"Sign the Wire with Love": The Morality of Surplus in *The Sun Also Rises*

By George Cheatham
(Greensboro College, NC)

Bill Gorton's mocking words as Jake Barnes returns from digging worms for trout fishing offer an interesting point of entry into *The Sun Also Rises*:

> "I saw you out the window," [Bill] said. "Didn't want to interrupt you. What were you doing? Burying your money?"
> "You lazy bum!"
> "Been working for the common good? Splendid. I want you to do that every morning." (113)

For Bill's joke foregrounds Jake's middle-class obsession with money—with working to make it and with spending it efficiently for his own pleasure. The ironically Marxist joke figures a distinction between surplus and exactitude, subtly undercutting Jake's repeatedly professed desire for the latter, and so calls into question the orthodoxy, I suppose it is, of what Scott Donaldson has called a "morality of compensation" in the novel.

Donaldson explains this morality of compensation as the "code" of the whole novel, which Jake explicitly states:

> Just exchange of values. You gave up something and got something else. Or you worked for something. You paid some way for everything that was any good. I paid my way into enough things that I liked, so that I had a good time. Either you paid by learning about them, or by experience, or by taking chances, or by money. Enjoying living was learning to get your money's worth and knowing when you had it. You could get your money's worth. The world was a good place to buy in. (148)

This code, Donaldson explains, pervades the novel through the metaphor of finance which illustrates the moral strength or weakness of the novel's various characters:

> Though physically impotent and mentally tortured, Jake Barnes remains morally sound, while Mike Campbell, Robert Cohn, and Brett Ashley, who are physically whole, have become morally decadent. . . . money and its uses form the metaphor by which the moral responsibility of Jake, Bill, and Pedro is measured against the carelessness of Brett, Mike, and Robert. Financial soundness mirrors moral strength. (77)

Well, certainly, to an extent. But Donaldson's thesis raises at least two basic questions which I wish to explore. First, isn't such an analysis rather too pat, rather too much like an equation which can be rather too easily problematized. And, second, isn't such an explicit exposition as that in Jake's meditations rather uncharacteristic of Hemingway, whose usual technique is to explore central concerns indirectly, through apparent trifles?

First, Donaldson's thesis is clear: Jake, Bill, and Pedro = financial and thus moral responsibility; Brett, Mike, and Robert = financial and thus moral carelessness; financial soundness = moral strength. But the entire pattern is undercut by Bill's joke, for example, which briefly foregrounds the miserly ("Burying your money?") and selfish (Bill, finally, doesn't use the worms) tinge to what Donaldson approvingly calls Jake's "meticulousness about money" and so, however subtly, aligns Jake with Robert

Cohn, the stereotyped "Jew," and against Bill Gorton.

Certainly, as Donaldson says, Cohn is apparently "tightfisted with his money" (80).

But isn't Jake somewhat tightfisted as well? What else can one infer from this exchange with Cohn about the bus trip to Burguette:

> "I'm not going up to-day," [Cohn said].
> "You and Bill go on ahead."
> "I've got your ticket."
> "Give it to me. I'll get the money back."
> "It's five pesetas."
> Robert Cohn took out a silver five-peseta piece and gave it to me. (100)

By this time in the story, of course, Jake, "blind, unforgivingly jealous" (99) of the affair with Brett, hates Cohn and probably demands his five pesetas out of spite. Even so Jake's understated insistence is notable. That his hatred manifests itself financially, even if only to cover his emotions, is telling. Cohn's "wonderful quality of bringing out the worst in everybody" (98) brings out of Jake a sense of rigid exactitude in financial matters. It brings out an undertone of miserliness to Jake's desire, his obsession, to "get his money's worth" which connects him, ironically, with Cohn and so clouds Donaldson's equation.

Jake's quibbling with the hostess in Burguette, although Donaldson cites it approvingly as part of Jake's trying "very hard always to get his money's worth" (76), is similar. Jake first balks at the high price of the lodging, twelve pesetas, but he accepts it when his and Bill's wine is included in that price:

> The girl brought in a big bowl of hot vegetable soup and the wine. We had fried trout afterward and some sort of a stew and a big bowl full of wild strawberries. We did not lose money on the wine, and the girl was shy but nice about bringing it. The old woman looked in once and counted the empty bottles. After supper we went up-stairs and smoked and read in bed to keep warm. Once in the night I woke and heard the wind blowing. It felt good to be warm and in bed. (110-11)

I quote this passage at some length to show the jarring note of Jake's concern about money. The bounty of the meal and comfort of the bed anticipate the understated spiritual goodness of the entire Burguette episode, typified by Bill's mock sermon of the next day:

> We should not question. Our stay on earth is not for long. Let us rejoice and believe and give thanks. . . . Let us rejoice in our blessings. Let us utilize the fowls of the air. Let us utilize the product of the vine. (122)

Framed in such a context, Jake's thought, however fleeting, that he is drinking enough wine to get his money's worth, and thereby financially besting the old woman, seems at best petty, at worst blasphemous, depending on how seriously one takes Bill's preaching. At least to a degree Jake is drinking for the wrong reason, not joyfully but commercially. The unpleasant undertone of miserliness here and elsewhere, subtle though it is, is enough to call into question Donaldson's thesis, according to which even such minor tremors in the metaphor of finance would threaten the whole moral structure of the novel.

