Ham and Eggs and Hermeneutics: Re-reading Hemingway's "The Killers"

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Hemingway's short stories have often been read through the aesthetic model of the iceberg, but the practice of omission has proved an obstacle to interpreting one of his most celebrated and supposedly exemplary texts, "The Killers." In particular, dominant realist readings of "The Killers" as a story of Chicago gangsters and the adolescent Nick Adams's moral education have failed to recognize the text's deep internal contradictions and absurdities, which point toward its secret representation of an entirely different scene of psychic and historical reality. Circumstantial but compelling archival evidence supports a radical re-reading of Hemingway's classic story based not on things left out but on things cryptically inscribed on the surface of the text in the form of the rebus. When deciphered, the text's secret inscriptions locate the "other" scene of "The Killers" in Hemingway's experience in World War I, and identify the text as a remarkable experiment in modernist form.

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FROM REALISM TO REBUS

"That story probably had more left out of it than anything I ever wrote. More even than when I left the war out of 'Big Two-Hearted River.' I left out all Chicago" ("Art" 11). *That story* was "The Killers" (1927) and Ernest Hemingway's comments in "The Art of the Short Story" made it the example par excellence of his theory of omission, the definitive aesthetic iceberg.

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And yet the critical status of what was once hailed as "amongst the most taught and most glossed stories in the world" (Flora, "Today" 18) has been in slow but steady decline for the last two decades. Literary history is forgetting Robert Frost's eulogy for the story in his obituary of Hemingway: "I remember the fascination that made me want to read aloud 'The Killers' to everybody that came along" (225). But that doesn't mean the story has lost its power to fascinate, only that criticism has not discovered what to do with it.

"The stories where you leave it all in do not re-read like the ones where you leave it out," Hemingway claimed: "They understand easier, but when you have read them once or twice you can't re-read them" ("Art" 11). You can re-read "The Killers" endlessly because you sense there's something in its narrative structure and in the texture of its language that cannot be grasped and so refuses to let you go. If it has taken thirty years of re-reading "The Killers" for me to arrive at a new *reading*, however, it's largely because that iceberg was always in the way. The critical consensus is that, in practice, Hemingway's iceberg theory boils down to the "commonplace idea" that literature implies more than it states and makes us feel more than we know (Smith, "Early" 277). But the iceberg also imposes certain assumptions about the aesthetic logic of the text and how it was composed that foreclose alternative readings of both its form and Hemingway's working methods.

In the case of "The Killers," it has proved a dead-end to look beyond its realist surface and see "Chicago" either as the clue to the text's missing narrative backstory (why two gunmen come to a small town diner looking for an ex-boxer) or as the geographical tip of a larger historical context (the era of Prohibition and gangland double crosses). As one critic of the iceberg metaphor says, what Chicago stands for is "not a mystery" and what happened to the ex-boxer there is "just irrelevant" if what really counts is the story's meaning for Nick Adams, the author's alter ego in his stories of the 1920s (Miko 511, 523). And yet the realist paradigms that dominate the field of Hemingway criticism have found little in "The Killers" to support psycho-biographical readings of either the adolescent Nick Adams or Hemingway himself. As for a genetic approach, the things left out of its manuscripts are "apparently trivial" matters involving what food Nick eats and the original name of the ex-boxer (Smith, "The Killers" 140). A critical history that prized "The Killers" as a classic of modernist minimalism now needs to take another look at the visible surface of the text. For the power to fascinate that has kept calling this reader back is not about things left out but things hidden in plain sight.

The new reading of "The Killers" that follows has a three-part history. It began from a sense that there was something wrong with the standard realist and symbolic readings, which missed or rationalized the text's enigmatic, puzzling allure. Then there was the film noir adaptation, *The Killers* (1946). In its very effort to be faithful to Hemingway's original, the adaptation made visible long-overlooked internal contradictions within the supposed realism of his story that support a radically alternative reading. And finally, I chanced upon an archival

discovery, made public in 2012: a three-page letter written in silly-looking cartoon drawings sent to Hemingway by his fellow American Red Cross ambulance drivers in September 1918. At this time, Hemingway was hospitalized in Milan following his famous wounding on the Italian/Austrian front, and embroiled in the love affair with his nurse later fictionalized in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Although it seems to have no possible connection to "The Killers," this amusing curio is the material evidence that turned a critique of the received wisdom into a rereading that aims to restore the text's place in Hemingway's oeuvre and to rethink the place of his short fiction within modernist literary history.

This "pictographic puzzle" letter-manuscript[1] adds another, crucial dimension to one of the most startling features of Hemingway's own letters, which is how, in absolute contrast to the terse minimalism and simple diction of his prose, in them he constantly plays silly private language games. As his editor, Sandra Spanier, notes: "Obscure personal references, ever-evolving nicknames, in-jokes, and offbeat private lingos that he shared with particular correspondents are at times perplexing, if not virtually impenetrable" (xxiii–xxiv). To his delight in wordplay, the pictographic manuscript adds Hemingway's familiarity with the *rebus* as a cryptic narrative device, and firmly grounds it in the wartime context. Significantly, this manuscript starts by addressing Hemingway with the same visual rebus he often used for his own signature in letters during and immediately after the war: the picture of a foam-topped beer mug. The signature encrypts his identity by using an object to stand in for his name, or rather nickname, "Hemingstein," abbreviated to "Stein."[2] There's nothing hidden or missing in the rebus, but to get the verbal-visual pun requires translating the visible thing back into a particular word (*stein*, rather than "beer mug").

