

ANALYSIS

“The Capital of the World” (1936)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Ernest Hemingway’s ‘The Capital of the World’ is a relatively neglected piece of work.... In this story, in less than a dozen pages of print, Hemingway managed to compress the material of an ordinary novel into a restricted but brilliant picture of Spanish society, of *pueblo espanol*, right on the eve of the Civil War.... From a technical standpoint ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ and ‘The Capitol of the World’ are the two stories that emerge as distinguished capstones to Hemingway’s career in this area of composition. Both of these works are compressed, or condensed, novels. ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ achieves its compression through the temporal shifts associated with Ford Madox Ford’s ‘time organ.’ But ‘The Capital of the World’ gets its compression by crosscutting from character to character, scene to scene, much as the movies do.

‘Crosscutting’ is in fact a cinematographic term, although the technique itself seems to have stemmed from literary sources: pioneer movie-maker D. W. Griffith confessed to learning the method from reading the novels of Charles Dickens. Eventually, of course, the influence of literary works on film reversed itself, so that it became reciprocal, with novels like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy (with its camera eye), and Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools* standing as prime examples of the reverse swing. The interaction between movies and print-fiction is clearly shown in Hemingway’s ‘The Capital of the World.’ The story reads like an adaptation for a film, and with a few directive phrases added, lining up photographic angles and distances, it could very easily be made into a shooting script.... The swift compression of these ‘camera shots’ is immediately appreciable. And the way in which the writer presents the entire story of the woman who owns the Pension Luarca in one sentence, focusing on the ‘bolster’ between her legs, is breathtakingly dramatic and satisfying. Passages like these make one wonder whether Hemingway might not have outstripped fellow novelists F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner in writing for the movies had he the need or the will to work for Hollywood as they did....

Two real whores are introduced into the story toward the conclusion, and the hawk-faced picador emerges from a cage with one of them eventually, even though the cowardly matador (having a bad day all around) had been buying her drinks all evening. According to Stephen A. Reid—who discerns an Oedipal pattern in ‘The Capital of the World’—even Paco’s mother is something of a whore. ‘Paco’s mother had no husband,’ Reid declares, ‘and there was, presumably, no individual man among his mother’s lovers who stood strongly enough as a rival of him for his mother’s love.’ Hence the bull becomes a surrogate father, and so forth, and Paco, according to this presumptive reading, becomes one of the most scorned objects in Spain....

Religion and bullfighting might be added to the long list of things that are considered the opium of the people. According to the Anarcho-Syndicalist waiter in the story, it is precisely these last two forms of beguiling illusion that are killing Spain, and so it is ‘necessary to kill the individual bull’ and (shades of the war to come) the ‘individual priest’ to get rid of ‘the two curses.’ However, according to the two priests staying at the Luarca, it is the city of Madrid—as a center of bureaucratic power, the implication is—which is killing Spain. One of the priests sums up much of the theme of the story in this pithy complaint: ‘Madrid is where one learns to understand. Madrid kills.’ The priests are bitterly disappointed about the amount of help they can get for their poor territory of Galicia (Pablo and his sisters are from the equally poor territory of Extremadura). If Hemingway’s early title had been slightly changed to ‘The Capital of *Disillusion*’ it would have perfectly suited the condition of these priests. The little illusion they can summon up comes from the generous portions of unconsecrated wine they imbibe at the Pension Luarca.

What all of this makes clear is that ‘The Capital of the World’ is a fictive anatomy of illusion-disillusion. It has a cast of twenty characters (if Garbo is counted), and with few exceptions they are graded on a basis of how much illusion or disillusion they represent, like the priests and the Anarcho-

Syndicalist waiter. The three matadors at the Luarca, for example, stand among the thoroughly disillusioned: the sick one is coughing away his life with tuberculosis; the short one knows that his day as a novelty is over; and the cowardly one, who was once brave, has lost his courage through a particularly 'atrocious' wounding. These toreros stay at the Luarca because it is a 'good address' and because 'decorum and dignity rank above courage as the virtues most highly prized in Spain.' At the same time they know their place in Spanish society, as second-rate bullfighters; along with the narrator they must know that 'there is never any record of any bull fighter having left the Luarca for a better or more expensive hotel.

Enrique—the dishwasher who is partially responsible for Paco's death—is only 'three years older than Paco,' but he has already taken his place among the disillusioned. In the priest's phrase Enrique has 'learned in Madrid,' and what he has learned is fear. 'Miedo,' as he says to Paco: 'The same fear you would have in the ring with a bull.' Paco's own state of virginal illusion, and courage, is revealed in his thoughts. 'No, he would not be afraid. Others, yes. Not he. He knew that he would not be afraid. Even if he ever was afraid he knew that he could do it anyway. He had confidence.'

Hemingway did not change the title of the story to 'The Capital of the World' until the Spanish Civil War had broken out. The story first appeared under the new title with the publication of *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* in 1938. By that time Madrid had become something of a capital of the world: all eyes were focused on it as the center of conflict between fascist and antifascist forces. Then, too, provincial youths like Paco always see the capitals of their countries as the grand omphalos of the universe. There is a kind of universal naivete and provincialism that makes youths think that Paris, Rome, Berlin, Tokyo, Moscow, Warsaw—each in its own right—is truly the capital of the world....

Several commentators have talked about the theme of 'The Capital of the World' in a rather simplistic way. As one puts it, 'this story advances the mordant conclusion that to be brave, good, and innocent is to be unfit for life.' [as in Melville's *Billy Budd*] As another says, in complementary manner, 'the theme is the necessity for disillusion.' Hemingway himself, however, is not far from suggesting in the story that Paco is a 'smart lad, to slip betimes away.' This is his athlete dying young, one who will not know the suffering and frustration of the other characters in the story: 'The boy Paco had never known about any of this [what has gone on about him in the pension] nor about what all these people would be doing on the next day or on the other days to come. He had no idea how they really lived nor how they ended.... He died, as the Spanish phrase has it, full of illusions.'

The very last sentence of the story brings theme and technique into mutual focus: 'He had not even had time to be disappointed in the Garbo picture which disappointed all Madrid for a week.' The Spanish translation of this story...brings the word *disappointed* under the rubric of illusion-disillusion. As he translates the final sentence it comes out with a peculiarly Spanish emphasis: ...Nor did he have time to disillusion himself with the movie of Greta Garbo, which defrauded all Madrid for a week.

It has become a cliché that the thing left out is what characterizes a Hemingway short story, which may be true for most of his stories but not 'The Capital of the World' (nor for that matter 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro'). Nor is 'The Capital of the World' a typical Hemingway story in the sense of being fully rendered, with little or no auctorial commentary and exposition. Quite the opposite—here Hemingway wrote omnisciently, from the beginning anecdote...to the final editorial commentary of the last sentence. His 'writing like God,' which he would carry through in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (the last of which is dominated by the movielike crosscutting), produced one of those fictive examples of...folk wisdom, typical of Spain.... The trick is to find a good balance between [illusion and disillusion]...as does the woman who runs the Luarca and, to as lesser extent, the middle-aged waiter."

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"*El Pueblo Espanol: 'The Capital of the World'*"

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