

MODERNISM AND TRADITION IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "IN OUR TIME"



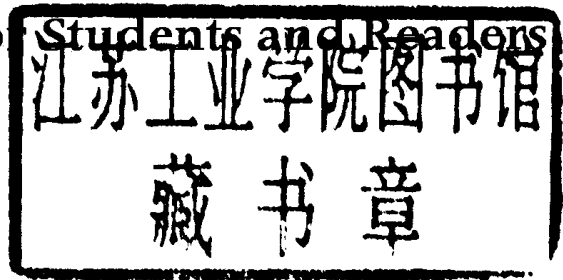
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND READERS

MATTHEW STEWART

Matthew Stewart

MODERNISM AND TRADITION
IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S
In Our Time

A Guide for Students and Readers



CAMDEN HOUSE

Acknowledgments

I extend my thanks to the editors at Camden House. I thank Jim Hardin for his interest and encouragement early on. Phil Dematteis's copyediting helped shape up the manuscript. Jim Walker deserves special thanks for being on top of everything that matters at each stage. He has managed the production beautifully. To friends and colleagues I also owe thanks. Milton Cohen saved me from errors, and asked stimulating questions. Robert Wexelblatt helped me see the real value of this project at a time when I needed to see it anew myself. Natalie McKnight has provided caring, committed leadership in my academic life and has been enormously helpful during a period that was much too busy (for both of us). John Fawell was there to talk about Hemingway's stories, to commiserate about the writing and publishing process and, most importantly, to make me laugh. Anne Barclay photocopied and typed like a trooper.

To my wife Judith Seltzer and to our son Jacob, I simply say that I can't imagine a day without you. What you've done along the way would take pages to acknowledge, but what you've been is even more important.

M. C. S.
September 2000

Foreword

THIS BOOK IS FOR READERS who wish to gain a deeper understanding of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Though not as widely known as his famous novels, such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), or *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), Hemingway's volume of interrelated short fictions continues to gain new readers and to be taught in university courses. In some important ways bolder and more radically experimental than his most acclaimed novels, *In Our Time* is an artistic achievement of the first order and one that may well leave even seasoned readers with many unanswered questions. Just where do these brief, italicized "Chapters" come from, and how do they fit in with the longer stories? Why is Nick Adams in so many of the stories but not in all? Why are the stories so full of violence and death? While no book can answer all such questions, I trust that this one provides some helpful information and hope that it opens up avenues of thought for the reader. While students, new instructors, and non-specialists might be expected to benefit the most from this volume, experienced scholars may also find material of interest—orientations or insights that stimulate new thinking about "old" material, story analysis that generates fresh contemplation that can be used in turn to reinvigorate the class room.

That some of this book's readers will be teachers is important, for Hemingway deserves to be remembered not only as a cultural icon but also, and more importantly, as one of the twentieth century's most important writers. The man whose photographs were a mass-media commonplace in the 1950s and whose name and image continue to be used more than ever to lend cachet to various consumer products remains important for his contributions as a writer of modern American fiction. While I give close attention in this study to the individual stories, I have tried to avoid pedantry and have especially tried to steer clear of critical jousting over fine points. The fine

points are important, and such jousting can be both enjoyable and illuminating, but it should be reserved for the specialized journals. The curious student and the more experienced reader of Hemingway alike are meant to feel at home here.

I have tried to adapt my criticism to the author's work rather than jam the work into a set of a priori assumptions. Great fiction transcends such assumptions, and the writers of great fiction outlive the rule makers of any generation and moralizers of whatever stripe. While I feel free to note Hemingway's weaknesses, the book is not an extended attack, nor the sort of concerted exercise in deflation that seems to have become popular in the last twenty years. I did not set out to write a hagiography but a piece of criticism, as honest as I could make it, on an author whose work I hold in high esteem.

