

**Rewriting the Writer:
Hemingway in Love and War
according to Richard Attenborough**
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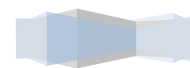
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Agnes von Kurowsky (1892-1984), then an American Red Cross nurse, was Ernest Hemingway's love interest for a few months at the end of World War I and, allegedly, the inspiration for British VAD Catherine Barkley in his romantic war novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Kurowsky tried to keep their brief, apparently unconsummated, romance carefully concealed but, once it was discovered, as it was bound to be, she steadily denied that it was a sexual affair similar to the relationship between Catherine and her American lieutenant, Frederic Henry, in Hemingway's novel. After her death in 1984, Agnes's second husband handed her war diaries over to Henry Serrano Villard (1900-1996), an old war-time friend of Agnes and accidental witness of her affair with Hemingway (1899-1961), apparently in gratitude for his having secured for her –in his capacity as retired US ambassador– a burial with all the honours due to war veterans. Villard subsequently engaged the help of well-known Hemingway scholar James Nagel of the University of Georgia to edit together a book, *Hemingway in Love and War* (1989), which contains Agnes's war diary and some letters, Villard's own memoirs of WWI and additional research by Nagel. This volume proves that there was indeed a romantic relationship between Kurowsky and Hemingway but does not come to a definitive conclusion about its actual nature.

Eventually the book and, so, Hemingway's war-time romance with Agnes made it to Hollywood. Villard's son, Dimitri, a producer without particularly distinguished credentials, used Agnes's diary as the basis of *In Love and War* (1996), which he produced and co-wrote with Allan Scott and Clancy Sigal. The film was directed by Richard Attenborough. Dimitri Villard's main interest in producing this film was vindicating his father's memory rather than Agnes's,¹ though actually the role that Villard played in the real-life affair is reduced rather than enlarged in the film. Ironically, in the process of honouring Villard senior, Kurowsky's main worry –namely, that people would trivialise her image, knowing her just as Hemingway's lost flame– became the basis for a topical and typical Hollywood bio-pic that has fixed her image in the minds of many cinema goers around the world. No doubt, Kurowsky's lost and found diaries contribute much to the understanding of *A Farewell to Arms*, illuminating many of its scenes and Hemingway's methods to fuse life and work. Villard and Nagel's book contributes a new vision to Hemingway's scholarship but is also careful to vindicate Agnes's life after meeting Hemingway, stressing the fact that the affair was by no means the central episode of her life. Attenborough's film, however, falsifies her image, taking many liberties with her version of events, all for the sake of paying homage to a youthful Hemingway.

Villard's gallant attempt at dispelling gossipy speculation on Agnes's life by publishing her version of events seems somehow a means to cure his own war wounds:

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the memory of his unrequited young love for her seems to have fuelled his interest in her life, kept alive for over seventy years after their first meeting in WWI Italy. For as long as President Wilson demurred sending US troops to Europe, the Red Cross offered young men who did not want to miss the spectacle of war a good chance to experience romantic adventure in a foreign land. Villard, a Harvard student, went to the Italian front as a Red Cross ambulance driver, and so did Hemingway, then a budding journalist. Hemingway, Villard and Agnes met at the Red Cross Hospital in Milan where she was a nurse and both men were patients. Young Hemingway had been badly wounded in the knee, Villard had jaundice. Indeed, while the bittersweet memory of the affair inspired Hemingway to create Catherine, Villard is reduced in *A Farewell to Arms* to a clause in a longer sentence which describes him as “a nice boy, also thin, from New York, with malaria and jaundice” (108).² Villard’s secondary motivation in publishing *Hemingway in Love and War* may have been, possibly, his resentment against Hemingway himself. An autobiographical essay by Villard included in *Hemingway in Love and War* shows, if not downright envy of his successful brother in arms, at least a certain puzzlement as to why the accidents of life turned young Hemingway, not exactly a likeable character, into a reputed writer.

