Hemingway’s The Fifth Column, Fifthcolumnism, and the Spanish Civil War

Noël Valis

The Hemingway Review, Volume 28, Number 1, Fall 2008, pp. 19-32 (Article)

Published by University of Idaho Department of English
DOI: 10.1353/hem.0.0022

For additional information about this article
THE FIFTH COLUMN is a disturbing play. The first time I read Hemingway’s only full-length work of theater it seemed dated to me. A Hispanist, I was teaching a course on the Spanish Civil War and wanted to include something of Hemingway’s. After that, I stuck with For Whom the Bell Tolls, which students either loved or hated with equal ferocity. In returning to the play, I find myself in the embarrassing position of going back on my words (Valis 258).1 The Fifth Column is a much more interesting work than I remembered, though it is still a very flawed one. The plotting, structure, and characterization have been raked over the coals enough since 1938, but the most serious criticism, in my view, has to do with its moral center. Lionel Trilling implied in 1939 that the play appears to advocate the notion that “oppression by the right people brings liberty” (59). There is “a Machiavellian indifference to [the] moral dimensions [of political questions],” according to John Raeburn (15). Stephen Koch and the distinguished historian Stanley Payne are even harsher. Koch wrote, “The Fifth Column is an exceptionally nasty piece of work and the moral nadir of Hemingway’s entire career” (240). Payne thought the play “was a grotesque romance of the Republican terror, in which the protagonist . . . was a swaggering American who specialized in political liquidation . . . [perhaps] the ugliest American in all world literature.”2

At stake is whether we consider The Fifth Column political propaganda or a political morality play.3 I argue here that the work is too morally confused to be either. That confusion, I suggest, is the fifth column itself, the
notion of an enemy within sabotaging and undermining a nation’s defense efforts. The power of fifthcolumnism resides precisely in its lack of location and slippery sense of identity. Who is the fifth column, and where can it be found? Moreover, fifthcolumnism can be characterized, paradoxically, as a structure of moral and political disorder. That is its purpose: to create disorder. Hemingway’s play internalizes fifthcolumnism through the moral ambiguities of its protagonist, Philip Rawlings, whose unquestioning political allegiance ironically betrays Republican ideals.\footnote{In other words, there is a destabilizing fifth column of moral confusion inside Loyalist forces that is eating away at the heart of the Republican cause.}

To what extent Hemingway was aware of the play’s muddied ethical core is another question. In a review of the play-doctored production of 1940, Joseph Wood Krutch thought Hemingway failed to pursue the unsettling moral-political implications of \textit{The Fifth Column} “because it is plainly so much easier to develop instead the easily managed story of the hero’s love affair with an American girl” \footnote{Benjamin Glazer, not Hemingway, was responsible for this heavily reworked, Hollywoodized version, which stressed the love story over politics, as recent unpublished research by Jonathan Bank reveals. Did Glazer find the political message too cloudy and go for something more conventional and straightforward? In any event, it was easier for Glazer simply to ignore that the hero of the play is not what he appears to be. Indeed, Hemingway seems to have modeled Rawlings in part as a modern version of the popular Scarlet Pimpernel, the English patrician Sir Percy Blakeney whose foppishness disguises his identity as the quick-witted savior of French revolutionary-era aristocrats from the guillotine.\footnote{Baroness Orczy’s creation was, interestingly enough, first a play in 1903, which she turned into a novel two years later. The classic—and best—film version, starring the inimitable Leslie Howard, had appeared in 1934.}

