***Death Sentences: Rereading* Old Man and the Sea** by William Cain (Gale Database Criticism)

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[(essay date January-March 2006) *In the following essay, Cain describes* The **Old** **Man** and the **Sea** *as the last great work by Hemingway and a story that is evocative of his struggle to write effectively at the end of his life.*]

Perhaps the familiarity of *The Old Man and the Sea* has prevented us from perceiving its terrible power. Hemingway's novel has become so taken for granted that we have not appreciated how disturbing it is: for all of its intrepid dignity on the surface, it is deeply disquieting in its themes. The best known of Hemingway's books, *The Old Man and the Sea,* is also the most misunderstood.

*Life* magazine published the entire text of *The Old Man and the Sea* in its September 1, 1952, issue and 5.3 million copies were sold in the first forty-eight hours. Scribner's first printing of 50,000 became available the next week and the book soon reached the best-seller list, where it remained for six months. The Book-of-the-Month Club chose it as a main selection with a first printing of 153,000 copies, and it was translated into nine foreign languages within the year. Soon *The Old Man and the Sea* was being taught in middle schools and high schools, and it became a favorite outside the classroom as well.

Not all of Hemingway's biographers and critics admire *The Old Man and the Sea,* and some have spoken about it harshly. Jeffrey Meyers, for example, emphasizes its "radical" weaknesses, including sentimentality, self-pity, and "forced and obtrusive" Christian symbolism. "In the highly acclaimed *Old Man and the Sea,*" he states, "Hemingway either deceived himself about the profundity of his art or expressed his contempt for *Life,* Scribner's, the reading public, the critics, and religion by writing an ironic and mock-serious fable that gave them exactly what they wanted and expected." Kenneth Lynn reaches the same conclusion: "Today, there is only one question worth asking about *The Old Man.* How could a book that lapses repeatedly into lachrymose sentimentality and is relentlessly pseudo-Biblical, that mixes cute talk about baseball ... with crucifixion symbolism of the most appalling crudity ... have evoked such a storm of applause from highbrows and middlebrows alike--and in such overwhelming numbers?"

As revealing as these edited books are about Hemingway's personal and sexual preoccupations, in my view they do not possess the authority of the works he completed and saw through to publication in his lifetime. The climax of Hemingway's career is *The Old Man and the Sea*: this is the point at which his journey as a published writer ended. The novel lacks the range and scale of his best books of the 1920s, but it is, I believe, the work of a master, and in retrospect it strikes me as the only possible ending for his career.

I am simply proposing that we give *The Old Man and the Sea* another look and in the process allow it to display its strange brilliance. From first to last Hemingway's sentences in *The Old Man and the Sea* take surprising turns, as when he concludes the opening paragraph with a sentence about Santiago's skiff: "The sail was patched with flour sacks, and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat." "Permanent" accents the point, making it unmistakable, and thus the sentence that comes a few lines later seems a contradiction: "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated." This adjustment in our response is part of Hemingway's narrative strategy: the later sentence corrects the earlier one--or, rather, it corrects our interpretation of the earlier one. The flag does not signify defeat, though to some it might be misread in that way. Hemingway is prompting us to see the difference between how something appears (and what it might mislead us to believe about a person) and who someone is.

Hemingway seeks in this fiction to make the tragic and the comic coincide, coalescing the heroic and the laughable in his sentences. Santiago is brave and ridiculous, self-aware and out of his mind. He endures; he shows grace under pressure. He is absurd, committed to a mission and a task that matter not against the dissolution performed by time.

The storyline and plain prose of *The Old Man and the Sea* invite a rapid reading for pleasure, but the risk then is not taking the novel seriously--by which I mean with full seriousness. Hemingway's ideal audience consists of readers who pause over sentences and savor the spaces in between--the perfectly modulated sequences of notes and silences that Hemingway deploys as breathtakingly as the jazz geniuses Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. "None of these scars were fresh," he writes of Santiago, "They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert." Hemingway gives the sense of wearing away in the sound of "old as erosions," and he implies that the scars are impossibly old, reaching backward to a desert that was once a sea. He reminds us of the span of time--that the sea in which the old man fishes will also eventually become a desert, boundless and bare.

Later, as evening falls and as the great fish that Santiago has caught continues to pull his boat, Hemingway writes:

It was dark now as it becomes dark quickly after the sun sets in September. He lay against the worn wood of the bow and rested all that he could. The first stars were out. He did not know the name of Rigel but he saw it and knew soon they would all be out and he would have his distant friends."The fish is my friend too," he said aloud. "I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him. I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars."

