

## ANALYSIS

*Across the River and into the Trees* (1950)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“In 1950, the first collection of Hemingway criticism appeared, John K. M. McCaffery’s editing of twenty-one essays, *Ernest Hemingway: The Man and His Work*... *Across the River and into the Trees* was the current target. It reads, [Chandler] Brossard said, ‘as though Hemingway got rather drunk and then talked the whole thing into a tape recorder, either for laughs or just to show off’.... In general *Across the River* received a very bad press indeed, so bad that Ben Ray Redman (*SRL*, Oct. 28, 1950) complained that reviewers had made up their minds before reading it.”

Frederick J. Hoffman  
“Ernest Hemingway” [1950]  
*Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*  
(Duke 1969; Norton 1973) 381

“*Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) made almost all of the reviewers very sad, even depressed, and caused two of them so much embarrassment that they wrote their comments with great reluctance. In fact, the expression of sadness and embarrassment was so negative that two critics, who in their own appraisals damned the novel with faint praise, attacked the other critics. One of these two, Ben Ray Redman, berated other reviewers for their identification of the author with his hero, Colonel Cantwell, and though it is not necessary to agree with his conclusions about Hemingway and Cantwell, it would be difficult to find any single element in the novel which so disturbed the critics as this characterization. It could almost be said that the response to Cantwell was the response to the novel. A few complimentary remarks were made about him, but the uncomplimentary remarks were many and diverse. For one thing, he represented an artistic failure, the failure of Hemingway to achieve an aesthetic distance between himself and his character. As the most prolific talker in the novel he was the best evidence of a collapse in Hemingway’s style. Further, he is the chief offender in the worst love story that Hemingway has created. Still further, he is evidence that Hemingway is still turning out the hero he presented in the twenties, but now a man thirty years older.”

Frank L. Ryan  
*The Immediate Critical Reception of Ernest Hemingway* [1950-51]  
(U Press of America 1980) 31-32

“The faults of *Across the River and into the Trees*, for which it has been duly belabored by the reviewers, are not principally matters of narrative perspective. The last days of Colonel Cantwell, an old soldier who refuses to fade away, somehow fail to realize a theme essentially valid and poignant: action is inadequate to theme. Between a solid beginning and a solid end we meander through a spongy middle of prolonged conversation wherein the hero expresses to his dream-girl *contessa* numerous prejudices, often malicious and often irrelevant to what meaning the book could have.... Since the Colonel does not notice...things, the responsibility for the observations is entirely the narrator’s; and he is, unfortunately, the same intrusive commentator, gone sentimental, who plagued the reader of *To Have and Have Not*. ‘The hell with you,’ says the Colonel to the mirror...and the reader may feel the same way toward the narrator.”

E. M. Halliday  
“Hemingway’s Narrative Perspective”  
*The Sewanee Review* LX  
(April-June 1952)

“First there were the reports of the writer’s serious illness in Italy... Then there was the announcement of the title itself, *Across the River and into the Trees*. The meaning of the phrase was clear, at least to those familiar with the story of the death of Stonewall Jackson, for near the wood-fringed Rappahannock the

wounded general is said to have become delirious, and then to have struggled from a coma to speak his last words, which are a highly expressive and rather Jungian metaphor for dying. Then when the book appeared there was the opening paragraph, which seemed to presage the ending with suggestions of Dante's *Inferno* and a mood of Stygian strangeness, as a man makes a difficult crossing of a canal in Italy with the help of a surly and Charon-like poler. And the suspicion that this overtone was quite intentional is hardly weakened when later in the novel a girl says to the man, 'You sound like Dante,' and he replies, 'I am Mister Dante...for the moment.' ('And for a while he was and he drew all the circles.')

Indeed the first chapter of the book perfectly introduces the theme, as the duck shooter dispenses substitute deaths in a highly ritualized preparation for his own which, like those of the birds, must be perfectly accomplished, and ultimately is.

