"The Gallantry of the Aging Machine": Ernest Hemingway's Colonel Cantwell and Masculine Aging in Modernist Literature

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Abstract. Age, like race and gender, is a socially constructed category, and in the 20th century, American society constructed aging as a process of inevitable natural decline, typically from age fifty or so. In Ernest Hemingway's 1950 novel *Across the River and into the Trees*, the semi-autobiographical protagonist expresses ambivalence about his aging body and perceived mental decline in ways that echo the anxieties the author expressed privately about his own aging as well as his accompanying fear that literary modernism had also already peaked. The ageism evident in reviews of *Across the River and into the Trees* suggests that Hemingway was justified in his anxieties about the perceived obsolescence of literary modernism. Struggling to articulate a more positive vision of aging while simultaneously acknowledging the more negative popular view, Hemingway tries in *Across the River and into the Trees* to teach his readers what it feels like emotionally to grow older in a youth culture.

Keywords: Hemingway, aging, masculinity, modernism, ageism

Age, like race and gender, is a socially constructed category, and in the twentieth century (and the twenty-first), American society constructed aging from midlife on as a process of inevitable natural decline, typically from age fifty or so. For example, in his 1950 novel *Across the River and into the Trees*, Ernest Hemingway's middle-aged protagonist, Colonel Richard Cantwell, clearly sees his own aging in terms of what Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls a "decline narrative". As she goes on to explain,

> [O]ur culture provides subjects with a master narrative of aging—something like the master narrative of gender or race: popularly disseminated, semiconscious, so familiar and acceptable that it can be told automatically. The plot of this one is peak, entry, and decline, with acceleration on the downslope. (Gullette 1997, 161)

One characteristic of this "decline narrative" is that it is always about "'identity stripping,' because it is a story of losing what we had" (Gullette 2004, 130).

In *Across the River and into the Trees*, Cantwell thinks of his own aging as an experience of decline and loss, perceptions linked in this essay to a broader cultural anxiety about masculine aging in modernist literature.[1] Hemingway's semi-autobiographical protagonist expresses ambivalence about aging in ways that echo the anxieties the author expressed privately about his own aging as well as his accompanying fear that literary modernism had also already peaked. The ageism evident in reviews of *Across the River and into the Trees* suggests that Hemingway was justified in his anxieties about the perceived obsolescence of literary modernism. Struggling to articulate a more positive vision of aging while simultaneously acknowledging the more negative popular view, Hemingway tries in *Across the River and into the Trees* to teach his readers what it feels like emotionally to grow older in a youth culture.

Literary and Cultural Discourses about Aging in *Across the River and into the Trees* and Other Modernist Novels

Decline narratives of aging are preoccupied with loss. Cantwell, who bears the physical and psychological scars of past trauma, muses frequently on his bodily losses: the right kneecap permanently damaged in the war (Hemingway 1950, 19), his "hand, which had been shot through twice, and was slightly misshapen" (Hemingway 1950, 55), his "beat-up" body (Hemingway 1950, 109) and facial scars (Hemingway 1950, 111-12), and his survivor's guilt. Cantwell repeatedly examines himself in mirrors and then disparages his own appearance (Hemingway 1950, 76, 111, 169). Cantwell is, in his own words, "half a hundred years old" (Hemingway 1950, 26, 63, 180). Right after Cantwell tells himself, "Keep your temper, boy", the narrator dispassionately observes, "But he was not a boy. He was fifty . . ." (Hemingway 1950, 7-8). And Cantwell must have silently had a birthday during the first 50 pages or so, because he later tells the waiter Arnaldo that he is "Fifty plus one" (Hemingway 1950, 75). When Renata later asks him, "Do you think it is true that men make their

1 Carlos Baker was the first to identify age as a theme of the novel, but see also Peter Lisca (1974, 300), Michael Seefeldt (1995, 252), James Meredith (1995, 98), Mark Cirino (2016, 11), Jopi Nyman (1998), and Stanley Cooperman (1965). See also Phillip Sipiora (1999) and David Wyatt (1999) for broader discussions of aging in Hemingway's life and fiction.

own faces after fifty?" he tells her, "I hope not. Because I would not sign for mine" (Hemingway 1950, 127). It is clear that for Cantwell, as for many aging adults, "Becoming an older body under the sign of decline involves masochistic internalizations that run all the way to self-hatred . . ." (Gullette 2004, 133). Given his multiple condemnations of his appearance, Cantwell seems unquestioningly complicit with his own denigration.

