Apart from a painterly handling of space, Ernest Hemingway’s sense of place is a leading source of significance in his works. In his book *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary Culture* (1998), Brian Jarvis talks about a “profound spatial connectivity” that linked Hemingway with the places he lived in and visited. These are not merely the physical locales of action, but also a kind of “generic place” and a state of mind that has become a point of reference for him. In fact, Hemingway’s geographical imagination and utilization of scenic description is so overt that the critic declares that for the writer, “all spaces contain stories.”

Along with many other places spanning different continents, Switzerland also falls within Hemingway’s cartographic description and location in his fiction. The love and concern for this place began in the early 1920s in the form of non-fictional reportage when he penned several dispatches on Switzerland for the *Toronto Star Weekly*. In the post world war scenario, many of his news items were related to economic conditions of that country. For instance here’s one item for *The Toronto Daily Star* dated February 4, 1922 Called “Tourists Scarce at Swiss Resorts”:

> Because the Swiss franc is still worth approximately twenty cents, the country is rapidly becoming impoverished. Tourists were always the principal Swiss source of income, and now tourists look at the exchange rates, see that they can get only five francs for a dollar, and stay away from Switzerland. As a result, parts of the country that were jammed with a tourist population before the war now look like the deserted boomtowns of Nevada…… So Switzerland is as cheap as anywhere else. But the tourists do not know it and Switzerland is paying the price of neutrality in a quite unforeseen way.¹

In another entry he tells us about the weak economy of that country once again:

> As you go back into Switzerland from Germany you must present your German list of belongings again and an import tax is levied on anything you have paid to bring out of the German republic. It is a wonderful example of getting them coming and going.²
Apart from several entries about the skiing pleasures, bobsledding, Swiss avalanches, game shooting and trout fishing locales, or the fun of celebrating Christmas at the roof of the world, Hemingway gives us a detailed information about the place in a dispatch called “The Hotels in Switzerland.” Beginning with how this small, steep country, with much more up-and-down than sideways is all stuck over with large brown hotels built on the cuckoo clock style of architecture, he goes on to describe the different kinds of people who inhabitant them. Besides the very young men from the French aristocracy “who wear very old names and very-tight-in-the-knees riding breeches with equal grace, there are the “ruddy English families who are out all day on the ski slopes and bobsled runs” and “a good sprinkling of Americans and Canadians who are traveling for pleasure.”

The Swiss make no difference between Canadians and citizens of the United States. I wondered about this, and asked a hotelkeeper if he didn’t notice any difference between the people from the two countries. “Monsieur,” he said, “Canadians speak English and always stay two days longer at any place than Americans do.” So there you are. Hotelkeepers, they say, are very wise. But all the Americans I have seen so far were very busy learning to talk English. Harvard was founded for that purpose, it is sometimes rumored, so if the people from the States ever slow up, the hotelkeepers may have to find some new tests.

Since the early days of journalistic writings Hemingway had been personally visiting Switzerland several times during his other European sojourns too and this gets reflected in his fiction, sometimes overtly and sometimes as passing references. In *In Our Time*, “Cross-Country Snow” lets the reader know that Nick has taken the risks of loving and marrying. The story takes place after World War I and the reader knows that fact that Nick’s leg is damaged. The story is quiet and visual and Nick and his friend George are in the last day of a skiing trip in the Swiss Alps. The narrator first describes the challenging skiing motions of the two men and the takes them inside a Swiss inn, where they enjoy a bottle of wine and each other’s company, discussing among other things about pleasure and responsibility. Soon they realize that they have not been alone in this tavern. Swiss woodcutters have entered and left during the time that they have been there. They symbolize the world of work and responsibility that George has not accepted but that Nick has, and with increasing assurance. The story is not sentimental about that
acceptance, but like Wordsworth’s skylark, and the Swiss woodcutters, Nick tries to be true to the kindred points of heaven and home.

