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Under Kilimanjaro: Homesickness for the Wild and Hemingway's African Dressing Gown

There is so much mystic nonsense written about hunting but it is something that is probably much older than religion.

—Ernest Hemingway, *Under Kilimanjaro*

Of “homesickness for the wild” Nietzsche wrote famously in *On the Genealogy of Morals* in the fragment taking an evolutionary, visionary shortcut from the time of “semi-animals, well adapted to the wilderness, to war, to prowling and adventure” to the time of man’s violent and ominous turn against himself, the break with “the old instincts of freedom,” or rather their sudden suspension in the abstract domain of “thinking, inferring, reckoning, coordinating cause and effect,” the confinement of “consciousness” equating the birth of “bad conscience.” The paradoxical “leap and plunge” into a higher, radically different level of shared, communal life left man an unguarded prey to processes of “internalization,” instinctual drives sublimating into the concept of the soul. In Nietzsche’s vision, the sublimated, the “tamed,” remains rooted in the experience of “a dreadful heaviness,” the loneliness of one cut off from the sources of “strength, joy and terribleness,” seeking old paths in a “new unknown world,” always in need of “former guides.” The “leap and plunge” which took place at an indefinite time at the dawn of mankind created a desire for some “subterranean gratifications,” the presence of which has assisted humanity ever since, assuming various forms, extreme in the manifestations of both creative and repressive power. In the last sentences of fragment 16 in *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche likens human history to an ongoing spectacle which calls for “divine spectators,” urges a premonition of its own justification, in some other, mystically or anti-mystically conceived, realm for what would otherwise seem a spectacle “played senselessly unobserved on some ludicrous planet!.” “From now on, man is *included* among the most unexpected and exciting lucky throws in the dice game of Heraclitus’ ‘great child,’ be he called Zeus or chance; he gives rise to an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise—” (84–85). While the irreparable loss of freedom opens space for

the homesickness for freedom, a latent “*instinct for freedom*,” the loss of religious “certainty” begets more nostalgic feelings for which art provides gratifications. In *Human, All Too Human*, in the part titled “From the Souls of Artists and Writers,” Nietzsche’s formulations tend to center on silenced “metaphysical strings” which account for the appreciation of art’s “highest effect.” He writes of plastic arts and music as “the measure of the wealth of feelings” we have lost “direct paths” to through the weakening of our religious experience. Liberated and skeptical, Nietzsche’s artist still seeks former guides, “feels a profound stab in the heart and sighs for the man who will lead him back to his lost love, whether she be called religion, or metaphysics” (82). In his review of Krzysztof Michalski’s *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Thought*, Tamsin Shaw writes of the religious strain which was never entirely lost in Nietzsche’s works despite their fervor in attacking religious emotionalism, obscurity, self-indulgence and sickness:

Nietzsche remained throughout his sane life a severe critic of religious illusions, but for all that he proclaimed his resilience in the face of hard truths, he could not easily reconcile himself to the fading of what he calls in *Human, All Too Human* ‘the rainbow colors at the outermost ends of human knowing and imagining.’ Nostalgia would not do. (52)

Nietzsche’s texts are not very likely to have been selected for the spacious book bag the Hemingways took with them to Africa in 1953, or bought by them on one of their not infrequent visits to the bookstores in Nairobi. Had they been read, talked or thought about in Africa or in Havana, Cuba, where Hemingway began to work on his African memoir, they would, most probably, have found their way there to keep company with references to Virgil, Machiavelli, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Simenon, Proust, Fitzgerald, Orwell, Whitman and others. Reference to Nietzsche’s thought in this article is not a return to critical discussions of its relevance to Ernest Hemingway’s work, the relevance which, as such readings when given to any of his texts admit, could be speculated on in terms of possible parallels but not demonstrated in terms of direct influence.¹ Nietzsche is quoted here to give a general, contextual perspective to the language of

