The Lion King

Review of True At First Light
by James Wood, New York Times, July 11, 1999.

IMITATION is not original, thus no original writer is ever really imitable. This is true of Hemingway, and it paradoxically explains why he has had such a large and questionable influence on American writing. The danger of a truly original style, of course, is that it has smooth copiers but does not have rough equals. That which is imitable is neutered by repetition. What cannot be imitated is what is truly original, not necessarily because it was so great but because it was, simply, first; it has a hard and unbreakable primacy. Perhaps this is how we feel about Hemingway: we do not feel that we are in the presence of one of the greatest stylists in literature (as we feel, say, when reading Flaubert, Joyce or Proust), but rather that what is great in him is that, as it were, he preceded his own bad influence. He was, at least, the master of his wake.

Not that you would know it from 'True at First Light,' which was begun in 1954 as the record of a recent African safari, swelled to over 800 pages, was then abandoned by Hemingway and has now been published in a reduction edited by one of his sons, Patrick. It contains all that is most easily imitated of Hemingway's style, reminding us again that after about 1935 the author franchised himself in increasingly despairing outlets. The book's failings are ones that have passed into contemporary currency in American writing. There is much sloshing male sentimentality, in that now characteristic form in which masculinity is taken to be inherently metaphysical (to hunt game is to quest, to be sexually needy is to confront 'the loneliness'). There is a refusal to think at all, which is disguised as a reluctance to think about inessentials: 'As I walked forward I did not think about anything at all except that it was a lovely early evening and that I was lucky to be in Africa.'

The famous style occasionally flares into fineness but is really no more than a pretender to its former royalty. Sentences are either casually functional or busily functional; in the latter category are many sentences that are completely uninteresting except that they carry on as if they were very interesting, as if they were little lozenges of lyricism when in fact they only leak information: 'She was fresh looking in her freshly ironed, faded safari slacks and shirt and beautiful and as she poured the Campari and gin into the tall glasses and looked for a cold siphon in the canvas water bucket she said.

. . .’ Too often, the beauteous repetitions of old seem thoughtless or else careworn, as if, like someone turning his old socks inside out, Hemingway were just trying to prolong the service of his words rather than, as formerly, trying to renew their secrets: ‘It was very good snuff; not as powerful as that of Arap Meina but enough snuff to let you know you had snuff when you tucked it under your upper lip.’

Yet the book is never quite uninteresting. The flat swagger of the language keeps you wary, if only for its rare volleys. There is a kind of mottled glamour, made up of bullying integrity and nonsense, of truth and falsity, which always makes the least of Hemingway’s books compelling. (He is like D. H. Lawrence in this regard.) And here and there one comes upon delicate descriptions of animals — for instance, a herd of eland, ‘the bulls heavy with their awkward grace’ — or of a gun firing (‘G. C.’s big double was firing and I saw the blossomings of dirt from it’) or of an airplane with ‘widespread cranelike legs’ coming in to land: ‘We saw the plane come over blue and silvery and spindle-legged and buzz the camp and then we were barrelling down along the side of the clearing and she was opposite us, with the big flaps down, passing us to land without a bounce and circling now, her nose high and arrogant, throwing dust in the knee-deep white flowers.’

Michael Reynolds’s excellent and exhaustive biography, now completed with this final volume, informs us that Hemingway and his wife, Mary, travelled to Kenya in the fall of 1953, and stayed in camp until March of the next year. This was the landscape Hemingway had used so majestically in his story ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro,’ almost 20 years before. In that tale, a wounded writer waits in camp for a plane to take him away, and his memories drift, from his involvement in World War I to an apartment in Paris. In many ways, Hemingway had become that stricken writer. He had met Mary Welsh in a London restaurant in 1944, and though still married to Martha Gellhorn, had begun an intense affair. The couple married in 1946; this fourth and last marriage of Hemingway’s became a movable theater of war. Heavy drinking and mental breakdown were its climate. Reynolds acutely analyzes the happiness and suffering that both parties created and received. In 1950, Gellhorn predicted that Hemingway would ‘end in the nut house,’ and in the same year Mary wrote to her husband’s publisher, Charles Scribner, that Hemingway had been ‘truculent, brutal, abusive and extremely childish . . . it looks like the disintegration of a personality to me.’

One of the forces of disintegration, sensitively considered by Reynolds, was Hemingway’s fear that he would never write anything better than ‘For Whom the Bell Tolls,’ which appeared in 1940. ‘True at First Light’ suggests, indeed, that Hemingway’s particular talent was a genius for originality; once it had edgily founded itself, it became, in time, a slack corporation devoted to self-imitation. Presumably Hemingway recognized this; it was why he abandoned the gargantuan ‘African novel’ sometime in the late 1950’s. He would first have recognized, on the evidence of what is before us, and despite his own description, that he was not writing a novel, but a somewhat fanciful memoir. The narrator is Hemingway: he is addressed as ‘Ernie,’ he recalls seeing D. H. Lawrence in Paris and meeting George Orwell, he muses about his chances of getting the Nobel Prize and so on. (These discussions are often charming, with that flickering, rough humor and self-mockery that Hemingway’s determined detractors tend to miss.) His wife is called Mary. A native Wakamba girl, Debba, in whom Hemingway became interested, has the same name in the book as she had outside it, though it seems that in the book Hemingway exaggerates his actual involvement with her.