The aesthetic logic of the rebus, a riddle made of things (from the Latin, plural of *res*), is therefore the very opposite of the iceberg, a structure in which only the tip is visible. Its power of fascination lies in the sense of seeing all there is to see and yet knowing we need to see it in another way. My case is that Hemingway built "The Killers" up from verbal-visual puns that originate in and are the equivalent of the private pictographic language demonstrated in his wartime correspondence. Once we recognize that what's missing is not omitted but *encrypted* in a series of rebuses — which take such unlikely forms as a plate of ham and eggs — then "The Killers" appears in its true guise: as Hemingway's most surprising experiment in modernist form, integral to a decade of war-inspired writing, culminating in *A Farewell to Arms*.

In order to advance this new model of interpretation, in what follows I triangulate three approaches: the formal, the genetic, and the historical. The first step is to overturn the standard interpretation that dominates Hemingway scholarship, which is premised on the seemingly self-evident genre of "The Killers": "slice of life realism" (Fleming 40). The second step is to revisit the genetic history of the text, most fully established by Paul Smith, which in a circular move has both been made in view of realist assumptions and helped to sustain them.[3] My case both enlarges the archival record by making new connections between manuscripts

and discovers meaning in what have appeared entirely trivial details. And finally, we need to reveal the text's *other* historical scene, a dimension that confirms an unexpected truth in Hemingway's otherwise curious comparison of "The Killers" with "Big Two-Hearted River." For, contrary to all appearances, the scenario of gangsters in Chicago is indeed comparable to the account of Nick Adams's trout fishing trip because it too is a story that passes for being about one thing while really being about the First World War.

The standard reading of "The Killers" has upheld realism by taking it at face value as a tale of Prohibition violence visited upon the unsuspecting denizens of a small town. However, in order to bring closure to a story that makes a running gag out of asking, "What's it all about?" (217),[4] the evidence of realism has to be reconciled with all that is perplexing about the scenario. For by the end we still don't know why the two killers set up their ambush in a lunchroom or why they walk away from it. Neither do we know why their intended victim, the prize-fighter Ole Andreson, fails to turn up for dinner that night or why he has no fight left in him. Nor do we know why Nick Adams gets involved by going to warn Andreson or why he then decides to get out of town. Indeed we don't even know why Hemingway titled a story in which nobody gets killed "The Killers." The realist approach trusts the explanation that Andreson "must have got mixed up in something in Chicago" and "double crossed somebody" (222), even though this is vague twice-over ("something," "somebody") and in any case no more than the speculation of George, the counterman. Above all, realist readings have to turn the text's many puzzling formal features and enigmatic details into a theme by declaring "The Killers" an "absurdist drama" (Fleming 40).

Formally, the most striking feature of "The Killers" is its repetitions, which critics have always interpreted as "purely for the sake of verisimilitude," so that the opening dialog of the killers, Max and Al, simply creates an "ominous tone" (Lamb 463):

> "I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?"
> "I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat." (215)

Here and throughout the text, Max and Al are excessively repetitious, both of themselves and one another, but there are also dozens more phrases in the dialog and several in the prose that are repeated verbatim or with minor variation. The killers' opening dialog sets up a textual universe of repetition whose cumulative effect exceeds individual character motivation. It is so subtly and skillfully done that each instance can pass for realism, even though Hemingway slips in clues to the contrary, as when Max asks George to speculate about their purpose in the diner:

> "What do you think it's all about?"
> "I don't know."
> "What do you think?"
> Max looked into the mirror all the time he was talking.

"I wouldn't say."

"Hey, Al, bright boy says he wouldn't say what he thinks it's all about." (217–18)

To call Max and Al "sadistic jokers" is fair (Flora, *Reading* 58), but does not go far enough because, constrained by realist assumptions, it misses the further dimension implied by Max talking into a mirror while he echoes back George's words. Such a doubled duplication makes a sadistic joke of the text itself. As Don Summerhayes says of verbal repetition across the *In Our Time* stories, written shortly before "The Killers," "it is in the interest of the realistic convention not to acknowledge the presence of repetition" (52). So long as "The Killers" is allowed to pass as realist, it is impossible to recognize Hemingway himself as a "sadistic joker" or to see that his text's repetitions belong in a more experimental modernist tradition.

As for the story's much-discussed enigmatic details—its many "mix-ups, irrelevancies, and incongruities" (Delaney 115)—to say that they make "The Killers" "absurdist" does not *explain* why the clock on the wall of Henry's diner is twenty minutes fast, why the opening fifth of the story is taken up by the killers ordering food, why Nick Adams spends half the story tied up in the kitchen with the cook, or why Mrs. Hirsch's rooming house is run by a Mrs. Bell. It only explains these mysteries away. Critics who have taken these enigmas with a straight face—the clock runs fast "as saloon clocks do" (Stubbs 84)—have missed Nick Adams's own sense that he has missed something. For when Nick goes to warn Ole Andreson at the rooming house and tries to summarize what happened in the lunchroom, he suddenly reflects: "It sounded silly when he said it" (221). The case for realism will have none of it: "Nick's words sound silly to him," insists Joseph Flora, "only because they reflect the irrational sequence of the evening and the absurdity of the world" (*Reading* 66). The case for realism cracks, however, once we recognize the basic contradictions internal to it. These contradictions appear in readings where Nick Adams is approached as a consistent character with a coherent chronology locatable within twentieth-century history.

Flora makes two logical and universally accepted observations about the factual and fictional historicity of "The Killers": that "the story takes place during Prohibition" and that, after it, the young Nick Adams "will make his way to Italy to the Great War" (*Reading* 57, 69). The problem with these statements is not that the text does not support them, but that they cannot both be true. For "The Killers" to be set during Prohibition, its events must date from after January 1920, when the Supreme Court upheld the Volstead Act of 1919; if so, then young Nick cannot leave to fight in a war that had ended in November 1918. We might be tempted to say, with Max, "Oh, to hell with the clock" (215), but either Hemingway was implausibly confused about such significant dates, which marked events he had only recently lived through, or the problem with chronology is not a mistake and not without meaning.

