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ROMANCE AND AESTHETICISM: ACROSS THE RIVER INTO THE TREES

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ABSTRACT

Across the River into the Trees (1950), a novel by Ernest Millar Hemingway (1899-1961), came after World War II. The novel is full of romance, and the details of World War I. The protagonist of the novel is not a young man but “a Colonel of Infantry in the Army of the United States, reduced from being a general officer” (*Across the River into the Trees*, p.8). At the age of fifty, Richard Cantwell is going from Trieste to Venice for a duck shoot. He, during his revisit instead of approving war, is in young love seriously. Depicting war and love, a clear contrast of emotions, ideas, and understandings has been shown on different issues of life, love, beauty, war, death etc. among the lovers, but they belonged to each other; Here, Hemingway celebrates romance and aesthetic appreciation of life and its true loving nature, more than in his any other novel.

KEY-WORDS: Richard Cantwell, Renata, daughter, romance, aesthetic, belongingness

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“Want to go on a duck shoot down in the marshes at the mouth of the Tagliamento? Wonderful shoot. Some nice Italian kids I met up at Cortina own it.”

“Is that where they shoot coots?”

“No.

They shoot real ducks at this one. Good kids. Good shoot. Real ducks. Mallard, pin-tail, widgeon. Some geese. Just as good as at home when we were kids.” (p.8)

The Colonel made the conversation, in the Second chapter, with the surgeon who was his old friend giving him medical fitness for the shoot. During his way from Trieste to Venice, along the road from Monfalcone to Latisana, he crossed Tagliamento, ‘green along the banks and men were fishing along the far shore where it ran deep’ (p.12), San Dona di Piave, Traviso, Fossalta, Noghera, Torcello, Burano

(island), Murano (island), Mestre, comparing past and present as a reel, the life includes childhood appreciation as William Wordsworth (1770-1850) commemorates the stage in his poetry.

On his way, he crossed many good rivers namely the Rapido, Dese, Sile, and Piave, canals like Sile, the Grand Canal, coast called Carole, the Veneto plain, Lombardy plain etc. During the crossing of the Grand Canal, they went under white bridge, the unfinished wood bridge, the red bridge, first high-flying white bridge, the black iron fretwork bridge leading to Rio Nuova. And, on his way to the wooden dock of Gritti, he recalled many important persons and he checked-in the Grand Hotel there. Mainly that he covered was from Trieste to Venice not space but time as well. It is the only way that he covers and sees many places but to these places he had been earlier also when he was a young boy; he is also talking about people and their lives and arts,

and whatever knowledge he gained during the war is, now, imparting to Jackson, his driver.

It is not that he is revisiting, recalling only the places, routes, gentry but he is witnessing the change of thirty years since 1918 as novel got published in 1950. The social developments and progress observed at different places with the passing of time are once again noticeable; here aesthetic travels along the hero in revising beauty of the places at different ages with a marked change:

"It looks quite differently now, he thought. I suppose it is because the distances are all changed. Everything is much smaller when you are older. Then, too the roads are better now and there is no dust. The only times I used to ride through it was in camion."
(p.12)

The war damages are now quite improvised, and at present the Colonel is trying to have lesson from the damages:

"...The blown up bridge was being repaired with a snarl of reverting hammers, and eight hundred yard away the smashed buildings and outbuildings of what was now a ruined country house..."
(p.13)

Having lessons from war destructions his experiences in his thoughtfulness are exploring:

"I guess the lesson is" the colonel said, "don't ever build yourself a country house, or a church, or hire Giotto to paint you any frescoes,"
(p.13)

Though the places are improved but the signs of destruction are yet traceable; changes can be noticed but war cannot be forgotten; impressions persist and prolong. If his present is hard experience, his past is romance.

He is recalling of the war and destruction done by that when he is passing through the same places again after thirty years. War impressions imprint grave on his mind. His reminiscence becomes all the more gloomy:

"...looking across the river from the bank where you could never show your head in daylight, relieved himself in the exact place where he had determined, by triangulation,

that he had been badly wounded thirty years before." (p.18)

And, about Fossalta, the place was badly destructed, he thinks, could not be reconstructed:

"...did Fossalta never get over the first war? I never saw it before it was smacked, he thought. They shelled it badly before the big fifteenth of June offensive in eighteen."
(p.17)

Ghastly remembering, the dead were difficult to be buried near "the Italian side of the river" (p.20):

"There had been a great killing at the last of the offensive and someone, to clear the river bank positions and the road in hot weather had ordered the dead thrown into canals. Unfortunately, the canal gates were still in the Austrians' hands down the river, and they were closed.

