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“Fourth and Fifth Dimension” in Ernest Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*

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Abstract:

Of all the things, Ernest Hemingway is remembered most for his terse, epigrammatic and understated prose. As a writer acutely conscious of his craft, he thought long and deeply on the art of writing. He, however, never expressed them in any sustained manner since he always held that talking about writing brought bad luck to the writer. At the same time he was too much of an artist to refrain from talking about his craft altogether. His views on writing often appeared either in his letters and interviews, or by way of gratuitous remarks in his writings, fictional as well as nonfictional. One such remark about “fourth and fifth dimension” in prose has led to considerable critical speculation. Drawing on extant critical views, this paper attempts to clarify the meaning and significance of this phrase and to show through an analysis of *Death in the Afternoon* that Hemingway sought to realize the fourth and fifth dimension in his nonfictional writings as well.

Keywords: Perpetual now, Ouspensky, Bergson, William James, radical empiricism, moments of consciousness, intensification of experience.

In a casual conversation with Kandinsky in *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), Hemingway makes an intriguing but significant remark: “The kind of writing that can be done. How far prose can be carried if anyone is serious enough and has luck. There is a *fourth and fifth dimension* that can be gotten” (33, emphasis added). What Hemingway may have meant by this phrase “fourth and fifth dimension” has led to considerable critical speculation. Hemingway himself does not elaborate it except by adding that “It is much more difficult than poetry. It is a prose that has never been written. But it can be written, without tricks and without cheating. With nothing that will go bad afterwards” (33). While a few critics have tried to suggest what he might have meant by this phrase, the others have agreed that the phrase is pretty vague.

Again, the confusion concerns only the second half of the phrase, namely the fifth dimension. As for the meaning of the fourth dimension, there seems to be unanimity among the critics. Joseph Warren Beach suggests that the fourth dimension is dependent on and related to an “aesthetic factor” achieved by the protagonist’s recurrent participation in some traditional “ritual or strategy” (319). Malcolm Cowley is of a similar opinion. According to him, the fourth dimension of time is related to “the almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies” (viii) and thereby, suggesting the recurrent patterns of human experience. As for the fifth dimension, Beach suggests that it may be an “ethical factor” achieved by the hero’s “participation in the moral order of the world” (321) while Cowley dismisses it as “a mystical or meaningless figure of speech” (viii).

Given the fact that Hemingway was always precise and meticulous with his choice of words, it cannot be that he had used this phrase in an offhand manner. Moreover, he who had been unsparing in his criticism of writers and critics for using abstractions, could not have ended up using one himself.

The most convincing explanation of the term has been offered by Frederic I. Carpenter who suggests that Hemingway’s fifth dimensional prose is an attempt to communicate the experience of the perpetual now. Carpenter points out that the phrase “fifth dimension” was first used by P. D. Ouspensky in 1931. In *A New Model of the Universe* Ouspensky defines the “fifth dimension” as “a line of perpetual now.... The fifth dimension forms a surface in relation to the line of time.... Though we are not aware of it, sensations of the existence of other ‘times’ continually enter our consciousness.... The fifth dimension is movement in the circle, repetition, recurrence” (375). Ouspensky was, in turn, indebted to Henri Bergson’s theory of time (physical and psychological) and William James’s concepts of “radical empiricism” and “moments of consciousness” (713). Carpenter says:

Approaching philosophy by way of psychology, James had interpreted all religious and artistic experience as empirical phenomena he had sought to observe, report, and analyse those intense ‘moments of consciousness’, which men of religion and of art alike have described as the most ‘real’ and important. With James, therefore, ‘realism’ had become psychological, ‘empiricism’ had expanded to include all ‘immediate’ or subjective as well as ‘mediate’ or objective experience. Studying under James, Gertrude Stein had developed artistic techniques for communicating this ‘immediate’ experience in prose style. Hemingway now carried these techniques further, and

incorporated their psychological and philosophic patterns (outlined by James, Bergson, and perhaps Ouspensky) in the structural forms of his fiction. (195)

While suggesting that Hemingway might have become familiar with these philosophical ideas in his exchanges with Gertrude Stein during his apprenticeship years in Paris in 1920s, Carpenter claims that the strongest evidence, however, that Hemingway had followed this pattern of ideas is internal. According to him, “it becomes the ideal of ‘intensity’ or ‘ecstasy,’ and produces that telescoping of experience and those flashes of illumination which make the ‘short’ life of Francis Macomber supremely ‘happy,’ and the snows of Kilimanjaro blindingly brilliant” (712-13). The fifth dimension, therefore, means the intensification of experience which produces an ecstatic and blissful state transcending the limits of time and of self and bordering on the mystical. And this state can be achieved by telescoping time and intensifying sensation in human consciousness.