Rawlings is a counter-espionage agent of the Republic masquerading as a journalist, or as he says: “I’m a sort of a second-rate cop pretending to be a third-rate newspaperman.” He also sometimes affects British speech and, like Sir Percy, who has his band of brothers, goes out “with the boys.” The society girl Dorothy Bridges, with her cultivated voice, clearly stands in for the aristocratic Marguerite, Sir Percy’s clueless wife. Dorothy calls Philip “a Madrid playboy” and says: “You could do something serious and decent. You could do something brave and calm and good” \footnote{Rawlings is a counter-espionage agent of the Republic masquerading as a journalist, or as he says: “I’m a sort of a second-rate cop pretending to be a third-rate newspaperman.” He also sometimes affects British speech and, like Sir Percy, who has his band of brothers, goes out “with the boys.” The society girl Dorothy Bridges, with her cultivated voice, clearly stands in for the aristocratic Marguerite, Sir Percy’s clueless wife. Dorothy calls Philip “a Madrid playboy” and says: “You could do something serious and decent. You could do something brave and calm and good” (\textit{TFC} 36, 22).\footnote{Rawlings is a counter-espionage agent of the Republic masquerading as a journalist, or as he says: “I’m a sort of a second-rate cop pretending to be a third-rate newspaperman.” He also sometimes affects British speech and, like Sir Percy, who has his band of brothers, goes out “with the boys.” The society girl Dorothy Bridges, with her cultivated voice, clearly stands in for the aristocratic Marguerite, Sir Percy’s clueless wife. Dorothy calls Philip “a Madrid playboy” and says: “You could do something serious and decent. You could do something brave and calm and good” (\textit{TFC} 36, 22).\footnote{Rawlings is a counter-espionage agent of the Republic masquerading as a journalist, or as he says: “I’m a sort of a second-rate cop pretending to be a third-rate newspaperman.” He also sometimes affects British speech and, like Sir Percy, who has his band of brothers, goes out “with the boys.” The society girl Dorothy Bridges, with her cultivated voice, clearly stands in for the aristocratic Marguerite, Sir Percy’s clueless wife. Dorothy calls Philip “a Madrid playboy” and says: “You could do something serious and decent. You could do something brave and calm and good” (\textit{TFC} 36, 22).}
Franchot Tone, who played Rawlings in the 1940 production of *The Fifth Column*, eventually became typecast in the role of café society playboy, the 20th century equivalent of an aristocratic fop. Rawlings, however, is really an inversion of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Sir Percy saves people. Rawlings kills them. He is, in more ways than Hemingway perhaps intended, not what he appears to be.

But then not much was in 1937 Spain, where Hemingway wrote *The Fifth Column* in the fall of that year. Deception and betrayal, large themes in his work, permeated the besieged city of Madrid, where fifthcolumnism contributed to the poisoned atmosphere. The term “fifth column” was first used during the Spanish Civil War in the fall of 1936, when one of Franco’s generals, most likely Mola, said there were four columns advancing towards the capital, while a fifth burrowed deep within the city was preparing for a Nationalist victory. To understand how the mindset and structure of the fifth column operate inside Hemingway’s play, it is worth looking at the real fifth column at work in Madrid and elsewhere.

Mola’s remarks provoked panic among *madrileños*, leading the Republicans to exaggerate the number and impact of fifthcolumnists and to try and hunt them down. This initial propagandistic salvo from the Nationalists was effective in sowing confusion, fear, and mistrust among the general population. Fifthcolumnists were organized mostly in clusters of cells called *Banderas* by the fascist-minded Falangists, who dominated such activities. Small and secret by nature, these groups were highly organized, though how much they actually accomplished is open to question, as Rawlings comments in the play:

> They have A numbered one to ten, and B numbered one to ten, and C numbered one to ten, and they shoot people and they blow up things and they do everything you’re overly familiar with. And they work very hard, and aren’t really awfully efficient. But they kill a lot of people that they shouldn’t kill. *(TFC 36)*

The idea of fifthcolumnism possesses imaginative power because it works through the mechanism of proliferation, like a kind of accumulating fiction. Fifthcolumnists appeared to be everywhere to *madrileños*, who found the tactics of snipers firing from rooftops or windows upon unsus-
pecting passers-by especially unnerving (Cervera Gil 263).

The assassination of the young International Brigader at the end of Act I of *The Fifth Column* is clearly meant to be the act of a fifthcolumnist, waiting in ambush like a sniper. The electrician who appears in the first act is reported dead in Act II, Scene III, a sniper’s victim, as Petra the maid remarks: “Oh, they always shoot from windows at night during a bombardment. The fifth column people. The people who fight us from inside the city” (*TFC* 46).

