DESIGNED TO AMUSE: HEMINGWAY'S

THE TORRENTS OF SPRING AND
INTERTEXTUAL COMEDY

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"So that's that."
—Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway's *The Torrents of Spring* is a strange book. Published in 1926 prior to the appearance of his career-defining novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Torrents* takes as its subjects Midwesterners of Michigan, men and women searching for connections and meaning. In popular Hemingway culture, the novel operates on a variety of planes. This oft-forgotten satiric novel, composed during Thanksgiving week, November 1925, separates the composition and publication of the author's first major novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Written to satirize the works of Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, as well as the publishing industry itself, *Torrents* utilizes several intertextual devices, labeled "Author's Notes" or "Notes to the Reader" throughout. The major function of the text, according to Michael S. Reynolds, may have been to force the severing of Hemingway's contract with his first publisher, Boni & Liveright, so that he could join Charles Scribner's Sons. Hemingway's contract stipulated that he would produce three books for Boni & Liveright; however, if the house rejected any of the three for publication, the author would be free to take his work elsewhere. Robert W. Trogdon notes that Hemingway, "made no attempt to deny the true nature of the work, making sure that Liveright knew exactly why he should reject The Torrents of Spring," thereby freeing him from the contract (22).

This question has become a source of wide speculation in Hemingway studies. Though Hemingway insisted that he did not write *Torrents* for such a purpose, feeling that the novel could stand on its own, the circumstances surrounding its inception and publica-
tion have led many scholars to question the author's veracity. Recognizing the novel's dual function allows for a better understanding of Hemingway's textual comedy; as both satire and contract-breaker, the work stands as a Hemingway time capsule, representing an important early moment in an author's burgeoning career.

The novel carries little weight in the academy; only a handful of articles discuss the work at length, with most recognizing function over aesthetics. Scott Donaldson notes that "whatever the intentions, Hemingway had the knack for getting himself and his work talked about," with F. Scott Fitzgerald and editor Max Perkins doing most of the talking (694). Similarly, Carlos Baker separates "the great business" of composing *The Sun Also Rises* from "the funny business" of writing *The Torrents of Spring*, with the latter representing "the first public notice that Hemingway was on his own," the means by which he became artistically independent (*Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* 37). More critically, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner concludes, "without a sense of Anderson's signature faux primitivism, stilted inner monologues, and narrative meanderings, *The Torrents of Spring* just reads like bad Hemingway" (70). However, Robert Coltrane reads the novel differently; citing Hemingway's reading of both *Dark Laughter* and Ivan Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring* concurrently in pre-composition, he asserts that "where Turgenev used a precise choice of words that involve the reader in the scene while also advancing the plot with economy—a technique Hemingway sought to emulate—Anderson's attempts as impressionism and stream-of-consciousness produced monotonous repetition, awkward fragments, and a ponderously slow pace" (152). Coltrane's recognition of the dual influence echoes the dual function of the published book, with the intertextual materials asserting much of Hemingway's authorial frustrations. Though the satire proves primary to the work, the novel "shows us a Hemingway we would not see again" (159), as Hemingway effectively shed his influences to get on with the rewriting of *The Sun Also Rises* (159). Easily the least-mentioned (and read) of Hemingway's works (proven by its lack of critical attention), *Torrents'* neglect promotes rereading, if only for the pleasure of witnessing the author's performance. However, the intertextual portions of the narrative in the form of embedded author's notes guide readers to a more fully aware Hemingway who offers critiques of composition, authorship, printing and the publishing industry as components of the satire.

**Designed to Amuse: Hemingway's The Torrents of Spring**

Though many of Hemingway's works maintain a near timeless quality, the exercises wrought in *Torrents* date the work. At that time Anderson was widely read and his style was easily recognizable. Today, that type of direct satire requires initial attention to Anderson as much as it requires understanding Hemingway's techniques. Considering that the majority of Anderson's fiction has lost favor with the academy and readers, this work puzzles Hemingway's staunchest supporters. Though written in a style similar to that of his early short stories, with short, terse sentences and attention to detail *The Torrents of Spring* breaks from convention in several moments specifically concerning its intertextual play. I contend that Hemingway's novel deserves a re-evaluation based in part on his experimentation with intertextual materials, specifically his author's notes to the reader. Because this novel was written early in his career and prior to his first mainstream success, Hemingway eschewed the well-worn aesthetic that would drive most of his fiction in favor of a slight, witty, tongue-in-cheek parody of one of his early mentors. Before Hemingway could become the author of *The Sun Also Rises* he had to play with authorship in *The Torrents of Spring*, cementing the acute sense of timing, style and economy he saw lacking in other prominent authors. Once finished with the satire, he could point readers away from such pretension in favor of a new style: his own.

