

Ringin the Changes: Hemingway's Bell Tolls Fifty

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Review (VQT), Winter 1991.

AS FOR Whom the Bell Tolls eases through its 50th birthday into ripe middle age, it has already outlived its author, its war, and most of its original audience. Today the Spanish Civil War, which was once the heart's blood of this novel, has become a footnote to the violent century that bore it. Old soldiers may still argue across cafe tables, rehashing their salad days at the siege of Madrid or on the rocky slopes of Teruel, but their memories have become history, and they have become artifacts, trapped in time. So much blood has since soaked the earth, dulling our capacity for horror, that Hemingway's once great novel has reached the sticking point: it must either transcend time or become one of its footnotes, of interest to historians and graduate students but no longer part of the mainstream. Even the best-written fiction goes astray in time's good time. How could Hemingway have predicted the contemporary American reader: detached, deconstructive, post-modernist, and political only on narrow issues?

Had Hemingway been able to imagine the ideological malaise left in the wake of Korea, Vietnam, and Watergate, he still could not have written for his 1940 readers and their 1990 grandchildren with the same effect. Robert Jordan is not our contemporary, and those first readers who responded so positively to his heroism are not our emotional brothers, barely our first cousins. When the battleship Houston was sunk in the Coral Sea, more than a thousand Houstonians volunteered in front of the old Loew's Theatre to man the new Houston. Today the theatre is probably gone; maybe the bronze plaque is still on the sidewalk, but I didn't see any volunteers for Vietnam lined up there the day I faced my draft board. Having been lied to by every president during the last 50 years, the contemporary reader is closer kin to A Farewell to Arms' Frederic Henry than to Robert Jordan. Cynical, self-centered, and opportunistic, Frederic is a survivor who volunteered to participate in war but without any burning reason. For love of Spain — the land, the Republic and its people — Robert Jordan risks his life to fight fascism, to protect Maria, to wash away his father's suicide, to do his duty. There's a word to reckon with: duty. Nelson used it bluntly at Trafalgar: 'England expects each man to do his duty.' To Robert E. Lee, 'duty' was the most sublime word of the English language. And as late as 1960, Hemingway's Thomas Hudson could still say that 'Duty you do'. In Vietnam we did the job assigned us, but few thought of it as our duty, not in the sense that Hemingway uses the word.

And yet, Robert Jordan, by the time he blows his bridge, has lost all of his innocence and most of his idealism. He is, in fact, a bit more like you and me than generalizations indicate. No one starts off cynical; none of us was born disillusioned. Each started out, if not with illusions, at least with political innocence, believing his elders, accustomed to words making sense, hoping for the political best. Then in 1940, pledging to keep us out of war, Roosevelt promised that no mother's son would die on foreign soil. And Lyndon Johnson promised no wider war in Vietnam. And Richard Nixon promised he was not a liar. And Reagan promised he would never make a deal for hostages. And George Bush promised no new taxes.

Thus, Robert Jordan's need for and loss of belief should remind us of our own needs and losses. I do not know for what ideals this generation would fight and die, but I cannot imagine them volunteering to die for another country's government. Some would go for love of slaughter, but I cannot imagine International Brigades forming to preserve the kings and kingdoms of Arabia, which, as I write these words, are being threatened by Iraq. I can imagine Americans being sent to war to keep open the flow of oil, to insure [sic] repayment of bank debts, or for any of the other money reasons that old congressmen send off the sons of others to die in foreign fields. But I cannot imagine those same young men streaming illegally into Saudi Arabia to keep a king on his throne. I cannot imagine them risking permanent blacklisting to fight for, say, black South African freedom. That is, of course, my cynicism speaking. Underneath I secretly hope for idealistic behavior, but having had it turn to mouth ash in the Tonkin Gulf, I resist its temptation as well as I'm able.

