Philip Young

[The Sun Also Rises: A Commentary]

The Sun Also Rises, which appeared in 1926, reintroduces us to the hero. In Hemingway's novels this man is a slightly less personal hero than Nick was, and his adventures are to be less closely identified with Hemingway's, for more events are changed, or even "made up." But he still projects qualities of the man who created him, many of his experiences are still either literal or transformed autobiography, and his wound is still the crucial fact about him. Even when, as Robert Jordan of For Whom the Bell Tolls, he is somewhat disguised, we have little or no trouble in recognizing him.

Recognition is immediate and unmistakable in The Sun Also Rises. Here the wound, again with its literal and symbolic meaning, is transferred from the spine to the genitals: Jake Barnes was emasculated in the war. But he is the same man, a grown Nick Adams, and again the actual injury functions as concrete evidence that the hero is a casualty. He is a writer living in Paris in the twenties as, for example, Harry was; he was, like Nick, transplanted from midwestern America to the Austro-Italian front; when things are at their worst for him, like Fraser he cries in the night. When he refuses the services of a prostitute, and she asks, "What's the matter? You sick?" he is not thinking of his impotence alone when he answers, "Yes." He is the insomniac as before, and for the same reasons: "I blew out the lamp. Perhaps I would be able to sleep. My head started to work. The old grievance." And later he remembers that time, which we witnessed, when "for six months I never slept with the light off." He is the man who is troubled in the night, who leaves Brett alone in his sitting room and lies face down on the bed, having "a bad time."

In addition, Jake like Nick is the protagonist who has broken with society and with the usual middle-class ways; and, again, he has made the break in connection with his wounding. He has very little use for most people. At times he has little use even for his friends; at times he has little use for himself. He exists on a fringe of the society he has renounced; as a newspaper reporter he works just enough to make enough money to eat and drink well on, and spends the rest of his time in cafés, or fishing, or watching bullfights. Though it is not highly developed yet, he and those few he respects have a code, too. Jake complains very little, although he suffers a good deal; there are certain things that are "done" and many that are "not done." Lady Brett Ashley also knows the code, and distinguishes people according to it; a person is "one of us," as she puts it, or it is not—and most are not. The whole trouble with Robert Cohn, the boxing, maladroit Jew of the novel, is that he is not. He points up the code most clearly by so lacking it: he will not go away when Brett is done with him; he is "messy" in every way. After he has severely beaten up Romero, the small young bullfighter, and Romero will not give in, Cohn cries, wretchedly proclaims his love for Brett in public, and tries to shake Romero’s hand. He gets that hand in the face, an act which is approved as appropriate comment on his behavior.

Cohn does not like Romero because Brett does. She finally goes off with the bullfighter, and it is when she leaves him too that she makes a particularly clear statement of what she and the other "right" people have salvaged from the wreck of their compromised lives. She has decided that she is ruining Romero’s career, and besides she is too old for him. She walks out, and says to Jake:

"It makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch... It’s sort of what we have instead of God."

In early editions, The Sun Also Rises had on its title page, in addition to the passage on futility in Ecclesiastes from which the
title is taken, Gertrude Stein’s famous “You are all a lost generation.” The novel provides an explanation for this observation, in addition to illustrating it in action. As in the story called “In Another Country,” the picture of the hero wounded and embittered by his experience of violence is broadened to include other people. Brett Ashley, for example, and her fiancé Mike Campbell are both casualties from ordeals similar to those which damaged Jake. Brett has behind her the very unpleasant death of her first fiancé; Mike’s whole character was shattered by the war. A Farewell to Arms can be read as background to the earlier novel: some of Brett’s past is filled in by Catherine Barkley, whose fiancé had been blown to bits in the war, and most of Jake’s by Frederic Henry.

The fact that characters in The Sun Also Rises are recognizable people, taken from “real life,” does not contradict the fact that they are in this pattern. Various personages known to Paris of the twenties have thought that they recognized without difficulty the originals—Donald Ogden Stewart, Harold Stearns, Harold Loeb, Lady Duff-Twysden, Ford Madox Ford, and Pat Guthrie—and even Jake had his counterpart in actuality. But Hemingway, like most authors, has changed the characters to suit his purposes, and it is clear that whatever his origins, Jake, for instance, owes most to the man who created him, and is the hero.

He is the hero emasculated, however, and this must primarily account for the fact that he does not always seem entirely real. As he feels befits his status, he is largely a passive arranger of things for others, who only wants to “play it along and just not make trouble for people.” But as narrator, at least, he is convincing, and if there is something blurred about him it helps to bring the participants into a focus that is all the sharper. Hemingway has always been good with secondary characters, finding them in a bright flash that reveals all we need know. Here, as he somehow manages to make similar people easily distinguishable, the revelations are brilliant. One remembers Brett and Cohn longest, for they get the fullest development, but Count Mippipolous is wonderful, and wonderful too—save for their anti-Semitism, largely missing from the twenty-five cent edition, which advertises that “Not one word has been changed or omitted”—are Mike and Bill.