1 In the essay “Hemingway and Nietzsche: The Context of Ideas,” from the volume *Nietzsche in American Literature and Thought*, edited by Manfred Putz, Christoph Kuhn wrote of the only evidence of Hemingway’s acquaintance with Nietzsche’s writings: Hemingway’s Shakespeare and Company library card for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* borrowed in 1926 and the copies of this text and of Guy de Pourtales’s biographical work *Nietzsche en Italie* in the library of Finca Vigia in Havana, Cuba. In his essay, Kuhn examines the motifs of *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises* and *Death in the Afternoon* from the perspective of the struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian as presented in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Hemingway's *Under Kilimanjaro* (2005), the complete text of his last unfinished African manuscript edited by Robert W. Lewis and Robert E. Fleming, earlier edited and considerably abbreviated by his son, Patrick Hemingway, in *True at First Light* (1999). The book is about Africa as much as it is about writing. In it, Africa and writing share a paradoxical quality: they call for mystifying perspectives and the need to hold back from them, they combine the idea of instinctive truth with the quest for the intensity of experience, they speak of a spectacle in which posturing and tricks do the magic of providing exceptional clarity of vision and exceptional creative energy. As Nietzsche's discussion of "homesickness for the wild," the text of *Under Kilimanjaro* depends for its suggestive undercurrents on the sense of loss as the necessary condition for the longing which seeks gratification in the acts of writing about it. What Toni Morrison says about the Africanism of Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* in *Playing in the Dark* may well apply to *Under Kilimanjaro*; Africa is in it "a blank, empty space into which he asserts himself, an uncreated void ready, waiting and offering itself up for his artistic imagination, his work, his fiction" (88–89). Perhaps what should also be said of Hemingway's need to assert himself as a writer in the text of *Under Kilimanjaro* is that the need always makes him suspicious about the meaningfulness of such concepts as artistic imagination and sometimes suspicious of the meaningfulness of the art of writing itself. In *Green Hills of Africa* Hemingway wrote: "All I wanted to do now was get back to Africa. We had not left it, yet, but when I would wake up in the night I would lie, listening, homesick for it already" (72). Readers of Hemingway's texts know that in the sentence "All I wanted to do now was get back to Africa," the word "Africa" could be substituted by the word "writing" without essentially changing the meaning of the sentence. Nostalgia for Africa, even before his leaving it, is for Hemingway a nostalgia for being able to write again, even before writing becomes lost in a completed text. The premonition of longing for Africa was particularly intense during his 1953–1954 safari. Things were not as "simple" then as they had been in 1933–1934. To use Morrison's words, there was still a considerable amount of playfulness but there was also the darkness of uncertainty whether he would ever be able to come back again.

What we learn in *Under Kilimanjaro* about the writer's attitudes towards Africa, wilderness, writing, and Africa as wilderness and writing come in the accounts of Hemingway thinking about the challenges of the present day, Hemingway reminiscing about the "good old days" and Hemingway conversing about these with his wife, Mary, who is first getting impatient to shoot her lion and then cannot help thinking about who killed it, as well as with his African companions who generally put more trust and take more pleasure in his words than his wife does. Thinking and talking which often turn to literary matters, if only in literary allusion and anecdote, are both highly gratifying and highly derided as

interruption of or end to hunting. As earlier in *Green Hills of Africa*, in *Under Kilimanjaro*, meditation and safari are wedded but safari and conversation form an even closer relationship. Relaxing and instructive, the chatty mode thrives on speculative and generalizing wit and thus both underlines and undermines what has long been recognized as Hemingway's, the writer's and the hunter's, aesthetic platitude: the art of writing and the art of hunting are mysteries insofar as they elude mystification. A writer and a hunter, Hemingway never denies taking pleasure in the recognition of a degree of mystification such epigrammatic formulations depend on. His use of highly normative and authoritative distillations of language ("clear," "good," "true") is equally typical as is his use of verbal signs of alertness to the traps of conceptualization, reflection, theoretical thinking. The compulsiveness to philosophize, to build systems, to judge, to enjoy a sense-making, value-establishing mood calls for Hemingway's coda which comes in a contrastive, counterbalancing form of declared or undeclared need to return to the idea of one simple, declarative statement but equally often of one simple, negative statement, or the protective distance of a humorous, sometimes overly bitter and sarcastic, tone. In Hemingway's fictionalized African memoirs, when the text recognizes the danger of celebrating its urge to speculate, to explain, to systematize, the deflationary, self-corrective warning usually comes from the wife, Pauline Hemingway in 1933 and Mary Hemingway in 1953–1954.

