A “Vulgar” Ethic: *The Sun Also Rises*

Any recital of the many interpretations given *The Sun Also Rises* affirms its richness: a document of the “lost generation,” a variant of Eliot’s *Waste Land*, an anatomy of the death of love, a satire of sentimentality, an analogue of the bullfight’s *corrida*, or a definition of the wounded hero. My interpretation also affirms its richness, hoping to clarify its esthetic quality and ethical pertinence. A thesis novel, *The Sun Also Rises* answers Jake Barnes’s moral concern: “I did not care what [the world] was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it” (148). To know “how to live,” the novel says, requires yoking the ethical principles in a discriminating hedonism and in vivifying traditions. Egoistic but selected sensuous gratification must wed selfless deference to selected social customs.

By not insisting upon this thesis, Hemingway achieves much of the novel’s esthetic quality. He dismisses the option of letting Jake exemplify the thesis. And so Jake’s impotence points not only at his sexual inadequacy, defective intelligence, and narrative unreliability but also at his inability to synthesize in his own actions the opposing ethical principles, even though he seems to sense the need to do so. Hemingway’s deadpan narrative style is another indication that he resists telling us to hear the thesis. Two sentences, representative of the disinterest in Jake’s narrating voice, do not even ask us to differentiate among facts: “The bull who killed Vincente Girones was named Bocanegra, was number 118 of the bull-breeding establishment of Sanches Taberno, and was killed by Pedro Romero as the third bull of that same afternoon. His ear was cut by popular acclamation and given to Pedro Romero, who, in turn, gave it to Brett, who wrapped it in a handkerchief belonging to myself, and left both ear and handkerchief, along with a number of Muratti cigarette stubs, shoved far back in
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the drawer of the bed table that stood beside her bed in the Hotel Montoya, in Pamplona" (199). The second sentence is long and complex, but the style of both sentences is the same. The difference between the facts in each sentence, however, is as great as the significance of the ear—a memento to Romero and the Spanish, a bit of refuse to Brett. The facts of the first sentence are insignificant because they are “historical”: the bull’s name, number, and breeder have value only as realistic details. But the facts of the second sentence are important because they are ethical: they concern values inferable from human actions and relationships. Yet Jake’s narrative voice underplays their importance, allows us to be lulled by the irrelevance of the historical facts that precede them. Confident, then, that other means are communicating the novel’s thesis, Hemingway refuses to italicize it stylistically.²

Hemingway also disperses the novel’s thesis among analogues. Although there is little dialogue or comment about ethical considerations per se, a good deal of it is about money, payment, and the characters’ financial situation.³ Attitudes about money are, of course, as symbolic of ethical priorities as are the analogues of the bullfight and the Tour de France, of Pamplona and Paris, as I will explain later.

One of Hemingway’s nicer touches is his concealment of the thesis in the novel’s apparently random narrative structure. The novel’s immediate effect on many readers is that of a loose amalgam of events. Some of them might well have been deleted: Jake’s chat with Harvey Stone, his and Bill Gorton’s encounter on the train with the pilgrimaging priests, their later meeting with the old Basque who had been in the States “‘forty years ago,’” the goring of Vincente Girones during the encierro. The cluttered gallery of minor characters adds to the impression that the novel has no principle of selection. What have these snapshot characters to do with the novel: the Montana couple and their son, Hubert; Edna, “a friend of Bill’s from Biarritz”; Robert Prentiss, “a rising new novelist”; the waiter who finds disgusting the “fun” of the encierro; Harris, the Englishman whom Jake and Bill befriend in Burguete? There is also the problem of the novel’s double plot. The episodic adventures of the expatriates confuse the Aristotelean story of Robert Cohn’s love and loss.⁴ Or so it seems until we see the plots as metaphors of hedonism and traditionalism. Unlike the straightforwardness and limited casts of most thesis novels, then, this one’s digressions, cluster of characters, and double plot mask its thesis.