The seeming ubiquity of the fifth column has an antecedent in the extended network structure of espionage, unsurprisingly one of the primary activities of such groups. Spies tend to multiply, whether in streets and back rooms or in the mind’s eye. All such figures share in the imaginative hold of shape-shifting. They provoke both delight and alarm, as Baroness Orczy cleverly intuited when versifying the Scarlet Pimpernel’s fascination:

> We seek him here, we seek him there,
> Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
> Is he in heaven?—Is he in hell?
> That demmed, elusive Pimpernel? (87)

Fifthcolumnism in civil war Spain was not, however, romance but a sinister reality to the Republican side. The hunt for saboteurs, infiltrators, and defeatists was intensifying by the time Hemingway began to write his play (see Alcocer 267–69). In December 1937, posters depicting a giant enemy ear listening were plastered everywhere, warning *madrileños* to be discreet, while the message of rear-guard vigilance appeared on earlier posters (Alcocer 269; Fellner 74; Cowley 122). Imagined as all-pervasive, fifthcolumnists were also seen as filled with contagion spilling over to the other side. The Spanish Republic was split by bitter internal political rivalries, which erupted in revolutionary street battles during the Barcelona May Days of 1937. The Stalinist-inclined Communist press accused the anti-Stalinist POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*/Workers’ Party for Marxist Unification) of being fascist agents. The charges, as George Orwell brilliantly observed and later historical accounts demonstrated, were fabrications. Nonetheless, many POUMists, smeared as “Trotskyists,” were rounded up, imprisoned, and even executed.

One gets a taste of such propaganda in Constancia de la Mora’s 1939 autobiography, *In Place of Splendor*:
Franco’s “Fifth Column” operated more powerfully in Catalonia than anywhere else in Spain. Disguised as ultra-revolutionaries, these fascist spies flocked into Barcelona, mouthing left phrases, talking of overthrowing capitalism, all the while they sapped the strength of the Republican rearguard. The fight against fascism in Spain required three things from Catalonia: food, grown by the peasants; armaments, manufactured by the workers; and disciplined volunteers for the Army. But the Trotskyites who acted as Franco agents, working through a political party called the POUM, wormed their way into high places (317–318).11

Hemingway was well aware of the treacherous undercurrents swirling around the charges and counter-charges of political heresy in Republican Spain. He also knew about José Robles, a close friend of John Dos Passos, who disappeared in December 1936 and was never heard from again. In all likelihood, Robles was murdered by Soviet secret police. A fervent supporter of the Republic but not a Communist, he had been working as a translator for the Soviets in Spain. Some accounts suggest that his lack of discretion got him into trouble, and Robles’s assassins may have killed him to silence him, as Ignacio Martínez de Pisón suggests in his excellent reconstruction of the events surrounding Robles’s disappearance. “They didn’t shoot a traitor,” writes Martínez de Pisón. “They shot him in order to turn him into a traitor” (110).12

At the time, Hemingway appears to have swallowed the Soviet version of Robles’s death. This and his insensitivity to Dos Passos’s loss of a dear friend caused an irreparable breach between the two writers. But by fall 1937, had Hemingway begun to question the story of Robles as a fifth-columnist? Were mistakes made, as Philip Rawlings asks Antonio, the counter-intelligence chief of Seguridad (a stand-in for SIM, the Servicio de Investigación Militar, or Military Investigation Service)?13 We can only speculate about whether Robles’s murder weighed on Hemingway’s mind, but if it did, it appears to have remained submerged beneath the surface of the text, a fitting corollary to the subterranean nature and effect of fifth-columnism as something slippery to acknowledge but easy to imagine.

By the time the play was staged in 1940, the Spanish Civil War was over, but fifthcolumnism was being reported everywhere. In the United States, congressional hearings on Communist and Nazi activities had already been
held in 1932 and again from 1934 to 1937. In May 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC, also known as the Dies Committee) was established (see “Investigation”; also MacDonnell). Alexander Henderson’s *Eyewitness in Czecho-Slovakia*, from 1939, focused on the fifth column tactics of Nazi propagandists among German Czechs in the Sudetenland. Publications including George Britt’s *The Fifth Column is Here*, William Donovan and Edgar Mowrer’s *Fifth Column Lessons for America*, Joseph Kamp’s *The Fifth Column in Washington*, Harold Lavine’s *Fifth Column in America*, Bernal de León’s *La quinta columna en el continente americano* (*The Fifth Column on the American Continent*), and an anonymously authored publication titled *Fifth Column Facts* all appeared in 1940.