So there was little movement to the water, the dead had stayed there a long time, floating and bloating face up and face down regardless of nationality until they had attained colossal proportions. Finally, after organization had been established, labor troops hauled them out at night and buried them close to the road."
(pp. 20 -21)

He, actually, himself has understood (as Colonel) 'how boring any man's war is to any other man'; it cannot be the notion of all as it is dull and deadly devastation so only real soldiers fight. He disapproves war among men and countries:

"They always take it personally, he thought. No one is interested in it, abstractly, except soldiers and there are not many soldiers. You make them and good ones are killed,..."
(pp.22)

He, also, explored about 'France as a military power' and about the 'French military thinking'. As a young boy his experiences were experimental, too; he was learning, enjoying, fearing with the effects of wars and the life went on:

"it was all wonderful to him and it moved him as it had when he was eighteen years old and had seen it first, understanding nothing of it and only knowing that it was beautiful. The winter had come very cold that year and all the mountains were white beyond the plain. It was necessary for

Austrians to try to break through at the angle where the Sile River and the old bed of the Piave were only line of defense.” (p.31)

At that time of fascination, his age was such to learn war-techniques and to implement them for the safest and effective use, and that he was learning procedural:

“The Austrian attacks were ill-coordinated, but they were constant and exasperated and you first had the heavy bombardment which was supposed to put you out of business, and then, when it lifted, you checked your positions and counted the people. But you had no time to care for wounded....”

“But thank God, some high fools always control it, and they did it piecemeal.” (p.32)

He recalled situations always controlled by some soldiers those used to think war as glorious and charming; he condemns those fools of high quality.

Against war Hemingway establishes aesthetic picturesque scenario through Richard, who not only recalls places, monuments, people, towns, wars, destruction, but also especially recalls his love and concern for his own city Venice, the queen of seas. How and who saved Venice during the attacks is very enthusiastic narrative to Jackson. In fact, the Colonel serving in the foreign army has no gush of patriotism and romance for war; but Venice is his romance as being his own town:

“It was the boys from Torcello. They were very tough and they had very good taste in building. They came from a little place up the coast called Carole. But they drew on all the people from the towns and the farms behind when the Visigoths over-ran them.” (p.2)

And after all plops, revealing Venice as his own beautiful town, he was full of explicit air:

“That’s my town” Venice. (p.29). In fact, Venice is his place because he was “a Torcello boy”. He explains this all to Renata that “I’m a Basso Piave boy and a Grappa boy straight here from Pertica. I’m a Pasubio too.” (p.161)

The Colonel has come to Venice to meet his young love, Renata.

Hemingway’s fictive is not the romance of a young man for a young woman. It fibered as the love of an old military Colonel who was quite ambitious man to have further military position but failed; who had his wife, a journalist; she had also left him. He is not even having any child up to the age of fifty. He, as a victim of war, a depressed man who loves Donna Renata, a young girl below nineteen years, revisits. She is an ordinary girl in intelligence but beautiful in looks; it was not the second or third but his fourth sweetest and last love:

“Shining in her youth and tall striding beauty, and the carelessness the wind had made her hair. She had pale, almost olive colored skin, a profile that could break your, or anyone else’s heart, and her dark hair, of an alive texture, hung down over her shoulders.” (p.80)

The colonel feels so moved by her styles that he finds himself plumaged:

“She turned her head and raised her chin, without vanity, nor coquetry, and the colonel felt his heart turn over inside him, as though some sleeping animal had rolled over in its burrow and frightened, deliciously, the other animal sleeping close beside.

“Oh you,” he said. “Would you ever like to run for Queen of Heaven?”

“That would be sacrilegious.” (p.83)

Both love each other in their true sense. Their style of romance is according to their age and their professions—as he is a military official and she is a student only, yet committed in love:

“I’m sorry,” the colonel said. “I had just slipped into my trade unconsciously.”

“And if we were such a thing as married would you practice your trade in home?”

“No. I swear it. I never have. Not in my heart.”

“With no one?”

“With no one of your sex.”