The term fifth dimension may be a new coinage but the concept of the fifth dimension has run through literature all along. We have Blake, the mystic poet, who said:

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour. (“Auguries of Innocence” 171)

Again, we have Wordsworth who calls such experience “spots of time” in *The Prelude* and James Joyce (1916) who calls them epiphanies. What they all have obviously been referring to is a kind of apocalyptic revelation and in the moment of this revelation, the value of the intensity of experience substitutes for that of the duration of experience.

II

What Hemingway, therefore, means by a writer having acquired the fourth and fifth dimensions in his writing is his ability to capture and portray life in all its complexity and to do so in a manner which one would think is possible only in poetry. Making a distinction between journalistic writing and creative writing, he says:

If it was reporting they would not remember it. When you describe something that has happened that day the timeliness makes people see it in their own imaginations. A month later that element of time is gone and your account would be flat and they would not see it in their minds nor remember it. But if you make it up instead of describing it you can make it *round and whole and solid and give it life*. You create

it, for good or bad. It is made; not described. It is just as true as the extent of your ability to make it and knowledge you put into it. (Monologue 36; emphasis added)

Hemingway’s endeavor as a creative writer has been to make his writings “round and whole and solid and give [them] life.” Most of the Hemingway critics and scholars have chosen to focus on his fictional works analyzing how he sought to capture life in all its all mysteriousness and inscrutability while remaining rooted in ordinary existence. His nonfictional works have received scant critical attention. Carpenter too focuses on *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and does not even refer to his nonfictional works. My contention in this paper is that Hemingway made a concerted endeavor to realize these fourth and fifth dimensions in his nonfictional works as well. *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) constitutes the first attempt in this direction. In fact, it anticipates and approximates the fifth dimension which is progressively realized in his later works.

But let us pause here briefly to take just a cursory look at the kind of critical reception that *Death in the Afternoon* has received. It has generally been dismissed as a dull treatise on bullfighting. Max Eastman argues that Hemingway’s bull is “juvenile romantic gushing and sentimentalizing of simple facts” (173) about the brutal, shocking and ignoble aspects of a bullfight. Margot Norris calls Hemingway a “pornologist”. Calling bullfight a barbaric and savage game, he finds Hemingway’s attempt to defend it in the name of aesthetics “particularly shocking and outrageous” (201). Robert Coates confesses that like most American readers he knows nothing and cares less about the bullfight and is bored by the exhaustive treatise (162). Some critics took the trouble of going through the book merely on account of their interest in the personality of the author. Granville Hicks finds it worth reading only for this reason. “If anyone else had written the book,” he says, “there would be little more to say; but because Hemingway ranks so high among contemporary novelists, and because more people will read it because they are interested in Hemingway than will read it because they are interested in bullfighting...” (163-64).

Only a few critics have viewed the book favorably. Malcolm Cowley calls it a “Baedeker of bulls” that concerns “the art of living, of drinking, of dying, of loving the Spanish land” (165), for bullfighting symbolizes a whole nation and a culture extending for centuries into the past. To H. L. Mencken, it is full of the “vividness of something really seen, felt, experienced” (171). Commenting on the literary beauty and significance of *Death in the Afternoon* Ronald Weber says, “Throughout the book he maintains an outer as well as an inner perspective that prevents it from being one with his material, wholly given over to a

factual account. Fact is always colored with personality, charged with personal reaction” (47). He suggests that this dual perspective within the work lifts it beyond the pedestrian tones of a mere guide to bullfighting.

From the brief overview of critical opinion on *Death in the Afternoon*, it can be seen that it has not very many admirers. Except for Weber, even the favorably inclined critics do not engage with it seriously and make only a few perfunctory remarks.

III

That Hemingway’s intention behind writing this book was not just to give a comprehensive account of bullfighting in the manner of a guidebook but to capture the drama of those intense climactic moments which give one a sense of the feeling of life and death becomes obvious in the very opening pages of *Death in the Afternoon* as Hemingway announces: “I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing, truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to *put down what really happened in action, what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced*” (9; emphasis added). In order to learn this art of capturing true emotions he had to, he claims, wait for five years, whetting, chiseling and refining his writing skills. It is only then that he sets out to “get the real thing, the sequence of motions and facts which made the emotion and which would be valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it truly enough, always” (10). Although he was still three years away from the use of the specific phrase “fifth dimension”, the above pronouncements clearly imply that he is seeking to realize the fifth dimension of perpetual now through radical intensification of experience.

