
BOOKS & WRITERS

Ernest Hemingway

By Dwight Macdonald

HE WAS A BIG MAN with a bushy beard and everybody knew him. The tourists knew him and the bar-tenders knew him and the critics knew him too. He enjoyed being recognised by the tourists and he liked the bar-tenders but he never liked the critics very much. He thought they had his number. Some of them did. The hell with them. He smiled a lot and it should have been a good smile, he was so big and bearded and famous, but it was not a

* "And what if she should die? She won't die. People don't die in childbirth nowadays. That was what all husbands thought. Yes, but what if she should die? She won't die. She's just having a bad time. The initial labour is usually protracted. She's only having a bad time. Afterwards we'd say what a bad time, and Catherine would say it wasn't really so bad. But what if she should die? She can't die. Yes, but what if she should die? She can't, I tell you. Don't be a fool. It's just a bad time. It's just nature giving her hell. It's only the first labour, which is almost always protracted. Yes, but what if she should die? She can't die. Why should she die? What reason is there for her to die? . . . But what if she should die? She won't. She's all right. But what if she should die? She can't die. But what if she should die? Hey, what about that? What if she should die?" *A Farewell to Arms* (pp. 245-6, Penguin ed.).

† I remember waking in the morning. Catherine was asleep and the sun was coming in through the window. The rain had stopped and I stepped out of bed and across the floor to the window. . . .

"How are you, darling?" she said. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

"How do you feel?"

"I feel very well. We had a lovely night."

"Do you want breakfast?"

She wanted breakfast. So did I and we had it in bed, the November sunlight coming in through the window, and the breakfast tray across my lap.

"Don't you want the paper? You always wanted the paper in the hospital."

"No," I said. "I don't want the paper now."

A Farewell to Arms (p. 193).

good smile. It was a smile that was uneasy around the edges as if he was not sure he deserved to be quite as famous as he was famous.

He liked being a celebrity and he liked celebrities. At first it was Sherwood Anderson and Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein. He was an athletic young man from Oak Park, Illinois, who wanted to write and he made friends with them. He was always good at making friends with celebrities. They taught him about style. Especially Gertrude Stein. The short words, the declarative sentences, the repetition, the beautiful absence of subordinate clauses. He always worked close to the bull in his writing. In more senses than one, *señor*. It was a kind of inspired baby-talk when he was going good.* When he was not going good, it was just baby-talk.† Or so the critics said and the hell with them. Most of the tricks were good tricks and they worked fine for a while especially in the short stories. Ernest was fast and stylish in the hundred-yard dash but he didn't have the wind for the long stuff. Later on the tricks did not look so good. They were the same tricks but they were not fresh any more and nothing is worse than a trick that has gone stale. He knew this but he couldn't invent any new tricks. It was a great pity and one of the many things in life that you can't do anything about. Maybe that was why his smile was not a good smile.

After 1930, he just didn't have it any more. His legs began to go and his syntax became boring and the critics began to ask why he didn't put in a few subordinate clauses just to make it look good. But the bar-tenders still liked him and the tourists liked him too. He got more and more famous and the big picture magazines photographed him shooting a lion and catching a tuna and interviewing a Spanish Republican militiaman and fraternising with bullfighters and helping liberate Paris and always smiling bushily and his stuff got worse and worse. Mr. Hemingway the writer was run-

ning out of gas but no one noticed it because Mr. Hemingway the celebrity was such good copy. It was all very American and in 1954 they gave him the Nobel Prize and it wasn't just American any more. The judges were impressed by "the style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration" he had shown in *The Old Man and the Sea*, which he had published in *Life* two years earlier. *Life* is the very biggest of the big picture magazines and *Life* is exactly where *The Old Man and the Sea* belonged. Literary prize judges are not always clever. This is something you know and if you don't know it you should know it. They gave him the prize and he went to Stockholm and the King of Sweden put the medal around his neck and they shook hands. Mr. Hemingway meet Mr. Bernadotte.

