

The Eyewitness Narrator in Hemingway's *Collier's* Dispatches and "Black Ass at the Cross Roads"

In a 1944 letter to Mary Walsh, Ernest Hemingway elliptically revealed the literary strategy that he would employ after his engagement in WWII:

I know can write good story once alone and with typewriter after this over and will go some good place for a couple or three days to do it. All notes are in the head. There are some terrific things—Shouldn't waste on *Colliers*. Could write a book now on this week . . . (Baker, *Letters* 560)

According to Donald P. Beistle in "Ernest Hemingway's ETO [European Theatre of Operations] Chronology," Hemingway's war experiences in the 1940s produced six dispatches, six unpublished short stories, four poems, fragments of an unpublished novel, and one published novel (1). Compared to the literary output from his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, the publications from the Second World War are surprisingly few indeed, especially since he seemed so pleased with all of the material he had accumulated through his experiences. Conceivably, had his WWII novel *Across the River and into the Trees* found a better critical reception, Hemingway would have published more about what he saw during that conflict. However, despite what critics have said about that novel, Hemingway did write some very powerful literature about combat conditions during WWII.

I'll examine here two of Hemingway's *Collier's* dispatches, "Battle for Paris" and "How We Came to Paris." In both of these dispatches, the narrative persona is Hemingway as not only a war correspondent and observer, but as a participant in the war as well. With these two dispatches, I'll then compare the narrative persona

and perspective of the posthumously published short story “Black Ass at the Cross Roads.” Although the narrator of this short story seems to be a soldier in the American army, he also shares similar characteristics with Hemingway’s “civilian” persona in the dispatches. Unlike the typical first-person narrator in Hemingway’s dispatches and other short war fiction, the persona in this short story not only narrates the story but also pulls the trigger on the enemy. By being so involved in the action, this narrator creates a morally ambiguous situation.

Because Hemingway never finished and thus never indicated which war “Black Ass at the Cross Roads” actually represented, it is first important to note the textual similarities that exist between the two *Collier’s* dispatches and this short story. Any comparisons between this material would have relevancy since the contents would have been based on similar experiences. The most obvious textual similarity to note is that all three prose pieces are set in the countryside of France during WWII. In “Battle for Paris,” Hemingway clearly identifies his location as “at a point a short distance beyond Epernon on the road to Rambouillet [23 miles southwest of Paris]” (364). Hemingway is again just as clear about his location when he begins “How We Came to Paris”: “[n]ever can I describe to you the emotions I felt on the arrival of the armored column of General Leclerc southeast of Paris” (374). In the short story, however, the exact location is never clearly stated. The short story begins at an unidentified crossroads with the “matter-of-fact report of a deadly mistake”—the killing of a French civilian (Johnson 250). In order to justify the man’s death, the guerrillas have accused him of being a collaborator: “‘*Sans doute c’était un Collabo*,’ Claude said” (“Black Ass” 579).¹ Most of the combatants in this story are not collaborators at all, but French irregulars (notice that everyone can speak French fluently) fighting to rid their country of Germans (“Black Ass” 585). Because of such textual references, the dispatches and the short story are all three set in France.

With the approximate location of the settings established, the next resemblance to note is that the war described in the dispatches and the short story is also the same. The publication dates of the dispatches in *Collier’s* obviously reveal WWII as the war

Hemingway is writing about. The unpublished short story provides no such conclusive dates. Internal evidence, however, shows the war in the short story to be the same as in the dispatches². For example, the narrator in the short story describes his band of fighters as “specialists in a dirty trade” (“Black Ass” 581). These particular “specialists” are guerrillas “set up for a simple job of assassination” (“Black Ass” 581). According to M.R.D. Foot, in *Resistance: An Analysis of European Resistance to Nazism (1940-1945)*, assassination was a primary job of the French guerrilla movement during WWII (9-10). Two weapons used in the story are decidedly of WWII vintage—the German *panzerfaust* and the American bazooka (“Black Ass” 581). Both the *panzerfaust* and bazooka were anti-tank weapons specifically developed to combat armor during WWII (Edwards 236). Considering these historical facts, the events in the short story seem to have occurred also during WWII.

