

“Hemingway’s British Accents”

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This essay focuses on an underexplored aspect of the transatlantic concerns of American modernism: the significance of accent. The transnational dimensions of Hemingway’s fiction have been well studied in critical circles (recent studies by, for example, Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera have continued to engage with this aspect of his work), but the author’s engagement with modes of Britishness is often bypassed in favour of other European cultures – in particular, those of France, Italy and Spain. Hemingway never used Britain as a setting in his fiction, and the role of Britishness in his work is elusive. Mark Spilka has linked Hemingway’s treatment of Britishness with his treatment of gender (see Spilka 121-2), while others have noted the importance of Hemingway’s British ancestry to his literary imagination (Hutchisson, Baker). Hemingway’s younger sister Carol records that their mother Grace Hall Hemingway saw herself as “very much an English gentlewoman”, “and thought of us [the children] as English as well, though of course we were all born in Oak Park” (Hutchisson, 8).

However, there has been no examination of the role of British voices or accents in Hemingway’s fiction of the 1920s. In works from *In Our Time* (1925) and *The Torrents of Spring* (1926) to *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), British accents perform a variety of roles associated with transnational communication. Distinctions between British and American modes of speech are invoked to explore wider concerns over the role of national boundaries and the difficulties of human connection in love and war. Whilst British voices in Hemingway’s writing may at times represent a lost standard from which the tone of American discourse deviates, they also play a distancing role, allowing experiences to be mediated through a destabilising or alienating register. As such, they are at one with Hemingway’s broader interest in the ways in which national identities are performed in the complex and tumultuous political world of the early twentieth century.

The question of accent is an interesting and conflicted one for the history of American literature, and it relates to the vexed relationship of language to national boundaries. In the colonial period and shortly afterwards, British visitors to the American territories often commented on the “purity” of speech found there. In 1724, Hugh Jones described American language as “good English without idiom or tone” (quoted in Longmore, 514). In the late eighteenth century, the Reverend Jonathan Boucher claimed that American speech represented “the purest pronunciation of the English Tongue that is anywhere to be met with” (qtd. in Longmore, 539). Intriguingly, these comments suggest the development of American English as a category separate: “*without idiom or tone*”, “*the purest pronunciation*”. In other words, American speech represents to these authors “the purest” English not by virtue of being identical to the English spoken in England but rather by *outperforming* it, becoming purer. Although partly based on southern and eastern English norms, this language already occupied a linguistic space claimed neither by an aristocratic English nor by the inflections of regional British dialects. Benjamin Franklin’s claim to an English acquaintance that American speech would represent “the best English of this Island” (Franklin, 196) anticipated Noah Webster’s development of American English for his 1828 dictionary as the ideal of a purified, democratic speech. For Webster, American English was cleaner and more direct than British English, remaining less “corrupted” by French influence. Webster claimed that for many words “the pronunciation in this country is more correct than that of the English: and it would be reprehensible servility in us to relinquish a correct practice and adopt an English corruption” (qtd. in Micklethwait, 145). For Webster, American English reconnected the language back to its Anglo-Saxon roots, a language that he saw as more honest, direct and phonetic.

Literary modernism (including American modernism) is usually described as a landscape of polyvocality, linguistic indeterminacy, and multiplicity. Yet there is a case for exploring the implications of an ongoing debate around the nature of the spoken English language and its implications for American authors in the period. American modernist authors were often self-consciously invested in the national dimensions of language, both written and spoken. For example, writing to James Laughlin in January 1936, Ezra Pound wrote that he had heard T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) on the radio the previous evening. He goes on:

Oh them cawkney voices, My Krissz, them cawkney voices! Mzzr Shakspeare
STILL retains his po /sishun. I stuck it fer a while, wot wiff the weepin and wailin...
My Krrize them cawkney voices! (qtd. in Chinitz, 102)