Throughout the novel Hemingway subordinates his thesis to
the illusion of reality, achieving something no other novel of his
does, the sustained verisimilitude that an authentic “imitation of
an action” must have. This novel is superior to *A Farewell to Arms*,
his other thesis novel, for *Farewell’s* thesis depends heavily
upon an event that courts improbability, Catherine’s death. In
contrast, the anticlimactic and ambiguous ending of *The Sun
Also Rises* nicely obscures this novel’s thesis.

Book 1 does not depict a “lost generation” whose lives have been
cut adrift from traditional values by the disillusioning experience
of World War I. Instead it depicts characters who find value in
hedonism. The book’s characters seek, for one thing, sensual grati-
fication. Georgette prostitutes herself in exchange for dinner.
The Braddocks drink, dine, and dance their time away. Brett ca-
vorts with faggots and parties with counts who indulge in cigars
that “‘really draw.’” Even Jake seeks sensual pleasure in the
tennis and sparring that sustain his friendship with Robert Cohn.
Most of Jake’s acquaintances also give little thought to the past or
the future, living for the moment. This seize-the-day ethic is aptly
captured both in the book’s quickly shifting scenes, which objectify
the characters’ impulsiveness, and in Frances Clyne’s complaint,
“‘No one keeps theirs [appointments], nowadays’” (46). And the
book’s hedonists determine values egoistically, indifferent to oth-
ers’ feelings or values. Drunken Harvey Stone enjoys baiting
Cohn, the homosexuals tease Georgette, and Brett rudely bursts in
on Jake in the middle of the night. Finally, these hedonists shun
rational effort. The larger portion of book 1’s dialogue records sen-
sory concerns, its verbal unintellectuality best heard in the
“nigger” drummer’s incoherence at Zelli’s: “‘. . .’ the drummer
chanted” (64).

Hemingway gives point to the hedonism in book 1 by including
expatriates who are not hedonists. This is the purpose, I assume,
for such family- and job-obligated expatriates as Jake’s fellow
 correspondents, Woolsey and Krum. Better, this accounts for
Cohn, anathema to hedonism. Only he is anxious about the future
and given to philosophic moralizings: “‘Don’t you ever get the
feeling that all your life is going by and you’re not taking
advantage of it? Do you realize you’ve lived nearly half the time
you have to live already?’” (11). He is also atypically plagued by a
sense of responsibility: “‘I can’t [tell Frances to go to Hell]. I’ve
got certain obligations to her’” (38). Though financially well off,
he lacks the independence to follow his impulses, urging Jake to
accompany him into the South America of Hudson’s *Purple Land.* Yet Cohn’s San Sebastian affair with Brett, which crowns the book’s hedonistic activities, indicates that hedonism might redeem him from his stodgy ways. At least it rescues him from his three-year mistress, Frances, “the lady who had him.”

Hemingway’s endorsement of hedonism emerges partly from his negative attitude toward Cohn. Yet his endorsement is not wholesale, for book 1 contrasts two models of hedonism, Brett and Count Mippipopolous. Initially the two seem indistinguishable, Brett’s comment to Jake, “‘I told you he was one of us,’” aligning them. Yet the two significantly differ. Whereas a mindless self-indulgence motivates Brett, the count is selective about his pleasures. For example, remembering nothing from one night to the next, Brett forgets both her appointment with Jake at the Hotel Crillon and her visit with the count to Jake’s apartment. She makes no distinctions among her “friends,” herding unselectively with “faggots,” counts, Jake and Cohn. She guzzles the count’s fine champagne as though it were table wine. By going off with Cohn she seems concerned only with immediate consequences: “‘I rather thought it would be good for him’” (83). In contrast the count is a connoisseur. He appreciates Brett’s beauty and “class,” enjoys hearing her talk and watching her dance, and he desires her—but as an esthete, not a sensualist. He likes maximum pleasure from individual sensations, chastizing Brett’s whim to drink a toast: “‘You don’t want to mix emotions up with a wine like that. You lose the taste’” (59). A pure hedonist, he is never ruffled because, unlike Brett’s recurring hope that she and Jake might yet be happy together, he has no romantic longings for future permanence. Being “‘always in love,’” he is ever resilient. Although, for example, he prefers to stay at a quiet restaurant to drink an after-dinner brandy—another devotee of Hemingway’s clean, well-lighted places—he is not annoyed by Brett’s wish to go to crowded, noisy Zelli’s.5

When Bill Gorton enters the novel in book 2 Hemingway keeps the focus on hedonism, for he invests both kinds in Bill. Onto the self-indulgent Bill-on-a-binge of the beginning of book 2, Hemingway superimposes the discerning Bill-on-the-fishing-idyll. And Bill’s bantering irony and satiric wit continually intensify his sensory pleasures.