Unlike the film, the book gives Agnes’s life a background, making her appear as an appealing modern woman committed to her work for the Red Cross. Born to a middle-class Pennsylvania family of Polish-German origins, Kurowsky qualified to be a professional nurse at New York’s Bellevue after a spell as a librarian. After the war, which she spent mainly in Italy, she worked for two years in Rumania still with the Red Cross and for five more years in Haiti (1926-1931). There she occupied quite a high position in the official organisms regulating the profession of nursing at a national level and married Howard Preston Garner, whom she later divorced. Back to the United States, she worked in a blood bank in New York during World War II, while her second husband, William C. Stanfield, fought at the front. She never saw Hemingway again.³

Nor did Villard. In 1962, after Hemingway’s suicide, Carlos Baker – Hemingway’s main biographer– approached Villard with news about Agnes, whom Baker had identified as the source for Catherine. An epistolary exchange followed and, eventually, Villard met Agnes again in 1976, when he could read the letters that Hemingway must have returned to her after the end of their romance.⁴ She insisted to Villard in the course of their correspondence that hospital conditions made a sexual affair impossible and claimed that *she* had left Hemingway both because of the age difference (she was seven years his senior) and also because she could not see what kind of future he could offer her.

In literary terms, Agnes’s diary, covering the period 12 June 1918 to 20 October 1918, is not exceptional. It is rather a mere record of her daily impressions, without further pretensions. She appears to be fond of flirting but scared of men who really desire her. The boyish Hemingway, whom she called the Kid, may have been a safe choice given her naive approach to men. She presents herself as a woman older than her years, but her behaviour is romantic in a rather adolescent, virginal way. The age difference troubled her deeply in her relationship with Hemingway, for she could not overcome the prejudices of the time; ironically, Hemingway married a few years later a woman older than Agnes. The diary, in any case, does not read as a record of passionate love: she is constantly concerned that Hemingway is investing too much in their

relationship and keeps a certain distance. The pressure that Hemingway's ardour and jealousy put on the inexperienced Agnes can be guessed between the lines.

The letters which she wrote to him both daily in the hospital and, later, from Florence, where she was destined, are more open as regards her passion for him. The affair was serious enough for them to discuss marriage plans in December 1917, three months after meeting.⁵ However, by March it was all over between them. Her letters chronicle the hesitation of a woman who wouldn't let herself fall fully in love with a younger man. It was only once he was gone back home that she gathered courage to tell him there was no future for them as a married couple. In her last, curt, letter of 7 March 1919 she announced to Hemingway her marriage to another man, which eventually failed to take place. Communication between them was interrupted for a while, but in her very last letter to him (22 December 1922) she responds to his announcement of his marriage to the adoring Hadley with warmth and sympathy.

The last two sections of Villard and Nagel's book include Hemingway's letters home from Italy and Nagel's conclusions. In his "Preface" Nagel uses the typical justification of literary scholars to sanction sophisticated gossip: Agnes's texts clarify the genesis of diverse texts that Hemingway wrote. Nagel, though, has another axe to grind: his thesis is that Hemingway was not faithful to the truth when it came to narrating his military experience of war. While Agnes is presented as the ideal nurse in Villard's account, the portrait of nineteen-year-old Hemingway is not so flattering: he was charming and popular, but also authoritarian and rude and, at worse, an alcoholic bully. Villard and Nagel also deny the myth of Hemingway as a wounded warrior, presenting his wounds as a result of a rash impulse leading him to the trenches at the wrong moment and for the wrong reasons. Nagel questions everything in Hemingway's Italian adventure: from his relationship with Agnes to whether he could speak Italian at all, passing through his exact position in the Italian army and the medals he received for courage, if any. The portrait of Hemingway that emerges from Nagel's examination of diverse documents is that of a man who lies to magnify a rather mild war experience which might disappoint the expectations of those left at home and, perhaps, his own romantic view of himself. Hemingway was seriously injured in the legs, but his war experience seems to have left him no other perceptible scars.