Killing the stars may sound far-fetched--some of Hemingway's critics have mocked this phrase. But there is no lapse here: such language is not far-fetched for an old fisherman tired from battle with his huge catch. This is how Santiago's mind drifts and fixes on an object of attention. The double "dark" in the first line connects Hemingway to his character--Hemingway has experienced the conditions that Santiago contends against. The vowels in "the worn wood of the bow"--the assonance of the phrase--evoke the feel of the wood's smoothness; what Santiago feels Hemingway has felt, and that is why this writer can strike the phrase that instills in us the same feeling. "The first stars were out" changes the rhythm, which is followed by Hemingway's break in point of view as he cites knowledge of a detail not known to his character and then lays down the passage of dialogue, quiet and meditative but edged with craziness.

People do talk to themselves, especially fishermen; Santiago knows he does, and Hemingway mentions this point in essays about fishing he wrote in the 1930s (e.g. "On the Blue Water," *Esquire,* April 1936). But there is more to it than that. No one else is with Santiago; he is alone at sea, occupying a jot of space amid immensity. There are no witnesses except for the reader to whom Hemingway tells the story. Those on shore, described in the final pages, see only the bare bones of the marlin; they do not know the facts and sensations of the struggle, and there is no indication that Santiago will talk about them.

Manolin, the person closest to Santiago, was not there for the contest with the marlin and the fight against the sharks either. Whatever he does hear from Santiago will be a diminished rendering of what took place. Moreover the sense of exhaustion Hemingway expresses in his character after Santiago returns to shore suggests to me that he will die very soon. Every life story ends in death, and no one knows what another person has gone through on his or her way there: the best we can achieve are approximations.

Santiago is detached from all others: nearly everyone else is a name in the newspaper or a dim recollection or a presence encountered on trips back and forth to his boat. Santiago says he loves Manolin, but it is not clear what his love amounts to. This old man would take to the sea whether Manolin existed or not. His photograph of his wife is underneath his shirt on the shelf in the corner; it made him lonely to see it, so he removed it from the wall. He does not dream about her, nor does she come to his mind when he is at sea.

Does Santiago, this figure of stark isolation, possess the grandeur that critics have attributed to him? In some measure he does, yet in truth he is just a fisherman, an old man alone, like Robert Frost's old man who can't keep a house. For many days Santiago catches no fish; he then catches a great fish only to lose it. On bad days and good days he returns to his shack, and, as Manolin is aware at the outset, this old man may not realize that some of the things he says are untrue.

There are determination and resilience in Santiago, in his devotion to his work at hand, akin to that of Hemingway rising with the sun to write and count that day's allotment of prose. This is a form of grandeur. But no exertion prevents death--the black oblivion (the other side of the white page of an author's book) into which all subsides. Day after day this knowledge pressed on Hemingway, and he is working through it in his depiction of Santiago. No writer was more severely driven by the imperative to work, nor was any writer more cut to the quick by the hopelessness of work shadowed by extinction.

In *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway recounts Santiago's story to express the majesty and the pointlessness of human effort. It is not that he is using Santiago as an analogy for himself as a writer. He is saying he and Santiago are the same. It is simple: one fishes, one writes, both die. This is not sentimental or self-pitying: it is the truth for Hemingway about what it means to be alive--that each of us is dying. When we are young we believe otherwise, as does Nick Adams in trailing his hand in the warm water on a sharp chilly morning at the close of "Indian Camp," the first story of *In Our Time* (1925): "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die." The questions Hemingway confronted were these: Since finally we know that everyone dies, how should we live? Why should we live?

For Hemingway these questions do not depend upon God. Not for him is the promise of the New Testament: "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (I Corinthians 15:26). Hemingway wrote against death; he professed that his best sentences could embody a feeling forever even as he knew that this forever could never be forever. A great book is a postponement of the inevitable: there is no defense against Time's scythe. If you think that something will last forever, you are not looking far enough ahead. It is punitive to think in such terms, which is why Hemingway often claimed that his work might win an eternal life after all. It was pretty to think so.

Facing eternity, or the lack of it, each day, Hemingway wrote until he could write no longer, and then, in July 1961, he killed himself. He kept going after *The Old Man and the Sea,* but the thousands of pages of sentences and half-sentences he produced would not cohere as books and that was because he had nothing left to say. Santiago was inherent in the Nick Adams of "Indian Camp," in the frailty of the overinsistent "quite sure" that he would never die. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* Hemingway gave life to the character that was always waiting for him, the person whom in a sense he always was, even when he was a handsome young man in his twenties, full of promise in Paris. A friend of his first wife, Hadley Richardson, remembered him: "You wouldn't believe what a beautiful youth Ernest was. ... He laughed aloud a lot from quick humor and from sheer joy in being alive." It is miraculous that this writer lasted as long as he did. He wrote with a gun to his head every day.

