# Last Words: Those Hemingway Wrote, And Those He Didn't

**By Joan Didion, The New Yorker, October 25, 1998.**

> *'In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.'*

SO GOES the famous first paragraph of Ernest Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms,' which I was moved to reread by the recent announcement that what was said to be Hemingway's last novel would be published posthumously next year. That paragraph, which was published in 1929, bears examination: four deceptively simple sentences, one hundred and twenty-six words, the arrangement of which remains as mysterious and thrilling to me now as it did when I first read them, at twelve or thirteen, and imagined that if I studied them closely enough and practiced hard enough I might one day arrange one hundred and twenty-six such words myself.

Only one of the words has three syllables. Twenty-two have two. The other hundred and three have one. Twenty-four of the words are '*the*,' fifteen are '*and*.' There are four commas. The liturgical cadence of the paragraph derives in part from the placement of the commas (their presence in the second and fourth sentences, their absence in the first and third), but also from that repetition of '*the'* and of '*and*,' creating a rhythm so pronounced that the omission of '*the'* before the word '*leaves'* in the fourth sentence ('*and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling*') casts exactly what it was meant to cast, a chill, a premonition, a foreshadowing of the story to come, the awareness that the author has already shifted his attention from late summer to a darker season. The power of the paragraph, offering as it does the illusion but not the fact of specificity, derives precisely from this kind of deliberate omission, from the tension of withheld information. In the late summer of *what* year? *What* river, *what* mountain, *what* troops?

We all know the 'life' of the man who wrote that paragraph. The rather reckless attractions of the domestic details became fixed in the national memory stream: *Ernest and Hadley have no money, so they ski at Cortina all winter. Pauline comes to stay. Ernest and Hadley are at odds with each other over Pauline, so they all take refuge at Juan-les-*

*Pins. Pauline catches cold, and recuperates at the Waldorf-Astoria.* We have seen the snapshots: the celebrated author fencing with the bulls at Pamplona, fishing for marlin off Havana, boxing at Bimini, crossing the Ebro with the Spanish loyalists, kneeling beside 'his' lion or 'his' buffalo or 'his' oryx on the Serengeti Plain. We have observed the celebrated author's survivors, read his letters, deplored or found lessons in his excesses, in his striking of attitudes, in the humiliations of his claim to personal machismo, in the degradations both derived from and revealed by his apparent tolerance for his own celebrity.

'This is to tell you about a young man named Ernest Hemingway, who lives in Paris (an American), writes for the *transatlantic review* and has a brilliant future,' F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to Maxwell Perkins in 1924. 'I'd look him up right away. He's the real thing.' By the time 'the real thing' had seen his brilliant future both realized and ruined, he had entered the valley of extreme emotional fragility, of depressions so grave that by February of 1961, after the first of what would be two courses of shock treatment, he found himself unable to complete even the single sentence he had agreed to contribute to a ceremonial volume for President John F. Kennedy.

Early on the Sunday morning of July 2, 1961, the celebrated author got out of his bed in Ketchum, Idaho, went downstairs, took a double-barrelled Boss shotgun from a storage room in the cellar, and emptied both barrels into the center of his forehead. 'I went downstairs,' his fourth wife, Mary Welsh Hemingway, reported in her 1976 memoir, 'How It Was,' saw a crumpled heap of bathrobe and blood, the shotgun lying in the disintegrated flesh, in the front vestibule of the sitting room.'

The didactic momentum of the biography was such that we sometimes forgot that this was a writer who had in his time made the English language new, changed the rhythms of the way both his own and the next few generations would speak and write and think. The very grammar of a Hemingway sentence dictated, or was dictated by, a certain way of looking at the world, a way of looking but not joining, a way of moving through but not attaching, a kind of romantic individualism distinctly adapted to its time and source. If we bought into those sentences, we would see the troops marching along the road, but we would not necessarily march with them. We would report, but not join. We would make, as Nick Adams made in the Nick Adams stories and as Frederic Henry made in 'A Farewell to Arms,' a separate peace: 'In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more.'

