THE IMITATIVE PHASE

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I imagine many readers scratch their heads after browsing through a shelf of Hemingway’s works. Why, there is a play, a parody, and a guidebook there, they find. Now, why would a writer of realistic fiction wander into such literary byways, they might well ask. Sampling the short stories, they might also wonder what to make of such oddities as “A Natural History of the Dead,” “One Reader Writes,” or “Homage to Switzerland,” so different from his better-known stories. And should they read “Old Man at the Bridge” and “The Chauffeurs of Spain” as news releases or as fiction? Among the curiosities in Hemingway’s canon, *Across the River and into the Trees* would perplex them most. Its realistic story, a dying ex-general on his last weekend pass to hunt ducks and to romance a nineteen-year-old Venetian girl, does not have much promise. Nor does its fantasy, that a princess can draw rancor out of an aging soldier and purify him before he dies. And its many nonfictional references would make them wonder whether a library should classify it under fiction, history, or autobiography. Carlos Baker’s explanation of many aspects of the novel would make my imagined readers decide in favor of autobiography: Hemingway’s interest in nineteen-year-old Adriana Ivancich, his recurring illnesses during 1948 and 1949, the deaths of several friends, the 1949 winter sojourn in Italy, and the appearance of Sinclair Lewis at the Gritti.¹ And my readers’ decision would be encouraged were they to read other critics who, biographically inspired, unsympathetically dismiss the novel as a satire of middle-aged adolescence, a wish-fulfilling fictional interview, a “senile version” of “vanquished heroes,” or a self-indulgent daydream.² But I would have my imagined readers,
whom I let return to their busy reality, hear Hemingway’s own classification of his novel, cryptic though it is: “ ‘In writing I have moved through arithmetic, through plane geometry and algebra, and now I am in calculus.’ ”

If the recipes for tragedy and epic went into making *To Have and Have Not* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and if they help us read those novels a bit more knowledgeably, then why not ask if any recipe went into making *Across the River*, too? Taking Hemingway’s mathematical metaphor in good faith, I answer that the calculus of the novel—its special symbolic method of analysis—is his conscious “imitation” of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. If the word in quotation marks because Hemingway does not imitate the design, specific scenes, or even crucial strategies of the poem; he is too good an artist to copy blatantly. I use the word in its renaissance sense to suggest, rather, that Hemingway “follows classical models,” writes “in the spirit of ” the *Divine Comedy*. He borrows some of its modes and devices. He incorporates several Dantesque effects. And he duplicates enough features to make discernible a conscious parallel. Unaware of the novel’s indebtedness to the poem, we may find little more than a novel of character, a quite muddled novel at that. But by hearing in one ear the poem, we may hear in the other Colonel Richard Cantwell—whose name invokes the cantos—a Dantesque sinner whose imminent death weighs heavily upon his failing heart. We may even hear Hemingway’s experiment, his Dantesque yoking of mimetic fiction, historicity, and dream.

Four months before *Across the River* was published, Lillian Ross’s notorious interview with Hemingway appeared. In it Hemingway declares that his writings compete against literary predecessors: “ ‘I started out very quiet and I beat Mr. Turgenev. Then I trained hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant. I’ve fought two draws with Mr. Stendhal, and I think I had an edge in the last one.’ ” No reference to Dante, of course. And some posturing and exaggeration as well. But this statement reiterates what Hemingway had said fifteen years earlier in “Monologue to the Maestro: A High Seas Letter”:

Listen. There is no use writing anything that has been written before unless you can beat it. What a writer in our time has to do is write what hasn’t been written before or beat dead men at what they have done. The only way he can tell how he is going is to compete with dead men. Most live writers do not exist. . . . The only people for a serious writer to compete with are the dead that he knows are good. It is like a miler
running against the clock rather than simply trying to beat whoever is in the race with him. Unless he runs against time he will never know what he is capable of attaining. [By-Line, 218–19]"