Carpenter says:

A fourth dimensional sense of time... is often achieved by a detailed description of the patterns of experience which have crystallized in rituals, ceremonies, traditions, habits of action, codes of behavior. On the level of pure realism, this may be suggested by that loving description of the techniques of any work or sport which is characteristic of all Hemingway's stories. (200)

Bullfighting is one such ritualized pattern of experience. It is a well-ordered ritual which Hemingway calls a tragedy involving a certain death of the bull and a great danger that the man faces as long as he remains with the bull in the ring. Right from the beginning, from

the matador’ and his *cuadrilla*’s ride to the ring and the tension that builds up during the ride, the arrival of the president, the procession of the bullfighters, matadors’ sending of their capes to friends, admirers of distinguished personalities, the matador taking up his position in the *burladero* and the president waving his handkerchief as a signal to open the door of the *toril* where the bull is waiting, to the moment of the killing of the bull, everything is well-ordered and well-planned. In the first act of the bullfight, the bull charges the picadors; in the second act, *banderillas* are placed in the bull, and in the third act, killing is done. The bullfight involves not only the matador and his *cuadrilla* and the bull, but “nameless people, dozens of them, hundreds of the thousands, in circles gradually widening till they include almost a whole nation and a culture extending for centuries into the past” (167). Thus, bullfighting becomes a symbol of the whole Spanish nation and culture.

The overall structure of a bullfight has the character of a ritual. Every stage of the action is sanctified by a long tradition and culture. In evoking the details of this ritualistic sport which suggest the recurrent patterns of human experience, Hemingway achieves the fourth dimensional sense of time.

IV

“The fifth-dimensional intensity of experience beyond time may come, finally, from a profound sense of participation in these traditional patterns of life experience” (Carpenter 718). For Hemingway, the real significance of bullfighting lies in the fact “that it kept before men’s attention their struggle with the brute forces of nature, to control them to their own ends, in which their human ingenuity gave them the assumption of victory, if they spent their best effort” (189). Bullfighting is to be seen as a microcosm of man eternally pitting himself against the destructive forces of nature and the overwhelming odds of death, but with one very important difference. In the bullring the forces of death are not nebulous and impersonal, but are given a concrete shape in the form of a bull, and the strict requirements of the fight give man a feeling, if illusory, of victory over death. And the closer a matador can provoke this danger of death and then control that danger in order to show his complete domination of his opponent, the better he is and the more beautiful it will be to watch. It is this significance of bullfighting which Hemingway captures and conveys in *Death in the Afternoon* and in doing so he almost realizes the fifth dimension.

The matador while fighting and killing the bull confronts death and the moment when the sword goes in between the shoulder blades and the bull and the matador are for the moment one: “the beauty of the moment of killing is that flash when man and bull form one figure as the sword goes all the way in, the man learning after it, death uniting the two figures in the emotional, aesthetic, and artistic climax of the fight” (234).

The matador achieves the mystical and ecstatic experience in the perfect fulfillment of this pattern of action. This is akin to the fifth dimensional moment which Robert Jordan realizes while making love to Maria:

... May be that is my life and instead of it being threescore years and ten it is... just threescore hours and ten or twelve rather....

I suppose it is possible to live as full life in seventy hours as in seventy years; granted that your life has been full up to the time that the seventy hours start and that you have reached a certain age.

... So if your life trades its seventy years for seventy hours I have that value now and I am lucky enough to know it.

... So if you love this girls as much as you say you do, you had better love her very hard and *make up in intensity what the relation will lack in duration and continuity.* (166-68)

Commenting on this passage, Carpenter says, “In the ecstatic experience of perfect union with his beloved, time has stood still, and the value of intensity has been substituted for that of duration. From this experience has emerged the philosophy of the eternal now” (716). In this telescoping of time from seventy years to seventy hours, Robert Jordan has an intense experience of a “perpetual now” which equals to the experience of a lifetime of “duration and continuity”. What takes Robert Jordan seventy hours to achieve and realize, the matador achieves in one moment. In a flash the matador achieves and realizes the moment of truth. It is a kind epiphany in which death unites “the two figures in the emotional, esthetic, and artistic climax of the fight.” And this apocalyptic revelation is received not only by the matador, but by the spectators as well when they identify themselves with the matador. “He gives the feeling of his immortality, and, as you watch it, it becomes yours. Then when it belongs to both of you, he proves it with the sword” (202). These passages are highly charged with emotion. They have a lyrical quality about them and in the rare moments they touch the height of poetry.

