

The Body Overconsumed: Masculinity and Consumerism in Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees*

Jopi Nyman

University of Joensuu

While all of Ernest Hemingway's writing can be seen to explore the construction and maintenance of masculinity, his *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) locates issues of gender and power in the context of aging and illness. By exploring the final days of Colonel Cantwell in Venice, the novel brings forth cultural responses to anxieties over aging and illness, with particular reference to gender. Thus, it is the intention of this essay to argue that this novel laments the loss of gendered (bodily and social) power. I will argue that when the body, the locus of gendered power, betrays the man, the only proper solution allowed for him is a rejection of aging and a return to the glorious past of nostalgia. In contrast to what some earlier critics have suggested,¹ Colonel Cantwell's death is not tragic but rather a gendered solution to cultural change and the loss of autonomy.

In this essay the attraction of an idealized past as portrayed in Hemingway's novel is located in the context of cultural change in which traditional gendered values are threatened. The novel is embedded in a

¹ The most noteworthy of these readings is Wirt Williams, *The Tragic Art of Ernest Hemingway* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. 155. According to Carlos Baker's *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton University Press, 1956), the novel is "elegiac" (p. 287).

more general discourse concerning the increasing significance of consumer culture in the post-war era. Although the novel is set in Europe and praises the quality products of European high culture such as Dante, Giotto, and Byron, they are viewed in a nostalgic mood as signs of the past that are no longer appreciated. In what follows I will suggest that in *Across the River* we can witness a clash of two discourses, different though coexisting, namely those of humanism and modernism/consumerism. Since the aging main character finds it difficult to accommodate to the commercialized values of the new discourse, he feels lost in the new world, which takes the symbolic form of terminal illness. Through its exploration of death, aging and illness in the context of consumer culture, the novel can be seen to convey a rather crude view stating that if commodities stay, humans go. At the same time it laments the loss of masculine autonomy and signals the replacement of the era of individualism with that of mass-production.

The representation of masculinity in *Across the River* tends to follow the strategies of traditional male-centered American narratives. It carries on the polarity and sentimentality of the American tradition of Cooper, Melville, and the hard-boiled narratives of the 1920s and 1930s. In its representation of gender it resembles Hemingway's earlier *To Have and Have Not* (1937), another narrative of death and masculine anxieties. In both novels the extremely masculinized protagonist is shown to believe in outdated values and to function according to an ideology that no longer works: he is a relic who does not fit in the old order. While Harry Morgan's loss of masculine power is symbolized in his mutilation, Colonel Cantwell has not only a maimed hand but also problems with his heart.

What these novels locate at the center of a masculinist discourse, as the core of masculinity, is the male body, portrayed as healthy and powerful. In western societies it is through an idealized male body that masculinity is performed: the strong athletic body is a public marker of gendered power.² Looking at himself in the mirror, the Colonel tries to persuade himself to think that he is all right in order to preserve his public status. He thinks that "the gut is flat, he said without uttering it. The chest is all

2 See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 54-55.

right except where it contains the defective muscle.”³ According to his view, based on the notion of the importance of the gendered body, the body must be kept in good shape because of the sense of power it supposedly provides him. While it is important for the Colonel to maintain his bodily and professional appearance, the medical examination at the beginning of *Across the River* reveals that his body is slowly deteriorating. Since the body is the locus of physical and social power, Cantwell's attempt to deceive his surgeon only reveals the importance of his reputation, as a part of his public identity. In order to pass the examination, he has “taken enough mannitol hexanitrate to, well he did not quite know what to – to pass, he said to himself” (6). Even though his cardiogram is “wonderful” and “could have been that of a man of twenty-five” or “a boy of nineteen” (6), he is a sick man and the self-prescribed medication does not help. The explicit emphasis on the Colonel's insistence on passing the examination and maintaining his professional/personal masculine identity speaks for his belief in a certain ideal of masculine behavior. For him, enduring the examination is a way of gaining power over his body, at least temporarily. The importance of endurance is also supported by his friend Gran Maestro, the aging head waiter at the Gritti, who is shown to be able to fight pain: “He took his ulcers day by day, and his heart the same way. When they did not hurt he did not hurt either” (148). Thus masculinity and a masculine way of coping with illness, pain, and aging, enduring it silently, becomes in the novel an assessment of a character's worth. The right way is a masculine way.

