



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

49 | Autumn 2007

Special issue: Ernest Hemingway

Falling into the Embrace of the Muse: Pregnancy as Problematic Creation in “Hills Like White Elephants”

Claude Maisonnat



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/733>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2007

Number of pages: 57-66

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Claude Maisonnat, « Falling into the Embrace of the Muse: Pregnancy as Problematic Creation in “Hills Like White Elephants” », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 49 | Autumn 2007, Online since 01 December 2009, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/733>

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

© All rights reserved

Falling into the Embrace of the Muse: Pregnancy as Problematic Creation in "Hills Like White Elephants"

Claude Maisonnat

"It is always a hard ride when the Muse pays her visits," I replied – "She must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring."

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*.

- 1 Judging from the mass of critical comments elicited by a story that is one of the shortest in Hemingway's whole literary output, it stands to reason that the mystery that lies at its core must be particularly resistant. It is, indeed, a tribute to the literary quality of the story that such a limited textual space can accommodate so many different, not to say contradictory, interpretations. If all readers readily agree, even though the fact is never mentioned as such, that the subject of the story is a discussion between a nameless man and a "girl" called Jig about the advisability of getting an abortion, there are as many opinions as there are heads about the exact outcome of the story. To mention but a few, some will argue that the man – a generic American – eventually has it his own way and, more or less perversely, manages to convince the girl to go through the ordeal, while others, on the contrary, will maintain that Jig stands her ground and has made up her mind to have the child whatever the consequences may be.
- 2 Clearly, the text of the short story functions as a sort of screen, of projection space, on which readers are too openly invited to represent their own fantasies or allowed to voice their ideological biases. In this essay, my aim is not to deny the relevance of the moral and ethical issues raised by the story, but to suggest that there is a possibility of eschewing the trap of endless binary oppositions by foregrounding its reflexive dimension. In short, instead of emphasizing the cultural contents of the text, I propose to study its purely literary dimension by showing that it is mostly a story about creation, inspiration, and the process of writing.

- 3 For a start, the very title of the short story functions as a signal that what is at stake here is a purely linguistic game. The title "Hills like White Elephants" presents itself as a standard simile in which tenor (the hills) and vehicle (the color white) appear to be the very subject of the incipit: "The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white" (259). Significantly, the narrative voice in charge of the story deliberately takes up the same theme again a few lines down: "The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry" (259), the better to pave the way for the introduction of the simile: " 'They look *like* white elephants,' she said" (259, my emphasis), thus vindicating the formulation of the title itself. As a result, three elements are clearly brought into play, and they are explicitly correlated: the fact that the subject of the enunciation is now the girl ("she said"), then the speech act of the comparison through the mediation of the preposition "like," and, finally, the seemingly incongruous image of the elephants.
- 4 Therefore, where the narrative voice is flatly descriptive, the girl introduces the unexpected element of the elephants which retroactively implies that the key word of the title is the comparison "*like* elephants" and not so much the "white elephants" as a reference to a supposedly valuable possession whose maintenance cost is too high to warrant the necessity of keeping it any longer. Of course, it is tempting to connect this newly discovered liability with the unwanted baby, but to my mind, it is a deceptive jump toward a conclusion that prevents the reader from considering the textual strategy implemented by Hemingway. At all events, what is undeniable is that the girl's statement triggers off an argument that does not bear on the meaning of the image but on its relevance. No sooner has she rephrased the narrator's descriptive statement into a figurative one than the man comments on her choice of a vehicle:
- "They look like white elephants," she said.
 "I've never seen one." The man drank his beer.
 "No, you wouldn't have."
 "I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything." (259)
- 5 By drawing our attention to the way Jig uses language, the man exposes to the full view of the reader the gap between the actual hills and the imaginary elephants, and by so doing he, more or less consciously, raises the issue of the mimetic representation of reality. To him the metaphor is not acceptable because it is not realistic enough, he has never seen such a rare animal as a white elephant, but when Jig argues that the reason he did not see one is precisely because what she meant was that it was not a visible elephant but an image, an elephant made of words only, he sticks to his guns maintaining that such animals do exist in other parts of the world, and seeing one is consequently a distinct possibility, even if it is not actually realized.
- 6 This amounts to a refusal to lose face, but what this confrontation betrays is the fact that what he resents is the potential, not to say inborn, metaphoricity of language. Evidence that this "literary" debate is more than a bickering over words but reaches deeper into the textual fabric, is to be found in the fact that it is continued on a different mode. Indeed, it is the girl herself who resumes the discussion by suggesting that literary creation in the form of the production of verbal images is meant to afford pleasure, emotional and intellectual enjoyment and gratification:
- "You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."
 "Well, let's try and have a fine time."
 "All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't

that bright?"