After 1930 his friends were not named Anderson or Pound or Stein. They were named Charles Ritz and Toots Shor and Leonard Lyons and Ava Gardner and Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper. He almost had a fight with Max Eastman because he thought Max Eastman had questioned his virility and he almost fought a duel with someone he thought might have insulted the honour of Ava Gardner but he didn't have the fight and he decided that Ava Gardner's honour had not been insulted after all. It is often difficult to tell about honour. It is something you feel in your *cojones*. Or somewhere. He liked Marlene Dietrich very much. They had good times together. He called her "The Kraut" and she called him "Papa." His wife called him "Papa" too. Many other people called him "Papa." He liked being called "Papa."

He wrote a novel called *Across the River and Into the Trees*. It was not a good novel. It was a bad novel. It was so bad that all the critics were against it. Even the ones who had liked everything else. The trouble with critics is that you can't depend on them in a tight place and this was a very tight place indeed. They scare easy because their brains are where their *cojones* should be and because they have no loyalty and because they have never stopped a charging lion with a Mannlicher double-action .34 or done any of the other important things. The hell with them. Jack Dempsey thought *Across the River* was OK. So did Joe Di Maggio. The Kraut thought it was terrific. So did Toots Shor. But it was not OK and he knew it and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He was a big man and he was famous and he drank a great deal now and wrote very little. He lived in Havana and often went game fishing and *Life* photographed him doing it. Sometimes he went to Spain for the bullfights and he made friends with the famous bull-

fighters and wrote it up in three instalments for *Life*. He had good times with his friends and his admirers and his wife and the tourists and the bar-tenders and everybody talked and drank and laughed and was gay but it all went away when he was alone. It was bad when he was alone. Nothing helped then. He knew he had been very good once, he knew he had been as good as they come at the special kind of thing he was good at, and he knew he had not been good for a long time. He talked to interviewers: "I trained hard and I beat Mr. De Maupassant. I've fought two draws with Mr. Stendhal, but nobody is going to get me in any ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or keep getting better." But he knew he was getting worse, and not better. He was a writer and his writing had gone soft a long time ago and he knew this no matter what the Nobel Prize judges and the editors of *Life* told him and he was a writer and nothing else interested him much. He took shock treatments for depression at the Mayo Clinic. He went twice and he stayed there a long time but they didn't work. He was overweight and his blood pressure was high and his doctor made him cut down on the eating and drinking. Last spring his friend Gary Cooper died. He took it hard. The position is outflanked the lion can't be stopped the sword won't go into the bull's neck the great fish is breaking the line and it is the fifteenth round and the champion looks bad.

Now it is that morning in the house in Ketchum, Idaho. He takes his favourite gun down from the rack. It is a 12-gauge double-barrelled shotgun and the stock is inlaid with silver. It is a very beautiful gun. He puts the end of the gun-barrel into his mouth and he pulls both triggers. There is nothing much left above the chin.

That week his great shaggy head looks down from the covers of the picture magazines on the news-stands and the graduate students smile thinly as they realise that a definitive study of the complete *œuvre* of Ernest Hemingway is now possible.

2

A PROFESSOR of English in North Carolina State College recently called Hemingway "essentially a philosophical writer." This seems to me a foolish statement even for a professor of literature. It is true that Hemingway originated a romantic attitude which was as seductive to a whole generation, and as widely imitated, as Byron's had been. (It is still attractive: Norman Mailer, for instance, is a belated

Hemingway type, though his prose style is different.) But Hemingway was no more a philosopher than Byron was; in fact, he was considerably less of one. A feeling that loyalty and bravery are the cardinal virtues and that physical action is the basis of the good life—even when reinforced with the kind of nihilism most of us get over by the age of twenty—these don't add up to a philosophy. There is little evidence of thought in Hemingway's writing and much evidence of the reverse—the kind of indulgence in emotion and prejudice which the Nazis used to call "blood-thinking." For all the sureness of his instinct as a writer, he strikes one as not particularly intelligent. Byron wrote *Manfred* but he also wrote *Don Juan* and the letters and journals; underneath the romantic pose there was a tough, vigorous, and sceptical mind, a throwback to the 18th century and the Age of Reason. There were two Byrons but there was (alas) only one Hemingway. He was hopelessly sincere. His life, his writing, his public personality and his private thoughts were all of a piece. Unlike Byron, he believed his own propaganda. I hate to think what his letters and journals must be like. I suspect he kept no journals, since to do so implies reflection and self-awareness; also that one has a private life as apart from one's professional and public existence; I don't think