Even though the male body functions as a signifier of power in the novel, *Across the River* tells another story in which gender, aging, and illness are connected. While the Colonel is not really old, in his consciousness illness is combined with old age since both signify a loss of control over one's body. As the Colonel's body becomes increasingly weaker, he turns to his nostalgic memories of youthful power. He attempts to reconstruct his manhood by resorting to the use of gendered power, as can be seen in his attack on two young sailors. Since the Colonel thinks that their whistles have hurt the feelings of Renata, his

³ Ernest Hemingway, *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950; London: Arrow Books, 1994), p. 132. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

young girl-friend, he, in accordance with the requirements of the masculine code, is forced to fight to preserve his reputation as a truly masculine character. Even though any form of physical stress may prove lethal to the Colonel, Renata is not permitted to see that his masculine power is nearly gone. His insistence on the maintenance of a gendered code reveals that masculinity is public and based on constant testing and battle. Thus masculinity is closely connected with a position of power, constructed in this novel also through the symbolic use of the hierarchy of the military system.

It can be argued that illness, connected with aging in *Across the River*;⁴ threatens the masculine identity of the main character, which leads the Colonel into exaggerated forms of masculine behavior, as in his above-mentioned attack. For the Colonel, aging and illness signify a radical loss of power that must be resisted and compensated for. When the Colonel starts to notice that his bodily power is diminishing, he resorts to verbal and symbolic power in order to maintain his position. He pulls rank, a masculine and hierarchically defined position of power. To stress the protagonist's power, the novel legitimizes his maintenance of power by portraying him as a leader who is both liked and feared by his subordinates. His orders are not to be crossed or questioned, as can be seen in this verbal attack on his driver: "'Don't you point me out a God-damn thing and until I direct you otherwise, don't speak to me until you are spoken to.'" (223). His yearning after his youth and early career is important not only in relation to gender but also to his professional achievements. In the novel his constant memories of his past days of glory reveal a sense of regret and a loss of power. The repeated references to the battles of the First World War support his disintegrating identity, where masculinity and professionalism have always been interchangeable, but are now diminishing. The attraction of the past is even further emphasized in his sentimental reminiscences of America as he knows it, as a landscape of natural beauty with white and ponderosa pines (150).

While it has been suggested that Cantwell's struggle with his pain is an attempt to maintain dignity and control over his impending death,⁴ this interpretation should be taken further and discussed in the framework of

4 Charles M. Oliver, "Hemingway's Study of Impending Death: *Across the River and into the Trees*," in Robert W. Lewis, ed., *Henzüzgway in Italy and Other Essays* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 150.

gender. In this sense, death in *Across the River* may function as a friend, as Wirt Williams has suggested.⁵ Death is a gendered solution that does away with the problems posed to masculine identity by old age, illness, and dependency. When an autonomous male faces problems threatening his identity, he may prefer death to a life in which he would need to submit to others. By attempting to preserve his appearance and status and by resisting proper medication and care the Colonel's behavior emphasizes the importance of masculine autonomy and the ideology of individualism. According to his extreme version of it, a man has to act alone, to hunt and to fight alone, without considering the needs and wants of others. In this novel the view is extended to include the moment of death. Colonel Cantwell dies alone in his car; it becomes the coffin in which his body finally becomes a corpse. Not even at the moment of his death does he require any help. To stress the point, he even manages to be coolly masculine up to the moment of his death: "he made the back seat all right and he shut the door. He shut it carefully and well" (224). Hence, at one level the novel can be read as a lament for social power and the disappearance of truly masculine characters, true individuals. The emphasis on the possibility of autonomous action in the narrative suggests that when power goes, only death can function as a form of relief.⁶

