*A Café is a very Different Thing: Hemingway’s Café as Church and Home*

“You want another *copita*?” the barman asked.

“No, thank you,” said the waiter and went out. He disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing.

‘A Clean Well-Lighted Place’

(*CSS*, 290-1)

The older waiter’s enigmatic claim at the end of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933) that, compared to a bar, “[a] clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing”, is a distinction with implications that have thus far not been adequately explored.[[1]](#endnote-1) The waiter’s preference for the café has significance beyond the story and it is an instructive starting point for an excursion into Hemingway’s apparent high regard for the café space and the impact it has upon his writing.[[2]](#endnote-2) In our continued fascination with the geographical and spatial contours of Hemingway’s life and work, the café has not gone entirely unnoticed, but there remains more to be said about how this quotidian yet important urban institution affected one of modernism’s most famous café habitués.[[3]](#endnote-3) Evidence from a range of Hemingway’s outputs suggests that the café has particular value as an idealized site, which connects it to familiar themes in his work such as conduct and behavior. Indeed, there exists such a thing as the perfect café, a supernal establishment, which seems to instantiate many of the principles, sentiments, practices, and virtues that we might associate with that famous paradigm of conduct in Hemingway studies, the Hemingway code. [[4]](#endnote-4)  We can see this in the consistency with which such cafés are characterized by recurrent themes of goodness, self-control, honor, dignity, solace, and sensuous gratification. In a life lived in exile, the best cafés provide all the existential comforts and rituals of home and church –a sense of spatial continuity and reassurance similar to the moral and behavioral reassurance proffered by the code.

This is not the first analysis to draw a connection between the code and “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”. In his 1967 “revaluation”, Earl Rovit finds that the story presents “[a] good introduction to [the code’s] form and subtleties” (Rovit, 110). However, instead of reading these qualities as intrinsic to the café *qua* café, for Rovit, the place is incidental, a blank upon which such characteristics are projected. Far from being a stage-set upon which characters perform, this essay argues that the café has significance for Hemingway in its own right and that his various representations reveal a spatial aspect to the much-theorized Hemingway code.

First, an example and then an elaboration of the code as it pertains to the discussion. In the opening chapter of *A Moveable Feast*, “A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel”, Hemingway describes stopping in at a favored café to write. His reminiscence portrays the gradual immersion into total artistic focus that begins with the café and conduct. In a ritualized visit that quickly establishes him at “home”, Hemingway hangs his coat, stows his hat, and orders a *café au lait*. And no sooner has he seated himself at a table in this “warm and clean and friendly” place than he takes out his notebook and begins to compose a story (*MF-RE* 17). His writing, however, is at first halting and erratic: he is distracted by sipping at a rum St James, looking up at a girl sat across from him, and by the regular sharpening of his pencil. The story “was writing itself,” he says, “and I was having a hard time keeping up with it” (*MF-RE* 17). What he describes is the unruly indiscipline of inspiration, and the artist must assume control or he risks failure. Much of what Hemingway divulges about his writing process in the rest of the memoir concerns routine, location, and luck:

The blue-backed notebooks, the two pencils and the pencil sharpener (a pocket knife was too wasteful), the marble-topped tables, the smell of *café crèmes*,the smell of early morning sweeping out and mopping and luck were all you needed (*MF-RE*, 169).

Here, the café is more than just a space in which to carry out a task. Its characteristics excite the senses and compliment the writer’s disciplined disposition. Aside from the horse chestnut and rabbit’s foot that he carries, the “luck” of which he speaks is largely self-made, hard won, and maintained through the discipline of early mornings, conscientiousness, and café ritual.[[5]](#endnote-5) There is a certain way of doing things here that is suggestive of code-like practice (control, grace under pressure, etc.). The café’s clean and orderly condition parallels the methodical approach of the writer who hopes to bring artistic order to creative chaos, which he eventually does, of course: “I was writing it now and it was not writing itself and I did not look up nor know anything about the time nor think where I was nor order any more rum St James … Then the story was finished” (*MF-RE* 18). During the process Hemingway seems to become oblivious to where he is but this does not undermine the importance of the café’s security- and solace-giving power. On the contrary, this is the place that permits the writer to transcend his material bounds and ease into a state of creative vulnerability. The creative act is an intensely personal one, as Hemingway attests: “[a]fter writing a story I was always empty both sad and happy, as though I had made love” (*MF-RE* 18). He then orders wine and oysters to allay this emptiness whereupon he immediately begins to feel content and buoyantly optimistic.