Apart from the Swiss locale mentioned in certain sections of *A Farewell to Arms*, the most exhaustive and authentic description of Switzerland is found in one of his short stories, aptly entitled “Homage to Switzerland.” Published in the 1932 collection of short stories *Winner Take Nothing*, wherein all the tales were according to the writer himself, ‘disturbing,’ this story uses an experimental narrative form of telling three stories in one, all opening the same way. Autobiographically speaking, the story went back in time to Ernest’s visit to Switzerland in 1927, just before his divorce from his first wife, Hadley. It is a humorous and ironic three-part story about Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Harris in Montreux, Vevey, and Territet. Anyone acquainted with the writer’s marital history could easily recognize that all the three men were Ernest Hemingway himself, attempting to recover from the trauma of separation from Hadley. A deep longing on the part of the writer for a normalcy in his life probably encouraged him to write such a story.

Biographical details tell us that soon after he arrived at the Nordquist ranch, Hemingway had sent Bill Lengel, editor at *Cosmopolitan*, “Homage to Switzerland” in response to his request for a new story. But the newness of form dissuaded Lengel from running such an experimental story in his mass market periodical. Smarting from the rejection, Hemingway immediately offered “Homage to Switzerland,” “Light of the World,” and “Mother of a Queen” to Maxwell Perkins for *Scribner’s Magazine* at a cut-rate of $2100 for all three, stating that he would like them to run in three successive issues “to bitch *Cosmopolitan*.” Later when this story was included in his anthology *Winner Take Nothing* (1932), Hemingway wrote to Perkins about the title, adding a neo-medieval epigraph of his own device:

>Unlike all other forms of lutte or combat the conditions are that the winner shall take nothing; neither his ease, nor his pleasure, nor any notions of glory; nor if he win far enough, shall there be any reward within himself.\(^6\)

In “Homage to Switzerland” we encounter a trio of increasingly dark episodes involving American men who are traveling in Switzerland, each for different reasons a
man without a woman, each incapable of loving or cut off from the kind of normal loving relation a man expects from married life. Each part of the story begins exactly the same way: a cold night at a Swiss rail station where an American man waits for the Simplon-Orient Express to arrive. The train is late. So is the hour. The method of each section is dramatic. Tributes often come in a three-part salute, and Hemingway not only breaks his story into three parts, he also emphasizes his experimentation by labeling those parts: “Portrait of Mr. Wheeler in Montreux,” “Mr. Johnson Talks About it at Vevey,” and “The Son of a Fellow Member at Territet.” Mr. Wheeler of the first section is the least sympathetic of the three men. He is in fact, rude – even sadistic – capable of making only the most superficial ties with other people. “Careful about his money”, he is also careful about his sexuality. He does not care for women, distrusts them, and toys with the Swiss waitress, offering her money to go upstairs with him.

“I'll give you two hundred francs,” he said.
‘Please do not say such things.’
‘Two hundred francs is a great deal of money.’
‘You will not say such things,’ the waitress said. She was losing her English…….
The waitress left the table and went over to the bar. Mr. Wheeler drank the wine and smiled to himself for some time.
‘Mademoiselle,’ he called.
The waitress pretended not to hear him.
‘Mademoiselle,’ he called again. The waitress came over.
‘You wish something?’
‘Very much. I'll give you three hundred francs.”

As the angry waitress leaves Mr. Wheeler, Hemingway wryly concludes the section with the statement: “He had been in that station before and he knew there was no upstairs to go to. Mr. Wheeler never took chances.”

In the second part, Mr. Johnson has taken his risks, and he is aware of his present loneliness. The Vevey location reminds the reader of another short story called “Canary for One” and the sad train ride of a couple who have lost the happiness they knew earlier at Vevey. Mr. Johnson becomes slightly maudlin and tells the porter that his wife has decided to divorce him. The cause is unknown, but doubtless she has her reasons. Mr.
Johnson is having difficulty dealing with that pain; and at first tries to wile away the time by flirting with the waitress.

“Signorina!’
‘What would you like, sir?’
‘You wouldn’t like to play with me? Johnson asked. The waitress blushed.
‘No, sir.’
‘I don’t mean anything violent. You wouldn’t like to make up a party to see the night life of Vevey? Bring a girl friend if you like.’
‘I must work,’ the waitress said. ‘I have my duty here.’ (107-8)

Having nothing better to do, he considers nostalgically the concept of life that the Swiss porters around him embody and then tries to fix up a conversation with them by offering a bottle of wine. ‘Is it the gentleman’s birthday?’ one of them asks. ‘No, said Johnson. ‘It’s not a fete. My wife has decided to divorce me.’ Then he asks them in return,

‘None of you gentlemen is divorced?’
‘No,’ said the porter…”They don’t divorce much here. There are gentlemen who are divorced but not many.’
‘With us,’ said Johnson, ‘it’s different. Practically everyone is divorced.’(109)

Johnson then tries to talk to these porters a bit more so that his grief is overcome easily but at the end of the section we are told that talking about it “had not blunted it”; it had only made him “feel nasty.”

