Ernest Hemingway's Style and Unique Concept

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The purpose of this paper is to try to understand Ernest Hemingway's style by delving into his religious experiences since his childhood. Conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism may have been a major influence on his aesthetic and/or theory of play and poetry. His way of thinking is most discernible in the works of Green Hills of Africa and Death in the Afternoon. Therefore these two works serve as the main sources for this paper. Apart from his religious experiences, he must have been influenced by his contemporary poets and critics such as Ezra Pound. This paper also tries to find out how these influences led Hemingway to come up with his unique concept of the fifth dimension, which T. S. Eliot described as being the "void" or the "nothing." Unless and until we can understand his fifth dimension, a radical religious possibility, it is very difficult to savor Hemingway's profound philosophic essence in his works.

Keywords: Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa, Death in the Afternoon, religious, aesthetic (esthetic), fifth dimension, real thing, image, void, nothing.
1. Introduction

*By Force of Will* written by Scott Donaldson should be consulted for information about Ernest Hemingway’s early religious experience.\(^1\) According to it, E. Hemingway was baptized at First Church as an infant. His family rose above to Third Church in 1903. He grew up a member of Third Church where his father served as a deacon and his mother directed the youth choir and presided over the musical activities of the Women’s Aid Society. In 1916 Hemingway was listed in the directory of those who considered First Church to be their home church, and in 1917 he officially joined First Church. He had officially joined Third Church by confession of his faith in 1910.

The Victorian morality of Hemingway’s childhood was in conflict with the irrational forces and terrible realities of World War I and, in its aftermath, they failed Hemingway in the fight. The result of this failure was Hemingway’s peculiar religious odyssey. He did not turn to atheism when Protestantism failed him, nor did his characters. They continued to practice their religion, however pathetically, and to admire people for whom religion still worked. Hemingway converted to Catholicism (however nominally) and continued to attend mass and say prayers until his death. Like T. S. Eliot before him,\(^2\) Hemingway experienced the failure of childhood religion and the experience of a profound crisis of faith, a crisis known primarily by the intensity of the doubt and despair that accompanied it. Hemingway’s descent into darkness and the discoveries consequent to that descent mark a religious design on the fiction of his early years. To see that design against the larger pattern of the early fiction, it is necessary to proceed slowly, setting forth a descriptive definition of the key term, “religious,” and adjusting that term to fit the context of Hemingway’s fiction by exploring its relation to his “aesthetic” and to the nature of play, since play is a major metaphor in Hemingway’s works and a natural bridge between the study of religion and the study of Hemingway’s fiction.\(^3\) To facilitate this purpose, a phrase can be appropriated from Hemingway that provides a shorthand term for the religious dimension which Hemingway achieves and explores in his early fiction. The phrase, borrowed from *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), is the “fifth dimension.”

“You see, he is really serious about something, ‘Kandisky said.’ ‘I knew he must be serious on something besides kudu.’ ‘The reason every one now tries to avoid it, to deny that it is important, to make it seem vain to try to do it, is because it is so difficult. Too many factors must combine to make it possible.’ ‘What is this now?’ ‘The kind of writing that can be done. How far prose can be carried if any one is serious enough and has luck. There is a fourth and fifth dimension that can be gotten.’ ‘You believe it?’”\(^4\)

The general meaning of the “fifth dimension” can and must be explained in this discussion of beginnings. This study employs the term “fifth dimension” to describe two different but closely related aspects of Hemingway’s works. First, the term is used to discuss his aesthe-
tic theory. When it is used for this purpose it points toward a way of writing which makes use of imaginary theory and technique to present a form of language which works through and beyond time to present that which will be true yesterday, today, and forever, the real thing. In a most perceptive essay on Green Hills of Africa, Barbara Lounsberry demonstrated how the phrase “fifth dimension,” in its own context, points toward Hemingway’s aesthetic. Green Hills also takes the reader back “to the time of aboriginal man” and is filled with “historical regression and the rhetoric of wonder.” These aspects of Hemingway’s emerging aesthetic blend with the language of religion and prompt the use of “fifth dimension” in the second, or religious, sense. As a phrase used to designate a dimension of existence and a mode of being that certain of Hemingway’s characters achieve, the “fifth dimension” is best understood as akin to the “void,” or the “nothing” which T. S. Eliot describes in “The Four Quartets.” It is, in short, the mystical-religious dimension of life perceived only when there is nothing left to perceive. The “fifth dimension” is a radical religious possibility achieved only dialectically or timelessly.