Dwight Bolinger claims that two elements popularized the term “fifth column” in America: the Broadway debut of Hemingway’s play and the Nazi invasion of Norway, reportedly abetted by fifthcolumnists like Quisling and coinciding with the play’s production. In tracing the origins of the term, Bolinger also observes that the *New York Times* had picked up on the expression in its Spanish Civil War coverage of October 1936, while two years later, in June 1938, Henry Wolfe had written a piece for the *New Republic* called “Hitler’s ‘Fifth Column’” (Bolinger 48–49).

By 1940 a kind of hysterical frenzy over fifthcolumnism had spread like wildfire in the United States, a phenomenon that Philip Roth would take to inordinate lengths in his novel *The Plot Against America* (2004), fictionalizing a Nazi-era fifth column takeover of the U.S. presidency. The Theatre Guild, which produced Hemingway’s play, was not above exploiting such fears, as Richard Allan Davison points out in charting *New York Times* reportage of the play’s production:

In a further attempt to spur on attendance, the Theatre Guild ran part of an editorial (from the *Sunday Times*, April 21) on the dangers of the Nazi fifth column movement entitled “Wake Up America”: “The technique of the Fifth Column . . . has become so obvious that there is no excuse for anyone to be trapped by it again.” (173)

Contemporary accounts of fifth column treachery were obsessed with two closely connected questions: who belongs to the fifth column, and where can it be found? As in civil war Spain, fifthcolumnists were appar-
ently everywhere, from Washington D.C. to Patagonia, and as Harold Lavine wrote in 1940, “in this uninhibited mood of emotionalism the Fifth Column soon came to include everyone you didn’t like” (5). More to the point, he wrote, “I am frank to admit that I don’t know any traitors. I don’t even know any potential traitors. I do know people who are frankly pro-Nazi” (11–12). Joseph Kamp said something similar: “In fact, no one, as yet, has laid hands on, or even pointed a finger at a real, live, honest-to-goodness member of the Fifth Column” (5). Nonetheless, both Lavine and Kamp go on to locate fifthcolumnists in the heart of government, labor, and industry, as well as schools and churches.

Perhaps most telling, however, is this comment from Lavine:

> These people, the patriots as well as the hypocrites, the frustrates as well as those who exploit their despair, constitute the real Fifth-Column menace to America. They are neither spies nor traitors; superficially, at least, they are plain Americans exercising their inalienable right to freedom of speech . . . . Yet they menace our nation as spies and traitors never could. They do not threaten an occasional factory or railroad or water-supply works. Their attack is upon the very fabric of this nation’s social, economic and political system. If they succeed the nation will simply disintegrate. That, in part, is what happened to France (13).

When the fifth column includes so many people that it can hardly be distinguished from the general populace, it melts into something amorphous yet ever-present. Fifthcolumnism becomes inseparable from the accusations of fifthcolumnism spread abroad through print and pressure tactics. In 1940, attacks on fifthcolumnism were intended to counter appeasement and rouse weak-willed democracies. The fifth columnist was less the actual traitor than the “passive non-resister, a man unsure of himself and of his world,” as one contemporary observer wrote. “This you may take to be gospel—it is not the converts but the doubters, the non-resisters, who explain the collapse of their nations. And, the truly decisive product of fifth columnism is not the convert, it is the non-resister” (qtd. in Bílek 208–09, Appendix 6). During the Spanish Civil War, non-resisters were called defeatists, or *derrotistas*. It was often difficult, however, to distinguish between passive non-resistance and active defeatism. Civilian complaints could be interpreted
either as blowing off steam or as deflating general morale. Dorothy Bridges, for example, at one point calls the maid Petra a defeatist for uttering a negative comment, but Petra replies: “No, Señorita, I have no politics. I only work” (TFC 26). Fifth columnists could claim they were merely passive resisters, as did one real fifth columnist, José María Carretero, a popular writer known as El Caballero Audaz (The Bold Cavalier). Most significantly, whatever the reality of the fifth column might have been, it was disseminated through speech. Although fifthcolumnists were associated with physical acts of sabotage, counterintelligence, and secret aid to the enemy, they were also propagandists. Republicans and Nationalists alike overstated the size and importance of the fifth column not only by what they said about it but by the mere fact of saying it. Words, whether spoken or published, created an organization that was part reality and part shadow.