I have included a short biographical chapter that concentrates on those aspects of Hemingway's life that seem to me most likely to assist the reader in gaining a deeper appreciation of *In Our Time*. The reader may find that it is helpful to understand some of the larger forces shaping the writer's life, forces that necessarily have a bearing on the work. After these preliminary observations, however, I have avoided narrowly autobiographical interpretations of the sort that claim that the fishing trip in "Big Two-Hearted River" is just like Hemingway's own fishing trip in ways a, b, and c but differs in ways, x, y, and z. Many of the fictions in *In Our Time* are highly autobiographical, but what may come as a surprise to some readers is that many are not autobiographical in any important way whatsoever. As a Hemingway scholar I have delighted in reading the fine biographies that exist, but my wish here is to allow the stories to have a life of their own, independent as much as possible from that of their world-famous author. If the reader is disappointed in this critical approach, I plead the practical exigency of limited space and note that Hemingway has not been underserved by biographical studies. The biographically inclined reader is referred to the bibliography at the end of this study.

The heart of the book is the textual analysis. I operate under the assumption that the critic's first duty is to respond to the story as it exists rather than cling to a predetermined thesis. I hope that I have avoided thesis-mongering, which is perhaps the worst sort of ped-

antry. Nevertheless, several themes recur in the analysis: that *In Our Time* is the most experimental of all of Hemingway's texts; that the daring and boldness Hemingway brought to the work were radical — he reshaped the landscape for American fiction writers — and he himself would never recapture this experimental strain with the same vigor; that along with, perhaps even despite, this modernist strain, Hemingway retained a good many traditional values; that (contrary to the claims of some notable contemporary critics) World War I was a watershed for Hemingway and occupies a central place in *In Our Time*; and that for every Hemingway stereotype that the reader may believe he or she has found fulfilled, there will be another instance where the stereotype is obviously contradicted.

The last point would profit from further elaboration, for the Hemingway reputation is still encrusted with layer upon layer of machismo. Many people, having heard about Hemingway but never having read him, come to his works looking for a bullying patriarch. Such readers had better be prepared for some surprises. Among American writers, only Mark Twain can be said to have achieved in his own day the celebrity status Hemingway achieved in his. It is doubtful, however, that any other writer's public image is so at odds with so much of what one actually finds in his texts. The myth of the life — and, yes, what a life it was! — has proven to enhance the pleasure of reading Hemingway but also to prevent seeing what his stories actually say and do. Many misconceptions retain their currency even among people who should know better. By way of encouraging in the reader an open-mindedness and a proper attentiveness to what is actually in the stories, let me briefly address two elements of the myth: Hemingway as action hero and Hemingway as "hypermasculinist."

Despite his status as a man of action — an image that he deliberately cultivated — Hemingway's fame should not rest primarily on his reputation as an action writer. For one thing, even in the stories of high outward drama, such as "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," "The Battler," and "Big Two-Hearted River" in *In Our Time*, or in a later story such as "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936), with its engrossing narration of hunting scenes, the external action is always a backdrop for the more important inner

dramas that are being waged. Furthermore, the Hemingway canon contains many stories that have virtually no outward drama, and even some of the ostensibly “action” stories or “action” scenes are not really action-packed. From an adventurer’s perspective “Big Two-Hearted River” is a yawner; and although in the later stories we find Francis Macomber running from lions and, after his change of heart, running down buffalo, we also find the moribund Harry spending all of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936) lying in his cot. Readers new to Hemingway’s work but familiar with his celebrity persona often express surprise that so many of his better stories contain so little outward action and overt drama. To read Hemingway for the first time is to discover that the most important drama is unspoken, latent, submerged.

Reading Hemingway for the first time can elicit other surprises, as well. College students frequently come to the texts armed with their “knowledge” of Hemingway’s tough-guy male chauvinism only to discover how often his fictions run counter to this easy stereotype. If his stories contain weak, damaged, and needy women, they also contain more than their full share of weak, damaged, and needy men. Even though Nick dumps Marjorie in “The End of Something,” it is he who adopts the attitude of the wounded victim and she who remains self-possessed. For every put-upon man suffering at the hands of his wife, such as Dr. Adams, there is a callous husband or boyfriend, such as George in “Cat in the Rain” or “the young gentleman” of “Out of Season,” who wounds the woman who loves him; and in no way do the stories dismiss, let alone condone, such callousness. Self-centered and self-destructive male behavior is there to be witnessed for all who will allow themselves to do so.