Cantwell is particularly obsessed with what he perceives as age-related mental lapses and castigates himself for these failings. He momentarily forgets his driver's name and accuses himself of "getting stupid" (Hemingway 1950, 14). As Gullette observes,

> Losing a tooth or forgetting a name, waking up in a sweat or not reaching an orgasm, if decline owns the narrative, become 'symptoms' that sweep us forward on the slick rails of the ideologized life course from 'age-related' to 'death.' (Gullette 2004, 133)

Cantwell is certainly guilty of that kind of catastrophizing. For example, he repeatedly fails to maintain the vigilance expected of a soldier at the front and then blasts himself as "damned careless" (Hemingway 1950, 100). Annoyed when people arrive or leave without his noticing (Hemingway 1950, 41), Cantwell is very hard on himself when it comes to minor lapses in vigilance, even though it is peacetime, and these lapses therefore have no negative consequences. He is obsessed with even his most insignificant failings, suggesting that it is age itself, and not its actual consequences, that concerns him.

Perhaps because he is in love with a young woman who is not yet 19 (Hemingway 1950, 82), Cantwell is particularly preoccupied with the sexual prowess of older men. The *Gran Maestro* tells him that their imaginary fraternal "Order" has promoted the cook "to the rank of Commendatore" because "He comported himself as a man three times on his fiftieth birthday"—interestingly, an accomplishment Hemingway also claimed for himself (Hemingway 1950, 60, and 1981, 658). The Grand Master took the cook at his word because "He looked ruined" (Hemingway 1950, 60). Hemingway explains further:

> [The Order] was named after a particularly notorious multi-millionaire non-taxpaying profiteer of Milan, who had, in the course of a dispute over property, accused his young wife, publicly and

> legally through due process of law, of having deprived him of his judgment through her extraordinary sexual demands. (Hemingway 1950, 57; see also Mandel, 1995)

Thus there are several oblique references to the sexual capacities—or incapacity—of other men of his age or older. It is not entirely clear whether Cantwell himself is immune from that particular indignity; he (improbably) consummates the relationship with Renata in a gondola, but most critics agree that because she is menstruating, he manually stimulates her to orgasm.

For a 51-year-old man, Cantwell initially seems oddly preoccupied with death. "Every time you shoot now can be the last shoot ... ", he tells himself in the book's opening chapter (Hemingway 1950, 7). Then the reader learns that Cantwell is coping with chronic heart disease and drugs himself with mannitol hexanitrate to pass a mandatory physical exam. Although his significantly younger doctor sees through the ruse, he nevertheless declines to challenge Cantwell's test results (Hemingway 1950, 8-11). Mannitol hexanitrate is a vasodilator used to prevent additional heart attacks; based on what he tells the *Gran Maestro*, Cantwell has already had at least three (Hemingway 1950, 138). Charles M. Oliver elaborates:

> Colonel Cantwell has had four heart attacks when the novel opens 'two hours before daylight' on Sunday morning, Cantwell recalling the fourth (which had occurred the day before) in flashback two thirds of the way through the novel. (Oliver 1990, 143)

During that episode, Cantwell emerges from a telephone booth, abruptly feels ill, and asks the concierge for a glass of water (Hemingway 1950, 196). Baker also describes that incident as a heart attack (Baker 1972, 274).[2] Thus, Cantwell certainly knows that his time is limited.