Attenborough's film ignores Nagel's undermining of Hemingway's allegedly heroic behaviour in the war. The film has all the defects of Hollywood sentimentalism without any of the virtues of pure, mad melodrama, which is what ultimately Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is. In box-office terms, *In Love and War* was a failure. Reviewers were not too keen on it, either. One was captivated by all the fine feelings but objected that "the audience is only given a glimpse of true love," and that Chris O'Donnell's young Hemingway "lacks the depth of impassioned love" (Cetner 1997: 16). Another British critic expressed moderate admiration, noting the thematic correspondences with Attenborough's previous film *Shadowlands*, another doomed love story involving the writer C.S. Lewis. "Love and suffering, these two films imply," the review reads "may well be beneficial if they come when we're ready for them; but coming at the wrong time they can destroy us" (Kemp 1997: 50-1).

British critics tend to respect Attenborough's work too much to discuss the film's glaring faults. Others are more daring. French critic Jean-Yves Katelan describes

O'Donnell as “inodore” and Sandra Bullock (Agnes) as “incolore.” For him, *In Love and War* is “long, c'est lent, c'est mollasson, et on a déjà tout vu, en mieux, dans des téléfilms idiots” (1997: 40). An American reviewer found the film “boring nearly beyond description,” attacking it for its reliance on “great visual beauty” that can not compensate for Attenborough’s detached direction (Cunningham). Another American reviewer agreed that “Attenborough’s latest sleep aid” is “at its best photographing stationary objects, such as architecture, trees and bedridden soldiers” (Clark). The preminence of static contemplation over dynamic action is generally the main complaint, together with the lack of screen chemistry between co-stars O'Donnell and Bullock. But, above all, reviewers condemn the film’s lack of passion. This has possibly much to do with Attenborough’s inability to account for Agnes’s doubts concerning age, the very reason why passion went wrong. “She’s older than he is,” a reviewer ironises, “a big deal in 1918.” (Howe).

The most interesting reviews are those touching upon the question of why this film was made at all. Joseph McBride finds the concept of making a film out of the writer’s experience of war rather than his fictional version of it “odd;” he cannot help finding *In Love and War* a “pallid imitation” of *A Farewell to Arms*, novel. Another reviewer notes that this “fairly standard-issue wartime liaison” would be of “no consequence to anyone but its participants –except that it really happened to Ernest Hemingway” (Schickel). Precisely, the film reveals that writers write, among other motivations, to tell themselves a more thrilling version of their own life. *Farewell to Arms* is certainly exciting when compared to dull *In Love and War*, and if Hemingway chose to lie and embellish his relationship with Agnes through fiction this is fair enough. As regards Agnes, the mystery of her exact relationship to Catherine in Hemingway’s imagination should have protected her identity and privacy in a way that, clearly, Dimitri Villard and Attenborough’s intrusion does not.

Biopics like *In Love and War* needn’t follow a strict code of adherence to reality or their sources. The problem is, though, is that they pretend to do so. The opening credits inform the spectator that Attenborough’s film is “based on a true story,” though, clearly, this does not mean that there is *truth* to be found in the retelling. Audiences tend to grant authority to screen biographies based on true events, often failing to see that most films of these kind disregard the notion of research and proof based on evidence. In this particular case, an additional problem is that by distorting the possible truths in its source, the volume by Villard and Nagel, *In Love and War* short-circuits the effects of research based on textual proof. Where Villard and Nagel question and hesitate, Attenborough states, which causes his version to overcome Villard and Nagel’s, and, what is worse, Agnes’s. The deviance from the *truth* is, in any case, noticeable enough for the film to include a disclaimer in the end credits, acknowledging the manipulation of events. Too late, of course, for impatient spectators who abandon cinemas or switch to another channel once 'The End' appears on the screen.

