Was 'Papa' a Truly Great Writer?

by Maxwell Geismar,
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IT WILL be a year tomorrow since the death of Ernest Hemingway. The testimonials, the encomiums are in. The reminisces have begun, and a full-dress biography is under way. It is not too soon to try to strike a balance between whatever is limited and transient in his writing, whatever durable, memorable.

It is no secret that during Hemingway's later years the more he became a popular symbol of 'art' in the United States, the more his serious reputation declined — perhaps because he himself no longer appeared to be serious as an artist. Perhaps this was due to the unfortunate persona, or public mask, which Ernest Hemingway chose for himself during his later career; the benign 'Papa' of American fiction, who, however benign, brooked little interference and less criticism. He might have done better to remember the aging Walt Whitman who 'made much of negatives' and yet cried to his Creator: 'Old, poor and paralyzed, I thank Thee.' Or again, take the ridiculed and neglected Herman Melville, who on his deathbed, describing life itself as that 'oblique, tedious, barren game hardly worth the poor candle burnt out in playing it', still left us the beautiful and immortal 'Billy Budd.' Hemingway, by contrast, had very early trapped himself into the stereotype of the romantic and virile literary 'man of action', so American in essence, and so little conducive to either intellectual or emotional development.

The magic pen of Hemingway's earlier and authentic talent never deserted him, even in some of the inferior later works. A re-reading of his first collection of stories, 'In Our Time' (1925) or his early novel, 'A Farewell to Arms' (1929), makes it easy to understand the impact upon the post-World War I period of a new style and a singular vision of contemporary experience. The earliest sketches of Hemingway's boyhood in the Michigan woods (his hero was called Nick Adams) were encircled by a boundary of pain, suffering and human loss. The horrors of World War I confirmed this native bent of Hemingway's dark talent. This was the perfect meeting of a temperament and a time, both equally ridden by convulsive agonies of destruction and death.

For this anatomy of war, all of whose tissues were saturated by pain rather than evil (since Hemingway apparently made no moral judgments; nor was he interested in social or historical 'causes' or, let us say, sequences), he evolved his famous flat style: the literal, factual description the 'way things are.' 'They shot the six cabinet ministers at half-past six in the morning against the wall of a hospital. There were pools of water in the courtyard.' What cabinet ministers of what country, for what crime, or for what historical movement, and with what justice, or with what miscarriage of justice, we are

never told. Rather as in the case of another earlier American virtuoso, Stephen Crane, these elements were rigorously excluded from the writer's art, in order to intensify the descriptions of pure pain and horror.

It was in these earliest books of Hemingway's, too, that his Nick Adams recorded his decision to make 'a separate peace' with the society or the culture which had created such scenes of senseless sufferings. In 'A Farewell to Arms', another early Hemingway protagonist, Lieut. Frederick Henry, is a deserter from the Italian Army after the great defeat at Caporetto. This novel remains one of Hemingway's best works just because or its descriptions of army life, of the marvelous Italian peasants, and of its central, if highly romantic, love affair. But 'The Sun Also Rises' (1926), the novel which almost created the Lost Generation of the post-war expatriates, seems less good today; more artificial, brittle and mannered. Just as none of us could live up to the disenchantment of all those attractive, wounded, desolate pleasure-seekers in the Basque country (as I wrote about this book in the early 1940s), few of us managed to be so overwhelmingly ineffectual. Hemingway's post-war generation was frustrated with an intensity and cunning of purpose, with an almost diabolical sense of self-defeat, that was far from being realistic.

In the 1930s, a period of relative 'peace' amidst the social anarchy, the revolutionary turmoil, the life-and-death upheavals and convulsions of contemporary history, the mood and tone of Hemingway's work became even darker. He retreated in 'Death in the Afternoon' (1932) from the 'game of war' (the game of life) to the sport of bull-fighting in Spain. This book was bitterly attacked (and with some cause) by the new generation of social critics in the early years of the Depression. We realize now that Hemingway had found his 'positive', his form of belief, in the primitive virtue of both the matador and the bull. Quite similarly, for a writer who was concerned only with the high moments in life, who scorned all its domestic details and all its prosaic surfaces — a writer who deriving from the suburbs of Oak Park, Ill., became a great primitive of modern letters — Hemingway found the true drama of animal dignity and courage in the moment of the kill. But the great virtue of this book was that Hemingway's sympathies were still equally divided between the victor and the victim: the matador and the bull were united in the moment of final fusion, the moment of life-in-death.

Well, frankly, even while I state this thesis, I must admit it appears to be an odd diversion for a major artist. Ring Lardner, during the same period, annihilated bull-fighting as a 'sport' with a few well-chosen pages of poker-faced nonsense. Yet in 'The Green Hills of Africa' (1935), Hemingway continued with the same themes, and the same central trinity of the hunter, the hunted and death as the fusion, the synthesis and the climax. Here, too, he celebrated his own divorce from modern civilization more explicitly and even more eloquently. He was through serving time 'for society, democracy and the other things.' It was easier, he declared, 'to keep well in a good country' (that is, Africa) by taking simple precautions than 'to pretend that a country which is finished is still

good.' (And that was, the United States of America.) 'Our people went to America because that was the place to go then. It has been a good country, and we had made a bloody mess of it and I would go now somewhere else as we had always the right to go somewhere else and as we had always gone. You could always come back.'