Indeed, campaigns to sow disorder and weaken morale were called “whisper propaganda” in places like the Czech Sudetenland where Konrad Henlein’s Sudeten German Party used not only storm troopers in the manner of “General Franco’s wreckers and saboteurs in Madrid,” but also newspaper attacks and, above all, gossip (Henderson 82, 101). Rumors of “The Day,” for example, forecasting Hitler’s triumphant arrival in the Sudeten country, circulated widely by word of mouth. In village communities such gossip soon turned very personal, focusing on people’s private lives and working through social ostracism.

The use of speech as a weapon highlights the intimate nature of fifth-columnism. First, words could target specific persons or groups. Second, because the source of fifthcolumnism was difficult to locate and seemed ubiquitous, it made the borders between “them” and “us,” between “inside” and “outside,” more permeable and confusing. A fifth columnist was someone on the inside in contact with an unseen outside. Hemingway captures this duality when Rawlings seeks a Nationalist who “is outside the town. But he knows who is inside the town” (TFC 40, original emphasis). The effect of fifthcolumnism, however, is to turn everything into an unsettling “inside.” Secrecy and camouflage, operating on both sides of the conflict, create the “inside man,” whose identity and whereabouts remain uncertain. This is politics at its most intimate.

Fifth column speech also originated in intimate spaces and circulated from person to person. An account of fifth column activities in pre-invasion Holland describes a Nazi agent’s quarters in these terms:
In 1938 the German legation owned two houses in the Hague. . . . I shall call the house in which Dr. Butting had his office House No. 2. What went on in House No. 2? It had been remodelled and had been divided like a two-family house—vertically, not horizontally; but between the two halves there was a communicating door. One side of the house was Dr. Butting’s. The other half housed the Nazi military intelligence agent for Holland (qtd in Bílek 205).

This space is not simply intimate. It is organized, as nearly all fifthcolumn activities were, to a specific end—the creation of disorder. Fifth-columnism embodies “the organization of disorder,” as Henderson pointed out in 1939 (98). It also suggests that disorder is something deep inside the body politic, and is, in that sense, intimate—hence, for example, the techniques of infiltration and “boring from within” (see Fifth Column Facts 11).

How does fifthcolumnism in the guise of moral confusion infiltrate Hemingway’s play? The spatial organization of The Fifth Column gives an initial indication. The two hotel rooms specified by Hemingway in Act 1, Scene 3 are joined by a connecting door from which hangs a war poster.

Rooms 109 and 110 in the Hotel Florida. The windows are open and the sunlight is pouring in. There is an open door between them and over this door has been tacked, to the framework of the door, a large war poster so that when the door opens the open doorway is blocked by this poster. Still the door can open. It is open now, and the poster is like a large paper screen between the two rooms. There is a space perhaps two feet high between the bottom of the poster and the floor. (TFC 13)

Each room reveals a different reality, in one the luxury-minded Dorothy Bridges and in the other Philip Rawlings as both lover and counterintelligence agent. When shut, the door designates Rawlings’s room as the secret, enclosed zone of espionage and police work. Ducking beneath the poster signals crossing over into a different space, but also highlights how the war is always hanging over—literally—everything in the play,
while it is at the same time something to be avoided. Both spaces are intimate in distinct but interconnecting, liminal ways, blurring differences precisely through the creation of intimacy.

All of the play’s settings are interiors, notably including the room in Seguridad headquarters, where there is a green-shaded lamp and “the windows are all closed and shuttered” (TFC 34). The war takes place almost entirely inside, not only physically but mentally. And nowhere is this more evident than inside the head of Hemingway’s main character. Philip Rawlings, according to Raymond Conlon, “is a classic case of the divided self,” filled with moral ambivalence (11, 15). Like the hotel setting, Rawlings has two faces, and he is deeply uncomfortable with the duplicity his double role entails. Reflecting his bicameral mindset, he says to Dorothy, “I’ve got the horrors, and I love you” (TFC 57). What the horrors are is never made explicit, but the unspoken weight of deception and murder surely figures into these ill-defined, amorphous feelings. Inchoate, the horrors embody the effects of fifthcolumnism as the enemy within, sabotaging Republican ideals. Indeed, although Hemingway’s play espouses all the political rhetoric of the Republican cause, speech here conveys a subterranean context of guilt and moral disarray that goes well beyond ambivalence. It goes to the heart of avoidance, of not facing squarely the moral conundrum of revolutionary murder, the gap between Republican conduct and Republican ideals.

