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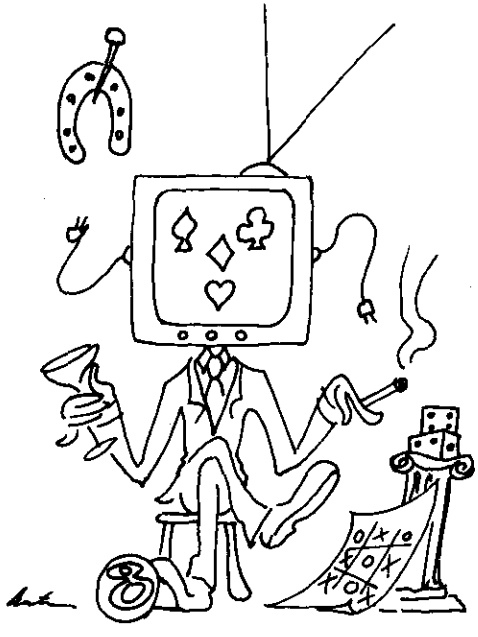

RITUAL AS INDICATIVE OF A CODE OF VALUES

CRISTINA MARIA TEIXEIRA*

Undoubtedly, the ritualistic connotation of Hemingway's work, and particularly of his short stories in IN OUR TIME, is very strong and worth analysing. Hemingway has even been criticized for his use of an unvarying code, his action almost always circling about ordeals, with triumphs and defeats in the bullring, the battlefield, the trout stream or other male proving grounds, where great value is placed on raw physical courage. This limitation seems to me rather a strength than a weakness, especially if we understand Hemingway's method:

> "You picked out the sharp details from life that had aroused your own emotion and, if you described them accurately, in their proper sequence and without closing your eyes to violence and horror, you had something that would continue to arouse the emotion of your readers."[1]

And Hemingway had plenty of good details he could draw from his legendary life - as a soldier, an expatriate, a hunter, a war correspondent, and a fisherman. It is a life which seizes us as firmly as does his work; he himself had experienced things he afterwards makes his heroes live. An "advocate of natural action", Hemingway selects an ordinary man to be his hero, giving thus a classical universality to his stories in which this common man is always brave and resolute in the face of defeat. Robert P. Weeks accurately observes that

> "Here is Aristotle's dictum turned upside down; we are moved not by the fall of a great man but the elevation to heroism of what we had taken to be a little man."[2]

However, this common man has a rigid inner discipline,

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*Mestre pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

a deep consciousness of right and wrong. As Donald Heiney puts it, these "Code Heroes" have "inwardly directed ethical lives". As we can see from Hemingway's biography and his work, life was for him a kind of game, and thus there must follow a "system, of arbitrary 'thou shalt nots' which comprises the rules which govern professional activity within the particular sport."[3] And Hemingway's characters evolve in what seems to be a pre-established order, aiming at transforming their vulnerability into a strong position in order not to be always losers in the game of life.

This game-like quality of life is closely related to the idea of ritual also present in Hemingway's books. There always are standards that the characters cannot violate in ceremonies of animal sacrifice, of conversion and rites of passage, the mystique of pain and death having the effect of catharsis. Hemingway has frequently been characterized as a primitive man; from the anthropological point of view, primitive man has an elaborate system of beliefs and a necessary performance of rites and ceremonies, an "exercise of magic lore". This atmosphere can be felt in Hemingway's work; since we live in a dangerous and hostile world we need to follow faithfully some customs in order to be safe. But Hemingway's religion is not of the orthodox, organized type; it is rather a "Religion of Man".

Analysing the stories of IN OUR TIME from this perspective, we are going to see that there really is a responsible and relevant moral code underlying all of them. Also, we have to keep in mind the "immense power of the unsaid", as stated by Hemingway himself: "the dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one eighth of it being above water."[4] Although the stories of IN OUR TIME were not written in a series, this "germinal book" of Hemingway is a sort of fragmentary novel since the stories are arranged in such a sequence that it shows the development of Nick Adam's* character — his "ordeal" — from his childhood, his

*Hemingway's most personal hero.

progressive disillusionment and loss of innocence, up to his young manhood, where he reaches a state of indifference to everything except his freedom.

The first story, "Indian Camp", gives an account of young Nick's initiation to pain, after a very significant (ritualistic) crossing of a lake. The violence of the jack-knife Caesarian and the resulting birth, parallel to the father's horrible suicide, the doctor's courageous and decisive steps in the operation, Nick's watchful and respectful behaviour, all this contributes to give an atmosphere of mysticism to the story. At the end, the doctor feels "terribly sorry" to have introduced his son to the latter's long road towards manhood: "It was an awful mess to put you through."[5] But No one can avoid, sooner or later, starting this long journey to self-knowledge.