This might sound a bit uncanny, but *Death in the Afternoon* in a way anticipates the Jordanian moment of mystical fulfillment and ecstasy. Chapter VII of the book opens with a startling statement:

So with any book on mountain ski-ing, *sexual intercourse*, wing shooting, or any other thing which it is impossible to attempt to make more than one version of at a time on paper, it being always an individual experience, there comes a place in the guidebook where you must say do not come back until you have ski-ed, had *sexual intercourse*, shot quail or grouse, or been to the bullfight so that you will know what we are talking about. (65; emphasis added)

The analogy between bullfight and sexual intercourse which has a ring of metaphysical conceit about it, not only anticipates the love-making scene of Robert Jordan and Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* but also shows that in and through ordinary and mundane life and activity one can achieve fulfillment and enlightenment which sages and saints seek through a different path. Here Hemingway is very much like T.S. Eliot of *The Cocktail Party* (1949) who shows that the fulfillment in marriage (an activity of the daily secular life of the humdrum world) which Edward and Lavinia find, is as significant and beautiful as the fulfillment that Celia finds in the love of God. The matador entering the sword into the bull is like a man entering a woman and that is the moment of the fulfillment and completion of the quest of life as D. H. Lawrence says that when a man enters a woman, he enters the inscrutable and unknown primordial world, a world which lies beyond, from which he has come and the woman in such moment of union also finds fulfillment.

But just as such complete union in man-woman relationship is rare, the complete oneness of the matador and the bull is rare. This oneness requires first of all, a matador who has mastered his art, a bull who is brave and is always willing to charge and an audience who is capable of appreciating the finer points of the art. Such unions were only occasionally consummated during the time of Joselito, Belmonte and Maera. The author has unqualified admiration for Maera:

... he was always one of the finest, most emotional and finished banderilleros that ever nailed a pair and he became one of the best and most satisfying matadors I have ever watched. He was so brave... and bullfighting was so important and so wonderful to him that, in the last year, his presence in the ring raised the whole thing from the least effort, get-rich-quick, wait-for-the-mechanical bull basis it had fallen to and, while he

was in the ring, it again had dignity and passion.... When the bulls did not come to him he did not point out the fact to the crowd asking for their indulgence and sympathy, he went to the bulls, arrogant, domineering, and disregarding danger. He gave emotion always and, finally, as he steadily improved his style, he was an artist. (79)

With Maera, the bullfight becomes supremely moral and he achieves in it an intensity of experience that borders on the mystical. This is the fifth-dimension realized in the fourth-dimension that *Death in the Afternoon* is all about.

Death in the Afternoon embodies this idea in its structure too. Hemingway has masterfully patterned the structure of the text after the ritualized structure of bullfighting. In other words, the text mimics the very act that it describes. Chapters 1 through 16 are, metaphorically viewed, a preparation for the killing of the bull in the ring. These chapters cover diverse aspects of the sport preparatory to killing and bring the reader to the climactic action of killing. In chapters 17 through 19 Hemingway adopts a distinct language and tone appropriate to the tragic occasion. No more nonsensical talk, no more stories, no more comedy during the final moments of tragic glory.

In these chapters Hemingway's keenness of observation and appreciation of the art of bullfighting comes out most clearly in his vivid description of the placing of the *banderillas* in the withers of the bull, the using of the *muleta* to place the bull in the position for killing, and the thrusting of the sword between the bull's shoulder blades. As words and syntax seek to capture the fast-moving and breathtaking action of the sport, they acquire an unusual beauty and significance of their own. They exhibit the kind of beauty and dexterity a matador displays in his handwork, footwork, and body movements. Hemingway's famous standard staccato prose here gives way to long rhythmic sentences.

The last chapter of *Death in the Afternoon* is a paean of Spain and bullfighting in which he emphasizes the transience of everything. But amidst the inevitability of change and loss is something which endures which he seeks to capture in the book: "The great thing is to last and get your work done and see and hear and learn and understand; and write when there is something that you know; and not before; and not too damned much after" (244).

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