More to the point, Rawlings hates the lies he tells. “I’d like to never have to lie,” he says, though he can also “lie so much easier in English [with a British accent], it’s pitiful” (TFC 38, 40). Lying filled the air in civil war Spain. As a fifthcolumnist tactic, it took the form of bulos, or false reports, that Nationalists brandished like verbal weapons, as José María Carretero elaborates:

The bulo . . . was the most powerful and effective weapon the Fifth Column used. The bulo won as many engagements as the most heroic military units. Because, in losing fictitious battles every day, it prepared the terrain for the final victory. The war ennobled, made prestigious and sacred the lie . . . God willing, may the artist be born with sufficient genius capable of conceiving a monument worthy of the bulo, an invisible giant of 100,000 mouths for shooting mortal projectiles, of 200,000 eyes for seeing what never existed, of 200,000 ears for hearing news that nobody gave (236–237).
Carretero says later that Nationalist propaganda was like an epidemic infecting the atmosphere of Red Madrid (239), an odd trope considering that many of his compatriots believed the Republic was already tainted and politically degenerate.

There is a major difference between Carretero’s hyperbolic sacralizing of disinformation and Rawlings's half-ironic, half-cynical nod to dissimulation. Some of the difference melts away, however, when we consider the purpose and aftereffects of both. Disinformation was not new. A German Disinformation Service operated during World War I. During the late 1930s, Stalin used Gestapo reports and his own campaign of disinformation to extend his power, arresting and murdering millions within Russia considered a threat to Soviet politics (see Krivitsky 203–204). The Stalinist purge, fueled by fabrications, coincided with the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, many Soviet advisors were recalled home from Spain to become victims of the purge, even as others transferred the same mentality and practices to Spanish soil.

Rawlings is a Party man. “My time is the Party’s time,” he says (TFC 65). In 1937, before the Nazi-Soviet Pact, it was easier to be pro-Soviet and hence anti-fascist. Nonetheless, to be a Party man in besieged Madrid meant occupying shifting ground. To his credit, Hemingway appears to recognize the moral quicksand in which his character flounders, even as his nerve for counter-espionage fails. But Hemingway does not pursue the implications. Thus Rawlings remarks, “I don’t believe anything I hear and very little of what I see” (TFC 18), but he says this while interrogating a comrade who has fallen asleep at his post and allowed a fifth columnist to escape. This interrogation continues in the play’s second act, under much harsher conditions, in what Hemingway calls Seguridad headquarters, a clear allusion to SIM, or the Servicio de Investigación Militar, the Communist-led secret police. Organized in August 1937, SIM used false charges of fifthcolumnism, along with torture and execution, to eliminate the POUM and other anti-Stalinists. Later, SIM used the same tactics to track down deserters and draft dodgers (see Thomas 492–493; Graham 375–378).

The real point of the interrogation in The Fifth Column is to ascertain whether the comrade is loyal to the Republican cause. In such an atmosphere of mistrust and presumed betrayal, it is easy to understand why Rawlings says later: “Don’t know too much. And whatever you know keep your good old mouth shut, eh?” (TFC 30). One can’t help thinking of José
Robles here, also a victim of the political purge happening in Spain (see Krivitsky 88–89), but the dark and sinister reality beneath Rawlings’s warning is disguised by facile cynicism. Near the end of the play, he remarks to his colleague Max: “You have to send me some place else though. I’m no good here any more. Too many people know what I’m doing. Not because I talk, either. It just gets that way” (TFC 80).