Most of the book is consumed by descriptions of shooting various animals — wildebeest, a lion, a tiger, some impala, some birds, some baboons; the first half is devoted to Mary’s obsessive tracking, and eventual shooting, of a large, dark-maned lion. (It seems that here again, if Reynolds is right, although Mary Welsh did kill a lion Hemingway exaggerates the depth of the actual obsession.) Mary shoots the lion, gets sick and travels to Nairobi. Hemingway is lonely without her, and visits Debba. One night, he goes out alone, armed with a spear.

The book’s preoccupation with the traffic of machismo — sex, drinking, hunting — is tiresome not because it is a preoccupation, something that all books have, after all, but because it is an unexplained preoccupation. It is unargued for, and simply assumed, that to kill a lion is an act of gravity. Clearly it is, but only once you have decided that it is important to kill lions. In the world of this book, you decide that it is important to kill lions because killing a lion is an act of gravity. This circularity of motivation simply exists here like a god: it is, in other words, a metaphysics. Hemingway and his wife live within a belief system that has no interest in explaining itself and therefore little interest in admitting the reader.

This could be a definition of metaphysical provincialism. Hemingway’s unwillingness, or inability, to include the reader in his obsessions may have something to do with the virtues and failings of his style and its gradual corruption. The perpetual danger of Hemingway’s writing is that a principled refusal to be sentimental actually stifles feeling and the explanation for feeling; then, in turn, that refusal becomes in itself sentimental. It can be put this way: Hemingway is a great truth-telling writer, except when he becomes sentimental about truth telling, and thus becomes untruthful. He is untruthful, above all, about the way most people actually think: ‘Then having a drink by the fire I was lonesome for Pop because we had sat by so many fires together and I wished we were together and he could tell me about things.' So Hemingway relaxes one evening at the camp. This masquerades as thought, but is no more than the ratification of permissible male reticence. It has the effect, throughout the book and elsewhere in Hemingway's writing, of making the hero not an active mind but merely a voyeur of his own obscurities. This Hemingwayesque creation, paradoxically alert but blocking the consequences of his alertness, can be found in Raymond Carver, in Richard Ford and in Robert Stone, and is perhaps the most depressingly familiar male hero in post-war American fiction.

This nullification of thought seems curious at first, because Hemingway's style so obviously owes so much to actual thought and the attempt to represent it. His long sequences of 'ands,' the thriving pressure of the tumbled sentences, the careful randomness of the visual detail, owe much to the first-person narration of 'Huckleberry Finn', and also something to the general modernist attempt to make consciousness a stream. Hemingway took this mimicking of the motions of thought and turned it outward, onto description itself: 'So I asked him for Wakamba words and tried to memorize them and then I thanked him and went out to the fire to sit by the fire in an old pair of pajamas from Idaho, tucked into a pair of warm mosquito boots made in Hong Kong and wearing a warm wool robe from Pendleton, Ore., and drank a whisky and soda made from a bottle of whisky Mr. Singh had given me as a Christmas present and boiled water from the stream that ran down from the Mountain animated by a siphon cartridge made in Nairobi.' This is Hemingway in the present book, but it might almost be Nick Adams of the earlier stories. Elsewhere, Hemingway wakes up from a nightmare in his tent: 'I lay and thought about that for a long time remembering many places and really bad times and I thought how wonderful it would be now after the rain and what were nightmares anyway and then I went to sleep and woke sweating again with the horrors but I listened carefully and heard Mary breathing softly and regularly and then I went back to sleep to try it once more.' This is merely babyishness posing as adulthood.

This kind of writing has the form of thought, but is not really thought. It resembles stream of consciousness, yet at every moment that consciousness is blocking thought, or allowing only a minimum of thought. It is how a mind works, perhaps, but not what a mind thinks. More often, Hemingway uses the form of stream of consciousness and applies it to description — of nature, or of a character's physical activity: 'It was pleasant in the mess tent with the heavy beating of the rain and I read and drank a little and did not worry at all about anything.'

This was Hemingway's revolution, to take first-person narration and make it into the original style of a third-person author: 'It was very beautiful in the spring and summer, the bay blue and bright and usually whitecaps on the lake out beyond the point from the breeze blowing from Charlesvoix and Lake Michigan' ('Up in Michigan'). No one could deny the force and beauty of this new style. But it always contained its own potential perversions and mutations. The danger is a kind of writing that, as in 'True at First Light,' moves like the mind but has no mind in it, that stifles feeling and then stylizes the very stifling. It is a style that flourishes its own negative veracity, but that in fact offers only negation. 'You cannot describe a wild lion's roar. You can only say that you listened and the lion roared. It is not at all like the noise the lion makes at the start of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pictures,' Hemingway writes. Language, one feels, exists precisely to drive around this admission of failure. We are reminded, perhaps, of that moment in 'A Farewell to Arms' when the hero sees a dead friend, and Hemingway writes: 'He looked very dead. It was raining. I had liked him as well as anyone I ever knew.' But if, for a brief historical moment, it was important for literature that Hemingway insist on what was not describable — that he make a hard clearing through the more untruthful descriptions of other writers — that moment soon passed, even in Hemingway's lifetime, and then he was left without proper enemies, and with merely the defense of his own forlorn lack. 'True at First Light' is the record of that lack, and as such serves as a warning to let Hemingway be, both as a literary estate and as a literary influence.