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The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the Fiction of Mobilization (review)

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· BOOK REVIEWS ·

The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the Fiction of Mobilization. By Keith Gandal. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 271 pp. Cloth \$55.00

To our significant if doomed scholarly efforts to unknot the complex tangle of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and war, we have new help in the form of Keith Gandal's *The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the Fiction of Mobilization*.

The crux of Gandal's argument is threefold: (1) Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner experienced the U.S. mobilization for the Great War but were denied the manhood-conferring experience of proper combat service on a real front; (2) the military's new meritocratic system gave ethnic Americans unprecedented opportunities to upstage "native" white Americans; and, finally, (3) the military's campaign to prevent casualties from sexually transmitted diseases demonized female promiscuity while sanctifying manly restraint. These three issues converge in interesting if different ways in what Gandal calls the three writers' mobilization (or postmobilization) racist promiscuity novels: *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Sound and the Fury*.

Much of Gandal's book performs the important task of introducing literary scholars to work being done by our historian colleagues and in doing a good deal of historical work himself. About ethnicity, Gandal makes the case that the World War I experience in training camps and the war itself was "arguably the first moment in American history when the socially and ethnically privileged are meeting the rest of the nation (minus blacks), not as servants, service people, employees, or charity cases, but rather on equal footing" (17). In particular, "the army's new meritocratic personnel procedures, including but not limited to intelligence testing, gave leadership opportunities [such as officer rank to command immigrant companies] to educated ethnic Americans," (18).

I have always read the relationship between *Gatsby's* veteran status and his obsession with Daisy in terms of a common trend among returning

veterans to deny the war by re-inhabiting their prewar selves in some form. Such denial is, of course, futile. Thus Gatsby's insistence that Daisy deny she ever loved Tom; thus his being reclaimed by violence at end of the book. But Gandal relates Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and his rise to greatness to his pre-combat mobilization experience. As a German-American "nobody," Jay Gatz "could be chosen for officer training, and specifically promoted to captain, while still at camp, on the basis of his own measurable and observable abilities, in the context of a new meritocratic moment" (81). Gandal sees Daisy as "one of the 'charity girls' or 'silly girls' that the moralistic U.S. wartime Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) fretted were compromising servicemen, morally and hygienically" (109). Gatsby's "'feminine' romanticism" toward her "is precisely consonant with the lesson of the wartime training camp authorities committee," which strove to generate "a 'new man,' who for one thing could resist the temptations of sex with a potentially infected woman" (113). In other words, the military fostered a chivalric sensibility in soldiers from all walks of life that discouraged male promiscuity by encouraging their roles as protectors of female honor. Such attitudinal training fit neatly with representations of the enemy as rapacious beasts. The exaggerated presentation of Gatsby comes to us, of course, through Nick—the Anglo-American who Gandal supposes probably felt "stymied" and "underused" by the military as Fitzgerald had (120), and whose ridiculing of Gatsby's romanticism functions as a ridiculing of the military system that lifted Gatsby to greatness and did nothing for Nick.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, the Jew from the military school "'where. . . no one ever made him feel he was a Jew'" (Gandal 124) and the Spanish boy who embodies the true warrior get the promiscuous girl (and split Gatsby into two characters, the sentimental wuss and the professional killer). Whereas university types today probably imagine academia as more progressive than the military, Gandal niftily contrasts Robert Cohn's time at military school and at Princeton. The latter "'made him race-conscious'" (124) in keeping with U.S. higher education's historical effort to limit Jewish access. Jake, Gandal reminds us, served on the same joke front where Hemingway and Frederic Henry did, his war wound ironically condemning this Anglo to live the chivalrous celibate life of training camp indoctrination as a symbolic expression of the military's underutilization of him. My own disinclination to see Pedro Romero as a soldierly paragon or bull-

fighting as analogous to combat has me now connecting Jake the pilot, not Jake the soldier, with Pedro the bullfighter—even Brett’s first husband, however shattered and unmanned by war, experienced “real” combat as a sailor and consequently experienced her embrace. With apologies to the Air Force, I wonder whether Hemingway, whose bad eye disqualified him from flying and who experienced the trenches (however briefly and in whatever capacity and even on the Italian front), used Jake’s branch of service as another means of characterizing his masculine anxiety—not just a joke front but a joke job, and one that exhibited the problematic romanticizing of modern warfare.