And so are the many “unmanly” moments in Hemingway. For every moment of masculinity triumphant, for every Villalta in his moment of tauromaquian glory, there is a battle-fatigued Nick Adams so overexcited by a fish he has hooked and then lost that he has to sit down to collect himself. This scene from “Big Two-Hearted River” reads like a modern male equivalent of the Victorian heroine overcome with the vapors. Whatever masculinized glories may exist are contingent and temporary, and Hemingway displays this fact not only in the early *In Our Time* but over and over again throughout

his career. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) depicts the triumphs of the young and vigorous Pedro Romero in the bullring, but it also gives full measure to the depiction of Belmonte, a has-been who not so long ago had been his generation's Romero, the best bullring artist of his day. *In Our Time* includes, in the story "The Battler," an even more grotesque version of the broken-down star in Ad Francis, whose days of tough-guy fame proved to be short-lived and who fell far and fast when he fell. He is damaged goods now, living on the margins of a society that once made a champion of him.

The celebration of masculinity, scenes of male bonding, machismo victorious — all of these hackneyed and unidimensional expectations of Hemingway's work must give way to the much richer, much more nuanced, much more complicated world that is actually present as early as *In Our Time*. The opening of the Hemingway archive in 1975, Scribners' publication of the highly edited *The Garden of Eden* (1986), and new modes of scholarly thinking have all helped readers to see what was really always there: a writer who wished to explore questions of gender and sexuality in a modern way. Readers who disabuse themselves of preconceptions and are willing to consider the entire Hemingway oeuvre rather than pass final judgment on the basis of selected instances culled from a particular handful of fictions may find these explorations rich and interesting or may find them disappointing. But if they are honest, they will not be able to say that Hemingway's work presents them with rigid gender definitions or stereotyped conventions of sexual behavior.

Thus, the present book opens with a caution and a plea to allow Hemingway the due earned by any serious writer: to give the text a chance, to read what has actually been written in all its fullness, complication, and even contradictoriness; and only then to judge.

Citation of Selected Letters

References to the letters of Hemingway are to *Selected Letters, 1917–1961*, edited by Carlos Baker (New York: Scribner's, 1981). The date of the letter will be given in parentheses in the form day/month/year, followed by the abbreviation *SL* and page number.

1: The Historical and Biographical Context

ERNEST HEMINGWAY WAS NOT YET NINETEEN when he arrived in Europe as a volunteer ambulance driver for the American Red Cross. After a brief stay in Paris he was sent to Italy, where he first transported wounded soldiers then volunteered as the head of a rolling canteen unit, the job he had when his leg was severely wounded by a shell explosion. By the summer of 1918 the Great War was nearing its end, but not before providing a young man from suburban Chicago with some rapid lessons in growing up modern. Although his war experience was brief, Hemingway was changed by the conflict in ways both predictable and subtle. His first assignment was to retrieve the body parts of men and women who were victims of a munitions plant explosion near Milan, an experience he would later use in "A Natural History of the Dead (1932)." Like millions of his generation, he saw at first hand the futile destruction of World War I, the catastrophe that swept away the nineteenth century once and for all. As shocking as his war experiences were, and as anxious as his wounds undoubtedly made him, he did not feel the full import of his injury immediately. Nor did he immediately understand the broader implications of the changes brought about by the war. A more profound emotional response and a fuller understanding of the war's ramifications, both personal and societal, developed steadily over the years between his return to the United States and the publication in 1925 of *In Our Time*, whose vignettes and stories are infused with postwar disaffection and anomie.

As with tens of thousands of his generation, Hemingway's wounding brought with it a hero's status — but also intimations of mortality just at the stage of life, the transition years of late adolescence and young adulthood, when most people feel invulnerable. Moreover, he had fallen in love with his nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, while convalescing in a Milan hospital, and they had talked of marriage. Shortly after returning home Hemingway received a Dear

John letter from Kurowsky and learned the shock and the quality of pain brought by *that* sort of wound. She was his first love; but for the adventurous and vivacious Agnes (who was eight years his senior), Hemingway was an attractive and special friend for whom she rather quickly lost romantic feelings once he was no longer a part of her daily life.¹ Not yet two years out of high school, Hemingway had been introduced to modern forms of suffering and chaos and also to the age-old anguish of loss and disappointment. One of his greatest gifts, which he displayed even as a young writer, was the ability to blend the new and specifically modern with the abiding and recurrent elements of human experience.