The clock in "The Killers" tells two times because it is a visual joke about the duplicity of time, a sign of the text's double temporality. To read the story as an

instalment of a linear Nick Adams novel makes it impossible to see that within this single text, Hemingway deliberately mixed up entirely incompatible temporal realities. Thematically, the "two-timing" clock therefore stands in for the larger questions that Hemingway raises regarding realism, memory, history, and identity, while formally it makes a visual pun the presiding feature of Henry's diner and, by extension, the devious aesthetic principle of the text as a whole.

While the presence of wordplay in Hemingway's writing has been often discussed, in the case of "The Killers," it has been naturalized in the same way as has repetition. The one, often-cited example is when Al asks George the simple question: "Got anything to drink?" (216). The counterman's reply ("Silver beer, bevo, Ginger ale") indicates his failure to "get" the question, so Al repeats it with emphasis: "I mean you got anything to *drink*?" This particular wordplay sustains the case for realism by reproducing the double coding of speech in the era of Prohibition, but other instances point in a different direction. Take the "apple sauce" accompanying the roast pork that Max tries to order (215). As a figure of speech, *applesauce* was a popular term in the 1920s to mean "nonsense" and, within Vaudeville theater, specifically denoted "silly" (Lighter 31). Since Max and Al "looked like a vaudeville team" and each throws the word "silly" at the other—Max's question, "Do we look silly?" is answered by Al's "You talk silly" (217)—it is a reminder of Nick's own verdict on the events he describes: "It sounded silly when he said it." Nick here gives voice to what readers making the assumption of realism avoid recognizing; when taken naturalistically, the narrative is indeed applesauce.

If we take what seems "silly" seriously, we find that the word has a defined frame of reference in Hemingway's work of the 1920s, including "A Very Short Story" and *A Farewell to Arms*. Their narrative contexts are a world away from "The Killers"—each involving a wounded soldier and his nurse—but the texts' common use of the word is revealing. In the short story, it appears in "the silly, talky time" under anaesthesia ("Very Short" 107), as it does in the novel when Catherine Barkley warns Fredric Henry he will "get very blabby under an anaesthetic," and afterwards he asks, "Did I say anything silly?" (*Farewell* 85). What is "silly" for Hemingway sounds distinctly Freudian, denoting what patients blab when the normal psychic prohibitions don't apply and the truth slips out in the form of bad jokes, nonsense, puns, and parapraxes.

If we go down Freud's royal road, the hermeneutical logic of "The Killers" resembles what he called "dream-work" and "joke-work," because in the mise-en-scène of the unconscious it is the most apparently silly and trivial contingent details that are the most meaningful. Recognizing the silliness of the text's riddles is therefore crucial, since this is both the disguise of their serious function and the clue to it. Conversely, the blind spot in realist criticism becomes fully visible when its own case is taken to its logical conclusion, that is to say, to the point of self-contradiction. That is why the 1946 Hollywood adaptation is, by default, one of the most valuable re-readings of Hemingway's story, since it had no choice but to prohibit visualizing certain things that would have looked decidedly silly.

VAUDEVILLE SURREALISM

Setting out to answer the central enigma of "The Killers," the film invents an entire narrative to fill out Ole Andreson's missing back-story and explain his suicidal passivity. *The Killers* is therefore usually taken as a classic film noir, yet a typically vulgar Hollywood adaptation that betrays the minimalist aesthetic of the original.[5] However, at a basic narrative level, *The Killers* forces us to see the inexplicable flaw in Hemingway's plot: if Max and Al could so easily kill Andreson in his room — as they do in the film version — why in the short story would they hold up a lunchroom for two hours, and then give up? Hit men don't show their hand and then walk away, any more than professionals wear gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints and yet leave behind three witnesses. The film adaptation can maintain its realism by rewriting the plot, but its inherent need to visualize Hemingway's original forces it to falsify quite spectacularly the central physical feature of "The Killers": the appearance of the killers themselves.

In Hemingway's story, Max and Al both wear "tight overcoats and derby hats" so that they are "dressed like twins" and resemble "a vaudeville team" (216, 219). The film not only fails to dress Max and Al like twins, it refuses to respect the most striking element of their appearance, a feature whose significance has been missed because of how slyly Hemingway plays with character description. Early on, we're told in great detail what clothes they wear and that Max is "about the same size" as Al — an observation that doesn't mean anything until, over a dozen lines later, the crucial visual fact is slipped in when Max is casually referred to as "the other little man" (216). Since unusual physical size would usually be the first thing to learn about a character, the reader baffled by both "other" and "little" can easily miss the point in "the other little man." In the film, Max was played by William Conrad, who at 5'7" is just below average height, while Charles McGraw at 5'10" does not fit the part of Al at all. Had the adaptation been faithful to Hemingway's original in representing two little men dressed like twins — casting, say, the equivalent of Peter Lorre (5'5") in both parts — Max and Al couldn't have passed for realistic gangsters from Chicago but would have looked like surreal fantasy figures out of a David Lynch movie.

By default, the 1946 adaptation therefore answers Max's question in Hemingway's original, "Do we look silly?" But the subtlety of the writing is such that Hemingway allows the reader to miss what is in plain sight, which is to say, to miss what Nick Adams misses. Assuming the realism of events, the reader assumes above all their non-contradiction, and in this way is misled by Nick's own failure to "get" it, to recognize the presence of *doppelgangers* or read the contradictory signs — from the clock that is wrong by twenty minutes to the eerie emptiness of the lunchroom, improbably visited by just four customers in what should be its two busiest hours. For Nick is not trapped inside a lunchroom; he's trapped inside someone else's nightmare.

