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Hobo Jungle: The Apprenticeship of Nick Adams in Hemingway's "The Battler"

Hideo Tsuji

Just having completed his major debut book, the young Ernest Hemingway fervently noted in his letter to Edmund Wilson¹ that he arranged the book so as to "give the picture of the whole between examining it in detail." According to the writer himself, to read the book would be "[l]ike looking with your eyes at something, say a passing coast line, and then looking at it with 15X binoculars. Or rather, maybe, looking at it and then looking in and living in it — and then coming out and looking at it again" (Hemingway, *Selected Letters* 128). In order to create this effect, the book was uniquely composed of named stories with vignette type entries inserted between them.

To Hemingway's dismay, however, Boni & Liveright, the publisher, disapproved of a couple of stories. They felt those stories were too obscene to be published under their name. Hemingway just followed the publisher's advice: he changed some parts of "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," and added the newly finished "The Battler" in place of "Up in Michigan." At the same time, this ambitious author also rearranged the order of stories. Hemingway was rather satisfied with the result, as he proudly told in his letter to

Horace Liveright² that “‘The Battler’ makes the book a good deal better. It’s about the best I’ve ever written and gives additional unity to the book as a whole” (*Selected Letters* 155). This book, eventually to be published in October 1925, is *In Our Time*.

Placed carefully in *In Our Time*, “The Battler” “serves as a gateway” as Nicholas Gerogiannis puts it (177). This “gateway” has a double meaning. On the one hand, Nick Adams, the protagonist, literally extends beyond the gateway of the closed circle where he has lived with his family and his friends. On the other hand, more figuratively, he is now “on the road” (Gerogiannis 177) on his own, which suggests that, with the other stories and Chapter 6 of the vignettes, in which Nick also appears, “The Battler” in particular focuses on a coming-of-age theme.

As it turns out, Hemingway created this initiation story by using a typical hobo setting. Descending from migrant workers hired during the rush of railroad construction in the late-nineteenth century, a hobo was a kind of tramp traveling free on freight trains.³ Some critics have casually noted that “The Battler” is set in a “hobo jungle” — a concealed camp for hoboes usually built at the side of a railway — and that Ad and Bugs, who Nick encounters in the story, are both hoboes.⁴ In fact, the entire motif of “The Battler” revolves around the hobo experience: since Nick himself has “swung on to the freight train when it slowed down for the yards outside of Walton Junction”⁵ and is later knocked off the train by a brakeman, Nick himself could well represent the typical hobo.

That Nick is also portrayed as a hobo leads us to reexamine “The Battler” in a new light. Although most critics have rightly focused on the relationship between Ad and Bugs when they discuss the story, the tendency to unnecessarily differentiate Nick from the two hoboes should be reconsidered. What will become clear in this revision is that Nick is involved in identity politics. This example of identity politics, however,

has more to do with an identity crisis than with the construction of identity. As just another hobo, Nick is thrown off into a world where his former social status loses its significance. In “The Battler,” violence, grotesqueness, and craziness tell Nick the difficulties in finding one’s own place and the possibilities for fluid forms of identity in a marginal world of a hobo jungle as opposed to the middle class setting he comes from.

1

Bound for Mancelona, Nick Adams is riding on a freight train from Walton Junction, when he is thrown off by a brakeman. After walking along the track for a while, he sees a campfire. Sitting by the fire is a man, whose face is severely damaged. This man abruptly announces that he is crazy, and that his name is Ad Francis, an ex-prizefighter. Bugs, a “negro” Ad introduces as his “pal” (100), comes to them with food and begins cooking. After a supper, Ad — silent and glaring at Nick while eating a sandwich — becomes “crazy.” Nick is about to be attacked when Bugs hits Ad at the base of the skull with a whalebone blackjack. He tells Nick that he has to knock Ad out whenever he becomes crazy. Ad became mentally ill after the breakup of his marriage; the couple were believed to be siblings and their relationship was sensationally written up in the newspaper, which, Bugs implies, motivated his wife to leave home. After telling this story, Bugs politely asks Nick to leave, saying that Ad may become crazy again when he sees Nick and that he does not want to hit Ad any more. Nick sets out for Mancelona, thinking about the two men by the campfire.