It could, of course, be argued that it is his health condition that causes him to experience age as decline: "The later life of men was collapsed by heart-attack discourse" (Gullette 1997, 154). As one scholar of aging studies more bluntly puts it, "Older men are constructed as pre-death" (Hearn 1995, 101). But many

2 For a detailed explanation of Cantwell's medical condition, symptoms, and pharmacological treatment, see Russo (1990, 177n7).

people in their fifties would feel not aged but robbed in their prime if they were diagnosed with a terminal illness. As a book reviewer for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* observes,

> The author's constant use of 'old' in connection with his 50 year old [sic] hero will be unconvincing to those readers who feel more vigorous at or past 50 than they ever felt in their lives. (Butcher 1977, 308)

Even Cantwell himself concedes that he's not all *that* elderly: "I couldn't even be an elder statesman. I'm not old enough" (Hemingway 1950, 227). At the end of the novel, the fact that Cantwell dies in the afternoon reinforces the idea that his death is premature (Russo 1990, 155).

Hemingway's work is typical of twentieth-century novels about midlife protagonists, including such canonical literary works as Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Because Gullette is the first and best-known scholar to have addressed masculine aging in a broad swath of modernist literature, her explanation of this phenomenon in modernist novels is worth quoting at some length here:

> Suddenly a host of characters in their forties and fifties or in some vague middle age began to appear and simultaneously decay. Many of the most striking and ultimately canonical of these were about men. . . . All these men lose their mental power and noticeably stop being productive through some complicated interactions with aging. . . . Aschenbach is in his fifties, St. Peter is fifty-two, Diver even younger". (Gullette 1993, 27)

Interestingly, because "the characters are not remotely old in years", these novels are not about elderly men: "'Aging' means aging into the middle years. And none of these characters can bear the process" (Gullette 1993, 30). The abrupt declines these characters experience are never satisfactorily accounted for, and their inexplicably sudden deterioration is inadequately explained because it is overdetermined; it is an expression of the writer's and the broader culture's age-related anxieties (Gullette 1993, 29).

Thomas Strychacz has argued that Hemingway presents masculinity as contingent rather than essential, as a rhetorical performance needing the legitimation of others (Strychacz 2003, 8). Masculinity must therefore be demonstrated, over and over again, before an evaluating audience. Given that definition of masculinity, what will happen if aging means Cantwell can no longer perform (especially physically, militarily, and sexually)? To develop Hemingway's pun, what happens when Cantwell *can't* perform masculinity *well*?, Jopi Nyman suggests, "Death is a gendered solution that does away with the problems posed to masculine identity by old age, illness, and dependency" (Nyman 1998, 38). Death solves the problem of a potential impending loss of masculinity and thus cures Cantwell's anxiety.

To a large extent, as Gullette's work indicates, Cantwell's problem is cultural rather than personal. In part because hegemonic masculinity is associated with physical strength, professional success, virility, and social power and control, Western cultures lack guidelines for how to be a man in old age:

> [A]s a result of the ungendered image attributed to older persons, and the construction of older men as an invisible, paradoxical, and unmasculine social category, Western hegemonic masculinity scripts are concluded at middle age. (Spector-Mersel 2006)

Cantwell is not the only man who struggles with maintaining masculinity as he ages.

Hemingway's Personal Experience with Aging

There is reason to believe that Hemingway shared Cantwell's angst. In an essay on Hemingway at fifty, David Wyatt suggests that "Hemingway had a terrible time with getting older" (Wyatt 1999, 596). When he was only 26, Ernest wrote his friend Ernest Walsh, "But the hell of it is that I am not competition [sic] with my contemporaries but with the clock—which keeps on ticking . . ." (Hemingway 2015, 11). Hemingway's own ambivalence regarding youth culture's importance to literary modernism is evident from his comments in a 1929 letter to Fitzgerald:[3]

3 See Monteiro (1997) for a study of Fitzgerald's influence on Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*. Kirk Curnutt (2002, 2005) and Suzanne del Gizzo (2015) have both discussed Fitzgerald's own struggles with aging and American youth culture. I am grateful to Suzanne del Gizzo for letting me read her essay, which was presented at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Conference in Waterford, Ireland, in July 2015.