THE MIRROR AND THE CLOCK

Nick Adams's situation recalls those uncanny stories where the narrative turns out to have all been a dream or suddenly shifts into a supernatural dimension and the hero discovers he is not who he thought he was. We should therefore take literally Paul Smith's argument that Nick and Andreson "must be seen as one, or at least as functions of one another" ("The Killers" 148). To be more precise, the text's verbal and visual doublings indicate the unity of the two characters as projections of a single subjectivity split in terms of chronology. Fulfilling the logic of the clock that tells two times, when Nick encounters Andreson lying in bed he encounters his own future self; and reciprocally, when Andreson meets the youthful Nick Adams, he is encountering his self from the past. The mirroring effect of this doubling is implied by the way Hemingway connects the two presiding features of Henry's diner: "Max watched the mirror and the clock" (219). Both mirror and clock require us to translate the image that's shown into another actuality, another time, and so illustrates the hermeneutical procedure of rereading demanded by the text as a rebus.

Hemingway's splitting of identity in terms of chronology has a precise historical dimension, corresponding to a traumatized memory that matches the doubled temporality of "The Killers": for the meeting of young man and older man is not only a meeting of *before and after* but before and after *the war*. However initially improbable, reading "The Killers" in terms of the war works with its internal temporal contradictions and intertextual connections. Thus, in the closing lines, Nick says of Andreson's fate: "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it" (222). The scenario of "waiting in the room" echoes the disturbing figure of a man lying down, unconscious, delirious, and above all wounded that is recurrent in *Men Without Women* (1927), in which "The Killers" was published. In this context, Ole Andreson might be identified as a war veteran, the ex-boxer who has given up on life standing in for a traumatized soldier. Significantly, the image of a wounded man lying down also applies to Nick Adams himself in two other stories in *Men Without Women*, including "Now I Lay Me," where the war-wounded and traumatized Nick lies "awake and dreaming" in his hospital bed (277), a scenario that retrospectively identifies "The Killers" as a waking dream.

The interchangeability of Nick and Andreson as halves of a divided self points to a key, and so far neglected genetic source text that provides material evidence that the war, rather than Chicago, was always the history back of "The Killers": Hemingway's early sketch known by its opening line as "Nick lay in bed,"[6] which was written in Milan shortly after the November 1918 Armistice. Here, the position that Andreson would occupy in "The Killers" is taken by the badly wounded soldier Nick Grainger. This Nick shares a first name with Nick Adams and a sense of fate with Ole Andreson that is expressed in the sketch's resonant final line: "'I had a rendezvous with Death'—but Death broke the date and now it's all over. God double-crossed me" (qtd. in Smith, "Apprentice" 138). A trauma-based

reading of "The Killers" might logically proceed from this point, showing how across texts recurrent elements are inverted and displaced in an incessant pattern of permutation. However, what makes "The Killers" so interesting as a war story is not its narrative displacement of a battlefield in Italy to a diner in Illinois or its substitution of a suicidal soldier by a zombie boxer. Nor is it even its coding of trauma from an event that happens in a particular space to a certain experience of *time*, time that repeats itself over and over or that never arrives, like Andreson in the diner and the killers at his room. Rather, the extraordinary quality of "The Killers" is that it encrypts Nick's identity and the traumatic double crosses of fate through the hieroglyphic language of the rebus.

DOUBLE TALK

This encryption is so silly that, even when it is spelled out, we are likely to miss it. Certainly, Nick misses it, since he fails to recognize Max and Al as *doppelgangers* and fails to recognize himself in Andreson. It is for this reason that the rendezvous of Nick and Andreson is not the story's turning point. The uncanny nature of their rendezvous passes Nick by, although it is recognized in the film adaptation, which had to rewrite the original to avoid visualizing something so implausible in Hemingway's text that it has always been overlooked. In the film, when Nick leaves Henry's diner, he runs to a rising frenzied crescendo in Miklos Rosza's score, leaping fences and gates, racing to burst through the door of Andreson's room. Nick would hardly *walk* to warn a man that killers are looking for him—but, in Hemingway's story, this is precisely what he does: "Nick walked up the street [. . .] Nick walked up the two steps and pushed the bell" (220). And then, after his encounter with Andreson, Nick "walked" back (222).

Nick's repeated acts of walking identify him as a *sleepwalker*, and further clarifies the point at which his identification with Andreson comes suddenly to the fore: not in their rendezvous, but during the closing dialog with George back in the diner. The importance of this moment is not what we learn about Andreson but about Nick, as the structure of the exchange reveals:

> "I wonder what he did?" Nick said.
> "Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for."
> "I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said. (222)

Nick's sudden panic, his decision to "get out," marks the exact moment he finally "gets it"—and therefore what "it" is. George's reply—"Double-crossed somebody"—has let the truth slip out as an unconscious pun, one that Frank Laurence repeats when he observes that "Nick was lucky not to cross the killers on his way back from the diner" (188). Nick panics because by going to warn Andreson he has, both literally and figuratively, just *crossed a double*—Max and Al, the double-talking double-act. In narrative terms, only now does Nick realize that by double-crossing the killers, by trying to cheat death, he has been tricked into the very crime that George attributes to Andreson. God is a double crosser

and what happens in Summit, Illinois is Hemingway's version of Appointment in Samarra.

