in the years that followed the First World War. When we think of the expatriates, we think of Fitzgerald, Elliot, Pound, Stein and others that sought Europe as a clear repudiation of the earlier American culture, from the end of the nineteen century, a repudiation of what was thought to be the prissiness of Victorianism in American culture (THORP, 1965). They were 'The Lost Generation'. The term 'Lost Generation' has, of course, acquired enormous cultural currency since then. It appeared for the first time in the epigraph in the beginning of one of his books. There is a sort of fun origin to the expression. The expression comes from Gertrude Stein and, in turn, she got it from a *garagiste*, someone who fixes cars, when this car mechanic was bitching to her about the fact that the young people who were growing up in France back then didn't know how to fix cars: '*Ces't une generation perdue*' he said (WEINSTEIN, 2003).

Life in France is also a recurrent theme in Hemingway. He evokes his experiences in Europe in several of his books - *A Moveable Feast* is, in itself, a nostalgic retrospect of his adventures in Paris. It is the one that has the beautiful sentence: *If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast* (HEMINGWAY, 2006a). To have lived in Paris as a penniless writer, enchanted with the place and with that moment, was enough to endear the atmosphere to him. He conveyed this endearment. The same Paris is written at the same moment in *The Sun Also Rises*. The story of

Jake Barnes is a close account of the story of the expatriates in the 1920's in Paris. Besides fictional stories, there are wonderful real life stories about Hemingway's exploits in Paris. He was thought to be something of a buffoon by this international group of writers that he hung out with. He boxed, or tried to box, everyone he knew, and occasionally knocked them out. If he liked someone he would invite the person to box. He was really this great big macho character with lots of strength. There are also stories of him with other writers who, strangely enough, took to him. Ezra pound, who would seem to be as different from Hemingway as you can imagine, championed him. Ford Maddox Ford, a very sophisticated British novelist, championed him. There are great stories of late nights in bars where Hemingway and James Joyce were together - Joyce who is his elder, and Joyce, as you know, was virtually blind, but Joyce would get in his cups all the time and when he would get really drunk, he would get in bar fights with great big people and then he would stick Hemingway in them and he would say 'deal with them Ernest, deal with them' (WEINSTEIN, 2003).

The notion of combat is intrinsic to Hemingway's *ethos*. To him, combat was a form of catharsis, a form of enema. In *In Our Time*, we can see enema in course. Here we have a perfect example taken from the vignette that antecedes the short story *Soldier's Home*:

> While the bombardment was knocking the trench to pieces at Fossalta, he lay very flat and sweated and prayed oh Jesus Christ get me out of here. Dear Jesus please get me out. Christ please please Christ. If you'll only keep me from getting killed I'll do anything you say. I believe in you and I'll tell everyone in the world that you are the only one that matters. Please please dear Jesus. The shelling moved further up the line. We went to work on the trench and in the morning the sun came up and the day was hot and muggy and cheerful and quiet. The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody (HEMINGWAY, 2010d).

That is the perfect example of enema taking place, and the shame that accompanies it. The shame of the relief that we feel when the danger is over and the event has passed. There is a silent code in Hemingway, that says you must stand up to anything that comes in your way and face it elegantly, that is called 'grace under pressure'. Hemingway loves bullfighting for largely that reason. Here is an example of 'grace under pressure' and of how a successful event must be conveyed:

> When he started to kill it was all in the same rush. The bull looking at him straight in front, hating. He drew out the sword from the folds of the muleta

> and sighted with the same movement and called to the bull, Toro! Toro! and the bull charged and Villalta charged and just for a moment they became one (HEMINGWAY, 2010e).

The passage is almost erotic. It depicts the moment of blending between animal and *matador*, between *conquistador* and conquered. The animal must die, but it shall be according to the rule of the art. Here is the outcome:

> Villalta became one with the bull and then it was over. Villalta standing straight and the red hilt of the sword sticking out dully between the bull's shoulders. Villalta, his hand up at the crowd and the bull roaring blood, looking straight at Villalta and his legs caving (HEMINGWAY, 2010e).

This is triumph. This is 'grace under pressure'. In the vignettes of *In Our Time* we get a picture of what Hemingway admires, and of what he fears. And we begin to see something about the requirements of his art, and we begin to understand how important it is to him to hold back, to hold strong, and not to give in.

He dies in 1961. A suicide. The body just could not hold up anymore. Even after dying so many times, understanding his deaths is only the beginning to understanding who Hemingway really was. We know that from the top of his tragic and pretentious personality he ruled his world and indelibly marked his century. He was the legend. In many senses he overthrew Crane, because he knew that Crane had never actually seen combat, whereas he had been there. He knew exactly how much his personal experiences validated and sealed with authenticity his works. He was a first hand witness to the carnage and the strange dignity that stems from war. He also knew personally the indignities that war can afflict in the human body and soul. There, he learned the value of human life. He taught American audiences about war. He also told Americans about the beauty, and terror, of certain sports, like hunting, boxing and bullfighting and how each one is a confrontation with death and an unparalleled opportunity for what he called 'grace under pressure', a test of man's rigorous, unforgiving and never flailing courage.

To conclude, and to complete our voyage to understand Hemingway's life and works through his deaths, we must now see two reports of a series of 'close calls'.

According to Professor Weinstein (2003), Hemingway, as a boy, fell and had a stick driven into the back of his throat gauging out part of both tonsils. In 1918, when he was a Red Cross worker in Italy distributing supplies to soldiers, a mortar shell exploded more than twenty fragments into his legs. He was then hit twice by machinegun bullets while carrying a more seriously injured man to the rear. As a young writer in Paris during the 1920s, he was clipped in

the forehead by pieces of a skylight that fell just as he was standing under it. In Wyoming, in 1930, his car turned over and his right arm was pinned back by the top of the wind shield and badly fractured – the bone sticking through the muscle. At another time, his brother Lester reports that Hemingway shot a shark with a rifle but the bullet split into several small pieces of hot lead that ricocheted into the calves of both his legs. In 1949, while duck hunting in the marshes near Venice, he got a piece of shell wadding blown into his eye and a serious infection developed. In 1953, he crash landed in Africa and the rescue plane that picked him up crashed and burned. When he reached medical aid in Nairobi, just in time to read his obituaries, his internal organs had been wrenched out of place, his spine was injured, and he was bleeding from every orifice.

Therefore it is not surprising to see that he writes about the damages that can be done to the body, and how much it can take.

The other report is from immediately before the Nobel Prize ceremony. Hemmingway was fifty-five years old, though he looked much older, as he was still trying to recover from a hurt kidney, a crack in his skull, two compressed and one bended vertebra, as well as severe burns from his plane crash in the marshes of Uganda from the previous winter (MORITZ, 1971, p. 141).

Perhaps, worst of all of his wounds, he held in his consciousness the suicide of his father. Hemingway, thus, did not die writing, nor *of* writing, nor from any of those wounds, he succumbed to his own genetics.

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