Unlike the journalism that he could write “anywhere” (*MF-RE* 19), it is clear that the café is a place particularly conducive to his creative work. Not just any old café would suffice, either, since he describes walking from his apartment on the Rue Cardinal Lemoine through the cold wind and rain past a host of other Latin Quarter establishments, a distance of almost two kilometers, to sit and take advantage of this “good” place.[[6]](#endnote-6) Bad cafés, like the “evilly run” Café des Amateurs, “the cesspool of the rue Mouffetard” (*MF-RE*,15), are to be generally avoided. On this moral spectrum the “good” café is a dependable place of rationality and control, playing host to a principled (and code-following) clientele, while the “bad” café, by contrast, is a dirty, protean den of iniquity; and its habitués, a licentious crowd of moral bankrupts. No creditable work will be done in such places.

As well as highlighting the importance Hemingway attaches to a particular kind of café, the opening pages of *A Moveable Feast* reveal the relationship between place, conduct, and the writer: how Hemingway conducts himself within a particular place and how, in turn, that place “conducts” his writing. It is within this set of connections that the spatial aspect of the Hemingway code can be seen.

Behind much of Hemingway’s fiction looms the crisis of existence – what various critics have by turn labeled “the shadow of ruin” (Penn Warren 1986, 86), “the ultimate horror” (Baker 1972, 123), or “the void” (Hassan 1971, 80). Hemingway himself referred to it as the great *nada* at the center of things. The aesthetic principles, strategies, themes, and attitudes deriving from this lone existential encounter have become known generally as the Hemingway code.

Deriving from a philosophy that might be described as Existentialism *avant la lettre* with a distinct Epicurean tone, the code is theorized through Hemingway’s writing as a value system that sought to give meaning and significance to a world seemingly devoid of such qualities.[[7]](#endnote-7) Broadly characterized in his work by self-control, honor, compassion, and fair play, as well as by an emphasis upon sensuous gratification as hard work’s reward, the code attempts to brook the disparity between man and his condition, providing a way of navigating and coping with “an unsettling or absurd world” (Willingham, 33). As well as comprising a set of rules – or what Rovit calls a system of “thou shalt not’s”– that constitute the ethics of an area of professional activity like writing, soldiering, or fishing, the code can also be understood as a “process of learning how to make one’s passive vulnerability (to the dangers and unpredictabilities of life) into a strong, rather than a weak position” and thus “how to exact the maximum amount of reward (“honor,” “dignity”) out of these encounters” (Rovit, 108-9).[[8]](#endnote-8) Comprehended in this way, we can see how the “good” café plays a role in the writer’s adherence to a disciplined and code-like approach to writing as well as in the rewarding of his efforts with sensuous gratification and existential satisfaction.

Sensuous reward is a key feature of the code’s relation to the café. For, if the tenure of existence is limited to this life, then one must luxuriate in the temporal, the finite, taking sensual pleasure in the quotidian. Robert Penn Warren put it like this: “if there is at center only nada, then the only sure compensation in life, the only reality, is gratification of appetite, the relish of sensation” (Warren, 93).[[9]](#endnote-9) My claim is that the “good” café is the material, spatial, ideal of this earthly compensation and, embodying aspects of the code, it operates as a secure and stable place where the code-follower can recuperate from, and make excursions into, the dizzying and unpredictable flux of modernity. [[10]](#endnote-10)

The early twentieth century saw an increasing fascination with space and place. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*,David Harvey identifies this preoccupation as an anxious pursuit of fixity and permanence resulting from a combination of an emerging internationalist consciousness and the general trend to innovate in art and to “make it new”. In an era when “transformations in spatial and temporal practice implied a loss of identity with place and repeated radical breaks with any sense of historical continuity”, one response, Harvey says, was to reaffirm the identity of place in the midst of growing abstractions of space (272).

For the expatriate writer in Europe, then, the concept of “being at home” was a complex and interesting one; and one to which the café was often central. Playing a crucial role in the social and cultural life of cities such as Berlin, Paris, and Vienna, the café provided constancy and relative security in a period characterized by upheaval and flux. The journalist and Vienna *Kaffeehaus* wit, Herman Kesten, described the café’s relationship to the exiled writer:

In Exile, the Café becomes House and Home, Church and Parliament, Desert and Pilgrim’s aim, a Cradle of illusions and a Cemetery. Exile makes one lonely and kills. It is also energetic and renewed. In Exile, the Café is the only continuous locality. I have been sitting in cafés in a dozen exile countries and it was if I was always sitting in the same café, at the Seaside, between Mountains, in London, in Paris, next to Amsterdam’s Canals, between the Monasteries of Bruges. I sat in the coffee house named exile and wrote (Kesten, 12-13 [my translation]).