Here Hemingway misses the chance to dig deeper and ask what exactly is motivating his character. “It just gets that way” seems inadequate to the circumstances. Rawlings has just described what he and the inquisitorial counter-intelligence chief Antonio have done to the corpse of a German working with fifth columnists: “The corpse you mean? They fetched him in from where we left him, and Antonio had him placed in a chair in the corner and I put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it and it was all very jolly. Only the cigarette wouldn’t stay lighted, of course” (TFC 79–80). It is one thing to shoot an enemy combatant, another to mock the dead. Perhaps the cynical, ironic tone of this utterance masks despair, the horrors to which Rawlings referred in an earlier scene. At this point, however, whatever resemblance to the Scarlet Pimpernel figure might belong to the play’s protagonist has pretty much fallen away. I suspect that Hemingway really wanted to create a hero of the Spanish Civil War, modeling Philip Rawlings at least in part on the movie stereotype of the flawed tough guy who deep down is good. What then does Petra mean when she says of Rawlings, “[H]e’s bad. I do not say he is not a good man. But he is bad” (TFC 47)? This same idea comes up again at the very end of the play, when our sympathies have moved to Dorothy, whom Rawlings has abandoned for reasons that suggest an underlying emptiness rather than revolutionary commitment. Max advises kindness, but Philip is not kind to Dorothy, whom he sees as frivolous and uneducated, even though he never bothers to illuminate her in matters political or ethical.

Rawlings’s bitter mock-sketch of what their future life together would be like undoubtedly reflects Hemingway’s own conflicted experience with women, but it also appears to project some unnamed inner turmoil onto a short-term relationship that has at best been ambivalent from the start. At this point even Dorothy agrees that Rawlings is “bad,” but she is no more able than Petra to articulate the precise nature of his failings. She comes closest to the truth when she accuses him—as he has already accused her—of being “a commodity.” The notion of having sold out permeates
this play, which is framed by allusions to prostitution in the opening and closing scenes.

But sold out to what or to whom? Was this fifthcolumnism? Fifth-columnism thrived on being hard to identify and locate, on spreading disorder by turning everything into an invasively intimate inside. The political divide in wartime Republican Spain in some ways created its own internal fifth column, which was not the POUM, but a widening gap between the rhetoric of the cause and the unpleasant realities of betraying that rhetoric. Hemingway’s character alludes but never specifies the lies which are fifthcolumnism. In a telling dialogue, Philip introduces Dorothy to Max as a “comrade,” saying: “Just a manner of speech. You call everyone comrade in Madrid. All supposed to be working for the same cause,” to which Max replies: “It is not such a good manner of speech.” And Philip says: “No. I suppose not. I seem to remember saying something like that myself once” (TFC 64). The subtext for this “manner of speech” is embodied in the comrades who aren’t really comrades—and in the real comrades who have eroded the Republican cause. Here, Philip Rawlings points to an internal fifth column not because he hates the Republic but because he loves it. He appears willing to do anything, even commit murder and acts of repression, to defend the Republic. What he appears unwilling or unable to do is to look inside himself, to ask what price he has paid for avoiding the contradiction between his ideals and his actions. Ultimately, this behavior gives him an oddly passive quality and makes him the perfect trope, the perfect character, of the fifth columnist. Rawlings’s lack of goodness, as Petra intuits, signals moral disorder, a moral core that cannot be located or identified, but can pass for what it is not. Hemingway’s play, as a result, cannot pass for either good political propaganda or lucid political morality play. Instead, it leaves us forever seeking an elusive Pimpernel who is nowhere to be found.

NOTES

1. I would not have reread The Fifth Column were it not for the kind invitation from Juan Salas and Jonathan Bank to participate in a panel, “The Spanish Civil War of Hemingway,” held at the Instituto Cervantes in New York City, 4 March 2008, and to conduct a post-performance discussion of the play at the Mint Theater, 22 March 2008. The Fifth Column, directed by Jonathan Bank, played from 26 February to 18 May 2008, at the Mint Theater, New York City. My thanks to Evelyn Scaramella for her assistance in locating hard-to-find materials for this article.
2. See also Fellner, White, and Davison, “Arthur Miller and Other Critics,” for more on the reception of the play. Harriet Fellner observes that “a black-or-white view of morality begs the ethical questions which the play raises” (9).

3. See Conlon, for The Fifth Column as a political morality play, and Nakjavani for the play as political propaganda.

4. By contrast, an early review says “the fifth column’ has essentially a secondary part” in the play (Anon., “Drama” 385).