Hemingway did—indeed I think it was this lack of private interests which caused him to kill himself when his professional career had lost its meaning.

We know what his conversation was like, in his later years at least, from Lillian Ross's minute account of two days spent with Hemingway and his entourage (*The New Yorker*, May 13th, 1950). The article presents a Hemingway who sounds as fatuous and self-consciously heroic as his general in *Across the River*. At least that is how it sounds to me. But Miss Ross has a different ear. She insists, and I believe her, that (a) she simply reported what Hemingway said and did, and (b) that she liked and respected him (and what he said and did). She also states that she showed advance proofs to Hemingway and that he made no objections to the article and in fact was pleased with it. One can only admire his objectivity and good nature. But perhaps his reaction was a little *too* objective. Perhaps it shows an alienation from himself that is neurotic—one should feel a certain amount of prejudice in favour of one's self, after all. Or perhaps, worse, it means that Hemingway by then had accepted the public personality that had been built up for him by the press—a well-trained lion, he jumped through all the hoops—and even gloried in the grotesque (but virile) philistine Miss Ross had

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innocently depicted. This latter possibility is suggested by a letter from Hemingway which Miss Ross quoted in *The New Republic* of August 7th last when she protested against Irving Howe's assumption that she had been out to "smear" Hemingway in her *New Yorker* piece. "The hell with them," Hemingway wrote her after the piece had been published, apropos of people who had found it "devastating" (as I must confess I still do). "Think one of the 'devastating' things was that I drink a little in it and that makes them think I am a rummy. But of course if they (the devastate people) drank what we drink in that piece they would die or something. Then (I should not say it) there is a lot of jealousy around and because I have fun a lot of the time and am not really spooky and so far always get up when they count over me some people are jealous. They can't understand you being a serious writer and not solemn." This seems to me, taken in conjunction with Miss Ross's reportage, to indicate the opposite to what the writer intended to indicate.

3

HEMINGWAY'S importance, I think, is almost entirely as a stylistic innovator. I have just re-read *A Farewell to Arms* and *Men Without Women* and what strikes me most is their extreme mannerism. I don't know which is the more surprising, after twenty years, the virtuosity of the style or its lack of emotional resonance to-day. Consider the opening paragraphs of *In Another Country*:

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

We were all at the hospital every afternoon, and there were different ways of walking across the town through the dusk to the hospital. Two of the ways were alongside canals, but they were long. Always, though you crossed a bridge across a canal to enter the hospital. There was a choice of three bridges. On one of them a woman sold roasted chestnuts. It was warm, standing in front of the charcoal fire, and the chestnuts were warm afterwards in your pocket. The hospital was very old and very beautiful, and you entered through a gate on the other side. There were usually funerals starting from the courtyard. Beyond the old hospital were the new

brick pavilions, and there we met every afternoon and were all very polite and interested in what was the matter, and sat in the machines that were to make so much difference.