So pervasive was the effect of this Hemingway diction that it became the voice not only of his admirers but even of those whose approach to the world was in no way grounded in romantic individualism. I recall being surprised, when I was teaching George Orwell in a class at Berkeley in 1975, by how much of Hemingway could be heard in his sentences. 'The hills opposite us were grey and wrinkled like the skins of elephants,' Orwell had written in 'Homage to Catalonia' in 1938. 'The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white,' Hemingway had written in 'Hills Like White Elephants' in 1927. 'A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details,' Orwell had written in 'Politics and the English Language' in 1946. 'I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain,' Hemingway had written in ‘A Farewell to Arms’ in 1929. ‘There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.’

This was a man to whom words mattered. He worked at them, he understood them, he got inside them. When he was twenty-four years old and reading submissions to Ford Madox Ford’s transatlantic review he would sometimes try rewriting them, just for practice. His wish to be survived by only the words he determined fit for publication would have seemed clear enough. ‘I remember Ford telling me that a man should always write a letter thinking of how it would read to posterity,’ he wrote to Arthur Mizener in 1950. ‘This made such a bad impression on me that I burned every letter in the flat including Ford’s.’ In a letter dated May 20, 1958, addressed ‘To my Executors’ and placed in his library safe at La Finca Vigia, he wrote, ‘It is my wish that none of the letters written by me during my lifetime shall be published. Accordingly, I hereby request and direct you not to publish or consent to the publication by others of any such letters.’

His widow and executor, Mary Welsh Hemingway, describing the burden of this restriction as one that ‘caused me continuous trouble, and disappointment to others,’ eventually chose to violate it, publishing excerpts from certain letters in ‘How It Was’ and granting permission to Carlos Baker to publish some six hundred others in his ‘Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917–1961.’ ‘There can be no question about the wisdom and rightness of the decision,’ Baker wrote, for the letters ‘will not only instruct and entertain the general reader but also provide serious students of literature with the documents necessary to the continuing investigation of the life and achievements of one of the giants of twentieth-century American fiction.’

The peculiarity of being a writer is that the entire enterprise involves the mortal humiliation of seeing one’s own words in print. The risk of publication is the grave fact of the life, and, even among writers less inclined than Hemingway to construe words as the manifest expression of personal honor, the notion that words one has not risked publishing should be open to ‘continuing investigation’ by ‘serious students of literature’ could not be calculated to kindle enthusiasm. ‘Nobody likes to be tailed,’ Hemingway himself had in 1952 advised one such investigator, Charles A. Fenton of Yale, who on the evidence of the letters was tormenting Hemingway by sending him successive drafts of what would be ‘The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years.’ ‘You do not like to be tailed, investigated, queried about, by any amateur detective no matter how scholarly or how straight. You ought to be able to see that, Fenton.’ A month later Hemingway tried again. ‘I think you ought to drop the entire project,’ he wrote to Fenton, adding, ‘It is impossible to arrive at any truth without the co-operation of the person involved. That co-operation involves very nearly as much effort as for a man to write his autobiography.’ A few months later, he was still trying:

> *In the first page or pages of your Mss. I found so many errors of fact that I could spend the rest of this winter re-writing and giving you the true gen and I would not be able to write anything of my own at all. . . . Another thing: You have located unsigned pieces by me through pay vouchers. But you do not know which pieces were changed or re-written by the copy desk*

> *and which were not. I know nothing worse for a writer than for his early writing which has been re-written and altered to be published without permission as his own.*
>
> *Actually I know few things worse than for another writer to collect a fellow writer's journalism which his fellow writer has elected not to preserve because it is worthless and publish it.*
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> *Mr. Fenton I feel very strongly about this. I have written you so before and I write you now again. Writing that I do not wish to publish, you have no right to publish. I would no more do a thing like that to you than I would cheat a man at cards or rifle his desk or wastebasket or read his personal letters.*

It might seem safe to assume that a writer who commits suicide has been less than entirely engaged by the work he leaves unfinished, yet there appears to have been not much question about what would happen to the unfinished Hemingway manuscripts. These included not only 'the Paris stuff' (as he called it), or 'A Moveable Feast' (as Scribner's called it), which Hemingway had in fact shown to Scribner's in 1959 and then withdrawn for revision, but also the novels later published under the titles 'Islands in the Stream' and 'The Garden of Eden,' several Nick Adams stories, what Mrs. Hemingway called the 'original treatment' of the bullfighting pieces published by Life before Hemingway's death (this became 'The Dangerous Summer'), and what she described as 'his semi-fictional account of our African safari,' three selections from which she had published in Sports Illustrated in 1971 and 1972.

