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Who Was Ernest Hemingway?

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His deepest wish, concealed by his self-asserting mask, was to become one with someone or something else

Reviewed:

The Letters of Ernest Hemingway, Volume 2: 1923–1925
edited by Sandra Spanier, Albert J. DeFazio III, and Robert W. Trogdon
Cambridge University Press, 519 pp., $40.00

1.

Ernest Hemingway wrote the first letter in this collection when he was twenty-three, the last when he was twenty-six. In these three years, living mostly in Paris, he fathered his first child, grew disenchanted with his first wife and took up with his second, quit his first job as a reporter, published his first three collections of stories and poems, wrote his first two novels, saw his first bullfight, and began transforming himself from a writer who conveyed inward experience in all its anxious detachment "so that…you actually experience the thing" into an aficionado who praised strength and bravery in "people that by their actual physical conduct gave you a real feeling of admiration." He also began inviting that kind of admiration for himself. By the end of the book, the avant-garde disciple of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, collecting rejection slips from little magazines, was already remaking himself as Papa Hemingway, celebrated everywhere for plain-style toughness.

This volume, the second of a planned seventeen in *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters of Ernest Hemingway*, includes almost 250 letters, three times the number from the same period printed in Hemingway's *Selected Letters 1917–1961*, edited by Carlos Baker (1981). The newly published letters are bracingly energetic and readable, and they add depth and detail to the already vast biographical record of Hemingway's early years. The editors' extensive annotations explain historical and personal allusions, record the minutiae of

Hemingway's finances, and tell more than anyone needs to know about the many boxers and bullfighters he admired.

What makes the book revelatory is not its biographical detail but the spacious view it gives of Hemingway's mind at work in his long, eager, and unguarded letters to boyhood friends. For the past fifty years, ever since his embittered older sister Marcelline reported that their mother had dressed the young Hemingway as a girl and had tried to raise the two of them as twins, and ever since his posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden* (1986) revealed his androgynous fantasies, the conventional reading of Hemingway explained him away as the product of sexual confusion and category-crossing. This turns out to be as simplifying and crude as the he-man image it supplanted. These letters make clear that both the he-man and the androgynous fantasist were surface expressions of a deeper wish that shaped Hemingway's life and work, a driving impulse that ultimately had nothing to do with sex.

Ernest Hemingway Collection/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston

Ernest Hemingway and his son Jack, Schruns, Austria, 1925

2.

Hemingway's letters are copious with gossip and boasting that he often enlivens by invention. He assures a friend at one point, "Quite a lot of the above paragraph is true." Except in a few authentic-sounding outbursts against his parents, almost everything he says about his emotional life seems false. His reports of perfect marital happiness with Hadley Richardson grow more insistent as he becomes increasingly disenchanted with her.

He constructs a different style for each of his correspondents. To publishers and editors he is formal and calculating. To Gertrude Stein he is flattering and deferential:

> I made it all up ["Big Two-Hearted River"], so I see it all and part of it comes out the way it ought to, it is swell about the fish, but isn't writing a hard job though? It used to be easy before I met you. I certainly was bad, Gosh, I'm awfully bad now but it's a different kind of bad.

To Ezra Pound he is bigoted and obscene:

> You heard of course of [Lincoln] Steffens marriage to a 19 year old Bloomsbury kike intellectual.

> Low-ebb the exjewish magazine publisher [Harold Loeb, ex-editor of *Broom*] and I play tennis occasionally.
>
> Uneasy shits the ass that wears the crown etc.

To his sanctimonious parents he alternates between dull formality and furious self-justification:

> I have no time or inclination to defend my writing[;] all my thoughts and energies go to make it better and truer and a work of art that is really good never lacks for defenders, nor for people who hate it and want to destroy it. Well it doesn't make any difference. They can't destroy it and in the end it just frightens them and they back away from it.

None of the different styles deployed in the letters resemble the narrative voice of his fiction. At the same time that he was perfecting the tension and tautness of "Big Two-Hearted River" and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), he was writing to boyhood friends and to colleagues from his wartime ambulance unit in a mixture of private slang ("yencing" is the sexual act) and polysyllabic buffoonery. Reporting someone's mishap on the way to an outdoor privy at night, he adds:

> Needless to say the enditer [i.e., Hemingway] never would peristalsis except in broad daylight wit the solar system doing its best to warm the function.