"You were getting awfully profound," P.O.M. tells her husband in the "Hunting and Conversation" chapter of *Green Hills of Africa* (29) once he has finished theorizing on the history of American literature and the fate of the American writer for their German friend, an intruder in good hunting but a welcome guest nevertheless for bringing back memories from the time of the author's first getting published in *Der Querschnitt*. Literary reminiscences, frequent and nostalgically colored in *Under Kilimanjaro*, are not viewed by Mary with as much suspicion and anger as is "Papa's religion," a system of conversational mannerisms involving quasi-mystical allusions and the language of male-bonding, a "complicated" means of relaxation which turns into a parody of Hemingway's commitment to his obligations as a loving husband, an acting temporary game ranger and a serious writer working on his text. Mary is Hemingway's audience when he talks about the concept of "truth" in his writing; like all writers a "congenial liar," he speaks of his own pride and fear when he remembers that Lawrence "could write beautifully" but with time needed "to become angry to write": "He had done some things perfectly and he was at the point of discovering something most people do not know when he began to have so many theories" (114). The "point" of discovering "something" is as close as Hemingway can allow for his work to speak of the art of writing as a means of providing compensation for lost religious insights, and even then, to strengthen rather than diminish the ef-

fect of "true" confession, it needs to be defended by the strategies of self-ironic context, of being "wet" in Africa: "I love to talk about writing and what you believe and know and care about. But it's only on a rainy day that we can talk" (113). In a play of mirror reflections, Mary, who like her husband is then thinking of his African fiancée in the Shamba and who "is a lot like [her]," verbalizes Hemingway's suspicion of and a certain measure of appreciation for such words of wisdom: "Which Lawrence were you talking about, D. H. or T. E.?" (114). Angrily reprimanded by Mary for not writing "something, occasionally," Hemingway relies for his self-control and self-assurance on G. C. saying he should be awarded the Nobel Prize for "[his] work in the religious field" and asking if he planned "to write something about how mysterious Africa was" and "to write in Swahili" (204). The metaphysics of writing/not writing are linked, in a humorously serious way such literary asides are to be made, to being/not being in Africa.

There is, in *Under Kilimanjaro*, considerable concern with what in his 1954 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech Hemingway called "the degree of alchemy" a "true" writer must possess and, in order not to lose it, rather not talk about. The alchemy is Hemingway's to the degree readers find enduring, perhaps nostalgically so, the formula Hemingway practiced and Nietzsche had earlier affirmed in *Human, All Too Human*, the formula for turning the fragmentary, the episodic, the anecdotal into the representative, the essential, the necessary. Seeing through the "veil of unclear thinking" in the language of metaphysics, Nietzsche wrote of the "seriousness of the efficient workman" perfecting "parts," taking "more pleasure in making the little secondary things well than in the effect of the dazzling whole" (86–87). Among the many returns readers may enjoy with Hemingway in *Under Kilimanjaro*, is the return to the time of writing *Death in the Afternoon*, relevant because of the association of Mary Hemingway's preparations for the hunt for the lion with the matador's preparations for the "always postponed" corrida and, more importantly, because of the "workman's" constant preoccupation with the technical aspects of writing. For all its faintly linear patterns of fictionalization, the manuscript of *Under Kilimanjaro* (*True at First Light* would still provide a much more effective title, had it ever been given some final, satisfactory version by the author himself) approaches the evocative mode of the last chapter of Hemingway's book on the art and the religion of bullfighting and writing: "If I could have made this enough of a book, it would have had everything in it.... Let those who want to save the world if you can get to see it clear and as a whole. Then any part you make will represent the whole if it's made truly." As the reference to the concept of the "whole" gets dangerously and pleasurably too abstract, too mystical, the passage concluding Hemingway's memories of Spain appears in need of a sobering, vigorous justification of its self-reflexivity:

“No. It is not enough of the book, but still there were a few things to be said. There were a few practical things to be said” (238).

