

## Book Review

### ***Reading Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls: Glossary and Commentary.* Alex Vernon. The Kent State University Press, 2024. \$42.95, 366 pp.**

Reviewed by Joshua Hamm  
United States Air Force Academy

**W**hether one is a literary scholar seeking to understand more about *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway the man, or the early twentieth-century cultural milieus that engendered writers like Hemingway—or whether one is a student tasked with writing an essay about the novel, who just may develop a more than passing interest in Hemingway in the process—*Reading Hemingway* provides an essential tool for indexing the novel's pivotal intricacies. I am of the former sort; a burgeoning scholar whose primary interests consist of early modern poetry and poetics with emphasis on religious lyric, as well as various subfields such as the history of theology, history of liturgical practice, and biblical studies. When inspired to broaden my literary experience into fields such as modernism and the early twentieth century American novel, I often wade into the dark, grasping for some piece of intertextuality that engages early modern literature and its influence on later cultures and texts. More often than not I am left to excavate those intertextualities for myself, but not so with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Alex Vernon has composed a glossary and commentary that expertly uncovers and illuminates the novel in a way that is invaluable for both Hemingway scholars and nonspecialists alike.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* is now eighty years old. Vernon's aim in composing *Reading Hemingway*, as stated in his acknowledgements, is "to make *For Whom the Bell Tolls* come alive again, as it lived for its writer and its first readers, as it might for a new generation." As any scholar knows, direct links between how a text's writer, readers, and future readers conceive its meaning and cultural vibrancy are tenuous at best, and if they exist at all they are far from immanently recoverable. The complexities involved in establishing the precise meaning-making modes and cultural apparatuses that inform a text's writer-reader relationship seem to increase exponentially with a text's age, and the more a text looms over and within a literary "canon" the higher the burden of proof the scholar must meet in justifying claims about such relationships. Vernon's aims are therefore bold and ambitious, but he embraces their daunting complexity head on in his introduction, aptly setting the tone for such a project with a quote from Susan Sontag's famous essay "Against Interpretation": "The function of criticism," she writes, "should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" (xi). Given the precarity of meaning and the depth to which *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as an American novel, is embedded within and mobilized by the politics of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), reconstructing what the novel *is* rather than advancing an argument about what it ought to *mean* for future readers is a prudent and highly generative distinction to draw at the outset. In his introduction, Vernon deftly sketches what *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is by way of tracing what it appears to have been for its immediate readers and critics as well as what it became for ensuing generations, allowing its intertextuality, rather than its genre and purported significance, to do the work of showing forth and enlivening the novel.

As Vernon goes on to make clear in his commentary on Hemingway's front matter, the intertextual history of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* does not begin with its publication, or even its composition. It begins at least several centuries prior, when writers as seminal as Shakespeare and John Donne unwittingly sowed literary seeds that would later bear fruit too irresistible for so many readers and writers, Hemingway among them. The runner-up title of the novel, Vernon notes, was "The Undiscovered Country," which is a metaphor for death borrowed from Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy:

Who would these fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of? (*Hamlet* 3.1.77-83)

Preoccupations with suicide appear to be a shared center of gravity here between Hamlet's musings, Robert Jordan's wrestling with his father's suicidal demise, and Hemingway's own "[mullings] over suicide a great deal during the late thirties," which he contemplates openly in two of his letters (Vernon 4). Vernon observes that Hemingway may have known one of Shakespeare's possible sources for *Hamlet*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), in which a main character, Hieronimo, is driven mad by his wife's suicide. However, Vernon also gestures toward possible extensions of this suicidal preoccupation to greater scales of complexity by way of Allen Josephs's *Ernest Hemingway's Undiscovered Country*.

The “undiscovered country” suggests, particularly in Hemingway’s view, *the nature of Spain itself*; more specifically, within the novel it hints at *the unknown but fateful* and omen-ridden nature of the episode of blowing the bridge . . . above all, the “undiscovered country” is *the realm of the artist’s imagination* where all the other elements are given a life of their own. (Vernon 5; emphasis added)

These layers of intertextuality—from Kyd to Shakespeare, from Shakespeare to Hemingway, from Hemingway to conceptions of Spain, fate, and the literary imagination—are exemplary of Vernon’s methodology and vision for an enlivened *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. By excavating these cultural touch stones and the connections they have enabled, *Reading Hemingway* presents a portrait of the novel that “puzzles the will, / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of.” It provides a description that disrupts and forestalls our readerly impulses to grope for an overarching, unobvious, and absolute meaning of the text that we will immediately recognize as meaningful eighty years past its publication. As Vernon appears to tacitly argue throughout *Reading Hemingway*, to be far afield from what *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is, despite grasping a felt though ultimately imposed meaning, allows it to become something like a dead skin long since shed which readers gawk at, feeling connected with the body that once wore it merely by way of the distortions of affective speculation. Apart from being the opposite of enlivened, such a readerly relationship with a text is ominously foreboding of its impending disintegration from literary consciousness altogether, the very fate Vernon aims to forestall in composing this reading companion.