In terms of the text's larger pattern of cryptic displacement, Hemingway introduces the term "double cross" in the closing lines to at last give the reader the figure of speech that has produced the literal doubleness and insistent repetition that has governed "The Killers" from the beginning. Only now can we see that the double-talk of Max and Al was not just wisecracking to rile the locals and kill time. It is a joke at the reader's expense, for the secret of the text's scenario lies in its repetitious form; only on re-reading can we grasp that the killers play on words because they are themselves the walking talking embodiment of wordplay.

The crossing of the double turns a pun into a rebus and reveals the genetic principle of the text, a working method that is as radical as anything in Hemingway's circle of more obviously experimental avant-garde contemporaries, including Stein, Joyce, and Tristan Tzara. Although there seems nothing formulaic about either Hemingway's conception of the rebus or its application, the closest equivalent would be the famously bizarre creative procedure of Raymond Roussel, who constructed entire narratives out of puns and homonyms. Connecting "The Killers" to such boldly non-realist modernist aesthetics is as dramatic a reversal of critical common sense as is reading the story in terms of war trauma, but taken together, they also confirm the need to admit the relevance of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.

The apparently realist objectivity of Hemingway's prose in "The Killers" turns out to be built upon the same logic as that of Freud's famous claim that the dream is a rebus that must be taken literally. Explaining that the dream-content "is expressed as it were in a pictographic script," Freud gave the example of "a picture puzzle, a rebus" that appears "nonsensical" so long as its parts are read for "their pictorial value"—that is to say, according to a realist mode of representation (277). For Freud, dreams only seem to tell stories and to show us things, but actually as a form of encryption, as a form of *writing*, the dream's most enigmatic objects represent *words*. Unlike a dream, "The Killers" passes for realist, but we should not be deceived into thinking we are being shown physical objects in a narrative—for example, two little men dressed like twins whom Nick tries to cheat—rather than seeing figures that embody *a figure of speech*: in this case, "double cross." Hemingway's method of writing and Freud's thesis of dreaming reject symbolism and instead entail a similar genetic procedure materialized in odd details rather than narrative wholes. According to Freud, "we should disregard the apparent coherence between a dream's constituents as an unessential illusion, and [. . .] trace back the origins of each of its elements on its own account" (581).

If the dream rebus invites a hermeneutic procedure of re-reading and reading in reverse, working backwards from material objects to decipher their verbal points of origin, then there is a crucial distinction that would apply to Hemingway's textual rebus. Here, where we encounter not visible objects but their verbal representation, we must translate from represented object to word (e.g. from

Max and Al as doubles who are crossed to the phrase "double cross"), and then from word ("double cross") back into the real object, of which Max and Al are just displaced representations. To find the thing itself and complete this genetic procedure, we need to take the embodied pun of the twin killers as the tip-off to the existence of two other visual rebuses encrypting Nick Adams's identity and Hemingway's wartime experience in Italy.

HAM AND EGGS AND HERMENEUTICS

To identify the rebus as Hemingway's methodology makes visible what is going on in "The Killers" at a verbal level, and this encryption of content as form goes back to the very beginning of the text's manuscript history. Dismissed for revealing only trivial differences—such as being located in Petoskey, Michigan during winter rather than in Summit, Illinois during fall—Hemingway's original, incomplete draft in fact features crucial wordplay he probably cut for being too explicit. Thus, just before the entry of the killers, Nick drinks three whiskeys served by George in coffee cups and is anxious about getting "tight."[7] A realist reading would see only details of Prohibition-era drinking or the theme of inverted appearances here, missing a specifically verbal logic that connects Nick to the killers via the double sense of "tight." Since we are told that Al has "tight lips" as well as a "tight-fitting overcoat" (216, 219), the draft plays on the word's capacity for exactly opposite meanings—uninhibited or repressed—to imply Nick's inner conflict and anxiety at becoming loose-tongued, when he might blab something "silly."

Most significantly, the original draft begins with a devious bilingual pun that makes the sign of the double cross: "Little Traverse Bay was frozen across from Petoskey to Harbor Springs." Far from being local color, we see in the lake named by early French travelers a double meaning and doubling effect, since "to traverse" is itself to *cross*. Repeating the word "across" three times (four including a cancelation) in the opening two paragraphs, Hemingway risked over-egging his pudding, as indeed he did a few years later for the final discarded chapter of *Death in the Afternoon* (1932). There, his tour of the peninsula goes "into Petoskey, around to Cross Village, looking across Little Traverse Bay" (qtd. in Beegel 55), making a three-fold repetition ("Cross"; "across"; "Traverse").

What passes for realistic detail enables Hemingway to encode meaning at a formal level; in the passage from *Death in the Afternoon,* the puns enact a doubling and crossing of locations in time and space, as here Hemingway identifies Northern Michigan with Northern Italy as twinned topographies of deep personal significance. In the original "Killers" manuscript, the wordplay on *crossing* and its meaning is easily missed, and the obscurity of the method is itself revealing: these are secret inscriptions, inscriptions of secrets. Unsurprisingly, then, Hemingway revised his manuscripts in ways that made the rebuses structuring his composition of "The Killers" progressively harder to identify. Whereas the key phrase "double cross" is explicitly given for the first rebus, in the next case it

is left disguised as the seemingly silly mix-up of food orders that preoccupies the opening fifth of the text.