Pound's comments are – although obviously humorous – curious, as *Murder in the Cathedral* can hardly be said to represent an attempt at mediating “cockney” language. The play adopts an incantatory, liturgical register at some remove from demotic speech. Indeed, it is arguably Eliot's earlier poem *The Waste Land* (1922), produced in collaboration with Pound, that provides the reader with a notable section of “cawkney” speech: “You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,/ He said, I swear I can't bear to look at you./ And no more can't I, I said” (*Waste Land*, 66). It is unclear what production it was that Pound listened to; a BBC television adaption of *Murder in the Cathedral* was not broadcast until October 1936. Nonetheless, what Pound *hears* in *Murder in the Cathedral* are the jarring tones of heavily accented British voices. Whether this is a true description of the performance or not, Pound's reception of *Murder* is clearly coloured by Eliot's apparent enthusiasm for London and its culture and by Pound's own rejection of London and its “cawkney voices”.

Such concerns seem to belie the uncomplicatedly transnational vision of modernism that still dominates critical discourse. Such criticism – whether focused on global or “planetary” visions of modernism – tends to reify transnationalism as a form of humanistic progress. To sound such a note of caution is not to return to obviously problematic nativist or nationalistic visions of literature, but provides a critique that focuses on the conflicts, distinctions and dissonances implicit in “cosmopolitan” American modernism. Pound, for example, wrote to Hemingway in 1933 to claim that, despite his expatriation and increasing sympathy with Italian Fascism, he remained a “patriot” (see Barnes, 27). The linguistic experimentation associated with modernist authors – a method that moves between different languages, cultures and registers – does not necessarily imply a refusal or rejection of national identity. In the case of Hemingway, the use of a British-accented English in his fiction becomes a way of heightening the reader's awareness of the national dimensions of language.

In the pieces that make up the early story collection *In Our Time*, Hemingway's use of British voices is focused on the chapter vignettes that intersperse the longer stories. The subjects of these chapters range from accounts of the First World War and of the refugee crises precipitated by the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-22, to descriptions of bullfighting. As Milton A. Cohen has argued, the language of these chapters became a way for Hemingway to “explore and develop his vocal range”, representing “a medley of voices” (80). The vignettes that Hemingway interspersed with his longer stories were originally published on their own, of course, as the collection *in our time* (1924). The 1924 *in our time*, published by the Paris-based Three Mountains Press, is presented in book covers decorated with a collage of newspaper headlines. The visual presentation of the book contributes to a sense of Hemingway's emergence out of a transatlantic literary culture in which politics is interwoven with mass culture. The book covers of the 1924 *in our time* present the viewer with overlaid fragments of newspaper text in English, French, Spanish, Russian and Greek.

But while this collage incorporates political reporting (a news article on the American volunteers in the First World War, for example) it is also peppered with advertising and society features. An article headed “W.E. Corey Makes Plans to Leave America Forever” is a gossip report on Corey, an American industrialist of the period, suggesting he will settle in France. Advertising on the front cover offers a “wonderful selection of petticoats and pettibloomers” and is placed alongside a sign for the Ritz-Carlton hotel. A line in bold capitals is obviously aimed at the expatriate English or American tourist: “LEARN FRENCH”. An article in Spanish on the left of the front cover on the matador Nicanor Villalta (a fighter that Hemingway particularly admired) is illustrated with a stylised cartoon. On the back of the book another advert proclaims: “For Travel – AMERICAN EXPRESS”. Hemingway’s emergence as a prose stylist is self-consciously presented within a transatlantic milieu that is at once political and commercial, touristic and inaccessible. “Europe”, as it appears on the covers of *in our time*, is a clashing cacophony of Cyrillic letters and matadors, war reportage, maps of the Mediterranean and adverts for tailoring services. This Europe is at one and the same time a confusing and turbulent political reality and a playground for travel and consumption.