"That was bright." (260)

- 7 Let us note, in passing, that the literary theme is associated by contiguity with a network of references to drinking and flowing liquids. Initially, they are sitting at a table drinking beer when the argument begins. It is abruptly interrupted when the girl's attention is drawn to the bead curtain with its advertisement for *Anis del Toro*, which leads to a conversation on drinks with a taste of licorice, the debate is resumed a second time with the following conclusion in the shape of a reconciliation: "'Should we have another drink?' " (260). More unexpectedly, a third bout is launched just after the man has broached the subject of the abortion, arguing that it is a perfectly simple and safe operation that will restore their threatened love. At this juncture, the topic of the literary image crops up in the context of love, as if acceptance of a successful simile acted as a guarantee that the man really loved the girl:
- "And if I do you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"
- "I love you now. You know I love you."
- "I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"
- "I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. [...]" (261)
- Isn't it a strange query for the girl to make, as if literary creation was more important than giving life?
- Or maybe she means that creative writing, as emblemized by the invention of a beautiful image, is the same thing as giving life?
- 8 At any rate, the conclusion that I draw from this situation, and which is the key to my interpretation, is that what the girl means is that it is abortion in the story that must be considered as a metaphor. She is indeed a something of a metaphor herself, as her name openly suggests, since in the turn of the century slang of sailors, the phrase *jig-jig* is a graphic translation of sexual intercourse. This sexual link indubitably casts the girl in the role of a succubus – a female demon reputed to have sex with sleeping men –, or more precisely of the more literary version of the demon, the proverbial Muse, as metaphor of the inspiration of the poet.
- 9 In this perspective, the central question of abortion in the short story becomes a metaphor for problematic literary creation, involving three agents, the girl, the American, and the narrative voice. To simplify outrageously, one could say that the girl stands for the Muse because of her interest and love of refined language: she is pregnant and wants to keep the baby, she is the origin of the story. Thus is the stage set, to replay the very old debate about the function of language in literary creation.
- 10 The American stands for the would-be writer who, as a disciple of Cratylus, believes in the possibility of accurate rendering of reality. His refusal of the baby suggests sterility and the impossibility of creation. Eventually, the narrator, following in the footsteps of Hermogenes, is the one who heeds the desire of the girl as Muse and who rescues the baby, or more accurately, he is the one who fathers the story. Quite significantly, the outcome of the dispute on procreation in the diegetic world of the short story is resolved at the level of the enunciation: the baby becomes the story itself. In the end, there is a happy resolution of the dilemma, whether the diegetic abortion took place or not becomes immaterial, the good news is that a textual baby is born. It is the triumph of the Muse over the death drive.
- 11 From this point of view, it is not illegitimate to assume that the story makes use of a few biographical elements, but they are, perhaps, not to be found exactly where one would

expect them. The fact that the male protagonist is merely referred to as "the American" leaves sufficient room for readers to assume that he might stand for Hemingway himself in the story, and thus the conflicts that he was going through at the time. It is common knowledge that, during the period he was involved in the writing of the story, Hemingway was married to Hadley Richardson and yet was simultaneously conducting an affair with Pauline Pfeiffer. In the complex sentimental imbroglio that ensued, it is claimed that Hemingway expressed his divided allegiance to each woman by saying: "I think that when two people love each other terribly much and need each other in every way and then go away from each other it works almost as bad as an abortion" (Baker 176). On top of that, the news that his first wife Hadley was pregnant, which made the situation even worse, may have found its way into the unconscious implications of the story. Moreover, the fact that Hemingway was uneasy with his desire for paternity transpires from a network of references in his whole *œuvre*, to father and son relationships, principally in the stories centered on Nick Adams, such as the emblematic "Fathers and Sons," in which he distinctly connects the question with the act of writing: "He could not write about him yet, although he would, later, but the quail country made him remember him as he was when Nick was a boy [...]" (459).

