

HEMINGWAY: ESSAYS OF REASSESSMENT



FRANK SCAFELLA

HEMINGWAY

Essays of Reassessment

Edited by

FRANK SCAFELLA

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HEMINGWAY

Prologue

Ernest Hemingway

The writer himself, if he is a good enough writer, is nothing and the book is everything. The writer should destroy himself with each book. There should be nothing left. If anything is left he has not tried hard enough.

Readers and critics like to think of the writer as a very good or a very bad man, preferably good, from whom will come many books all written from the writer's wisdom, honesty, probity, kindness, understanding and other noble endowments if he is good or from his superlative wickedness if he is bad. They also love the works of weak and tragic writers and feel that these books must reflect their lives. This love is more recent.

Actually a writer is both the mine from which he must extract all the ore until the mine is ruined, the mill where the ore must be crushed and the valuable metal extracted and refined, and the artisan and artist who must work that metal into something of enduring worth.

Sometimes there is no mine and the writer must make his gold by alchemy. No one believes this nor knows anything about how it is done. The writer himself does not know. All he knows is that he cannot do it often. All he finds out in life is that if he has the mine within him and can extract the gold he must exhaust the mine each time or he will sicken and die. These are hard things to accept and can not be explained to outsiders.

If you have not understood this it is perfectly all right. You can stop reading at this point. No one understands it and writers who

tell you that they know how they make magic are lying to you. If they even talk about how it is done they will lose the power to do it. Some one has been talking to me about it and I talked a little and so I have temporarily lost the power to make it and I am writing this as a penance and to cleanse myself hoping that the power will return to me.

Did you know that no writer who has ever lectured about writing has ever afterwards written anything that would outlive him? This will teach you to be careful.

On the positive side there is nothing that can help you. It would be better to die silently.

On the unimportant or negative side there are a few things that can be told, perhaps, without harm. We can try it.

The writer carries his death in him and the death is his book. His physical body may survive several books. But each time whatever is within him will be killed by the book if the book is to have a life of its own. This is strange and is why writers are always strangers. Once they live any place they are dead unless the book kills them and they become alive again. If the book does not kill them but is a false book and one of a series they are dead but they do not know it and they will go on writing false books forever. This is the writer's great temptation when he tries to make his book without dying in it. Something must always die but no matter what else dies the writer must die if the book is to live. If this does not interest you skip it because you are dead already and it cannot help you.

It is not unnatural that the best writers are liars. A major part of their trade is to lie or invent and they will lie when they are drunk, or to themselves, or to strangers. They often lie unconsciously and then remember their lies with deep remorse. If they knew all other writers were liars too it would cheer them. . . . Lying when drinking is a good exercise for their powers of invention and is very helpful in the making up of a story. It is no more wicked or reprehensible in a writer than it is to have strange and marvellous experiences in his dreams. Lying to themselves is harmful but this is cleansed away by the writing of a true book which in its invention is truer than any

true thing that ever happened. Since they must die with the book and start life again with the next book everything is forgiven at the end of the book. It may be interesting to know that it is the writer who must forgive himself. Now haveing done penance I will prepare to write again.

(item 845, Hemingway Collection, JFK Library)

Introduction

Frank Scafella

Manuscript fragments like the foregoing Prologue, and there are several like it in the Hemingway archives at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, give us a Hemingway we are not all that familiar with. Writing as penance? Writing as alchemy? Writing as the power of making magic? Writing as a mode of dying into a new life? The writer as stranger? These ideas about writing we might expect to find in C. G. Jung or D. H. Lawrence or one of those heady writers who fueled thought and writing in the sixties, such as P. D. Ouspensky, but not in Hemingway. Isn't he that guy who lived it up to write it down, if not verbatim then so nearly that you can go to the very place in his story, like Seney in Upper Michigan, and stand in the trout stream his fictional character fishes? And can't you go to northern Italy and stand on the very spot on the riverbank at Fossalta di Piave where Colonel Cantwell defecates in *Across the River and Into the Trees*? What magic or alchemy can there be in writing that masks, as we believe, Hemingway's own personality and life with fictionalized persons, places, and events?

"We know Hemingway by now all right," Wilfred Sheed avers (*New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986). Yet just when we thought we knew him well, here comes Hemingway out of the manuscript trunk to speak to us of power, of penance, of alchemy, of magic, and of sacrificing himself to his work so his books might live. These unexpected elements in what appears to be Hemingway's closest approach to a literary credo suggest that it is time to take another look at the work and the life of the writer we thought we knew, and perhaps even to reassess our understanding of his

aesthetic principles and his work. The Hemingway Society undertook just such a reassessment at its Third International Conference, held in Schruns, Austria, during the third week of June 1988. The essays presented here are a selection of the best papers from that conference. I and my subeditors—Paul Smith, Michael Reynolds, and Gerry Brenner—believe these essays at once engage in and point the direction for a full-scale reassessment of Hemingway in our time.