2. Death in the Afternoon in Fifth Dimension

American author Ezra Pound, writing as a scientist collecting “data,” presented an experience not as though he had it, but as though it just happened to him, as a brick might fall on his head or sand blow in his eyes. So far as his imagery was visual, he wrote as though vision were not purposive, not selective, not active, but a passive inflow of something “out there,” the way images are imprinted on the film or plate in a camera. When his images are not limited to the visual, they include various affective responses as well as external stimulus, so that the camera metaphor becomes inadequate, and then the ideal model becomes a chemist watching “forces” produce chains of chemical “effects” in a laboratory.

The imagist theory of Ezra Pound, postulated in response to British psychologist Bernard Hart, and in conjunction with Hilda Doolittle and Richard Aldington, foreshadows Hemingway’s famous observation in Death in the Afternoon (1932):

“I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced. In writing for a newspaper you told what happened and, with one trick or another you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timelessness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day; but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be valid in a year or in ten years, or with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard trying to get it.”

The similarity to E. Pound is not accidental. Hemingway’s poetic was worked out, according to American critic Charles Fenton, while Hemingway was writing the sketches for in
the contents of *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923).\(^{10}\) According to Carol Baker, at this time Pound served as friend, teacher, companion, and catalyst to Hemingway.\(^{11}\) It is no surprise, then, to find traces of imagist poetic in the early work of Hemingway. The surprise is that Hemingway’s imagist aesthetic, in practice, gives rise to debates over the religious character of his fiction *Death in the Afternoon*. Like E. Pound, E. Hemingway wrote in response to, but not as a disciple of, the positivism of the age. His aim was not to defend poetic language against the charge that it had aided and abetted the spread of vagaries and nonsense, but to defend the mystery of life toward which even the most precise language points. Hemingway’s sparse prose style proves that he too despised the wasteful and deceitful use of language that the positivists attacked, while it also points beyond itself into what Hemingway called the “fifth dimension,” as mentioned above. There are opposing views. Wyndham Lewis labeled Hemingway a “dumb ox” and charged that his writing was all “an art of the surface,”\(^{12}\) Moloney made this school’s usual claim about the limits of Hemingway’s fictional world: it is “the deadly, stale, monotonous world of modern positivism and modern industrialization from which all spiritual leaven has been removed and he is consistent in giving flatness to the speech of this characters.”\(^{13}\) Moloney argued that the use of symbols in fiction testifies to the artist’s belief “that fact is more than fact.”\(^{14}\) Moloney viewed Hemingway’s continued use of the symbol as an indication that his “naturalism is always promising to break through its isolation and to link up with the world of spirit but the promise is never quite achieved.”\(^{15}\) Promising, but “missing” the third dimension, for Moloney, Hemingway’s fiction was a godless fiction that places nada (=nothing) where spirit once was.

### 3. Producing the Fifth Dimension

The present study supports the claim that Hemingway’s fiction extends to the fifth dimension, and that Hemingway achieved that dimension in his early writings.\(^{16}\) Although the fifth dimension was named by Hemingway and outlined in some detail by Carpenter, its borders are by no means clear. Therefore, a careful description and a precise definition of the fifth dimension as a province of the religious dimension, is necessary. A review of Hemingway’s aesthetic, its sources and its analogues are essential to that task.

“Once I remember Gertrude Stein talking of bullfights. She spoke of her admiration for Joselito and showed me some pictures of him in the ring and of herself and Alice Toklas sitting in the first row of the wooden barreras at the bull ring at Valencia with Joselito and his brother Gallo below, and I had just come from the Near East, where the Greeks broke the legs of their baggage and transport animals and drove and and shoved them off the quay into the shallow water when they abandoned the city of Smyrna, and I remember saying that I did not like the bullfights because of the poor horses. I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which pro-
duced the emotion that you experienced. In writing for a newspaper you told what happened and, with one trick or another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day; but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always was beyond me and I was working very hard trying to get it.”