Any reader born around 1936, the first year of the Spanish Civil War, has gone through more political promises made and broken than he or she can remember. This disillusionment, which has become an American rite of passage, is also part of Robert Jordan's political education. With the International Brigades, early in the war, he tells us that devotion to the Loyalist cause was like a religious experience, 'the feeling you expected to have but did not have when you made your first communion. That 'purity of feeling' barely lasted the first six months; survivors hardened quickly. At Gaylord's Hotel in Madrid, where Jordan was privy to gossip of the Russian insiders running the war, his innocence evaporated. 'You corrupt very easily, he thought. But was it corruption or was it merely that you lost the naïveté that you started with?' In his fortunate or unfortunate fall into awareness, Robert Jordan established a paradigm for his immediate readers, many of whom would discover their political realities on the beaches of war, or in its hedgerows and jungles, or in its aftermath of deceit. It's an old lesson, maybe a universal one, a lesson we've learned by heart these last 50 years.

If Jordan's political education so resembles our own, why then is *For Whom the Bell Tolls* so little read, so seldom taught? Why has Hemingway become the quintessential Twenties author and not the man of letters he aspired to be? Today we

teach, read, and talk about his short stories (1924-36), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Few and strange are those of us interested in his experimental works of the thirties, fiction and nonfiction that went against the prevalent tide of tedious proletariat preaching and romantic escapes. After 1940, Hemingway published only one flawed novel, *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), and one novella. Among school children, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), because it is short, seemingly moral, and without offensive parts, has become a classic of sorts, but it is now vaguely embarrassing to many scholars. Too direct, probably. About the posthumous works, critics are divided and scholars are largely silent. *The Garden of Eden* was so badly edited that the present text is like reading *A Tale of Two Cities* with London left out. *A Moveable Feast*, a curious kind of fiction, is only marginally better in its editing. Two chapters were cut, most of the others were re-sequenced, and his foreword was pieced together by his editors from several different manuscripts. Which brings us back to *The Bell*, for if Hemingway is going to be more than a Twenties period piece, this novel is his present best hope of surviving until his entire canon is reliable enough to be evaluated. That one should have to defend *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, make cases for its relevance, tells us two things: the novel is out of tune with these times, and it may not be the great work it once seemed, for great novels should need no apologists.

II

In October 1940, when the novel was first published, reviewers could not have imagined my last sentence's needing to be written. With few detractors, *The Bell* was a raging best seller, Hemingway's first truly mass-market novel. After his new books in the Thirties sold barely in the twelve thousand copy range, he gloried in the *The Bell*'s first printing of 210,000 copies that sold out immediately. With interest spurred on by Book-of-the-Month Club selection, Paramount purchased the film rights to the novel three days after it appeared in print; in less than six months the book sold 491,000 hardback copies. Critical consensus was euphoric: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was among Hemingway's finest work. The *New York Times* called it 'the best book Ernest Hemingway has written, the fullest, the deepest, the truest. It will be one of the major novels in American literature'. Dorothy Parker wrote that it was 'beyond all comparison, Ernest Hemingway's finest book'. The *Nation* thought the book set 'a new standard for Hemingway in characterization, dialogue, suspense and compassion'. Clifton Fadiman in *The New Yorker* said it 'touches a deeper level than any sounded in the author's other books. It expresses and releases the adult Hemingway'. *Saturday Review of Literature* called it 'the finest and richest novel which Mr. Hemingway has written . . . and it is probably one of the finest and richest novels of the last decade'. Edmund Wilson

loved the novel: ‘Hemingway the artist is with us again; and it is like having an old friend back’. Amidst such effusive praise, only John Chamberlain, of the major reviewers, had the reserve to question whether this was Hemingway’s best novel or not. We would not know, he said, ‘until the passions of the present epoch have subsided’.