In "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife", Nick prefers to follow his father who goes hunting in the woods, as a sign of the solidarity of the male sex — and this is the "expected" attitude. However, he now perceives that his father, whom he considered to be a heroic figure, also has flaws, and this knowledge pushes him a little farther from family ties, and it is another step to his independence.

"The End of Something" still presents Nick in close relationship with nature; once more there is water around him, and a beautiful moon beyond the hills. His "modus operandi" while he is fishing has clear ritualistic connotations. But he does not feel happy: "I feel as though everything has gone to hell inside of me."[6] He puts an end to his love affair with Marjorie, in his desire not to be held by anything in order to get away, to follow his inward trip.

And Nick is indeed learning lessons: in "The Three-Day Elow" we see how he feels about his break with Marjorie: "Just like when the three-day blows come now and rip all the leaves off the trees."[7] But he also realized that "there was nothing that was irrevocable.... Nothing was finished.

Nothing was ever lost."[8] Here we have once more the fire and the purifying water, now in the form of rain when he finds himself in a literal road, as representative of a more subjective, symbolic one. He is introduced to drinking, which seems to have the mystical effect of a magic potion, for while they drink, they are near the fire, thinking about a "profound truth" and they "conduct the conversation on a high plane."[9] Even drinking has its "rules": "... dad only likes me to drink what's open... He says opening bottles is what makes drunkards". Also: "Even if his (Nick's) father had never touched a drop Bill was not going to get him drunk before he himself was drunk."[10] It was a point of honor for him.

Nick is now on a real trip, out on his own for the first time: "It was dark and he was a long way off from anywhere."[11] Before coming into contact with a new form of violence and evil — now of an order different from the one he had experienced in "Indian Camp" — personified by Ad Francis (a demented ex-fighter, a heroic victim) and his male-nursing Negro, Hemingway purposefully makes his hero cross a bridge, a symbolic link between past and present. Then he sees a fire in the darkness and, Prometheus-like, he goes towards this fire, where he is to acquire knowledge of evil.

After the extremely autobiographical story called "A Very Short Story", there follows a series of stories that could very well be about the several ways of life Nick could have led, after having crossed the bridge: a soldier coming back late from a war that has incapacitated him for any sort of normal life, even sex life ("Soldier's Home"); a skeptically portrayed man who naively believes in the possibilities of significant social action ("The Revolutionist"); an uninteresting, sexually incompatible middle-class American that happens to be married to a lesbian woman ("Mr. and Mrs. Elliot"); bored, polite, wandering married Americans in Europe ("Out of Season" and "Cross Country

Snow"); a boy that falls from innocence and therefore accepts the facts of life as they really are, with an uncomfortable pessimism; he discovers that his hero/father is a "crook", after having witnessed his violent death.

In "Big Two-Hearted River" we are actually back again to Nick's life, which now finds itself "nel mezzo del cammin". But while Dante ("... mi ritrovai in una bosca escura...") proceeds in his symbolic, mystical journey downwards, Nick has reached this place moved by a desire to stop, to return to the "good old days" of his happy and unthreatened boyhood. He moves away from that burned-over country (here the destructive power of fire is made apparent) to reach the river that would wash him clean of his past experiences. This story, which seems to be nothing but a collection of sensory details, has a deep meaning underlying it. The fishing trip is really an escape: "Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind."[12] Gradually he frees himself from the weight of civilization that was "too much heavy".[13] He is in perfect harmony with the natural world, guiding himself by the position of the sun and the river, instead of using his map. When he reaches the "correct place", he feels the protection of nature, with "something mysterious and homelike".[14] The pitching of his tent and the preparing of his meal are done in such a rhythmical and regular process that it closely resembles ritualistic procedures in a ceremony.

The second part of the story begins when the "sun was up"[15] and the morning and the river "excites" him. His fishing is also a kind of rite; Nick knows exactly how things should be done. He does everything very slowly, careful to do the things correctly so that his life here in the woods seems to become a series of little ceremonies, with their specific "code" that must be obeyed:

> "He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him. If a trout was touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attack-

> ed the unprotected spot... Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it."16

As the ritual of fishing demands that lives cannot be wasted unnecessarily, Nick dropped the small, valueless trout (under the good, accepted size) back into the stream, careful not to make it die. He even knows and accepts when he is the loser, and the huge trout wins the contests; he feels the exact time to stop, as if following a designed order: "he did not want to rush his sensations any".[17] And, as in rituals and games, there are also forbidden things that could not be done, and established limits beyond which it is dangerous to proceed: "In the swampfishing was a tragic adventure".[18] Later, when he is grown and mature enough, he will reach this now unpleasant, enigmatic place, but now he feels he has "journeyed" as far as he had been able to.