Two World War One chapters use British accent and register to describe the violence and bloodshed of the western front. The subject of these chapters is thought to be based on stories told to Hemingway about the 1914 Battle of Mons by his friend, the British officer Eric Dorman-Smith. In the first of these vignettes, subtle use of language undercuts the apparently matter-of-fact style of the text:

We were in a garden in Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed over up the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came over just like that. (In Our Time, 306)

Here the single word “awfully” acts as a signifier of a laconic British wit, contrasting starkly with the circumstances in which the narrator finds himself. The two lines that end the vignette – “We shot them. They all came over just like that” – are typical of the pared, staccato style associated with Hemingway’s mature phase, yet here in this early work, this familiar style is couched within a narrative “voice”, one associated with a British officer. As an intensifying word, “awfully” is associated with a high-status British register. Within this register, however, the word has the effect of somewhat downgrading the import of what is being described, associated commonly with polite pleasantries: “thanks *awfully*”, “an *awfully* nice man”. What is happening in Mons – the repeated killing of German soldiers – truly is “awful”, but the style of the narration allows the reader to elide this reality. This is aided by the narrator’s use of the word “potted” (another British phrasing) instead of “shot” at the beginning of the vignette. By the end of the sketch, however, “potted” has been replaced with “shot”. The vignette’s movement thus seems to be towards a stark, brutal, and more impersonal treatment of war and away from the genteel style – “young Buckley”, “potted”, “awfully” – associated with the British officer. Milton Cohen suggests that Hemingway’s treatment of different registers implies an “internationalism” that makes national identification ambiguous, reflecting “the cosmopolitan settings” (Cohen, 94). However, I would argue that “internationalism” is the wrong word here, having the effect of downplaying the specificities of national identification explored in the text. What is happening, rather, is a type of distancing that depends heavily on the specific voice through which the war reports are mediated. The text draws attention to the very process of mediation, to the idea of cultural exchange.

In the second chapter, the narrator recalls a barricade mounted by the British at the Mons-Condé canal. As Cohen surmises, this figure is a different speaker to the one who narrates the related chapter. Here “hyperbolic speech brims with British superlatives” (Cohen, 147):

It was a frightfully hot day. We'd jammed an absolutely perfect barricade across the bridge. It was simply priceless. A big old wrought-iron grating from the front of a house. Too heavy to lift and you could shoot through it and they would have to climb over it. It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we potted them from forty yards. (In Our Time, 310)

Again, these “hyperbolic” superlatives – “frightfully”, “simply”, “absolutely” – draw attention to the intensified experience of war that their ironized narrative voice undercuts. In an upper-class British context, “frightfully” as an adjective has little to do with actual terror or fright, but is simply used as a synonym for “very” or “extremely”. This is the language of a “garden party” (Cohen, 144) or pheasant-shooting expedition, rather than that of mortal combat. Again, the British voice serves a particular purpose here. Firstly, the voice has the effect of distancing the reader from the violence and death it describes. Secondly, Hemingway’s ventriloquism, whereby his language takes on the qualities of the British officer, reminds the reader that war itself is a type of exchange, of communication between nations.

In the parodic novel *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), British speech and culture are evoked to lighter if no less satirical effect. As a sardonic response to his friend and mentor Sherwood Anderson’s novel *Dark Laughter* (1925), Hemingway skewers Anderson’s essentialised view of both European culture and of African Americans and indigenous peoples. Subtitled “A Romantic Novel in Honor of the Passing of a Great Race”, the book takes aim at Anderson’s “primitivist” phase. At the beginning of the 1920s, Anderson had written that the African American had “something absolutely lovely that’s never been touched” (qtd. in Whalan, 73). *Dark Laughter* would return repeatedly to the figure of the laughing African American, and the novel ends with a description of the “high shrill laughter of the negress” that runs through “the garden and into the room” (262-3). Yet *Dark Laughter* is also preoccupied with the idea of Europe, “the Old World, [...] a world in which men knew too much about women and not enough” (143). As Mark Whalan has argued, Anderson’s preoccupation with African Americans became “an imaginative, symbolic and erotic touchstone” for the writer’s developing consciousness (73). Yet, as the passage just quoted suggests, Europe also was mediated through an imagined and eroticized symbolism for Anderson. Both of these tendencies are parodied in *The Torrents of Spring*, where Hemingway parades a series of snatched glimpses of African Americans to parody Anderson’s essentialising attraction to the “absolutely lovely” core of black identity.¹ For example, Scripps, the protagonist of Hemingway’s book, notices a “negro cook” in the diner at Petoskey (38). Later, Scripps is haunted by the “high-pitched” “laughter of the negro” (64). Similarly, the novel repeatedly refers to what it calls “the sound of an Indian war-whoop” (7, 11, 18). The “war-whoop” is a sound that – like the “dark laughter” of Anderson’s novel – seems to mock the self-absorbed naivety of Hemingway’s white protagonists. Yet Scripps also returns continuously to thinking about the “Europeans, members of a worn-out civilization world-weary from the war” (15).

