

Papa lives

The reissue of four Hemingway novels prompts an assessment of the author's reputation by James Atlas, associate editor *The Atlantic*, Oct 1983

IT'S always a gamble to re-read the books one loved in youth. Most of Fitzgerald still holds up, but Thomas Wolfe is virtually unreadable. J. D. Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye* turns out to be as good as I remembered it, but *Franny and Zooey* is unbearably cute. Scribner has recently reissued in hardcover Ernest Hemingway's four major works — *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *The Old Man And The Sea* — and I made my way through them again, mesmerised by Hemingway's genius as a storyteller and alarmed by the vicissitudes of his prose.

The discrepancy between eloquence and maudlin self-indulgence was often visible on a single page; I never knew when he would soar and when he would lapse into the fabled macho pose that has proved so irresistible to parody. (I especially recommend Dwight Macdonald's essay in *Against The American Grain*, which begins: 'He was a big man with a bushy beard and everybody knew him.') But there is something moving about this uneven achievement; Hemingway's tremendous vulnerability and his dogged efforts to master it, to push on at whatever cost, gave his life and work a terrible pathos.

Hemingway's apprenticeship, like everything else about him, constitutes a legend. By his early twenties he had found a style, the crisp declarative sentences and willfully simple diction of *In Our Time*; and with *The Sun Also Rises*, begun just after his return from Pamplona in 1925, he found his narrative voice. The dissolute expatriate scene he depicts may seem overly familiar to us now, the spare dialogue mannered, but Hemingway never sentimentalises Jake Barnes's obsession with Lady Brett; the story's action, from Paris to Pamplona, unfolds with calculated simplicity.

He had already mastered a technique of leaving things out that gave special emphasis to what he left in. Here is Jake Barnes looking over a whore:

'She grinned and I saw why she made a point of not laughing. With her mouth closed she was a rather pretty girl.'

The only thing we're told about one Harvey Stone is that he 'had a pile of saucers in front of him, and he needed a shave' — enough to convey his situation and the shabbiness of the whole boulevard scene. In a Montmartre nightclub, Jake glances over at the count who has become his latest rival for Brett and notices that 'there were three girls at his table', establishing the count's decadence in a single image. Everything is understated,

compressed — evidence of how confident Hemingway was of his material. I wasn't surprised to learn from Bernice Kert's gossipy new book, *The Hemingway Women*, that he wrote the first draft of *The Sun Also Rises* in two months; it has a concentrated fluency that no amount of revision can achieve, and that comes from having something definite to say.

Some novelists confess their weaknesses in their work; Hemingway confessed his strengths. He made his central characters men who stood apart from the terrible things they saw and studied life with cold detachment. Even when they got hurt, they were stoical about it. Jake suffers his rejection at Brett's hands without complaint, just as Lieutenant Frederic Henry, in *A Farewell To Arms*, endures the death of his lover, the English nurse Catherine Barkley. That Hemingway's marriage was falling apart in Pamplona, that the nurse he fell in love with while recovering from a wound received while driving an ambulance [*actually delivering chocolate and cigarettes to Italian troops in the frontline trenches*] during World War I eventually ditched him for someone else, are facts of more than biographical interest: the only way he could deal with them in his work was by omission (Jake is unmarried) or by having the woman who betrayed him die in childbirth. He could never allow his protagonists to be confused or weak. They're shadowy figures, so well defended that they nearly forfeit our sympathy. One feels that these guys can take care of themselves.

It seems fair to say that Hemingway never really understood himself. His well-publicised front of bravado and he-man feats masked a nature that was somehow empty. What comes through in the huge volume of letters edited by Carlos Baker is the portrait of a man utterly deluded about the extent and sources of his pain, a malicious bully whose exploits served to fill up a life in which something — love, empathy, genuine interest in others — was missing. He could never seem to hit upon the right tone, addressing his correspondents in a garrulous, swaggering voice that always came off sounding hollow ('Hadley and I have been very tight and having a swell time'). He dwelled with sentimental enthusiasm on the joys of domestic life while going through four wives; praised his contemporaries to their faces and dismissed them after they died; disparaged and celebrated himself in the same breath ('I am truly, and I say this in all humility, very brave; that is brave enough to sell it as a commodity . . .'). He laid bare his confusion, his resentment, his doubt, in everything he wrote, but never seemed to know it.