What followed was the systematic creation of a marketable product, a discrete body of work different in kind from, and in fact tending to obscure, the body of work published by Hemingway in his lifetime. So successful was the process of branding this product that in October, according to the House & Home section of the New York Times, Thomasville Furniture Industries introduced an 'Ernest Hemingway Collection' at the International Home Furnishings Market in High Point, North Carolina, offering '96 pieces of living, dining and bedroom furniture and accessories' in four themes, 'Kenya,' 'Key West,' 'Havana,' and 'Ketchum.' 'We don't have many heroes today,' Marla A. Metzner, the president of Fashion Licensing of America, told the Times. 'We're going back to the great icons of the century, as heroic brands.' Ms. Metzner, according to the Times, not only 'created the Ernest Hemingway brand with Hemingway's three sons, Jack, Gregory and Patrick,' but 'also represents F. Scott Fitzgerald's grandchildren, who have asked for a Fitzgerald brand.'

That this would be the logical outcome of posthumous marketing cannot have been entirely clear to Mary Welsh Hemingway. During Hemingway's lifetime, she appears to have remained cool to the marketing impulses of A. E. Hotchner, whose thirteen-year correspondence with Hemingway gives the sense that he regarded the failing author not as the overextended and desperate figure the letters suggest but as an infinite resource, a mine to be worked, an element to be packaged into his various entertainment and publishing 'projects.' The widow tried to stop the publication of Hotchner's 'Papa Hemingway,' and, although the correspondence makes clear that Hemingway himself had both trusted and relied heavily on its author, presented him in her own memoir mainly as a kind of personal assistant, a fetcher of manuscripts, an arranger of apartments, a Zelig apparition in crowd scenes: 'When the Ile de France docked in the Hudson River at noon, March 27, we were elated to find Charlie Sweeny, my favorite general, awaiting us, together with Lillian Ross, Al Horowitz, Hotchner and some others.'

In this memoir, which is memorable mainly for the revelation of its author's rather trying mixture of quite striking competence and strategic incompetence (she arrives in Paris on the day it is liberated and scores a room at the Ritz, but seems bewildered by the domestic problem of how to improve the lighting of the dining room at La Finca Vigia), Mary Welsh Hemingway shared her conviction, at which she appears to have arrived in the face of considerable contrary evidence, that her husband had 'clearly' expected her to publish 'some, if not all, of his work.' The guidelines she set for herself in this task were instructive: 'Except for punctuation and the obviously overlooked 'ands' and 'buts' we would present his prose and poetry to readers as he wrote it, letting the gaps lie where they were.'

Well, there you are. You care about the punctuation or you don't, and Hemingway did. You care about the 'ands' and the 'buts' or you don't, and Hemingway did. You think something is in shape to be published or you don't, and Hemingway didn't. 'This is it; there are no more books,' Charles Scribner III told the New York Times by way of announcing the 'Hemingway novel' to be published in July of 1999, to celebrate the centennial year of his birth. This piece of work, for which the title 'True at First Light' was chosen from the text ('In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon and you have no more respect for it than for the lovely, perfect weed-fringed lake you see across the sun-baked salt plain'), is said to be the novel on which Hemingway was trying intermittently to work between 1954, when he and Mary Welsh Hemingway returned from the safari in Kenya which provides its narrative, and his suicide in 1961.