"I don't like that word your sex. It sounds as though you were practicing your trade."
(p.84)

Both, experience and innocence have knowledge of Spanish, French, and English—romance languages derived from Latin-- but the Colonel had the knowledge of Austrian, American, and German languages also. Girl is soft and gentle in behavior while Richard is hard due to his war traits but always tried to be nice to the girl. Both have honesty in love for each other to converse and to feel:

"The male might have been wounded, the Colonel thought, although, from his looks, it seemed unlikely. But God help me to avoid brutality. And look at Renata's eyes, he thought. They are probably the most beautiful things she has, with the longest honest lashes I have ever seen and she never uses them for anything except to look at you honestly and straight. What a damn wonderful girl and what am I doing here anyway? It is wicked. She is your last and true and only love, he thought, and that's no t evil. It is only unfortunate. No, he thought, it is damned fortunate and you are very fortunate." (pp. 85-86)

It is frolicsome romance of a man who has lived a life and gained experience of life as civilian as well as, as a military man. It is not an absolute romance for Richard but a type of life experience blended with love. His experience of war is playing basis in their relationship. To be with a young girl for romance and living life for fun is enough for him but, all the more, it is a sheer good luck to him to have her love as well.

The Colonel considers Spanish to be a hard language, and finds the girl sometimes straight-forward, but for him also, it is very difficult to leave his traits as an officer; here lies the beauty of exchange:

"There were two other women whose faces meant nothing to the colonel.

"Are they lesbians?" he asked the girl.

"I do not know," she said. "They are all very nice people."

"I should say they are lesbians. But maybe they are just good friends. Maybe they are both. It means nothing to me and it was not a criticism." (p.86)

He is egoist, boastful, callous and self pitying buffoon sort of lover. He is having bitter nature. But girl, being inexperienced and crazy for military life, devotes herself for such love and she speaks straight, clear and true. She wants to be with her love but finds it not possible to get married or to have children, so their relationship faces stasis:

"Do you think she would mind if we had a baby?"

"I don't know. She is very intelligent, you know. But I would have to marry someone, I suppose. I don't really want to."

"We could be married."

"No." she said. "I thought we should not. It is just a decision as the one about crying."
(p.93)

In fact, she has something in her mind for the military officer and that too, of fifty years of his age with ill-health that she reveals later:

"Maybe you make wrong decisions. Christ knows I've made a few and too many men are dead from when I was wrong."

While he finds "The Ladies Home journal"—a magazine wonderful as "it combines sexology and beautiful foods. It makes me hungry both ways."
(p.87)

In their unmatched love, with their pros and cones, both are true to each other, and romance is giving pleasure to them. They are considerate towards each other despite stasis; only temperament of the two lovers is different. He is conventional type while she is trying to be more honest and free beyond her age. Aesthetic is still the point of concentration of Hemingway, when the Colonel asked, "Why do you look sad now?" She answered with the understanding of delicacy of their relationship:

"I am not, really I am as happy as I ever am. Truly. Please believe me, Richard. But how would you like to be a girl nineteen years

old in love with a man over fifty years old that you knew was going to die?"

"You put it a little bluntly," the Colonel said. "But you are very beautiful when you say it."

"I never cry," the girl said. "Never. I made a rule not to. But I would cry now."

"Don't cry," the Colonel said. "I'm gentle now and the hell with the rest of it."

"Say once again that you love me."

"I love you and I love you and I love you."

"Will you do the best not to die?"

"Yes."

(pp. 91-92)

Undoubtedly, death as a resultant probability of war frightens the girl so she is shown sometimes blunt and very straight in her behavior:

"...I have a disappointment for you, Richard," she said. "I have a disappointment about everything."

'She said it as a flat statement and it came to the Colonel in the same way

as a message came from one of the three battalions, when the battalion commander spoke the absolute truth and told you the worst."

(p.110)

Very next she talks more practically like that they have not much luck. She is not having any regret for being blunt but she tries to justify herself as she questions to Richard frankly:

"...Isn't it wonderful to have people who do not lie?" (p.116)

Hemingway depicted reality only through mirror and portrait of the girl with the proper aesthetic idea in the fiction. These are the two things place the exact reality and do not lie. It is not like that the Colonel is not thoughtful of his age and appearance and as well as of his war-wounded hand also. In front of the mirror, he has put face to face with the reality that he cannot be a match of any beautiful and young

girl. Besides, he has many wound marks on his body and out of that his hand was clearly visible that he never liked, and girl tried to feel good with the hand. But his compulsion was that whenever he comes in front of the portrait he started talking to it. That is another reality that her age becomes static in the portrait and she is much younger beauty in it than he is.