Apparently, “The Battler” is far from a simple adventure story though the figure of the hobo must have excited Hemingway’s youthful penchant for such adventures. Gerogiannis asserts that “The Battler” owes much to Jack London, especially *The Road*, which is an account of his youthful hobo experiences (178-79).⁶ There are also other possible sources for Hem-

ingway's hoboes. According to Frederick Feied, already in the eightenneties, the adventure of "Wearly Willie [*sic*], the vagabond," and later, "Happy Hooligan," a comic-strip hobo character, "were sufficiently colorful and picturesque" so that the young Hemingway may have been familiar with hoboes through such popular media as magazines and newspapers (13).⁷ A photograph that shows a smiling, teenage Hemingway posing as a hobo printed in Oliver's *Ernest Hemingway A to Z* (142) is enough to verify his fascination with the hobo.

Nevertheless, hoboing in "The Battler" is much grimmer than the younger Hemingway can have imagined. As it is, instead of turning to these preceding hobo stories, historical accounts of the life of a hobo will be more helpful to explain the grim aspects of hoboing described in "The Battler." According to Nels Anderson, who spent his younger days as a hobo before studying sociology at the University of Chicago, the largest group among hoboes consisted of migratory or seasonal workers.⁸ These hands were indispensable in such workplaces as farms in a harvest season, construction sites for huge structures like a railway or a bridge, and lumbering or mining camps, where an extremely large workforce was required for a short duration of time. As one of the most notable examples, the rapid development of the railroad system in the late-nineteenth century needed a lot of workers who could travel from one railway construction site to another. These workers often decided to jump on freight trains when they traveled, for cars were not yet ready to serve as the chief means of transportation. While this wandering style has become hoboes' chief image, the severe conditions and the nature of work they were engaged in certainly determined the characteristics of a hobo: a male who often remained a bachelor since he could not stay at one place long enough to be a husband or a father. This figure may suggest how he was perceived in society. Not surprisingly, a hobo was labeled an outcast who was lazy, irresponsible,

depraved, and, in some cases, dangerous.⁹

The cultural force behind ascribing these negative epithets to hoboes was domestic ideology. In the late-nineteenth century, as America was changing toward a capitalist society, home which had been the site of economic self-sufficiency in the republican era was redefined as the “inner” world. As opposed to the “outer” world where a patriarch was employed to support his family, this new domestic space was characterized as a sacred sphere for a mother to bring up children, which became the norm in middle class culture. A set of these cultural and social standards can be summarized as domestic ideology. Hoboes were a cultural enemy who challenged every value that domestic ideology upheld. Most of all, they were the “homeless,” and thus excluded onto the margin of society.

Ironically enough, however, hoboes were “indispensable outcasts” as historiographer Frank Tobias Higbie’s book title puts it. Another recent book, *Citizen Hobo*, also focuses on the complex social position hoboes occupied with its oxymoronic title. As these historiographical accounts contend, hoboes constituted a socially and culturally necessary group, however easy it may be to imagine that a hobo appeared an unrestrained idler to the middle class citizens. In fact, a socio-economic structure that allowed, or actually needed the nomadic life style of hoboes as seasonal and migratory workers was the same one that prescribed domestic ideology.¹⁰ Hoboes, in this sense, inhabited the darker side of the modern capitalist American society. Therefore, to foreground a hobo life would relativize middle class cultural norms that repressed and excluded hoboes.

It is no doubt that, both Ad and Bugs, two hoboes in “The Battler,” were represented as outcasts. The former has been involved in an incestuous scandal and put in jail for “busting people all the time after she [his wife] went away” (103) while the latter is an African American who has been incarcerated for “cuttin’ a man” (103). In fact, it is in jail that they

have met.

As for Bugs, Hemingway also put emphasis on the fact that he is an African American. It is not only a matter of skin color; Nick discerns that Bugs is a black even before seeing him: "It was a negro's voice. Nick knew from the way he walked that he was a negro" (100). Bugs is a black not because he has a dark skin but because of his "blackness." This essentialist assumption, at least for Nick, is significant.

Ad is no less "marked" than Bugs. When Nick first sees Ad in firelight, he is shocked by the man's severely damaged face that he willingly shows to Nick — "He had only one ear. It was thickened and tight against the side of his head. Where the other ear should have been there was stump" (99). The physical deformity of the unknown is emphasized, which makes Nick nervous. However, Nick soon learns that the man is strange in other ways:

"Listen!" the man said. "Call me Ad."

"Sure!"

"Listen," the little man said. "I'm not quite right."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm crazy."

He put on a cap. Nick felt like laughing. (99)

Nick does not understand the man, who is not yet identified as the ex-prizefighter, because the man does not appear crazy at this point. He innocently asks, "How does it get you?" The man replies, "I don't know [. . .]. When you got it you don't know about it" (99). Nick learns that Ad is ruled by a different nature, which is partly clear from his unpleasant appearance.

