

Review of A Moveable Feast

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WHEN Ernest and Hadley Hemingway came to Paris in December, 1921, the dreary aftermath of World War I was receding and life on the Left Bank had begun to revive. Already, the beat had been marked out which young American aspirants in letters and the arts follow to this day. It ran and still runs, as everybody knows, the length of the Boulevard Montparnasse from the Closerie des Lilas at the Observatoire to the Restaurant du Petit Trianon opposite the dingy railway station, and by one route or another down to St.-Germain-des-Prés [sic] and the Seine.

There were detours and bypaths. Behind the boulevard, painters found studios and writers rooms in the direction of the Montparnasse Cemetery. Students drank beer at Baizar's- in the Rue des Ecoles. Those who could afford it lunched in view of the Luxembourg Gardens at the Café de Médicis, where they drank the 1915 vintages of the Hospice de Beaune topped off by the Marquis d'Audiffred's marc de Bourgogne. John Dos Passos and the playwright John Howard Lawson had come upon the Rendezvous des Mariniers on the Ile Saint-Louis ('Monsieur Dos Passos!' Mme. Lecomte cried in 1920; 'I used to darn his socks for him.') which 10 years later was taken over, like Sutton Place in New York, by – it must be agreed – a bearable species of 'the rich and well-born.'

Hemingway carried letters from Sherwood Anderson (doubtless from others, too), but in that small tranquil world there was no need of formal introduction. 'Everybody' frequented the same half-dozen cafés, ate in one or another of the same score of restaurants. Acquaintance was easily made, talk was on matters of common interest; for this generation, still in the temper of 'art for art's sake', ideological passions were as yet unknown. Artists and writers were a united family and nothing more than the conventional contempt for the bourgeoisie inherited from the romantics of 1830 divided them off from the rest of the world.

Along the route between Montparnasse and the St.-Germain quarter stood two rest camps in the Rue de l'Odéon. One was Adrienne Monnier's lending library, the Malson des Amie des Livres, where certain leading writers of the Nouvelle Revue Française forgathered every afternoon and one was privileged to hear their conversation: Gide, Valéry, Larbaud (translator and shortstory writer), Léon-Paul Fargue (poet and night-wandering raconteur), Jules Romains – and, when he was not absent en poste, the poet-ambassador Claudel. Here Larbaud, one evening, read his famous lecture that was the first evaluation of 'Ulysses.'

Across the way was the lending library of the Princeton parson's daughter with whom Mile. Monnier shared a flat in the same street – Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Co. Miss Beach was to publish 'Ulysses' in February, 1922, and Joyce, not normally a man to circulate much, came in to pick up and return page-proofs, later to read reviews and hear reports of sales. Here, also, one found and talked to every British and American author who turned up in Paris.

Adrienne was plump, beaming and voluble in the full-skirted Quaker-grey dress she wore in her shop. Sylvia, in a tailored suit, was bone-dry of body and laconic wit, receiving with a smile that verged at times on a sardonic leer, offering no conversation unless it was wanted. This straight-backed young woman, in whom every gesture displayed the old style of breeding, was endlessly tolerant of the most perverse human foibles. With Nelson Dean Jay of the Morgan bank, she was one of the two most civilized and authentic Americans in Paris.

There were, as yet, relatively few Americans about. Ezra Pound had settled in Paris; Gertrude Stein and Miss Tokias were in their pavillon in the Rue de Fleurus; Man Ray was there. Will Bradley was establishing the literary agency which Jenny, his widow, would manage so remarkably after his early death; Edna Millay, gay and sans make-up, had her own small circle. Janet Flanner and Virgil Thomson were already old Parisians; Hart Crane had come and gone. Harold Stearns, a Montmartre character, introduced one to his Harvard master, George Santayana, talked epistemology – and took to writing the racetrack column for The Paris Herald, under the by-line, Peter Pickem.

It was not until 1923 that Americans came in a flood, prompted by the European currency inflations or supported by Guggenheim fellowships. They arrived at a moment when the Right Bank had come to life, glittering with luxury and vibrant with new energy – the theaters of Dullin and Baty, a brilliant film world and, above all, the seasons of the Ballets Russes. It was here that Diaghileff, the most extraordinary animator of the arts since the Renaissance patrons, found employment for so many painters and composers – and without which Stravinsky's music might have gone long years unperformed.

ON the Left Bank the light brightened, the cafés became more animated, and a general air of happiness spread from the homely fact that so many who frequented them were writers and artists actively at work. The miseries they may have known were of a private order; for them, at any rate, the time was not out of joint.

Such, in brief, was the Paris in which the Hemingways swam.

'A Moveable Feast' is composed of 20 sketches, rewritten from Hemingway's notebooks of the years 1921–1926. Though the volume has the air of a random compilation, it is in fact a calculated production, and this for two reasons: first, because embedded in its pages are messages to the few readers who will know for whom they are meant; and, secondly, because as an artist Hemingway never allowed himself to appear in undress.

‘Emotions are the only facts,’ Havelock Ellis once wrote. This is a book of love, loathing and bitterness. Love of Paris is the matter of the parts in which Hemingway relates how he settled into a routine as a writer in the tranquil years before what he calls ‘the rich’ arrived. Written with that controlled lyricism of which he was master, these pages are marvelously evocative.

Love of his young wife shines softly in his revelation of an adoring, undemanding nature, achieved through the extraordinary felicity and tenderness of the dialogue he lends Hadley – a true triumph of Hemingway's art. He loved Ezra Pound, and though he has little to tell about him – there is no portrayal, no record of his ideas or it is clear that this was a good and innocent man, able to disarm Hemingway's suspicion, which was the only path to his affection. Love again of Sylvia Beach, about whom he tells us little more, but who was the rock on which he could rest, the understanding soul to whom one need never tell more than one had a mind to reveal.