One sign that Hemingway is competing with Dante is the novel’s most conspicuous but most ignored feature, its mixture of fiction and nonfiction. No work of literature more effectively yokes historical and imaginary experience, actual and legendary characters than Dante’s great poem. Likewise, along with its fictitious characters Across the River alludes to no fewer than sixty actual people, ranging from Ingrid Bergman and Margaret Truman to Giotto and Piero della Francesca, from Custer and General Walter Bedell Smith to Frederick the Great and T’Sun Su, from Gene Tunney and Stonewall Jackson to Gabrielle d’Annunzio and Red Smith. And to the novel’s imaginary world Hemingway ties military campaigns of both world wars, odd things for a novelist to hitch to a fiction—unless, of course, he has the esteemed precedent of a literary work that contains Florentine civil strife among Guelphs and Ghibellines, warfare between papal and temporal rulers, and many historical events that predate 1310. Like the poem, the novel is riddled with arcane and topical allusions, both to people—Benny Meyers, Lightning Joe, Cripps—and to places—the Rapido, Grosshau, Eylau, and Cooke City, Montana. In this respect the novel competes with the poem for annotations, should it ever be properly edited for future generations.

Not only does Dante’s name occur a dozen times, but many minor features also suggest that the Italian’s poem lurks in the novel. Dante’s love of the city-state, despite his censure of Florence’s degeneracy, has its parallel in Cantwell’s love of Venice. Intimate with its history and former inhabitants, its nobility and working people, he regards it as his city (26). Cantwell fulminates against many things, recalling those grand diatribes that erupt throughout the one hundred cantos too. Thinking of France, for instance, he notes that “there you fight your way into a city that you love and are very careful about breaking anything and then, if you have good sense, you are careful not to go back because you will meet some military characters who will resent your having fought your way in. Vive la France et les pommes de terre frites. Liberté, Venalité, et Stupidité” (26). Though scaled down, Col. Cantwell also mirrors Dante’s encyclopedism. He knows birds, wines, fish, the history of Venice, writers, artists, architecture, fuels, and, above all, military history. Dante’s topophiliac style may have encouraged Hemingway’s already strong penchant for writing about landscape, terrain, place names, and rivers; and so
Cantwell relishes thinking, for example, about cities—Torcello, Burano, Caorle, Mestre, Noghera—and rivers—Tagliamento, Piave, Sile, Brenda, and Dese. The novel’s narrative point of view is also Dantesque. Cantwell is a character narrated about and a persona who narrates interior monologues, just as Dante is author-commentator and pilgrim-participant. The novel’s several boatmen and Venetian bridges call to mind the ferrymen and angels who assist Dante’s progress, the bridges across the pits of hell, and even the metaphoric motif of the Dantean journey: “O you who in your wish to hear these things / have followed thus far in your little skiffs / the wake of my great ship that sails and sings, / turn back and make your way to your own coast. / My course is set for an uncharted sea” (*The Paradiso*, 2:1–4, 7).

The title of the novel, *Across the River and into the Trees*, ascribed to Stonewall Jackson, evokes those rivers Dante’s pilgrim crosses: Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Lethe, and Eunoe. Particularly apt to the memory-ridden Cantwell would be the river Lethe. Its waters of forgetfulness wash away memory and so lead to the “everlasting forest,” the sacred wood of the earthly paradise. Least to be overlooked is the “sparse, direct, and idiomatic language” of both writers, a quality noted by Hemingway’s middle son: “Though I have never read it anywhere in the critics, I do think that the deceptively simple style of Dante was as much a model for Papa as anything else he may have read.”

The poem’s best-known volume, *The Inferno*, deals with a place that figures prominently in the novel too: hell. While the cornices of purgatory and the spheres of paradise have their share of historical personages, Dante especially delights in populating the circles of hell. So does Cantwell. He relegates generals Walter Bedell Smith, Bernard Law Montgomery, and Jacques Leclerc to the Inferno’s vestibule, telling Renata, who dreads having to know such men,

“We won’t have to know them this side of hell,” the Colonel assured her. “And I will have a detail guarding the gates of hell so that no such characters enter.”

“You sound like Dante,” she said sleepily.

“I am Mister Dante,” he said. “For the moment.”