While the novel shows the implausibility of the ideal of the autonomous subject through the decay of the male body, it also explores the end of the ideology of masculinity and the ideal of the self-made man by locating its characters in a modern world of consumption and consumer culture. Colonel Cantwell and his values of courage and honesty do not to function in the traditionally individualistic manner amidst trademarks and products of mass culture; using the trademarks, and constructing a life world in which the mastery of trademarks guarantees the consumer control over the world.⁷ The active role of the consumer challenges the

5 Wirt Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

6 While Wirt Williams suggests that death "functions as a climactic opportunity for affirmation and transcendence" (*ibid.*, p. 156), it is more apt to say that death saves the autonomous individual from humiliation and degradation and maintains the masculine heroics of the Colonel.

7 See David Nye, "The Cultural and Historical Roots of American Icons;" in Aaron Betsky, *Icons: Magnets of Meaning* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997), pp. 92-111.

traditional view of consumerism. According to such critics as Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, in consumption-based culture humanity gives way to objects; in the consumption-oriented era products represent progress, replace old ideals, and the consumer is passive. They write: "Consumerism engendered passivity and conformity within this supposedly ever-expanding realm of the *new*, which put leisure, beauty, and pleasure in the reach of all."⁸ Mike Featherstone has connected consumer culture with leisure time, which has to be filled with commodities;⁹ the purchasing of commodities; shopping is in itself a commodity. Thus consumerism may signify a break from the old tradition and come to represent a progressive and modern life-style for its subjects. However, consumers should not be seen as merely passive, but through consumption they may actively seek fulfilment and construct a new self or a utopia, as Fredric Jameson has argued.¹⁰ In a similar vein Janice Radway has pointed out in her analysis of the meaning-making of romance readers that cultural commodities do not totally control their consumer. Instead, the consumer gives meanings to the different texts she encounters.¹¹

It can be argued that the idealized body, young and good-looking, forms the basis of consumer culture. The image of the ideal male (or female), best seen in the emphasis on film stars and other idealized images created by the media, rests on the emphasis on health, youth, sexual virility, and beauty.¹² Featherstone connects the emphasis on the body in consumer culture with the emergence of the late twentieth-century personality type, described in David Riesman's and Christopher Lasch's well-known works of cultural criticism. While Lasch's narcissists are concerned with their own looks and fears of aging, Featherstone goes further and suggests that the individual becomes a player, a performer, for whom the public space is a sphere where the body

8 Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minneapolis Press, 1992), p. 49; italics original.

9 Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," in Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, London: Sage, 1991), pp. 172-173.

10 See Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979): pp. 130-149.

11 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 6-8.

12 See Featherstone *op. cit.*, p. 193.

and appearance are used for gaining social power. In the games of consumer culture the individuals have to monitor themselves and develop their skills, as can be seen in the popularity of self-help literature.¹³ The individual is a commodity that tries to sell itself to potential buyers; hence the body must conform to the ideals as much as possible. In Hemingway's novel the Colonel appears initially to be in total opposition to the images promoted by commercialism. Since he represents an older tradition (the individualist tough guy tradition) in American culture, his location in the discourse of consumerism appears to be rather insecure. Because of the success of his masculine code of behavior in certain military and hierarchical settings, the Colonel would prefer a return to the old order, as revealed in his longing for the glorious days of the First World War. It is also suggested that his power, both bodily and military, is slowly but surely diminishing – once a General, he has been reduced in rank (100). However, regardless of his own dislike of commercialism and the emergence of modern values, he is not only firmly located in the discourse of commercial culture but also tries to make a self for himself by his control of trademarks. While his relationship to increasing commodification is ambivalent, he feels compelled to control socio-cultural change by all means available to him.