More importantly, Hemingway “utilizes” Bill for the transition from hedonistic values to traditional ones. Unlike most of the egotistic hedonists, Bill is socially responsible. Not only does he frat-
ernize with Jake, with Jake's crowd, and with the Spanish peasants on the trip to Burguete, but as his first conversation with Jake indicates, he is also brotherly to people in need of help, like the "noble-looking nigger" boxer in Vienna. Rather than pursue experiences meaningful only to himself, Bill seeks shared experiences and fellow feeling, as the fishing trip with Jake indicates. (The hazard in fellow feeling is that it can become sentimental. The Englishman Harris, whom Jake and Bill befriend during their fishing retreat, illustrates that hazard: "‘I say. You don't know what it's meant to me to have you chaps up here... I say. Really you don't know how much it means. I've not had much fun since the war... I say, Barnes. You don't know what this all means to me'" [129]. In short, Bill's behavior adumbrates the several features of Spanish traditions that await the vacationing expatriates.

Whereas individuals determine simple hedonistic values, traditional values are collective products. Hemingway nudges us to see that difference by echoing scenes from book 1 in book 2. He sets the Braddocks' sarcastic drinking party and Harvey Stone's or Jake's solitary drinking against the Burguete bus trip's communal wine-drinking and the Pamplona wineshop camaraderie, everyone eating and drinking from the same bowl and wineskin. And whereas hedonists' pleasures are ephemeral because they live for one day at a time, traditionalists gain more durable pleasures because each new pleasure links to those of the past and is part of a larger ceremony. Since A.D. 1126 the annual six-day festival of San Fermin conforms to a predictable pattern of street dances, religious processions, encierros, fireworks, boys dancing around well-slain good bulls. Hemingway nicely records the meaningful formalization of Spanish experience in the collective response to the death of Vincente Girones, the farmer gored during the encierro: "The coffin was carried to the railway-station by members of the dancing and drinking society of Tafalla. The drums marched ahead, and there was music on the fifes, and behind the men who carried the coffin walked the wife and two children.

Behind them marched all the members of the dancing and drinking societies of Pamplona, Estella, Tafalla and Sanguesa" (198). Hedonists explore and express private emotions and sensations, but traditionalists sublimate both needs either through the religious activities of the festival, through the vicarious ceremony of the bullfight, or through aficion for bullfighting. Finally, though the hedonists are also empiricists, the rituals of piety and
pleasure acknowledge, for Spanish traditionalists, a spiritual dimension to life.\textsuperscript{7}

The cultural differences between France and Spain have received critical analysis aplenty.\textsuperscript{8} But in my reading they function to underscore the antithesis of hedonism and traditionalism. Friendship, for instance, is a commodity in France. Jake’s concierge speaks rapturously of Brett—after Brett has tipped her well. When Jake returns to France he tips heavily to ensure future hospitality: “Everything is on such a clear financial basis in France. It is the simplest country to live in. No one makes things complicated by becoming your friend for any obscure reason. If you want people to like you, you only have to spend a little money” (233). In Spain friendship is either gratuitous or granted to the morally deserving. Soon after Jake arrives in Pamplona, a porter thoughtfully brushes the road dust from his shoulders; Jake offers no money and the porter asks for none. When the bus to Burguete stops along the way and Jake buys drinks, a serving-woman returns his tip, “thinking I had misunderstood the price” (106). Just as Jake’s \textit{aficion} earns Montoya’s respect, pandering Brett to Romero loses it. Hemingway also uses the cultural differences in the national sports, bicycling and bullfighting, to emphasize antithetical values. Though the bike race is a group activity, individuals compete to win. But the bullfight requires teamwork among the toreros and is ultimately a representative ceremony, the matador reenacting every man’s attempt to subdue the brute forces of nature. The Tour de France asks for strength, endurance, and scant mental attention. The bullfight demands skill, grace, concentration, and courage. The tour’s competitors, riding the same direction, obviously risk little compared to the bullfight’s antagonists, who meet head on, risking death.