And for a while he was and he drew all the circles. They were as unjust as Dante’s but he drew them. [245–46]

Neither Cantwell nor Dante disparages only military figures. Of professional writers who fraudulently write of combat Cantwell acknowledges that he is uncertain of how to categorize that
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sin (137). But anyone familiar with The Inferno could easily assign stations for several of the novel's fictional characters. Cantwell's boatman on the duck shoot will go among the wrathful and sullen in the inferno's fifth circle. Pescecani (i.e., sharks), the fat, wealthy Milanese in the bar at the Fiat garage, will go into bolgia five among the grafters of the eighth circle, his mistress into circle two among the carnal. Brusadelli, the Milanese profiteer who had gone to court against his young wife, claiming that her inordinate sexual appetite had caused him a severe loss of judgment (57), will go into circle nine among Cain's fellow traitors against kin. But Cantwell, like Dante's pilgrim, praises people. He wishes he could live half his time in hell (250) with Rommel, Ernst Udet, and Col. Buck Lanham, historical figures. And if he had his way he would probably like to elevate Renata to paradise's sphere of Venus among the amorous.

A more telling parallel between the poem and the novel is the shared aim of both works' heroes. Aware of his spiritual sloth and fearful of the afterlife awaiting him, Dante's pilgrim flees the dark wood to seek his soul's salvation. Richard Cantwell similarly fears his approaching death. And his desire to reform acknowledges both spiritual sloth and the need to purge his soul for salvation. He admits to being a bastard, brusque and brutal; wishes that he were kind, good, and had less of what he regards as wild boar blood; and asks, "God help me not to be bad" (65).

Entrenched in many of the deadly sins, Cantwell's salvation is not easy. Gluttony, that hedonism of the palate never absent in a Hemingway novel, is one of Cantwell's major vices. It is closely followed by pride. Cantwell tells himself, for instance, that nobody on the duck hunt shoots better than he (292), and he modestly congratulates himself for being correct in more than ninety-five percent of the military decisions he has made (294). While thoughts of his ex-wife, the pescecani, and the Fascist hall porter easily stimulate the deadly sin of wrath, his admission that he disparages the successful (251) shows envy too. Rather than adduce the other cardinal sins, I would note the impress of Dante's poem on the novel by pointing out that though fraud is not among those sins, Dante regards it as the worst of sins, giving it the two lowest circles in his inferno. By having Cantwell counterfeit his heart condition during the medical examination, Hemingway makes him a potential inhabitant of circle eight's "simple frauds." Cantwell's passion for Renata might invoke the sin of lust. But Dante's scheme would locate him among the carnal of
the second circle, for Cantwell’s relationship to Renata is like that of such other warrior-lovers as Paris, Tristram, and Achilles.

Dante’s pilgrim learns that for his salvation he must obey the confessional formula: candid confession, mournful contrition, and burning gratitude. Hemingway’s thirty-odd years as a “Catholic” would make him no stranger to that formula, and Cantwell complies with it, though he does not believe in an afterlife. He confesses that he has made three wrong decisions that have cost the lives of many men (94) and that he has lied to his own advantage precisely four times. His war reminiscences, Hemingway’s narrator insists, are not military swagger: he was “confessing,” not lecturing (222). Cantwell is also contrite. Acknowledging his wish to attain and keep the rank of general, he admits “I have failed and I speak badly of all who have succeeded. Then his contrition did not last . . .” (251). The sincerity of his contrition shows through the three memories that plague his conscience. He had arrogantly assumed that Ardennes was safe for his best friend George, who died there (292–94). He had let many of his troops be killed by obeying SHAEF military orders during the Westhall Schnee-Eifel campaign (233–35). And he had obeyed more SHAEF orders on the Hurtgen Forest assault, which decimated his regiment, causing him to be “completely desperate at the remembrance of his loss of his battalions, and of individual people” (242). Cantwell is remorseful even for something as minor as wasting electricity, regretting that just “as he regretted all his errors” (180). Though it is not “burning,” he finally expresses gratitude that he has been such a “lucky son of a bitch” who ought to be sad about nothing (254). Moments before he dies he reiterates this last step in his confession, again grateful for his lifetime of luck (307). Much of Cantwell’s talk, memory, and action may find him among the ditches of hell or, in the novel’s terms, in “the oaken staved hogshead sunk in the bottom of the lagoon” (3). But he hopes to ascend to some ledge of purgatory.