This is a most peculiar way to begin a story. Nothing "happens" until the last sentence of the second paragraph. Up to then everything is simply atmosphere but not atmosphere as it was generally known before Hemingway, except for the wonderful two sentences about the game hanging outside the shops. It is an original mixture of the abstract and the concrete, as in the first sentence, and the effect is to describe not a particular state of mind but rather a particular way of looking at experience, one which makes as sharp a break with previous literary methods as Jackson Pollock made with previous ways of painting. The primitive syntax is the equivalent of Pollock's "drip and dribble" technique and, like it, is a declaration of war against the genteel and academic style. There is also a parallel with the architecture of Mies Van Der Rohe, whose "Less is more" applies to Hemingway's style, which gets its effect from what it leaves out. (Maybe this is the characteristic 20th-century manner in the arts: I'm told that in the music of Webern and the jazz of Thelonius Monk one should listen not to the notes but to the silences between them.) Because Van Der Rohe's buildings are simple in form and without ornamentation many people think they are functional, but in fact they are as aggressively unfunctional as the wildest baroque. The same goes for Hemingway's style which is direct and simple on the surface but is actually as complexly manneristic as the later James.

"Refinements in the use of subordinate clauses are a mark of maturity in style," writes Albert C. Baugh in *A History of the English Language*. "As the loose association of clauses (parataxis) gives way to more precise indications of logical relationship and subordination (hypotaxis), there is need for a greater variety of words effecting the union." Hemingway was a most paratactical writer. Not because he was primitive but because he was stylistically sophisticated to the point of decadence. Supremely uninterested in "precise indications of logical relationship," he needed very few words; his vocabulary must be one of the smallest in literary history.

I can see why, in the 'twenties, the two paragraphs quoted above were fresh and exciting, but in 1961 they seem as academically mannered as *Euphues* or *Marius the Epicurean*. This is, of course, partly because Hemingway's stylistic discoveries have become part of our natural way of writing, so that they are at once too familiar to cause any excitement and at the same time, in the extreme form in which Hemingway used

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them, they now sound merely affected. This kind of writing is lost unless it can create a mood in the reader, since it deliberately gives up all the resources of logic and reason. But I was, in 1961, conscious of the tricks—and impatient with them. *Why* must we be told about the two ways of walking to the hospital and the three bridges and the chestnut seller? The aim is probably to create tension by lingering over the prosaic—writers of detective stories, a highly artificial literary form, have learned much from Hemingway—just as the purpose of stating that it is warm in front of a fire and that newly roasted chestnuts feel warm in one's pocket is to suggest the coldness of Milan that fall. But these effects didn't "carry" with me, I just felt impatient.

4

A FAREWELL TO ARMS is generally considered Hemingway's best novel. It has aged and shrivelled from what I remembered. I found myself skipping yards and yards of this sort of thing:

"We could walk or take a tram," Catherine said.

"One will be along," I said. "They go by here."

"Here comes one," she said.

The driver stopped his horse and lowered the metal sign on his meter. The top of the carriage was up and there were drops of water on the driver's coat. His varnished hat was shining in the wet. We sat back in the seat and the top of the carriage made it dark.

(Half a page omitted)

At the hotel I asked Catherine to wait in the carriage while I went in and spoke to the manager. There were plenty of rooms. Then I went out to the carriage, paid the driver, and Catherine and I walked in together. The small boy in buttons carried the package. The manager bowed us towards the elevator. There was much red plush and brass. The manager went up in the elevator with us.

There is a great deal of paying cab drivers and finding it dark at night inside a closed carriage.

I found both the military part and the love-story tedious except at moments of ordeal or catastrophe. The wounding of the narrator, Lieutenant Henry, and his escape after Caporetto are exciting, and the chapters on the retreat from Caporetto are as good as I remembered, especially the four pages about the shooting of the officers by the battle police. As long as the lieutenant and Catherine Baker are making love and having "a good time" together, one is bored and sceptical. To my sur-

prise, I found that Catherine was like the heroines of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Across the River and Into the Trees*, not a person but an adolescent day-dream—utterly beautiful and utterly submissive and utterly in love with the dreamer: "You see I'm happy, darling, and we have a lovely time. . . . You are happy, aren't you? Is there anything I do you don't like? Can I do anything to please you? Would you like me to take down my hair? Do you want to play?" "Yes and come to bed." "All right. I'll go and see the patients first." The conversation of these lovers is even more protracted and boring than that of real lovers. (It is curious how verbose Hemingway's laconic style can become.) But at the end when Catherine dies in childbed, the feeling comes right and one is moved—just as the preceding ordeal of the escape to Switzerland by rowing all night is well done. This deathbed scene is one of the few successful ones in literary history; it is the stylistic antithesis to Dickens' Death of Little Nell (of which Oscar Wilde remarked, "One must have a heart of stone to read it without laughing").