Hemingway’s parody of Anderson is right to read race as the overwhelming theme of *Dark Laughter*. It is also true that there is something disturbing about Hemingway’s use of race in *Torrents*, as if underneath the critique of Anderson, D.H. Lawrence and others (there are snide references to Lawrence and to Mabel Dodge in the novel) lies a kind of embittered white protectionism.² Yet Hemingway’s early novel could just as easily be a lampoon of the

essentializing gaze that the younger writer would himself direct at Spain and Africa later in his career. In this way, *The Torrents of Spring* is far more than a critique of Anderson; in its transatlantic concerns, its mock primitivism and its explicit address to the idea of the “passing” of the white race, *Torrents* is self-consciously engaged in a critical taxonomy of American “whiteness”. Such concerns may be found in other novels of the period, for example – and famously – in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), where Tom Buchanan’s obsessions revolve around the status of the “Nordic” race in a multiethnic America (18). As Benjamin Schreier has written, *Gatsby* “dramatizes a . . . longing for interpretative security” (187), a “stable conception of identity” (155). Just as, for Scheier, *Gatsby*’s racial preoccupations do not reify but undercut any stable conception of “white” American identity, so Hemingway’s savage satire destabilizes fixed polarities of racial or cultural identity. In this context, the presence of a British voice (in the character of the waitress Diana) acts to locate Scripps’s consciousness in a stable, ancestral identity (although Scripps is half Italian, and of Irish origin on his father’s side). Just as Scripps’s friend Yogi Johnson seeks meaning in encounters with indigenous cultures, and ends the novel following a Native American woman naked into the snow, Scripps is engaged in a quest for rootedness.

Diana the British waitress is from the Lake District, “Wordsworth’s country, you know” (31). Scripps, attracted to her background, marries her on a sudden impulse. Diana’s identification with Wordsworth and the Lake District is significant. Scripps describes her speech as “picturesque”, and the sound of her words triggers an eccentric chain of associations in his mind:

It had been that very picturesque quality *in her speech* that had first drawn him to his present wife. That and her strange background. England, the Lake Country. Scripps striding through the Lake Country with Wordsworth. A field of golden daffodils. The wind blowing at Windermere. Far off, perhaps, a stag at bay. Ah, that was farther north, in Scotland. They were a hardy race, those Scots, deep in their mountain fastnesses. Harry Lauder and his pipe. The Highlanders in the Great War. (57-8; my emphasis)

Scripps’s assessment of his wife’s speech as “picturesque” prepares the ground for a series of imagined scenes or sketches. As exemplified by figures like William Gilpin, who toured the Lake District and other British landscapes in the eighteenth century, the “picturesque” represented a pictorial ideal of rural landscape, quickly rendered in sketches, engravings or paintings. Such scenes served to reinforce a subtle nationalism, where the idea of England was mediated through artistic treatments of rural beauty (see Bate 119-152). By the time of Wordsworth’s career, this nationalism was bolstered by a parochialism that arose out of necessity, with continental travel rendered impossible as a consequence of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In the passage from *Torrents*, Scripps inscribes himself into these Romantic scenes, “striding through the Lake Country with Wordsworth”. It is significant that it is the quality of Diana’s *speech* that is able to conjure up these scenes: as if speech is able to embody the imagined qualities of national character. Yet Scripps’s exploration of this English idyll is confused, with his vision of the Lakes – “golden daffodils”, the bracing breeze and Windermere – segueing into a series of images of Scotland. This leads Scripps to muse about the nature of Scottish identity – “a hardy race” – before the thought leads him to consider the role of Highland regiments in the First World War. Racial, or ethnic, identity is not stable in *Torrents*; rather, Hemingway exposes ethnic essentialisms to be a series of fragile performances. It cannot be accidental that Hemingway’s use of the image of Windermere had a family resonance for him. The Hemingway summer cottage at Bear Lake, Michigan was named “Windermere” by Ernest’s mother Grace Hall, a reference to her