> Everybody loses all the bloom—we're not peaches—that doesnt [sic] mean you get rotten—a gun is better worn and with bloom off—So is a saddle—People too by God. You lose everything that is fresh and everything that is easy and it always seems as though you could *never* write—But you have more métier and you know more and when you get flashes of the old juice you have more results with them. (Hemingway 1981, 306)

In the next paragraph, he adds, "the stuff when you are no longer young is better than the young stuff—" (Hemingway 1981, 306). Amusingly, Hemingway was consoling Fitzgerald just after Scott's 33rd birthday, and "no longer young" Ernest was 31 at the time. Clearly Hemingway was susceptible to the lure of youth culture.[4]

Moreover, Hemingway and his fellow modernists defined themselves as young artists rebelling against their elders. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he complained of Virginia Woolf,

> She belongs to a group of Bloomsbury people who are all over 40 and . . . they dislike what they consider the intrusion of anybody much under 40 into the business . . . They live for their Literary Reputations and believe the best way to keep them is to try and slur off or impute [impugn] the honesty of anyone coming up. (Hemingway 1981, 264; Baker's emendation)

Hemingway was (perhaps understandably) incensed when the *Books* supplement of the *New York Herald Tribune* published a review of his third short story collection, *Winner Take Nothing,* under the headline "Ernest Hemingway Has Put on Maturity". Hemingway particularly resented a line in reviewer Horace Gregory's laudatory final paragraph: "In this book Ernest Hemingway has again assumed leadership for a generation that is facing the difficult problems of approaching middle age" (Gregory 1977, 140). Ernest, then 34 years old, responded angrily in a letter to his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins: "That bird, when he labelled me as approaching middle age was trying to get rid of me that

4 Youth culture is generally defined as a postwar phenomenon (Savage 2007, xv; Hobbs 2016, 5), but Jon Savage argues that "postwar youth culture is not as new as it might seem" and traces its roots in cultural changes occurring as early as the late nineteenth century.

way—Others having failed. . . . When does Middle Age commience? [sic]" (Hemingway 1996, 202). Hemingway makes approaching middle age sound like imminent death. As James H. Meredith observes,

> By the 1950s, 20th-century America had become a youth culture, but Hemingway, who had once been a purveyor of that culture, at the age of 51 was now paradoxically becoming a victim of it. (Meredith 1999, 98)

He was no longer the hot young writer, and both he and his critics mourned that perceived loss.

Although Hemingway was only 51 years old himself when *Across the River and into the Trees* was published, he also had good reason to be uneasy about his own deteriorating health. Like his protagonist in *Across the River and into the Trees*, Hemingway himself took mannitol hexanitrate—"Ernest to control his high blood pressure, the Colonel to keep his heart pumping" (Reynolds 1999, 202). Biographer Michael Reynolds tells us that while writing the novel, Hemingway was "intensely aware that his erratic blood pressure could, at any moment, blow a hole through a major artery" (Reynolds 1999, 206). Meredith has suggested of Hemingway that, "from a personal standpoint, the war [that is, World War II] not only almost killed him; it also sped up his already accelerating aging process as well" (Reynolds 1999, 96). Hemingway had many reasons for feeling physically vulnerable and older than his biological age.

Finally, Hemingway had an additional reason for anxiety about his own future, as Gerry Brenner has pointed out (Brenner 1983, 169). Hemingway's father had suffered from diabetes and heart disease and shot himself at the age of 57, an age that 50-year-old Hemingway was rapidly approaching as he wrote *Across the River and into the Trees*. Ernest was obviously experiencing a common and predictable fear (shared by many adults 50 and over) of experiencing the ill health a parent has endured before dying—exacerbated, in Hemingway's case, by a fear of inheriting his father's suicidal depression.