We would be overstating our case, however, if we were to suggest that a current reassessment depends only on the materials in the Hemingway archives (which were officially opened for scholarly use, incidentally, in 1980, the year the Hemingway Society was founded at a conference on Thompson's Island in Boston Harbor, in sight of the Kennedy Library). Yet Hershel Parker, our lead essayist, calls the Hemingway archives an "honest-to-God treasure trove" that makes Hemingway scholars the luckiest bunch in business today. And from the vantage of his own considerable experience in archival work, Parker outlines the ways these materials, especially the manuscripts of the major works, not only will permit Hemingway scholars to open a study of Hemingway's aesthetic theory "in process" but may force a fundamental revision of our aesthetic assumptions about his work. For "now that you have such textual riches available," says Parker, "it very often requires going back through all the known stages of composition rather than going by the text that happened to get into print." And when we begin making our way back through the known stages of composition of a given text, as William Balassi does with *The Sun Also Rises* in his essay, or as Susan Beegel does with the unpublished story "A Lack of Passion," or as Paul Smith does in his study of the manuscript variants of "Now I Lay Me," we find ourselves in "that ambiguous terrain where textual and biographical evidence have aesthetic implications," Parker points out, and on such ground our understanding of a text must often be formulated anew in radical and unexpected ways.

But there are other and equally persuasive grounds than the Hemingway archives for undertaking a reassessment of Hemingway at this time. There are, for example, the several new biographies of the past four years, from Peter Griffin's *Along with Youth* (1985, with second and third volumes to follow) and Jeffrey Meyers's

Hemingway (1985) to Michael Reynolds's *The Young Hemingway* (1986, second volume has just been published) and Kenneth Lynn's *Hemingway* (1987). In view of these recent and often conflicting "lives" of Hemingway, it becomes more than ever difficult to determine, as Scott Donaldson attempts to do in his essay, whose portrait is the accurate one and who will write the *definitive* biography.

Donaldson contends that a definitive biography of Hemingway will never be written, principally because no biographer can grasp the truth (let alone the final truth) of his or her subject. Every assessment of Hemingway's life must therefore be at once a reassessment of his other "lives" and the creation of a new life—if for no other reason than, as Emerson puts it, that every generation must write its own books. So Donaldson characterizes the "good" or the "ideal" biographer rather than the definitive biography of Hemingway, and those whose essays are gathered here with his exemplify very nicely the various professional qualities Donaldson finds essential in the makeup of the ideal biographer.

Harry Stoneback, for example, manifests a healthy skepticism and unwillingness to accept the obvious in his presentation of evidence for Hemingway's deep and genuine commitment to Catholicism. Stoneback has been the drudge in this area, and the evidence he presents compels a reassessment of the notion, common among the biographers, that Hemingway was at best a "nominal" Catholic. Don Junkins, on the other hand, shows himself a sensitive evaluator of the biographer's tendency toward self-projection; Junkins finds Hemingway's biographers very often "shadowboxing" with themselves in the guise of delivering a knock-out punch to the champ. Jackson Benson engages the problem, manifest particularly in Lynn's biography, of reading the life of the man in the fiction. He calls this the "backflow of biography" and urges us to dam this flood with sensitivity to Hemingway's humor, his social and political acuity, his gentleness, his exposure of human folly—in a word, his authorial "otherness." Thus, Benson sets the stage for the essays that constitute the "psychology" section of this book, and we could ask for no better transition from biography to psychology than Michael Reynolds's "Up Against the Crannied Wall."

"The only reality is in our own minds," Reynolds tells us. Therefore, one's only hope of knowing anyone or anything is to make

every effort to know one's own mind and the mind of the other. But how does one know another mind when it is no longer present in a living body? Can one ever come to know another mind through the evening paper, grocery lists, photographs, secondhand testimony, notes scrawled on envelopes, or written records of any kind? No, says Reynolds. For the "crannied wall" up against which all biographers (should we say all scholars and critics, too?) eventually finds themselves is the realization, come to in their study of one or another of the writer's current material forms, that "the man in the photograph is dead, decayed, and completely irretrievable." It is in precisely this predicament that "good" biographers and critics—in Donaldson's terms the drudges, the masters of their records, the sensitive evaluators of humankind, the ones who have established an intimate relationship with their own significant other—show, as Reynolds does so deftly, that their skin is thick: they admit defeat but are not defeated. For Reynolds scales the crannied wall by becoming the artist in his own right, creating his own Ernest Hemingway, and structuring a plausible life for him by telling a hell of a good story—having first understood (as Carlos Baker and Scott Donaldson did before him) "the limits of his genre and the fictive nature of his trade."

The essays in the psychology section are not quite so homogeneous as in the other two sections. In one grouping stand Earl Rovit and Mark Spilka, scholars whose work on Hemingway is of long standing and continues to be very influential. (Rovit's 1963 Twayne book on Hemingway has just been reissued in collaboration with Gerry Brenner, and Spilka's new book on androgyny in Hemingway has recently been published by the University of Nebraska Press). We coaxed Bud Rovit into taking another look at Hemingway. His assignment was to let his mind settle in a text and to think his way back out of it to see what he might say about Hemingway today. After some hesitation, he settled on the concluding scene of *The Sun Also Rises*. There he found himself "the reader . . . eagerly searching for a key to Jake's frame of mind." He is struck once again by the style of Jake's dialogue with Brett, which excludes everything in the scene but "a few graphic details" that are so "severely outlined and highlighted," so "unconnected" to narrative texture or the "source of perception that renders them," that Rovit