Like Dante’s pilgrim’s quest for spiritual salvation, so too is Cantwell’s assisted by a guide, a young woman who fulfills the courtly convention of being Christ’s secular analogue. Lying with Cantwell she consoles him and encourages him to talk, thereby purging his bitterness and trying to help him “‘die with the grace of a happy death’” (240). Handmaiden to Cantwell’s need for spiritual housecleaning, Renata is the confessor-therapist who hears his unorthodox confession. Repeatedly she admonishes him to be good, gentle, and cheerful, not angry, rough, or brutal; to ignore
those things that, like the pockmarked American writer, evoke his malice. He tries to comply, beseeching God to help him “avoid brutality” (85). His supine position during much of the novel, especially the long sequence on his bed during which he “educates” her about the war, also shows her role as therapist. To further suggest her role may have been why Hemingway included Cantwell’s five-chapter conversation with Renata’s portrait: he behaves as virtuously before her image as Dante’s pilgrim does before Beatrice’s. Cantwell’s salvation, then, depends upon Renata’s ability to teach him caritas, the charitable love of others. Reflecting this, her gifts help him see their value as gestures of love and of willingness to serve. He reciprocates by buying her the turbaned, ebony-faced brooch, symbol of a “confidential servant” (105).

Clearly the novel lacks the poem’s scholastic thinking, theological and anagogical framework, allegorical method, and intricate architecture. But it shares the poem’s historicity. Dante-as-pilgrim, walking among the “dead,” allows Dante to reminisce, declare his historical biases, and give dramatic voice to such authentic people as Ser Brunetto Latino, Farinata degli Uberti, Publius Papinius, Guido de Guinizelli, or Forese Donati. Cantwell, on the brink of death, similarly allows Hemingway to remember things past and to make historical footnotes on people, places, and events. Both the poem and the novel, as testaments, then, settle accounts with friends and enemies, dramatize personal beliefs and values, and bear witness upon time past and present.

The novel’s historical references and reminiscences, assignable as Hemingway’s actual experiences, might suggest that he is experimenting with the historical novel. Yet that kind of novel tries to portray realistically the social milieu, events, or crises of a historical place or period and to represent, to one degree or another, actual persons. Or it tries “to portray the kind of individual destiny that can directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch.” In contrast, Hemingway’s novel and Dante’s poem are not fixed to one place and time. And they dramatize the private historical biases of fictional characters who, removed from a typical milieu, are preoccupied with personal problems that relate to more than one historical period. But unlike Dante, Hemingway never dramatizes the actual people Cantwell cites. Instead, he generates the novel’s historicity by alluding to, rather than dramatizing, actual people. Admittedly the
The immediate effect is that Hemingway is merely name-dropping, for he fails to give substance to people who apparently have meaning to Cantwell. Yet the allusions fulfill their expected literary function. By drawing together and establishing a relationship between dissimilar experiences, they amplify an individual experience and make it representative. For example, when Cantwell thinks of “Marbot’s Lysette who fought, personally, at Eylau” (52) during the Napoleonic War of 1805, the allusion to the French general’s fierce mare may parallel both his own combat with death and a female’s attempt to rescue him. Allusions to such past and present persons as Robert Browning and Custer, Eisenhower and Margaret Truman, du Picq and Degas reflect Cantwell’s praise or scorn of lifestyles and values that mesh or clash with his own. A form of historical shorthand, such allusions let Hemingway create a hero who overlaps fictional and historical realities.

