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## Hemingway, *The Fifth Column*, and the “Dead Angle”

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HEMINGWAY,  
*THE FIFTH COLUMN*,  
AND THE “DEAD ANGLE”

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EARLY IN 2008, *The New York Times* published an article containing excerpts from a Hemingway letter written 70 years before—a letter, according to the *Times*, that Hemingway had “hoped” would be published in the newspaper. So we have the title of the article, written by Charles McGrath, “Hemingway, Your Letter Has Arrived.” Most of the letter is about Hemingway’s stays at the Hotel Florida in Madrid during 1937 and 1938, and more particularly about the wartime conditions under which he composed his only full-length play, *The Fifth Column*. On the whole, the letter does not add any significant new details about the composition of the play or Hemingway’s purpose in writing it. But one phrase in the letter, “dead angle,” might be of interest to scholars writing about a common feature of the author’s work; namely, Hemingway’s interest in what can generically be called the “good place”; a place that also goes under names like “*locus amoenus*,” or “*querencia*” (Alinei, Monk).<sup>1</sup>

As described by Hemingway scholarship, a good place generally provides safety, rest and contemplation, and pleasant circumstances, as Room 109, Dorothy’s room, does in *The Fifth Column*. Safety, an escape from danger, or troubles, is a particularly salient feature of a good place. A well-known example is the “*querencia*” from *Death in the Afternoon*, which Hemingway defines “as a place the bull naturally wants to go to in the ring; a preferred locality . . . where the bull makes his home” (*DIA* 150). A good place can also be an enabling location for a specific action, such as writing: “[Madrid] was always a good place for working. . . . So was Paris, and so [was] Key West, Florida in the cool months . . . Other places,” he

continues, “were not so good. But maybe we were not so good when we were in them” (SS v).

A large part of the letter, as printed in the *Times*, goes as follows:

In the fall of 1937 when I took up playwrighting [sic], there weren't any top floors to the hotel [Florida] anymore. Nobody that was not crazy would go up there in a bombardment. But the two rooms where we lived were in what is called by artillerymen a *dead angle* [emphasis mine]. Any place else in the hotel could be hit and was. But unless the positions of the batteries on Garabitas hill were changed; or unless they substituted howitzers for guns, rooms 112 and 113 could not be hit because of the position of three different houses across the street and across the square . . . . It seemed eminently more sensible to live in a part of a hotel which you knew would not be struck by shell fire, because you knew where the shells lit, than to go to some other hotel further from the lines, the *angles of which you had no data to figure* . . . . [emphasis mine]

Now, please recall the appearance of the words “angle” and “safe” in a scene from *The Fifth Column*. Shells are falling on the hotel. The Moorish Tart (Anita), Preston, Dorothy, and the Electrician are wondering if they should vacate the room, Room 109. Philip tries to reassure them that they are safe. All but Philip and Dorothy leave the room. We are in Act One, Scene Two.

PHILIP: “This room has an excellent angle, really. I mean it. I could show you from the street.” . . .

DOROTHY: [*As they stand listening to the clattering of the brick and glass after the burst*]

“Philip, is the angle really safe?”

PHILIP: “It's as good here as anywhere. Really. Safe's not quite the word; but safety's hardly a thing people go in for any more.”

DOROTHY: “I feel safe with you” (*TFC* 11–12)

In the technical language of fortifications, a dead angle (“dead ground,” “blind spot,” or “sector without fire”) has one meaning for defenders and another for an attacking force. From the defenders’ point of view, a dead angle is an area in front of a salient angle into which they cannot train their guns, either because they cannot see it or because the area is out of alignment with their guns.<sup>2</sup> From the attackers’ perspective, a dead angle is anything that nullifies a potential target. So safety is relative to whether one is inside a fortification, within a “dead area,” or outside in a similar area, typically a “blind” place below a parapet or in front of a salient angle.<sup>3</sup>

In his letter, when Hemingway represents Rooms 112 and 113 of the Hotel Florida as a dead angle, he writes from the perspective of a defender; or, more precisely, of an occupant within a fortified position. The rooms are protected not only because the enemy’s guns on Garabitas Hill are ineffectual (they are using “guns” not “howitzers”), but also because “three different houses across the street and across the square” either block the vision of Franco’s artillerymen on Garabitas Hill, or provide a material shield for Rooms 112 and 113. Otherwise, the result would have been the same for 112 and 113 as for other rooms in the hotel: “Any place else in the hotel,” he writes, “could be hit and was.” Rooms on the top floors, in fact, had been completely destroyed.

“Virtually all of Hemingway’s writing is elegiac in tone, continually confronting loss and probing its pain. . . .” (Beegel 57). This certainly seems true of his representations of the good place. Each of them, due to the breakup of a human relationship or other change, is ephemeral; and most, if not all of the good places end on a sad, even painful, note. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine’s death in childbirth ends the novel’s Swiss idyll. Inscrutable, hostile forces, characterized by Frederic as “they,” destroy the good place in Switzerland and all hope of finding it again: “They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you. Or they killed you gratuitously like Aymo” (FTA 327).<sup>4</sup> In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the emotion of loss (and abandonment) is more muted. But there is still something like a nihilistic, and unknowable, force at work: “What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too” (SS 382–383). For Nick and George in “Cross-Country Snow,” as they contemplate losing the skiing trips that bring them comfort and pleasure, the feeling of loss is more nostalgic than painful:

“Maybe we’ll never go skiing again, Nick,” George said.