Even though *Across the River* does not present a fully developed coherent and unified view of commodification and consumer culture, their importance as central tenets in the modern world starts with the setting of the novel. While John Paul Russo has suggested that this Hemingway novel is strongly connected with the romantic tradition of the Venice novel,¹⁴ it can also be argued that the novel juxtaposes the traditional notion of the Venice of European high culture with a commodified Venice to an extent that the myth becomes deconstructed. In this novel, Venice, a city of tourists who can be exploited by the tourist industry,¹⁵ functions more as an object-like commodity than it does as a symbol of high culture. Its spectacular sights form the object of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

¹⁴ John Paul Russo, "To Die Is Not Enough: Hemingway's Venetian Novel," in Robert W. Lewis, ed., *Hemingway in Italy and Other Essays* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 161.

¹⁵ As Renata puts it in her comment to the Colonel: "No, let me ask the price. They will charge me less than they would charge you. After all you are a rich American" (189).

Colonel's gaze; Renata, as an inhabitant of Venice, is for the Colonel a physicalized way of approaching and taking over the city. In fact, the novel can be seen to become part of a sentimental Venice discourse in which images of youthful love-making in the gondolas are promoted in order to attract potential tourists. However, as the quotation below shows, by allowing a decaying military man who prefers a blanket to a hotel bed to represent the tourist Hemingway's novel ironically undermines the discourse of consumerism:

The colonel heard the slap of the waves, and he felt the wind come sharply, and the rough familiarity of the blanket, and then he felt the girl cold-warm and lovely and with upraised breasts that his left hand coasted lightly over. Then he ran his bad hand through her hair once, twice, and three times and then he kissed her, and it was worse than desperation. (112)

The novel's location in the discourse of commercialism is emphasized in the Colonel, who tends to relate to the world through objects and trademarks. While he despises commercialism, consumerism, and mass culture, he uses his knowledge of quality products and trademarks to construct a masculine identity that would work in the changed world. His "old Sollingen clasp knife" (13) and stay at "the Gritti Palace Hotel" are signs of hierarchy, emphasizing his masculine status. Nor does he merely drink champagne but only "Roederer Brut '42 and he loved it" (100) or "Perrier-Jouet" (106).¹⁶ His Venice is not free either because gondoliers charge and have to be paid off: at one point he takes "the ten centesimi gondola across the canal, paying the usual dirty note" (135).

The fully commodified world in which the Colonel has to live troubles him at times, as signified by the dirtiness of the note he uses to pay for a trip across the canal. The only way for him to hold on to his masculine identity is to achieve knowledge over the trademarks, to become an expert. Quality products construct for him a sense of authenticity; they can be trusted, or, to use David Nye's terms, they construct a landscape of social life.¹⁷ Since only hunting may function as an escape to the

¹⁶ Curiously enough, he also likes to read *The Ladies' Home Journal* (64) because of the way "it combines sexology and beautiful foods" (64; see also 192). For information he, however, prefers *The New York Herald Tribune* (121), the English-language newspaper for Americans abroad.

¹⁷ See Nye, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-111.

traditional world for the Colonel, his story is a relic-like narrative in which the modern world is contrasted with the masculine tradition. While the Colonel may rely on certain popular icons because of the life worlds they suggest, his sense of cultural and esthetic hierarchies is firm. The novel's passages in which works of art and artistic traditions are discussed also reveal a conflict between the old and the new, the individually crafted and the mass-produced. Jackson, the chauffeur, likes landscape paintings and comic books. As a product of the new era and consumer culture, the chauffeur even uses popular culture as a point of reference to describe Venice: "'St. Mark's square is where the pigeons are and where they have that big cathedral that looks sort of like a moving picture palace, isn't it?'" (21).

While Jackson represents the ignorant tourist, the Colonel is a masculine gazer who wants to possess the city and to play games with it. In the passage below it is the Colonel who is active in looking at the city that is to be colonized for him, just like all cities in his wars. He, indeed, penetrates the feminized city of culture:

He penetrated into the far side of the city, the city that finally fronted on the Adriatic, and that he liked the best. He was going in by a very narrow street, and he was going to not keep track of the number of more or less north and south streets that he crossed, nor count the bridges, and then try and orient himself so he would come out at the market without getting up any dead ends.