Chamberlain was right. With passions not merely subsided but largely forgotten, the once burning politics of that Spanish war are lost on the reader today; it was difficult enough at the time to keep the players straight. To the American reader, unsure of the dates of his own Civil War, what happened at Burgos and Madrid four wars ago are merely blips on the ragged EKG of our times. The American reader does not particularly care who was a Fascist and who a Communist; that there were Russians and Russian-trained Spaniards running the war for the Loyalists no longer matters. That there were lies is unremarkable. That there were betrayals seems customary. That civilians were bombed at Guernica seems perfectly ordinary to an age in which the nuclear destruction of population centers is a foregone conclusion. That atrocities were committed and many died is hardly news after Auschwitz, Dresden, Stalingrad, and Hiroshima. Whatever horrors Hemingway tried to conjure in his anti-war novel, he could not fully imagine our capacity for violence. To children who grew up on World War II, lost faith in Korea, and lost hope in Vietnam, Robert Jordan’s lengthy internal debates about his politics, his motives for killing, and his hopes for a better world seem stale, flat, and profitless.

This present dearth of idealism is probably no more permanent than was its seeming demise following World War I. Everything cycles. If hula hoops and Bermuda shorts can rise from the dead, why not the capacity for idealism that characterized the 1940’s reviewers and their audience? It is, however, during this lull between enthusiasms that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* must find new readers and wider rationale or be left stranded on the beach with other once famous but now largely unread American novels. The curious tide that brought it ashore has ebbed, and it cannot afford to wait on that same tide’s return. The 1920’s Melville revival re-floated *Moby Dick* to its present seaworthiness; maybe postmodernism can recast *The Bell*, giving it a tone that rings clear for our times. This is not to imply that any novel’s greatness depends upon current critical trends. Classic fiction will always prevail eventually, but critics do give teachers new handles on a novel which encourage them to take it back into the classroom. What gets taught gets talked about and becomes actively part of the cultural flow. If post-modernist interests do not restore *The Bell*, its time will eventually come round nonetheless. At least without the confusion of past idealism and politics, we are free to examine the novel in a far different light from that available to its first readers.

In doing so, we can broaden our scope of enquiry, widen the vista. Until recently our interests have been too narrow and too predictable. While Hemingway’s invented language continues to incite his Spanish detractors and apologists, it is not a central issue, for this novel was no more written for a Spanish-speaking audience than A

Farewell to Arms was written for an Italian one. The problem of Spanish slang and cursing will neither save nor silence *The Bell*; if besmirching the foulness of one's mother's milk is not a perfectly translated Spanish curse, American readers, upon whom *The Bell's* status depends, will never know or care deeply about the difference. Nor will that audience respond to historical issues: if Hemingway has maligned Andre Marty as a paranoid sadist, today's readers do not particularly care. Nor are they concerned about which characters are real, which imaginary, and which based loosely on real counterparts. Those issues are exhausted avenues, still on the street map, but no one lives there anymore.

Another main road no longer travelled, and rightly so, is the one detailing the novel's epic qualities and characteristics. Not that they are not present, and not that Hemingway did not consciously put them there, but they now are a less substantive issue than they once appeared. Books are not read because they are epics; first they must tell an interesting story. Homer wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; Virgil wrote an epic. Hemingway once said that bad writers fall in love with the epic, implying that he never would. He also promised he would never compete with Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. Maybe he forgot, or maybe he was leaving a confusing trail of contradictions for his own amusement. The degree to which Hemingway fulfilled or failed to fulfil requirements for an epic is not an uninteresting academic debate, but neither is it an issue sufficiently central to rehabilitate the novel for most readers.

If *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is to become once more important to the Hemingway canon, then post-modernist readers must not so much deconstruct the novel, but reconstruct it. As modernist, Hemingway has been rightly praised for liberating the American stylist with his native voices and for reaffirming American subject matter: the loss of innocence, the American in Europe, the effects of violence, the search for values, and the definition of manhood. While these issues are less central to the contemporary agenda, it would be a mistake to assume that Hemingway does not speak, in a less obvious voice, to points dear to the post-modernist heart — gender roles, self-referencing, appropriation, multiple framing, narrative guises, and writing about writing. These elements all have their roots in the modernist period in the same way that modernist roots are deeply buried within the crannied Victorian wall. It would not be surprising, therefore, to find that *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, written on the transition point into the post-modernist era, contained within it the seeds of the next generation.