“ancestral England” (Baker, 3). Not only was “Windermere” the location of early holidays for Hemingway, but it was where he stayed for two weeks after his marriage to Hadley Richardson in 1921 (see Baker, 81). As a personal signifier for Hemingway, then, “Windermere” represents both a childhood stomping ground, the location of his two-week honeymoon, and a sign connecting to a dimly remembered sense of ancestral ethnicity.

Indeed, ethnicity can be seen to exist as much in the imaginations of the principal characters as in reality. When Scripps first meets Diana, he muses about the English, who “travelled all over the face of the globe. They were not content to remain in their little island. Strange *Nordics*, obsessed with their dream of empire” (31; my emphasis). Note Hemingway’s use of the word “Nordic”: a parallel to Tom Buchanan’s adoption of the term to describe his racial worldview in *The Great Gatsby*. In *Torrents*, Englishness is associated with global travel, displacement, and a lost empire. Yet, as we have seen, Englishness is also connected to regional specificities, and a “Lake Country” mythologized as the home of Wordsworth. By the end of the novel, Scripps has fallen out of love with Diana and become irritated by her distinctly English speaking voice: “Ah, there it was. That *horrid clipped speech* again” (131; my emphases).

An interest in the negative qualities of English speech is also found in Hemingway’s contemporaries. The censorious, parsimonious associations of the “clipped” tones of English speech are used effectively by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his 1934 novel *Tender is the Night*, for example. A bad-tempered British hotel guest interrupts a late night conversation between the characters Rosemary Hoyt and Luis Campion, spitting “distinctly”: ““Will you kaindlay stup tucking!”” (51). In opposition to Campion’s “Oxford drawl” (13) this voice is abrupt, “distinct”, and tightly held. This clash of two language registers also draws attention to questions of national identification and language ownership, concerns tied to wider issues of “expatriation” and ethnicity. For example, the group around Dick and Nicole Diver that Rosemary finds herself in is described as “overwhelmingly American and *sometimes scarcely American at all*” (63; my emphases). “What *nationality* are these people?” is a question voiced earlier in the book (26; my emphasis). Expatriation here both hides and highlights national identity. These concerns are expressed through a preoccupation with speech. Whilst the “Oxford drawl” can *mask* ethnic and sexual indeterminacy (Campion is described as of “indeterminate nationality”, 13) connotations of the English or British voice may also be shaped by certain pejorative associations with the British character: disapproval, moralism, sanctimoniousness.

In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway uses the differences between British and American speech for subtle purposes. Here, the conflicts of the First World War as fought on the Italian front act as a parallel to the struggles and battles between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley. From early on in the novel, distinctions between Frederic’s American speech and Catherine’s English accent are established. In their first extended meeting, Frederic presses Catherine’s hand and exclaims “Dear Catherine”, for her to respond that it “sounds very funny now – Catherine. You don’t pronounce it very much alike. But you’re very nice. You’re a very good boy” (30). Communication is mediated through distinctions of register and voice; even the beloved’s name does not sound “very much alike” in Frederic’s mouth. When Frederic returns to his Italian roommate Rinaldi, he tells him that he has been “calling on the British”. The distancing phrase “calling on the British” turns a romantic assignation into a scene of transnational communication, of international diplomacy. At the same time, of course, a scene of international *conflict* rages outside of the military camp. For Frederic, Catherine is someone he can “talk English” to (25). Yet shared language implies neither shared speech tones nor common purpose. Frederic knows he does “not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her” (29).