I have not yet done justice to *The Old Man and the Sea.* This novel is more extreme than I have suggested--than I even want to suggest. It has an unyielding power in its scenes and in its vision that expose dimensions of experience that are almost impossible to face and that bring home with intensity the feelings that Hemingway explored. When the sentences of *The Old Man and the Sea* are lingered over, the experience of the novel becomes unforgettable and unforgiving: it wounds the reader's consciousness. This novel's extremity is evident early in the action, as Santiago prepares for a new day of fishing: "The successful fishermen of that day were already in and had butchered their marlin out and carried them laid full length across two planks, with two men staggering at the end of each plank, to the fish house where they waited for the ice truck to carry them to the market in Havana. Those who had caught sharks had taken them to the shark factory on the other side of the cove where they were hoisted on a block and tackle, their livers removed, their fins cut off and their hides skinned out and their flesh cut into strips for salting."

The verb *butchered* describes the activity of preparing the marlin for sale but carries with it the connotation of unflinching slaughter, which Hemingway amplifies in the final sentence, with its hoisting, removing, cutting, and skinning. The impact is visceral and is meant to elide differences between marlins and sharks and human beings. Hemingway makes us remember that we are as permeable as are these creatures; our flesh is vulnerable to the knife--we can be cut to pieces--and our bodies will be degraded too. The humiliations of lifelessness are contained in us.

Hemingway was a fisherman, hunter, ambulance driver, war reporter, soldier; he was wounded and injured countless times and knew what a knife could do. The rending of bodies appears throughout his nonfiction reportage on wars and battles (journalism is one-third of his total output) and in his fiction from the woman in "Indian Camp" whom Nick's father sews up after the Caesarean and her husband who cuts his throat from ear to ear to the mutilated Jake Barnes, the bloodied Frederic Henry and the hemorrhaging Catherine Barkley, and the wounded, broken down, dying, or dead figures of Harry Morgan, Robert Jordan, Colonel Cantwell, and Thomas Hudson.

"Gee I was sorry when I heard that you were to go under the knife," Hemingway wrote to his sister Marcelline, May 20, 1921, after she had told him about an operation ahead. "There's nothing bothers me like having a dear old friend or relative go under the knife," he says again in this letter, and he repeats the phrase "under the knife" eight more times before he is done. Hemingway truly was his father Dr. Clarence E. Hemingway's son: cutting was in his blood.

The blood flows in *The Old Man and Sea,* as when Manolin recalls his first boat trip with Santiago: "I can remember the tail slapping and banging and the thwart breaking and the noise of the clubbing. I can remember you throwing me into the bow where the wet coiled lines were and feeling the whole boat shiver and the noise of you clubbing him like chopping a tree down and the sweet blood smell all over me."

To my ear the phrase "the wet coiled lines" does not fall within the range of Manolin's voice. Neither does "feeling the whole boat shiver." The rhythm is right for Hemingway himself, whereas for Manolin it is instead the phrase "the noise of you clubbing him" that expresses how he would speak. Hemingway wants it this way: his voice resonates within the voice of the character he is presenting; his voice is in the midst of his character's words. We will miss the power of the scene if we fail to see how subtle and intimate it is. It affirms companionship that partakes of repulsion and joy, bloody and sweet.

A later sequence of sentences, describing Santiago's baits, extends and toughens this pointed piteous effect: "Each bait hung head down with the shank of the hook inside the bait fish, tied and sewed solid and all the projecting part of the hook, the curve and the point, was covered with fresh sardines. Each sardine was hooked through both eyes so that they made a half-garland on the projecting steel. There was no part of the hook that a great fish could feel which was not sweet smelling and good tasting."

Feel the hook passing through your eyes. The helplessness of each fish, the mutilation inflicted upon it, show us what we are capable of and do all the time: this is what we do to fish, and what throughout history human beings have done to one another. Santiago enjoys his occupation; he is an expert. The fish he hopes to catch is "great" literally and figuratively, and its meat and blood are sweet. The play of light, the salt smell in the breeze, the endurance of this aged fisherman--the scene is seductive yet horrific, calling to mind Oedipus gouging his eyes in Sophocles' play and the tormentors in *King Lear* who bind the corky arms of Gloucester and grind his eyes to sightlessness.

