

# The Fifth Column

Review by Philip Young for  
the New York Times, September 21, 1969

THERE was a time when the author of this book had misgivings about everything in it. He wished he had turned the material of his only full-length play, 'The Fifth Column' — 'The Four Ninety-Five Column Marked Down From Five,' he once called it — into a novel. (A better idea was the shorter piece of fiction he originally intended.) And for a while, he complained, these 'Four Stories of the Spanish Civil War' 'wouldn't come.' It was not long, however, before they did. Three appeared in *Esquire* and one in *Cosmopolitan*. Then the play was published, and produced, with its proper title. Now, roughly three decades later, it is surprisingly good to have back these tales of the Last Great Cause, for the first time, under one book cover.

They grew, of course, out of Hemingway's considerable experience of the Spanish war as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance and as a participant in filming 'The Spanish Earth.' More specifically, they grew from adventures in and around besieged Madrid — particularly in the Hotel Florida and in a bar called Chicote's. The book is unified, then, in time, place, and action. It is unified even more by the dominating presence of the author, who is to be found alive on every page. That presence slants the focus, but also gives the book its sharp distinction. This is immediate, unmistakable Hemingway.

He nowhere appears entirely without disguise, but the leading character in all these pieces is clearly the writer of them. He is Philip Rawlings, protagonist of the play, and he is narrator of the stories, most often called Edwin Henry (E. H.). The adventures in counterespionage as Philip were wishful invention; the experience behind the stories was pretty much actual. Indeed, in the latter case, there is a question as to how autobiographical fiction differs from autobiographical journalism — the best, that is, of the dispatches the correspondent filed from Spain, which were reprinted a couple of years ago in 'By-Line: Ernest Hemingway.' The answer is that the difference lies more in quality than kind. As good as some of that correspondence was, all four of these stories are better than any of it. (A fifth, 'Nobody Ever Dies,' was wisely not reprinted; a sixth, 'Landscape With Figures,' remains unpublished.)

In theory the writer distinguished sharply between journalism and what he put down 'for keeps.' But in practice the line sometimes faded out of sight — except that as a rule the fiction was written with more care. (The reviewer has seen a typescript of one of these stories, 'Night Before Battle'; it is heavily and significantly revised.) Hemingway seems also to have saved the best stories for fiction. As a result, the stories beat the dispatches. They are more memorable and more moving.

'The Denunciation' starts as if it were to be a feature story on Chicote's, where 'the good guys went,' but it becomes a genuine story when an incident of espionage picks it

up and carries the load. ‘The Butterfly and the Tank,’ which John Steinbeck thought among the ‘very few finest stories’ ever written, is more of a problem. Is it completely written? During the action the manager of the bar tells the narrator ‘You must write a story about this’ — something the narrator has already told us he intended to do. The manager also insists on, and explains, the title. The question, then, is if Hemingway found a different and effective way here to tell a tale, or if instead he has presented the material for one? To a lesser extent both ‘Night Before Battle’ — grim but also lively and at times funny — and ‘Under the Ridge’ — even grimmer and not funny at all — raise the same question.

But it would be a bad mistake to bog down in the problem of genre — for, however their true nature is to be described, all four stories are deft, absorbing, and they stay with you. The play may be something else. Its author himself called it ‘probably the most unsatisfactory thing I ever wrote.’ Not explaining why he did not recollect his emotion in tranquillity (rework his drama back in this country) he blamed his avowed failure on the ‘honestly impossible writing conditions’ in his room at the Florida, which was frequently shelled during his stay there — a room which is most literally described as the principal set in the play. It is as if the author were living onstage, an impossible place to write indeed.

And so ‘The Fifth Column’ is autobiographical drama. Philip Rawlings, its leading man and a Loyalist agent, justified his apparently dissolute existence as a ‘third-rate newspaperman’ on the ground that he is really a ‘second-rate cop.’ So Hemingway justified that Rawlings’s mistress calls ‘this absolutely utter playboy business’ on the ground that he was turning it to literature. (Except for her unbelievable stupidity, Dorothy, the mistress, is an accurate portrait of fellow journalist Martha Gellhorn.) As elsewhere, the author gets good comic mileage out of the speech of those for whom English is not the native tongue. The hotel manager is hilarious. Actually all of the horseplay is amusing. But the utterly serious business depends for its impact on our believing in the hero’s romantic political convictions — when, as ‘Under the Ridge’ makes clear, the author himself was uncertain of them. In the play, Philip nobly renounces Dorothy for the cause; in life Hemingway married her.

At one point, Philip mentions to his mistress people who have ‘done such things that it would break your damn heart if I tried to tell you about it.’ Precisely Hemingway’s purpose in the book: to tell us about such things. Despite his fascination with warfare and his cheerful wit, he is also trying to tell us that war is hell. (All the good themes are old stuff.) And if he fails to break our hearts, exactly, his stories reach deep enough to touch them.