The time of the year in the dispatches and the short story are also similar. In “Battle for Paris,” Hemingway gives the date as 19 August 1944 (364). Although Hemingway does not give the exact date of the narrative in “How We Came to Paris,” S.L.A. Marshall, in “How Papa Liberated Paris,” sets the last possible date of the action in the article as being 25 August 1944 (5). The narrator of the short story stresses that it “was a beautiful late summer day” (“Black Ass” 580), and arguably, the story is set in the same season as these two *Collier's* articles. Even though the action of the story is suggestive of the August articles, the geography of the story does not exactly correspond. A character in the story states that “Soissons’s way the hell back” (“Black Ass” 579). This statement means that the city of Soissons is behind them; thus, the action of the story is set somewhere between the Aisne region, which is in the northeastern part of France, and the Belgium border. During the late summer, however, the Allied forces had not reached this far in the post D-Day invasion of occupied France (Ellis 1). Hemingway’s dispatches during that time were from the Yvelines region which is southwest of Paris. *The World Almanac of World War II* states that the U.S. VII Corps did not take Soissons and cross the Aisne River until 29 August (Young 291). Hemingway did not leave Paris to travel into that area of France until the second of September. On this date, Hemingway made note of the “wind in the trees as fall weather

came'” in his war diary (Baker, *A Life* 420). Throughout Hemingway's war diary, he repeatedly notes that the weather in September is cold and rainy and not unseasonably warm (Notebook 3-9). Although the time and the geography may not precisely line up, the season of the year in the short story and in the dispatches do roughly correspond.

Unquestionably, the type of combat that Hemingway describes in the dispatches also occurs in the story as well. In “How We Came to Paris” Hemingway writes:

On the main Versailles-Villacoublay highway the column proceeded past the wrecked airdrome of Villacoublay to the crossroads of Porte Calamart. Here, while the column was stopped, a Frenchman came running up and reported a small German tank on the road that led into the woods. I searched the road with my glass but could not see anything. In the meantime, the German vehicle, which was not a tank but a lightly armored German jeep mounting a machine gun and a 20-mm. gun, made a turn in the woods and came tearing up the road, firing at the crossroads. (380-381)

The action in this passage occurs on a crossroads, involving a suspected German tank (although the tank turns out to be a jeep). Similarly, Hemingway writes in the short story that

[w]e set the traps well beyond the crossroads so that we would not louse up the crossroads and make it look like a shambles. We wanted them to hit the crossroads fast and keep coming. (“Black Ass” 580)

The location of the action is again at a “cross roads,” (and involves German military vehicles, as well as French civilians). The practical and metaphoric importance of a crossroads is underscored by the fact that Hemingway mentions it five times in this dispatch, and he also uses it in the title of the short story. Moreover, Hemingway was using only “The Cross Roads” as the title of the story until he penciled in “Black Ass at” while working on the second draft (folder 284 1). Crossroads seemed to have been the first thing on his mind when he began writing the story.

In the dispatches and in the short story, the crossroads serves as a unifying metaphor representing the difference in the way WWII was fought from the other world war in Hemingway's experience. The crossroads represents the mobility that dominated the battlefield of WWII, whereas stalemate dominated WWI. In *Panzer: A Revolution in Warfare, 1939-1945*, Roger Edwards describes the WWI battlefield:

Sited in heavily protected fieldworks, so thickly secured with barbed wire entanglements "that daylight could scarcely be seen," the machine-gun cut deep swathes in assaulting infantry. Offensives stumbled to a halt, casualties reached appalling levels. (16)

Metaphorically speaking, the crossroads replaced the no man's land in military importance as tank warfare broke through the "barbed wire entanglements" of the WWI mentality of stasis. Hemingway, a WWI veteran who was wounded by both a trench mortar and machine gun (Baker *A Life* 45), painfully understood the differences of the second war from the first one: he could literally feel the difference. Hemingway's brother Leicester writes that Ernest

had had his firsthand view of the [second] war, and he said that it made sense. He said that World War I had made no sense to him at all. Twenty years after the Spanish War, he said, the more he read and remembered about that one, the less he understood any of it. But World War II made sense. (266)