Kesten’s experience of the café is representative – many of literary modernism’s luminaries were exiles to some degree or other. Many had swapped their natural homeland for a cultural one, the café. For itinerant artists and writers like Hemingway the café was at the center of lived experience. It was, in an almost literal sense, a medium of discourse, like a newspaper or magazine. People that were separated from the patterns of their society – whether by choice or not – still needed a forum, a place where they could meet and drink and talk and work.

For the many that were drawn to the capitals of Europe the café became a staple (and stable) part of city life, not only practically and economically but also creatively and, perhaps more importantly, psychologically. In a recent sociological study, *Café Society*, Graham Scambler argues that the café provides the deracinated and displaced with ‘respite, familiarity, and recognition’ (Scambler, 67). The café becomes Kesten’s “continuous locality” – house, home, church, and parliament – precisely because it offers many of the existential anchors associated with the traditional comforts of home life, the religious doctrine, and principles and rule of law. This sense of attachment is cultivated and reinforced through habit and ritual, as Scambler says:

Returning to a café to *get a fix* implies more than a passing need for caffeine, solitude or seclusion. It is the addiction of *l’habitue*. The will has surrendered to a routine. Replete with props—local newspaper, weekly magazine, puzzle book—the drinker subsides with a practiced sigh of relief. It is usage characterized by ritual: visits occur at the same time every day, with the same greeting, seat occupied and drink ordered (Scambler. 80).

It is through such ritualized habituation that in the “familiarity of the neat and predictable loneliness is accommodated and […] ‘ontological insecurity’ held at bay” (Scambler, 80). Indeed, in the final bravura paragraphs of *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) Hemingway pays tribute to the café’s power as a bulwark against the existential insecurities of its habitués:

In cafés where the boys are never wrong; in cafés where they are all brave; in cafés where the saucers pile and drinks are figured in pencil on the marble table tops among the shucked shrimps of seasons lost and feeling good because there are no other triumphs so secure and every man a success by eight o’clock if somebody can pay the score in cafés (*DIA*, 245)

In this formulation, the café functions as a panacea for a host of crises of masculinity. No man in this place is ever wrong, scared, overcharged, hungry, or without a drink; his victories are unequivocal and enduring, and reward is a straightforward and predictable matter of paying for it. So long as he remains in the café his wellbeing is assured; what happens when he is outside is another matter (as we shall see below with discussion of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”). Written from the perspective of the insider, someone who feels a sense of belonging to this café community, Hemingway’s encomium presents a sentimental yet earnest understanding of the café’s dependable role in social and cultural life.

Hemingway’s conception of the “good” café as an important, almost sacred, space for art rather than merely a place for eating, drinking, and socializing seems to have developed from his earliest days in Paris. Arriving in the city in December 1921, he and Hadley joined the great influx of Americans whose ranks swelled the expatriate population from approximately eight thousand in 1920 to around thirty-two thousand in 1923.[[11]](#endnote-11) American Expatriate life at this time centered around the district of Montparnasse and two artists’ cafés in particular, the Café du Dôme and the Café Rotonde (Wilson, 206). Like countless Americans before them the Hemingways headed straight for the famed Café du Dôme. Described by Robert Forrest Wilson as the “focus, community center, club and town-hall” for the district’s American citizenry, this was the place to go (Wilson, 194). Writing from the café’s *terrasse* to Sherwood and Tennessee Anderson, Hemingway conveys all the excitement and enthusiasm of the tourist enjoying the novelty of the experience:

Well here we are. And we sit outside the Dome Café, opposite the Rotonde that’s being redecorated, warmed up against one of those charcoal brazziers and it’s so damned cold outside and the brazier makes it so warm and we drink rum punch, hot, and the rhum enters into us like the Holy Spirit (c.23rd December 1921, *Letters vol. 1*, 313).

The pilgrimage to this “American” outpost in Paris rewards the foreign visitor with the familiarity and “continuous locality” of his own people, and his ironic reference to the “rhum” as Holy Spirit pushes the metaphor of the café as religious sanctuary.