The relationship of this unusual pair is difficult to evaluate. When Bugs comes to the campsite, Ad introduces Bugs to Nick, that "[h]e's crazy, too" and calls him his "pal" (100). Bugs, in return, professes his affection for the unconscious Ad when he explains to Nick how he has met

Ad: "Right away I liked him and when I got out [of jail] I looked him up. He likes to think I'm crazy and I don't mind. I like to be with him [. . .]" (103). Some critics have pointed out that Bugs is motherly to Ad, as he is servile, preparing the food and taking care of Ad.¹¹ Yet, Bugs often uses the blackjack on Ad. This physical violence is excessive in that it gives Bugs complete control over Ad: "I know how to do it. He won't remember nothing of it. I have to do it to change him when he gets that way" (102). The violence is indispensable to their relationship because it is the only means for Bugs to get along with the crazy Ad. In a sense, violence is what keeps them together.

In order to give a reasonable explanation for the uncertain relationship between Ad and Bugs, a surprisingly large number of critics have readily asserted their relationship to be homosexual. Indeed, there are some homoerotic passages in "The Battler" as when Nick is urged to count the slow pulse of the former boxer: "The little man's wrist was thick and the muscles bulged above the bone" (99); Nick feels "the slow hard throb under his fingers" (100).

However, more importantly, it should be noted that sexuality itself was one of the most powerful frames that supported domestic ideology. For example, Joseph DeFalco concludes that Bugs is homosexual in the following terms:

The fact that he [Bugs] is dark, however, signals the danger inherent in the nature of such a figure. His apparent homosexuality gives further credence to his changeling nature and points to the dangers of the personage who indulges in activities which are *contra naturam*. (77; italics original)

DeFalco's logic reveals, if not his own belief, what he presumes when he reads Hemingway's literature: white middle class ethics that accompany powerful gender norms. It is certain that there were cases in which hoboos

were engaged in homosexual relationships. Nevertheless, if one assumes, as some critics have done, that hoboes were homosexual only because of the situation that shows single males living together, this very act of forced interpretation is framed by domestic ideology.

As DeFalco's example indicates, an attempt to determine the sexuality of Ad and Bugs has ironically obscured the nature of the hobo jungle. The hobo jungle is, for Ad and Bugs, like a home, as described by Bugs when he asks Nick to leave:

"I can wake him up any time now, Mister Adams. If you don't mind I wish you'd sort of pull out. I don't like to not be hospitable, but it might disturb him back again to see you. [. . .]. Good-bye. I wish we could ask you to stay the night but it's just out of the question. Would you like to take some of that ham and some bread with you? No? You better take a sandwich [. . .]." (103)

He sounds as if he is saying farewell to a houseguest. The hobo jungle is, apparently, not only for eating and sleeping. It is to Ad and Bugs what home is to Nick. However, their home is completely different from the home that was governed by domestic ideology. The latter was prescribed to be the site of reproduction, where heterosexuality became the norm. On the contrary, sexual identity can become flexible in the hobo world. Being "*contra naturam*," the hobo world becomes a provocative counter-image of domestic ideology, rendering it not the norm but only an alternative. Accordingly, what has been thought to be natural becomes no more natural at all, as this counter-image illustrates how the natural itself is a cultural construction. The hobo jungle is, to use Judith Butler's term, the site of gender trouble. As such, it can challenge the culturally and socially constructed modern family system.

Nick's home, as can be seen in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" of *In Our Time*, is a middle class setting where a religiously pious, highly moralistic mother predominates. A middle class boy, Nick can be an intruder or a potential enemy for two hoboes, which is clearly suggested when the crazy Ad threatens him:

[Ad] glared at Nick, his face was white and his eyes almost out of sight under the cap.

"You're a hot sketch. Who the hell asked you to butt in here?"

"Nobody."

"You're damn right nobody did. Nobody asked you to stay either. You come in here and act snotty about my face and smoke my cigars and drink my liquor and then talk snotty. Where the hell do you think you get off?" (101)

At least to the crazy Ad, Nick appears just another intruder into their hobo jungle.

However, what matters most in "The Battler" is that Nick himself is depicted as a hobo. Though he may remain an amateur one throughout the story, he is well aware that he has been thrust into the world of real hoboes when he repents of his folly as "a lousy kid thing to have done" (97) after being deceived by the brakeman — "Come here, kid, I got something for you" (97). Nick suffers at the hands of the brakeman but he feels he himself is partly responsible. He also braces himself up: "He would get him some day. He would know him again. That was a fine way to act" (97).¹² Nick is trying to become a more mature hobo who can defend himself and manage his own fate.