Such concerns appear to depend upon a series of national oppositions. Yet Catherine's ethnic identity is less stable than might be assumed. Whilst Rinaldi refers to Catherine, to Frederic, as your "lovely cool... English goddess" (61), she later talks of herself as "Scotch and crazy" (114). These sets of contradictions play on ethnic essentialisms – English coolness and rationality, and Celtic emotion, madness. Rinaldi later refers to Frederic himself as a "fine good Anglo-Saxon boy" (151). Rinaldi's choice of the term "Anglo-Saxon" raises questions over America's racial identification as well as its new global power. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term "Anglo-Saxon" was used by imperialists to justify closer ties between the United States and Britain in global expansionism and "white" colonization. In the November 1898 edition of *McLure's* magazine, for example, George Waldron claimed that "Asia and Africa are rapidly crumbling before the vigor of the Occident. Which race will ultimately take the lead in this world empire? If history and present tendencies count for anything, we must answer, the *Anglo-Saxon*" (Waldron, 187; my emphasis).

Yet Frederic's identity as an "Anglo-Saxon" is also placed in doubt within the book. The preoccupations with national or ethnic identity that the novel explores are mirrored in a marked interest in disguise, and masquerade (see Strychasz, 87-91). Frederic's experiences on the fighting line have made him aware of the ways in which soldiers from opposing armies have crossed frontiers in disguise, posing in the enemy's national uniform. When Frederic encounters the *carabinieri* he escapes, fearing he will be executed as a German spy: "I was obviously a German in Italian uniform. I saw how their minds worked" (199). At the front, the Italian lieutenants take Frederic for an Italian (174). After Frederic leaves the front and wears civilian clothes, he feels "like a *masquerader*" (217, my emphasis). When he is reunited with the now pregnant Catherine and her friend Helen Ferguson, Ferguson tells him that he has "ruined" Catherine with "his sneaking *Italian* tricks", and is a "dirty sneaking *American Italian*" a "snake with an Italian uniform" (220, my emphases). The distinctions between different types of speech which were highlighted at the beginning of the book have now given way to a situation in which national identifications are blurred. This is also reflected in the conversations Catherine and Frederic share about their future. As Catherine and Frederic discuss their future life together, Catherine talks of how future marriage will lend her American nationality:

"I'll be very glad to be an American and we'll go to America, won't we darling? I want to see Niagara Falls."

"You're a fine girl."

"There's something else I want to see but I can't remember it."

"The stockyards?"

"No. I can't remember it."

"The Woolworth Building?"

"No."

"The Grand Canyon?"

"No. But I'd like to see that."

"What was it?"

"The Golden Gate! That's what I want to see. Where is the Golden Gate?" (262)

Here, becoming "an American" means access to the natural and technological wonders of the United States – a touristic itinerary centred around Catherine's hazy vision of Niagara Falls and San Francisco's Golden Gate. To readers who have completed the book, of course, this whimsical dialogue is painfully poignant; Catherine will die in labour, denied the opportunity to visit the America that she dreams of.

Yet in a sense this is precisely the point; national essences or identities are shown to be dreams, constructed here out of a vague collection of postcard images of America. As elsewhere in the book, national identities are exposed as masquerades, fluid constructions that blur distinctions and boundaries. Hemingway's concern with speech and accent is typical of a world in which identity can be produced and mediated through language.

¹ Hemingway's criticism of Anderson's "primitivism" is recorded in a letter to Wyndham Lewis, where the American writer praises Lewis's *Paleface* (1929) for destroying "the Red and Black enthusiasm very finely. That terrible shit about the nobility of any gent belonging to another race than our own [...] was worth checking" (*Selected Letters*, 264).

² On the wall of the Indian club that Yogi Johnson visits are "framed autographed photographs of Chief Bender, Francis Parkman, D.H. Lawrence, Chief Meyers, Stewart Edward White, Mary Austin, Jim Thorpe, General Custer, Glenn Warner, Mabel Dodge, and a full-length oil painting of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" (102-3).

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