Yet, readerly impulses to reach for immediate, decontextualized impressions of a text’s meaning are often what conspire to produce its intertextuality. This paradox is not

lost on Vernon, who does not shy away from the fact that Hemingway's appropriation of Donne's "Meditation XVII" (1624) for his novel's title and epigraph bears no apparent connection with or interest in its original context and meaning. As Donne writes:

No man is an *lland*, intire of it selfe; every man  
is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a  
*Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse,  
as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor*  
of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death*  
diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And  
therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;  
It tolls for *thee*.

Since Hemingway stumbled upon this piece of Donne "while flipping anxiously through *The Oxford Book of English Prose*," Vernon argues that "one should perhaps proceed no further than a cursory reading of the passage, perhaps intended to be received by readers in 1940 as a call to action, to global citizenship, to war against the fascist threat" (5). Vernon rightly points out that Donne's text has very little to do with politics, that he "uses body-politic analogies...as analogies" for humanity's collective loss when anyone dies (6). The bell always tolls for thee because, Donne argues, we are all of a created piece with those whose death is signaled by the tolling. It does not beckon the individual to heroic acts of self-sacrifice for a political cause, such as those of Hemingway's Robert Jordan, acts that Donne suggests in *Biathanatos* and *Pseudo-Martyr* bear no meaningful distinction from suicide, as Vernon notes. Despite Hemingway's use of Donne's meditation as a gloss to index the novel's organizing ethic, very little if anything about Jordan's character reflects traits that

Donne would assess as morally exemplary. Hemingway ignores what “Meditation XVII” is, grasping onto an immediate and therefore decontextualized sense of its meaning for a twentieth century moment that is, nevertheless, rhetorically potent for his own text precisely because it is mistaken and misleading. Despite the distorting violence done to “Meditation XVII,” only Donne could have inflected *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the direction of what it would become. Only a misappropriation of Donne’s words, etched as they are into western literary consciousness, could have engendered the intertextuality Vernon elucidates in *Reading Hemingway* so as to enliven the novel.

Vernon maps the fraught history of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* criticism with unflinching honesty, showing that it met with starkly divided sentiments upon initial publication. Whereas American critics tended to hail the novel as soon to be “one of the major novels in American literature” (Vernon xi), those who fought in the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War “trounced it as a political betrayal and as an unrealistic adventure tale that resembled their soldiering experiences not in the least” (Vernon xi-xii). Later critics tended to side with the latter, but in ways more critical of the novel’s style than its historical accuracy. In a 1964 essay, Sontag “slammed the book . . . and works like it ‘as bad to the point of being laughable, but not bad to the point of being enjoyable,’ because ‘they are too dogged and pretentious’” (Vernon xii). Tim O’Brien wrote that it depicts a “‘a pretty dubious moral code,’ with ‘the novel’s concluding scene . . . [being] weirdly Victorian in its celebration of self-sacrificial military values (honor, duty, discipline)’” (Vernon xii). For Vernon, the consistently acrimonious state of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* criticism is largely a function of a genre tension in Hemingway’s aesthetics between romanticism and realism, or perhaps more accurately, between high romance and ruthless naturalism. On the one hand,

the novel has the narrative structure and character of Homer's *Odyssey* married with late modern, and in some ways laughably masculine, romantic sentiments about love and sex. Yet on the other, Hemingway displays a penchant for the brutal and bloody honesty of actual war in the relentlessly progressive mode of the *Iliad*. It is out of these generic tensions, bolstered with contextual misappropriations of literary canon, that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is born. As Vernon leaves his readers at the end of his introduction:

It is October 1940. The Second Spanish Republic is dead. France has fallen as fascist Germany has conquered western continental Europe. Can a war novel contain the Romance and the Real, the genres' conflicting expectations? Can it hold beauty and ugliness? Can it deliver pleasure and appall? Can art appease?

Absolutely, Hemingway says. The hell it can, himself says. (xxxvi)

The tense history of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* criticism therefore perfectly mirrors the aesthetic mode of the novel. As Vernon moves us from his introduction and commentary on Hemingway's front matter into his elucidations of the text proper, he has set the primary conceptual frame for his picture of what the novel is in the year 2024: a constellation of aesthetic tensions and contextual misappropriations unfurled by eighty years of equally acrimonious history and critical commentary. Vernon maintains this theoretical framing throughout his commentary on each chapter, further refining the reader's understanding of significant moments within the novel, while contextualizing them within the relevant history as well as the very constellation of tensions it has engendered.