- 12 And yet, more than the sentimental and ethical problems, expressed in terms of a problematic pregnancy, that Hemingway had to face, it seems to me that such biographical elements function as a thin veil to disguise the anxiety of a writer not wholly convinced of his mastery of the craft he had chosen, wondering about the tenets of his artistic creed and consequently in need of reassurance. My argument is precisely that it is such a quest for the origin of writing that "Hills like White Elephants" explores in an oblique way. It is worth remembering here that the story allegedly opposes a masculine principle associated with virility and confidence in the practical powers of language, and a feminine principle associated with procreation and a more pregnant, i.e. poetic, relation to language. It is remarkable that the end of the text remains open, and that there is no way of ascertaining whether the abortion will take place or not.
- 13 What remains certain however is that the voice that takes charge of the narrative cannot be said to be nameless and sexless because it is literally composed of the other two. In short, it is both masculine and feminine, so that making a case for androgyny becomes a plausible alternative. Hemingway falls back on the old tradition of the writer as androgynous creature, the artist being defined as the agent who allows both his feminine and masculine parts to merge into the act of creation. On Hemingway's own terms, if the story "Hills like White Elephants" is so successful it is because the man's and the girl's voice become fused into the voice of the androgynous narrative agent, thus making their contradictory desires productive.
- 14 Consequently, femininity in the short story definitely appears as the prime mover that enables creation to take place. If we accept the assumption that the American is a figure of the double for Hemingway, then the end of the story acquires a new layer of significance. Jig is indeed the agent who jigs him into action – that is to say, she triggers off the writing process in him –, and it is no wonder that the excipit should remain her privilege as she expresses both relief and satisfaction that their story comes to its end as narrative: " 'I feel fine,' she said. 'There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.' " (263). The circularity of her last statement, induced by the repetition of the phrase " 'I feel fine,' " is also quite meaningful as she is the alpha and the omega; she is, as it has been noted earlier, at the origin of the story. As far as the dialogues that constitute the text are

concerned, Jig has the first and the final words, but as a figure of the Muse it is also her end (*fine*) that is inscribed in the narrative. Her task has been completed and the writer appears for what he is, the medium through which creation is allowed to take place. At a symbolic level, her pregnancy has not been terminated and, ironically, it is the end (death) of the story that guarantees her survival.

- 15 Once the potential reflexive dimension of the text has been identified, then many other elements in the short story appear to confirm that through the theme of pregnancy and abortion, Hemingway was trying to come to terms with his doubts concerning the aesthetic of representation through language that was to become the hallmark of his writing process, namely the notorious, allegedly objective, understated, unemotional style, so congenial to detachment and anonymity, of which "The Killers" was supposed to be the finest example. "Hills like White Elephants" provides a clear demonstration that beneath the anonymous, non-committal voice of the narrative agent there lies the feminine voice of Jig and the masculine voice of the American. It is small wonder that "Hills like White Elephants" found its place among the seven stories that, in the preface to *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Hemingway claimed he loved best (V).
- 16 That Hemingway specifically strove to make the narrative voice as neutral as possible is perfectly illustrated by the first paragraph of the short story, which can be compared to the painting of a landscape. It is strictly descriptive as far as the setting is concerned, and plainly factual as far as temporality is concerned. In this static scene the two protagonists are barely distinguishable. For this scene to become meaningful it has to be followed by a dialogue, but even the dialogue remains elusive because they only talk about drinking beer in the heat of the day, and nothing can be deduced about the why and wherefore of the presence of the two characters. The second element that will suggest that it is possible to assume that the scene has a hidden meaning, is Jig's introduction of the unexpected elephant metaphor, which triggers off both the protagonists' argument and the readers' speculation about the image itself and the reason why Jig and the American embarked on this discussion.
- 17 Arguably, in this short story, Hemingway dramatized the predicament of the writer in quest of inspiration, by adding a layer of reflexivity to a narrative whose symbolic contents are already so complex, in spite of their simplicity, as to stimulate its readers' exegetic desires. Thus, the spatial framework of the short story becomes relevant in a different way. The station, the train become metaphors of the text itself, while the railway tracks symbolize the signifying chain (or linguistic network) with all the other images of linearity in the text (the lines of hills, the river Ebro, etc.). The long wait at the station which stands at a junction, is a fitting occasion for the protagonist to decide what kind of writer he is going to be, to choose whether he will heed the warnings of the Muse or not, as between Barcelona and Madrid, he stands at a crossroads in his career.
- 18 The same holds water for the obvious opposition, noted by all critics, between the dryness of the barren landscape suggesting the idea of sterility and the proliferation of signifiers associated with the liquid elements (the river, the various drinks, water, beer, *cervezas*, absinthe, *Anis del Toro*), which all suggest thirst, thirst being a metaphorical substitute for the desire to write. Further evidence of the fact is provided by two decisive textual elements, namely the two stages noticeable in the progression of the narrative. In the first half of the text the main topic of conversation is drinks and the desire to try new ones, while in the second half, the understated but massive topic is clearly the abortion itself.

