Hemingway's New Stories and Other Recent Works of Fiction

Review of Winner Take Nothing in the New York Times by Louis Kronenburger, Nov 5, 1933

HEMINGWAY has had so many imitators and his manner has become so familiar in other men's writing that until we get back to his own work we half forget what Hemingway himself is like. He has created a fashion, almost a tradition, but it by no means completely expresses the man; in one respect, indeed, it misrepresents him. What he has bequeathed to others is a highly impersonal, hard-boiled, callous reporting of speech and behavior, and they have tightened the belt a notch and robbed life of the humanity behind it, action of the subtle intuitions behind it and speech of the emotional chaos behind its shortcomings as a mere form of expression. Hemingway's followers have tried to make morons and killers and bullies of a whole generation because they could not use his technique without using the materials it best seemed too fit. Without Hemingway there could hardly have been, for example, a gangster literature as we know it, or so much melodrama disguised as realism or sentimentality disguised as bravado.

But Hemingway's followers learned no lesson from him: they merely took their cue, which is an entirely different matter. And the dead-level impersonality they evolved misrepresents Hemingway in at least one respect. Hemingway has tremendous personality. It is not the usual kind of personality in literature, not D. H. Lawrence's or Chekhov's, or Max Beerbohm's; it isn't magnetic or inflammatory or pervasive or repellent; indeed, it is a personality in retreat, almost in hiding; an implied personality just as Hemingway's sense of values is an implied sense of values. For though he writes with his ear cocked and his eye coolly leveled, he writes with himself tautly withheld, which is not the same as keeping himself in the background. He has superb drive but no gusto, fine perceptions but little sense of identification. One feels that he learns about people by listening to them, not by talking to them. In the end he probably learns more that way, but he remains in some subtle sense a stranger among his characters.

Everybody, more or less, has commented upon the fact that at bottom Hemingway is a romantic and a sentimentalist. It is not a new discovery, yet it remains an interesting one to discuss. What, both in his life and his writing, has his highly masculine and often brutal world given to him so that he need not enlarge upon it; and what has it replaced? It has given him the physical sensations of direct action, rude contact, swift pace. It has given him something to be downright and, if necessary, harsh about without exposing himself as inhumane; it has given him somebody else's code to interpret so that he need not formulate (which is a much harder job) a code of his own; it has given him, perhaps, the right to despise. It has replaced a world filled with much more dubiety and anguish; a world whose restraints are more painful than Mr. Hemingway's total holding back, a world whose sentimentality is all loose ends and not a dammed up spate. Mr.

Hemingway's nostalgia, it strikes one sometimes, is for that world; the nostalgia of that world itself is something beyond — or behind — it.

In this new book of stories we get close to that world on a few occasions, however casual or gruff or gingerly the approach. There is a wavering toward it in Fathers and Sons, in Wine of Wyoming, in A Day's Wait, in the crudely ironic pathos of The Light of the World. The human note of these stories is speeded up or soft-pedaled, yet breaks through. In Fathers and Sons it breaks through most clearly; and there, perhaps sentimentally one's self, one sees the issue involved in Hemingway's determination to be always an objective, never a subjective, writer: he will not let memories be memories to him, they must always be facts.

Yet can any writer go on and on writing about the same things when they are merely things he has observed, overhead, impaled with his intelligence? A subjective writer can tell the same story his whole life long because it means everything to him; a Proust or a Jane Austen can go on endlessly observing because he observes his own heritage or her own great dream; but the world Hemingway has made so familiar to us is neither heritage nor dream to him; he is simply its consummate reporter. The reporting in almost all these stories is superlative; the dialogue is admirable, the rapidly sketched-in picture is vivid, whole; the way of life is caught and conveyed without a hitch. It is not that the more typical of these tales represent mere virtuosity — they represent something more; it is not that the life they portray isn't worth exploring. But Hemingway has explored it beyond its worth. One does not cavil on moral grounds; one does not cavil on esthetic grounds; one does not cavil on human grounds. It is no doubt on philosophical grounds that one does object — because of the ultimate wastefulness of showing us things without infusing them into a more spacious canvas, without providing them with transcending values. As Hemingway presents his hard, stupid, aimless, greedy people they imply little more than the truth that they exist. Hemingway's world has been compared to many others, but not to one with which it has everything, and yet nothing, in common: Villon's. The bitter, melancholy, profoundly compassionate flame that has kept Villon's world alive for 500 years, that has given it permanent meaning, is what Hemingway needs a little of. One reads a story like the first and finest in the present book, a story called After the Storm, and one deeply regrets that in the main such incomparable equipment as Hemingway's goes off so many times with a proud and clean report — and hits nothing.