“We’ve got to,” said Nick. “It isn’t worth while if you can’t”  
(SS 188).

In most of Hemingway’s narratives, loss of the good place occupies only part of the story. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” however, Hemingway structures nearly all of the dialogue, tennis-volley fashion, around such loss.

Hemingway’s representations of the good place involve the presence of an absence, a remembering of what was, and what might have continued, but is no more. Impersonal, unmotivated forces cause the loss of the good place, and characters respond with emotions ranging from pain to nostalgia. Loss of the good place generally involves the separation of two or more people. One dies, or decides to depart, before the other. And the emotions of loss—nostalgia, mourning, pain or the like—can occur, as a conditioned foreshadowing, before the loss itself. From the characters’ first entry into the good place, the reader seems to know (or intuit), that Catherine, Frederic, Nick and the others cannot stay there permanently. Like Adam and Eve in Eden, they lack “sovereignty” over the place they inhabit; in other words, they cannot possess the good place as their own.

So how do Rooms 109 (Dorothy’s) and 110 (Philip’s), as depicted in *The Fifth Column*, act as a dead angle? On what literary grounds can we call the dead angle a good place? How does it differ, if at all, from other good places discussed in Hemingway criticism?

Our answer to these questions, I believe, stems from how we interpret the “problem” set by the play: the preservation of the Republican ideal and Philip’s attempt to rally disparate persons in its cause. Represented in the play by the defense of Madrid (and more abstractly by the patriotic songs “Bandera Rossa,” “Comintern,” and “International”), the ideal is under attack from without by the Fascist forces firing artillery rounds on the city, and from within by members of the Fifth Column. Philip realizes that the gravest threat is from within, not only from men like the unidentified stranger who kills Wilkinson in Philip’s room, but also from those who do nothing to defend the ideal, people like Anita, Preston, and most of all, Dorothy. Even Antonio, head of SIM, seems to be more interested in administrative routine than in actively helping Philip in his struggles with the enemy.

What Philip realizes, in short, is that groups seemingly sympathetic to the Republican cause are unable or unwilling to come together and form a coordinated defense against the enemy. Every “comrade” in Madrid is “supposed to be working for the same cause,” Philip tells Max. (*TFC* 64). But Hemingway emphasizes that they are not working together by dramatizing self-centered behaviors such as laziness (Preston), ignorance and laziness (Dorothy), prostitution (Anita), vanity and self-indulgence (Dorothy), or the desire for a good story (Preston). A scene in which a sleeping guard allows a Fifth Columnist to escape and others which show the hotel manager attending to the comfort of his guests also illustrate the lack of commitment to a common cause. Who gets muddy in this play? Only Philip and Max after their night raids on the enemy are “*both so covered with mud that they are almost unrecognizable*” (*TFC* 56, stage direction, original emphasis)

Hemingway also foregrounds the lack of a unified front against the enemy with an *absence of talk* among the characters about working together or even about sharing their food with the starving citizens of Madrid. Talk about how and why to resist the enemy arises mainly from Philip in conversations with Max and Dorothy. However, Max delivers the most explicit justification for fighting late in the play (Act Three, Scene One). Max and Philip are resting and eating in Room 110 after a night raid. Max, Philip’s sometime mentor and the voice of his conscience, gives the reasons why they fight:

MAX: You do it so *every one* will have a good breakfast like that. You do it so *no one* will ever be hungry. You do it so men will not have to fear ill health or old age; so they can live and work in dignity and not as slaves. (*TFC* 67–68, original emphasis).

Philip’s criticism of Dorothy for buying an expensive fox-fur cape, set in an exposition about the sacrifices of Republican soldiers and those of the International Brigades, contains essentially the same message. To Dorothy’s defensive statement that the cape was “so cheap. The foxes only cost twelve hundred pesetas apiece,” Philip ironically replies “That’s one hundred and twenty days’ pay for a man in the brigades. . . . I don’t believe I know any one who’s been out for four months without being hit or killed” (*TFC* 61). With this speech, Hemingway suggests that Dorothy,

while not an active member of the Fifth Column, passively aids and abets its cause.

It can be argued that every major Hemingway narrative contains a good place. Each falls into one of two overlapping categories—a good place that features a close human relationship like that between Dorothy and Philip, and/or a good place that features a relationship with a special location, like Room 109 with its many comforts. In the former category, the focus is on the human relationship, sexual or companionable, and on why and how the relationship ends, usually by the death or departure of one person. In the latter, the character partakes in the nature of the place and the good things the place contains. Nick Adam's camp on Big Two-Hearted River is one example: "He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it" (SS 215)

Each good place can differ from the others in at least four important ways: the point of view used to describe it, the narrative method (description or dialogue), its position within the story, and how it is "staged."; that is, the setting in which the good place occurs and the "good things" that fill that setting. In *The Fifth Column*, for example, Room 109, features such "good things" as alcohol, sex, perfume, hot water, and food. But every good place ends the same way, on an elegiac or painful note created by a character, or characters, ending a relationship. Nowhere in Hemingway, in spite of recollections about it, can a good place be retrieved once gone or ended. None is a replica of any other. All of them, in other words, tell different stories by different linguistic means.