In the standard reading, the confused ordering of food that opens "The Killers" allows the big city gangsters to bait George and Nick as "bright boys": it is an absurd running gag whose real significance obviously has nothing to do with food. But to reach the obvious conclusion too quickly misses the text's precision, in particular the special emphasis that Hemingway places on *ham and eggs*—ordered first, mentioned twice as often as bacon and eggs, and featured at the moment George serves the food:

> "Which is yours?" he asked Al.
> "Don't you remember?"
> "Ham and eggs."
> "Just a bright boy," Max said. He leaned forward and took the ham and eggs. (216)

The clue to why bacon and eggs are only bacon and eggs whereas ham and eggs signify something else is withheld from the reader until Nick goes to see Ole Andreson. But it is likely to pass unnoticed—*has* passed entirely unnoticed in Hemingway criticism—unless we bear in mind the only two other Hemingway stories where ham and eggs are eaten, each written shortly before "The Killers": "Fifty Grand" and "The Battler." Jack Brennan, who eats ham and eggs in the first story, and Ad Francis, who eats them with his friend Bugs and with Nick Adams in the second story, are, like Ole Andreson in "The Killers," boxers. As Hemingway spelled out in his unpublished 1919 story "The Woppian Way" (or "The Passing of Pickles McCarty"), in the world of boxing, an unskilled, second-rate fighter, a mere "preliminary boy," is known as a "ham-and-egger" (qtd. in Smith, "Apprentice" 140). Nothing in "Fifty Grand" or "The Battler" invites us to consider the wordplay, but in "The Killers" the excessive emphasis on ham and eggs, together with the explicit motif of double meaning in relation to the menu ("I mean you got anything to *drink*?"), reveals this as another of the text's structural rebuses.

Even more clearly than the "double" embodied in Max and Al which becomes a "double cross" when Nick crosses them, the ham and eggs materialize a figure of speech, a rebus with thematic significance: "The Killers" is a story in which everyone is just a "ham-and-egger"—a fighter who can't fight, killers who don't kill, small town rubes whose idea of the American dream is to eat "the big dinner" (216). As with the "double cross," Hemingway deliberately delayed giving away the key to the rebus—the identification of Andreson as a boxer—so that the ham and eggs could pass as simply ham and eggs.

Once grasped, the visual pun on "ham-and-egger" then makes it possible to reread the text and notice other boxing wordplay, which starts when Al places his order for ham and eggs. Hemingway's observation that Al was wearing "a silk muffler and gloves" now becomes a wink to those in the know, since a *muffler* is not only a type of scarf but also a boxing glove (216). In terms of the text's hermeneutics, the point of Hemingway's wordplay is precisely its ability to pass unnoticed,

which is why the biggest ham-and-egger of them all is the reader's proxy, Nick Adams. The taunt of the killers — "Do you get that, bright boy?" (218) — confirms that, existentially speaking, the "ham-and-egger" *gets it* (becomes fate's victim) because he doesn't *get it* (is unable to grasp what's going on until it is too late).

The clearest signs of Hemingway's intentions in regard to Nick, the reader, and to interpretation more generally, are two small, late revisions he made to his manuscript. The first revision is the detail of making Mrs. Hirsch's rooming house where Andreson awaits his rendezvous with death run by a Mrs. Bell. "One of the most puzzling and most debated passages," this inclusion of Mrs. Bell has nevertheless been seen as "adding verisimilitude" (Moore 428). The realist reading makes sense only by excluding the "silly" alternative, hinted at in what the landlady says about Ole Andreson: "He was in the ring, you know" (221). Nick replies, "I know it," but fails to get the joke: he rings the doorbell of a Mrs. Bell to see a man who was in the ring. The grating ironies of Hemingway's double wordplay pass Nick by, but they confirm the hermeneutic significance of both names and puns in "The Killers."

The second revision is to the very title of the story. Hemingway changed "The Matadors" to "The Killers" as he finished his manuscript, seemingly to avoid mixing up one sport, boxing, with another, bullfighting. Hemingway used sporting figures of speech as expressions of destiny — most famously at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*: "the first time they caught you off base they killed you" (252) — and his re-titling of "The Killers" was his most duplicitous. For the killers do indeed deliver on his title, if we bear in mind another sporting vocabulary, one specifically associated with Nick Adams in stories such as "Big Two-Hearted River": trout fishing. Hemingway was surely playing on the definition of *killers* as "an effective angler's bait" (OED). Max and Al fulfill the meaning of *bait* as both verb — to taunt, goad, provoke — and noun — a lure or trap. Tricking the young fisherman into playing the role of the fish, Hemingway's double-crossing killers made Nick take the bait, and his failure to see the snare until it is too late anticipates the reader's own failure to get the pun.

Finally, the genetic history of "The Killers" confirms that Nick Adams's identification as a ham-and-egger who doesn't "get it" was essential to Hemingway's conception of the story from the start.[8] For, prior to being cut in revision, his first two manuscripts featured two more scenes where ham and eggs are eaten, and in both cases it is Nick who is served them. In his first manuscript, Nick eats ham and eggs before the killers arrive, and in the second manuscript, he eats them after they have gone, so that by cutting first the original and then the replacement scene, Hemingway reveals the significance of the dish by repeated acts of negation. More than that, George suggests the ham and eggs for Nick both times in ways that imply the act of identification: it's not just what Nick happens to eat; it's his regular dish. In the final text, the ham and eggs link five of the six main characters — ordered by Max, eaten by Al, served by George, cooked by Sam, and pointing via the "ham-and-egger" pun to Ole Andreson — so that only Nick is left out. Hemingway's decision to omit these two scenes from his earlier drafts

demonstrates both his working method and how he progressively concealed it by transforming a content into a form: withholding the literal rebus's verbal point of origin—the phrase "ham-and-egger"—he then cut the link between the rebus and its original referent, which was not the ex-boxer but the young tyro Nick Adams.

The third rebus in "The Killers" became still more obscured in the published version, but its clarification by way of the text's genetic history confirms how the ham-and-egger and the double cross are both encryptions of the war.