‘You like being married?’ Johnson asked one of the porters.
‘What?’
‘You like the married state?’
‘Oui. C’est normale.’
‘Exactly,’ said Johnson. ‘Et vous, monsieur?’
‘Ca, va,’ said the other porter.
‘Pour mor,’ said Johnson, “ca ne va pas.” (111)

The absence of the normal is also Hemingway’s topic in the story of Mr. Harris, the protagonist of the third section. Like the two other American travelers, Mr. Harris is middle-aged, an expatriate who has been away from America a long time. The pain that occupies him is the recent suicide of his father and he engages in a surreal conversation with a diehard member of the National Geographical Society – a kindly old man, whose politeness is in sharp contrast to that of Mr.Harris:
‘I have never been to America. But I would like to go very much. Perhaps I shall attend a meeting of the society sometime. I would be very happy to meet your father.’
‘I’m sure he would have liked to meet you but he died last year. Shot himself, oddly enough.’
‘I am very truly sorry. I am sure his loss was a blow to science as well as to his family.’
‘Science took it awfully well.’ (116)

Humor is one means of coping with loss and this is another way of saying the same thing that Mr. Johnson said in the earlier section, ‘Pour mou, ca ne vas pas.’

In all the three sections of the story we find Hemingway juxtaposing the ambience of the warm, well-lighted station café with the bleak and dreary portrayal of the main characters. Set in multi-lingual Switzerland, the story also emphasizes the uses of language and the inadequacies of language to blunt pain. Technique-wise too, Hemingway does away with all nonfunctional decoration and ornamentation, as he had declared elsewhere, “Prose is architecture, not interior decoration.” Though each individual episode is realistic, the effect of the three is close to the method used by the Absurdist playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee: repetition emphasizes absurdity, talk emphasizes the vacuum. Hemingway catches a tone at once light and sinister by repeating certain items of dialogue. For example, Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Harris each offers the waitress a cigar. Similarly, the setting of each dramatic scene echoes the other; although the episodes take place at different stations, the scene is essentially the same. And each contrasts inner and outside temperatures. As Joseph M. Flora reminds us, the setting of each section tellingly catches a detail of “One Reader Writes.” It is snowing in Virginia as the wife writes her letter to the syndicated columnist, and it is also snowing as the three men face their particular form of loneliness.

An analysis of this tryptich shows how “Homage to Switzerland” at first seems merely to be a report of an actual event in Hemingway’s life – it relates to his most important themes, to love and marriage, to fathers and sons, to zestful realization of active life, to coming to terms with the certainty of death. But more than that, through
three traveling Americans, Hemingway in this story actually pays homage to the solid values of middle-class Switzerland – not the spectacular values but the ordinary in life: love, marriage, fruition – and in a sense, to the best qualities of conservative European culture. It can also be interpreted to relate to the best qualities of Oak Park. That Hemingway was really worried about the ideal of normalcy in relationships is also clearly revealed in “A Day’s Wait” -- a story that follows “Homage” immediately in the collection. At first seeming merely a report of an actual event in Hemingway’s life, it relates to his most important themes, to love and marriage, to fathers and sons, to zestful realization of the active life, to coming to terms with the certainty of death.

I am tempted to conclude with the similarity of theme of “Homage to Switzerland” with what is reiterated in most of Henry James’ so called ‘international’ novels where he eulogizes the cultures of the Old World as against that of the New.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:


2 “German Export Tax Hits Profiteers.” February 25, 1922 .Ibid. p.96

3 Ibid. pp.103-04.


5 EH-Maxwell Perkins , August 9, 1932, PUL

6 EH notebook on WTN in Baker Collection, Box 17, Folder 6, PUL. Quoted in Michael Reynolds, *Hemingway in the 1930s*.