The very fact that this war made sense to Hemingway shows up with the metaphor of the crossroads in the dispatches and in the short story. Moreover, it is precisely because he had had such a "firsthand view" of the way this war was fought that this understanding was possible. Hemingway based his sense of the war on what he saw at the front and not on what he heard in the rear. Ironically, in this war the term front was a misnomer because the enemy could have come from any direction (and did!). For example, in "Battle for Paris," while Hemingway was traveling ahead of the

main body of the Allied forces, he describes what has always been called the war's front:

You come down a slope of highway to a village with a gas station and a cafe . . . From this point you can see a long slope of highway to your rear and a long stretch of highway ahead . . .

This is necessary since the Germans are both ahead of us and behind us. (371)

As this particular stretch of road illustrates, any point in the road could be the intersection where two enemies would collide. According to Hemingway's dispatches, the crossroads was exactly where the war was being fought at this time, and the only way for him to have understood that point was to have been there.

As was the case in these dispatches, the crossroads is likewise where all the action takes place in the short story. For example, the narrator describes his band of irregulars at work:

The half-track came on very fast and now we could see the faces clearly . . . They were shouting in German and the driver and the officer with him must have seen the mines across the road and they came to a tearing swerving halt and had started to back when the bazooka hit . . . It rained metal and other things. ("Black Ass" 584-585)

The fighting here is so close that debris falls on the men after they destroy the enemy's vehicle ("Black Ass" 585). The description of the action at this crossroads typifies the narrator's proximity to the fighting in the short story and mirrors Hemingway's perspective in the two dispatches. In Tony Tanner's review of *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*, he writes that it is "always clear that there was a close connection between Hemingway's journalism and the distinctive prose he evolved in his fiction" (526). Because the crossroads represents the narrator's proximity to the action in both the short story and the dispatches, it represents this "close connection" that Tanner identifies between Hemingway's journalism and fiction. The first-person perspective in the journalism and in the short story represents being there in the middle of the action—unlike the other

journalists and novelists who were either at the rear or safely at home.

Besides proximity to combat, Hemingway's persona in the dispatches also shares other characteristics with the narrator of the short story. Ronald Curran, in his article "The Individual and the Military Institution in Hemingway's Novels and *Collier's* Dispatches," states that the dispatches, "Battle for Paris" and "How We Came to Paris," reflect Hemingway's "traditional stance of the individual superior to institutions who, because of his natural skill, transcends them" (34). In these two dispatches Hemingway "portrays himself as a guerrilla leader of the Free French fighters" (Curran 34).

Important to Hemingway's portrayal of himself as a guerrilla leader is the explanation why he had to become one in the first place. In "Battle for Paris," Hemingway gives an explanation for his involvement with the guerrillas:

War correspondents are forbidden to command troops, and I had simply conducted these guerrilla fighters to the infantry regiment command post in order that they might give information. Anyway, it was a beautiful day that day and when we came down the smooth black road toward Rambouillet, with the big plane trees on either side and the wall of the park on our left, we saw the road block ahead. (365-366)

Hemingway attempts to project an attitude of nonchalance: "Anyway, it was a beautiful day." Hemingway took charge of the guerrillas because circumstances forced him to the forefront. This is the persona of the reluctant hero. The "road block" must be broken, and Hemingway was the only man with the skill to break it. He was forced into action. Unlike the conventional depersonalized, third-person perspective used by other war correspondents, this Hemingway persona proves to be a complicated narrator. As this dispatch clearly illustrates, the narrator (as both war correspondent and leader) not only tells the "story," but also has a large role in creating the story as well.