Writing Horace Liveright on 7 December 1925, Hemingway defended his methods, explaining, "I do not think that anybody with any stuff can be hurt by satire" (Letters 434). Though the references to Anderson are too many to count, Hemingway insisted, "This one has the advantage of starting with all the people who have read Black [sic] Laughter to sell to first and when it gets started it will be awfully hard to stop. It does not depend on Anderson for its appeal, but it has that to start with" (435-36). Hemingway was quite aware of Liveright's possible reaction, since Anderson was a key success in the Boni & Liveright house. Whether his novel's intentions married with his results or not, the work was rejected by Liveright due to its depiction of Anderson's fiction. Hemingway wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald on 1 January 1926 that "I have known all along that they could not and would not be able to publish it as it makes a bum out of their present ace and best seller Anderson. Now in 10th printing" (459). Once published by Scribners, the novel did not sell well, though critics picked up on the author's wit and comedic styling, as well as his intertextual author's notes. Contextually, part of this com-
Fragmentary glimpses of Stein followed by the incessant questioning of Anderson, coupled with the meandering thoughts and actions of thinly sketched characters, provide the work with an ample satiric quality, something explained in his preface.

Hemingway's elimination of his preface, then, proves important. It is surprising that Hemingway cut anything from this text, as Reynolds concludes that “ten days after it was begun, the book was finished: unplanned and unedited, The Torrents of Spring was ready for the typist” (334). However, Hemingway eventually wrote on the typescript of the preface, “I will probably cut this out” and put a large “x” through the entire text (“Author’s Preface” 62). Why Hemingway cut it is unknown. If he was worried that he had gone too far with a preface to his satire, his final text proper shows no such worry. Littered with section epigrams (from Fielding’s Joseph Andrews), tongue-in-cheek section titles (Part One: “Red and Black Laughter” [Torments 1]), overt digressions from author to reader, and easily discernible stylistic machinations mimicking Anderson and Stein, The Torrents of Spring is replete with elements that mark the work as anything but restrained. Though Hemingway skewers his satiric subjects, he never mentions why or how he is doing it, something a published preface would have possibly clarified. To get at the truth behind his satire Hemingway had to trust his readers’ abilities to recognize the style and laugh at the punch lines. Had he given them the punch in a preface, the work might have lost some of its humor. His choice to cut the preface asserts his willingness to remove unessential pieces already submerged into other textual components, allowing his embedded author’s notes to the reader more room to maneuver.

These notes feed off the many repetitive Anderson notions (especially characters “wondering”) littered throughout the text, for instance, early on Yogi Johnson looks out a window: “Yogi Johnson stood looking out of the window of a big pump-factory in Michigan. Spring would soon be here. Could it be that what this writing fellow Hutchinson had said, ‘If winter comes can spring be far behind?’ would be true again this year? Yogi Johnson wondered” (Torrents 3). Scripps O’Neil, once finding his way to the pump factory, “knew it was the factory. They weren’t going to fool him on that. He walked up to the door. There was a sign on it: KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU. Can that mean me? Scripps wondered. He knocked on the door and went in” (28). Later another character, Diana, having just mar-
ried Scripps O'Neil, effectively becoming his second wife, is described as follows:

She had a man now, a man of her own. For her own. Could she keep him? Could she hold him for her own? She wondered. Mrs. Scripps, formerly an elderly waitress, now the wife of Scripps O'Neil. With a good job in the pump-factory. Diana Scripps. Diana was her own name. It had been her mother's, too. Diana Scripps looking into the mirror and wondering could she hold him... Diana looked into the mirror. Could she hold him? Could she hold him? That thought never left her now. (43)

These wonderings and repetitions call directly to readers familiar with Anderson's Dark Laughter as well as the work of Gertrude Stein and others. The questioning done by the characters fractures the narrative flow of sentences, with Hemingway deconstructing style and work on a sentence-by-sentence basis. Thank goodness the novel is short, for the exercise grows increasingly tiresome, another intended effect of Hemingway's satire.

