

Braver Than We Thought

**Review of *The Garden Of Eden*,
by E.L. Doctorow, New York Times, May 18, 1986**

EARLY in his career Ernest Hemingway devised the writing strategies he would follow for life: when composing a story he would withhold mention of its central problem; when writing a novel he would implant it in geography and, insofar as possible, he would know what time it was on every page; when writing anything he would construct the sentences so as to produce an emotion not by claiming it but by rendering precisely the experience to cause it. What he made of all this was a rigorous art of compressive power, if more suited to certain emotions than others. He was unquestionably a genius, but of the kind that advertises its limits. Critics were on to these from the very beginning, but in the forward-looking 1920s, they joined his readers to make him the writer for their time. His stuff was new. It moved. There was on every page of clear prose an implicit judgment of all other writing. The Hemingway voice hated pretense and cant and the rhetoric they rode in on.

The source of his material and spring to his imagination was his own life. Issues of intellect — history, myth, society — were beside the point. It was what his own eyes saw and heart felt that he cured into fiction. Accordingly he lived his life to see and feel as much as possible. There was no place on earth he was not at home, except perhaps his birthplace. His parents' Middle Western provincialism made independence an easy passage for him. He married young and fathered a child — the traditional circumstances for settling down — and took his family with him to Europe in pursuit of excitements. He skied in the Austrian Alps, entrained to Paris for the bicycle races or prizefights, crossed the Pyrenees for the bullfights and made urgent side trips to mountain villages for the fishing or shooting. In America too, he drove back and forth from Idaho or Wyoming to Florida, never renting a place to live in for more than a season. He was divorced and remarried, with more children, before he bought a place of his own in Key West. But there was better fishing in Cuba, and a woman he secretly wooed there who was to become his third wife — and so on. It was Flaubert who said a writer has to sit quietly in one place, rooted in boredom, to get his work done. Hemingway lived in a kind of nomadic frenzy, but the work poured out of him. The stories and pieces and novels were done in longhand in the mornings, at whatever makeshift table he could find in a room away from his family. As his fame grew he was able in this or that remote paradise he had found to demolish his solitude by summoning friends or colleagues from other parts of the world. And they came, at whatever inconvenience to themselves, to fish or hunt or ride with him, but most importantly to drink with him. He had sporting friends, military friends, celebrity friends, literary friends and friends from the local saloon. He was forever making friendships and breaking them, imagining affronts, squaring off in his heavyweight crouch. Most people are quiet in the world, and live in it tentatively, as if it is not theirs. Hemingway was its voracious consumer. People of every class were drawn to this behavior, and the boasting, charming or truculent boyishness of his ways, and to his ritual celebration of his appetites.

By and large he worked from life on a very short lead time. He wrote 'The Sun Also Rises' while still seeing many of the people in Paris on whom he modelled its characters, and though it took him 10 years to use his World War I experiences for 'A Farewell to

Arms'. by the time of the civil war in Spain he was making trips there knowing he was collecting the people, incidents and locales for 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. a novel he completed in 1939, within months of the war's end. Only illness cut down his efficiency, or more often physical accidents, of which he had a great many; he ran cars into ditches and broke bones, or cut himself with knives, or scratched his eyes. But with the Second World War his ability to work quickly from life declined, and with it the justification of his techniques. Though he was prominently a correspondent in that war, the only novel he produced from it was the very weak 'Across the River and Into the Trees'. and that not published until 1950. People noted his decline and attributed it to the corruption of fame, but in the last decade of his life he wrote 'A Moveable Feast'. a memoir of his early days in Paris (published posthumously in 1964), and 'The Old Man and the Sea'. and seemed to have found again what he could do.

Hemingway talked of suicide all his life before he committed it. In 1954 his proneness to accident culminated in not one but two airplane crashes in East Africa where he had gone to hunt, and which left him with the concussion, crushed vertebrae, burns and internal injuries that turned him, in his 50's, into an old man. From a distance the physical punishment his body received during his lifetime seems to have been half of something, a boxing match with an invisible opponent, perhaps. His mind was never far from killing, neither in actuality as he hunted or ran off to wars, nor in his work. He went after animals all his life. He shot lion and leopard and kudu in Africa, and grizzly bear in the Rockies, he shot grouse in Wyoming and pigeon in France; wherever he was he took what was available. And after he killed something it was not necessarily past his attention. His biographer, Carlos Baker, tells of the day, in Cuba, when Hemingway hooked and fought and landed a 512-pound marlin. He brought it to port in triumph, receiving the noisy congratulations of friends and acquaintances. But this was not, apparently, enough. After a night of drunken celebration, at 2 or 3 that morning, he was seen back at the dock, all alone under the moon; the great game fish hanging upside down on block and tackle, he was using it for a punching bag.