Take, for example, the element of appropriation. Eliot told the modernists to steal large and boldly, but few openly followed his directive. Today, in music, art, or writing, one is likely to find the artist doing a 'cover', appropriating for his own use the work of some other admired artist. In freshman English we still call this plagiarism; yet Eliot plagiarized *The Waste Land* from the broken shards of his cultural inheritance, remaking them into his own work. The post-modernist artist does the same. While

Hemingway never worked as boldly as Barth or Calvino, he still insisted that some writers were born only to contribute a single line to another writer. He learned that truth at Pound's knee and practiced it surreptitiously all his life. In his early vignettes, called in our time (1924), he appropriated the voice and stories of a British friend. His famous depiction of the retreat from Caporetto in *A Farewell to Arms* was taken wholesale from unacknowledged sources. In *Islands in the Stream* (1970) he appropriated well-known paintings of Winslow Homer and gave them to his fictional painter, Thomas Hudson. He told himself in an early unpublished note that education consisted in finding sources obscure enough that no one would recognize them when he used them. Despite his anti-intellectual public guise, Ernest Hemingway was not an uneducated man: his Cuban library held six thousand volumes, some of them obscure enough to appropriate.

III

In writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway drew heavily on at least two authors: Owen Wister and T.E. Lawrence. By 1939, when he began writing his novel, Hemingway had known Wister for eleven years, having read his seminal western, *The Virginian*, as early as high school. The older writer was Hemingway's direct link to the American 19th-century old-boy tradition. Wister had been Harvard classmate and personal friend to Teddy Roosevelt, Hemingway's most obvious early role model. That *The Virginian* was dedicated to Roosevelt was not lost on Hemingway. Wister, having been encouraged in his writing by Henry James, felt he was passing the torch of tradition on to the pacemaker of the next generation when he befriended Hemingway through their mutual friend and Scribner editor, Max Perkins. As soon as one connects *The Virginian* with *The Bell*, both obvious and subtle appropriations appear. Jordan leaves the American West to go to a civil war, reversing the *Virginian's* pattern of moving West after the American Civil War. Like the *Virginian*, Robert Jordan is a natural leader, a horseman, a quick and deadly shot, a teller of stories, and a man facing an enormous task. Both men make decisions well under pressure and take decisive action as if they were born to it. Jordan is the hired gun, the outsider brought in to organize the local hands in a crucial task. He understands the Spanish terrain, its people and their language. Like the *Virginian*, Jordan bends men to his will through action and words. The *Virginian* has his *bete noir*, Trampas, to face over drawn guns; Jordan has his Pablo. In both novels the love interest is a strong motivating force. The *Virginian* teaches the New England schoolmarm to ride and shoot; she teaches him to read Dostoevsky and Shakespeare. When he is wounded and vulnerable, she defends him, saving his life. Afterward they marry: enervated East and war-weary South unite in the American West to pour grit back into the nation's chops. The parallels are not one for

one with *The Bell*, but homage is being paid. In a role reversal, Jordan is the educated lover, a college professor; Maria is the tyro who, nonetheless, teaches Jordan to love. When he is wounded, she tries to save him, but he will not let her. In Spain there are no happy endings, no coal deposits to sell the railroad, but as Jordan lies dying on the Spanish earth, he is fortified by the memory of his courageous grandfather, Civil War veteran and Indian fighter in the West. While these parallels may not seem like appropriations in the post-modernist sense, neither are they merely allusions. Wister's novel solved a very real problem for Hemingway: how to write about the Spanish war yet isolate his protagonist from the front lines and the various historical necessities that setting entailed. Moving Jordan across the frontier into the wilderness, as Wister did in *The Virginian*, gave Hemingway a freedom for invention he would have otherwise lacked. Once a man crosses the frontier, the social contract is broken and all rights and responsibilities revert to him. Wister knew it, and Hemingway remembered the lesson.