The fact is Hemingway is a short-story writer and not a novelist. He has little understanding of the subject-matter of the novel: character, social setting, politics, money matters, human relations, all the prose of life. Only the climactic moments interest him, and of those only ordeal, suffering, and death. (Except for a lyrical feeling about hunting and fishing.) In a novel he gets lost, wandering around aimlessly in a circle as lost people are said to do, and the alive parts are really short stories, such as the lynching of the fascists and the blowing up of the bridge in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the short story he knows just where he is going and his style, which becomes tedious in a novel, achieves the intensity appropriate to the shorter form. The difference may be seen in comparing the dialogue in *A Farewell to Arms* with that in the little short story, "Hills like White Elephants." The former is often aimlessly repetitious because the writer sees nowhere to go (except at peak moments of crisis) but the latter is directed with superb craftsmanship to the single bitter point the story makes. Every line of this apparently random conversation between a man and a girl waiting at a Spanish railway station—she is going to Madrid for an abortion he wants but she doesn't—develops the theme and when towards the end she asks, "Would you do something for me now?" and he replies, "I'd do anything for you," and she says "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?"—then one feels that tightening of the scalp that tells one an artist has made his point.

5

"HEMINGWAY'S tragedy as an artist," Cyril Connolly writes in *Enemies of Promise*, "is that he has not had the versatility to run away fast enough from his imitators. . . . A Picasso would have done something different; Hemingway could only indulge in invective against his critics—and do it again." The list of Hemingwayesque writers includes James M. Cain, Erskine Caldwell, John O'Hara, and a whole school of detective fiction headed by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. It also includes Hemingway. Connolly wrote before Hemingway had begun to parody himself in *The Old Man and the Sea*—which is simply his early short story, "The Undefeated," perhaps the best thing he ever did, re-told in terms of fishing instead of bullfighting and transposed from a spare, austere style into a slack, fake-biblical style which retains the mannerisms and omits the virtues—and above all in *Across the River and Into the Trees*, an unconscious self-parody of almost unbelievable fatuity. The peculiar difficulty American creative writers have in maturing has often been commented on. Emotionally, Hemingway was adolescent all his life; intellectually, he was a Philistine on principle. His one great talent was æsthetic—a feeling for style, in his writing and in his life, that was remarkably sure. But the limits of æstheticism unsupported by thought or feeling are severe. Hemingway made one big, original stylistic discovery—or rather he worked it out most consciously with the aid of Gertrude Stein—but when he had gotten everything there was to be gotten out of it (and a bit more) he was unable, as Connolly notes, to invent anything else. He was trapped in his style as a miner might be trapped underground; the oxygen is slowly used up without any new air coming in.

Hemingway's opposites are Stendhal and Tolstoy—interesting he should feel especially awed by them—who had no style at all, no effects. Stendhal wrote the way a police sergeant would write if police sergeants had imagination—a dry, matter-of-fact style. Tolstoy's writing is clear and colourless, interposing no barrier between the reader and the narrative, the kind of direct prose, businesslike and yet Olympian, that one imagines the Recording Angel uses for entries in *his* police blotter. There is no need for change or innovation with such styles, but the more striking and original a style is, obviously the greater such necessity. Protean innovators like Joyce and Picasso invent, exploit, and abandon dozens of styles; Hemingway had only one; it was not enough. But he did write some beautiful short stories while it was working. Perhaps they are enough.

thoughts after closing time?

It is some years now since Mr. Cyril Connolly announced that it was "closing-time in the gardens of the West".

It is still anyone's guess how far this verdict will be proved correct—even it was a little premature. What has become clear to a great many thinking people lately, however, is that their best chance of understanding the way the world is going is by studying the lucid, factual and highly readable survey to be found every week in *The Economist*.