Stressing the fact that Nick is also a hobo is the title of the story. Initially, Hemingway named it "The Great Man." The title was then changed

to “The Great Little Fighting Machine” in the middle of writing, and finally settled to “The Battler.”¹³ While the second title is quite recognizable as signifying Ad, the ex-prizefighter, the other two are not. Especially, when it comes to “The Battler,” it becomes more ambiguous who the battler is. It cannot be denied that the title still signifies Ad. However, at the same time, it can also signify Nick, who, as Bugs comments in a prophetic manner, “[has] got a lot coming to him” (100) and indeed soon finds himself deeply wounded on the “battlefield” in Chapter 6, which comes right after “The Battler.” As it can signify not only Ad but also Nick, the changed title suggests the similarity between them.¹⁴

In fact, as the story unfolds, Nick perceives a change in Ad, who has appeared so different from himself. When Nick first sees Ad’s queerly damaged face, it is enough to make him “embarrassed” (99):

The man [who is to turn out to be the ex-prizefighter] looked at Nick and smiled. In the firelight Nick saw that his face was misshapen. His nose was sunken, his eyes were slits, he had queer-shaped lips. Nick did not perceive all this at once, he only saw the man’s face was queerly formed and mutilated. It was like putty in color. Dead looking in the firelight.

“Don’t you like my pan?” the man asked.

Nick was embarrassed. (98-99)

Hemingway uses light and shade to depict Ad: while the firelight illuminates a part of his face, the rest is in shadow, which enhances the dreadful-ness and hints at the violence and craziness under the surface. However, when lying unconscious by the fireside, Ad’s face appears quite different: “[Ad’s] mutilated face looked *childish* in repose” (103; emphasis added). Here, too, the firelight reveals the underlying nature of Ad. This image of childishness is, interestingly, inconsistent with the former images of violence and craziness. Moreover, to Nick, who has just repented his conduct

after being deceived by the brakeman — “What a lousy kid thing to have done” (97) — , Ad’s childish inner nature seems to overlap with his own.

If Nick finds similarity rather than differences as he gets to know Ad, this process marks a sharp contrast to the way social workers or members of social organizations disguised themselves as hoboes to engage in undercover investigations. What becomes clear in this comparison is the difference between how Nick and a social investigator — both from the middle class — define themselves when they build relationships with hoboes. In *Indispensable Outcasts*, Higbie points out that “the [social investigation] texts are as much about defining differences between investigator and subject as they are about working-class life itself” (68): the investigator had to demonstrate how his “real” self was different from his research subject (hoboes) to acquire “authoritative” voice in his description (74). In consequence, it is suggested, those social investigation texts remain estranged from the hobo world however deeply they try to penetrate into it. The persistent irony is that they are texts “about” hoboes and never become texts “of” hoboes.

In “The Battler,” the self-defining performance of undercover investigators cannot be found on Nick’s part. It is true that, as Higbie reminds us, “[o]nly middle-class investigators could shift so easily between class identities” (74); Nick is no exception in this privilege. However, while social investigators “passed” into a hobo world willingly after elaborate preliminaries, Nick is plunged into it and lacks both experience and strategy to manage his situation. At the beginning of the story, he has been violently transformed into a figure which leads Ad to mistake him as his fellow — Nick’s “pants were torn and the skin was barked” and “[t]here was a big bump coming up” (97). Nick is also keenly aware that he is “a long way off from anywhere” (97) and that he has been cut off from his middle class background for the meantime. It is no longer possible for him to switch

identities, which is what characterized hobo investigators. Not only has Nick been deprived of his original self, but he also does not search for the “Other” in hoboes.

The hobo jungle in “The Battler,” moreover, cannot provide Nick with a useful role model for identity construction in the usual sense. In contrast, most significantly, Ad’s craziness is subversive enough to displace such identity construction. As his craziness disrupts “the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person,’” his very being illustrates that identity is “not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler 23). In fact, if one is confronted with the following question — which is the “real” Ad, the crazy Ad or the sane Ad, one likely answer will be that both the crazy Ad and the sane Ad are real. This answer suggests that identity, if defined as the core of self, can be fluid or disruptive rather than coherent and stable. In the hobo jungle of “The Battler,” cultural and social norms of intelligibility are challenged.

3

Although several scholars have mentioned that “The Battler” is set in a hobo jungle, they have not discussed the meaning of the setting any further, partly because the story does not hint at its importance on the surface. If it did, “The Battler” would cease to be a story that is “of” the hobo world. “The Battler,” instead, shows the continuity between Nick’s former world and the hobo world. This continuity, however, differs from a social reformist scenario in the Progressive era warning middle-class citizens of plausible social depravity. In the latter case, the middle class and hoboes are hierarchized vertically on social strata. This stratification is the strategy of middle class identity politics to differentiate hoboes as the “Other” and to place the middle class itself in a socially and culturally superior position.