Dr. Clarence Edmonds Hemingway practiced family and obstetrical medicine in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, where Ernest Miller Hemingway, the second of six children, was born on 21 July 1899. His father's love of the outdoors, of hunting and fishing and woodsman's skills, would quickly take root in young Ernest. Before he was two months old, he made the first of many summer journeys to northern Michigan, where his parents built a cottage on Bear (later called Walloon) Lake. As a boy, Ernest spent every summer there, and the small towns and countryside of the region would become the setting of several Nick Adams stories in *In Our Time*. The rest of the year the family lived in a large house on Kenilworth Avenue in Oak Park that Hemingway's mother, Grace Hall Hemingway, had planned. His father's practice prospered, and his mother commanded a handsome hourly rate for giving voice lessons. From her Hemingway inherited his artistic inclinations, and it was, no doubt, at her urging that he began to develop them — though he would attain to a much more twentieth-century sensibility than the essentially Victorian Grace ever cultivated.

The Oak Park of Hemingway's day retained its suburban, separate-from-Chicago character. Its north side, where the Hemingways lived, was a white, Protestant, upper-middle-class community, progressively Republican in politics, conservative if not restrictive in its

¹ Henry S. Villard and James Nagel provide the fullest account of the relationship between Hemingway and Kurowsky in their *Hemingway in Love and War* (1989).

social mores, peopled largely by college-educated professionals and businessmen who saw to it that the school system remained strong.² Hemingway's outdoor summers and solid upbringing, however, were accompanied by personal and family problems. There is abundant evidence that Ernest, like his father and other members of his family, suffered from depression, which became more severe as he matured but manifested itself incipiently in his childhood. He seems to have been subject early on to spells of black foreboding of death and to have become fearful in the night. Much of his juvenilia, including stories that he published in his high-school literary magazine, gives evidence of a preoccupation with the violent and the morbid.

The family problems became more severe as Hemingway grew up. As he got older he increasingly expressed resentment both of his mother's smothering pieties and, even more, of what he saw as her domination of his father, whom Hemingway came to consider dangerously weak. This familial discord works its way into several Nick Adams stories, perhaps most notably "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," and is part of the creative context for several stories in *In Our Time*. His father's chronic depression would lead to suicide when Hemingway was twenty-nine.

Hemingway was a good student in a superior high school. He participated in a large number of extracurricular activities, including the school paper and literary magazine. Despite his love of athletics and his later boasting about his boyhood prowess in various sports, the truth is that he was athletically mediocre except in hunting and fishing. After high school he disappointed his parents by deciding not to attend his father's alma mater, Oberlin College. He was eager to get out into the world and begin working as a writer, and his uncle's influence enabled him to join the *Kansas City Star* as a cub reporter. He began his writing career on the police and hospital beat, developing a style that was strongly shaped by the newspaper's 110 rules for writing. When he became famous, Hemingway expressed gratitude for the early discipline that forced him to produce terse

² Michael Reynolds gives an excellent description of Hemingway's Oak Park in *The Young Hemingway* (1986).

prose shorn of clichés, empty adjectives, florid rhetoric, and other forms of verbal inflation.³

When the United States entered World War I, Hemingway was too young for military service; in any event, he would surely have been turned down because of weak vision in his left eye. Moreover, Hemingway's father had opposed Ernest's desire to join the military after high school, though he did not try to prevent his son from volunteering for the American Red Cross a year later, in the spring of 1918. Hemingway spent eight months in Europe, much of it convalescing from his wounds and a subsequent case of jaundice. When he returned to Oak Park in 1919, he found, like many men coming back from the war, that being the victorious hero gained one, at most, only a brief moment in the sun; and Hemingway was willing to buy his moment at the expense of telling obvious stretchers about his ordeals. As Harold Krebs, his fictional alter ego in "Soldier's Home," finds out, there was little from the war experiences that would be of use in building an ordinary life.