One of the practical things, then, which *Under Kilimanjaro* has to say and which readers have no trouble relating to “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” or “Hills Like White Elephants,” where Africa is only alluded to, is that talk, including talk about the need not to talk, is part of Hemingway’s African experience, necessary material to present this experience truly in a literary representation. “A large part of time in Africa is spent in talk,” Hemingway feels compelled to explain, “Where people are illiterate this is always true. Once you start to hunt hardly a word is spoken” (150). Talk is essential for performing the duty of the acting game ranger Hemingway accepts for a time as his own; he can represent and administer law, spoken and unspoken, only if he can master the verbal art of negotiating, calculating, connecting causes and effects, manipulating people (including himself) into believing what he says and acting as he wants them to act. This art involves a considerable degree of mystification, trickstery, game playing and showmanship. Papa Hemingway is often seen sitting by the campfire in his “heavy dressing gown”, the garment which turns emblematic of reminiscing mood and verbal ease. Not trying to mitigate his nostalgia he may then remember Pop (the white hunter, Philip Percival), his absent guide to the reality and to the myth of Africa whom, as he says, he “respected as [he] had never respected [his] father” (2) and with whom twenty years earlier he “had first sat together by the fire or the ashes of a fire and talked about the theory and practice of shooting dangerous game” (48). Pop speaks Hemingway’s language and when, at the beginning of *Under Kilimanjaro*, he is asked to say “one sound thing about elephants,” he, like Hemingway, chooses to joke about his knowledge. “In the classic formula” of the father addressing his son to leave him on his own, Pop tells Papa: “Now it is all yours” (6).

Is Africa all Hemingway’s? The writer’s answer might well again be “no” to “all,” but “yes” to “parts.” The fragments of *Under Kilimanjaro* in which Hemingway writes of his urge to define what Africa means to him never cease to follow complementary patterns of negation and affirmation. Especially revealing in their truth-seeking clarity are perhaps those in which he comments on his immersion in the stream of African life in terms of the awareness of his being distanced from it. Hemingway writes of being “suspended between our new African Africa and the old Africa we had dreamed and invented” (419), of bad conscience as “an invention of the whites who are temporarily occupying the country” (426), and, switching to his self-ironic, (non)formulaic tone, of Ngugi’s phrase “Fuck ‘em all” said in that “beautiful [English] language” which “was becoming a dead language in Africa” (350), or of the words of fatherly advice he himself preaches while drinking in Mr. Singh’s general store: “Keep your bowels open and remember

that there is some corner of a foreign field that shall be forever England" (342). Sitting by the campfire in his heavy robe made in Pedleton, Oregon and his mosquito boots made in Hong Kong, Hemingway thinks "I'm a stranger here," while whiskey tells him he is not (165). On another campfire occasion, before the "clarity" of African stars makes such statements sound much too "pompous," he tells Mary: "If you don't feel like a fool in Africa a big part of the time you are a bloody fool" (273). Africa never ceases to be a challenge to the writer's desire to approximate it in words.

Serious or humorous, practical or theoretical, the affirmative mode of Hemingway's account of his 1953–1954 revisit to the African continent carries a premonition that something significant will happen and that something significant will be said about it. In the author's words: "Something, or something awful or something wonderful, was certain to happen on every day in that part of Africa" (15). The excitement of waking up to the expectation of what an African day will bring creates in the writer's and the hunter's imagination an illusion of reaching back towards the fundamental and the inevitable. In the classic formula of an imaginary union with Africa, the emotional landscape in the religious colors of nostalgia, Hemingway's acting game ranger is like Nietzsche's distant descendant of hunters, warriors, wanderers, adventurers following his instinctual desire for freedom of expression: he arouses "an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if within him something were announcing and preparing, as if man were not a goal but just a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise..." Like Nietzsche, Hemingway associates the longing with childhood:

There are always mystical countries that are a part of one's childhood. Those we remember and visit sometimes when we are asleep or dreaming.... Africa, being as old as it is, makes all people except the professional invaders and spoilers into children. No one says to anyone in Africa, 'Why don't you grow up?' (23)²