Hemingway’s cryptic comments in *Death in the Afternoon* convey a faith akin to Pound’s in the correspondence of the accurate image to the “real thing,” though analysis of Hemingway’s aesthetic reveals both lines of kinship and points of divergence between Hemingway and his mentor. Hemingway’s aesthetic is nowhere stated explicitly and systematically, but fragmentary comments make it is possible to suggest an outline of the theory that informs his practice of prose writing during his first ten years. These reflections from *Death in the Afternoon* contain the skeleton of the Hemingway’s aesthetic. Hemingway’s cryptic comments in *Death in the Afternoon* convey a faith akin to Pound’s in the correspondence of the accurate image to the real thing, though analysis of Hemingway’s aesthetic reveals both lines of kinship and points of divergence between Hemingway and his mentor. Hemingway’s aesthetic is nowhere stated explicitly and systematically, but from fragmentary comments it is possible to suggest an outline of the theory that informs his practice of prose writing during his first ten years. These reflections from *Death in the Afternoon* contain the skeleton of the Hemingway’s aesthetic. From them it can be concluded that: Firstly, there is a conflict between immediate and learned perception, “knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel … .” Secondly, the crux of the perceptual problem lies in the presentation of subjective responses to an experience under the conditions of time. The haste necessitated by a deadline forces the newspaper reporter to resort to deception, “with one trick or another you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account … . “Thirdly, a mode of perception that fuses fact, emotion and motion into a single vision or image must be developed if a piece of writing is to endure. What is needed is “the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, … .”

The point in Hemingway’s aesthetic needs little elaboration. It is restatement of Pound’s dictum that a certain clarity and intensity are necessary if the image is to be accurately represented. The intuited image and not the learned response (the abstraction, the concept) must lie at the base of a successful piece of writing. The most obvious divergence between their briefly stated theories is the absence of the “sequence of motion” in Eliot’s theory. The first clue to Hemingway’s solution to the problem of presenting an image or story under the condition of time is found in his concern for context. According to Hemingway, humanitarians and animalians dislike the bullfight because they think that the “poor horse” is mangled and mistre-
ated for no justifiable reason. Because these people became fixated on one point of action in the entire drama of the corridor, Hemingway holds out little sympathy for them. He stated that:

"I believe that the tragedy of the bullfight is so well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual that a person feeling the whole tragedy cannot separate the minor comic-tragedy of the horse so as to feel it emotionally. If they sense the meaning and end of the whole thing even when they know nothing about it; feel that this thing they do not understand is going on, the business of the horse is nothing more than an incident. If they get no feeling of the whole tragedy naturally they will react emotionally to the most picturesque incident."18

He continued, insisting that to the fan, "the minor aspects are not important except as they relate to the whole."19 Hemingway's point is clear. It is dangerous and distorting to lift a thing out of context if the meaning of the thing is to remain clear. A word of caution is offered to those who forget that experience is "going on" — that it must be seen as a sequence of motion and not as a static thing. Later in Death in the Afternoon Hemingway spoke directly to the problem of time as he remembered the difficulty he experienced while trying to image Hernandorena's wound:

"For myself, not being a bullfighter, and being much interested in suicides, the problem was one of depiction and waking in the night I tried to remember what it was that seemed just out of my remembering and that was the real thing that I had really seen and, flatly remembering all around it, I got it."20

With the addition of memory, Hemingway moved his aesthetic theory from the third dimension, space, to the fourth dimension, time. He spoke of "remembering all around," and of the "sequence of motion," but his nonfiction is devoid of detailed or systematic discussions of time. His fragmentary remarks suggest that an important set of distinctions should be made if an uncommon view of the fourth dimension is to be gained. Reality, facts, and the "real thing" are not to be confused with each other. Reality exists as a force in the world independent of language. It exists as duration21 and cannot be distinguished from its past or its future. Facts are phenomena that can be distinguished from one another by analysis and cataloged in great detail through the use of language. The definitions, although nowhere sanctioned by Hemingway, help elucidate his own definition of the "real thing." At some point in time the memory process strains beyond memory for yet the next sequence of motion pointed to by the facts and finds that which is just beyond remembering — the real thing. The experience is subjective and defies words. It is the "sequence of facts and motion which make the emotion," and the emotion that is made is, I suggest, the subjective apprehension of the reality of the sequence office (behavioral and physical) stretched out before the observer
into the third and fourth dimensions. The emotion to which Hemingway refers is analogous to the subjective awareness of the life-force that Bergson called intuition. Intuition, or emotion, so described points the facts directly toward vitality, and “the sequence of facts and motion which make emotion” are the real thing, or the intuited image, an image that can be recreated from memory of actual, literary, or secondhand experience.

The construction of the vignette reflects the same process Hemingway ascribed to his recollection of Hernandorena’s wound. Hemingway remembered all around the event; an event which he knows about only from conversations and/or readings, since he haunted yet made his fleet trip to Spain and the corridor. The reader does not see the bull actually gore Maera, nor are the wounds ever described in detail. Maera is seen lying still with his face in the sand. Then the omniscient narrator turns the angle of vision and gives us a view from inside Maera’s mind. In the chapter 9 of Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway went into great detail describing the life and talents of Maera who was very much alive when Hemingway wrote the chapter describing his death. In my opinion, the reader is told that Maera “felt warm and sticky from the bleeding.”