While much has been done to connect the obvious satirical elements directed at Sherwood Anderson and his work, little has been done to understand the many author's notes that appear throughout the text. Granted, they are smarmy, tongue-in-cheek, and off topic. But if the effect of satire is to clarify and critique a social or cultural situation through carefully structured comedy, the notes perform their duty well. Appearing at various points within the text proper, these notes take a sharp detour from the flow of the novel and directly address readers, covering a variety of topics from editing and composition to structural integrity and fluidity and purporting to assist readers. The first appears a little over halfway through the novel, with Hemingway asking the printer to disregard the note. It's for the reader, not the printer. He takes a swing at printers, writing, "what difference does it make to the printer? Who is the printer, anyway? Gutenberg. The Gutenberg Bible" (46). Taking this buffoonish authority toward his readers, Hemingway placates them: "In case the reader is becoming confused, we are now up to where the story opened with Yogi Johnson and Scripps O'Neil in the pump-factory itself, with the Chinook wind blowing... the story will move a little faster from now on, in case any of the readers are tiring" (46-7).

Keeping with the critique of repetition, he reminds readers again that "at any rate, we will now go on with Yogi Johnson. Yogi Johnson, the reader may remember, is the chap who was in the war. As the story opens, he is just coming out of the pump-factory. (See page three.)" (47). Such placating not only disrupts the narrative with its self-referencing and arrogance, but also makes the reader feel rightfully annoyed to be condescended to. This effect adds invariably to the satire Hemingway set out to write, for he is able to reinforce the haughty and brooding nature of the school he critiques while posing as a member of that company.

His next note comes after a direct reference to Dark Laughter, in which Hemingway describes two black figures looking through the slit in the roof of an Indian club to which Yogi has been brought by two large Indians: "Above him a slit came in the roof. Then it was blocked by two black figures, there was the sound of a kick, a blow, a series of thuds, some dull, some sharp, and two human forms came crashing down the ladder. From above floated the dark, haunting sound of a Negro laughter" (67). Earlier Johnson questions his surroundings: "Where had he been? Had he been in an Indian club? What was it all about? Was this the end?" (66). Once seeing and hearing the laughter, Johnson leaves the club with the Indians, as Hemingway reminds readers that "[f]rom above them, out of the window of the club came the haunting sound of a Negro laughing" (67). Ending the chapter on a fitting note of tension, confusion and anxiety for the characters is obstructed by Hemingway's next note, in which he boasts, "In case it may have any historical value, I am glad to state that I wrote the foregoing chapter in two hours directly on the typewriter, and then went out to lunch with John Dos Passos, whom I consider a very forceful writer" (67-8). Noting his ease in writing the chapter puts Hemingway's previous chapter, with its tense ending, at odds with the laborious writer persona. Though he brings this persona in later on, his reference to Dos Passos also plays into the pose his author adopts. Positioning writers of great worth around him inevitably results in great writing, as far as the notes are concerned. Early on Hemingway drops the names of Booth Tarkington, H.G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford (whom he disparages), H.L. Mencken, Dos Passos, Anderson himself and eventually F. Scott Fitzgerald. This listing of forces continually pummels the reader with a "look who I know" pose, an arrogance created to repel readers and therefore make them laugh. Fitfully, Hemingway concludes, "I would like the reader to particularly remark the way the complicated threads of the lives of the various characters in the book are gathered together, and then held
there in that memorable scene in the beanery. It was when I read this chapter aloud to him that Mr. Dos Passos exclaimed, ‘Hemingway, you have wrought a masterpiece’” (68). Since this note concerns an episode readers have yet to encounter, Hemingway’s mock arrogance regarding Dos Passos’s review only adds to the humor once the episode appears. Introducing the episode by proclaiming its necessity, excellence and masterful quality results in the threads fraying, leaving a void. It is this void that Hemingway has been alluding to all along, the void inherent in works like Dark Laughter.