There were others Hemingway loved – Bill Bird, whom he does not write about and who printed Hemingway's first book (a pamphlet-length version of ‘In Our Time’) at his Three Rivers Press; ‘Chink’, his Anglo-Irish wartime comrade on the Italian front [he was not, in fact, the two met in Milan while Hemingway was recuperating], referred to in passing; the poet Evan Shipman. But they were few, for Hemingway did not give himself easily; there was something wary, secretive, beneath his often boisterous gaiety.

Mostly, this is a book about people, and the choice he made among the many he knew remains perplexing, despite the prefatory note that it was made ‘for reasons sufficient to the writer.’ One asks at first why room was found for a brief moment with the painter Pascin that tells us nothing. Why, after 35 years, should Hemingway embalm an encounter with a flashy nonentity and another with an anonymous homosexual, both pieces savagely written and serving no literary purpose? Why, if he so disliked kindly and helpful old Ford Madox Ford, should he not tell us the reason, instead of printing a thin and stupid anecdote which concerns – but in this example unconvincingly – Ford's innocent mythomania (as the French call the telling of harmless fables) ?

These and their like are quick pencil sketches; the portraits, ‘warts and all’, are of Gertrude Stein and Scott Fitzgerald. Miss Stein was his first intimate friend in Paris. He had been sent to her by Sherwood Anderson, the author of the story, ‘I Want to Know Why’, which Hemingway so brilliantly plagiarized in his own first successful story, ‘My Old Man.’ Hemingway is very good on Miss Stein – her egomania, her impatience of contradiction, her dislike of ‘the drudgery of revision and the obligation to make her writing unintelligible’, her quaint preference for Ronald Firbank and Mrs. Belloc Lowndes to D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley. He has a lot of sly and witty fun with her and her companion.

In one of their talks he received the impression that she was trying to persuade him of something more than simple toleration of homosexuality. Miss Stein had prepared at Johns Hopkins in psychology. This did not make her an authority, nor perhaps entirely objective, but it lent her a point of view. Hemingway, who always bristled at the mere sight of a deviate, writes, with the detachment appropriate to the occasion:

‘Miss Stein thought that I was too uneducated about sex and I must admit that I had certain prejudices against homosexuality since I knew it in its more primitive aspects. I knew it was why you carried a knife. . . . Under questioning I tried to tell Miss Stein that when you were a boy in the company of men, you had to be prepared to kill a man, know how to do it, and really know that you would do it in order not to be interfered with. . . . If you knew you would kill, other people sensed it very quickly and you were let alone.’

What is the significance of this reminiscence? Had that boy with a knife undergone a traumatic experience in the ‘company of men’ – of tramps and on lake boats, as he specifies? Was this the proximate cause of the longing expressed in ‘Death in the Afternoon’: ‘The only place where you could see life and death, i.e. violent death, now that the wars were over, was the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it’? Were war and blood sports a psychic need to which his prodigious talent responded by making of him the supreme poet of the age of violence in which he lived?

Finally, there is the much longer section – more than a quarter of the book – devoted to Scott Fitzgerald, from which Zelda Fitzgerald cannot be said to be left out. We are given first a highly comic episode describing a journey from Paris to Lyons and then back in a car left in Lyons by the Fitzgeralds. In this and in two shorter sketches which follow, Scott is dealt with clinically (one might say) but without petty malice, indeed, with an underlying affection; Zelda with cold hatred.

Then, in the final section, bearing the lyrical title, ‘There is Never Any End to Paris’, the purport of the book is revealed. By a species of literary architectonics at which Flaubert would have cried ‘Bravo!’ this masterly artist arranges to give unity to his book, plead his case with the wife he left 30-odd years before, and at the same time curse from the grave (as it turns out) the small handful of readers who will know at whom his finger points – in particular two individuals: ‘the pilot fish’ who led him to ‘the rich’ and caused (he says) the corruption of his purity as artist and estrangement from his wife, and ‘another rich’ to whom he felt he owed a grim legacy.

‘Those who attract people by their happiness and their performance are usually inexperienced,’ he writes of himself. ‘They do not always learn about the good, the attractive, the charming, the soon-beloved, the generous, the understanding rich who have no bad qualities and who give each day the quality of a festival. . . .

The rich come led by the pilot fish. . . . In those days I trusted the pilot fish. . . . Nothing ever catches him and it is only those who trust him who are caught and killed. . .

. I wagged my tail with pleasure and, plunged into the fiesta concept of life to see if I could not bring some fine attractive stick back, instead of thinking, 'If these bastards like it, what is wrong with it?'"

His second legacy is couched in this form: 'We had already been infiltrated by another rich using the oldest trick there is. It is that an unmarried young woman . . . goes to live with the husband and wife and then unknowingly, innocently and unrelentingly sets out to marry the husband' – and in this case succeeds.

Par délicatesse, j'ai perdu ma vie; this, though in a raging tone, is Hemingway's last cry. Pathetic defense on the part of a man who sought to show – and, by an art in which credibility triumphs over verisimilitude, long persuaded us – that fortitude is the highest virtue, and that the savage is noble, is laconic, severe, animated by a sense of honor. And yet, in this baffling character there is something that goes deeper than pathos.

More than anything else, the book is a chant of love addressed to his first wife. He knew that in the invincible armor of her candor she possessed a strength greater than his own and forever denied him. Two natures struggled in the breast of this Faust – and they died in each other's grasp, so to say, the lower nature resisting with its last breath. Because there was this struggle, we must speak of tragedy, not of pathos.

Though this may seem at first blush a fragmentary book, it is not so. It should be read as a novel, belongs among the author's better works and is, as 'mere writing', vintage Hemingway.