Aging and the Literary History of Modernism

Hemingway might have been especially concerned about aging because he had achieved professional literary success so early in life. He had published what are arguably his three best books (*In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell*

to Arms) by the time he was 30. His books during the next two decades—*Death in the Afternoon*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Green Hills of Africa*, and the more highly regarded *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—were not so consistently well received. Given the rapidly changing reception of his own books, he might well have felt that the cultural importance of modernism as a literary movement was fading rapidly. In her 2017 biography of Hemingway, Mary V. Dearborn contends that *Across the River and into the Trees* was "born, without a doubt, from Ernest's deep fears about his writing future and his reputation" (Dearborn 2017, 521-22). Some of those fears and anxieties about his own aging seeped into *Across the River and into the Trees* and cost Hemingway his aesthetic control of his material.

Hemingway was part of a modernist cultural milieu so early in life that a volume about his circle has been titled *Everybody Was So Young* (Vaill 1998). Other literary works of the period also demonstrated a preoccupation with youth. Consider such titles as Wilfrid Owen's 1917 poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Hemingway's own 1922 poem "Along with Youth", Wyndham Lewis's 1932 nonfiction work *Doom of Youth*, and Vera Brittain's 1933 memoir *Testament of Youth*. Hemingway's contemporary Malcolm Cowley wrote in *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* of what he called "the omnipresent culture of youth" among the expatriates who founded literary modernism (Cowley 1951, 237). Cowley argued in his introduction that the Lost Generation, which he defines as those who graduated from college (or were of age to do so) between 1915 and 1922, felt that their unique experiences (especially in World War I) united them with each other in opposition to earlier generations (Cowley 1951, 8).

Technology further divided young people of the 1920s from earlier generations. The explosive growth of print media led to magazines that catered to youthful audiences by celebrating (or sometimes bemoaning) dance parties, jazz, college athletes, and the "flapper" (McDonald 2013, 255). Young people flocked to the cinema, and films glamorized their young stars. Even the growing availability of automobiles contributed to the increasing freedom and sexual independence of young adults (McDonald 2013, 259).

The ideology of youthfulness was so vitally important to the Jazz Age that Scribners once promoted one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels in the *New York Times* by appealing to potential readers' experience of youthfulness: "WERE YOU EVER UNDER THIRTY? Then read *This Side of Paradise*" (qtd. in Meade 2004, 20). Zelda Fitzgerald once wrote approvingly in a short article titled "Eulogy on the Flapper" that "Flapperdom" mandated that women maximize the social

capital of youth: "It is making them intelligent and teaching them to capitalize their natural resources and get their money's worth. They are merely applying business methods to being young" (Fitzgerald 1991, 393). Elsewhere she wrote in a 1928 article of "the current insistence upon youth as the finest and richest time in the life of man" and explained further:

> [T]here has never been a time when so many positions of importance have been occupied by such young men or when the pages of newspapers and anthologies have borne the names of so many people under thirty (Fitzgerald 1991, 409).

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and The Fury,* and *Sons and Lovers* were all published before their authors passed the age of thirty. Modernism was widely (if perhaps unfairly) perceived as a product of the young.

Perhaps literary modernists' self-conscious insistence on youthfulness and the contrast between that insistence and Hemingway's own insecurities about aging and masculinity as expressed by his aging autobiographical hero together help explain why reviewers frequently evaluated *Across the River and into the Trees* in ageist terms. Lee Cheney Jessup, writing for the *Nashville Banner*, opens his review by mentioning the eager anticipation of readers longing for another *A Farewell to Arms*:

> They have reckoned, however, without consideration for the intervening years, and the fact that "Farewell to Arms" is the product of a young man's enthusiasm and vitality.
> The latest of Hemingway's is the product of a sadder and wiser personality. (Jessup 1977, 293)