THE *PASSING* OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Along with the appearance of the identically dressed little men, the most visually striking image in "The Killers" is that of another pair of bodies: Nick and Sam, bound and gagged "back to back" in the kitchen (219). Shocking though it is, Al's insult that he has them tied up "like a couple of girl friends in the convent" (218) actually displaces the true horror and humiliation of the image, which is not perverse sexual inversion and religious slander but perverse sexual inversion and racial miscegenation: the mixing up of black and white. Combined to form *one* body, they are also curiously but emphatically linked by Nick himself. Immediately after being untied, Nick goes to warn Ole Andreson, but begins by telling the story of himself and Sam as paired hostages: "two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook. . . . They put us out in the kitchen" (220–21).

A small but crucial revision Hemingway made to his manuscript reveals why the pairing of Nick and Sam was essential to the original identity of Ole Andreson and why, together, they form another rebus. Before becoming "a big Swede named Ole Andreson" in Hemingway's third and final manuscript, the killers' intended victim was "a wop named Dominick Nerone" (qtd. in Reynolds and Small 5). Dominick Nerone came from "The Woppian Way," a story about an Italian boxer who changes his name from Nick "Piccolo" Neroni to Pickles McCarty so that the "wop" can pass as Irish. The issue of *passing* is tied to the question of color directly raised by Al in "The Killers"; "What do you mean the nigger?" (217). Sam is called "nigger" a dozen times, although what's most interesting textually are the variations Hemingway uses to identify Sam whenever he is paired with Nick Adams: "the nigger and bright boy," "Nick and Sam, the cook," and "Nick and the cook" (217, 219). They are never referred to as "Nick and the nigger" because that would have given the game away; it would have made explicit that, when tied back-to-back, the two men form a rebus that encrypts the name Dominick Nerone. If Hemingway originally tied Nick to a black man and sent him to warn a man whose Anglicized name would be *Nick Black*, it was to spell out that the man he was going to warn was *himself*. When he changed the name to Ole Andreson, replacing the little black wop with a big white Swede, Hemingway concealed this identity by calculated inversions of size and color.

The question that arises is: what made the original Italian name so important to Hemingway that he would elaborately work a literal rebus for it into his

text? The answer lies in "The Woppian Way," which features the basis to all three rebuses in "The Killers" and reveals their direct connection to the war. For the wop Nick "Piccolo" Neroni in this story is the boxer explicitly called a "ham-and-egger" who, after giving up boxing in America to fight with the famous Arditi corps on the Italian front, misses his rendezvous with a glorious death when "double-crossed" in battle by the Austrians. Hemingway's biographers identify Nick Neroni and Dominick Nerone as based on Nicholas Nerone, an Italian war hero who earned four silver crosses and the *Croce de Guerra*. Hemingway first mentions him—as an "Italian officer" and as "Nick"—in a letter written on the day of the Armistice, 11 November 1918, while he was recovering in a hospital bed in Milan from wounds inflicted by Austrian mortar shrapnel (*Letters* [2011], 150). According to James Mellow, Nerone's "heroic feats" almost immediately inspired Hemingway to write, and, "borrowing Nick Nerone's first name, he sketched out the grim tale of Nick Grainger" (81).

The literary inspiration did not end with "Nick lay in bed." Hemingway resumed their friendship two years later when Nerone moved to Chicago to work at the Italian consulate. Throughout 1921, the two men boxed together, and that September, Nerone led the parade in which Hemingway was presented with his own silver cross. According to Reynolds, he was "so impressed with the young Italian that he revised his early story, 'The Woppian Way,' to include some of Nerone's experience and gave his hero Nerone's name" (*Young* 236). The issue of naming reaches its decisive conclusion in Reynolds' observation: "Although Ernest never saw Nerone after leaving Chicago, Nick's name became part of Hemingway's most famous character, Nick Adams" (*Paris* 127).

However, to conclude that Nick Nerone links "Nick lay in bed," "The Woppian Way," and "The Killers," would be to resolve the genetic issue only on a biographical level, whereas the larger significance of the name is formal and resides in the rebus. For the encryption of the name Dominick Neroni in "The Killers" fulfilled the aesthetic logic of the visual rebus that Hemingway often used to sign his own name in letters between 1918 and 1920. As the recently discovered three-page letter-manuscript from September 1918 reveals, it also emerged from the larger pictorial language he shared with his fellow American Red Cross ambulance drivers.

Introducing a series of recent events narrated in cartoonish images, the first page of the letter-manuscript begins with the number "2" followed by a pair of pictures to form the opening line of address: a frying pan with an egg in it linked by an ampersand to a foaming stein of beer. Under the heading "Hemingway Pictogram Puzzle Solved," Jessica Green of the Kennedy Library reported that the line of address had been deciphered thus: "To Agnes von Kurowsky (a frying pan with an egg, Ag sounds like egg) and Ernest Hemingway (overflowing beer stein)."[9] The significance of the manuscript's discovery and decipherment is first that it specifically associates the rebus with both love and war, since this pictographic letter was addressed to Hemingway and his lover, the "Cross Red Nurse" later fictionalized in "A Very Short Story" and *A Farewell to Arms* (*Letters* [2011]

153). Secondly, that the pictographic letter was mailed from the front line in the context of wartime censorship of correspondence and only weeks before he wrote his first war story, "Nick lay in bed," confirms Hemingway's familiarity with the rebus as a form of encrypted narrative communication. To replace his signature with a rebus is an act of self-evident symbolic importance, but the epistolary pictogram is too elaborate to have been a one-off, making it highly likely Hemingway used the rebus far more widely.

