

Paris in a New Light

by Brenda Wineapple, Wall Street
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AFTER Ernest Hemingway put a shotgun to his head in the summer of 1961, his wife – his fourth – claimed he had died while cleaning it, but unsurprisingly the story didn't fly. More believable was her tale of Hemingway's having, before his death, more or less finished a Paris memoir, which he considered almost ready for publication.

Though Hemingway had once told Charles Scribner, his publisher, that writers turn to memoir only when they have nothing more to say, Mary Hemingway claimed that she had found an autobiographical typescript by her husband in a blue box, 'together with his dated draft of his preface and a list of titles'. At the urging of literary critic Malcolm Cowley, by her account, Mary then edited the manuscript, adding or removing commas, checking spelling, and occasionally cutting 'repetitious words or phrases which I felt sure were accidental rather than intentional.'

She and Harry Brague, Hemingway's editor, also hammered together a new preface, 'switched about a couple of chapters for continuity's sake', and added as an epigraph Hemingway's comment to his friend, the writer A.E. Hotchner, that 'if you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.' A book was born.

But was it the book Hemingway intended?

Not according to the newly 'restored edition' of *A Moveable Feast*, edited by Seán Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway's grandson. He pronounces it 'a less edited and more comprehensive version of the original manuscript material'. And maybe this new version is in fact closer to the real Hemingway, whoever that is.

But when writers have not personally approved a manuscript for publication, or even when they have – as in the case Raymond Carver, who later bristled at emendations made by his editor, Gordon Lish – it is difficult, if not impossible, to figure out what their intentions were. Consider the poems of Emily Dickinson, who left no instructions about how she might want her almost 2,000 unpublished poems to appear or whether they should be printed at all. As a result, various versions of them have been circulating for more than a century. Which of these most truly represent her? We just don't know.

A cynical view of the new *A Moveable Feast* is that its publisher invented an anniversary – the 50th year since Hemingway completed a draft of the Paris sketches – to burnish Hemingway's image and, of course, sell books. Yet motive matters little. What counts is Hemingway's unmistakably tactile prose, almost abstract in its mellifluousness: 'All of the sadness of the city came suddenly with the first cold rains of winter,' he writes,

‘and there were no more tops to the high white houses as you walked but only the wet blackness of the street and the closed doors of the small shops.’

The new edition of *A Moveable Feast* contains 19 sketches (the same number that Mary Hemingway used), slightly rearranged and no longer chronological. Hemingway evidently intended to delete some sketches that Mary included in the first edition. They are now presented separately in the back of the book, alongside other Paris sketches – notably one about the spoilage of his first marriage, called *The Pilot Fish and the Rich*, and presented in its entirety for the first time.

Mary Hemingway evidently did more than trim accidental or repetitious words: Here and there, as in the book’s entertaining if ambivalent portrait of F. Scott Fitzgerald, she cut words or phrases (now reinstated) that may have altered the original manuscript’s meaning or emphasis, if only in minor ways. And where the 1964 version of *A Moveable Feast* is shaped and polished, with a beginning and an ending, the restored edition, covering the same period, 1922-26, seems more provisional and hesitant. With its non-chronological structure, for example, it does not achieve the sense of finality found in the 1964 version; nor does it impose one.

Although *A Moveable Feast* purports to be a series of vignettes capturing the young Hemingway’s actual experience of the writers and artists and fellow expatriates he knew in Paris in the 1920s, and although the narrative voice is Hemingway’s own, he declares – in the restored edition – that ‘this book is fiction and should be read as such.’ It is a point he makes more than once. ‘This book is fiction,’ he writes again, ‘but there is always a chance that such a work of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.’

Indeed it does. Hemingway’s dark portrait of F. Scott Fitzgerald is freshly cruel (even if Seán Hemingway claims the restored passages make it kinder). In Hemingway’s account, Fitzgerald is a craven alcoholic willing to barter his talent for filthy lucre and the approval of his jealous wife. We again read of Fitzgerald helplessly asking Hemingway for reassurance about his manly credentials. No less unkind is Hemingway’s description of Ford Madox Ford, the English man of letters who, according to Hemingway, was a habitual liar, one who ‘lied about things that left scars’ As for Gertrude Stein, whose salon Hemingway frequented, she comes across as wise, peremptory and largely incapable of ‘ever speaking well of any writer who had not written favorably about her work or done something to advance her career.’

But these chapters say less about Hemingway’s vengefulness than about the competitive, insulated and ambitious world of expatriate writers during the so-called golden age of Paris in the 1920s. The 1964 *A Moveable Feast* appeared just when they and other survivors of the Lost Generation were nostalgically recalling their well-spent youth. Now, 45 years later, this particular Paris in the springtime reads, in part, as a romantic fabrication. It was born of the antic imaginations of authors such as Gertrude

Stein (her inventive *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* appeared in 1933), Matthew Josephson (whose 1962 *Life Among the Surrealists* chronicles his Paris years) and John Glassco, whose *Memoirs of Montparnasse* is a raucous celebration of Parisian joie d’vivre [sic]. And of course Papa H., whose portrait of himself in *A Moveable Feast* as a young artist in Paris was hailed upon its publication as a masterpiece of pride, pleasure, melancholy and love.

Melancholy, for sure. His tribute to the irascible Ezra Pound as a good friend ‘always doing things for people’ sets a benchmark for generosity that Hemingway cannot reach. As we repeatedly see, he is forever judging and labeling and comparing – the writer and artist Wyndham Lewis has the eyes of an ‘unsuccessful rapist,’ the stories of Katherine Mansfield are ‘near-beer.’

And a sense of impending failure is built into his prose. ‘In those days you did not really need anything, not even the rabbit’s foot.’ Though disenchantment had always been his *métier*, it holds court in this ominous, poignant book, not least when it refers obliquely to the dissolution of his marriage to Hadley, his first wife, the long-suffering and idealized center of the book, whom Hemingway betrays with her friend Pauline Pfeiffer (his second wife and the grandmother of Seán Hemingway). In one sketch, Hemingway writes: ‘The bulldozing of three people’s hearts to destroy one happiness and build another and the love and good work and all that came out of it is not part of this book. I wrote it and left it out.’

Gifted in the not-said and in the wresting of emotions from the declarative, Hemingway casts himself in *A Moveable Feast* as both an ingénue learning his craft and an older, sicker, still deliberate man who, finally turning to memoir, writes of the past as honestly as he knows how – which is to say, as a novelist. The newly restored edition gives us an opportunity to meet Hemingway less as the controlled craftsman that he long pretended to be than as the embittered, frightened, sharp-eyed avoider of feelings who captured them unerringly. But in many ways the book remains what it was: the elegiac testimony of a writer sensitive to time and change, to false starts and to false people, most especially himself, and all those ‘limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring’.