Because nonfiction theoretically defers to truth rather than beauty, and because both Dante’s poem and Hemingway’s novel are strongly autobiographical, the historicity of both works would seem to limit their esthetic effects. On the contrary, by honoring the muse of history only part of the time, both writers secure esthetic effects unobtainable had they adhered to the convention that a work be allegiant either to fiction or to nonfiction. Dante and Hemingway deliberately mix the two and so get the effects accruable both to history and to fiction as well as the enriched ambiguities of the mixture. That is, both poet and novelist satisfy a reader’s interest in fact, information, opinion, and truth; gratify his desire to engage in wish-fulfillment, beauty, and the imaginary; and challenge his ability to differentiate history from fiction and to interpret both. The hazard in a historical-imaginary matrix is occasional Dantesque obscurity. And Hemingway succumbs to it, as the vagaries of some of Cantwell’s maulerings show. But in so doing, Hemingway is not unique. One of his earliest mentors, Pound, had likewise succumbed to it in his Cantos. And the hazard is worth risking since the attempt to synthesize fictional and historical realities prods a reader to engage with the interplay of different realities, to engage his sensibilities more than he does with conventional works. It also acknowledges the long-standing classical debate between Plato and Aristotle of reality versus mimesis. Hemingway renders this debate in Cantwell’s recurring colloquies with two objects in his hotel room, Renata’s portrait and his mirror. Cantwell admits that the portrait inadequately represents reality, the living Renata: “‘There’s no
comparison, of course,' he said. ‘I don’t mean likeness. The likeness is excellent’ " (209). But as an artistic creation, the portrait is like the novel’s fictitious elements, a mimetic attempt to represent the essential reality of a person. Cantwell’s mirror is like the novel’s historicity: “Mirror was actuality and of this day” (180).

The consorting of fiction and nonfiction is not an isolated example of Hemingway mingling normally disparate entities. The January-May relationship between a battle-ravaged American colonel and a nubile Italian countess also signals that he overlaps alien worlds. So do the novel’s two actions, the duck hunt frame tale and the reminisced day with Renata, and its two times, a single winter weekend set against the entire range of rapidly shifting events that the colonel’s memory recalls from the past. But Hemingway’s most interesting act of interpenetration is his immersing mimetic experience and historical material into a dream vision.

Although the *Divine Comedy* has a historical dimension, even more noticeable is its dream dimension. After all, the journey of Dante’s pilgrim grows out of the medieval convention of the dream vision. Many things suggest that Hemingway’s novel is also a dream vision. Renata and the colonel daydream about a trip through the States, knowing full well it will never come to pass. Many of the colonel’s memories approach dreams or nightmares that haunt him. Some of his memories even have the tang of fantasy, as does the one of beating senseless two sailors who disrespectfully whistle at Renata. Cantwell’s regard for liars also hints that his story may have elements of a tall tale: “A liar, in full flower, the Colonel had thought, is as beautiful as cherry trees, or apple trees when they are in blossom” (278). The novel’s lack of physical action also intimates the novel’s dream or daydream dimension; for most of the novel’s events are Cantwell’s reminiscences while lying on his bed or sitting—in the Buick, in Harry’s bar, in a duck blind, at the Hotel Palace Gritti restaurant, in a gondola, or on the toilet. Sedentary action, appropriate to the novel’s contemplative mood, invites dreams and memories, unreal and real experiences, to blur and mingle. And the novel’s setting in the “Sea City” is a good place, Jungians would say, for unconscious dreams to surface.

The novel’s dream dimension explains an apparent artistic flaw. At the beginning of chapter 3 the novel’s narrator says that Cantwell, sitting in the duck blind on Sunday morning, had
been medically examined the “day before yesterday” and that “yesterday he had driven down from Trieste to Venice” (12). In this chronology the exam was on Friday, the drive on Saturday, and the hunt on Sunday. But this omits the day Cantwell spends with Renata. For if he drove to Venice “yesterday” (Saturday) and spent one night sleeping in the Hotel Palace Gritti with a portrait and another night with Barone Alvarito and the other duck hunters—“Last night there had been a fair amount of good lying after the grappa had been passed around” (279)—then the duck hunt would have to have been on Monday. Not a flaw, the extra day is one of Hemingway’s “blinds,” “any artifice you use to hide the shooter from that which he is attempting to shoot” (278). (Hemingway’s narrator gives this definition when the novel resumes the duck hunt in chapter 40.) This blind sustains the blurred demarcations between fictional, historical, and dream materials in the novel. And it conceals Hemingway’s use of Renata as a dream maiden.