Presented with such opposite value systems, ethic-questing Jake neither chooses between them nor synthesizes them in himself. Instead he weds the two by pandering Brett to Romero, the novel’s central event, out of which come the thesis, the moral complexities, and the major ironies of the novel.

Jake’s pandering is primarily significant because it begets the affair that yokes the novel’s exemplars of hedonism and traditionalism, the event necessary to dramatize its thesis of “how to live.” That the affair is “immoral,” brief, and sparsely treated is intentional: it brilliantly soft-pedals the thesis. Jake’s pandering is also significant for its revelation of Romero. More than the ex-
emplar of traditionalism or the code hero with "grace under pressure," he is also part hedonist. Desirous of sensory gratification he declares, "I always smoke cigars" (185), recalling the novel's only other cigar smoker, Count Mippipopolous. Certainly Romero is aware of the behavior his fellow Spaniards expect: "It would be very bad, a torero who speaks English" (186). Yet his affair with Brett shows him defying convention to mix hedonistic pleasure with his traditional role, a mixing whose importance I will argue shortly.

Jake's pandering also highlights the novel's moral complexity. His act seems simply of a piece with his friends' moral irresponsibility. But the novel disabuses us of that notion. At the beginning of chapter 16, for instance, Jake advises Montoya not to give Romero the American ambassador's invitation to evening coffee. Jake is as aware as Montoya that partying and hobnobbing with influential people will corrupt Romero's considerable talents. To further deny any thought of seeing Jake's pandering as the act of an irresponsible inebriate, Hemingway carefully records Jake's sobriety throughout the entire chapter. He is "uncomfortable" at being "so far behind" the drinking "gang" and embarrassed at Mike's vulgarities to Romero. He sees that Montoya does not nod his customary greeting when he sees Romero with Jake's friends. And Jake diverts Mike from brawling with Cohn. He also censures both Cohn's "childish, drunken heroics" and Brett's desire for Romero: "You oughtn't to do it" (183). Most of all Jake is conscious of "the hard-eyed people at the bull-fighter table" who watch him leave Brett with Romero: "It was not pleasant" (187). Jake's moral awareness incriminates his pandering.

It is possible that Jake's act is an inconsistency in his character, a flaw in the novel. But that act pinpoints the novel's specific ethical dilemma. Jake's commitment to hedonism and his love for Brett tell him to help gratify her desire, to sympathize with her plea: "I've got to do something. I've got to do something I really want to do. I've lost my self-respect" (183). Simultaneously his afición for the bullfight tells him to be loyal to its values, to acknowledge the social obligation of keeping Romero uncontaminated for the sake of tradition. He shares Montoya's worry: "People take a boy like that. They don't know what he's worth. They don't know what he means. Any foreigner can flatter him. They start this Grand Hotel business, and in one year [he's] through" (172). Jake's dilemma necessitates betraying one of the two imperatives. And his pandering, of course, betrays traditionalism.
But Hemingway exonerates Jake’s act since, though strictly unethical, it serves the ethical ideal of joining the novel’s antithetical principles, if only symbolically. To me this seems the primary irony of the novel.