Hemingway's literary versions of himself reflect this self-deception. Jake, Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, are men without qualities, bleak-hearted adventurers obsessed with proving themselves. Jake has to show off how much he knows about bullfights, and Lieutenant Henry is annoyingly competitive, putting down the doctor who doesn't drink and admiring the one who does; ridiculing a boxing

instructor who ‘went all to pieces if you started after him’; boasting of his sexual prowess, his bravery, his taste in wine. Robert Jordan is another virile guy, an unreal exemplar of Hemingway’s motto, ‘grace under pressure.’ Vain about his ability to identify types of guns and planes (‘Now, as they moved out of sight toward Segovia, they did not look to be the green, red wing-tipped, low flying Russian conversion of the Boeing P32 that the Spaniards called Moscas’), and patronising toward the guerrillas he’s working with behind the fascist lines (‘give the men tobacco and leave the women alone’), Jordan is too courageous to be believed. He can ride, shoot, wire a bridge with explosives, even face his own death with equanimity. Fear is just another obstacle to be mastered.

Whenever Hemingway leaves his heroes to themselves (usually during some lull in the action), he gets in trouble. They can’t seem to reminisce without becoming sentimental. Frederic Henry recalling the joys of whoring in the Abruzzi (*‘Suddenly to care very much and to sleep to wake with it sometimes morning and all that had been there gone and everything sharp and hard and clear . . .’*) sounds like a bad imitation of Molly Bloom. Jordan goes on at tedious length about the good old days, musing reverentially on his grandfather’s heroic deeds in the Civil War (*‘Aw hell, I wish Grandfather was here, he thought’*) and dismissing his father, a suicide like Hemingway’s, as *‘that other one that misused the gun’*. This is the closest Hemingway ever gets to writing about what must have been one of the most traumatic episodes of his life.

A bitter loneliness afflicts these characters. The only love Hemingway ever convincingly describes is between various ‘buddies’ — Jake and his fishing companions, Henry and his roommate — who provide the special kind of fellowship that harks back to boyhood, sharing stuff girls don’t know about. Women seem to exist wholly for the pleasure of his protagonists, like the good whiskey they’re always extolling. The dialogue between Henry and his lover, Catherine, is enough to make one wince:

‘We won’t fight.’

‘We mustn’t. Because there’s only us two and in the world there’s all the rest of them. If anything comes between us we’re gone and then they have us.’

‘They won’t get us,’ I said. ‘Because you’re too brave. Nothing ever happens to the brave.’

And so on. Henry is gruff but tender-hearted, Catherine utterly passive — an ‘adolescent daydream,’ in Macdonald’s pitiless estimate. And the love scenes in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are even worse; Robert Jordan can’t look at Maria without feeling ‘a thickness in his throat’ (I counted four such thickenings within as many pages). The

lovers' notorious talk about how 'the earth moved' when they made love is more ludicrous than I remembered. Hemingway was obviously fond of the phrase; they resort to it three times on a single page, and then Maria tries it out on the wise old woman Pilar, vying with her for the distinction of who has known the earth to move most times. Nothing is harder to write than sex scenes, but Hemingway's stream-of-consciousness rendering of this geological phenomenon ('Come now, now, for there is no now but now. Yes, now. Now, please now . . .') isn't one of the more notable attempts.