- 19 However, if the subject of drinks seems to act as a cover not to mention the more delicate subject of the abortion, what is remarkable is the connection established, as it were subliminally, between the two by the use of the empty signifier *thing*, either on its own or in composition (*nothing, anything, everything*), so that in fact while they are talking about drinks they are referring to the abortion. Secondly, out of the twenty-six occurrences of the signifier "thing", two, including the first to appear in the text, refer to the elephant metaphor, while the rest replace more or less directly either the words 'drinks' or 'speech' or 'abortion,' unambiguously linking the three together, and adding the necessity of making a choice. In this perspective, even the ominous phrase "to let the air in," used two times and which is alleged to suggest the technique used for the abortion, takes on a different coloring. Instead of understanding it as a euphemism for bringing death, it is possible to reverse its import and to read it metaphorically as the breath of inspiration necessary to the poet. In this case, the crucial paradox – but we are within the wider context of the androgynous nature of the artist – is that it is the writer himself who has to let the air in, to allow room for the music of the text as it were, which may also mean to sacrifice the follower of Cratylus that lies in his breast.
- 20 As for the second half of the text, which centers round the argument about the abortion, it is worthy of note that the conversation does function as an illocutary game of distribution of symbolic places in which the American wishes to be recognized as having the upper hand, while Jig is supposed to comply with his desire, and pretends that she does not mind the abortion. Not without a perverse streak, the young man *wants* Jig – the very verb is used over and over again – to voice openly her desire for the abortion, while he appears to be reluctant to force her, as we can see for ourselves in the following statement: " 'You've got to realize,' he said, 'that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you' " (262). His " 'I don't want you to do it' " which actually means "I want you to do it," sounds like Bartleby's " 'I'd prefer not to,' " while it is clear that it is Jig who would prefer not to as her echoic answers and her vague, weary and generalizing acceptance testify: " 'I'd do anything for you' " (263).
- 21 Hemingway's very subtle *tour de force* here is that he succeeds in reversing the meaning of both positions, so that contrary to Melville's hero whose general refusal was symbolic of the end of the desire to write, the young man eventually renounces the lures of the naïve belief in the mimetic powers of language and accepts that the very basis of literariness is the creation of ambiguity, ambivalence, hesitation, uncertainty, indeterminacy, on condition that they are not due to shortcomings or absence of craftsmanship, but to aesthetic, and in this case it also means ethical, positions. The uncertainty inherent in the blurred textuality of the short story will never allow us to decide for sure whether the young man will become a writer or not, but the only thing that is certain is that the narrative voice, standing here for Hemingway himself, is on the way of achieving the trick. Moreover, we know that a new start is made possible if the American stops talking (and starts writing instead?). Jig's repetition of the word "please" to make him keep quiet is an illustration of the kind of textual paralysis that threatens him if he does alter his views both on the abortion and on language. In short, the ethical question does not so much apply to the justification of the abortion in the diegetic world of the short story, as it concerns the very nature of textuality and art.
- 22 One rarely commented way in which Hemingway produces ambivalence in the short story is precisely the problematic recourse to a foreign language, Spanish for the occasion.