Many of Bill Gorton's expenditures, on the other hand, are marked by a certain lavishness which disturbs Jake but aligns Bill with the financial carelessness of Brett and Mike rather than

the meticulousness of Jake, further vexing Donaldson's division. The redundant shoe-shines Bill buys Mike, for example, make Jake "a little uncomfortable" (173). And Bill's stuffed animals, which are similar to the shoe-shines, bring up the second question I started with: Isn't such an explicit morality of compensation as that in Jake's meditations rather uncharacteristic of Hemingway, whose usual technique is to explore central concerns indirectly, through apparent trifles? The central concern in this case seems more properly called the morality of surplus than the morality of compensation, and it's explored indirectly through the apparent trifle of Bill's stuffed dogs rather than directly in Jake's meditations.

Bill, in fact, not Jake, first introduces what Donaldson calls the "code" of the novel—the concept of "exchange of values":

> "Here's a taxidermist's," Bill said. "Want to buy anything? Nice stuffed dog?"
>
> "Come on," I said. "You're pie-eyed."
>
> "Pretty nice stuffed dogs," Bill said. "Certainly brighten up your flat."
>
> "Come on."
>
> "Just one stuffed dog. I can take'em or leave'em alone. But listen, Jake. Just one stuffed dog."
>
> "Come on."
>
> "Mean everything in the world to you after you bought it. Simple exchange of values. You give them money. They give you a stuffed dog."
>
> "We'll get one on the way back."
>
> "All right. Have it your own way. Road to hell paved with unbought stuffed dogs. Not my fault." (72-3)

Bill introduces the concept in such a context, though, that Jake's unqualified echoing of it seems at least a little odd. A stuffed dog is so superfluous, so gratuitously non-utilitarian, as to mock in advance Jake's notion of exchange as equivalence.

The two continue their conversation:

> "How'd you feel that way about dogs so sudden?" [Jake asked.]
>
> "Always felt that way about dogs. Always been a great lover of stuffed animals."
>
> We stopped and had a drink.
>
> "Certainly like to drink," Bill said. "You ought to try it sometimes, Jake."
>
> "You're about a hundred and forty-four ahead of me."
>
> "Ought not to daunt you. Never be daunted. Secret of my succes. Never been daunted. Never been daunted in public." (73)

Jake, though, seems to be daunted. That is, he seems to draw back from, even to fear, both here and throughout the novel, the sort of loss of control, the sort of risk, the sort of financial and moral inexactitude, exemplified by Bill's drunken excess. Such superfluity as Jake fears, however, such inexactitude of exchange, is essentially human. It is natural for humans to transcend their own limits. What we call culture or history is, after all, an open-ended transformation of fixed boundaries, a transcendence of mere appetite, a rich surplus over precise measure. It is this capacity for a certain lavish infringement of exact limit which distinguishes humankind (Eagleton).

Surplus, however, is radically ambivalent. And this creative tendency to exceed oneself is also the source of destructiveness. Hence Jake's fear. He's literally and figuratively gun shy. For the war, on a large scale, pervasively figures the destructive use of surplus throughout *The Sun Also Rises*. A colossal cultural over-reaching into too much—too much wealth, power, greed, rhetoric,

patriotism—that "dirty war" has in some way wrecked the lives of a generation. The war has stripped away its excess in self-destruction leaving a kind of nothingness at its center, a lack—figured most clearly in Jake's wound. And as a defensive response to both the war's excess and the threat of that nothingness, Jake embraces exactitude. A world stripped clean of excess is an exact one, one in which a person can precisely balance both his financial and moral checkbook, as it were, one in which a person can precisely know the values, one in which, as Jake asserts, "You could get your money's worth."

The talkative waiter probably knows how to get his money's worth. He's probably daunted too. He certainly shares if not Jake's fear of destructive excess at least Jake's sense of the waste of it. Following the death of the peasant gored during the encierro, the waiter, himself not an aficionado, denounces bull fighting:

> "Badly cogido through the back," he said. He put the pots down at the table and sat down in the chair at the table. "A big horn wound. All for fun. Just for fun. What do you think of that? . . . Muerto. Dead. He's dead. With a horn through him. All for morning fun. Es muy flamenco." (197-98)

This waiter, of course, will never run the bulls. But, for that matter, Jake doesn't run them either. He only watches, and he barely manages to do that. Jake describes two encierros, both of which he almost misses by oversleeping. One he watches—significantly, I think—from the balcony of Cohn's room, where he's slept, wearing Cohn's coat; the other he almost misses, hung over and groggy from the previous night's drunken fight with Cohn.