Faced with the technical problem of how to put into English a novel whose entire cast speaks in Spanish, Hemingway hit upon the curious method of literally translating Spanish grammar, diction, and idiom to convey the language's character. (A case of imitative fallacy, if there ever was one.) Thus we have, repeated again and again, such peculiar curses as 'I obscenity in the milk of thy mother,' and 'Take your bad milk out of here, you horse exhausted *máricón*.' Pilar, in a highly implausible flashback that goes on for some thirty pages, speaks in a kind of stylised poetry that no one has ever spoken and only Hemingway ever wrote:

And as we stood there the sun rose over the far hills and shone now on the road where we stood and on the white wall of the barracks and the dust in the air was golden in that first sun and the peasant who was beside me looked at the wall of the barracks and what lay there and then looked at us and then at the sun and said, 'Vaya, a day that commences.'

This from a writer noted for his command of idiom.

Hemingway couldn't not write in this style. It was 'his way of life,' Harry Levin noted, in a brilliant anatomy of its features (see *Memories Of The Moderns*), a reflection of his remorseless will to see, and to register what he saw with as little elaboration as possible. The linked, run-on sentences, the plain vocabulary, the internal monologues, are pared down to give the narrative momentum. Among their many virtues, Hemingway's novels are exciting to read; they course with rapid action. What gives his novels such heightened urgency is the succession of brisk images. Hemingway can sustain a breathless pace for chapters at a time, piling image upon image, scene upon scene, until the need to know what happens next submerges every other consideration. He isn't a leisurely read.

One of the most powerful impressions one gets from *The Sun Also Rises* is of how desolate Hemingway felt by the time he was in his twenties. The novel is saturated with details that convey an overpowering sense of depression:

The flags in the square hung wet from the white poles and the banners were wet and hung damp against the front of the houses, and in

between the steady drizzle the rain came down and drove every one under the arcades and made pools of water in the square, and the streets wet and dark and deserted; yet the fiesta kept up without any pause. It was only driven under cover.

For all the devoted attention he lavishes on the world — the sad beauty of Paris, the pristine clarity of a trout stream high up in the mountains — an aura of profound melancholy clings to Jake and his crowd. The fiesta in Pamplona is evoked with a detached exactitude that points up the characters' desperation: the incessant piping of fifes; the drunken men in the cafés 'singing the hard-voiced singing'; the 'wine-shops with light coming out from their doors onto the wet, black street' in the town at night.

Against this somber backdrop, the deceptions of Lady Brett and her thwarted, quarrelling lovers seem even more heartbreaking. When Brett confesses to Jake that she's fallen for the matador and pleads with him to arrange a tryst, Hemingway manages to write the entire scene without a single reference to how Jake felt except that 'it was not pleasant.' After Brett and the matador go off, he returns to the café and notices their three empty cognac glasses on the table: 'A waiter came with a cloth and picked up the glasses and mopped off the table. There the chapter ends.

The cinematic quality of this style, its immediacy and urgent pace, made it a perfect vehicle for the war scenes that were Hemingway's great achievement. His ability to chronicle the experience of combat was unequalled — an astonishing accomplishment for someone who never actually fought in either World War I or the Spanish Civil War. The logistics of troop movements, the panic of soldiers and fleeing peasants, the contrast between the natural beauty of the countryside and the ruin war inflicts: it was when Hemingway was working with a large canvas that he was most effective. The shelling, the wounded on stretchers, the caravans of trucks moving through the mountains in *A Farewell to Arms*, have a lurid, Goyaesque clarity:

The wounded were coming into the post, some were carried on stretchers, some walking and some were brought on the backs of men that came across the field. They were wet to the skin and all were scared. We filled two cars with stretcher cases as they came up from the cellar of the post and as I shut the door of the second car and fastened it I felt the rain on my face turn to snow. The flakes were coming heavy and fast in the rain.

Here the syntax spills forward with scarcely a qualifying adjective, depending for its effect on repetition and on strong monosyllabic verbs. Henry's portentous musings on the futility of war seem fatuous beside his clear-eyed account of how war looks.