Beyond the local color element, a certain amount of confusion is introduced by the way the Spanish language is used in the text, because it implies that an unmentioned activity of translation is going on, and, as translation inevitably entails losses, not to say possibilities of mistranslation, the effect created is that of a gray area in which invisible textual negotiations take place. For instance, the American logically orders their beer in Spanish: “ ‘Dos cervezas,’ the man said into the curtain” (259). But strangely enough, the Spanish waitress answers in English and the rest of the dialogue takes place in English. Stranger still, when the waitress returns with the drinks and wants to collect the money, she uses a mix of English and Spanish: “ ‘Four reales’ ” (260), where one would have expected something like “quatro reales.” Similarly when the waitress comes with the last drinks she addresses the protagonists in English directly, but the text says: “ ‘What did she say?’ asked the girl” (263), which implies that the initial statement was delivered in Spanish, a language that Jig does not understand. A close textual analysis reveals that the narrative voice is regularly playing the role of an unacknowledged translator, thus leaving its imprint on the textual fabric. What is highlighted here is the fact that writing is, in its essence, an activity of translation. Images, ideas, actions, plots..., are all mediated by language, i.e. translated into words. No wonder then if the story opens with the discussion of a metaphor which is, by definition, an act of translation of an image into another.

- 23 When all is said and done, it seems difficult not to accept that “Hills like White Elephants” presents us with a self-portrait of the artist as a young restless father-to-be, by obliquely representing the plight of the writer confronted to the aleatory nature of inspiration and the difficulty of aesthetic choices. I would like to argue that contrary to what happens in “Bartleby,” the figure of the writer in the short story is on its way to redemption and creativity, because he has become aware that the significance of a metaphor does not lie in its meaning but in the metaphoric act itself. If literature is a journey then the end of the short story can be read as a new beginning, the prospective writer forging ahead with greater power and insight after a salutary questioning of his art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Baker, Carlos. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*. New York: Scribner's, 1969.
- Benson, Jackson J., ed. *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1975.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Foe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Eby, Carl P. *Hemingway's Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Flynn, Elizabeth A. “Gender and Reading.” *College English* 45.3 (March 1983): 236-253.

Gillette, Meg. "Making Modern Parents in Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' and Viña Delmar's Bad Girl." *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.1 (Spring 2007): 50-69.

Hashmi, Nilofer. "'Hills Like White Elephants': The Jilting of Jig." *The Hemingway Review* 23.1 (Fall 2003): 72-83.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. 1939. London: Arrow Books, 2004.

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." 1853. *The Piazza Tales*. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

Mellow, J. R. *Hemingway: A Life without Consequences*. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1992.

Rankin, Paul. "Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants.'" *Explicator* 63.4 (Summer 2005): 234-237.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer, ed. *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974.

ABSTRACTS

Despite the immense critical success of "Hills like White Elephants," its reflexive dimension has not been given proper attention. The aim of this essay is to focus on the way Hemingway dramatizes in an oblique way the predicaments of an inexperienced writer questioning the tenets of his art, unsure of himself and of his creative powers, and consequently in need of reassurance. The central argument is based on the implications of the "white elephant" metaphor which does not so much require an interpretation in terms of contents as in terms of strategy. Close textual analysis and stylistic considerations will confirm that the subtext of the short story invites a meta-fictional reading of the text, to the effect that what happens under the reader's gaze is the metamorphosis of the problematic baby into a textual offspring.

Malgré le grand succès de "Hills Like White Elephants", sa dimension réflexive a été négligée par les critiques. Cet article étudie la manière utilisée par Hemingway pour mettre en scène implicitement les difficultés rencontrées par un jeune écrivain, lequel s'interroge sur ses principes artistiques, peu sûr de lui-même et de ses capacités créatives, et qui, par là, a besoin d'être rassuré. L'idée centrale est basée sur les implications de la métaphore "éléphants blancs", laquelle nécessite une interprétation non pas tant en termes de contenu que de stratégie. En accordant une attention rigoureuse au texte et à certains aspects stylistiques, il apparaît en effet que le sous-texte de la nouvelle convoque une lecture méta-fictionnelle du texte, qui montre que ce qui se déroule sous le regard du lecteur est la métamorphose du bébé problématique en un fruit textuel.

AUTHORS

CLAUDE MAISONNAT

Claude Maisonnat is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary British literature at the University of Lyon II, France. A Conrad specialist, he has published more than 25 articles on his works and a book on *Lord Jim*. He has also published extensively on the contemporary short story and written (with Patrick Badonnel) a book on the psychoanalytical reading methodology of the short story. He is currently editing a volume on the short stories of John McGahern for JSSE.