This complicated persona is somewhat similar to the one projected in "How We Came to Paris." Although once again

Hemingway is both war correspondent and leader of the guerrillas, Curran argues that Hemingway's overall "attitude in this dispatch is . . . ambivalent" by comparison (36). When the regular army catches up with the guerrillas, the group of irregulars is dismissed in all senses of the word. Therefore, without a leadership role, Hemingway is no longer "so enthusiastic about the individualized, non-institutionalized guerrilla fighting; instead he is fascinated . . . by the mechanism of war" (Curran 36). Hemingway's ambivalence, however, does not lead to a total lack of interest in the war effort, but instead leads to a sublimation of his experience into a literary digression. For example, at the very end of this dispatch, Hemingway writes that

I couldn't say anything more then, because I had a funny choke in my throat and I had to clean my glasses because there now, below us, gray and always beautiful, was spread the city I love best in all the world. ("How" 383)

Hemingway sublimates the dual persona of war correspondent and guerrilla leader into a persona that he has used before. He can no longer speak as the warrior, so he returns to the well-known persona of his youth: the Parisian expatriate. However, it is important to note that this persona closes the dispatch; what Hemingway really means is that he cannot "say anything more" through his former persona. Hemingway only uses this old persona as a means to exit gracefully from this dispatch and to transition to the next one—because his guerrillas have been dismissed, he has been dismissed as well. The narrative persona of the war correspondent and war participant in these two dispatches holds together well. The fact that Hemingway made disparate identities fit into the same persona is not surprising since Hemingway had been juggling many different roles throughout his professional life. Curran also writes that

Hemingway's image as an individual who remained fluid and dynamic in the face of institutional pressure to conform his existence to an established pattern generated much of his general popularity. His international residence, his profession as artist, his

involvement in world politics, his role versatility (writer, journalist, aficionado, big-game hunter, deep-sea fisherman, soldier, war correspondent, and lover) all bespeak a uniquely versatile independence, one dramatized in his art as well. (26)

This “versatility” explains the ability of the narrative persona to project the various roles in these two dispatches. Essentially, it is Hemingway’s “versatile independence” from the institution of journalism that allows him to reinvent the traditional role of the war correspondent into something entirely new.

With Hemingway’s engaged first-person narrative persona, the narrator of the dispatches becomes a special type of eyewitness reporter of the war. In *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg explain the complexity of this type of narrator:

His eyes can be turned inward so that he is his own subject matter or outward so that the other characters or the social scene itself become the dominant interest. In the eye-witness form of narration, considerations of character are intimately related to considerations of point of view. To the extent that the narrator is characterized he will dominate the narrative, taking precedence over event and situation. (256)

Hemingway’s unique persona clearly dominates the narrative and undeniably takes “precedence over event and situation.” It is no wonder that conventional correspondents and historians alike gave his dispatches a poor rating because he was not working with the conventional “objective” third-person narrative. Hemingway himself even undervalued their literary merit (Meyers 398). However, as Curran points out, “Hemingway’s choice of magazine for publishing his work is significant primarily because *Collier’s* was a popular one, selling for ten cents and reaching a broad, general audience” (30). In “Novelist as Reporter: Ernest Hemingway,” William White states that “instead of the objective reporting we normally associate with daily journalism, Hemingway used what he saw for his own particular purposes, whether it was to be published as a news dispatch or a short story” (78). Instead of the objective

“truth,” Hemingway was giving the people the true “gen” (gen being Hemingway’s own term for authenticity).

In his dispatches, Hemingway made good writing accessible to the “general” reader, although highbrow readers obviously read his work as well. In “The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,” Walter J. Ong discusses the complexity of Hemingway’s theoretical reader:

The reader . . . has a well-marked role assigned him. He is a companion-in-arms . . . It is a flattering role. Hemingway readers are encouraged to cultivate high self-esteem. (63)

Although Ong is specifically talking about Hemingway’s fiction here, the theoretical audience in these journalistic dispatches is not really any different. In fact, according to Ong, because Hemingway’s war journalism is

about the here and now, and, if the story can be got to the reader quickly, the camaraderie can be easily projected between the narrator and the reader. The reader is close enough temporally. . . to the event for him to feel like a vicarious participant. (67)