Authoritative and overbearing, Hemingway offers a “P.S.” section, tutoring readers with “it is meant in the best spirit of friendship when I say that you have no idea, reader, what a hard chapter this is going to be to write. As a matter of fact, and I try to be frank about these things, we will not even try and write it until tomorrow” (69). Hemingway bookends his note with anecdotes regarding how easy it is to write and how difficult it is to write, two sides of the same persona. Flashing brilliance through both genius (writing naturally) and craft (writing deliberately) actually structures the modern author. However, he makes these statements in order to remind readers what lurks behind written texts: work. These notes put readers in a position of questioning authority by boasting openly about it. Whether that work results in a true representation of humanity remains the readers’ responsibility to determine.

Following soon after is a preemptive note to chapter fourteen, where everyone is “Inside the beanery. They are all inside the beanery. Some do not see the others. Each are intent on themselves” (78). Hemingway mentions an episode where F. Scott Fitzgerald came over prior to the writing of the following chapter, got drunk and sat in the fireplace, informing readers, “I know, reader, that these things sometimes do not show in a story, but, just the same, they are happening, and think what they mean to chaps like you and me in the literary game. If you should think this part of the story is not as good as it might have been remembered, reader, that day in and day out all over the world things like this are happening” (76). Apologizing for the material written, Hemingway assures readers, as he did earlier, that the work “doesn’t seem so bad,” hoping that readers like it, and if they do, “will you tell your friends about it, and try and get them to buy the book just as you have done? I only get twenty cents on each book that is sold, and while twenty cents is not much nowadays still it will mount up to a lot if two or three hundred thousand copies of the book are sold” (77). This ridiculous in-text plea for readers to help him sell the book offers a sterling critique of the publishing industry, as certain books (including In Our Time, published one year prior) suffer from lack of appropriate advertising and coverage, as well as marketing. Hemingway sees this as an opportunity to situate authorship between editing and advertising as much as between writing and revising. With authority dependent upon reviews and reader response, Hemingway concludes his penultimate note accordingly: “At least, [the chapter] will be just as good as I can write it. We both know how good that can be, if we read the blurbs, eh, reader?” (77).

This note is a sly reference to the dust jacket (of which Hemingway disapproved) for the first edition of In Our Time, published by Boni & Liveright, that featured several blurbs promoting Hemingway’s prose, thus exposing the rupture between artist and public. Since authorship is a public creation rather than a private one, Hemingway’s deft understanding and treatment of that authority pushes his own critique of publishing as much as his lack of regard for Anderson’s methods.

His final note to the reader contains an explanation of a mysterious episode left hanging early in the novel. In explaining the story’s background and history, Hemingway puts the final nail in the coffin, assuring readers that he is just clearing things up. He writes, “Anyway, reader, as a secret history it always seemed to me like an awfully good story, and I know you would rather I explain it here than drag an explanation into the novel, where really, after all, it has no place” (90). Of course, if the episode’s background had no place, then the episode itself has no place in the novel either, a point Hemingway subtly implies. If the novel is wrought with such infelicities and unexplained fractures, he placates his reader one last time, writing “I just felt I owed it to you, reader, to give some explanation” (90). Since the Hemingway style is predicated on exactness and directness, his referral here to an “explanation” brims with arrogance. That present-day readers would recognize this conceit more clearly (since his style had not completely pervaded the reading market as it has today) makes the joke even clearer. Hemingway always felt that he achieved his style by stripping away the unimportant material in favor of the absolute truth, the thing which matters most. His authorial pose concedes defeat in his final note, for if this story requires explanation in order to be effective, how many other parts of the story require such treatment? The satire reaches a high point here, for
Hemingway does not personally operate on the level that his *Torrents* persona does. He trusts his readers will separate the real Hemingway from this one, and reviews proclaimed the novel’s satire effective thanks in large part to the author’s notes. With these notes, Hemingway was able to construct an authorial persona akin to Anderson’s, while simultaneously critiquing that very persona for readers. At times maddening and hilarious, these notes add comedic ruptures to Hemingway’s novel, coming at just the right times, and with just the right amount of punch.