Since Hemingway's death in 1961, his estate and his publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons, have been catching up to him, issuing the work which, for one reason or another, he did not publish during his lifetime. He held back 'A Moveable Feast' out of concern for the feelings of the people in it who might still be alive. But for the novel 'Islands in the Stream' he seems to have had editorial misgivings. Even more deeply in this category is 'The Garden of Eden'. which he began in 1946 and worked on intermittently in the last 15 years of his life and left unfinished. It is a highly readable story, if not possibly the book he envisioned. As published it is composed of 30 short chapters running to about 70,000 words. A publisher's note advises that 'some cuts' have been made in the manuscript, but according to Mr. Baker's biography, at one point a revised manuscript of the work ran to 48 chapters and 200,000 words, so the publisher's note is disingenuous. In an interview with The New York Times last December, a Scribners editor admitted to taking out a subplot in rough draft that he felt had not been integrated into the 'main body' of the text, but this cut reduced the book's length by two-thirds.

The hero of this radically weeded 'Garden of Eden' is David Bourne, a young novelist and veteran of World War I, who is traveling with his wife, Catherine, through Spain and France in the 1920's. The couple are on their honeymoon. In their small black Bugatti, they drive from the seaport village of Le Grau-du-Roi, where their stay has been idyllic, to Madrid, where the first shadows appear on their relationship. Catherine evinces jealousy of his writing. At the same time she demands experimentation in their lovemaking — she wants them to pretend that she is the boy and he is the girl. At Aigues-

Mortes, in France, she has her hair cut short, and later she insists that he have his cut by the same hairdresser in a match to hers, so that he will look like her. David complies in this too, though not without some resistance and a foreboding of the ultimate corruption of the marriage.

Going on to La Napoule, near Cannes, they engage rooms in a very small hotel, where it is quiet because it is summer, the off-season in the south of France. One of the rooms is for David to write in. He has just published his war novel in America and received in the forwarded mail the press clippings and publisher's letter telling him he is a success. This news disturbs Catherine. The differences between them sharpen as she presumes to tell him the only subject worth writing is their life together on their honeymoon.

One day drinking at the cafe terrace of their hotel, they attract the attention of a beautiful young woman named Marita, who is very impressed by this darkly tanned couple with their newly dyed, almost white hair, and French fisherman shirts and linen trousers and espadrilles. She moves to their hotel. Catherine fulfills David's forebodings by commencing an affair with Marita. In further sign of her instability, she encourages David to embark on his own erotic relationship with the woman, who makes it easy by privately confessing to him that she has fallen in love with both of them. He succumbs. The menage swims from the deserted beach coves of the area and sunbathes nude. David sleeps with one or the other as they designate in their time-sharing with him. Every day consists of a good deal of drinking, of martinis, which David himself mixes and garnishes with garlic olives at the small hotel bar, or absinthe, or Haig pinchbottle and Perrier, or Tavel, or carefully prepared Tom Collinses. The mixing and consuming of drinks is the means they seem to have chosen to adjust to the impact of their acts and conversation on one another.

It is Catherine who begins spectacularly to come apart under the strain. Becoming, in turn, bitter or remorseful, she either excoriates David for his relationship with Marita, or condemns herself for making a mess of everything. As a defense against the situation, and what he perceives as his wife's clearly accelerating mental illness, he begins to write the story he has been resisting for years, the 'hard' story, he calls it, based on his life as a boy in East Africa with his white-hunter father. This story gradually intrudes on the main narrative as the boy David sights the bull elephant with enormous tusks that his father and an African assistant are looking for; he reports his sighting and lives to regret it, as the father tracks down the great beast and destroys it. The climax of the novel has to do with Catherine's reaction to this story, which David has written by hand in the simple cahiers used by French schoolchildren. A disaster then occurs which is the worst that can befall a writer as a writer, and the menage breaks up forever, two to stay together and one to leave. At first reading this is a surprising story to receive from the great outdoor athlete of American literature. He has not previously presented himself as a clinician of bedroom practices. Even more interesting is the passivity of his writer hero who, on the evidence, hates big-game hunting, and who is portrayed as totally subject to the powers of women, hapless before temptation and unable to take action in the face of adversity. The story is told from David Bourne's masculine point of view, in the intimate or pseudo-third person Hemingway preferred, but its major achievement is Catherine Bourne. There has not before been a female character who so dominates a Hemingway narrative. Catherine in fact may be the most impressive of any woman character in Hemingway's work, more substantive and dimensional than Pilar in 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' or Brett Ashley in 'The Sun Also Rises.' Even though she is launched from the naive premise that sexual fantasizing is a form of madness, she takes on the stature of the self-tortured Faustian,

and is portrayed as a brilliant woman trapped into a vicarious participation in someone else's creativity. She represents the most informed and delicate reading Hemingway has given to any woman.

For Catherine Bourne alone this book will be read avidly. But there are additional things to make a reader happy. For considerable portions of the narrative, the dialogue is in tension, which cannot be said of 'Across the River and Into the Trees', his late novel of the same period, and for which he looted some of the motifs of this work. And there are passages that show the old man writing to the same strength of his early work — a description of David Bourne catching a bass in the canal at Le Grau-du-Roi, for example, or swimming off the beach at La Napoule. In these cases the strategy of using landscape to portray moral states produces victory.

