

At Sea with Ernest Hemingway

**Review of Islands In The Stream
by Christopher Ricks,
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‘YOU’RE going to write straight and simple and good now. That’s the start.’ The faded adjuration in *Islands In The Stream* is from one half of Hemingway to his other half — from the lonely uncorrupted painter Thomas Hudson to the companionable corrupted novelist Roger Davis. ‘That’s the start’: and *Islands in the Stream*, which is the end, is not straight or simple or good. Written mostly in 1951, ten years before he shot himself, it is Hemingway’s last novel; it comes hard on the callous heels of *Across The River And Into The Trees*, and it opens up the Parisian reminiscences (it has its own such) which petrified as *A Moveable Feast*. It had grown into a four-part enterprise, but Hemingway salvaged *The Old Man And The Sea*, and what now remains is Part I ‘Bimini,’ Part II ‘Cuba,’ and Part III ‘At Sea.’

‘Bimini’ is Thomas Hudson in the 1930s entertaining the three sons of his two wrecked marriages; they fish; their love leaves him open to his loneliness, and then the death of two of them leaves him nothing but lonely. ‘Cuba’ is Thomas Hudson clandestinely war-efforting in about 1942; his other son (the eldest) has been killed as a pilot; Thomas Hudson drinks; he meets his first wife who is all he has ever wanted. ‘At Sea’ is Thomas Hudson commanding the pursuit of some German U-boat survivors; the Germans die, and it may be that the wounded Thomas Hudson is about to too.

The three Parts part. According to Carlos Baker: ‘He hoped to make each section an independent unit. Later he would accomplish the welding job that would unify the whole.’ But nothing could ever have welded these together — they desperately don’t fit, which is both why Hemingway had to write the book and why he didn’t publish it. The fissures can’t even be leaped, let alone welded. Part III is *At Sea* and so is the book. ‘There aren’t any answers. You should know that by now. There aren’t any answers at all.’ But when Thomas Hudson says answers, Ernest Hemingway means questions.

Devious and secretive, *Islands In The Stream* is an elaborate refusal to say what is the matter with Thomas Hudson. It calls him Thomas Hudson throughout, which makes the reader’s relationship with him at once utterly stable and aloofly unadvancing. The book makes it impossible for us to know what is the matter with him (and so at the same time to know what was the matter with Hemingway) by an ingenious circumvention: it proliferates good reasons for him to be in a bad way. What — it asks incredulously — is the matter with him? Haven’t his marriages broken up? Doesn’t he still despairingly love his first wife? Aren’t all his sons killed? Isn’t his work as a painter threatened by drink and indiscipline? Isn’t he enduring the joyless dangers of furtive seamanship in a war which seems merely six of one and half a dozen of the other? What more do you want? Well, yes: but apart from the ‘work’ one (which doesn’t ring true but does ring

revealingly false), all of these stand rather as ex-post facto constructions than as living pains. The great swordfish here escapes; the mighty fish which Hemingway here most adroitly lands are indeed prize-winning specimens but are red herrings.

That Thomas Hudson feels the worthlessness of it all, this comes through. But his creator, with that kindest of protectings which is usually a self-protecting, decides against any painful exploration of what is the matter: instead, he scatters matters. The gap then yawns — sometimes like a crevasse, sometimes like a yawn. The ‘sinister acumen’ which W. H. Mellers half-praised in Hemingway thirty years ago (*Scrutiny*, 1939) is here bent to not giving anything away — or rather to giving away haystacks with the odd poisoned needle in them. As in the Father Brown story where there are too disconcertingly many murder weapons, so here there are altogether too many things which could have killed Thomas Hudson’s spirit. ‘He did not know what made him feel as he did.’ Nor did his creator — or if he did, he wasn’t telling. The enterprise is intricately self-defeating, at once locally steered and drivingly uncontrollable (‘It was as though he were hooked to a moving anchor’). It resembles Hamlet as it seemed to T. S. Eliot. Eliot sought an objective correlative, ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion’; what he found was pathology and failure:

Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet’s bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action.

Thomas Hudson’s three sons are slaughtered for the cruellest of markets: not commercialized sentimentality, but authorial escape. They are thrown off the sled so that Thomas Hudson — alias Ernest Hemingway — may get away. And why the frantic flight? What do you mean, those may not be wolves at all — didn’t you see me throw the children to them? It was Fitzjames Stephen who was wittily perturbed about infant mortality in Dickens: in Dickens ‘an interesting child runs as much risk . . . as any of the troops who stormed the Redan.’ In Hemingway — a trooper who stormed Redans for all he was worth — the children ought to ask danger-money. Two sons abruptly die in a car, and one in a Spitfire; such things happen, but the book should not make out that this precipitates Thomas Hudson’s bitter hopelessness. He does not really want to live whether they live or not.

‘But why did I ever leave Tom’s mother in the first place? You’d better not think about that, he told himself.’ Thomas Hudson’s favorite form of communication with himself is telling himself. Yet we should apply a remark of Thomas Hudson’s about that other kind of telling, the sharing of confidences. ‘Telling never did me any good. Telling

is worse for me than not telling.’ That is Thomas Hudson manfully not expatiating to others on his grief, but it goes for the plight of the whole book. Instead of telling, telling himself. ‘Work, he told himself.’ ‘You’d better not think about that’: was there ever a book so obsessively about not thinking about things? And yet the more often the phrase rings out, the more strangely it rings. Must there not be some quite other thing about which Thomas Hudson cannot bear to think, some deepest vacancy which these self-injunctions are to ward off? Or is it that when Thomas Hudson says he’d better not think about something, he means he’d better not think?