Basically, while the book places itself on the edge of doubt, never openly stating that Agnes and Hemingway’s affair was sexual, Attenborough’s screen writers develop the popular model of the romance based on a single night of passion (the model for *Titanic*). The film also presents Agnes as the writer’s fatal muse: it was because she left him, Attenbrough and company argue, that a bitter Hemingway sublimated his energies into art, becoming thus a great writer. Her own motivations for breaking up, however,

are trivialised and she appears to be a hesitant, insecure woman who does not know what she really wants. The film even suggests that she lost the chance of lifetime fulfilment by not marrying young Hemingway. This does not correspond to her memories of Hemingway but to a romantic framework that is imposed on her story with Hemingway in a clichéd, old-fashioned way, which essentially subordinates her successful life as a woman to his successful but unhappy life as a man. This is done by softening Hemingway's least endearing aspects –his heavy drinking, his bouts of violent jealousy– and presenting him as a boy who knew no better than love his pretty nurse and trust her. Agnes rejects Hemingway for the professional, material and emotional security that Dr. Caracciolo (a character in whom real-life Italian officers Enrico Serena and Domenico Caracciolo meld) offers her. But she soon leaves Caracciolo⁶ stranded in a superficially romantic Venice to throw herself at the feet of an embittered Hemingway who rejects her. “The Kid has grown up, Ag” a resentful Hemingway tells her, “thanks to you.” She goes away, meek and tamed.

The scene of Hemingway's rejection of Agnes's love is the grossest instance of manipulation in the film and not only because it never happened. Actually, Agnes's rejection may not have been at all a determinant factor in Hemingway's life. His biographer James R. Mellow writes that by June 1919, three months after the break-up, Hemingway wrote to a friend about the failure of Agnes's plans to marry Caracciolo “full of genuine concern: ‘she has fallen out with her Major. She is in a hell of a way mentally and says I should feel revenged for what she did to me. Poor damned kid. I'm sorry as hell for her.’ But there was nothing he could do. He had cauterised the memory of her, burned it out ‘with a course of booze and other women and now it's gone.’” (Mellow 1992: 98) Hemingway's claim that he had forgotten the pain of his failure with Agnes might not be true, but he was not, it seems, as hostile as the young Hemingway in Attenborough's film. A reviewer argued that Attenborough makes Agnes more sympathetic, for here Hemingway is the one responsible for the break-up. That, however, does not seem to be the intention. The film ends with a final note about the fate of Agnes and Hemingway after the end of the affair: she married at 36, he was awarded the Nobel prize and wrote *A Farewell to Arms*. Significantly, Agnes's professional and emotional life is reduced to a single observation: that she married, but very late. His committing suicide while she lived to achieve stability and certainly a good measure of happiness is obviated and he appears to have triumphed as she sank into obscurity. The book actually produces the opposite effect –portraying a successful Agnes and a failed Hemingway.

Hemingway, of course, has become himself a partly fictionalised romantic character: a myth of masculinity. Attenborough acknowledged having taken some “creative licence” (Gómez 1997: 3) for his film; but he argued in his defence that a film about Hemingway cannot have a happy ending, for his was a tragic life (Amiguet 1997: 51). The problem is that this view requires a radical revision of Agnes's role, turning her into somebody else, a footnote in Hemingway's (macho) myth. Actress Sandra Bullock thinks that Agnes and Hemingway “deserved each other but it was unfortunate timing” (May 1997: 44). A reviewer agrees, noting that *In Love and War* strongly suggests that this relationship could have been a happy one, had either of these “confused, unsure” kids tried to “tough it out and follow their hearts” (Wilmington). But, of course, this would have prevented the bitter, suicidal Hemingway we all know from having been born at all. The world would have gained a happy man and lost a great writer to

domestic bliss. “Would that have been desirable?” Wilmington wonders. “Does anyone want to see movies where Beethoven or van Gogh have happy love lives, freeing them from the torment and sublimation of music composition and painting?,” he adds (Wilmington). This seems to suggest that homage is paid to Agnes in Attenborough’s film as Hemingway’s cruel muse –the woman whose lack of clear perception of his values allowed the genius to be born. In contrast, the book subtly suggests that by leaving him she spared herself a great deal of the unhappiness that was latent in him and that would later erupt taking his life with it. Villard and Nagel do celebrate the fact that Agnes was not sacrificed to the glory of Hemingway the genius, possibly because Villard himself loved her in his own way more than he loved Hemingway. The film is, in contrast, quite ambiguous: she is both blamed for having made Hemingway unhappy and humiliated for having missed a life with him. And this is because Attenborough and his writers are too impressed, too much under the domination of the Hemingway myth to try to dispel it.