However, the enthusiasm of the visitor “just-off-the-boat” soon gives way to the assured and cynical pose of the resident journalist insider. Just three months later, in a series of dispatches for the *Toronto Star*, Hemingway disassociates himself from the “American Bohemians in Paris” who “crowd the tables of the Rotonde” (*DLT*, 114).[[12]](#endnote-12) This is the demographic of exchange-rate tourists who saw Paris as an amusing playground. Free from the puritanical constraints of prohibition, they came in search of booze, low living costs, and the casual morality of the City of Light.[[13]](#endnote-13) Hemingway feared that their money and appetites were turning the city into “a super-Sodom and a Grander-Gomorrah” (“Wild Night Music of Paris”, *DLT* 117). He accuses them of living a faux-bohemia, feigning eccentricity in their lifestyle and dress, they were “posing as artists” but were “nearly all loafers expending the energy that an artist puts into his creative work talking about what they are going to do” (*DLT*, 114-15). Throughout these articles there is the sense that the café should be a much more serious and authentic place. This view, and his distaste for these fashionable and frivolous cafés is apparent thirty years later when he writes of “The Closerie des Lilas” as a “good café” where “[p]eople from the Dôme and the Rotonde never came” because “[t]here was no one there they knew, and no one would have stared at them if they came in (*MF-RE*, 73). Hemingway associates the Lilas with poets, professors, scientists, and Legion of Honor winners, and he says “these people made it a comfortable café since they were all interested in each other…and in the papers and periodicals…and no one was on exhibition (*MF-RE*, 73-4).

Hemingway’s early dispatches demonstrate an understanding of Paris that framed the metropolis in the context of its status as a world city. Walter Benjamin’s “Capital of the Nineteenth Century” was now, according to Gertrude Stein, “where the twentieth century was”. In *Becoming Americans in Paris* (2011), Brook L. Blower proposes that Paris was a symbol of “accessibility and universal relevance”, seen “by many across the globe as a requisite life experience, essential to coming to terms with the dawning of the modern age” (Blower, 5). Paris was *the* modern city and this modernity was built upon a creative and revolutionary past that became romanticized and metaphorical. It was this mythos allied with fantasies of art, culture, liberating bohemia, and cheap living that made Paris not just an attractive tourist destination but also a place for those who wished to bask in the creative ether and realize artistic ambitions.

Sherwood Anderson encouraged Hemingway to go to Paris because he had experienced first-hand its inspiring atmosphere. In Paris, art was a serious pursuit and its artists were respected. In his *Paris Notebook, 1921*, Anderson writes of the city’s allure: “[w]hat attracts us to this place is old France. The streets here are haunted by memories…We walk thro [*sic*] all these streets haunted by the ghosts of great artists of the past” (quoted in Fanning, 23). This attraction was also felt by artists a generation earlier. Recalling his arrival in Paris in the 1870s the writer George Moore explicitly connects the café not only to the urgent business of art and artistic education but also to more noble mythical pursuits:

I felt that my business was the discovery of a café where I could pass the evening –nothing to me seemed more essential than that. [...]

In the Middle Ages young men went searching for the Grail; to-day the café is the quest of a young man in search of artistic education (Moore 1914, 140).

Moore eventually found his Grail in the *Nouvelle Athènes*, the famous meeting place of the Impressionists, which he exalts as having a profound formative influence: “[h]e who would know anything of my life must know something of the academy of the fine arts. Not the official stupidity you read of in the daily papers, but the real French academy, the *café.”* He goes on to insist that “the influence of the “Nouvelle Athènes” is inveterate in the artistic thought of the nineteenth century” (Moore 1926, 85-6). Moore’s panegyric can be understood alongside works celebrating the unconventional lifestyles of bohemian artists, like those portrayed in Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851), as formative antecedents of the fantastic allure and idealization of Paris’s café culture.

This is the artistic heritage, to which the café is central, that Hemingway saw himself joining and taking a part.[[14]](#endnote-14) He had come to Paris to become a writer and to this end, in the three months since his arrival, he had made prompt use of Anderson’s letters of introduction to Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Lewis Galantière, and established for himself an advantageous place amongst modernism’s leading lights. Such associations would have bolstered his sense of himself as an artist, and the meetings would have introduced him to the lifestyle and work ethic that separated the successful artist from the dissipating idler. Such insights gave him confidence enough to speak on their behalf: “the artists of Paris who are turning out creditable work resent and loathe the Rotonde crowd” (*DLT*, 115). If cafés were associated with the mythic imagery of bohemian artists and their modern-day inheritors, the conduct of these “loafers” was sullying the notion of what it meant to be an artist, and Hemingway’s quick disapproval can be read both as a corrective and a belief in an ideal café culture.[[15]](#endnote-15)

From his earliest experiences, then, the “good” café for Hemingway is associated with a serious and disciplined approach to art and life. But the spatial aspect of the code also has an epicurean dimension. Here, the café is connected to something that transcends the everyday practicalities of living and writing to the extent that its value surpasses the kinds of activities traditionally enjoyed by the code-follower, such as hunting, bullfighting, or fishing.