If the verbal rebuses of "The Killers" had their origins in the visual rebuses Hemingway shared with his wartime "Red X" comrades (*Letters* 146), it comes as less of a surprise to deduce that the ham and eggs served in the story not only point back to the "ham-and-egger" identity of the boxer, Nick Nerone, but to the phonetic/pictorial punning on the name Ag ("sounds like egg") that surely joined the names of Hemingway and Agnes to make "ham and eggs." Agnes's painful betrayal of Hemingway in March 1919 explains why the dish served in Henry's diner should be integrally connected with double-crossing. It also explains why the path of the rebus leads from "The Killers" forward to *A Farewell to Arms*.

Although the war novel echoes the short story in numerous small ways, the essential connection occurs in its last pages. As Smith has argued, the "double-crossing destiny" that betrayed Nick Grainger in "Nick lay in bed" here returns to punish the deserter, Fredric Henry, with the double deaths of mother and child ("Apprentice" 143). Catherine's final words—"it's just a dirty trick" (255)—echo "The Killers" by identifying fate as a sadistic joker, and Hemingway played the joke not only on the woman who betrayed him but also on himself, to the extent that Fredric Henry, like Nick Adams before him, was an obviously autobiographical figure. For while Catherine lies dying in her hospital bed, Henry goes out to a café and, asking for food more at home in Chicago than Milan, eats a double order of ham and eggs. Disguised by the novel's narrative realism, *A Farewell to Arms* therefore closes with a secret homage to the rebus from "The Killers" encrypting the un-heroic truth of any man who in love or war tries to pass as a hero: in the end, life makes ham-and-eggers of us all.

A Farewell to Arms brought to a conclusion a decade of Hemingway's work marked by the theme of the "double cross"—from the "nice double cross" played on the boxer Jack Brennan in "Fifty Grand" (249) to Prudence cheating on Nick Adams in "Ten Indians" and Jesus's betrayal in "Today is Friday," the latter two stories genetically tied to "The Killers" through Hemingway's claim that he completed all three on the same day in May 1926. There is no shortage of biographical grounds for the recurrence of betrayal, from the romantic (Hemingway's affair with Pauline while married to Hadley) to the professional (his attack on Sherwood Anderson). Equally, the way he hid his unheroic role in the Red Cross behind the glory of a silver cross must have felt like a betrayal of Nick Nerone, the true war hero. However, the formal logic of the textual rebus dictates that we must translate not only represented objects into words and names (ham and eggs into "ham-and-egger"; Max and Al as doubles who are crossed into the phrase "double

cross"; Nick and the "nigger" bound together into the name "Nick Black") but also words and names back into the original objects and people.

If behind ham-and-egger we find Hemingway and Agnes, and behind Nick Black, Nick Nerone, what things are behind the double cross? An important clue appears in a letter sent on the day of the Armistice, 11 November 1918. In it, Hemingway drew a picture of his recently awarded silver cross for military valor so that it overlapped the cross motif in the paper's American Red Cross letterhead (*Letters* 153). Later that month, he turned these two visual crosses into a rebus in "Nick lay in bed," the sketch set on the day of the Armistice that was inspired by Nick Nerone and featured a victim of fate resembling Ole Andreson. Verbally described in the text, the first cross is the silver military medal that the suicidal Nick Grainger dismisses as no more than a "tin cross" (qtd. in Smith, "Apprentice" 142). The second cross does not appear in the text, but on the paper onto which it was written, since it is once again the visual motif of Hemingway's American Red Cross stationery. Signifying wounds received in love and war, the material red cross and the verbal silver cross literalize the thematic "double cross" named in the final line of the sketch that affirms its status as the ur-text of "The Killers": "God double-crossed me." As the archival copy bears witness, the Red Cross motif on the verso is actually visible through the paper, leaving its physical yet ghostly impression behind the final lines of the manuscript.

The textual significance of these red and silver crosses gives new meaning to Hemingway's famous commitment to concrete particulars, to empirical *things* rather than abstractions. For while "The Killers" seems an objectively observed realist narrative about gangsters in an Illinois diner, it invites re-reading according to the hermeneutic logic of its duplicities, from the clock that tells two times to the mirror into which the double-talking killers talk. The text's ambivalent desire is to be misread as one story while telling another, set in another scene, another time, the uncanny mise-en-scène of a traumatized memory whose secret lies within the endlessly repetitious form of the text. If the task of the critic faced by fascination is not to explain the text away but to make discoveries that do justice to it, then revealing the rebus shows the double quality of "The Killers" as a masterpiece of modernism passing as a ham-and-egg story.

Notes

1. See Green, "Hemingway Pictogram Puzzle Solved!" The manuscript is cataloged as EHPP-IC04-003-007 in the Ernest Hemingway Collection.

2. See Hemingway, *Letters* 75, 164, 168, 171, 175, 206, 221.

3. Since 1993, when Flora declared that "Smith recounts as much as we are likely to know about the composition history" of "The Killers" ("Today" 30), only Michael Reynolds and Judy Jo Small have attempted a fresh genetic approach. See note 8.

4. All references to "The Killers" and other Hemingway stories are to *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigía Edition*.

5. For readings of *The Killers* that identify the film's own rebuses, see Conley and Harris.

6. "Nick lay in bed" in the Ernest Hemingway Collection, KL/EH 604.

7. "The Killers" in the Ernest Hemingway Collection, KL/EH 535.

8. My own genetic analysis contradicts the otherwise compelling case of Reynolds and Small, according to which it was only in his final manuscript, influenced by the boxing rhetoric Hemingway used in letters to Sherwood Anderson, that "The Killers" became the story of a boxer.

9. See Green.

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