Myth, of course, is another word for lie. Margaret Norris has argued that lying is the basis of *A Farewell to Arms*. In a covert sense, this novel lies about Hemingway’s experience in the war, for Hemingway feels that “in order to be listened to, in order to give the novel a popular reception in the United States, he has to mask his war story as a love story” (Norris 1994: 691). His bare literary style, apparently devoid of rhetorical devices attests to the 'truth' of the story, offered to readers who “are less interested in the violence and cruelty that is the truth of war than in their own comfort and pleasure as readers” (Norris: 692). Norris sees in Hemingway’s novel a tension between what can and cannot be said about war, made transparent also in the tension regarding the limits of the representation of sex. The anxiety to please is, thus, the main motivation behind Hemingway’s writing and Frederic’s behaviour: Hemingway lies to please his audience, Frederic to quench Catherine’s thirst for love. Norris argues, finally, that as Wilfred Owen claimed in his famous poem “Dulce et Decorum Est,” war literature lies.

On the whole, though, she misses an important point: Owen attacks bad, manipulative war literature written in the name of glory and patriotism. “Dulce et Decorum Est” defends a new model of war literature that does not lie, that is brave enough to tell the truth about war. Likewise, while Frederic initially lies to Catherine about loving her, he has learnt by the end of the book to tell her the truth, or rather, they both have learnt. The love story might not correspond at all to Hemingway’s alleged wish to please his American audience, for the love plot seems to express something deeply felt, whether it mirrors his love for Agnes or not. *A Farewell to Arms* refuses to be sentimental –in the sense of being manipulative– for Hemingway knows his material contains already much human emotion. Hence the bare style, the use of Frederic as narrator, the gaps in which one can read Hemingway’s resistance to analysing the motivations of his characters.

He was angered by Borzage’s version of *A Farewell to Arms*, hating the moralising reading forced upon his text by the Hays Office strict code; imagine how annoyed he may have been by Attenborough’s sentimental manipulation of his own life. Agnes, who never really raised her voice against *A Farewell to Arms*, but who fiercely defended her right not to be treated merely as copy for Catherine Barkley, must have also been appalled by this dishonest version of her time with Hemingway. Not to mention the many scholars committed to vindicating the role of women in narrating the

experience of war and who do not enjoy Attenborough's advantageous position. The only comfort is that the quality of Attenborough's film is low enough to leave little trace. Hopefully, it will disappear from the collective memory –the pity is that it might well take Agnes away into oblivion with it.

NOTES

- ¹ The film is dedicated to the memory of Henry Villard, who died, aged 95, as the film was being made.
- ² I am quoting from Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957 (1969)).
- ³ Agnes, though, gave Hemingway's widow, Mary, photos showing her and Hemingway together at the time of their romance, which can be seen at the Hemingway Key West Museum. Agnes also lived for a time in Key West.
- ⁴ Her fiancée, Italian officer Domenico Caracciolo, apparently forced Agnes to burn Hemingway's love letters out of jealousy. All of Agnes's papers are now in the Hemingway Collection of the John F. Kennedy Library of Boston.
- ⁵ Hemingway's own letters home (21 July to 11 December 1918) speak very briefly of a girl he is in love with but whom, he assures his worried mother, he has no plans to marry.
- ⁶ Caracciolo is presented in the film as an incompetent doctor under a rather xenophobic light. When Hemingway is wounded, he is bent on amputating his leg, a risk he never ran in real life. Only Agnes's modern American therapy saves Hemingway from literal amputation and metaphorical castration. In this absurd scene Caracciolo is apparently seduced by her professionalism. No doctor, however, would have ever allowed a nurse to try out her own methods, much less to so openly contradict him before a patient.

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