Hemingway's writer in Africa is an invader, an ex-warrior who knows the meaning of the biblical references to "compensations of combat" but at the same time one who "has kept a child's heart, a child's honesty and nobility" (24), who celebrates his own sensitivity, sensuality and the powers of identification with people and

2 On the margin of the paragraphs opening Chapter 2 and introducing the theme of childhood and its connection to Africa, Hemingway put a note "Throw out or re-write all this EH." As it is, the text he wrote may have appeared too vague, generalizing or sentimental to the author; however, as the editors observe, the theme is continued and gains significance in other places in the manuscript, so revision of the fragment is perhaps more likely than its total omission (see "Textual Notes" to *Under Kilimanjaro*, 451).

places every time the clarity and the beauty of a new day in Africa bring the experience which is probably older than religious feeling, old and fresh as the sight of the Mountain rising from the plains.

The feeling of something about to happen is Hemingway's experience of the African night when he leaves camp to walk in the moonlight, barefoot, a spear in his hand. Again, he is a warrior and a child, and more intensely so than at daybreak. The immediacy of the African night makes him free, happy, unspoiled, uncaring for "the stupidities of daily life" (361). In the moonlight the borderlines between reality and unreality, never solid in African daylight, vanish and he delights in certainty of the deeply sensual immersion of his own existence into the very existence of the African earth and its inhabitants. Hemingway hears the night birds and the lion. He looks directly into the eyes of foxes, hares and wildbeast and not into the reflection of the car headlights in them; he sees the Mountain shining white in the moonlight and not the lights of the camp. Hemingway is there "to learn" of the night, knowing already as much as Keiti knows of it when he says: "Nobody knows the night.... The night belongs to the animals" (379). Sharing the knowledge with the inhabitants of Africa, not hunting for trophy, as nobody hunts for trophy at night, and not having to hunt for meat, Hemingway tries not to kill. The African nightscape opens up an imaginary space of no bad conscience, no art tricks, no human language, not even a thought of there being no word for "I'm sorry" in Swahili (492). What keeps the promise of approaching the fundamental, the necessary is not meant to be literary. When Hemingway takes off his dressing gown and his mosquito boots and when he grasps his spear, he still makes gestures of one who knows what it takes to be and to feel like a famous "true" writer: "It was more than a bit theatrical but so is Hamlet" (359). Once he leaves the camp, with its tribal laws and rules of safety, he welcomes the danger of having no followers, no audience, no aficionados, no listeners, no readers. What he learns, he learns "alone" and he "[does] not want to share it with others" (360). Rather than suggest the possibility of being saved for future narratives where they could gain suggestive power through condensation and omission, the brief accounts of Hemingway's walks towards the Mountain tell us of the writer's desire not to be a writer, to go beyond the memory of "good old days" of hunting and writing well, beyond the hunter's and the writer's nostalgic ethics and aesthetics. And this, as he knows very well, is already exceedingly literary. The truth that he learns afresh in an attempt to learn the language of animals is again as ancient as Africa, real or invented, lost or regained: the teller's safety is in there being no escape from the longing to tell and from telling of the longing. The night walk is an actual experience but in place of an imaginary shepherd dog, the "tamed," home-guarding animal that could not keep the writer's company and break his isolation, it

is closely followed by the awareness of it being a reenactment of the dreams of childhood and the texts of the past, Hemingway's as well as other dreamers' and writers'. To walk in the grass in that part of Africa when something is always about to happen and then to be written about still feels as good for Hemingway as walking on the pine-needled and sweet fern forest floor once did for Nick Adams in the hillside part of "Big Two-Hearted River" and as walking on the springy and cool forest floor did for Nick Adams in the "good part" of "The Last Good Country."