. . . and Thomas Hudson thought he had never seen a lovelier face nor a finer body. Except one, he thought. Except the one finest and loveliest. Don’t think about it, he told himself.

Let’s not think about the sea nor what is on it or under it, or anything connected with it. Let’s not even make a list of what we will not think about it. Let’s not think of it at all. Let’s just have the sea in being and leave it at that. And the other things, he thought. We won’t think about them either.

All right now. Don’t think about that either. If you don’t think about it, it doesn’t exist. The hell it doesn’t. But that’s the system I’m going on, he thought.

He knew they [the discovered German bullets] were the rest of his life. But he did not wish to think about them now....

‘You truly think we will have a fight?’ ‘I know it. Do not think about that. Think about details.’

Well, it keeps your mind off things. What things? There aren’t any things any more. Oh yes, there are.

He knew there was no use thinking of the girl who had been Tom’s mother nor all the things they had done and the places they had been nor how they had broken up. There was no use thinking about Tom. He had stopped that as soon as he had heard.

There was no use thinking about the others. He had lost them, too, and there was no use thinking about them. He had traded in remorse for another horse that he was riding now.

Go ahead and drink the rest of your drink and think about something good. Tom’s dead and it’s all right to think about him. You’ll never get over it. But you are solid on it now.

The instances are desolate and desolating — and not the less so for the utter unsolidity of this last sentiment (twenty pages from the end). It is not just Thomas Hudson who so unremittingly fingers his concealed wound as never to reach for his bow. Hemingway had become all wound and no bow.

And the other horse that Thomas Hudson was riding now? A bankrupt duty, that of pursuing those Germans. Gone is Hemingway's old vengeful zest of which Edmund Wilson wrote so piercingly ('indulgence in that headiest of sports: the bagging of human beings') — and a good thing it is gone. But what is left is not the disinterested but the uninterested. 'Get it straight. Your boy you lose. Love you lose. Honor has been gone for a long time. Duty you do.' But so truncated and impoverished a notion of duty does not do its duty: it — and in both ways — does for duty.

Well, I know what I have to do, so it is simple. Duty is a wonderful thing. I do not know what I would have done without duty since young Tom died. You could have painted, he told himself. Or you could have done something useful. Maybe, he thought. Duty is simpler.

But too much simpler, so much so as to be no stay (even when lacquered with hard-wearing irony) against emptiness and terror. Hence the fierce flashes of the old Hemingway — the boy's blistered struggle with the swordfish, or a bloody gloating fight at the dock. Thomas Hudson's friend Roger — with an excuse but with no real reason — smashes up a meanly abusive man. But it turns sour, and not just for Roger. Roger is the stronger and more skilled fighter. As so often in Hemingway, we are offered a 'hideous moral spoonerism: Giant the Jack Killer.' That is C. S. Lewis's dismayed evocation of Tamburlaine, and Hemingway has things in common with Marlowe. There is the single stylistic feat which is indeed a 'mighty line' and yet in both senses of the phrase. There is the reducing of life to the sensation and the sensational. And there is the problem of how much in the end someone can know about men who knows so little about women. It was a disaster for Hemingway that he had no daughters; it might have been a disaster for them if he had.

But Marlowe didn't live till he was sixty, didn't have to find out that his simple (though simply equivocal) code wasn't only inadequate to the complexities of love and of steadfastness but was inadequate even to most of the simplicities of life. It is impossible to read *Islands In The Stream* without thinking of Hemingway's suicide. So much of the book is about suicide, and often the anecdotes are so little to the point as to make it likely that the point is not where Hemingway is pretending. There is the pig which swam out to sea.

'¡Qué puerco más suicido!' Thomas Hudson said.... 'I'm sorry your pig committed such suicide.' 'Thank you,' said Thomas Hudson. 'We all have our small problems.'

There is the detailed irrelevance of 'the suicide gentleman':

We all called him Suicides by then so I said to him, 'Suicides, you better lay off or you'll never live to reach oblivion.'

Is it a laugh that (successful) Suicides is good for? And there is the discussion of committing suicide by eating phosphorus, and by drinking dye, and by setting yourself on fire. And there is Roger's mistress, who killed herself.

'You wouldn't ever do that.' 'I don't know,' Roger said. 'I've seen it look very logical.' 'One reason you wouldn't do it is because it would be a hell of an example for the boys. How would Dave feel?' 'He'd probably understand. Anyway when you get into that business that far you don't think much about examples.'

But Hemingway did think about the hell of an example which his father had set. John Berryman* has set it down:

*Tears Henry shed for poor old Hemingway
Hemingway in despair, Hemingway at the end,
the end of Hemingway,
tears in a dining room in Indiana
and that was years ago, before his marriage say,
God to him no worse luck send.*

*Save us from shotguns & fathers' suicides.
It all depends on who you're the father of
if you want to kill yourself —
a bad example, murder of oneself,
the final death, in a paroxysm, of love
for which good mercy hides?*

*A girl at the door: 'A few coppers pray'
But to return, to return to Hemingway
that cruel & gifted man.
Mercy! my father; do not pull the trigger
or all my life I'll suffer from your anger
killing what you began.*