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Series: Bloom's Notes

Authors: Bloom, Harold


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8. Signs, Motifs, and Themes

At the beginning of chapter five, as Jake takes us down the boulevard with him on his way to work, he notices three familiar street people: the man with the jumping frogs, the man with the boxer toys, and the man pushing the roller that leaves a damp word—CINZANO—on the sidewalk (35). While inviting readers to read these signs with him, Jake does not analyze them for us. One might say there is no need to analyze them, for not everything that happens on the surface of a novel bears significance: the street signs may be nothing more than accurate surface details. Yes, they are that, but streets are full of details, indeed so full that were Jake to tell us everything he saw on his way to work, the novel would get no further than that single morning. Therefore, these signs chosen by the author/narrator should at least be checked for significance, for all the detail that Jake takes in on that particular morning, he has selected these signs to suggest what it was like on the boulevard.

Both the man with the jumping frogs (presumably toys) and the man with the toy boxers are selling their merchandise.

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to tourists. Jake steps aside "to avoid walking into the thread with which his girl assistant manipulated the boxers. She was standing looking away, the thread in her folded hands." (35). Ralph Ellison thought this scene significant enough to use a variation on it in Invisible Man. Perhaps there is more here than Jake cares to comment on. First, one can say that selling and buying are a part of the novel: a simple exchange of values, as Bill Gorton says. The two pitchmen, we note, do not delay Jake any more than the three-card monte games on the streets of New York catch the attention of the streetwise. Jake is not on native ground, but he is not a tourist. That's the point. He avoids the unseen control threads, for he has watched the game plenty of times before. But the controls are
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Lost Generations

Gary Senovitz


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When an adviser to President Obama was quoted in _The New Yorker_ as saying that the administration’s policy in Libya was “leading from behind,” he initiated a season of hand-wringing about American decline, as if he had announced that the president was implementing a secret plan to make a second-rate country even worse. But whether America is leading from – or falling – behind affects more than our foreign policy. It also affects how it feels to be an American, which is a central concern of American novelists.

LEAVING THE ATOCHA STATION (Coffee House Press, paper, $15), Ben Lerner’s remarkable first novel, published last year, is a stringsroman and meditation and slecker tale fused by a precise, reflective and clarly comic voice. It is also a revealing study of what it’s like to be a young American abroad. The plotting is scant. Adam Gordon, a poet, having bluffed his way into a fellowship in Madrid, makes friends, struggles with Spanish, smokes hash, wanders around, writes poetry, doubts poetry and has two low-energy love affairs. But the real action of the novel is interior. Gordon has two struggles: the classic one, to live authentically, and an aesthetic one, to represent “the texture of et cetera itself,” with a poetry that transcends mere snapshots of localized events and attempts to capture the hum and buzz of “life’s white machine.” To Gordon, these struggles are the same. “I wondered if the incommensurability of language and experience was new, if my experience of my experience issued from a damaged life of pornography and privilege, if there were happy ages when the starry sky was the map of all possible paths, or if this division of experience into what could not be named and what could not be lived just was experience, for all people for all time.”

In a book packed in references to art and literature, there is no evident allusion to another short first novel centered on a young Midwesterner in Spain: “The Sun Also Rises,” published in 1926. Lerner’s novel could have the same epigraph as Ernest Hemingway’s—Gertrude Stein: “You are all a lost generation”—and both books remind us that if you are far from home, alienated from life’s clean
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War, gender, and Ernest Hemingway

The Hemingway Review, Fall 2002

ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "Big Two-Hearted River" remains perhaps the most famous piece of fiction about war with no mention of the war in it. The absence of war is exactly the point of the story, as Nick Adams, a recently returned veteran of the Great War, attempts to forget the war, to recover his prewar adolescent self by engaging in his favorite prewar adolescent activity, fishing. Yet the very language of the story reveals Nick's soldiery self and betrays his attempt to escape that self:

Nick went over to the pack and found, with his fingers, a long nail in a paper sack of nails, in the bottom of the pack. He drove it into the pine tree, holding it close and driving it gently with the flat of the axe. He hung the pack on the nail. All his supplies were in the pack. They were off the ground and sheltered now. (CSS 167)

This is the language of a soldier carrying out the physical tasks of soldiering, of getting down to his business. Ulysses S. Grant's mantra resonates here, and seems applicable to both Nick Adams and Ernest hemingway: "I am a verb."

Nick manages over the course of this very long trip to suppress his memory and imagination almost entirely, except for one remembered pre-war fishing trip with friends. Nick has mastered what Hemingway later calls 'the greatest gift a soldier can acquire,' the ability to 'suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after' (MAW xxviii). In "Big Two-Hearted River," besides war, the other significant absence from Nick Adams's consciousness is love. No women in Nick's life appear in the story, as it to suppress thoughts of one—war or women—he necessarily must suppress the other. Even the two trout he catches are both male.

Military and war experiences affect the soldier's sense of gender identity, which for the male veteran means his manhood, his comprehension of himself as a man, and by extension his personal expression and experiences of gender. This corrosion of identity, in the case of Nick, is both a byproduct and a result of the war he returns from. His body bears the scars of his service and his soul is torn by the experiences he had to endure. The story of "Big Two-Hearted River" is the story ofNick's efforts to reframe his identity, to restore the way he saw himself before he went to war: as a hunter, a fisherman, a lover, and a man. The war has left its mark, but he is determined to carry on without it.
War, gender, and Ernest Hemingway

The Hemingway Review, Fall 2002

This is the language of a soldier capable of infinity, the mental tasks of soldiering, of getting down to his business. He has learned the difference between the past and the present minute with no before and no after. (MAW, xxvii.) In "Big Two-Hearted River," besides war, the other significant absence from Nick Adams's consciousness is love. No women in Nick's life appear in the story, as if to suppress thoughts of one—war or women—he necessarily must suppress the other. Even the two women he catches are both male.

Military and war experiences affect the soldier's sense of gender identity, which for the male veteran means his manly self, his possession of himself as a man, and by extension, his personal proprioception and experience of space and time. The spatial and temporal dissonance that results from the impossible coexistence of the past and the present minute with no before and no after forces the soldier to accept the fact that history is not fixed, that the war is not over, that the manly self is not in control of the space and time he occupies.
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