A more obvious appropriation was what Hemingway took from T.E. Lawrence's World War One adventures in the Arabian desert. In 1928, Hemingway read Robert Graves' early Lawrence biography, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, preparing himself for Lawrence's own account — *Revolt in the Desert* — which he read in 1931. Three years later Hemingway ordered the Liddell Hart book, *Colonel Lawrence*; and in 1935, he bought Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. During the first two years of the Spanish Civil War, Hemingway purchased two more Lawrence biographies, and as he began writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he bought *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*. Suffice to say that Lawrence and his Arabs were much on Hemingway's mind during *The Bell's* gestative period.

Having had no first-hand experience in guerrilla warfare, Hemingway transposed what he learned from reading Lawrence's account of the desert war to Jordan in the Spanish mountains. Both characters, larger than life, are college men: Jordan teaches at the University of Montana; Lawrence was a research fellow at Oxford. Both men are fluent in local dialects, know their terrain from pre-war travel, and practice the customs of the country. Both are attentive to details and are able to inspire natives to follow their outside leadership rather than that of a local leader. Both men are dynamiters: Lawrence specialized in trains, Jordan in bridges and trains. Both men, out of battlefield necessity, are forced to kill close friends. When his wounded Arab friend, Farraj, cannot be left behind to be tortured by the Turks, Lawrence kneels beside his comrade and puts a bullet through his head. Jordan faced a similar situation when his friend Kashkin was wounded by a Fascist patrol:

'I shot him,' Robert Jordan said. 'He was too badly wounded and I shot him.'

Both Lawrence and Jordan have divided loyalties: distrusting the politics of their superiors, they both feel more brotherhood with their guerrilla bands than with their

commanding officers. In sum, Hemingway's fiction depends in large degree on his appropriations from Colonel Lawrence who, just out of sight in the novel, is nonetheless informing its action. While Lawrence silently contributed to the casting of *The Bell*, Hemingway's public life played an equally strong role. Like his post-modernist kin, Hemingway, from 1930 onward, was always self-referential, continually calling attention to himself and to his earlier work. By 1940, his audience knew he had been to the Spanish war and was writing about it, for his life had become public property. If one had not read Hemingway's North American News Alliance reports from the Spanish front, he could not have escaped the author's goings and comings covered by national magazines and wire services. By 1940, Hemingway already had published a handful of short stories set at the war, written one play about it (*The Fifth Column*, 1938), and told any number of interviewers he was at work on his Spanish war novel. All of this activity, while adding to the popular but false conception that Hemingway lived his life and then wrote about it, was a series of self-referential acts closely kin to similar activities of Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson, and numerous others writing in post-modernist time.

Even more self-referential was *The Bell*'s basic plot: a young but experienced American volunteers for a foreign war where, while doing his duty, he falls deeply in love with an attractive woman. Hemingway used that plot in *A Farewell to Arms*, and he calls our attention to it in his second war novel, asking that comparisons be made. Any experienced Hemingway reader could not have gotten past the opening paragraph of *The Bell* without thinking of *A Farewell to Arms* which begins:

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 channels.

For Whom the Bell Tolls begins:

He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees. The mountainside sloped gently where he lay; but below it was steep and he could see the dark of the oiled road winding through the pass. There was a stream alongside the road and far down the pass he saw a mill beside the stream and the falling water of the dam, white in the summer sunlight.

The point of view has shifted from first to third, but the internal rhythms and landscape renderings are remarkably similar. Once again we are somewhere else, some place unnamed, not knowing where or why, not knowing through whose eyes we are seeing. Once more we begin in the middle of things with much left out, much to recover. Reviewers missed the point, calling *The Bell* a return to Hemingway's early style. Yes, it starts in the same manner, and, yes, it has a roughly similar plot, but these self-

referencing devices call our attention to differences, not similarities, between the two books. It is as if Hemingway were saying to those who bemoaned his departure from his fiction of the Twenties, 'Sure, I can still do it if I want to, but there's more to a writer's life than his early work.' There are, in fact, several Hemingways — part continuum, part discrete periods. There is no single Hemingway style, but several, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* signals the transition into his late, eclectic period.