Three months after submitting to *The Dial* his story about an aging matador, "The Undefeated," he reports: "The Dials had my long Stier Kampf story now for almost a trio of the monats so they may produce kickage in [i.e., payment] also."

To appreciate Hemingway's inventiveness, one should read this collection with a biography at hand, preferably Michael Reynolds's fine-grained *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (1989). Hemingway's righteous anger when his Paris sublets "turned out to be crooks and left in the middle of a month when they'd agreed to stay 3 months" has a different ring if you remember that he had done the same thing a year before, when he and his wife sneaked away from Toronto three months into a one-year lease.

Hemingway's apprentice work, until he left for Paris in 1921, was written in a hearty, loquacious style partly learned from Sherwood Anderson (whom he lampooned a few years later in *The Torrents of Spring*):

> When you enter the room, and you will have no more chance than the zoological entrant in the famous camel-needle's eye gymkhana of entering the room unless you are approved by Cambrinus, there will be a sudden silence.

Gertrude Stein taught him to strip away all that. He wrote, but didn't publish, prose experiments like this one:

> Down through the ages. Why is it down through the ages? Down and out through the ages. Out through the ages. No not that.

Stein freed him to write a kind of fiction she never wrote, studies of an anxious detachment that resisted wordy description, the detachment of Krebs in "Soldier's Home" who vaguely wants a girl but doesn't want the "intrigues and politics":

> He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences.

Or Nick Adams's symbolically charged detachment in "Big Two-Hearted River" when he recoils from entering the entangling swamp:

> He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits.... In the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure.

Hemingway was now expert at recording this kind of detachment in a short story, but he was frustrated in his efforts to extend it to the length of a novel. Then he hit on the idea of giving Jake Barnes, in *The Sun Also Rises*, a detachment so complete that it had no psychological cause for him to worry over, the effect of a sexual wound inflicted by accident in the war. But F. Scott Fitzgerald sensed something deeper in that detachment. Jake Barnes, he said, "isn't *like an impotent man. He's like a man in a sort of moral chastity belt*."

In 1924, around the time Hemingway was writing "Big Two-Hearted River," the very different world of his later career was starting to take shape. In 1923 he had thrilled to the bullfights in Pamplona. Now, while preparing to return to the fiesta, he wrote in a letter:

> Do you remember me talking one night at the pub up on Montallegro about the necessity for finding some people that by their actual physical conduct gave you a real feeling of admiration.... Well I have got a hold of it in bull fighting. Jeesus Christ yes.

He wrote this to Edward O'Brien, an editor who dedicated an annual anthology of stories to him and gave him his first taste of other people's "feeling of admiration."

3.

The young men in Hemingway's early stories live by a moral code that requires them to answer only to themselves. The moral question they ask about their actions is whether they are living up to their own heroic ideal, not what the effect of their actions might be on anyone else. They refuse the obligations imposed by their families and the commitments desired by women. In place of personal relations, they merge into an undifferentiated band of brothers who share the same ideal.

Hemingway's letters to his friends from home and the war are startlingly vivid in their commitment to fraternal bonds. In many paragraphs, instead of writing about "I" or "you," he refers to both himself and his friend simply as "a male." "Bring a male up to date," he asks. Urging a friend to find a job in Paris, he writes, "It aint merit nor hard work gets a male good employment." Another friend got married after suffering from "celibacy prolonged beyond the point where it aided a male."

Hemingway seems to have been driven into his band of brothers by the same motive that draws many college boys into fraternities (and girls into sororities). Anxious because his conflicted, complex sexuality did not live up to an imaginary model of straightforward masculinity, and too young to know that everyone's sexuality is conflicted and complex, he joined other young men who calmed their anxiety in a shared hatred of anyone blatantly different:

> The fairy will do stuff to get on that a male is barred from. No Fairy ever starved nor was hungry. Lots of swell guys have done both. Unfortunately a male runs up agin them in the practice of Literature.