As it depicts the similarities rather than the differences between Nick and Ad, “The Battler” challenges, or “battles” against this kind of middle class politics.

A critique of middle class social and cultural politics, “The Battler” enables us to reinterpret Nick’s coming-of-age. As an apprentice hobo who just set off into the outside world with adventurous anticipations, Nick soon suffers at the hands of a brakeman, and discovers the hobo jungle of two real hoboes. Their homely space, however, is different from his: Ad is crazy, and their relationship is ruled by violence. This is what Nick experiences in “The Battler.” This summary suggests “initiation” is no longer adequate to describe his situation in the story. Nick’s experiences bring him beyond the limit of a middle class social system and nullify its cultural norms without which one can hardly be initiated as a legitimate citizen. In this sense, what he experiences in the hobo jungle can have dramatically diverted Nick’s way in *In Our Time*. If “The Battler” gives “additional unity” to *In Our Time* as the author claimed, it opens up a gate through which we can enter into the book and radically reinterpret it.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the session meeting of the Tokyo American Literature Society’s monthly meeting, Keio University, Mita campus, June 26, 2004.

** I would like to note my gratitude to Professor John Scahill of Keio University for his proofreading this paper. It goes without saying, however, that any errors in it are my sole responsibility.

1 Dated October 18, 1924.

2 Dated March 31, 1925.

3 Although some writers attempt to distinguish a hobo from a tramp or a bum, the difference, if any, is not important for this essay. The word’s origin remains obscure although it is said to come from “homeward bound” or their greeting, “Ho! Beau.” The first example quoted in *OED* 2nd edition is dated

1889.

- 4 For example, Philip Young observes that Nick “encounters Ad and a companion in a sort of two-men hobo jungle” (34), and Baker, in the same manner, notes the “locale was a hobo jungle near Mancelona, Michigan, and the circumstances were wholly invented” (141). However, they do not focus on this topic any further.
- 5 Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon, 1998) 97. All further page references to this edition are given in parentheses.
- 6 Gerogiannis, however, does not further argue about the hobo setting that “The Battler” shares with *The Road*, as his initial interest lies in the journey narrative in general.
- 7 In a letter to Hemingway dated January 21, 1919, Agnes von Kurowsky, a U. S. Red Cross nurse during World War I and a supposed lover of Hemingway at that time, wrote, “I took some pictures of Luigi, our cook. He is a most delightful character, the exact image of the comic paper Weary Willie — with one eye out of focus and a perennial smile” (qtd. in Villard and Nagel 158). This suggests that Weary Willie was very popular and that Hemingway knew of him.
- 8 Anderson notes, “From the records and observations of a great many men the reasons why men leave home seem to fall under several heads: (a) seasonal work and unemployment, (b) industrial inadequacy, (c) defects of personality, (d) crises in the life of the person, (e) racial or national discrimination, and (f) wanderlust” (61).
- 9 In Chicago, the center of railroad system, there was the largest hobo community, known as “hobohemia.” As he was born and raised in Oak Park located very close to the city of Chicago, it is highly possible that Hemingway knew of it.
- 10 In a similar vein, Jack London points out from the leftist point of view: “This surplus labor [hoboes and others who were not regularly employed] acts as a check upon all employed labor. It is the lash by which the masters hold the workers to their tasks or drive them back to their tasks when they have revolted. It is the goad which forces the workers into the compulsory ‘free contracts’ against which they now and again rebel. There is only one reason under the sun that strikes fail, and that is because there are always plenty of men to take the striker’s places” (“The Tramp” 126).
- 11 See Bache; also, DeFalco 71-79.

- 12 For the hobo, a brakeman, often called a “shack,” was a detested enemy, as London’s account stresses: a shack tries to get a hobo off his train though “there is no legitimate way, short of murder, whereby the train-crew can ditch him” (*The Road* 202).
- 13 According to Paul Smith, Hemingway started writing a story which would become “The Battler” somewhere in mid-December, 1924. It was left untouched until mid-March, the next year, when he received a letter from Liveright that announced they had disapproved of a couple of stories of *In Our Time*. Soon afterward, Hemingway finished this incomplete Nick story as a substitute for “Up in Michigan” — a story about the seduction of Liz Coates by Jim Gilmore at Horton Bay.
- 14 Interestingly, “battler,” according to *OED*, also denotes “swagman” in Australian English. Further research might make it clear whether Hemingway was aware of this meaning or not.

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