By conveying the closeness of the war, the narrative persona in these two dispatches naturally fits into the overall scheme of Hemingway’s narrative strategy. Because the writer is both narrator of and participant in the event, the narrator truly knows the experience firsthand; therefore, Hemingway naturally presents the material in the first-person perspective. In “Point of View in Hemingway’s Novels and Short Stories: A Study of the Manuscripts,” Genevieve Hily-Mane sees Hemingway’s choice of narratives in a somewhat different way:

. . . the choice of person is felt as being important in order to render the equivalent of a real contact between reader and novelist; and the writer is thinking more of conditioning his reader—actually forming him, rather than informing him—since he points out that such a technique makes it possible to transmit things to the reader’s memory and experience to such a degree that

they become an integral part of his life without his realizing it. (37)

The reader experiences the action in the dispatches vicariously because he becomes conditioned to do so. In this way, war experience becomes a part of his own experience.

In a sense, the narrative tense is only retrospective because of the time it takes the material to get published in the magazine; it is not necessarily an aesthetic device that conveys reflective distance (as in the retrospective first-person narrative in *A Farewell to Arms*). It seemed to have taken about six weeks for the article to get published from the day the event occurs. The narration then is retrospective only because Hemingway used the past tense to condition the reader to transcend the time lag between the event in the dispatch and the date of publication. The reader benefits from the complexity of this narration by being theoretically able "to feel" like a vicarious participant.

At times, even Hemingway got caught up in this complicated narrative, as he switched from the past to the present tense intermittently. In the sentence, "this is what the alleged front was like at that time" ("Battle" 371), for example, the "is" denotes the present tense (in the here and now) and the "was" signifies the retrospective narration of the combat itself. However, when Hemingway actually described the combat he switched back to the present tense. In Ong's view, the shift from the present to the past tense in the dispatches detracts from the "vicarious" participation of the war. In order to maximize the conditioning of the reader, Hemingway thus minimized this shift from the present to the retrospective.

In terms of delivering a sense of immediacy, the engaged first-person narrator works as well in the short story as it does in the dispatches. In the short story, for example, the narrator not only tells of the killing of the young German boy but also pulls the trigger that kills him:

"I'll try one with the M-1," I said. Auguste handed it to me and I waited until the first German on the bicycle was past the half-track and clear of the trees and then had the sight on him, swung with him and missed . . .

I tried it again swinging further ahead. The German fell in the same disconcerting heartbreaking way and lay in the road with the velo upside down and a wheel still spinning. ("Black Ass" 587)

The lack of what Wayne C. Booth describes as "aesthetic distance" (121) between the narrator and the action creates an interesting moral tension in the story. Even in war, an assassination by definition is not the moral equivalent to an act like destroying a tank with an anti-tank weapon. An assassination is usually a dispassionate act against another person—an act which morally could be considered close to murder. As in the dispatches, the narrative in the short story is also retrospective without being reflective. Whereas the lack of reflection helps the dispatches in creating a sense of vicariousness, the lack of reflection in the short story also involves the reader closely in the act of pulling the trigger on another human being. Because the reader shares in the narrator's sense of action, the reader shares in the killing as well. To borrow an idea from Ong, the experience of this event is almost too "vicarious" to comprehend the moral consequences of the narrator's assassination of the young boy. The reader thus becomes an unwilling accomplice in the act of killing.

Perhaps because combat in this war moved so fast, the narrator does not fully comprehend the moral dilemma of his actions—he did not have time to. Yet despite the narrator's personal involvement in the action, Kenneth G. Johnson writes in *The Tip of the Iceberg: Hemingway and the Short Story* that the "narrator, who appears to be in command of the irregulars at the crossroads, is saddened by the slaughter" (251). But it is not until the narrator has pulled the trigger and mortally wounded the young man that he begins to understand the moral consequences of his actions; however, by then it is too late. With dispassionate irony, the narrator describes the young man's death:

We went first to the German in the road. He was not dead but was shot through the lungs. We took him as gently as we could and laid him down as comfortable as we could . . . He tried to talk but he couldn't. He was trying to take it the way he'd always heard you should.