After his long convalescence, and after being precipitously dumped by Agnes von Kurowsky, Hemingway was much more keenly aware of the fragility of things. He was subject to black moods, and for a long time he could not sleep without a light. His parents worried, as do Harold Krebs's, that he was content to drift aimlessly through the first years of adulthood. The war and his first taste of foreign travel had given him experience and confidence and a desire to seek further adventure but had also affected him in a darker, more troubling fashion. He was not jaded, but he was aware that the lessons he had learned as a youngster could not provide a shield against certain kinds of vulnerability. The men and women of his generation were susceptible to the pains and turmoil to which men and women have always been susceptible, but there were also new problems to contend with. The modern world presented forces that people had little hope of comprehending, much less overcoming. The leviathan war had amply demonstrated that, although it

³ Charles A. Fenton's *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway* (1954), one of the first scholarly studies, remains a fine summary of Hemingway's experiences at the *Star*.

took several years of development and a move to Paris for Hemingway to come to a mature reckoning of the war's impact. When he first returned home, it was simply easier and more honest to go fishing in the northern woods of his youth than to try to fulfill his parents' expectations or to meet the larger world head on.

The American poet Ezra Pound, who later became Hemingway's friend, wrote in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" (1920) that World War I occasioned "wastage as never before" and "disillusions as never told in the old days." The scale of destruction wrought by the war had been unimaginable theretofore: ten million soldiers died; millions more were wounded; before the war finally ground to a close, yet more millions had begun to die in the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918–1919. The boundaries between civilian and soldier had become blurred and, in many instances, had crumbled away as the eternally stalemated conflict stretched from the Straits of Dover to Switzerland, extended into Italy and the Middle East, and caused every segment of European and, eventually, American society to be mobilized in support of the "war effort." Well over 100 billion dollars was spent, and the magnitude of destruction and loss of property had no parallel. Afterward, people came to see that "the war to end all wars" had accomplished none of the goals that were trumpeted at its outset. Ultimately, it became clear that the ill-conceived Versailles Treaty that ended the First World War was nothing less than the official prelude to the next worldwide exercise in destruction.

In Europe a generation of young men had been devastated. Many of those who survived the trenches were disillusioned and bitter, and they encountered difficulties in reintegrating themselves into ordinary, workaday society. But those who had fought in the war were not alone in feeling displaced. A large segment of the younger generation was disaffected, and this mood surpassed the ordinary rebelliousness of youth both in intensity and in its impact on the whole culture. The German philosopher Oswald Spengler's despairing Nietzschean treatise *The Decline of the West* (1918; revised, 1923) struck a chord not just in his native country but throughout Europe. The gloom, despondency, and doubt were accompanied in many countries by economic crises and political instability. The losers — especially the Germans — simmered in bitterness, and the

victors soon wondered what, exactly, they had won. Smaller conflicts flared up in the immediate postwar years, such as the Greco-Turkish war, which Hemingway covered as a correspondent. This is the European milieu in which Hemingway moved as a reporter, expatriate, and apprentice fiction writer. Even though there are only five paragraphs in *In Our Time* with a First World War setting, the book is infused with the war and its aftermath.

It is also infused with the historical particulars and the feel of an era lost to readers today. The book, of course, reflects the years of Hemingway's growing up, roughly 1910 to 1925, a time that has grown vague — that has long ceased to represent "our time." For example, the baseball talk in "The Three-Day Blow," with its allusions to cheating incidents and untrustworthy players, was fresher to Hemingway's contemporaries than to us. It is meant to add an edge of cynicism to the boys' essentially juvenile conversation. But while the topical quality of the volume is present in the stories, with their allusions to such matters as baseball players, veterans returning from the Rhineland, and expatriate Americans living in postwar Europe on the cheap, it comes out most strongly in the vignettes. As if to emphasize this contemporary quality, when the vignettes were published together as *in our time* in 1924, the dust jacket took the then-novel form of a collage that included a map and excerpts from newspaper articles in various languages.