He is also transitioning into his most complex exploration of gender roles, experiments which have left his traditional readers perplexed but which should interest those post-modernists for whom gender is important. The novel's first readers saw only the love story: Jordan and Maria making the earth move out and away from them in their moment of *La Gloria* as Maria calls it. But there was always more to the picture. There was always Pilar. There was always the triangle: Pilar, Maria, and Jordan. It is more than Jordan's death that Pilar reads in his palm: he is the man for whom she has been preparing Maria. Pablo wanted her; the gypsy yearned for her, but Pilar, who claimed Maria for her own, gives her as a gift to Jordan in an act he neither fully understands nor questions deeply. In a rare moment, Pilar tells the two lovers,

'Yes, he can have thee, . . . I have never wanted thee. But I am jealous. . . . I am no tortillera but a woman made for men. . . . I do not make perversions. I only tell you something true. Few people will ever talk to thee truly and no women. I am jealous and say it and it is there.'

Tortillera is Spanish slang for lesbian, the dark side of Pilar left largely unspoken in 1940. Hemingway, who would become increasingly fascinated with such triangles, realized the androgynous side of men and women earlier than most have given him credit. In the end, with Jordan broken on the slope and waiting for his death to find him, Maria is sent away with Pilar holding her, the same Pilar who has said of herself, 'I would have made a good man, but I am all woman and ugly. Yet many men have loved me and I have loved many men.' Any novel that has an androgynous older woman, a rape-scarred younger woman, and an odd assortment of men working out male-identity problems ought to provoke something more than a knee-jerk response from those interested in gender studies.

IV

More interesting, perhaps, than *The Bell's* gender issues are the complexities of its narration and its structure, both here and throughout his work much neglected aspects of Hemingway's artistry. With deceptive simplicity Hemingway was always testing the limits of narrative, extending the possibilities of how a story can be told. One of his earliest discoveries in Paris was the curious effects of skewed and shifting points of view. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* he uses a curious omniscient point of view encompassing a

whole range of narrative voices. When it suits his purpose, Hemingway's narrator can tell us how Anselmo suffers in the snowstorm on his road watch or of Andres' difficulties taking the message to Golz. The power of that narrative voice is most felt in the gut-wrenching story of El Sordo's brave death on his lonely hilltop. When the closing chapters begin to alternate between Andres' frustrating effort to warn Golz and Jordan's effort to blow the bridge, the counterpoint works and the reader's belief is not strained. We recognize Hemingway's mastery of a traditional narrative stance.

Elsewhere in the novel, however, Hemingway twists, bends, and sometimes breaks every tacit rule for the omniscient narrator he has adopted. He can move the reader into Jordan's mind, which is an old prerogative, but then, for extended periods, Jordan becomes the narrator who provides flashbacks to his earlier life and even flashforwards to fantasies of taking Maria to Madrid. Jordan's internal monologues turn into narratives, stories within stories, a device more closely associated with John Barth than Ernest Hemingway. Most of what the reader finally knows about Jordan's past he learns from these narratives, not from the omniscient author.

Interesting, you say, but not all that incredible. Look again. Look at the other narratives embedded within the larger story of Jordan's bridge: there is Rafael's story of rescuing Maria when they blew up the train; the story of Kashkin's death which is revealed over the course of the novel; the gripping story of El Sordo's hilltop fight; Maria's story of the execution of her parents and her own rape; Andres' story of his bull-baiting youth; and Jordan's story of his political education at Gaylord's in Madrid. Almost every character, including Pablo, becomes, at some point, a narrator within the larger narrative, but the most remarkable storyteller of all is Pilar. She first tells us the story of her life in Valencia with the bullfighter, Finito, and later creates its sequel — his dinner of honor turned grotesque by his horror of the bull's head on the wall. But these stories are overshadowed by her stunning account of the first day of the revolution when Pablo and the peasants executed the Fascists in the village square, beating them to death with flails in drunken, primitive rage.