There is a telling scene in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) when, on their way to Pamplona, Jake Barnes, Bill Gorton, and Robert Cohn, stop overnight in Bayonne. Jake describes the next day:

In the morning it was bright, and they were sprinkling the streets of the town, and we all had breakfast in a café. [...] It was hot, but the town had a cool, fresh, early-morning smell and it was pleasant to be sitting in the café. A breeze started to blow, and you could feel that the air came from the sea. There were pigeons out in the square, and the houses were a yellow, sun-baked color, and *I did not want to leave the café* (*SAR*,79-80 emphasis added).

Remember, this takes place before the trout fishing in Burguete that is so often read as the bucolic center of the bibulous hurricane that is expatriate Montparnasse and the San Fermín fiesta. The visit to the café in Bayonne is merely a stopover, and the threesome still have all the fun and excitement of fishing, bullfighting, and festival ahead of them. The fact, therefore, that Jake states his reluctance to leave this rather unassuming café is significant.

One can certainly understand his hesitation. The sensate description conveys Jake’s emotional response without its being stated directly. Focusing on fundamental sensations and basic needs (Sight, touch, smell, satiation, comfort), Hemingway carefully signals that right here, right now, the café represents total satisfaction and inner peace. Existential equilibrium is a rare state of being in the novel, and Jake will only experience true contentedness again in San Sebastian after the fallout from the fiesta.

In contrast to his desire to stay in the Bayonne café, Jake expresses no such disinclination later when he is petitioned by the Englishman, Wilson-Harris, to “‘[s]top over another day’” in Burguete and try for some more big trout on the Irati river. His unequivocal response that “‘[w]e really have to get into town’” (*SAR*, 111) is due to a number of factors, not least of which is his desire to see Brett, but it is noteworthy for the fact that the fishing, so thoroughly enjoyed and celebrated by Jake has not induced the same frank statement of reluctance as the little café in Bayonne.

The modest triumph of café experience over the quintessential leisure pursuit, fishing, is again demonstrated in an earlier journalistic piece Hemingway wrote for the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1922, entitled ‘Fishing the Rhône Canal’. Towards the end of the article Hemingway departs from his main subject and discusses a café encountered on his way back from the canal. He describes an enchanting establishment that beckons the weary traveler with a galloping gold horse statue atop its roof and a “great wisteria vine as thick as a young tree that branches out and shades the porch with hanging bunches of purple flowers and that bees go in and out of all day and that glisten after a rain” (*DLT*, 170). Green tables and green chairs compliment the verdant scene where the spellbound customer is rewarded with bounteous provision in the form of “seventeen percent dark beer” that “goes foaming out in great glass mugs that hold a quart and cost forty centimes”. The beer is served by an attentive barmaid who “smiles and asks about your luck” and takes care of all the traveler’s needs (*DLT*, 170-171).

The striking thing about this particular paradise is that it is sited within the mundane surroundings of a train station on the edge of the Swiss town of Aigle, which, like the café in Bayonne, is not the fisherman’s ultimate destination. And yet, this station arouses in Hemingway the same reluctance to leave that Jake Barnes felt in Bayonne. He writes: “Trains are always at least two hours apart in Aigle, and those waiting in the station buffet, this café with the golden horse and wisteria-hung porch is a station buffet, mind you, wish they would never come” (*DLT*, 171). Again, it is the supernal café and not the fishing that elicits a stated desire for the experience to be prolonged. We assume Hemingway, like the café’s other patrons, wished he, too, could postpone his onward journey. For he and they already find themselves quite at home.

The model of the café as a “continuous locality”, a comforting place of solace and satiation is roundly articulated in Hemingway’s most famous treatment of the café, ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’. In this skillfully compressed tale, an illuminated little Spanish café comes to embody all the virtues of the code: dignity, honor, orderliness, security, solace, and sensuous gratification. Operating as a moral beacon amid the dark enveloping beyond of *nada*, it stands as a comforting defense against despair and meaninglessness and is perhaps Hemingway’s most explicit tribute to the exceptional power of the café. Scriptural references and allusions in the story imbue the café with a kind of religious gravitas. Code ideology and space come together so meaningfully here that we might understand the ‘Clean, Well-Lighted Place’ as instantiating Kesten’s notion of the café as a kind of church, whose denomination is the code.

Recounting the story, we know that an old man has tried to commit suicide and it is to the clean, well-lighted café that he has turned. Two waiters (one young, one old), sit watching, discussing him:

“Last week he tried to commit suicide,” one waiter said.

“Why?”

“He was in despair.”

“What about?”

“Nothing.”

“How do you know it was nothing?”