But although he doesn't face the bulls himself, Jake, unlike the waiter, at least recognizes the value deriving from such confrontations. And he recognizes further, with some trepidation, that it's not just bull fighters who must work either in or out of the terrain of the bull. "In bull-fighting," says Jake, "they speak of the terrain of the bull and the terrain of the bull-fighter. As long as a bull-fighter stays in his own terrain he is comparatively safe. Each time he enters into the terrain of the bull he is in great danger" (213). The terrain of the bull specifically and the whole fiesta generally figure that tenuous ground between too much and nothing where creative excess resides. Jake, however, after the destruction of the war, alternately fears and desires this excess, and the novel maps his alternate advances into and retreats from this tenuous ground, into and from the terrain of the bull.

The road to hell doesn't traverse this tenuous ground, of course, and it is, as Bill Gorton says, paved with unbought stuffed dogs. That is, crass, utilitarian quantifying of experience, of life, of whatever is damning. And whatever sort of salvation or redemption there is lies in surplus, in the exceeding of exact equivalence. Experiences, for example, exceed the sort of valuation that Jake, in his night-time meditations, would like to give them:

> We walked on and circled the island. The river was dark and a bateau mouche went by, all bright with lights, going fast and quiet up and out of sight under the bridge. Down the river was Notre Dame squatting against the night sky. We crossed to the left bank of the Seine by

the wooden foot-bridge from the Quai de Bethune, and stopped on the bridge and looked down the river at Notre Dame. Standing on the bridge the island looked dark, the houses were high against the sky, and the trees were shadows.

"It's pretty grand," Bill said. "God, I love to get back." (77)

Notions of equivalence, of exact valuation, are radically vexed by such moments as this one on the bridge—like stuffed dogs which, mysteriously, mean "everything in the world" to you after you buy them (72). Or like Brett, who by any equitable standard of valuation clearly isn't worth what Jake pays to indulge her selfish desire for Romero. As Michael Reynolds says,

> By pimping for Brett, [Jake] has cancelled his membership in the select club of aficionados. Montoya may have once forgiven him his drunken friends, but he will never forgive him for assisting in Pedro Romero's corruption. The novel's most understated passage occurs when Jake pays his hotel bill. He tells us: "Montoya did not come near us." This, the cruelest line in the book, goes without comment. . . . Jake, who started with so few assets, now has even fewer to get him through the night. If the novel "is such a hell of a sad story," as Hemingway said it was, the sadness resides in Jake's loss. (132)

Yet somehow Jake's morality is mirrored in this very loss, not, as Donaldson says, in his financial soundness. For by returning to Brett, Jake re-enters—decisively, I think—the terrain of the bull, that tenuous ground between too much and nothing:

> That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right. (239)

Such forgiveness simply doesn't add up, to use Donaldson's metaphor. Has Jake paid for Brett with Montoya? Is she then his? Must he now pay again? Is he getting his money's worth? Unlike Jake's checkbook, the relationship just doesn't balance. Nor should it, for the relationship involves a simple exchange of values. When introducing the concept of exchange of values, we remember, Bill Gorton says,

> Mean everything in the world to you after you bought it. Simple exchange of values. You give them money. They give you a stuffed dog. (73)

When echoing this concept, however, Jake makes a subtle but deeply significant revision:

> Just exchange of values. You gave up something and got something else. (148)

Both phrases—simple exchange of values and just exchange of values—are radically ambiguous. Just exchanges are mere exchanges, sure, but they are also equitable exchanges, legal, correct, proper, exact, accurate, uniform exchanges. Simple exchanges, on the other hand, are mere exchanges as well, but they are also artless, open, guileless, innocent, humble, wretched, pitiful, silly, foolish exchanges. This understated trifle, the distinction between *just* and *simple*, is perhaps the moral center of the novel.

No, Jake's rescue of Brett doesn't add up. For Jake, having lost his penis in the war, will not be, as it were, stuffing Brett. Hemingway probably intended such a sexual implication, since the stuffed and probably mounted dogs are part of a series of such images, most obviously the final mounted policeman with his

raised baton. Were Jake able to have intercourse, he and Brett would fit, match, balance, in the conventional sexual equation 1+1=1. Without a penis, however, with this nothing in the middle caused by the destructive excess of the war, Jake no longer fits. Hence his fear and its attendant risk, nothingness. And hence his obsession with balance, with exactitude. But only in such a wretched, pitiful, and foolish imbalance as that of his relationship with Brett does Jake's humanity, his morality, reside. His simple forgiveness of Brett exceeds exact equivalence. It is a gratuitous excess of the strict requirements of justice, a kind of nothing, a refusal to calculate debt, out of which something may come.

Works Cited

Donaldson, Scott. "Hemingway's Morality of Compensation." *Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 71-90.

Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Scribner's, 1970.

Reynolds, Michael. "False Dawn: *The Sun Also Rises* Manuscript." *Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 117-32.