Because of the novel’s unique structural elements, many of the contemporary reviews cited Hemingway’s author’s notes as crucial to the satire. The *Boston Transcript* characterized Hemingway as willing and eager to “sign-board his way with explicit direction.” These directions poke fun at process and product, as Hemingway sees fit to present readers with a relentless onslaught of paratextual and intertextual materials alongside his text proper. Lawrence Morris, writing for the *New Republican*, considered them “a healthy laugh at the over-solenomy of modern fiction. Hemingway supplies the grain of salt.” The notes achieve a level of fun, as the reviewer for the *Oakland Tribune* wrote: “Indeed, the enthusiasm of the author leap out of the printed page, or spill over into the margins, where he addresses the reader in confidence, takes him into more secrets” (*Oakland*). The *Detroit News* correctly reads the inclusion of the notes as a chaotic harbinger, declaring, “These notes add not a whit to the coherence of the story. In fact, you are not supposed to know what the story is all about, and you never will.” On the other hand, the *Louisville Herald Post* misses the joke, writing “books with their tongues in their cheeks affect us unpleasantly. When we find that, after the End, there’s a smart Aleck problem for the Reader, we grow rebellious.” The rebellion is the point for Hemingway, as his authorial persona relies on readers being both amused and frustrated by the exercise, thereby placing added animosity upon Anderson’s fiction. That is exactly the reaction the satire is supposed to elicit, as Richard West for the *Tennessean* noted “a desire for a little more ingenuity and a little less sameness in the plots of Mr. Anderson can be detected . . . I think we may say the book expresses what most of us have felt at one time or another.” Whether timely or not, Hemingway’s short novel made a small dent in the literary landscape once published. Though he made more than a dent with *The Sun Also Rises* some months later, his use of author’s notes in *The Torrents of Spring* points to a writer willing to experiment with intertextual elements in order to critique multiple publishing functions along with his earliest champions. Recognizing the former strengthens our reading of early Hemingway as he sought to evolve into the writer he would eventually become.

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NOTES

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1Hemingway’s conclusion after explaining the rejection of *Torrents* to F. Scott Fitzgerald in a 31 December/1 January 1925 letter (Letters 460).


3Hemingway wrote Ezra Pound on 30 November 1925, “Wrote [Torrents] to destroy Sherwood and various others. It does all right. It’s first really adult thing have ever done. Jesus Christ it is funny” (Letters 422).

4Reynolds refers to the novel as a “literary foul to force Liveright to break their contract” (332).

5The main source of this insistence comes, of course, from the author’s correspondence with his first publisher, Horace Liveright. Trusting the author’s overtures provokes questionable at best.

6Coltrane concludes, “[Hemingway] would not again resort to the use of an extended satire as a means of relieving personal and professional frustrations” (159).

7Hemingway’s combative relationship with critics would be more evident in his 1935 nonfiction *Green Hills of Africa*, in which he explains how critics are “angeworms in a bottle” who make good writers “impotent” (*Green Hills of Africa*, 21, 24). The benignal of that sentiment are found in this preface.

8Hemingway included part of Fielding’s preface to Joseph Andrews as the epigraph to *The Torrents of Spring*. It reads: “And perhaps there is one reason why a comic writer should of all others be at least excused for deviating from nature, since it may not be always so easy for a serious poet to meet with the great and admirable; but life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous” (lii).

9In his review of *Torrents*, Harry Hansen of the *New York World* characterized Anderson’s fiction as “easy to parody. He is always repeating himself, both in his words and in his attitudes. He shows no change, no many-sideesness. He is always the dreamy, searching groper, watching the commonplace facts of life with a sort of boyish amazement on his face. His prose is slow and simple . . . His thoughts mature as slowly on paper as they mature slowly in the mind of the average peddling man.”

10In his 7 December 1925 letter to Liveright, Hemingway added: “the making of all those burbs on the cover, each one of which would have made, used singly, a valuable piece of publicity but which, grouped together as they were simply put the reader on the defensive” (Letters 435).

WORKS CITED