The *Christian Science Monitor* called the novel "autumnal" and concluded that Hemingway "is on the brink of no longer having anything vital to say" (Kalem 1977, 307). Cowley writes that the novel is "a tired book" (Cowley 1977, 300), employing one of the most commonly used descriptors in the novel's contemporary reviews. Presumably, "tired" is code for a novel obviously written by an old man. Lewis Gannett described Cantwell as "a tired young-old man, in love with lost youth" (Gannett 1977, 289). The reviews suggest a critical

perception that modernism—the literary movement of which Hemingway was in the vanguard—was artistically exhausted and therefore being eclipsed. After all, by September 7, 1950, when *Across the River and into the Trees* was published (Baker 1972, 265), Hemingway's mentor Ezra Pound was institutionalized, and many of his other mentors, friends, and rivals were dead, including Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Maxwell Perkins, and James Joyce. True, T.S. Eliot had received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, but that might easily have seemed to Hemingway like a sign that the modernists' best work was behind them rather than a ratification of that work's literary excellence. As Cowley observed in writing of the 1920s, "it was hard for us to get used to the idea that there were rebels younger than ourselves, who regarded us as relics of an age that was passing" (Cowley 1951, 224). The expatriate modernists thought of themselves as the young avant garde and did not relish being supplanted by a still younger generation.

Isaac Rosenfeld, writing for the *Kenyon Review*, offers one of the most perceptive analyses of the critics' responses to Hemingway:

> It is easy to understand how Hemingway took hold of our imagination. The characters he created of the lost generation gave us an image of ourselves which we were glad to accept. (Rosenfeld 1977, 329)

The obvious corollary is that the character Hemingway created in *Across the River and into the Trees* was 50, tired, and dying—an image of themselves that few members of his generation would have found it easy to accept. Uncomfortable identifying with Hemingway's latest autobiographical avatar of his generation, the reviewers staged their uneasiness about their own aging in writing so disparagingly about Hemingway's depiction of their imaginary contemporary, the aged and terminally ill Richard Cantwell.

Across the River and into the Trees and the Optimistic Possibilities of Aging

Yet oddly, there are discordant notes that suggest that while Richard Cantwell sees age as decline, Hemingway could also envision more optimistic possibilities. For example, the narrator is kinder in his observations about the protagonist's physical appearance, observing of Cantwell:

> He did not notice the old used steel of his eyes nor the small, long extended laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, nor that his broken nose was like a gladiator's in the oldest statues. Nor did he notice his basically kind mouth which could be truly ruthless. (Hemingway 1950, 112)

As William E. Cain notes of a similarly paradoxical comment about Santiago's appearance in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "Hemingway is prompting us to see the difference between how something appears (and what it might mislead us to believe about a person) and who someone is" (Cain 2006, 114). The fact that Cantwell's mental lapses are insignificant further indicates that Hemingway is not as convinced as Cantwell is that all aging is decline. The narrator suggests that Cantwell has gains as well as losses, something Cantwell himself, preoccupied with his perceived physical and mental deterioration, rarely acknowledges. Hemingway is evidently less convinced that the aging process involves exclusively negative changes than his protagonist is.[5]

Cantwell himself seems to recognize that the decline narrative is not inevitable when he recalls the Countess Dandolo:

> [S]he is over eighty, and she is as gay as a girl and does not have any fear of dying. She dyes her hair red and it looks very well. She is a good companion and an admirable woman". (Hemingway 1950, 47)

Similarly, Cantwell notes of the *Gran Maestro*, who is two years older than he is (Hemingway 1950, 55),

> The *Gran Maestro* was festive and well with the morning. He took his ulcers day by day, and his heart the same way. When they did not hurt he did not hurt either. (Hemingway 1950, 202)

It is possible to be very elderly ("over eighty") or ill (plagued with ulcers and a cardiac condition) and nevertheless remain "gay" and "festive". It is just Cantwell himself who cannot manage it.

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5 Suzanne del Gizzo sees similar contradictions in *The Dangerous Summer*, Hemingway's posthumously published memoir about a bullfighting rivalry in Spain during the summer of 1959 (del Gizzo 2016). While Hemingway was in somewhat better aesthetic control of *Across the River and into the Trees* than he was in this later book, the same anxieties inform the logic of both narratives.