Chiefly it is Hemingway’s ear, a trap that catches every mannerism of speech, is responsible for the fact that these wastrels come so alive and distinct. That famous ear also caught a great many “swells” and “grands” that have dated—for slang is one thing almost certain to go bad with the passage of time—and some

of the dialogue of camaraderie (“Old Bill!” “You bum!”) is also embarrassing. But taken as a whole the talk is superb and, as a whole, so is the rest of the writing in the book. Hemingway’s wide-awake senses fully evoke an American’s Paris, a vacationer’s Spain. Jake moves through these places with the awareness of a professional soldier reconnoitering new terrain. The action is always foremost, but it is supported by real country and real city. The conversational style, which gives us the illusion that Jake is just telling us the story of what he has been doing lately, gracefully hides the fact that the pace is carefully calculated and swift, the sentences and scenes hard and clean. This is true of the over-all structure, too: the book is informal and relaxed only on the surface, and beneath it lies a scrupulous and satisfying orchestration. It is not until nearly the end, for example, when Cohn becomes the center of what there is of action, that opening with him seems anything but a simply random way of getting started. This discussion of Cohn has eased us into Jake’s life in Paris, and especially his situation with Brett. Suddenly the lines are all drawn. An interlude of trout fishing moves us smoothly into Spain and the bullfights. At Pamplona the tension which all try to ignore builds up, slowly, and breaks finally as the events come to their climax simultaneously with the fiesta’s. Then, in an intensely muted coda, a solitary Jake, rehabilitating himself, washes away his hangovers in the ocean. Soon it is all gone, he is returned to Brett as before, and we discover that we have come full circle, like all the rivers, the winds, and the sun, to the place where we began.

This is motion which goes no place. Constant activity has brought us along with such pleasant, gentle insistence that not until the end do we realize that we have not been taken in, exactly, but taken nowhere; and that, finally, is the point. This is structure as meaning, organization as content. And, as the enormous effect the book had on its generation proved, such a meaning or content was important to 1926. The book touched with delicate accuracy on something big, on things other people were feeling, but too dimly for articulation. Hemingway had deeply felt and understood what was in the wind. Like Brett, who was the kind of woman who sets styles, the book itself was profoundly creative, and had the kind of power that is prototypical.

But for another generation, looking backward, this quality of the novel is largely gone out of it. The pessimism is based chiefly on the story of a hopeless love, and for Jake this is basis enough. But his situation with Brett sometimes seems forced—brought up period-
ically for air that it may be kept alive—as if Hemingway, who must have been through most of Jake’s important experiences, but not exactly this one, had to keep reminding himself that it existed. And worse: though the rest of the pessimism rises eloquently out of the novel’s structure, it does not seem to rise out of the day-to-day action at all. There is a gaping cleavage here between manner and message, between joy in life and a pronouncement of life’s futility. Jake’s disability excepted, always, the book now seems really the long *Fiesta* it was called in the English edition, and one’s net impression today is of all the fun there is to be had in getting good and lost.

And yet *The Sun Also Rises* is still Hemingway’s *Waste Land*, and Jake is Hemingway’s Fisher King. This may be just coincidence, though the novelist had read the poem, but once again here is the protagonist gone impotent, and his land gone sterile. Eliot’s London is Hemingway’s Paris, where spiritual life in general, and Jake’s sexual life in particular, are alike impoverished. Prayer breaks down and fails, a knowledge of traditional distinctions between good and evil is largely lost, copulation is morally neutral and, cut off from the past chiefly by the spiritual disaster of the war, life has become mostly meaningless. “What shall we do?” is the same constant question, to which the answer must be, again, “Nothing.” To hide it, instead of playing chess one drinks, mechanically and always. Love is a possibility only for the two who cannot love; once again homosexuality intensifies this atmosphere of sterility; once more the Fisher King is also a man who fishes. And again the author plays with quotations from the great of the past, as when in reply to Jake’s remark that he is a taxidermist Bill objects, “That was in another country. And besides all the animals were dead.”

To be sure, the liquor is good, and so are the food and the conversation. But in one way Hemingway’s book is even more desperate than Eliot’s. The lesson of an “asceticism” to control the aimless expression of lust would be to Jake Barnes only one more bad joke, and the fragments he has shored against his ruins are few, and quite inadequate. In the poem a message of salvation comes out of the life-giving rain which falls on western civilization. In Hemingway’s waste land there is fun, but there is no hope. No rain falls on Europe this time, and when it does fall, in *A Farewell to Arms*, it brings not life but death.