There were curious undertones in such utterances, of course. Who were 'our people', and who were the 'others' who had come to America because they did not know it was too late? Rather like Henry James, the more Hemingway abandoned his own country, the more right he claimed to sole ownership. Yet, nevertheless, such are the ways of genius, the period of the 1930s was also the period of the great dark short-stories of Ernest Hemingway which will remain as his most enduring contribution to world literature. These appeared in a series of volumes, from 'Men Without Women' (1927) to 'Winner Take Nothing' (1933) and the collection called 'The Fifth column and the First Forty-Nine Stories', in 1938. And what stories they are! You may remember the Billy Campbell of 'A Pursuit Race', who has shot himself full of dope and retired to bed. (The cool sheets are as soothing as a woman.) 'They got a cure for that,' says his manager. 'No,' says Billy, 'they haven't got a cure for anything.'

There is Frazier's monologue in 'The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio' — this Hemingway protagonist who 'avoided thinking', as we are told, 'except when he was writing', and who concludes that bread, and not religion, is the opium of the people. (Along with economics, patriotism, sexual intercourse, gambling, ambition, a belief in 'any new form of government', so Hemingway declared, and of course drinking, perhaps the best opiate.) There is the famous Spanish 'nada' of 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'. 'Hail nothing, full of nothing, nothing is with thee'. There is the American business man's brief 'coming of age' in 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber', when he loses his lifelong sense of fear and becomes a man — just before his wife takes him out with a well-placed rifle shot. There is the dying and distraught artist-hero of 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' (reputed to be Scott Fitzgerald, but actually closer to Hemingway himself), tracing the ruins of his life and career in a feverish reverie of horror.

These stories, as well as the more famous and highly anthologized tales like 'The Killers', are at the core of Hemingway's work; and within their framework they are perfect. No artist who wrote such stories can ever be ignored, or patronized — even though he had reached the end of his own demonic, solitary and obsessed talent. His future direction was uncertain, his later work imperfect.

The novel, 'To Have and to Have Not' (1937), marked, apparently, both Hemingway's return to the United States and to contemporary civilization itself. He had returned, if briefly, to Key West to record a memorable epitaph on the Boom period of the 1920s. 'Some made the long drop from the apartment or the office window; some took it quietly in two-car garages with the motor running; some used the native tradition

of the Colt or Smith and Wesson: those well-constructed implements that end insomnia, terminate remorse, cure cancer, avoid bankruptcy.' And it was here, in a novel which was itself both desperate and disorganized, that Hemingway's racketeer-hero, Harry Morgan, also dying, made his famous decision to rejoin the human race. 'A man . . . One man alone ain't got . . . No man alone now . . . No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody . . . chance.'

This was the prelude to Hemingway's belated social conversion in the play called 'The Fifth Column' and the famous and popular novel of 1940, 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' — a novel of the Spanish Civil War which sold close to a million copies. Sometimes called Hemingway's best novel, too, it is a curious mixture of good and bad, of marvelous scenes and chapters which are balanced off by improbably or sentimental or melodramatic passages of adolescent fantasy. For you couldn't always 'come back', as Hemingway had declared; or if you did, you paid the price of leaving.

The younger and typical American writer of the Depression years, Tom Wolfe, knew the score more accurately in his 'You Can't Go Home Again'. Here, like many another fiction writer fiction writer of the 1920s, Hemingway paid the price for the cutting of his native roots. An earlier generation of American realists, from Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson to Ellen Glasgow, who had never dissociated themselves from their native society even when they appeared most critical of it, continued, like their European counterparts, to develop and grow. Hemingway, by contrast, simply continued to pour the romantic emotions of youth, now somewhat stereotyped and stylized, into his aging later heroes. In this respect, 'Across the River and Into the Trees' (1950) was probably his worst novel. In a kind of Jungean reversal, all of this artist's prejudices, affections and obsessions, usually contained within the rigid discipline of his craft, were released in this chronicle of a veteran of World War II.

'The Old Man and the Sea' (1952) was a partial comeback, though again Hemingway celebrated the familiar theme of the solitary individual drifting on a blind and hostile sea of life: a watery Darwinian universe of shark-eat-shark, and winner take nothing. The Nobel Prize awarded for this book was in effect (and as usual) a recognition for earlier, more original and more enduring work.

Yes, it is true that the boundaries of Ernest Hemingway's literary reputation have contracted since the first glowing period of his advent. That was the time when the present reviewer, with many others, believed he was the brightest talent of the modern American epoch. In that sense he is a writer who gets smaller as you grow older. Yet there still lies at the very center of Hemingway's world that perfect cluster of great short stories which are as immune to criticism as they will be impervious to time.