But despite the age factor and different temperaments, it is the intense love story of a Colonel and an ordinary student. It is full romance with aesthetic delineations:

"I wish we could be married and have five sons," the Colonel said.

"So do I," the girl said. "And send them to the five corners of the world."

"Are there five corners to the world?"

"I don't know," she said. "It sounded as though there were when I said it. And now we are having fun again, aren't we?"

"Yes daughter," the colonel said."

And again when they are serious she uses a metaphor moon for her that:

"I'll be the moon. She has many troubles too."

"Yes her sorrows come regularly. But she always fills before she wanes."

And there relations are such that he says:

"I want you daughter. But I don't want to own you."

"I know it," the girl said. "And that's one more reason why I love you." (pp. 99-100)

Both understand each other well and "they feel wonderful," (p.105) together:

"You are not that kind of a soldier and I am not that sort of girl. But sometime give me something lasting that I can wear and be happy each time I wear it."

"I see," the Colonel said. "And I will." (p.103)

The Colonel gifted her something artistic and due to his different temperament he thought:

"...the small ebony negro's head and torso and pinned it high on her shoulder. It was about three inches long, and was quite lovely to look at if you liked that sort of thing. And if you don't you are stupid, the Colonel thought." (p.125)

Though she wants to know the truth of war, she considers war to be 'a sad science' so much that she started hating 'the war monuments,' though she said 'I respect them.' (p.126). She wanted to pay respect to the feeling of the Colonel so she used to ask about war; but love, sex and children were her main concern as against Cecily Saunders in William Faulkner's (1897-1962) *Soldiers' Pay*¹ (1926) who prefers to play on sex seeing the morbidity of war; contrasted to Cecily, Renata was sad and indecisive only, but seemed quite satisfied and happy after the gondola trip. The difference is Cecily plays negative and Renata celebrates affected emotions. Aesthetic lies in the instances of their intense love making these give a completion to their relationship:

"He kissed her then and he searched for the island, finding it and losing it, and then finding it for good. For good and for bad, he thought, and for good and for all." (p.153)

And for all love to her:

"The Colonel said nothing because he was assisting, or had made an act of presence, at the only mystery that he believed in except the occasional bravery of man." (p.153)

At the celebrating occasion:

"The Colonel, lying under the blanket in the wind, knowing it is only what man does for woman that he retains, except what he does for his fatherland or his motherland, however you get the reading proceeded.

"Please darling," the girl said. "I don't think I can stand it." (p.153)

And also:

"You're in the lee now, Daughter."

"But it is too soon now. Don't you know how a woman feels?" (p.154)

Again to quote intensity of their love:

"Where the island now and in what river?"

"You are making discovery. I am only the unknown country."

"Not too unknown," the Colonel said.

"Please don't be rude," the girl said. "And please attack gently and with the same attack as before."

"It is no attack," the colonel said. "It is something else."

"Whatever it is, whatever it is, while I'm still in the lee."

"Yes," the Colonel said. "Yes, now if you want, or will accept from kindness."

"Please, yes."

'She talks like a gentle cat, though the poor cats cannot speak, the Colonel thought....' (p.155)

This gondola trip was just like magic to the Colonel but that was the time to be decisive for the girl. It was very important to note in the chapter that both "walked holding close and hard in their sorrow and their happiness." (p.160). and when he asked what is her decision she was still indecisive. In *A Farewell to Arms*² (1929) Katherine was decisive in love but Renata was not being immature. So, he made resolution that he will not harm her; he compared her portrait with his own image in the mirror; and later revealed to the girl that they cannot be one. The Shakespearean (1564-1616) character, Hamlet, *Hamlet*³ (1603), type pondering came out in some hysteric situation to the girl. Both loved each other and could not be decisive to be one so it was the love story that ended by simple good-bye. In fact, war and age factor played great roles in their love-story. The gondola trip made the warrior romantic as well as self-decisive:

"You ought to take a good one. Not that old displaced engine boat."

"I'd rather take the displaced engine boat if you don't mind."

"Mind?" the Colonel said. "Not me. I

only give orders and obey orders. I don't mind. Good-bye, my dear, lovely, beautiful."

"Good-bye," she said." (p.195)

In fact, it is the story of such a man who was lucky enough to be alive after two World Wars but failed to achieve his ambition to become a General: "I have eyes and they have fairly fast perception still, and once they had ambition." (p.171). He felt that his wife was after his military reputation, so she left him. War seemed hopeless to him. Richard has been shown equally depressed as the boatman at the shoot whose wife and daughter had been raped by military personals during the war. He even fails to accept orders of his young love, Renata. He is, explicitly, having officers' traits.