“He has plenty of money” (*ACWLP*, 288)

The old man’s despair is not about ‘nothing,’ of course, as many commentators agree. The nothing (or *nada*, in Spanish) contains “huge actuality” (Baker, 1972: 124). It is an intangible existential dread that is made up in part of both the acknowledgement of advancing age and the fear of an inexorable demise into nothingness. “Death”, as Penn Warren observes, “is the great nada” (1964: 92). The old man’s fear is triggered by the dark of night, and it is the café’s light that temporarily abates his dread. Sitting at a clean table on the terrace “in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light” (*CSS*, 288) he is provided with sanctuary and even guidance. In this way, the café provides the kinds of ministrations normally associated with a typical church.

Religious references abound in the story. Penn Warren, for instance, asserts that “in this phase [of his work] Hemingway is a religious writer” (1964, 92). George Monteiro finds that the twenty-third psalm is of particular significance and suggests that the old man sitting in the shadow of the leaves is “a deliberate echoing of the shadow image of the twenty-third psalm (‘though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death’).” And notes an even closer echo of Luke 1:79, on the purpose of John the Baptist: “‘To give light to them that sit in darkness and *in* the shadow of death’” (1987, 92). He also highlights what he calls “the remarkable literalization into action of one of the most familiar metaphors employed in the twenty-third psalm – ‘my cup runneth over’” (1987, 93). This occurs when the young waiter has finished pouring the old man a brandy, and the old man then motions with his finger and asks for “‘A little more,’” prompting the following action: “The waiter poured on into the glass so that the brandy slopped over and ran down the stem into the top saucer of the pile” (*CSS*, 289).

Like every church, the clean, well-lighted café has a clergy: in this case the waiters. The opening description of them foregrounds their ministerial status and concern for their ‘congregation’ (here: the old drinker):

[t]he two waiters inside the café knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him (*CSS*, 288).

Like shepherds, the waiters keep watch on their flock. The burden of the code can sometimes lie heavy; the effort to define and maintain it, as Penn Warren says, “however limited and imperfect it may be, is the tragic or pitiful human story” (1964, 88). Despair is the old man’s tragic story. The waiters – the older waiter in particular – provide “code guidance” in accordance with a “café liturgy,” much like a priest might provide spiritual guidance. The younger waiter may be understood as a trainee or seminarian. His naïve understanding of *nada* and his impatience with the old drinker are reflective of his neophyte status. Together, the waiters want to ensure that the old man does not digress or dishonor himself; that is, leave without paying or get too inebriated. Sensuous gratification is a key element of the code, but control is also important. The older waiter observes that though drunk the old man “drinks without spilling” and walks “unsteadily but with dignity” (*CSS* 290).

At one point, the old waiter articulates his role at the café as a kind of hieratic office. Arguing with his novitiate, he emphasizes the solace-giving importance of the café late at night when the *nada-*fearing ‘congregation’ may need the comforting light or his clerical intercession: “‘I am one of those who like to stay late at the café,’” he says, “‘[w]ith all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.’” Like the purpose of John the Baptist who gives “light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79), the wise waiter clearly understands the café and his pastoral duties similarly: “‘[e]ach night I am reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the café’” (*CSS*, 290).

Though he may perceive his role as such, it should be understood that it is precisely the café that confers upon the waiter his hieratic office. It is in this place that he attains solace and finds that code adherence is realizable. In the same way a person of faith might feel closer to God in a church (and comport themselves accordingly), the code follower is more attuned to the exigencies of the code in the well-lighted café. Once outside, however, the waiter falters. Beyond the light and the clean tables, he is no longer a member of the ‘code clergy’. He can neither minister nor can he adequately keep at bay his own fear of *nada*. Indeed, at the end of the story, stood outside when the shutters are down and the light is off, the waiter articulates the fear common to him, the old drinker, and “all those who need a light for the night”:

It was all nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada* (*CSS*, 291)

The café provides the perspicacity and orderliness required to keep such fears at bay. Outside of this ‘church’ and no longer clerically engaged, the waiter is simply another congregant beset by fear of that great ‘Nothing.’ And subsequently, in an oblation to *nada*, he recites parodic versions of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ave Maria: “Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name thy kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada*” (*CSS*, 291).

Significantly, in traditional Catholic Mass, the Lord’s Prayer is typically recited not by the priest but by the congregation. His resort to common prayer here confirms his demotion from celebrant to congregant. The prayer is a parodic entreaty for protection (for himself, for others) against the enveloping nothingness. Outside in the dark and vulnerable, the waiter goes to a nearby bar in search of reassurance. We might even conceive of the waiter’s visit here as a momentary fear-driven lapse into willful disavowal of the code because the bar is no clean, well-lighted place; it can provide no such clarity or reassurance. Unlike the café, the bar lacks certain understood principles of conduct or form.