For this reader, *The Gun and the Pen* begins to lose its persuasiveness after the Hemingway chapter. I can’t place Benjy’s mental deficiencies in the context of the U.S. military’s intelligence testing and screening for feeble-mindedness as readily as Gandal. In his scheme, Benjy’s gelding for failing to meet mental standards and Quentin’s preclusive incestuous desires work like Jake’s war wound to provide something “objective” between the Anglo man and the Anglo woman. Gandal also contends that Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* displaces the mobilization’s training in chivalry onto Quentin’s ancestry and the legacy of the Confederate gentleman-officer. He sees Quentin’s chastity as channeling the spirit of “the ‘new man’ of the training camps” (157). Because Dalton Ames, who secures that desideratum, the Anglo woman, is an Anglo combat veteran, ethnic competition in this postmobilization racist promiscuity novel occurs elsewhere, by “identify[ying] Quentin with Italians and Jason with Jews [even] as it puts them both in competition with ethnic Americans” (160).

After a short chapter bringing the three major texts together, *The Gun and the Pen* moves quickly through three other short chapters to conclude. The first interprets Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust*, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* as parodying or otherwise playing with the 1920s postmobilization racist promiscuity novel. This second trio “spoof[s] . . . the notion of impossible love, and ethnic Americans are no longer scapegoated” (186). The “sublimation of mobilization wounds in tragic love stories” and the “military’s chivalric new man [. . .] are replaced, on the one hand, by an openly perverse eroticization of the charity girl, the prostitute, and even venereal disease and, on the other hand, by a disassociation of masculinity and bravery as well as a mockery of the army’s social hygiene campaign and its YMCA idealists” (198). The

second closing chapter provocatively examines Faulkner's continuation of the Compson story in the "Appendix (1699-1945)" (Viking *Portable Faulkner*). Dropping Caddy in Paris on the arm of a German officer, for a 1946 audience, places her on "a special shelf in hell," and participates in the post-World War II "backlash against the new female sexuality and power that he at least tolerated in the late 1920s" (203). Parisian decadence becomes associated with French military weakness in a way that culturally reinforces the Great War's training camp message. The last chapter renders the book a little more contemporary in reminding post-Vietnam War generations "how powerful the call to the military was to American young men" through William Burroughs's *Junky*, "a thinly fictionalized, autobiographical novel in which his [military] ambition and rejection was transmuted and absorbed into a grand indifference" (217).

In closing, I would like to offer a friendly amendment to Gandal's hypothesis. All literary argumentation is circumstantial, and *The Gun and the Pen* provides significant new circumstantial considerations. But to the emphases on the role of the U.S. Army in promulgating the chaste chivalric warrior, as well as the wartime threat of ethnic Americans and promiscuous Anglo women, I propose we add a more explicit recognition of these trends prior to the mobilization effort. Decades prior, in fact, though one need only go as far back as Edgar Rice Burroughs's prewar *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) to see a novel that values "physical fitness and prowess" (117), offers a model for "Gatsby's famous double-sidedness, over which critics have long puzzled—as chivalrous lover and cold-blooded killer" (119), promotes (white) male sexual restraint and championing of female virtue, and registers an Anglo response to ethnic and meritocratic threats—this last, among other things, in the guise of Jane's suitor Canler, a businessman whose ability to buy her in marriage suggests the meritocratic threat inherent in a democratic capitalist system industrializing at an unprecedented pace. Like those military training camps, *Tarzan* teaches ethnic American doughboys that they too can rise from subhuman status to a new nobility by means of raw talent, hard-knocks schooling, and old-school virtues.

—Alex Vernon, *Hendrix College*