The man is Richard Cantwell, a badly marked-up colonel in postwar Italy. He goes briefly to Venice for the duck shoot and to see Renata, a 'nearly nineteen' year old countess who loves him, and with whom he is in love. As he returns to duty after the visit his heart, the most defective part of his war-ravaged body, finally gives out. After reciting his version of the words of General Jackson, his source, to T/5 Jackson, his driver, Cantwell dies, as all had known he soon must do.

In very many ways, this is the mixture as before. As Robert Jordan is about as far as the hero ever gets from being Hemingway himself, so Richard Cantwell is about as close to him. The author protested vigorously against people who suspected this identification, and if one went too far with it his complaint was legitimate. Hemingway was not a professional at arms, but a learned amateur (though this colonel is an officer of an oddly literary sort). The author did not die in Italy, and Cantwell did not display all sides of his character. But not in a long time, and never at such length, had Hemingway presented himself, 'strictly controlled and unthinking,' in so thin a disguise. When the novel was published, ex-General Cantwell, who has 'been beat up so much he's slug-nutty,' had Hemingway's age to the year. He had grown into his middle period from the hero we once knew particularly as Lt. Henry, for it was Frederic Henry, 'a lieutenant then, and in a foreign army,' who fought and was wounded—like Cantwell and Hemingway—at Fossalta. The eccentric, battered soldier with high blood pressure, who chases the mannitol-hexanitrate tablets with alcohol and stays, in Venice, at the Gritti, was very nearly Hemingway....

The situation in the novel ('a girl nineteen years old in love with a man over fifty years old that you knew was going to die') is perilous, to be sure. But that fact does not fully explain why, with the methods and materials which have been in other Hemingway novels so satisfying, this is one of his weakest books. The failure is the sum of many errors—the tone of emotion recollected in rage, the savage and quite irrelevant attacks on another American novelist, the wholly embarrassing conversations with a portrait of Renata, and with the girl herself, for instances. More basic difficulties are the result of two delusions under which the book was written, and by which it is conditioned. One of these was more or less conscious, and the other not so. The unintentional delusion under which Hemingway labored throughout the novel is that he was being interviewed. T/5 Jackson, Renata and others act as straight men, setting up implausible questions so that Cantwell can pontificate. When obliging reporters were not about, Hemingway interviewed himself. Thus we get estimates of prominent writers, generals, admirals, and presidential candidates—and of Red Smith, a sports columnist who writes a little like Hemingway.... Most of this is not very interesting to read...

The other delusion was more or less conscious, for in the book Hemingway realized, a wish—quite patently envisaged a dream of how he himself would like to die. He supplied for his hero an ideal girl, and ideal meals with perfect wines in his favorite city, and—the crucial piece of preparation—'the best run duck shoot I have ever shot at.' Then when it is over Cantwell gets the signal from his heart, gets to speak his appropriate last words and to write his will, and expires.... This method produced a novel which for its author, he indicated, was almost intolerably poignant, but which readers sympathetic to Hemingway found painful for other reasons.

There are other reasons for the failure of the book, too. Since there never was less distance between Hemingway and his hero, the writer was almost completely uncritical of him. The discipline which once kept Hemingway from the self-indulgence of chronicling his every opinion, taste and whim broke down utterly.... Correspondingly, the heroine was never less real, being more than ever the girl who exists so for

her lover that she ceases to exist for herself... Much that is important to the author has become unimportant or even ludicrous to the reader.... The writer was imitating himself, and the result is a more telling travesty than anyone else composed.... Some of the background in the novel is excellent. The Venice winds, waters and lights are marvelously captured....

Cantwell journeys to the place by the river Piave where he (and Hemingway, and Adams and Henry) 'had been hit, out on the river bank.' 'This country meant very much to him, more than he could, or would ever tell anyone,' Hemingway says.... At this point as never elsewhere, Hemingway confronted and acknowledged the climax of his life, after a pilgrimage which binds this book to his first one with an iron band. In his effort to come the full circle before he is done, the hero does not end his journey at the place where first he lived, but at the place where he first died.