But to be able to list the discrete excellences of a book is to say also it falls short of realization. The other woman, and third main character, Marita, has not the weight to account for her willingness to move in on a marriage and lend herself to its disruption. She is colorless and largely unarticulated. David Bourne's passivity goes unexamined by the author, except as it may be a function of his profession. But the sad truth is that his writing, which we see in the elephant story, does not exonerate him: it is bad Hemingway, a threadbare working of the theme of a boy's initiation rites that suggests to its own great disadvantage Faulkner's story on the same theme, 'The Bear.' In David's character resides the ultimate deadness of the piece. His incapability in dealing with the crisis of his relationship does not mesh with his consummate self-assurance in handling the waiters, maids and hoteliers of Europe who, in this book as in Hemingway's others, come forward to supply the food and drink, the corkscrews and ice cubes and beds and fishing rods his young American colonists require. In fact so often does David Bourne perform his cultivated eating and drinking that a reader is depressed enough to wonder if Hemingway's real achievement in the early great novels was that of a travel writer who taught a provincial American audience what dishes to order, what drinks to prefer and how to deal with the European servant class. There are moments here when we feel we are not in France or Spain but in the provisional state of Yuppiedom. A reader is given to conclude that this shrewdest of writers made an uncharacteristic mistake in not finding a war to destroy his lovers, or some action beside their own lovemaking to threaten their survival. The tone of solemn self-attention in this work rises to a portentousness that the 70,000 words of text cannot justify.

But here we are led back to the issue of editing a great writer's work after his death. As far as it is possible to tell from biography, and from the inventory of Hemingway manuscripts by Philip Young and Charles W. Mann, Hemingway intended 'The Garden of Eden' as a major work. At one point he conceived of it as one of a trilogy of books in which the sea figured. Certainly its title suggests a governing theme of his creative life, the loss of paradise, the expulsion from the garden, which controls 'The Sun Also Rises' and 'A Farewell to Arms' among other books and stories. Apparently there is extant more than one manuscript version for scholars to choose from. Carlos Baker mentions the presence of another married couple in one of the versions, a painter named Nick, and his wife, Barbara. Of the same generation as David and Catherine Bourne, Nick (is Adams his last name?) and Barbara live in Paris. And there may be additional characters. Presumably the material involving them is in a less finished state and easily stripped away to find the spare, if skimpy, novel we have now in print. But the truth about editing the work of a dead writer in such circumstances is that you can only cut to affirm his strengths, to reiterate the strategies of style for which he is known; whereas he himself may have been writing to transcend them. This cannot have been the book Hemingway

envisioned at the most ambitious moments of his struggle to realize it, a struggle that occupied him intermittently for perhaps 15 years. And it should have been published for what it is, a piece of something, part of a design.

For there are clear signs here of something exciting going on, the enlargement of a writer's mind toward compassion, toward a less defensive construal of reality. The key is the character of Catherine Bourne. She is in behavior a direct descendant of Mrs. Macomber, of 'The Short Happy Life'. or of Frances Clyne, Robert Cohn's emasculating lover in 'The Sun Also Rises', the kind of woman the author has before only detested and condemned. But here she has grown to suggest in Hemingway the rudiments of feminist perspective. And as for David Bourne, he is unmistakably the younger literary brother of Jake Barnes, the newspaperman wounded to impotence in that first expatriate novel. But David's passivity is not physical and therefore more difficult to put across. He reminds us a bit, actually, of Robert Cohn, whom Jake Barnes despised for suffering quietly the belittling remarks of women in public. Perhaps Hemingway is learning to dispense his judgments more thoughtfully. Or perhaps David Bourne was not designed as the hero of the piece at all. With a large cast and perhaps multiple points of view, something else might have been intended than what we have, a revised view of the lost generation perhaps, some additional reading of a kind of American life ex patria with the larger context that would earn the tone of the book. There are enough clues here to suggest the unmistakable signs of a recycling of Hemingway's first materials toward less romance and less literary bigotry and greater truth. That is exciting because it gives evidence, despite his celebrity, despite his Nobel, despite the torments of his own physical self-punishment, of a writer still developing. Those same writing strategies Hemingway formulated to such triumph in his early work came to entrap him in the later. You can see this beginning to happen in his 1940 novel, 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. where implanting the conception of the book in geography, and fixing all its action in time and relentlessly understating the sentences, were finally dramatic strategies not formally sufficient to the subject. I would like to think that as he began 'The Garden of Eden', his very next novel after that war work, he realized this and wanted to retool, to remake himself. That he would fail is almost not the point — but that he would have tried, which is the true bravery of a writer, requiring more courage than facing down an elephant charge with a

.303 Mannlicher.