The novel’s secondary irony, which also displays its moral complexity, is Jake’s Nick Adams–like obtuseness. Like his fictional predecessor, Jake too suffers from limited vision. Intelligent though he is, he fails to see or to sense that his pandering achieves the ethical ideal he seeks. His disapproval of Brett’s desire for Romero and his reluctance as go-between initially mark his failure. His depression at the end of the fiesta also marks it, as does his inability to discern between Brett’s affairs with Cohn and Romero: “That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right” (239). Like the difference between Brett and Count Mippipopolous, the parallel here asks Jake to discern the inferiority of Cohn’s sterile to Romero’s virile traditionalism. But Jake neither says nor does anything to show that he sees, much less takes joy in, the ethical synthesis of Brett’s second affair. Finally, Jake’s attitude toward Brett in Madrid confirms his obtuseness. For if he saw any value in Brett’s affair, he would treat her with greater, not less, regard.

The episode in Madrid needs extended comment because it shows still another degree of Hemingway’s craft. During the episode Jake’s conduct is as much at odds with his normal manner as Brett’s rectitude is with hers. To be sure, in the Hotel Montana he consoles Brett, sincerely calling her “ ‘Dear Brett’ ” (243) as she cries in his arms. Yet his compassion is short-lived. Something about her behavior sours him. In the Palace Hotel bar he begins to mouth moral inanities: “ ‘It’s funny what a wonderful gentility you get in the bar of a big hotel. . . No matter how vulgar a hotel is, the bar is always nice. Bartenders have always been fine’ ” (244). And to her remark that Jake “think of” the fact that Romero was born while she was still in school in Paris, he sarcastically replies, “ ‘Anything you want me to think about it?’ ” (244). Lunching with her at Botín’s he gorges on “roast young suckling pig” and drinks several bottles of rioja alta, a strange burst of hedonism. Finally, his retort to Brett’s notion that they “ ‘could have had such a damned good time together’ ” is sardonic, even malicious: “ ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?’ ”

Jake’s behavior here reveals three different interpretations. It may reveal a bitter man who resigns himself to the futility of his
ethical search, but not before he abusively takes out his frustrations on a scapegoat, Brett. This interpretation would add to the ways Hemingway mutes the novel’s thesis, for Jake’s behavior would deny that the novel offers any answer to his wish to find out how to live. Or Jake’s behavior may reveal his acumen as a moral realist. Even though he has not yet found out how to live, his behavior would indicate that he knows a victim of self-deception when he sees one. Brett obviously regards her break with Romero as an act of self-denial: “‘You know I’d have lived with him if I hadn’t seen it was bad for him’” (243). Added to her tears, to her preoccupation with the effect Romero has had upon her, and to her solicitousness that Jake not “get drunk,” her behavior shows genuine moral growth. But Jake’s behavior repudiates it. His dialogue conveys disgust at her moral rationalizations. And his burst of hedonism dramatizes his judgment that by sending Romero away she merely arrested her appetite before it became glutted. This interpretation also contributes to the novel’s thesis by rebuking a facile synthesis of hedonism and traditionalism: a fraudulent model for the novel’s ethic, Brett would justify Jake’s conduct.

Finally, Jake’s behavior may reveal defensiveness. Given his ethical concern and his presumed love for Brett, Jake could respect and reinforce any sign of moral development in her, as when she tells him, “‘You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch’” (245). But Jake expresses no approval, for he may be unwilling to accept what he recognizes: that she has acquired the self-esteem his pandering lost him, that she threat­ens to be his moral equal if not his superior, that she needs neither his pity nor his help. Like his sarcasm, his indulgence at Botin’s would be self-protective. Both actions refuse to consider that Brett has outdistanced him in his search for discovering how to live. So his novel-ending, sardonic remark, “‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?’” although true, would expose a moral pettiness and resentment that show his immaturity. This interpretation of Jake’s conduct would also be appropriate to the novel’s thesis. Surely it would be fine irony that ethic-questing Jake actually did not want to know how to live. Intolerant, envious, and defensive, his behavior would scorn the possibility that Brett might achieve the ethical ideal he professed to be seeking. I favor this third way of interpreting Jake’s behavior, for it is consistent with his limited vision in the rest of his narrative. And it shows Jake doing at the novel’s end precisely what he was doing at its beginning—bad-
mouthing a friend, Hemingway’s first clue that Jake was not a trustworthy narrator. This interpretation, though, can coexist with the other two—and more—thanks to Hemingway’s dexterity.