For example, like the formulary of the church that prescribes practices of worship, there is also what one might call a ‘liturgy of the café,’ which prescribes an ‘order of service.’ This is already evident in the older waiter’s conduct and prayers discussed thus far, but it becomes even more apparent when we contrast the waiter’s notion of his priestly duties with the indifference of the barman who serves him at the end of the story:

He smiled and stood before a bar with a shining steam pressure coffee machine.

“What’s yours?” asked the barman.

“*Nada*.”

“*Otro loco màs*,” said the barman and turned away.

“A little cup,” said the waiter.

The barman poured it for him,

“The light is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished,” the waiter said.

The barman looked at him but did not answer. It was too late at night for conversation.

“You want another *copita?*” the barman asked.

“No, thank you,” said the waiter and went out. He disliked bars and *bodegas*. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing (*CSS*, 290-1).

There is a distinct absence of fellowship in the barman’s transaction with the older waiter. It is a cold and mechanical proceeding, devoid of the kinds of welcoming pleasantries that one in need might hope for. There is no pleasant salutation. The barman’s terse question gives no indication that anything other than alcohol will be available or indeed proffered – there will be no conversation, certainly. Where, in the café, the waiters kept a watchful eye on the old drinker, here the barman unconcernedly turns his back on his client. The barman’s lack of concern and/or judgment is also evident when despite concluding that the old waiter is “Otro loco más” [another crazy one] he still pours a drink for his “crazy” client without regard for the consequences of serving alcohol to someone of such a disposition. He even offers another *copita* [glass] as soon as the first is emptied. Note also, the unpolished bar can be considered “messy” and the result of a lack of regard: for standards, for clientele; and regard for an “order of service” that reveals to us the crucial difference between the bar and the café in this story.

***Coda:* The Twenty-third Psalm**

Accepting that the ‘Clean, well-Lighted Place’ represents a kind of ‘code church’ replete with ministering waiters, the Twenty-third Psalm now presents a highly suggestive overarching theme for Hemingway’s idea of the “good” café in general.

First, a reminder of the Psalm:

1 The LORD *is* my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil,

my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Typically understood as a meditative prayer of trust in God and commitment to Him, the psalmist acknowledges the spiritual sustenance and solace associated with being watched over and provided for. The kind of solace that the psalmist attains via faith in God can be likened to the consolations Hemingway associates with his concept of the perfect, or clean, well-lighted café. Both the psalm and Hemingway’s notion of the café are about provision, satiation, and comfort.

The natural imagery of the psalm – the green pastures and still waters – is evident in most of Hemingway’s ideal cafés. It can be seen in the shading trees that enclose his favorite Parisian café, La Closerie des Lilas, or in the “great wisteria vine” and “purple flowers” that shade the café in Aigle; or in the tree that shades the terrace of the clean, well-lighted Spanish café. It perhaps should be noted that is not at all usual to have an urban café terrace furnished with such verdure. The waters at these cafés may not be so still but they are there: in the form of great foaming quarts of dark beer in steins cold and beaded on the outside; and they provide the same sense of repose and have the same restorative action.

The psalm’s “valley of the shadow of death” is understood here as *nada* and associated insecurities. In the psalm, where protection from this shadow is derived from God and everlasting life, here a brief but tangible sanctuary can be realized at the café. This is key: despite the occasional tragedies and insecurities of modern life, a table can always be readied at the supernal café where one’s spirit can be lifted and vitality restored. In the café, a ministering waiter takes the role of shepherd and host. The “staff” of the café, like the staff of the psalm, is a source of comfort; albeit here it is literal, waist-coated, and tray carrying. Where the psalmist envisions the perfect life as dwelling in the “house of the LORD forever”, for Hemingway it is dwelling in the perfect café.