5. Krutch suggested that the play’s themes “are all concerned in one way or another with the difficulty of reconciling the aims of a holy war with the methods which it must inevitably use, and with the contrast inevitably apparent between the cause for which one is fighting and the individuals in whose name the cause is fought for” (372).

6. Trilling characterized the play as “at best the story of the regeneration of an American Scarlet Pimpernel of not very good intelligence” (58). See also Reynolds 279.

7. Later, Dorothy reiterates to Rawlings: “But, darling Philip, the first thing is for you to start here now and do something worth doing and stop this absolutely utter playboy business” (TFC 24).

8. See Cervera Gil, who has thoroughly documented the fifth column in Madrid; also Alcocer’s and Carretero’s first-hand accounts.

9. These sniping activities were called paqueos.

10. See Orwell’s account 170-179; also Cervera Gil. Linda Stein notes that “Hemingway refers to the history of the SIM [Servicio de Investigación Militar/Military Investigation Service] and its attack on the members of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) in the discarded portion of Act 2, Scene 1 of the early typescripts” (243–245).

11. See also Soledad Fox’s useful biography of de la Mora. Fox mistakenly refers to the POUM’s “Falangist activities” (63).

12. Fox maintains, “one could also argue that there is no proof whatsoever that Robles was killed by communists” (73). While much mystery still surrounds Robles’s death, the case built by Koch and especially Martínez de Písson points convincingly to the communists as responsible for his death.

13. See, however, Hemingway’s “Treachery in Aragon” (June 1938), in which he insists, without naming either Robles or Dos Passos directly, that Robles was a spy, having been judged “after a long and careful trial in which all the charges against him had been proven” (26). There was no trial.


15. This panic was sparked in part by foreign correspondent Leland Stowe’s reports on pro-Nazi fifthcolumn treachery in Norway (Bolinger 49). See also Lavine 3–6, for more on the hysteria over fifthcolumnism in America. The accuracy of Stowe’s newspaper dispatches on the Nazi invasion of Norway has since been questioned (Lavine 9-11; MacDonnell 113–114).

16. The item quoted is from 28 April 1940. Fellner notes that “New York’s generally reliable Herald Tribune also reported on ‘showmen’s’ claims that front-page publicity about fifth column activities did not help the play financially, though this seems uncertain in light of the success of [Robert] Sherwood’s topical drama [There Shall Be No Night]” (38).
Kamp went on to say that fifthcolumnists “invariably sail under false colors and masquerade as ‘humanitarians,’ ‘liberals,’ ‘new deal’ Democrats and ‘progressive’ Republicans. They are found in every walk in life. Some are social workers, trade union leaders, teachers, clergymen, government officials” (8).

The specific reference is to Nazi fifthcolumnism in Holland.

See Cervera Gil 212–218 for more information on the character and actions of the derrotista during the Spanish Civil War.

Carretero wrote: “The Fifth Column’ is not political, military or terrorist; it is simply a [movement] of passive resistance, of solidarity and aid among Nationalist martyrs, captives in Madrid” (202). All translations are my own.

Henderson provides a useful account of Nazi propaganda methods in Czechoslovakia.

See also Lavine, who speaks of a “pattern of disorder” in the propaganda methods of Communists and Fascists in the U.S. (21). George Britt, whose reports first appeared in the New York World-Telegram, refers to the propagating of racial and religious divisions (27), which Fifth Column Facts calls “confusionist tactics” (35). See also MacDonnell’s informative Insidious Foes.

See also Hemingway’s “Fresh Air on an Inside Story,” from 22 September 1938, in which he sets up a straw man who claims that thousands of bodies, victims of a Red Terror, are lying about. This fantasy is easy to dismiss, but what gets lost here are the abuses by SIM that were indeed taking place at that time.

WORKS CITED


Bernal de León, José. La quinta columna en el continente americano. Mexico City: Ediciones Culturales Mexicanas, [1940?].


Britt, George. The Fifth Column is Here. New York: Wilfred Funk, 1940.

Carretero, José María (El Caballero Audaz). La quinta columna. Vol. 4. La revolución de los patibulares. Madrid: Ediciones Caballero Audaz, 1940.