Although enriching complexities account for much of the stature of *The Sun Also Rises*, they also account for the long-held misunderstanding of the universality of Hemingway’s ethic. The late Delmore Schwartz best put the case against his ethic over thirty years ago. Observing Hemingway’s “extraordinary interest” both in sensuousness and in conduct, Schwartz found no “clear link” between the two. And then he charged Hemingway’s ethic with irrelevance: “The morality cannot be directed to other kinds of situations and other ways of life without a thoroughgoing translation. It is a morality, to repeat, for wartime, for sport, for drinking, and for expatriates; and there are, after all, a good many other levels of existence, and on those levels the activities in question fall into place and become rather minor. Consider, for example, how irrelevant the morality would be when the subject matter was family life.”

Schwartz’s first oversight is visible by looking again at the bullfight. Its elaborate ceremony makes it seem a pure example of codified conduct. But Hemingway uses it as he does Romero, to fuse hedonism and traditionalism, to “link” sensuality and conduct. As I earlier noted, Romero’s linking is outwardly visible in the separate activities of a public bullfight and a private affair. But he also links the two in the single activity of the bullfight itself. Mentally obedient to prescribed rules, the matador simultaneously must respond to and discriminate among the sensory stimuli of each moment. And though his performance serves tradition, he also does “it all for himself inside” (216). A conformist to ritual, Romero is resilient too. On the last day of the fiesta he draws by chance a bull with impaired vision: “He worked accordingly. It was not brilliant bull-fighting. It was only perfect bull-fighting” (217). Finding in the bullfight a synecdoche of life and its paradoxes, Hemingway would have us see that its total experience is individual and collective, physical and cerebral, ephemeral and permanent. A dynamic sporting event and a structured work of art, it is concerned both with senses and with conduct.

Hemingway’s answer to Jake’s concern with “how to live” also applies to Schwartz’s charge of “irrelevance.” After all, the basic
“oughts” of its ethic are like the antithetical imperatives in most moral systems. It seems obvious to me that respect for traditionalism acknowledges communal values, and respect for hedonism simultaneously acknowledges personal values. Such an ethic is “irrelevant” only if we ask Hemingway to “translate” it and codify in detail how we must apply it to specific situations. Hemingway credits us with the intelligence to deduce the codes applicable to our varied situations. Be they military or political, legal or commercial, athletic or domestic, academic or civic—all experiences have their analogue in the opportunities and obligations of the bullfight. In every social situation mature and moral individuals attempt, like the matador, to balance self-effacement and self-assertion, duty and pleasure. Hemingway says, then, that to draw fullness from any experience requires weighing action against thought, spontaneity against discipline, sense against intellect, rights against rules, the past against the present and the future. Though different in degree but not in kind, the same synthesizing process confronts matador or hostess, fisherman or farmer, boxer or businessman, hunter or teacher, soldier or spouse.

Hemingway’s most brilliant achievement in this novel is ultimately its paradoxical vulgarity. Etymologically speaking, it expresses sophisticated ideas in the language of, and through the experience of, common people. I refer not just to Hemingway’s vernacular style, although that contributes to the novel’s achievement. I refer more to his domestication of such abstract considerations as esthetics and ethics. He renders them accessible to the general public, for he implies that beauty can be found, as Count Mippipopolous finds it, in such immediate things as cigars, food, wine, and women. By urging emulation of such a connoisseur of the commonplace, Hemingway democratizes esthetics, reclaiming it from the cultured few for the ordinary many. Similarly Hemingway implies that one can find, as Romero does, a system of right conduct as well as beauty in such an event as the spectacle of a bullfight. By democratizing ethics, usually the preserve of religion and philosophy, Hemingway demonstrates that socially affirmative ethical systems can even be derived from debauchery and athletics. Though he “coarsens” esthetics and ethics, I think he does so to offer an answer to that question common to the lives of all people. Two immoral and vulgar acts, Jake’s pandering and Brett and Romero’s affair, paradoxically contain Hemingway’s subtle answer of how to live.