The literal translation of her name, “reborn,” has obvious significance for Cantwell, a man desiring salvation. And several of her features suggest that Cantwell fabricates her, just as Dickens’s Mrs. Gamp fabricates her imaginary companion, Mrs. Harris. When Renata describes her portrait looking as though she were rising out of the sea with dry hair (97), her comparison to Aphrodite is as difficult to imagine a real woman saying as it is easy to imagine a middle-aged man feeling proud to be adored by such a young goddess. Similarly, the poetic language that defines her is fantasy-inspired. Her identity? “‘I am only the unknown country’” (155). Her ambition? To “‘run for Queen of Heaven’” (83), offers Cantwell. Her genealogy? “‘The moon is our mother and our father’” (114). We can snicker at such language. But it helps us reject Renata as a credible character, the effect the novel must achieve if Renata is to fulfill the “blessing-bearer” role of Dante’s Beatrice.15 Her solicitousness over Cantwell’s maimed right hand, her gifts of the portrait and the emeralds, and her desire that he release the memories and experiences that cause his bitterness—all characterize her as la belle dame d’merci. But her love for the battered Cantwell, who she knows will soon die, is not sufficiently motivated for a believable love story. Hemingway never even defines the origin of their relationship, letting us imagine that it springs full-bodied from Cantwell’s forehead. But its “great miracle” (288) is no less justified than Beatrice’s love for Dante. Having abandoned his youthful devotion of her, Dante is unworthy of receiving Beatrice’s intercession. That she intercedes
for him anyway demands as much willing suspension of disbelief as Renata’s love for Cantwell.

What about the novel’s tropes? Cantwell’s heart turns over inside him when he sees Renata’s profile “as though some sleeping animal had rolled over in its burrow and frightened, deliciously, the other animal sleeping close beside” (83). Because Renata is menstruating, Cantwell must search for her clitoris, “the island in the great river with the high steep banks” (153). And after he has manually induced her orgasm, the ecstasy is a “great bird” that “had flown far out of the closed window of the gondola” (154). Pretty poetic for Hemingway. But to approach the metaphoric heights to which the paradisal voyage of Dante’s pilgrim and Beatrice soars, he must risk lyrical language. And such lyricisms add to the novel’s dream dimension, just as allusions emphasize its historicity.

The novel’s dream dimension seems partly aimed at mythopoeticizing Cantwell as the dying hero. That role seems confirmed by Renata’s devotion to him and her definition of his narrated memories, “‘Sad stories of the death of kings’” (236). And his formulaic confession, his verbal exorcism of bitterness, his return to and commemoration of the site of his initiation into mortality at Fossalta, and his participation in the mock Order of Brusadelli—all approximate ceremonies that would confer representative stature upon Cantwell. His desire to keep death at bay, evidenced in his continual self-medication and his relationship with Renata, is a universal desire, adding to his stature. Unwilling to succumb to a failing heart, Cantwell subscribes to a life-sustaining belief, declaring, “‘Every day is a new and fine illusion’” (232). And notwithstanding his verbal brutalities, he values the Platonic qualities absorbed in Dante’s trinity and esteemed by the race: goodness, beauty, and truth. Acknowledging the first of these, he is ever conscious of his lapses in kindness. When he leaves Renata he pledges that he will continue to try being good (277). Equally noticeable is his esthetic sensibility. He appreciates the beauty of art and architecture, Venice and its market, oxen, Renata and red sails on the country canals (24). He also desires to know and express the truth. Regarding his military experience, he tells Renata that he will tell her the truth, regardless of whom it hurts (225). Even the occupation to which Cantwell has given his life, metaphor of every man’s combat against life’s continuous conflict, suggests his universality. Like the residents of Dante’s postmortal places, then, he is an individual and a type.