Even the metaphor from which the title of this essay was taken sounds more admiring than condemnatory:

> The motorboat came gallantly up beside the piling of the dock. Every move she makes, the Colonel thought, is a triumph of the gallantry of the aging machine. We do not have war horses now like old Traveller, or Marbot's Lysette who fought, personally, at Eylau. We have the gallantry of worn-through rods that refuse to break; the cylinder head that does not blow though it has every right to, and the rest of it. (Hemingway 1950, 52)

As Wyatt suggests, "For an aging man, as the Colonel surely feels himself to be, the gallantry consists in accepting the gift of however much remaining time there might be" (Wyatt 2016, 54).

Drawing on Carlos Baker (1972, 280-82), several critics argue that the many faltering machines in the novel—including a "failing [speedboat] engine, the [elevator's] unstable current" (Stolzfus 2003, 25), and even "the balky locks and keys" (Seefeldt 1995, 258)—all become "tropes for Cantwell's failing heart" (Stolzfus 2003, 25). Interestingly, however, in each case, the machines *do* eventually work; the "mechanical disorders" are only momentary (Baker 1972, 279). The implication is that despite temporary mechanical disorders, most of us work pretty well in our fifties and, with luck, beyond.

One key moment for this reading occurs when Cantwell, walking the city, encounters two younger men whom—tellingly—he refers to as "former fascists" (Hemingway 1950, 186). Fascism celebrated youthfulness; in his book *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*, Jon Savage writes, "The futurist insistence on the vitality of youth became the central part of the Fascist program" (Savage 2007, 195). Not realizing he understands Italian, the young men criticize Cantwell's gray hair, his uneven gait, and his combat boots and uniform before asserting his sexual impotence. Angry, he lies in wait for them, abruptly confronts them, and spits on the pavement at their feet. They promptly turn and run. Afterward Cantwell tells himself, "I should not blame them, since they were defeated", adding, "But their manners were not good in respect to a man of my rank and age" (Hemingway 1950, 187). The fact that he can vanquish them with "his old and worn death smile" and an unspoken threat suggests that Colonel Cantwell has lost none of his authoritative bearing, regardless of his age (Hemingway 1950, 187).

Perhaps the most persuasive argument that Hemingway is not as pessimistic as Cantwell about aging lies in Cantwell's improbable relationship with Renata. How decrepit can Cantwell be if he has managed to attract the romantic love and sexual desire of a teenager? Furthermore, the fact that she willingly listens as he lectures her at length about life suggests that she believes he has wisdom to impart. Hemingway, too, seems convinced that what Cantwell has learned throughout his life is valuable and should be shared with a younger person who can learn from it in turn. Certainly he had had similar experiences himself while covering World War II for *Collier's*. In a 1949 profile of Hemingway for *Life* magazine, Malcolm Cowley notes,

> Younger men and women come to him for advice about their literary problems and their love affairs, while he talks to them as if he were ninety years wise instead of only forty-nine. (Cowley 1950, 41)

The fact that the reviewers almost universally disparaged this aspect of the novel perhaps indicates that Hemingway was more optimistic about the value of aging than his reviewers were.

Finally, the novel's Venetian setting further emphasizes Hemingway's theme of the beauty and glory of what is already in a state of decline. "No one is ever old in Venice", Cantwell thinks to himself (Hemingway 1950, 93). Venice, which is in many ways the novel's main character (Stolzfus 2003, 25), is literally decaying and falling into ruins, yet its splendor is undeniable. The implication is that what is old can be valuable and beautiful not *despite* its age but *because of* its age.

