

ANALYSIS

“The Revolutionist” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“The young and starry-eyed revolutionist is a recurrent and often a pitiable figure in his fiction. The short story called ‘The Revolutionist’ can hardly be said to blaze with the message of the *Communist Manifesto*. As a young artist developing his art, and as a veteran who had fought and been badly wounded in the most wasteful butcher-shop of all wars, he had a right to feel sick at the mention of capitalized Great Causes. He was too busy with his serious writing, and his work for the news-services among the political entanglements of the European continent, to follow Mike Gold in anti-capitalist or anti-republican war-whoops. Though he once sent them the story ‘Alpine Idyll’ when the editors asked him for a contribution, and twice wired them memorials on the dead, at their request, his considered opinion of *The New Masses* was that it was a puerile house-organ.... Without adopting the political jargon on the period, he was sufficiently aware of the implications inherent in the growing political decadence of European society. But he had preferred to work at his art rather than to confuse his job of work with that of the propagandist.”

Carlos Baker
Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952-73) 201-02

This story about a young Hungarian who wants the government to control everything is preceded by a vignette about an Irish policeman named Boyle (boil) who murders two Hungarian burglars out of ethnic prejudice because he mistakes them for Italians. Based on his perceptions as a reporter, his knowledge of human nature, his disillusionment with politicians and his disbelief in Great Causes, Hemingway distrusted government and wanted as little of it as possible, in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson.

The young revolutionary is unable to support himself, essentially a freeloader relying on comrades for survival, based on a note written at Party headquarters in “indelible pencil” on oilcloth—a credential likely to get rubbed out. Party membership is his “ticket” on the Italian railroad, which has always been notorious for inefficiency. As a Red he “had suffered very much under the Whites” in Hungary, just as in the vignette the Hungarian burglars suffer under a white who hated Italians. The vignette and the story portray what an inhumane mistake it is to reduce people to their ethnicity or politics. The young Red remains a true believer that Italy will lead the world revolution even after the older Communist, his Italian guide, informs him that the revolution is going “very badly” in Italy.

The shy young idealist shies away from the facts and does nothing to further the revolution but enjoy the countryside and walk around looking at pictures by idealistic painters. “Mantegna he did not like.” The great realist Mantegna is known especially for his fresco *St. James Led to His Execution* (c.1455), depicting the customary fate of idealistic revolutionaries. The disillusioned older Communist suggests that the young revolutionary take a look at the Mantegnas in Milan. “No,” he said, very shyly, he did not like Mantegna.” The idealist does not look at what he does not like.

“While the weather held good,” the revolutionary walks up over the mountains, an archetypal image of the ideal, only to be arrested on the other side. The last sentence of the story is an abrupt contradiction of his optimism like a slap in the face to sober up a drunk. It is also an example of Hemingway’s “omission theory.” We are left to infer that the neutral Swiss will extradite the revolutionary back to Hungary, where he will no doubt pay further for his naivete—perhaps by execution.

Michael Hollister (2012)