It was a game you play, as some pe[o]ple used to play double Canfield or any solitary card games. But it had the advantage of you moving while you do it and that you look at the houses, the minor vistas, the shops and trattorias and at old places of the city of Venice while you are walking. If you loved the city of Venice it was an excellent game. (135-136)

As the Colonel finds it impossible to accommodate himself fully within the discourses of modernism and consumer culture, he resorts to his nostalgic memories of the past. While the solution is gendered and brings forth notions of a *male-centred* world, it also signifies his view of the inauthenticity of modernity. As he puts it himself, "everything is trick now" (144). By contrasting commodification with use value, this passage, a part of which can be read as a re-write of advertising slogans, can be seen to aim at revealing the sheer commerciality of contemporary culture, a facet which the Colonel only partly accepts. The evident feminization of the city in the passage above also locates the Colonel as an active character with power over the feminine and the masses.

Another reason for reading *Across the River* in the context of consumer culture is the way it brings forth the importance of shopping. While Renata is more attracted to luxuries because money does not appear to be a problem in her family, the Colonel is shown to go to the market place with "those condemned to early rising" (135), meaning those who have to shop there for their daily food. The Colonel is also shown to buy sausages at the market place, which again shows how he makes a self for himself through consumption. However, what he buys is not a mere mortadella but a sausage that has "the half smokey, back pepper-corned, true flavor of the meat from the hogs that ate acorns in the mountains" (139). The advertisement-like description of the qualities of the sausage takes the power of the description even further, and, indeed, the deification of commodified culture is made explicit later in the same chapter when the Colonel makes the observation that "[a] market is the closest thing to a good museum like the Prado or as the Accademia is now" (140). While the Colonel is not really the shopping type himself, he is connected to this activity through Renata. In one episode they go to a jeweler's shop in order to buy Renata a present that she has selected.¹⁸ The act of shopping in itself devalues the Colonel's traditional masculine identity because he does not have enough money, but to keep up his masculine mask he has to give the pin to Renata.

Food is also commodified and explored in the context of leisure time in the novel. The meals that the Colonel buys for Renata are luxurious and include delicacies such as lobsters and "crab enchillada [...] served in a shell" (198). It is worth pointing out that the meals function as a show of the Colonel's gendered expertise, which also extends to the area of food. The restaurant is, indeed, the scene for a perfect meal as depicted in a film or a tourist advertisement. To heighten the atmosphere the Colonel asks the head waiter to "[p]roduce a few smells or something from your off-stage kitchen" (200). While the meals may also function as sexual metaphors, as suggested by the Colonel's view of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, their connection with the body and death is also made explicit. This is revealed not only through the suggestion that Renata eat "a nice

¹⁸ What Renata chooses is a miniature of a black body, a "small Negro with the ebony face and the turban made of chip diamonds with the small ruby on the crown on the turban" (77). This pin definitely objectifies the Other by transforming the black body into a commodity that has value only in as much as it decorates the white body.

Siisser Tod Sandwich" (65), but also through the Colonel's narration of his war memories. When the masculine body faces death and loses its power, it is good only as a meal for dogs. Yet consuming can continue:

That was the first time I ever saw a German dog eating a roasted German kraut. Later on I saw a cat working on him too. It was a hungry cat, quite nice looking, basically. You wouldn't think a good German cat would eat a good German soldier, would you Daughter? Or a good German dog eat a good German soldier's ass which had been roasted by white phosphorus. (187)