Claude got a couple of tunics from the dead and made a pillow for him. Then he stroked his head and held his hand and felt his pulse. The boy was watching him all the time but he could not talk. The boy never looked away from him and Claude bent over and kissed him on the forehead. (588)

The narrator's emotional change from coolly aiming the rifle to the sensitivity demonstrated in this scene is remarkable. In the span of probably an hour, the narrator's emotional range will have gone from adrenaline-induced excitement to a "black ass" depression ("Black Ass" 589). As evidenced by a letter to Colonel Charles T. Lanham, 2 April 1945, Hemingway uses the term "black ass" for emotional depression (Baker, *Letters* 578). The narrator probably had been drinking throughout, but that still does not fully explain his dramatic emotional change; the narrator was obviously having moral regrets about the killing of an "innocent" soldier, which in itself may have accounted for his need to be drunk while carrying out this mission. This was probably not the first nor the last time he would have been an assassin at the crossroads.

The similarity in narrative perspective between this short story and the Chapter IV vignette in *In Our Time* helps in understanding the complexity of this situation. Although the persona in the WWI vignette is entirely different than its WWII counterpart, the immediacy of the first-person narrative is not:

It was a frightfully hot day. We'd jammed an absolutely perfect barricade across the bridge . . . priceless. A big wrought-iron grating from the front of a house. Too heavy to lift and you could shoot through it and they would have to climb over it . . . It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we potted them from forty yards . . . It was an absolutely perfect obstacle . . . We were frightfully put out when we heard the flank had gone, and we had to fall back. (37)

In this vignette, the narrator is so caught up in admiring the perfection of his killing field that he has forgotten that he is literally hunting human beings. Despite his respect for the valor of the enemy's officers, he is only bothered by the fact that he has to

leave this murderous “playground” without killing more enemy soldiers. Because the vignette is so short, the reader never knows if the narrator had any moral regrets for his actions. Yet what Hemingway has so skillfully depicted in this vignette is that otherwise perfectly sane men can get so caught up in killing that they forget their humanity. Thus, the experience of black ass in the WWII short story represents the soldier regaining his humanity as he realizes what he has done. Hemingway, who knew the moral requirement of war firsthand, reports this terrible irony without editorial comment because he knows that this inhumanity is an irreconcilable condition of combat.

Before he wrote “Black Ass at the Cross Roads,” the first-person narrator in Hemingway’s short stories about war typically provided no more than the bare facts. In fact, Hemingway’s fiction rarely involved combat directly at all. Whereas in other short stories such as “In Another Country” and “Now I Lay Me” the first-person narrator is telling a story not about his combat experiences, but about his moral and physical recovery from those experiences, the narrators in this WWII story and in the WWI vignette are reporting from combat, from actual sites of battle. Generally, in his writing, Hemingway has proven more concerned with the lasting psychological effect of war, rather than with the exact moment a hero is being changed by his experiences of war. Especially since the persona in the “Black Ass” has so much in common with the author’s persona in his *Collier’s* dispatches, this short story’s first-person narrator offers an unusual glimpse into the transformation of a Hemingway hero. What is most important to understand in the similarity between the war correspondent in the dispatches and the first-person narrator in the short story, however, is that each was an eyewitness to the terrible tragedy of war. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hemingway, the writer, was able to place vicariously a reader into a modern combat situation because Hemingway, the man, had had the guts to go there. □

Notes

1. Collaboration has special significance in France during WWII because “the orders of the greatest living French soldier [Marshal Petain] held them [the French people] to collaboration with the enemy” (Foot 12).

2. For example, in “Battle for Paris,” Hemingway describes French irregulars:

When I reached the outpost again, I found two cars full of French guerrilla fighters, most of whom were naked to the waist. They were armed with pistols and two Sten guns they had received by parachute. (365)

These guerrillas are similar to those found in the short story:

German prisoners who had been taken by irregulars were often as cooperative as head waiters or minor diplomats. In general we regarded the Germans as perverted Boy Scouts. This is another way of saying they were splendid soldiers. We were not splendid soldiers. We were specialists in a dirty trade. (“Black Ass” 581)

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