There is also a dark aspect of Hemingway's walks, reminiscent of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and not very remote from his sleepless night thoughts about the need to "verify the Fitzgerald quotation:" "In the real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning" (219). Back in the camp, in the verbal exchanges between Hemingway and Mary commenting on his walks, the suppressed tension is always high. Mary calls them "night wildness and wickedness," a phrase which, like the accusation of her husband's "lying about the lion" (241), bears protective, self-ironic features of Hemingway's literary gown. The literary context, however, becomes no less real, serious and feared than Mary's lion, for it concerns now not so much consideration of technical, practical difficulties but the confrontation with the very thought of the possible inability to write. As it is the case with most writers and hunters, Hemingway is superstitious, and the premonition of being incapable of practicing his metier, however truly African and attractive it may sometimes seem to him, is not to be taken lightly and not to be taken metaphorically. Asked by Mary why he has to go out at nights, he answers: "Because the time is getting short. How do you know when we can get back? How do I know we'll ever get back?" (421). In the same conversation, when they are making plans for their Christmas trip, Mary declares her understanding of her husband's needs saying "You stay until you're finished here" (423), and Hemingway knocks on the wood and finishes his drink. In the last fragment of *Under Kilimanjaro*, when the two talk about having to leave Africa, Mary asks with what seems like childish innocence: "Don't you want to see the most wonderful places before you die?", to which her husband answer is "No" (440). What is missing from the manuscript of *Under Kilimanjaro*, perhaps intentionally omitted from it and only alluded to in fragments of conversation, is the account of the airplane crashes the Hemingways' safari ended in. From that unmentioned perspective, the questions Mary asks Hemingway are the questions he asks himself about the meaningfulness of his writing, testing his own faith and his own trust in his literary career. On the one hand, as the editors of *Under Kilimanjaro* observe, working on his African manuscript in 1954, the author of *The Old Man and the Sea* and laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature was "completely comfortable depicting his persona with self-deprecating humor" (viii).

On the other hand, there is the repetitiveness and the aggressiveness of Mary's comment on his "mental slovenliness," of the question she asks him on his return from the night "craziness:" "Why don't you write something so I'll be proud of you?" (291), of Mary's words being emphatically echoed by the words from Mrs. G. S. Held's letter: "Why not write SOMETHING that is worthwhile, before you die" (308). There is something disquieting and ominous in Hemingway's writer's urge to respond in anger to the "ignorant Iowa bitch" with the words: "I have already done this and I will do it again many times," and to Mary Welsh Hemingway: "I'm not hopeless because I still have hope. The day I haven't you'll know it bloody well" (241).

One can hardly doubt that acts of verbal violence in Hemingway's African manuscript are self-aimed and that they have their source in the experience of loss. In the text of *Under Kilimanjaro*, loss is always present. Pop is absent, back to his farm and family ("But he was nomadic," and "he was finally leaving us." [2]); the game warden, G. C., goes away for some time leaving Hemingway alone with his problems ("I'm sorry I have to go, Ernie," G. C. said." [222]); Mary flies to Nairobi to do her Christmas shopping and is missed ("I was lonely for Mary." [306]); the lion is killed and the excitement of preparations for the hunt and of the estimates of its danger is gone ("It's strange now without a lion to look forward to in the morning." [272]) Much of the African wilderness belongs to the past and so does Hemingway's interest in the hunt for trophy, "simply" and "hard" (407). There is the recollection of regret felt about having to leave Africa and having to kill "homesickness for Africa in different ways" (205) in the past and there is the thought of having to leave Africa soon (without taking Debba "home") and knowing already the feelings it will cause. Longing and the sense of urgency in trying different ways to compensate for it in the language of his art constituted for Hemingway a part of the truth about Africa. Hemingway discovered how potent these themes were as early as in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and he explored them again in *Under Kilimanjaro* and in *The Garden of Eden*. Of the two, only *The Garden of Eden* ends with the hope for a new day of good work. The African manuscript, lost in the ashes of the trash burner, will return to David Bourne afresh. In the last chapter of the novel Hemingway worked on until his death in 1961, his writer is seen in his dressing gown walking out "into the dew-wet early morning" (246), ready to share his faith in the possibility of bringing the African text back to life. The sentences of the lost narrative seem themselves to be ready to fall into their right places. Miraculously "returned to him," they cannot, however, communicate the African experience directly to the reader. That experience can be written about but not written down. What remains truly "intact" is older than religion or the practice of art.

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