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a theater of cruelty with a flesh-piercing array of images and terms that complicate the novel's renderings of nature's wonder and humankind's courage. One could characterize *The Old Man and the Sea,* as some have done, as an existentialist novel, but while the writings of existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus offer contrast and comparison, they are not directly relevant to the inquiry that Hemingway undertook: he came to questions of life and death on his own and was brooding over them when he was in his teens. He forged his style by studying Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce, among others, even as he developed his conceptions of identity and nature within the contexts of his family, his hometown of Oak Park, Illinois, with its schools and churches, his summers in Michigan, and his experiences in love and war.

Here is Santiago thinking about the "big sea turtles": "Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle's heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. But the old man thought, I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs." The first sentence records a fact that at first makes no sense: one might have expected the sight of the turtle's heart continuing to beat after it is slaughtered to lead us to be the opposite of "heartless." It is a grotesque image; if you read the sentence, it will stay with you. We are heartless when we see this sight because we have no hearts ourselves. But Santiago says that he does and that his hands and feet are turtlelike; he is one of them. If at this moment he is different from us, it is because at this moment he is not human.

If he is human, it is because he is a killer. As the marlin eats the bait, Santiago says: "Eat it so that the point of the hook goes into your heart and kills you, he thought. Come up easy and let me put the harpoon into you. All right. Are you ready? Have you been long enough at table?" His tone is beguiling and ruthless; he loves his prey heartlessly. The domesticity of the marlin "at table" makes the scene more dreadful: Santiago's love for the marlin coincides with his intention to kill it. He kills the creature he loves, and he loves it because he can and will kill it.

Once the marlin is hooked, Santiago cuts away one line and connects it to "the two reserve coils": "It was difficult in the dark and once the fish made a surge that pulled him down on his face and made a cut below his eye. The blood ran down his cheek a little way." The "him" refers to Santiago, but for a second we interpret it as the fish because this is the noun that has come just before. The pronoun *him* is the fish and is Santiago too, who has cut the fish but who now is bloodied himself, like the sardines hooked through the eyes, and like the fish clubbed until its sweet blood covers Manolin.

To give himself strength, Santiago eats pieces of tuna: "Holding the line with his left shoulder again, and bracing on his left hand and arm, he took the tuna off the gaff hook and put the gaff back in place. He put one knee on the fish and cut strips of dark red meat longitudinally from the back of the head to the tail. They were wedge-shaped strips and he cut them from next to the back bone down to the edge of the belly. ... I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it. Slowly and conscientiously he ate all of the wedge-shaped strips of fish."

"Brother" implies one level of relationship, but this bond evolves toward a deeper one that declares Santiago's identity with his prey, an identity to which Hemingway testifies in sentences as the novel moves toward its climax and conclusion: "But I must get him close, close, close, he thought. I mustn't try for the head. I must get the heart." "The shaft of the harpoon was projecting at an angle from the fish's shoulder and the sea was discolouring with the red of the blood from his heart. ... I think I felt his heart," he thought. "He did not want to look at the fish. He knew that half of him had been destroyed. ... He liked to think of the fish and what he could do to a shark if he were swimming free." The killing of the marlin is savage and heartbreaking, brutal and erotic. By killing the fish he loves, Santiago becomes one with it as the ambiguous "half of him had been destroyed" suggests. It is not just that he has taken life, but also that he has experienced what it is like to die.

In Hemingway's work it is unclear whether it is more painful to die or more painful to live. The wrenching pain of life is signified in *The Old Man and the Sea* when Santiago sees two sharks approaching the boat: "'*Ay,*' he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood." There is no translation for this word because the feeling knows no bounds: no language, not Spanish or English or any other, can name it. It may not even be a word but, rather, a "noise," an expression of utterly helpless incoherence.

Nowhere in the accounts of the crucifixion in the Gospel narratives is mention made of nails going through Jesus' hands and into the wood of the cross. Nailing, however, rather than binding with rope, was a common practice, and the story of Thomas's doubt of Jesus' resurrection (John 20:24-31) is keyed to his desire to see and feel "the print of the nails." For Hemingway, the nails are crucial, so much so that I am almost tempted to say we should not dwell upon the crucifixion of Jesus itself when we read Hemingway's lines, but, instead, imagine as acutely as we can the word we would cry out or the noise we would make if it were our hands through which nails were driven. "My wounds were now hurting," Hemingway said in a letter to his parents (August 18, 1918) after he had been wounded, "like 227 little devils were driving nails into the raw."