Then in the most personal and fundamental way possible to man he performs this primitive ceremonial, which is revelation as nothing else could ever be of his mingled disgust and reverence for that event of his life by which the whole may be known, and by which it was unalterably determined. As Poe was drawn helplessly to the site of his pain, the tomb of his decaying beloved, and as Hawthorne was long unable to escape Salem, the scene of the inherited and acquired sins he held in horror, so Hemingway must someday have made this trip to Fossalta, and found this place by the bank of the river. Now it is done, and the hero can die. No doubt he would die again, before Hemingway was finally finished with him. But never again could he perform so dazzling and apocalyptic an act. For here Hemingway tightly unified and glaringly spotlighted the core of all he had done; and Cantwell in his eloquent rite squats low over the place of his first death, while his eyes look out at the last one, across the river and into the trees."

Philip Young  
*Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*  
(Penn State 1952,1966) 114-21

"With the possible exception of sacrifice, they [abstractions, rules, ritual, sacrifice] dominate the details of *Across the River and into the Trees* as well. If examined in terms of the religion of Manhood, this is not as unsuccessful a book as most critics have claimed. It gives those members of the Order who realize that they will die a natural death—a way to meet the problem of dying. Colonel Cantwell still enjoys many of the things that have contributed to the happiness of his life—the beauties of nature and art, the taste of good food and drink, the pleasures of hunting, the give and take of sexual love—and in memory he can experience again the pleasure of fulfilling a soldier's duties.

The reviewers have looked upon this preparation for dying as little more than nostalgic sentimentalism; but even granting that the story tends in this direction, it still fits neatly into the Hemingway religio-philosophical mold. At its climax there is the usual refusal to turn to the supernatural, a more pointed refusal than ever. 'You going to run as a Christian?' the Colonel asks himself, and answers, 'Maybe I will get Christian toward the end. Yes, he said, maybe you will. Who wants to make a bet on that?'" [The abundant Christian symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* and the affirmation of Santiago (Saint James) as a Christ-evoking figure are evidence that Hemingway himself "got Christian toward the end."]

Joseph Waldmeir  
"Confiteor Hominem: Ernest Hemingway's Religion of Man"  
*PMASAL XLII* (U Michigan 1956) 166

"*Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) came out of Hemingway's Second World War experiences as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* came out of the Spanish Civil War. There, however, the similarity ends. The basic difference is that *Across the River* takes place after the war is over, and thus the combat incidents which interested Hemingway and would doubtless have interested his reader are merely mentioned in passing. In many respects the novel is autobiographical. The hero, the American colonel Richard Cantwell, is Hemingway's age, and he is credited with most of Hemingway's exploits in the Italian army in the First World War. In a sense Cantwell represents what Hemingway would have become had he chosen to become a professional soldier rather than a writer after the war, a choice he might well have made.

The scene is laid in Venice, where the fifty-year-old Cantwell loses himself in an affair with Renata, a 'nearly nineteen' year old countess. Most of the novel is devoted to conversations with Renata and others; Hemingway uses the novel as an outlet for a motley set of personal ideas including his opinions of Second World War generals, theories of strategy, remarks on American politics, and innuendoes about his former wives. Young (in his *Ernest Hemingway*, N.Y., 1952) sums up the difficulty well when he remarks that Hemingway seems to be writing the novel under the impression he is being interviewed....'Jackson, Renata, and others act as straight men, setting up implausible questions so that Cantwell can pontificate.' There are better passages: the hunting scenes, especially the opening chapter describing duck-shooting in Venice in winter, and the Colonel's description of America to Renata (Chapter XXXVII). In the end Cantwell dies of a heart attack in his car, shortly after he reminds his driver of the dying words of Stonewall Jackson: 'Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees.' In spite of such occasional fine passages, however, *Across the River* is the weakest of Hemingway's full-length works, and often reads like an unconsciously funny parody of his own style."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 160-61