While images of the Roaring Twenties still occupy a lively space in the American cultural imagination, the mainstream temper in the United States was actually quite conservative, seeking for isolation and "normalcy" after the war. The war years had introduced unprecedented repression and censorship into American civil life, and, despite the flappers and the necking in rumble seats, postwar society proved resistant to political reform and meaningful social innovation. Anti-immigrant feeling ran high in the 1920s, as did fear of Bolshevism. Doing his utmost to maintain quietude, even at the expense of breaching civil liberties, President Woodrow Wilson's attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, "The Fighting Quaker," aggressively deported radical immigrants and laid legally dubious injunctions on strikers and labor agitators without hesitation. The Red scares of the postwar years coincided with a rapid rise in the membership of the

Ku Klux Klan. "I can tell Wops a mile off," says policeman Boyle in "Chapter VIII" of *In Our Time*, apparently confident that he will not be reprimanded for hastily shooting a suspect dead as long as the man is a swarthy immigrant. Boyle's belligerence is matched by his ignorance: the suspect was actually Hungarian (79).

Alcoholic beverages became illegal with the enactment of the Volstead Act in 1919, so naturally for millions of people the selling, buying, and drinking of alcohol became more fascinating than ever, ensuring that bootlegging gangsters would become America's nouveau riche. Other gangsters, like Sam Cardinella in "Chapter XV" of *In Our Time*, worked at the newly organized, extremely violent extortion schemes called racketeering. The world was also full of legal violence that made just as little sense and was just as horrible as the illegal varieties that received sensationalized treatment in the press. Hemingway's readers in 1925 would remember — if not in detail, at least in general — the Greco-Turkish war of 1919–1922 that is central to three vignettes and one story in *In Our Time*. And the recent Russian Revolution and the other attempted revolutions that it spawned would have made the title character in Hemingway's "The Revolutionist" historically more immediate to his initial readers than he is to us. Still, readers then as now had to contend with the lack of political and historical background in the vignettes, short sketches that begin *in medias res* and concentrate on developing images and single events to achieve an intensity of effect. As we shall see, Hemingway was experimenting with the idea that purposely leaving out background would make his stories stronger.

The urbanization of America was already well along, and the wealthy country's material progress, while it was a wonder of the world, exacted a spiritual price and produced yearning and disgruntlement in some — especially the young. Greenwich Village became the bohemian center of America, but many artists and writers took advantage of the weakness of Continental currencies and sought a freer and more cosmopolitan life in European cities. Among these, —Paris was the strongest magnet— especially the area around Montparnasse, known as the Latin Quarter. There the artistic and literary scene merged with café life, and serious artists lived a bohe-

mian existence in close company with poseurs, dilettantes, wastrels, and dropouts of various stripes.

At the urging of Sherwood Anderson, who was by then a celebrated author, the newlywed Hemingway and his wife Hadley (née Richardson) whom he had met during a brief sojourn in Chicago, sailed for Paris in December 1921, with Hemingway's sights firmly set on the writing life. In Paris he would meet Pound, Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert McAlmon, and others who would play a formative role in his apprentice years. Prior to his arrival, Paris had already become established as a cosmopolitan center of the literary and artistic avant-garde. By choosing Paris as his expatriate headquarters Hemingway was able to submerge himself in a heady literary and artistic milieu, and he made the most of his opportunities. With no literary achievements to recommend him but with a strong and attractive personality and an obvious enthusiasm for the writing life, within a year he would befriend several key modernist figures and be fully involved in the Parisian literary circle.

Furnished with letters of recommendation from the kindly Anderson, Hemingway soon met Stein and Pound, the two writers who exerted the most direct influence on his development. Stein's home was part modernist art gallery and part salon where many of modernism's brighter stars could be seen shining. Although he had some experience of modern painting from his visits to the Art Institute of Chicago, Hemingway was relatively unschooled in modern art. Stein began his immersion in it. She and her brother Leo had always shared a quick eye for important developments in the visual arts, and on her walls hung works by Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and other modernist giants then considered avant-garde. For his part, Pound treated Hemingway as a promising writer worthy of tutelage and pointed out significant modern authors that he should read. Sylvia Beach, whose bookstore, Shakespeare and Company, was an important center of Parisian literary life, provided the library needed by the student writer. It was Beach who first published Joyce's modernist opus *Ulysses* (1922), and she promoted young writers by stocking their books, providing encouragement,