Vernon begins his analysis and commentary on Chapter 1 by considering Jordan's body posture and surroundings described in its very first sentence: "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest." Noting how this becomes something of an

organizing motif for the novel, establishing “a pattern the novel repeats during soldiering and sex scenes” (11), Vernon points out that it returns to this image in its closing sentence: “He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest” (471). The novel’s circularity is also highly compressed chronologically; the time elapsed between Jordan’s initial laying on pine needles and his feeling his heart against them as he lay dying is a mere, although intense and fevered, three calendar days. Vernon makes this feature of the novel explicit for readers of his companion text, as he clearly marks the start of each calendar day as *Reading Hemingway* progresses through chapter commentaries. Such an implied tripartite structure admits of many intertextual possibilities, of course, from “Hemingway’s characterization of the bullfight as a tragedy staged in three acts” to the fact that “it corresponds to the Easter (Paschal) Triduum, the Three Days from the evening of Maundy Thursday to the Sunday evening of Christ’s Resurrection” (11). Such connections are unlikely to be serendipitous, especially in light of the forms of religiosity Hemingway employs elsewhere in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

In Chapter 27, for example, where Hemingway has Joaquin slip into a Hail Mary in response to being bombarded by an air assault, Vernon shows this is more than a response to danger with prayers for defense against evil. Rather, “Joaquín doubly rejects Pasionaria in the turn to Mary and in the very language of the prayer...then moves into the prayer of contrition...Joaquín’s chief sin would be his rejection of the Catholic God, his idolatrous secular replacement of the Virgin Mary with Pasionaria” (Vernon 238). Vernon demonstrates an illuminating sensitivity to these implicitly religious points of intertextuality, even noting that despite Hemingway’s misappropriation of Donne, a “more visible trace of Donne in Jordan” and other characters is found in Donne’s “romantic love poetry, which couples



sexuality's sacred and profane elements" (7). The religious orientations of characters like Jordan and Joaquin with regard to overlaps between the sacred and the sexual are therefore implicitly contrasted, since Jordan appears to strike a sacred-profane balance more in line with Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" than Joaquin's eschewing sexuality as idolatrous. Vernon therefore reveals at least one way in which Hemingway leverages Donne appropriately, albeit much less explicitly than in his misappropriations of him.

Vernon also carefully and honestly explicates Hemingway's grammar and syntax, whose somewhat jarring and anachronistic executions within character dialogue have divided readers and critics. *Reading Hemingway* proves the novel's dialogue intentionally mimetic—that Hemingway's grammatical and syntactical choices are a result of his own sensitivities to possible intertextual and intercultural receptions on the part of his would-be readers. As Vernon writes:

Throughout the novel, Hemingway's translation of Spanish dialogue aims to preserve the foreignness of the culture to English readers and even to Jordan, a professor of Spanish. A smooth translation into a familiar English idiom would fail to remind readers that they are experiencing spoken Spanish, that in a sense they are privy to Jordan's on-the-fly interpretation. It would fail to immerse them in the scene . . . In other words, the novel's sometimes clunky, sometimes too-literal translations have a mimetic effect. What some readers find distracting and distancing is a kind of realism. (14)

The novel's use of *thou*, *thee*, and *thy* appears at once designed to evoke a sense of foreignness for modern English readers while also grounding them, perhaps unawares, in a particular historical moment. As Vernon notes, "*Thou*, *thee*, and *thy* accurately document

the Republic's employment of the informal pronoun for everyone and its rejection of the formal pronoun for anyone—typically used for strangers, elders, and people in positions of authority” (xvii). Historically, these pronouns were used in early modern English as informal pronouns in comparison to the then more formal *you* and *your*. During the Spanish Civil War, with the Republic's attempt to flatten social relations, the historical informalities of *thou*, *thee*, and *thy* pronouns were seized upon and used ubiquitously instead of the more formal modes of address in Spanish (xvii). However, the success of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a thoroughly American novel owes more to lack of scrutiny of these features on the part of American readers than to a recognition of their genius. That Vernon addresses these issues up front is another prudent move in pursuit of depicting what the novel is for twenty-first century readers. If *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is to enjoy continued status as a mainstay in the American canon, thus avoiding relegation to the status of old curio, these intertextual and intercultural ironies of the text must be brought to the forefront of our understanding of it. Chapter by chapter, *Reading Hemingway* does this with expert precision and clarity.

What all of these examples show is that *Reading Hemingway* provides a gloss and commentary as broad as it is deep; it is an indispensable tool for the scholar, the undergraduate, and anyone adjacent or in between. By focusing on clarifying for readers what *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is, how it is what it is, and why it is what it is, Vernon presents an intrepid, thorough, and honest portrait of the novel that avoids overdetermination of its meaning on behalf of current and future readers. Rather than insisting, in ways Hemingway himself does, on a significance as conceptually obscure as it is culturally narrow, *Reading Hemingway* presents an image of the novel for us to interpret faithfully anew, ultimately signaling to future generations, simply, “it tolls for *thee*.”

**Joshua Hamm** is a Major in the United States Space Force and an English Instructor at the United States Air Force Academy. Prior to commissioning as an officer in the Air Force in 2012, he studied early modern philosophy at Miami University. In 2022, he earned an MA in English from the University of Virginia with a concentration in World Religions, World Literature. His research focuses on seventeenth-century religious lyric poetry, with special emphasis on post-Reformation sacramental poetics and literary paraphrases of biblical texts.