He assures one friend about another, "He hates Kikes worse than we do." But Jake Barnes hints at a deeper antagonism to anyone who seems exempt from the complexities that the brothers fear in themselves: "I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together."

Hemingway's marriage is no threat to the Bruderbund, he insists, because Hadley is effectively another male. To one friend he reports, "She is the best guy on a trip you ever saw"; to another, "She fishes not with the usual feminine simulation of interest but like one of the men." He explains that because his marriage is happy (when in fact it was falling apart), he can maintain his friendships: "No males can be on any sort of a decent basis if one male is unhappily married."

In twentieth-century culture, the heroic code served young men reasonably well until they were around twenty-five. After that, it turned seedy and bewildering because it had nothing to tell them about adult personal relations or adult social behavior. The band of brothers precipitates into lonely isolates who try to revive their fellowship as drinking buddies, with alcohol as the solvent of individuality, or who compete against each other in shows of

manliness. In later years, when Hemingway wasn't drinking with a gang of friends, he insisted on telling you not only that he was stronger and braver than you are, but that his wife was better than your wife:

> Miss Mary [Mary Welsh, his fourth and last wife] is durable. She is also brave, charming, witty, exciting to look at, a pleasure to be with and a good wife. She is also an excellent fisherwoman, a fair wing shot, a strong swimmer, a really good cook, a good judge of wine, an excellent gardener, an amateur astronomer, a student of art, political economy, Swahili, French and Italian and can run a boat or a household in Spanish.

Ernest Hemingway Collection/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston

Ernest Hemingway at the bullring in Madrid, 1923

The later Hemingway imagined impassive older men like Colonel Cantwell, in *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), who could nevertheless be passionate lovers to younger women, but in the 1920s he was still committed to the unhappier truth of his own emotions. For Nick Adams "the good place" is where "nothing could touch him." When Nick ends his affair with Marjorie "there wasn't any scene."[1]

Without a band of brothers to dissolve into, Hemingway began fantasizing that he could merge instead with a lover. Everyone quotes the most obvious examples. *A Farewell to Arms*: "There isn't any me. I'm you." "We're the same one." "I want us to be all mixed up." *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "I am thee also now.... You are me now." "I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other.... I would have us exactly the same." *The Garden of Eden*: "Now you can't tell who is who can you?" (this after the woman enters the man with her hand). Everyone interprets these as gender-crossing, but they express the same wish for dissolution that recurs throughout Hemingway's letters to his band of brothers, where, in one enthusiastic paragraph after another, he refers to each of them with the single phrase "a male."

What Hemingway wanted—both as he-man and as androgyne—was a lasting intimate connection that did not require him to be a separate individual person—something no one can have. Virginia Woolf, in a review that infuriated him, perceived the price he paid for his wish. Hemingway's characters, she said, are like people overheard in a restaurant talking in rapid slang, "because slang is the speech of the herd." Those who speak it are "seemingly much at their ease, and yet if we look at them a little from the shadow not at their ease at all, and, indeed, terribly afraid of being themselves."

Slang is the one element of Hemingway's fictional style that also occurs throughout his letters. His vocabulary of praise contains little more than "corking" and "whamming" and "swell," applied to almost anything, ad lib. He tells a friend that Pauline Pfeiffer, later his second wife, is "a swell girl."

Edmund Wilson famously wrote about *Green Hills of Africa* (1935):

> For reasons which I cannot attempt to explain, something dreadful seems to happen to Hemingway as soon as he begins to write in the first person. In his fiction, the conflicting elements of his nature, the emotional situations which obsess him, are externalized and objectified; and the result is an art that is severe and intense, deeply serious. But as soon as he speaks in his own person, he seems to lose all his capacity for self-criticism and is likely to become fatuous or maudlin.

Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry speak only to themselves, indifferent to readers who overhear them. Nick Adams is unaware of the narrator who records his thoughts. When Hemingway tried to speak as "I," consciously addressing the "you" of his audience, he knew he had no authentic public voice, only boast and bluster, with which to declare the excellence of his actual physical conduct while frightened of being himself.