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POSTSCRIPT

WE HAVE AVOIDED editorial pronouncements, but the 100th number seems an occasion on which we should try to explain what we consider ENCOUNTER's achievements and goals. ENCOUNTER has been more successful than we anticipated. We are printing 33,000 of the 100th number. When we started over eight years ago, we thought we would be doing well if we maintained a circulation of 10,000 readers.

What I want to do here is relate the kind of magazine we are to periodicals of ten and twenty years ago. I have in mind, particularly, *The Criterion* and *Horizon*.

What this will show, I think, is that, whether or not there has been (as Mr. Cyril Connolly, in his *Comment* in the 100th number of *Horizon* wrote), a decline in the arts, there has certainly been a shift in interest on the part of the public interested in reading periodicals from the purely literary and critical, to the conditioning circumstances in which writers, artists, and critics work.

In his *Comment*, Connolly wrote:

During the eight years I have edited *Horizon* we have witnessed a continuous decline in the arts. Literature has been robbed of Joyce, Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Wells, Valéry, Freud, Frazer, to name but a few, and their places are not being filled.

Some readers might feel inclined to protest that if dying means decline, then the arts have always been going downhill. But the mere list of the contents of *The Dial*, vol. lxxiii, 5, for November, 1922, lends force to Mr. Connolly's remarks, made in the late 1940s. They include:

T. S. Eliot *The Waste Land*.
W. B. Yeats, *The Player Queen*.
Arthur Schnitzler, *Doctor Graesler*.
Sherwood Anderson, *Many Marriages*.
Ezra Pound, *Paris Letter*.
Illustrations by Picasso, Brancusi, Duncan Grant, Adolph Dehn.

Yet to-day, more than in other times, it is not possible to prove that there is a decline in the arts. Nor should one wish to do so. Art depends on miracles that solve problems which to analytic criticism would seem unsolvable. The great achievement of modern art has been—in painting and music, at all events—its

miraculous resourcefulness. Picasso is incredible, and during the whole of his lifetime Van Gogh remained a critical impossibility.

It may be that there are Rimbauds disguised among the Beatniks, and a D. H. Lawrence just coming from a New Town. I very much hope so, and if that happens we hope that ENCOUNTER will be the first to publish him. But even a Rimbaud or a Lawrence wouldn't, for the time being at all events, produce the kind of atmosphere in which a magazine devoted purely to literature would be "news" in the way that *The Egoist*, *The Dial*, *transition*, etc., were news.

IT IS IMPORTANT that there should be magazines devoted purely to the arts and criticism. I doubt whether they can to-day have the kind of central position which *The Criterion*, *Horizon*, and other magazines I have mentioned had. This may not be due so much to the famous decline in the arts, as to the fact that in a time when the work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf is dismissed as "experiment," and poetry is going through a phase of "consolidation," "correctitude," return to tradition, and "elegance" (to use the phrase employed by Miss Elisabeth Jennings in a British Council pamphlet recommending the English poets of the past ten years), literature, however admirable, is not news in the way that experimental writing—with its mixture of the sublime and the absurd—was a generation ago.

When I insist that a magazine must contain news, I do not mean this in the journalistic, but in the *Make It New* sense, of Ezra Pound's title for a volume of his essays. For a magazine to be news, readers have to look to it for work in progress that activates, experiments, influences, disturbs, ferments. The programme of Eugene Jolas in *transition* was "the revolution of the word": however silly this may have shown itself in some of the contents, it made one buy the magazine to find one's own bearings among transforming art, hoping (if one was young) it might change one's life.

I think that to-day the effects of certain conditioning circumstances in science, politics, and society, are news in the way that, a generation ago, *Work in Progress* was. They are so for various reasons. The most obvious of these is that our whole culture is threatened with total destruction. Almost as obviously, we are living in at least one scientific, and several social revolutions: revolutions in the class-structure, in education, in standards of living in our own