"I have loved but three women and have lost them thrice.

You lose them the same way you lose a battalion; by errors of judgment; orders that are impossible to fulfill, and through impossible conditions. Also through brutality I have lost three battalions in my life and three women and now I have a fourth, and loveliest, and where the hell does it end?" (p.95)

He is not even sure of his fourth love that it will retain or flop like his earlier loves. In the end he became unlucky when the loving and leaving was over.

In the novel, the Colonel is shown quite concerned with luck and hope. He considers himself lucky fellow that he has been saved in all wars but unlucky that not to be a General. He considers himself lucky to have young Renata as his true beloved but unlucky not to have family with his any wife and with Renata, also. He considers himself lucky to have love and unlucky not to own it:

"A liar, in full flower, the colonel had thought, is as beautiful as cherry trees, or apple trees when they are in blossom. Who should ever discourage a liar, he thought, unless he is giving you co-ordinates?" (p.278)

And pondering over the beginning of the novel from where he started:

"You bitch, the Colonel thought. Though that is unjust. It is your trade. But why is it a hen calls better than a drake. You ought to know, he thought. And even that's not true. What the hell is true? Drake actually calls better.

Now don't think of her. Don't think of Renata because it won't do you any good, boy. It might even be bad for you. Also you said good-bye. What a good-bye that was. Complete with tumbrels. And she would have climbed up in the damned tumbrel with you too. Just so long as it was a real tumbrel. Very rough trade, he thought. Loving and leaving. People can get hurt at it.

Who gave you a right to know a girl like that?

Nobody, he answered." (pp. 288-289)

Luck plays important role in his life same he considers it to be important in life. War brings a bad luck for him that his hand was seriously wounded that he disliked but the girl always loved his bad hand. The War has, in fact, finished his ambitious career as well as his family life. His only hope was his romance. It was also over by the time. Whatever warmth he got from Renata that was due to her daughter like age in comparison to the Colonel; when Renata asks to pronounce her daughter thrice, at once he utters in different languages as if trying to remember that she is of the age of her daughter:

"Hija, figlia, Daughter." (p.266)

The Colonel had understood very well what the life is—"What you win in Boston you lose in Chicago." And again he explains life "...it is like professional football, calico, what you win in Milano you lose in Torino." Having understood that he had lived his life and there is no further luck and no hope to be completed, he committed suicide. The Colonel gave his suicide note to Jackson and ordered him, as his trait was, to open it if the situation comes; after finishing all his concerns he committed suicide; so Jackson was forced to open it. He reads that as:

"IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH THE WRAPPED PAINTING AND THE TWO SHOTGUNS IN THE CAR WILL BE RETURNED TO THE HOTEL GRITTI VENICE WHERE THEY

WILL BE CLAIMED BY THEIR RIGHTFUL OWNER SIGNED RICHARD CANTWELL, COL., INFANTRY, U.S.A." (p.308)

Hence, destiny fixed this romantic hero also who was quite determined to have fun through duck shoot and love-making and resolute enough not to harm his beloved at any cost, Hopes shatter and man shatters in across the river into the trees. Love and life both lost. He proved himself as a good shooter, as he shot the idea of unlucky, hope and sets his own destiny across the river into the trees as winner in love. Writ Williams finds that "Hemingway has no more aggressive hero not even Harry Morgan"⁴ like the Colonel Cantwell. Romance finished his existence on earth as war was the trait of the Colonel because of which he was able to achieve courage to shoot himself. He thought Renata to be the rightful owner of his belongings as he wanted to prove his love like a winner in war. Like an officer he proceeded for his suicide without giving hint to Renata even, and Jackson was not much intelligent to think of his proceedings in advance. Here, Renata is his existence and victory: "Colonel's decision to rush toward death and dictate all the terms of meeting thus becomes his triumph."⁵

Hemingway aesthetic provides a pondering to life, "What's a man life worth anything?" (p.188). To him "a market is the closest thing to a museum" and there he saw "a few albacore and bonito. These last", the Colonel thought, "looked like boat-tailed bullets, dignified in death, and with the huge eye of the pelagic fish." (p.192). His life was as it was fish in market place lived and died dignified. He made his death worth for Renata without keeping his promise of "not to die". On the whole autobiographical traits of Hemingway cannot be denied as he wants to see dignity in death of his heroes.

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