He was unhappily aware that physical excellence, like Pedro Romero's in *The Sun Also Rises*, whether real or pretended, had nothing to say and embarrassed itself when it tried to speak. James Thurber, alert to the Hemingwayesque temper of the times, wrote a story, "The Greatest Man in the World" (1931), about a hero who performs a physically excellent feat, but when he speaks in proud triumph, reveals himself to be contemptible.

Hemingway's deepest wish, concealed by his self-asserting mask, was to become one with someone or something else, to live without the burden of a self. Denis de Rougemont observed that lovers like Tristan and Isolde who wish to dissolve their separate selves by merging into each other instead find themselves trapped in their separate bodies, and can escape the trap only by dying. When an American senator killed himself in 1924, Hemingway said in a letter: "I still claim that anybody that wants to do it can do it. Things are looking better and I look forward to not giving a demonstration of my theory for some time." At the climax of a bullfight in *The Sun Also Rises*, Romero's "sword went in, and just for an instant he and the bull were one."

4.

The Cambridge Edition of the Letters of Ernest Hemingway seems to have been edited for readers who do not exist, readers who use scholarly editions but who need footnotes identifying Tolstoy and Picasso. The air of unreality that pervades this and many other

learned editions in recent decades seems typically to have been imposed by a publisher on editors who know better. Carlos Baker's 1981 selected edition had deftly concise annotations that respected a reader's intelligence, as the new edition does not. The new edition, unlike the old one, interrupts the text with a footnote explaining the philosophy of "Marcus O'Realius."

Other notes are even less helpful. Proust, the editors report, wrote a work titled *A la recherche du temps passé* (they also mistitle the English translation), the third volume of which "had recently drawn attention" to the suburban village of Guermantes. Hemingway writes in a letter, "Thus are we buggared by destiny, as Hamlet remarked," and the editors explain:

> Possibly a reference to Prince Hamlet's remark shortly before his fatal sword fight at the end of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare that there is "special providence in the fall of a sparrow"—that ultimately "providence" controls even the smallest action and event, and that death will come when it will come.

This overlooks Hemingway's anatomical paraphrase of Hamlet's: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends."

In later years Hemingway made a great public show of expertise in the many arts of hurting and killing.[2] In Paris, in the years he wrote these letters, he took pride in very different skills. When the editor of the little magazine *This Quarter* had to be away for health reasons, Hemingway took charge of printing, proofing, and production, "working back in the printing room directly with the foreman," and his letters report the work with a focused enthusiasm more plausible than his self-dramatizing reports of boxing and bullfights. "Like anything with plenty of detail you have to concentrate on it absolutely." His workman's knowledge gave him a confidence he never felt as a spectator or aficionado:

> Do you want the volume numbers in the other side to balance the white space left by the slanting cliché [the printing plate with the title of the magazine set at an angle]? Or do you want it left out? For binding purposes—when the covers are off and for libraries it is best to have it in. All magazines do.

During these years, Hemingway was dismayed by the demands of fatherhood, was rejected or exploited by editors, and lived over a sawmill because he preferred to spend his wife's money on wine and travel. His letters at the time tend to portray this era more or less in the way he sentimentalized it afterward in *A Moveable Feast*, as "the early days when we were very poor and very happy." He had been neither of those things, but he was still writing only to serve his gift, unlike later years when he served two masters, his gift and his fame. "Writing is the only thing worth a damn," he said in a letter in 1925. "Unless you're a painter Then it's painting."

Letters:

Edward Mendelson

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1. Critics noticed long ago an almost invisible suggestion in *A Farewell to Arms* that Frederic, after coldly intending to use Catherine merely for sex, falls passionately in love with her, not only for the excellent reason that she is a beauty who tends devotedly to his war wounds, but also because those wounds include a knock on the head. "I was crazy about her," he reports, meaning what everyone means by it; then, a few pages later, she says while touching his head, "A bump like that could make you crazy." ↩

2. For an astonishing catalog of Hemingway's ubiquitous self-promotion in tabloids and men's magazines, see David M. Earle, *All Man! Hemingway, 1950s Men's Magazines, and the Masculine Persona* (Kent State University Press, 2009). ↩

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