In Thomas Mann's *Tod in Venedig* ("Death in Venice"), an important influence on *Across the River and into the Trees* (Seyppel 1957; Baker 1972, 266-67), the fifty-something protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, comes to Venice for his summer vacation, falls in love with a beautiful young boy, and dies rather suddenly, presumably of cholera. Before he dies, he gets a haircut and even wears makeup in a sadly misguided attempt to look younger:

> [A]lmost his last act is to have himself tailored and barbered and cosmeticized into a garish simulacrum of youthfulness—thus re-enacting the spectacle of the obscene and embarrassing young-old man which he had found so loathsome on the voyage into Venice. He has become exactly that which he most abhorred. (Tanner 1992, 359)

Aschenbach's love for the boy named Tadzio—which initially sounds like "adieu"—is really Aschenbach's narcissistic love for his own lost youth (Gullette 1993, 29). Similarly, Hemingway's Colonel Cantwell falls in love with a beautiful young woman who is the same age he was when he first came to Italy in World War I and was wounded at Fossalta, and her name, Renata, means "rebirth" (Lisca 1974, 292).

But Cantwell, unlike Mann's Aschenbach, never tries to disguise his age cosmetically. Like Aschenbach, he mourns his lost youth and is disgusted with his present age, but unlike Aschenbach, he refuses to pretend. His attitude (and, I suspect, Hemingway's) is Wordsworthian resignation:

> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower,
> We will grieve not; rather find
> Strength in what remains behind. (Wordsworth 1904, 355-56)

The narrator gently reminds us that, in spite of Cantwell's terminal heart disease, he still wakes up happy every morning (Hemingway 1950, 289). Age does not necessarily bring despair.

Hemingway expresses very similar attitudes about aging in his fiction both before and after *Across the River and into the Trees*. In his 1933 short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place", Hemingway presents what initially seems like a narrative of decline, in which a melancholy old man visits a café. The two waiters at the café discuss the old man, revealing that he has recently attempted suicide. They both believe him to be at least 80, and he seems plagued by loneliness and despair. Only gradually does the reader learn that the older waiter not only sympathizes with the old man but also shares his depression, which suggests that the old man's despair is not purely a result of his age. Similarly, in Hemingway's 1952 novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago is ostracized by his community for his unluckiness as a fisherman, which might indicate that because he is now old, he is no longer able to fish successfully as he once did. But in the course of the narrative Hemingway shows the reader that Santiago is not just capable of defying ageist expectations and landing a massive fish; he is also capable of teaching Manolin how to be a man. Marco Portales identifies a tradition of representing old men in American literature as moral educators of the young; while he focuses on nineteenth-century literature, he mentions

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* as a twentieth-century example of the tradition he traces (Portales 1989, 146). Similarly, Seefeldt suggests that "The persistent cross-generational theme—Cantwell constantly 'teaching' an eager Renata, as well as learning from her—implies an instinctive need to speak to younger generations" (Seefeldt 1995, 251). Hemingway's older protagonists, apparently exhausted and useless to society, nevertheless teach their protégés how to live.

Phillip Sipiora suggests that "there is a great deal to learn about aging successfully in Hemingway's fiction" (Sipiora 1999, 61). Similarly, Hemingway himself went on, despite the unfavorable critical reception of *Across the River and into the Trees,* to write *The Old Man and the Sea* (which won him both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Nobel Prize for Literature), portions of *The Garden of Eden* (his most experimental work, published posthumously), and *A Moveable Feast* (his best-selling memoir, also published posthumously)—hardly works anyone would characterize as signaling an artistic decline.

Across the River and into the Trees becomes a meditation on aging masculinity (particularly the stereotypical physical masculinity represented by the warrior) in which Hemingway expresses curiously ambivalent attitudes about what it is like to be in a 51-year-old aging body. Although Cantwell himself is preoccupied with his own decline, Hemingway's narrator subtly insists that aging is not the horror that Cantwell seems to believe it is. On the contrary, Cantwell wakes up happy every morning, does not try to disguise his aged appearance, still has the power to scare off would-be attackers with little more than a glare, and spends his last days in a city internationally known for both its age and its beauty. Hemingway presents the decline narrative in painful detail but ultimately subverts it by insisting on details that undermine its totalizing version of aging.

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