The narrator hold this perspective and tells how Maera felt about the approach of the bull’s horns, but he does not record the charge of the bull. Hemingway’s account of Maera’s death enters into and goes beyond the third dimension. On the surface the vignette is very flat, a mere record of the facts surrounding Maera’s death. But, as we have seen, the most important facts are missing. The vignette as mere record is too scanty to be good. Its value lies in its success as an image. The passivity of Maera is emphasized time and again in the vignette. He is aware of an animate world outside of his consciousness — warm, sticky blood, a horn going through his body, but he has no part in the action. Toward him the bull is charging. The wounded Maera has left the dimension of cause-effect progression and entered the flow of time. He is in motion. At first he is in the present sensing facts without the intervention of mind. Maera is pulled into motion in his last moments. He seems to approach duration or timelessness. The fourth dimension moves toward the fifth. Hemingway makes room for movement between the dimensions by leaving things out. He commented often on the importance of this technique. This technique is based on his iceberg theory and was first stated in Death in the Afternoon.

“If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.”

The crucial word here is a word often repeated by Hemingway in his discussions of writing, “know.” But only knowledge of a special kind, as we have seen, will finally allow the writer to deliver the “real thing.” What the writer must know is the reality that flows through the event and this can only be known by intuition, by a special knowledge, and by using this
knowledge to design a vehicle that will provide conveyance toward reality. The vehicle, of course, can never contain reality itself, and hence there will always be something crucial missing from the intuited image, or real thing. The real thing, if it is made with great care and full knowledge of the reality which is being omitted, will stand as a signpost in the path to reality itself. To insure that there is space for reality in the image, the writer often omitted facts. Too many facts may distract readers from the path to reality, causing them to mistake the pathway for reality itself. One further development can be detected in Hemingway's aesthetic. It is the end result of his struggle with the temporal problems posed by his correlative; it is the fifth dimension. Since Hemingway devoted only a line to the possibility of writing in the fifth dimension in *Green Hills of Africa*, we must turn elsewhere for details. Earlier Hemingway made it clear that mystery of a certain kind is a legitimate goal:

"True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly. Mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries; but incompetence is not one of them ... ."25

Hemingway's theory of art advanced toward mystery of a certain kind. The achievements of his art in the fourth dimension — that of time — assured his arrival in the fifth dimension. His handling of the problem of time results in the possibility of art at the edge of memory, intuiting reality itself in the fullness of its flux and power. Hemingway stated, "mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries ... ." Such knowledge is not gained by tricks of language. Nor is mysticism to be equated with ignorance of facts.26 But to describe what mystery is, rather than what it is not, is absurd, according to Hemingway. Mystery must be accepted as mystery. Hemingway maintained that it can be presented by means of indirection only, through a description of the behavior of those who claim to be acting in response to the felt-presence of mystery. That being the case, a working definition of mystery, or "the religious" must be postponed until the general tenor of character-response to mystery has been charted in Hemingway's early fiction. Hemingway's characters do not use the word "mystery." Their words for mystery, when they have the courage to speak of it at all, are nada, or nothing. Bergson could have foreseen the evolution of the nothing theme, and the emergence of the character types that follow in response to the theme, by looking at Hemingway's solutions to aesthetic problems in the fourth dimension.

4. Void

Hemingway's characters do not use the word "mystery." Their words for mystery, when they have the courage to speak of it at all, are nada, or nothing, like the above. The dichotomy between the continuous flow of life and the discontinuous significance with which humans invest life in time creates the problem of the void. Bergson described the void this way:
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“The void of which I speak, therefore, is at bottom only the absence of some definite object, which was here at first, is now elsewhere and, insofar as it is no longer in its former place, leaves behind it, so to speak, the void of itself. A being unendowed with memory or expectations would not use the words “void” or “nought”; he would express only what is and what is perceived; now, what is, and what is perceived, is the presence of one thing or of another, never the absence of anything. There is absence only for a being capable of remembering or expecting.”