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The sometimes extremely violent sketches that Hemingway interspersed between each story are taken from his actual experiences and placed in the book in a chronological order. There seems to be no relationship between these "vignettes" and each story, but in fact they give an ironical contrast, or, as E.M. Halliday states:

> "They give the ironic effect of supurious order supporting the book's subject: modern civil disruption and violence seen against the timeless background of everyday human cross purposes."19

It is in the sketches that we see how intensely Hemingway celebrates the themes we have seen previously, sometimes with a shocking violence. We cannot help feeling that what Hemingway saw was not only as a vast and intricate game, but also as a kind of show, a feast, as is shown in the sketch for Chapter I: "the whole battery was drunk going along the road in the dark... It was funny going along that road".[20] But he gives us also scenes of dire cruelty

and cold blood, as in Chapter V, when there is an execution by a firing squad of six cabinet ministers, one of whom was sick with typhoid and died "with his head on his knees".[21] In the sketch for Chapter VI, Nick is hit in the spine and therefore cannot behave bravely any more in the war, as a "patriot" would do. He ironically says to his friend: "We've made a separate peace".[22] This wound is a perfect symbol for all the injuries he has been suffering in his process of development; this blow in the spine is a visible mark of his inward, psychic pain. From this point on he will be an expatriate, withdrawing himself from political and social commitment.

In his long break with society, he will look for other forms — and more ritualistic ones — of action to satisfy the physical side of his nature. And he could not have found a better place than the bullring, where the contest between man and animal, the killing of a bull or the dying of a matador acquires the stature of a religious sacrifice. In the sketch for Chapter XII we come to know Villalta, one of Hemingway's code heroes, who behaves almost like a priest in his emotional relationship with the bull; the way the scene is described provokes in us a feeling almost of awe:

> "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. Villalta became one with the bull and then it was over."23

Quoting Joseph Waldmeir:

> "There must be a cognizance of death both from the standpoint of killing and from that of being killed; there must be more than a cognizance, actually; there must be an acceptance. Knowledge of death's inevitability so that he does not react to its immediacy, coupled with unconcern for the possibilities of life after death, are the necessary attributes of the ideal

> bullfighter... He must realize that it is not that one dies but how one dies that is important. And equally important, that it is not that one kills but how one kills."24

To balance the killing by Villalta we have the death of Maera in the sketch for Chapter XIV. When Maera's dying hour comes he must face it bravely, and he does.

Having analyzed the book from the point of view of ritual, there still remain questions we may ask: Why does the author emphasize so much the physical activities of the outer world? Why does he picture life for us in such a ritualistic way? The hypotheses that may answer these questions are varied: on a superficial level we could say that Hemingway, as an autobiographical writer, builds an artistically heightened fiction using materials of his own life. Interpreting this theme on a symbolic level, we may say that physical violence and external war are the moral equivalent of life itself and that the real battleground is inside each one of us. Here I would like to quote Earl Rovit's convincing explanation of Hemingway's peculiar universe:

> "... This is the great dilemma for the modern artist: are values jokes or are they worthy of belief? Is there meaning in this chaos of seeming non-meaning (nada) or not? And with the failure of modern religion to supply a deeply convincing rationale in which man can trust to a Providence beyond his understanding to make a super-sense out of what appears to be non-sense, modern man's attempt to effect a passage across the shadow have stimulated some of his most unnerving reflections and, peripherally, some of his most intense creations of art... Hemingway's code is an attempt to cross the passage by creating a dimension of meaning within the naturalistic flow of physical event, but without invoking a realm of supernatural focus... Hemingway's mysteries are humanistic rather than theological."25

Does he really feel satisfied with all this? Certainly not, because not unfrequently we feel the irony of Hemingway's view of the world: "It was all a nothing and a

man was a nothing too... Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada."[26] And he reinforces this feeling of the emptiness of modern life in a Parody of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada."[27] It was not without reason, since Hemingway was afraid for nada, of the nothingness of modern existence since childhood.

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[4]Hemingway, a Collection of Critical Essays, Robert P. Weeks. p. 6.

[5]In Our Time, Ernest Hemingway. p. 18.

[6]Ibid., p. 34.

[7]Ibid., p. 47.

[8]Ibid., p. 48.

[9]Ibid., p. 45.

[10]Ibid., p. 44.

[11]Ibid., p. 53.

[12]Ibid., p. 134.

[13]Ibid., p. 134.

[14]Ibid., p. 139.

[15]Ibid., p. 145.

[16]Ibid., p. 149.

[17]Ibid., p. 151.

[18]Ibid., p. 155.

[19]Ernest Hemingway, a Collection of Critical Essays, Robert P. Weeks. p. 64.

[20]In Our Time, Ernest Hemingway. p. 13.

[21]Ibid., p. 51.

[22]Ibid., p. 63.

[23]Ibid., p. 105.

[24]Ernest Hemingway, a Collection of Critical Essays, Robert

P. Weeks. p. 166.

[25] Ernest Hemingway, Earl Rovit. p. 113.

[26] Ibid., p. 111.

[27] The Short Story in America, Ray B. West Jr. p. 97.