A Farewell To Arms is narrated in the first person; For Whom The Bell Tolls, published eleven years later, is told by a whole cast of characters — Robert Jordan, Jordan's lover, Maria, the peasants enlisted to help Jordan blow a bridge, a famous revolutionary, various Loyalist officers, even a fascist lieutenant. The novel shifts effortlessly from voice to voice, enabling Hemingway to portray the war from every side. Jordan's is the least plausible of these voices; it's the peasants who bring home the courage and terror latent in every skirmish. The mean-spiritedness that spoils Hemingway's letters and his memoir, A Moveable Feast, is nowhere in evidence. For those who were no threat — soldiers, peasants, doomed revolutionaries — Hemingway was capable of unaffected sympathy, and his intuitions about what they must have gone through constitute a radical imaginative feat. The scene where a few guerrillas make their last stand on a hilltop, fending off a battalion of fascists only to perish when planes are brought in to bomb them from above, is nearly unbearable to read. Praying madly, firing at the strafing planes, they're caught at the very moment of death:

Then, through the hammering of the gun, there was the whistle of the air splitting apart and then in the red black roar the earth rolled under his knees and then waved up to hit him in the face and then dirt and bits of rock were falling all over and Ignacio was lying on him and the gun was lying on him. But he was not dead because the whistle came again and the earth rolled under him with the roar. Then it came again and the earth lurched under his belly and one side of the hilltop rose into the air and then fell slowly over them where they lay.

Hemingway's terse valediction is a masterpiece of indirect summary:

'The planes came back three times and bombed the hilltop but no one on the hilltop knew it.'

For Whom The Bell Tolls made Hemingway a hero of the left in Spain, but he was too shrewd an artist to write a partisan book. The fascist lieutenant who storms the hill is given equal time to brood about how war is hell, and when, on the last page, Jordan lies dying behind a tree, submachine gun at the ready to take a few fascists with him, who should ride into view but this same lieutenant. Men are men, and both sides suffer equally: a hackneyed truth, perhaps, but a profound one.

The end of Hemingway's career was a sad business. The last novels were self-parodies, none more so than The Old Man And The Sea. The internal monologues of Hemingway's crusty fisherman are unwittingly comical (*'My head is not that clear. But I think the great Dimaggio would be proud of me today'*); and the message, that fish are *'more noble and more able'* than men, is fine if you're a seventh grader. *'The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish,'* Hemingway

explained to Bernard Berenson. ‘All the symbolism that people say is shit.’ He was right about that.

Why do so many American writers have disastrous final years? I suspect the public attention devoted to their careers has something to do with it. Hemingway claimed to have nothing but contempt for the journalistic creation known as ‘Papa,’ but the safari-suited, marlin-hunting tough whose exploits filled the pages of Life magazine was a persona he created himself. The vow of unworldliness demanded as a condition of belonging to the order of artists wasn’t for him, and he made sure everyone knew it. Hemingway resisted the narrowness of the writer’s life in America as strenuously as he could — hunting, fishing, covering wars — but he was always haunted by that next book. Like Fitzgerald and Faulkner, Dos Passos and James T. Farrell, he had done his best work by the time he reached his forties but he forced himself to go on, toting up the number of words he produced each morning until he killed himself. Maybe if he’d found some other way to live his life, some role that honored his achievement without demanding that he exceed it, he wouldn’t have felt compelled to keep on writing when he had nothing more to say

Even so, he managed to produce — since we must keep score — three novels and an imposing opus of stories that have lasted, as he knew they would. For all his bluster, his conspicuous roistering in far-off lands, his stubborn production of bad books, he was an obsessive craftsman who created through sheer hard work one of the most distinctive prose styles in the English language. To read through these handsome, plainly designed editions of his best-known works is to be reminded that whether or not he ‘beat Mr de Maupassant’ or ‘fought two draws with Mr Stendhal,’ as he once boasted to a reporter, Hemingway could go the distance with any novelist of the twentieth century.