"At first sight Hemingway's novel *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) may almost appear to be a relapse into his earlier disillusioned attitude of, for instance, *A Farewell to Arms*. It is the story of an American colonel of the Second World War who is in love with an Italian girl and dies of a heart attack after shooting duck in the lagoons near Venice. The framework is thus made up of the well-established theme of love and death, of war (in retrospect) and hunting. What distinguishes the book from the earlier ones is a peculiar balance of resignation in the premonition of death, of bravely contested bitterness about certain war experiences, and of a reluctant gentleness of touch in the description of the love relationship between the aging man and the young girl. In fact this relationship takes the place of the one accepted value and causes the disillusioned colonel to try and make sense of the events of his life. Contrary to the numerous critical objections raised, the novel has not failed to appeal to the post-war reading public as the twentieth-century version of the eternal subject of love and soldiering."

Heinrich Straumann  
University of Zurich  
*American Literature in the Twentieth Century*  
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 109

"In *Across the River and into the Trees* the male protagonist must tell his story to soothe his psychological wounds, and the success of this undertaking requires a sympathetic female audience. Colonel Cantwell, like Hemingway, is over fifty years old, has lost three women, and calls Renata (allegedly based on the real-life Adriana Ivancich) his last love. Repeatedly, he asks her if she finds his stories boring (236,240), and she replies emphatically, "You never bore me' (236). A little later she explains: 'Don't you see you need to tell me things to purge your bitterness?' (240). The colonel hopes to gain immortality through Renata (whose name means 'reborn'), not by reproduction but by passing on his knowledge. Through a process that brings together teacher and student, experience and innocence, they attain complementarity. Ironically, Adriana, for whom Hemingway wrote *Across the River and into the Trees*, did not like the book and told Hemingway that she found it, of all things, boring. Almost all the critics agreed."

Rena Sanderson  
"Hemingway and Gender History"  
*The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, ed. Scott Donaldson  
(Cambridge U 1996) 190-91

"In 1950 Hemingway published his first novel in ten years. It is the story of Richard Cantwell, a fifty-year-old American colonel in love with Renata, a nineteen-year-old Italian countess. As he is leaving Venice, Cantwell eats, drinks, and makes love to his countess. As he is leaving Venice, he suffers the last in a series of heart attacks and dies. Reviewers disliked the book intensely and it became the target of several parodies. But is the book the unqualified failure that it first appeared to be?"

Judged strictly as a realistic love story, the novel fails. Despite the fact that she is based on a real person (Adriana Ivancich), Renata lacks plausibility. She is perhaps better viewed as a symbolic character. Her name, as Arthur Waldhorn has noted, means 'reborn,' and Cantwell's love for her is as much a desire to recapture the 'beauty and innocence [Cantwell] nostalgically yearns for' as a physical or sexual desire. Furthermore, *Across the River and into the Trees* is not only a story about love: It is also a story about war and about confronting death. In fact, several comments Hemingway made about the book suggest that it was not his chief intention to produce a realistic novel. Rather, he seems to have intended a more symbolic work than any he had written in the 1920s and 1930s, and the chief subject matter of that work was the recent war.

Responding to reviewers' criticism that *Across the River and into the Trees* lacked action, Hemingway told Harvey Breit 'they can say anything about nothing happening in *Across the River*, but all that happens is the defense of the lower Piave, the breakthrough in Normandy, the taking of Paris and the destruction of the 22<sup>n</sup>d Inf. Reg. In Hurtgen forest plus a man who loves a girl and dies.' He describes his approach to this material as consisting of 'three-cushion shots' (Breit 61-62).