All of Hemingway's characters possess active memories. For some memory is the curse that bears the unrelenting truth and terror of human insignificance in the ongoing flow of time. For others it proves to be painful cure for the terror that haunts those who seek meaning from history. The difference lies in how they practice the art of remembering. These distinct responses to the void generate a variety of character types in the early fiction. The most common type is the character who lives with the knowledge that time creates an inevitable void at the center of life as it flows over a world of fixed values and ideals. Such characters square their shoulders in the face of the void and take a firm grip on timeless values and behave according to well-established codes of conduct. These are clearly ethical types. They are often silent and lonely people, sonic in their endurance, and heroic in their continual battle to keep the “nothing” away. Nick's stern, stubborn, plodding father, Dr. Adams, is exemplary of the ethical type. Such characters are only the reverse side of the coin that bears the imprint of the romantic. The romantic, unlike the ethical character, is ignorant of the terror of life in the flow of time, but like the ethical type the romantic tries to live a life according to certain timeless values and visions. Hemingway's portrait of Robert Coin, a classic case of arrested development, is a fine rendering of the romantic type. The romantic spares the terror and despair that plague the life of the ethical type, but ignorance of historical existence provides no lasting defense against the flow of time. Hemingway portrays these romantics as the uninitiated on the road to maturity and as the naive steering straight toward disaster. For example, Nick's father emerges as the major character type in Hemingway’s early fiction, and the one whose actions will trace the religious intention on the fabric of that fiction.

5. Focusing the Religious Intention

The relation between play and the religious must be made clear before Hemingway’s religious intention comes into focus. The first serious student of play, Johan Huizinga, argued that play and the sacred were identical phenomena. Even his most casual observations about the nature of play advance this claim: “The child plays in complete — we can well say, in sacred — earnest.” This is not careless prose or mere hyperbole on Huizinga’s part. He sees a direct and describable relationship between play and the sacred. He argues that the sacred and the beautiful are levels of human experience that can be attained through play. For it is “in play we may move below the level of the serious as the child does; but we can also move above it — in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred.” Nor is Huizinga content
to stop with a "vehicular" understanding of the relationship between the sacred and play. At the level of fundamental definitions Huizinga clearly insists on the identification of the realm of play with the realm of the sacred and declares that one of the most important characteristics of play is its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds. Now, the marking out of some sacred spot is also the primary characteristic of every sacred act. Formally speaking, there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis court, the chessboard and pavement-hopscotch cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle.

After further comments on the play character of feasts, sacred rites, and the eludes that the "make believe" element in primitive religions, Huizinga concludes that "the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness;" ... "archaic ritual is thus sacred play." Huizinga's observations on the relation of play and the sacred are indispensable to a study of Hemingway's religious intention. Play and players are everywhere evident in Hemingway's fiction (boxing, fishing, bullfighting, topping). Traditional signs of the religious (dogma, faith statements, Christ figures) are, on the other hand, quite sparse. Thus, any attempt to bring the fifth dimension into focus required a careful analysis of the relation of play and the sacred in Hemingway's fiction.

6. Conclusion

Based on my study of Death in the Afternoon in Fifth Dimension, Producing the Fifth Dimension, Void and Focusing the Religious Intention, I conclude that Ernest Hemingway's style is religious and then aesthetic, and that his unique concept is fifth dimension and then void.

There were several very severe critics such as Wyndham Lewis who labeled Ernest Hemingway as a "dumb ox" and charged his writing as "an art of the surface," and Michael Moloney who described E. Hemingway's fictional world as "the deadly, stale, monotonous world of modern positivism and modern industrialization from which all spiritual leaven has been removed and he is consistent in giving flatness to the speech of his characters." However, as I have acquainted myself with Buddhism albeit rather slightly, I can intuitively understand T.S. Eliot's interpretation of "the fifth dimension." That is "the mystical-religious dimension of life perceived only when there is nothing left to perceive." The fifth dimension is a radical religious possibility achieved only dialectically despite time and within the tension of the sacred and profane, transcending both. Therefore, in order to understand Hemingway's methodology of "putting down what really happened in action," some knowledge of void or certain experience of this oriental philosophy of nothing is very useful if not indispensable. For example, in describing the Hernandoreua's wound in Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway tried to see the "real thing" or reality which exists as a force in the world independent of language. Hemingway speaks of "remembering all around," and of the "sequence of motion and
fact.” This can be possible only when one puts oneself at the "vold" or the "nothing." Thus Hemingway was trying to transcend the analytical use of language in describing "reality," and he instinctively called the state of mind with which to discern it as "the fifth dimension.”

Notes


22) Hemingway, *op. cit.* pp.74-84.
24) Ibid., p.169.
25) Ibid., p.47.
26) Ibid., p.47.
29) Ibid., p.19.
30) Ibid., pp.19–21.
31) Ibid., p.25.

Bibliography