Without drawing undue attention to his artistry, Hemingway has written a collection of short stories embedded in a framing novel. In fact, most of the action that makes Jordan's three-day wait to blow the bridge less tedious comes through these embedded stories. This structural experiment is a variation on Hemingway's continual investigation of narrative limits. In 1925, he embedded his terse vignettes as counterpoints between the stories of *In Our Time*. In 1932, he embedded several stories, both narrative and dialogic, into *Death in the Afternoon*. In 1937, he welded a series of Harry Morgan short stories into the novel *To Have and Have Not*. Inside Hemingway's last unfinished book, *The Garden of Eden* (1986), David Bourne writes the remarkable story of his father's elephant hunt. And in what may be Hemingway's finest if not his

strangest fiction — ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ — he embedded at least six stories within the story of his dying writer, Harry Walden.

Written three years earlier, ‘Snows’ now appears as a trying-out of The Bell’s experimental structure, for almost 30 percent of the novel is stories told within the larger story, frames within frames, voices within the over-voice. And for each story the primary audience is Robert Jordan, himself a writer. He tells us that ‘Pilar made him see the Fascists die in that story she had told by the stream. . . . If that woman could only write. He would try to write it and if he had luck and could remember it perhaps he could get it down as she told it. God, how she could tell a story. She’s better than Quevedo, . . . I wish I could write well enough to write that story.’ And there we are, finally, at the quintessential post-modernist moment: the story within the story being listened to by a writer who hopes one day to write the story we have just read.

Halfway through the novel, we are told that Jordan
would write a book when he got through with this. But only about the things he knew, truly, and about what he knew. I will have to be a much better writer than I am now to handle them he thought.

For Hemingway’s central character to be an author thinking he must become a better craftsman to write the story that is, in fact, being written by Hemingway cracks the realist’s mirror, pushing the unsuspecting 1940’s reader into post-modernist terrain where we are all cousins together. Fictions collapse into other fictions, their frames enclosed by further frames. Told at the turning point, Hemingway’s Bell is the biographer’s delight, a transition piece between periods, a work looking both ways, speaking beneath and between the lines directly to us, its unimaginable future readers.

But wasn’t that always Hemingway’s primary subject: the writer writing? Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* is a journalist self-consciously writing a novel; in ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ a story in which almost nothing happens except the pure prose of it, Nick Adams leaves behind him the need to write. Unwritten stories weigh heavily on the conscience of the dying writer, Harry Walden; other writing writers appear in *To Have and Have Not*, *Islands in the Stream*, and *Garden of Eden*.

Those are the obvious occasions, but Hemingway’s subject was frequently the act of authorship even when the surface story was about something else. As soon as we realize that the bullfighter, hunter, fisherman, and boxer were his metaphors for the writer and his trade, we see that his entire canon is about writing, its processes, its purpose, and the death of the artist. You can count on that with Hemingway: the artist either dies or loses so badly it amounts to the same thing. Against heavy risks and long odds, the artist, nevertheless, continues to perform: the writer on his fiction, the dynamiter at his bridge work. Driven by Hemingway’s 1940 ethic, neither has a real choice: the book must be written and the bridge blown; each has become a function of the other. But each man’s

death diminishes mankind, as Donne's epigraph promises, and each finished work diminishes the artist's storehouse of ideas, making the cost of life and art almost unbearable. Almost, but not completely, for in the lap of death, we continue to create our art, diverse and various as its forms may be, and in the process deplete the mine from which our resources come. Each of us is his own Emersonian artist; each life a series of artistic gestures, a collection of stories. Like Hemingway, like Jordan, none of us has a choice, and all our stories are embedded within larger stories. If we make that connection, then the novel transcends the historical context that bore it, becoming a parable rather than a paradigm. And thus, softly, across time, *The Bell* continues in muted tones to toll for us.