One such three-cushion shot is apparent in the novel's title, which is based on the last words of Confederate General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson—'Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees' (ARIT 307). Colonel Cantwell is an avatar of this Civil War hero. Renata's name works with this pattern of symbolism, suggesting Cantwell's rebirth or perhaps his reunion with an earlier state of existence. The union between Cantwell and Renata, often treated as the ridiculous daydream of a writer who is undergoing the male menopause, is on one level the attempt of a dying man to rediscover the youth that he once was or the attempt of a hardened, pragmatic soldier to unite with his long-estranged anima. It is appropriate that the encounter takes place in Venice, for Cantwell's love affair with that city predates his metaphor-laden love affair with Renata by nearly thirty years.

As an eighteen-year-old junior officer in the Italian infantry, Richard Cantwell fought the Austrians outside Venice. He was first wounded slightly and spent his convalescent leave in that city; then he was nearly mortally wounded near the Piave. These early associations with Venice make him feel that it is 'his' town. His wide acquaintance among the boatmen, bartenders, headwaiters, and porters of the town suggest a local boy returning to his hometown, not a member of the army that has conquered fascist Italy. Renata seems designed to suggest to readers the open and innocent soul of the man that Cantwell once was, a man they see only in certain brief memories that the colonel's surroundings evoke.

In contrast to his remembered self, Cantwell looks at his driver, a boy who, in spite of his 'combat infantryman badge, his Purple Heart, and the other things he wore, was in no sense a soldier but only a man placed, against his will, in uniform.' This young conscript, with his pragmatic view of life, is ironically given the same surname, Jackson, as the heroic Civil War general. The contrast inherent in that naming points up the difference between modern war and nineteenth-century war. As the colonel relives former times in preparation for death, he thinks constantly of how he has seen the world change...

Because the colonel is a military man, *Across the River and into the Trees* becomes a subtle meditation on war in modern times. Whereas once the leader of soldiers was revered for personal bravery and fighting ability, the modern military establishment distrusts officers who have fought personally as Cantwell has done. The architect of the Allied victory in Europe, Dwight D. Eisenhower, is criticized as 'some politician in uniform who has never killed in his life, except with his moth over the telephone, or on paper' (234). Cantwell sizes Eisenhower up as a presidential candidate in the postwar civilian world rather than as a true soldier of his own stamp.

Among the soldiers who appear in Cantwell's memories and the stories he tells Renata, none really recalls Stonewall Jackson except Cantwell himself. Although Hemingway does not refer to Jackson's death except for the allusion in the title and a brief passage near the end of the book, the parallel between him and Cantwell is reinforced by knowledge of the way Jackson died. While conducting a reconnaissance with his staff between Confederate and Federal lines, he was shot by his own troops. (Jackson himself remarked that all of his wounds were from his own men.) Cantwell has suffered a similar attack at the hands of his own army. Promoted to brigadier general because of his merits as a leader, he is assigned an

impossible attack on an impregnable target that probably has no military significance but is 'important because it got into the newspapers' (233). After inevitably losing his command, Cantwell is subjected to 'friendly fire' from the military establishment, who strip him of his star to cover up the foolishness of their own orders. Jackson died a lingering death from pneumonia after his wound; Cantwell eventually succumbs to a heart condition presumably aggravated by the stress he has had to endure.

Hemingway's attempt to move from arithmetic through plane geometry and algebra and into calculus resulted in his least successful book. Perhaps in compressing his account of some of the major battles of the recent war into a few pages of Colonel Cantwell's reminiscences, he encountered the limits of the iceberg principle that had worked so brilliantly in his works of the 1920s and 1930s. Disappointment over the book's reception did not curtail his work on other experimental fiction, but it did make him hesitant to publish until he was sure of the power of his work. *The Old Man and the Sea* was published during his lifetime because it had been read and pronounced impregnable to criticism by several critical readers. His two larger novels remained unfinished when he died, victims of his uncertainty. Nevertheless, both illustrate new developments in his fiction."

Robert E. Fleming  
"Hemingway's Late Fiction: Breaking New Ground"  
*Cambridge Companion* (1996) 129-31

Michael Hollister (2015)