1. In a write-up of a 2007 roundtable discussion on Hemingway, one critic neglects the distinction between a café and a bar that Hemingway’s old waiter is at pains to make. When summarizing the action of the story, it is wrongly claimed that after closing the café the waiter, instead of going to a bar, goes on to another café. This highlights the point that not enough has been made of the significance of the café as a unique place in this story. (See Del Gizzo and Roman 2007, 111). In another article, the action is summarised as follows: “[t]wo waiters sit in a Spanish café. [...] The two converse about a customer after he leaves, an old man who has recently attempted suicide, and whom the two waiters, at the insistence of the younger, have put out of the bright, cheery bodega so they can close for the night.” Here, the term *bodega* is casually deployed as a synonym for café, which again ignores the older waiter’s explicit differentiation. (See Wright 2003, 190). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The terms “space” and “place” have particular meaning in the context of spatial studies. For the theorist, Yi Fu Tuan, “the meaning of space often merges with that of place”. Space is metaphorical rather than material. It indicates a sense of movement, of history, of becoming, and often implies creative, imaginative, symbolic, or perceived experience or associations. Tuan defines “space” as “freedom.” “Place”, on the other hand, is “security”; often understood to imply a fixed sense of location, of being, or of dwelling. He says “if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (Tuan 1977, 3-6). In this essay, the term “café space” refers to the generalized concept of “the café”, which can have signifying potential. The “good” café here is space transformed into place and is loaded with significance. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. No scholar has so far imputed the importance of the café to Hemingway’s life and work in the way I do here. For example, William Adair reads the various café scenes, café names, landscapes, and foods in *The Sun Also Rises* as symbolic referents to what he labels the novel’s “pre-story past” – those incidents and events that have “already happened” to Jake Barnes and his generation, circa 1914-1922. However, the focus on historical events (i.e. temporality) trumps spatiality. For, in his analysis if a café has any importance at all it is only nominally and because it references something else (see Adair 2001, both (Spring) and (Fall)). In ‘Expatriate Lifestyle as ‘Tourist Destination: *The Sun Also Rises* and Experiential Travelogues of the Twenties’, Allyson Nadia Field does not ascribe the café any particular value in and of itself but instead reads the profusion of cafés and bars in *The Sun Also Rises* as Hemingway “contribut[ing] to a body of travel literature describing the places that constitute the infamous expatriate lifestyle” (83-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Traditional code scholarship has been recuperated in recent years, and particularly successful have been discussions that eschew traditional biographical and masculinist readings. See, for example, Sandra Whipple Spanier who cogently presents Catherine Barkley as the real code hero of *A Farewell to Arms* (Spanier 1987). Gail D. Sinclair takes Spanier’s analysis further and suggests that the women bearers of the Hemingway code “exhibit greater fortitude while participating in the same essentially male dominated world waged in brutal war and rugged survival” (Sinclair 2002, p. 96). This essay focuses upon a general understanding of the code and its relationship to space rather than characterization and therefore does not explicitly engage with the nuances of the code hero. See *n8* and *n10*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In his autobiography, Lincoln Steffens says of Hemingway’s approach to writing: ‘I think he thought that writing was a matter of honesty and labor” (Qtd in Cowley, 44) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. According to Google Maps™, Hemingway’s apartment on the Rue Cardinal Lemoine is approximately 1.8km and twenty minutes’ walk to the Place St-Michel. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion of Hemingway and Existentialism see Killinger (1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Rovit distinguishes between “the sportsman’s code”, which comprises a set of rules that govern “professional activity” like soldiering, bull-fighting, deep-sea fishing, etc., and the “Hemingway code”, which he theorizes through the “game of life” as the “ethic, or philosophic perspective, through which Hemingway tries to impart *meaning* and *value* to the seeming futility of man’s headlong rush toward death” (pp. 108-109). For the purposes of this essay, I do not engage with this distinction because I see Hemingway’s profession of writing, his notion of the ‘proper’ use of the café, as well as his (and his characters’) need for ontological security as inseparable from “the game of life.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In his work, *Space and Place,* Yi Fu Tuan further defines places as “centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation are satisfied” (4) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Philip Young has defined the code hero as one who possesses “honor and courage which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man and distinguish him from the people who follow random impulses, let down their hair, and are generally messy, perhaps cowardly, and without inviolable rules for how to live holding tight” (Young 63-4). He also posits a distinction between the Hemingway hero and the code hero, and later advocated the substitutions employed by Earl Rovit: the “tyro” is the Hemingway hero, the novice initiated in a nihilistic world; and the “tutor,” is the code hero, the model through which the “tyro” learns the necessary skills for survival. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See McAuliffe, *When Paris Sizzled*, p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. According to Jerrold Seigel, most of the bourgeois inhabitants lived in Paris for only a short time, thereafter returning to the bourgeois life they had forsaken (See *Bohemian Paris*,51). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This is the broad picture drawn by Malcolm Cowley’s in *Exile’s Return* (1951). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. It is also the beginning of Hemingway’s attempt to insinuate himself within the mythic tradition of the cafés of Paris, which in *A Moveable Feast* he is ultimately successful. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In ‘Hemingway’s Morality of Compensation’, to which this paper owes much of its premise, Donaldson says, “To the writer, single-minded in his dedication to his craft, the time-wasting of café habitués represented the greatest sin of all. It was the work that counted, and talking about art was hardly a satisfactory substitute” (Donaldson 1971, 403).

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