But Cantwell is not an archetypal hero. Leave that to Santiago
of Old Man and the Sea. Santiago’s antithesis, he is a more complex character, made so partly by the novel’s marriage of fiction, history, and dream. And Hemingway’s studied refusal to create a character who invites quick identification adds to Cantwell’s complexity. Revamping the conventional types of the soldier—neither miles glorious, sadist, nor Homeric model of poetry-inspiring heroism—Hemingway literally demotes him to a prosaic career man who drinks, defecates, and knows his cant well: “‘S-6 wants you to button up and use plenty of artillery. White reports that they are in fair shape. S-6 informs that A company will swing around and tie in with B’” (245). By keeping Cantwell out of heroic combat scenes, Hemingway further deprives him of situations that normally guarantee admiration. No apologist for the career soldier, Hemingway denies Cantwell dignity, force of character, and self-understanding, giving him, instead, vanity, self-righteousness, and vacillation. Like Dante’s pilgrim, who immodestly regards his talents as superior to Lucan and Ovid (The Inferno, 25:91–94), Cantwell vainly sees himself as Rommel’s peer and Eisenhower’s superior, and he boasts of his military savvy. Self-righteousness makes both Cantwell and Dante’s pilgrim mete out judgments, just or not. And like Dante’s pilgrim, who vacillates from sympathy to censure for the various people he encounters, the colonel slides from tenderness to coarseness, divided between his impulse, to extend his public profession of war and violence into his private life, and his self-imposed imperative, to be good. Even more, so insignificant is Cantwell’s current military role that his duties in Trieste go unmentioned. Hemingway thereby strips him of valor and patriotism, authority and power, attributes that are vital to any military hero.

Complex though Cantwell’s character is, it does not draw together the novel’s diverse elements. A character who tries to straddle the worlds of mimetic representation, history, and dream, Cantwell at least confounds my attempts to identify with him. Ultimately he mirrors his own right hand, incurably split. His excursions into paranoia and estheticism, jargon and poetry, history and fantasy, vindictiveness and confessions, obscenity and tenderness portray him at best as schizophrenic. I grant that schizophrenia is consistent with the novel’s experimentation. But the novel must also satisfy the primary requirement of all successful fiction, to be narratively engaging. Disingenuous readers and a fond author, I believe, grant the novel that.
The novel might have been successful had Hemingway given firmer clues of its source than those I have gathered. For as it stands the novel’s use of autobiographical flashbacks, historical allusions, lyricism, dialogue, and love story seem muddled. And they invite critical disapproval largely because the novel is being measured against the conventions of realistic fiction rather than those of Dante’s classical poem. For comparison, one virtue of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is that the title serves notice that a reader will benefit from knowing Homer’s poem. Hemingway serves no such notice, which may block a reader from seeing that the novel’s heterogeneous elements are as yoked by design as are those in Dante’s poem.

Had he served notice, however, the novel would suffer from the comparison. Understandably it lacks the poem’s scholastic thinking, theological and anagogical framework, allegorical method, and intricate architecture. All but the last of those are alien to Hemingway’s art. But it also lacks the subtle psychological resonances of the poem, even though Dante’s method of achieving them is usually Hemingway’s too. The customary method of both writers, that is, is to dramatize actions and record dialogue objectively to let psychological insights surface of their own accord, without authorial prompting. When, for example, Dante’s pilgrim embraces Casella in canto 2 of *The Purgatorio* and admires his song, Dante dramatizes his pilgrim’s hedonistic lapse from his commitment to seek spiritual salvation and also mocks his vanity, for the song is one of Dante’s own *canzone* set to music. Similarly, in the dialogue between Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry during their supposedly idyllic retreat in Switzerland, Hemingway brilliantly dramatizes not romance but boredom, tension, and the psychological burden that their desperate dependency upon each other creates. But in *Across the River*, by directly immersing us in the psychological process of Cantwell’s mind, Hemingway loses the dimension, interest, and interpretive potential of such drama. Even more, while Dante’s pilgrim filters the plethora of Dante’s mind because he is student-spectator, a similar plethora splits Cantwell, tutor-participant. Finally, whereas Dante, for all his artistic subtlety, maps his pilgrim’s basic journey, Hemingway leaves most readers wandering among the back roads of Cantwell’s mind.