So how does the dead angle differ from other good places in Hemingway? The differences arise, I believe, from an essential feature of playwriting; the fabrication of dialogue. As a playwright, Hemingway had to "tell" all in dialogue directed toward action, not only with speeches, but also with stage and character directions. The actions of the characters, especially Philip and Dorothy, are necessary conditions of dialogue. Most of the dialogue in *The Fifth Column*, especially in the last scene (Act Three, Scene Four), is directed at Philip's actions and Dorothy's response to those actions. When Philip enters Dorothy's room (she never enters his), Hemingway tells us, in effect, that it is Philip who makes the choices, who commands the space, who sets the topic of dialogue and guides it. All of this, by making Philip a subject, transforms Dorothy into an object, his "com-

modity" (*TFC* 83–84). Once she realizes this, she understands that she will never receive what she wants from him; he will never give up his work for the Republican cause and go away with her: "We could go to that place near Saint Tropez and the rains haven't started yet and it would be lovely there now with no people. Then afterwards we could go to ski" (82). After he rejects her suggestion, the dialogue focuses on the action of their separation:

[DOROTHY *twists away from him*]

DOROTHY: "Then, go then."

PHILIP: "Good-bye."

DOROTHY: "Oh, get out."

(*PHILIP goes out the door and into his room. . . .*) (*TFC* 84–85)

In his room, Philip stands "looking into the electric stove." Alone in her room, Dorothy sits on her bed "crying" (85). Their different body positions, standing vs. sitting, seem to tell us that for Philip there is sadness (and regret?), but real pain for Dorothy.

Hemingway uses action to draw another contrast between his two main characters. Only Philip has an exit and entrance, an exit through the "proper" door of Dorothy's room, into his own room, Room 110. His exit becomes an entrance elsewhere, a paradigm not only for Philip's actions throughout the play, but also for his life before he met Dorothy. The final scene is replete with the names of countries, hotels, and places that Philip has been to and left; for example, "Egypt," the "Crillon, or the Ritz," "Nairobi and the old Mathaiga Club" and "Hungary" (82).

Hemingway, as a playwright, knew that plays are meant to be seen. And what is more visible than action, than characters moving around on stage, entering and leaving rooms, sitting, standing, and the like? Grounding dialogue in such action gives the meaning of the dead angle and its loss an intelligible, and comprehensive, reach. But in his novels and short stories, as opposed to the play, Hemingway is a writer who "computes with place." In the letter to the *Times*, he discusses the differences between the construction of place in drama versus fiction:

About writing the play [*The Fifth Column*] I was excited and happy to be able to write the dialogue without having to write about places. That is, you could say a place was such and so.



You did not have to really make it as in a novel so that the reader can walk in and know it is true. A set designer would have to make it from your knowledge . . . But when I make country, or a city, or a river in a novel it is slow work because you have to always *make* it, then it is alive (original emphasis). But nobody makes anything quickly nor easily if it is any good.

“Walk in and know it is true.” Like walking into a room? A familiar, homey room? It is certainly an apt description of a good place—at least one in its early stages. However, Hemingway draws a distinction between the places that he had to “make” in his novels and the one he didn’t have to make in *The Fifth Column*. Here, it seems, is how the dead angle differs from other good places in Hemingway’s work. The dead angle that he “found” in Rooms 112 and 113 at the Hotel Florida was something a set designer would have to recreate on stage; the good places in his novels and short stories were places he had to “make” with great care and in painstaking detail.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Alinei sees an analogy between the *querencia*, as Hemingway describes it in *Death in the Afternoon*, and the scene in which Pablo refuses to leave the cave in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (488, 491). For Monk, “hotel room(s)” are always a “zone of safety” for the Hemingway hero (131).
2. Salient angle: an angle pointing outward; an interior angle of a polygon that is less than 180 degrees.
3. Every book on fortifications, forts, or siege-craft seems to contain a discussion of the “dead angle.” See, for example, Campbell (89), Duffy (45–46), Herman (16–17), and Pepper (3–6, 19).
4. Randall Wilhelm, in a perceptive article on *A Farewell to Arms*, sees a correlation between still-life painting and the tradition of *memento mori*. Perhaps Hemingway intends for the ephemeral nature of a good place, and its emotional effects, to resonate the reader with a similar correlation.
5. The distinction between “made” and “found” has a family resemblance to the distinction between “artificial” and “natural *querencias*” that Hemingway draws in *Death in the Afternoon* (151–154). Rooms 112 and 113 in the Hotel Florida comprise a “natural” good place, already there to be found and used.

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