We know that Hemingway was captivated by representations of Jesus on the cross and pondered them often. The image figures, for example, in many paintings by the Old Masters he revered and examined in the Louvre, the Prado, and other museums. "Lots of nail holes," says Frederic Henry about Andrea Mantegna in *A Farewell to Arms,* alluding to Mantegna's "The Lamentation over the Dead Christ" (c. 1490), a painting in the Brera National Art Gallery in Milan, where in the summer and fall of 1918 the nineteen-year-old Hemingway recovered from the wounds he described in his letter to his parents. He was haunted by bodies pierced, lacerated, and cut, in anguish like the body of the crucified Jesus.

In Madrid in mid-May 1926, Hemingway wrote a short story entitled "Today is Friday," which presents the conversation of three Roman soldiers late in the evening of the day of the crucifixion. The second soldier wants to know why Jesus did not come down from the cross, and the first soldier replies that Jesus did not want to--"that's not his play." The second soldier insists that everyone wants to come down from the cross: "Show me one that doesn't want to get down off the cross when the time comes." "What I mean is," he continues, "when the time comes. When they first start nailing him, there isn't none of them wouldn't stop it if they could." The third soldier then says, "The part I don't like is the nailing them on. You know, that must get to you pretty bad." Hemingway uses his pronouns keenly: Is "you" the person being nailed, or the person watching the nailing, or the person watching who feels as if he is being nailed himself? Or is the "you" intended above all to wound the reader, impelling each of us to imagine how we would feel if we were nailed to a cross?

Later Santiago shoulders the mast as he walks ashore, and soon he rests on his bed with "his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up." Santiago is the crucified Jesus, by which I mean that the pain he has gone through has taken him as close to the divine as any man can be. But the identification that matters is less with Jesus himself than, more specifically, with Jesus' pain--the weight of a cross cutting into the shoulder, the nails pounded through hands and feet, and above all this cry: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is to say, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46). Echoing the first line of Psalm 22, this is for me the most searing passage in the Gospels. It brings before us the voice of absolute abandonment, a pain no language or translation is adequate to, a question cast into a void. This is life at its most essential, as Hemingway understands it: forsaken man crucified, alone, emits an appeal to which there is no reply.

For Hemingway, Jesus was not the Redeemer but the peerless embodiment of a life of pain. Jesus accepted a mission: he knew he was dead the moment he was born. He embraced it freely because he knew that through his death was eternal life for all humankind. This is a promise of salvation in which Hemingway did not believe. For him there was no life after death, and his abiding concern increasingly came to be why and how a dying person--we are always dying--makes art. Santiago toward the end in fact wonders whether he might be "already dead," but then he realizes he "was not dead," and he knows he is not because he feels "pain." Pain confirms for the old man he is alive, and as long as he is alive, he works.

Hemingway's son John said after his father's death: "I keep thinking what a wonderful old man he would have made if he'd learned how. I don't think he had faced up to becoming old." Yet the pain cut deeper, as another of his sons, Gregory, suggested when he said his father lived "with the knowledge of what the edge of nothingness is like." It was not only what Hemingway could not face but also what he did face. Returning to the harbor, Santiago reflects: "And what beat you, he thought. 'Nothing', he said aloud. 'I went out too far.'" He pulls in the boat by himself because "there was no one to help him." Far out, Hemingway saw nothing and that was the vision that gives such desperation to the disciplined books he wrote. As he said two years later in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he had made a commitment to be a writer "driven far out past where he can go, to where no one can help him."

Hemingway realized he wanted from his sentences more than sentences in books, however great, could give. For this reason I think he did not care much about his books once they were done. What Hemingway cherished was the act of writing them, the experience of making them--of moving his pencil across the page, of making, revising, and honing sentences. In the introduction he wrote in 1948 for a new edition of *A Farewell to Arms,* he explained what it felt like to write this novel:

I remember living in the book and making up what happened in it every day. Making the country and the people and the things that happened I was happier than I had ever been. Each day I read the book through from the beginning to the point where I went on writing and each day I stopped when I was still going good and when I knew what would happen next. The fact that the book was a tragic one did not make me unhappy since I believed that life was a tragedy and knew it could only have one end. But finding you were able to make something up; to create truly enough so that it made you happy to read it; and to do this every day you worked was something that gave a greater pleasure than any I had ever known. Beside it nothing else mattered.

Inside the world of the book while it was being written, it was possible for Hemingway to feel nothing else mattered, including the reality of death. This for him was the thrill of creation--a form of happiness oblivious to its own impermanence. In the midst of his sentences as he wrote them, Hemingway could experience the feeling of immortality: I am not immortal but, at this moment, I feel as if I were. But when the final sentence was written and the book was done, where was he? What next?

He would have to attempt to do it again, writing himself into a place where nothing mattered. He knew all the time that his story could only have one end.

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