Although some of the meals of the novel display a tendency to accommodate with the upper-class life-style promoted in consumer culture, they are also juxtaposed with the all-male meals close to nature, which again reveals the Colonel's ambivalent position. Thus the choice between luxury and asceticism, culture and nature, is gendered and the preferred world of authentic values is foregrounded and masculinized. The final meal that the Colonel has with his hunting friends shows how much value the (gendered) notions of authenticity have for the Colonel. A simple meal, "cooked on the old open-hearth kitchen" (204), and enjoyed with friends on a hunting-trip, is all that he needs to become fully satisfied. Interestingly enough, the authentic company of his friends is discussed by inverting it into a group of liars: "Last night there had been a fair amount of good lying after the grappa had been passed around, and the Colonel had enjoyed it" (204). Thus the world of commodities and consumerism is contrasted with that of male bonding and boyish community. While the Colonel may express a wish to have Renata there with him, it is not absolutely necessary. Since a man has to face his fate alone, to hunt alone, and to suffer alone, the novel places explicit emphasis on autonomy as a gendered characteristic and mourns the end of the alleged era of authenticity when men were men and not troubled with the rise of a modern, consuming-based culture.

In terms of its ideology *Across the River* is a relic-like narrative, a residual or remnant story, to use Raymond Williams's terminology.¹⁹ As Williams defines the concept, "[t]he residual [...] has been effectively

¹⁹ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-127.

formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process."²⁰ In the Colonel's yearning for the clear codes and pleasures of his days of glory and happiness, the novel explores the way in which the discourses of modernity and commercialism clash with the ideals of a life outdoors, amidst nature, where a man can act as he wants to. The "residual" views of Colonel Cantwell stem from an older world where traditions are esteemed and masculine authority is still in its proper place. His dreams of escaping it all with Renata are mere fantasies in which commercialized views of America and an American lifestyle are combined with sentimentality. By locating the gendered values that he submits to in the framework of advertisement-like passages, he signals that they no longer function properly. While the Colonel may use trademarks, icons of an imagined life world, to construct a new self, allegedly in control of the world, in the end he also has to give in and accept his fate.

The yearning for the youthful and healthy male body can also be seen in the context of overwhelming commodification. It is not a mere reflection of the ideal body promoted in film and advertising, but through the Colonel's yearning the ideal is also criticized to some extent and shown to be implausible. The emphasis on the body and its decay through illness and aging can also be seen as signs of the crisis of the autonomous male: since not even the body can be trusted, the crisis of masculinity deepens further. This novel does not only resemble *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) in its emphasis on the body and its problems, but it also combines masculinity with a yearning for nature, imagined authenticity, and male bonding. While Jake and Bill achieve peace when fishing, the Colonel finds home when hunting with his friends. Yet *Across the River* argues more visibly for the return of masculine power in the Colonel's yearning for the hierarchical world of both the army in the good old days and that of medieval Europe. Like the romantic artist, the Colonel considers himself a great individual. Since these structures are not valid in the world of commercial culture, there is no place for the male body but it is shown to be overconsumed, terminally ill and ready to depart from the world. The future belongs to objects, not individuals.

The masculinized ideology of the Colonel and the tradition that he respects and submits to is also at odds with the dominant ideology of the

post-war period. In addition to autonomous action, the Colonel likes the masculinized world of authentic European high culture, which is now about to be lost in the midst of American consumption and mass culture. Since Jactson, the Colonel's driver, is shown to be unaware of the significance of the esthetic tradition and to prefer comic books, the conflict between them is connected with debates about cultural power. To use the terms of the cultural critic Andreas Huyssen,²¹ this modernist novel by Hemingway considers post-war American mass culture and its emphasis on consumption as its feminized Other, a diluted form of tradition and culture that threatens the values of the autonomous male protagonist. For the Colonel the only way to cope with the Other is to challenge it and to control it. His active consumer choices should be read as his way of confronting the increasing commercialization of the world. While he despises certain aspects of mass culture, others he may use and try to benefit from: it is through a knowledge of the icons and the worlds they suggest that he feels able to control the changing world in the manner of an individualist hero.

21 See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 44-62.