This 'African novel' seems to have presented at first only the resistance that characterizes the early stage of any novel. In September of 1954, Hemingway wrote to Bernard Berenson from Cuba about the adverse effect of air-conditioning on this thing he was doing: 'You get the writing done but it's as false as though it were done in the reverse of a greenhouse. Probably I will throw it all away, but maybe when the mornings are alive again I can use the skeleton of what I have written and fill it in with the smells and the early noises of the birds and all the lovely things of this finca which are in the cold months very much like Africa.' In September of 1955, he wrote again to Berenson, this time on a new typewriter, explaining that he could not use his old one 'because it has page 594 of the [African] book in it, covered over with the dust cover, and it is unlucky to take the pages out.' In November of 1955, he reported to Harvey Breit, of the New York Times, 'Am on page 689 and wish me luck kid.' In January of 1956, he wrote to his attorney, Alfred Rice, that he had reached page 810.

There then falls, in the 'Selected Letters,' a certain silence on the matter of this African novel. Eight-hundred and ten pages or no, there comes a point at which every writer knows when a book is not working, and every writer also knows when the reserves of will and energy and memory and concentration required to make the thing work simply may not be available. ‘You just have to go on when it is worst and most helpless — there is only one thing to do with a novel and that is go straight on through to the end of the damn thing,’ Hemingway had written to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1929, when Fitzgerald was blocked on the novel that would be published in 1934 as ‘Tender Is the Night.’

In 1929, Hemingway was thirty. His concentration, or his ability to ‘go on when it is worst and most helpless,’ was still such that he had continued rewriting ‘A Farewell to Arms’ while trying to deal, in the aftermath of his father’s suicide in December of 1928, with the concerns of his mother, his sixteen-year-old sister, and his thirteen-year-old brother. ‘Realize of course that thing for me to do is not worry but get to work — finish my book properly so I can help them out with the proceeds,’ he had written to Maxwell Perkins within days of his father’s funeral, and six weeks later he delivered the finished manuscript. He had seen one marriage destroyed, but not yet three. He was not yet living with the residue of the two 1954 plane crashes that had ruptured his liver, his spleen, and one of his kidneys, collapsed his lower intestine, crushed a vertebra, left first-degree burns on his face and head, and caused concussion and losses of vision and hearing. ‘Alfred this was a very rough year even before we smashed up in the air-craft,’ he wrote to Alfred Rice, who had apparently questioned his tax deductions for the African safari:

> *But I have a diamond mine if people will let me alone and let me dig the stones out of the blue mud and then cut and polish them. If I can do it I will make more money for the Government than any Texas oilman that gets his depreciation. But I have been beat-up worse than you can be and still be around and I should be working steadily on getting better and then write and not think nor worry about anything else.*

‘The literal details of writing,’ Norman Mailer once told an interviewer, ‘involve one’s own physiology or metabolism. You begin from a standing start and have to accelerate yourself to the point of cerebration where the words are coming — well, and in order. All writing is generated by a certain minimum of ego: you must assume a position of authority in saying that the way I’m writing it is the only way it happened. Writer’s block, for example, is simply a failure of ego.’ In August of 1956, Hemingway advised Charles Scribner, Jr., that he had ‘found it impossible to resume work on the Africa book without some disciplinary writing,’ and so was writing short stories.

In November of 1958, he mentioned to one of his children that he wanted to ‘finish book’ during a winter stay in Ketchum, but the ‘book’ at issue was now ‘the Paris stuff.’ In April of 1960, he told Scribner to scratch this still untitled Paris book from the fall list: ‘Plenty of people will probably think that we have no book and that it is like all the outlines that Scott had and borrowed money on that he never could have finished but you know that if I did not want the chance to make it even better it could be published exactly as you saw it with a few corrections of Mary’s typing.’ Ten months later, and five months before his death, in a letter written to his editor at Scribner’s between the two courses of shock treatment administered to him at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the writer tried, alarmingly, to explain what he was doing:

Have material arranged as chapters — they come to 18 — and am working on the last one — No 19 — also working on title. This is very difficult. (Have my usual long list — something wrong with all of them but am working toward it — Paris has been used so often it blights anything.) In pages typed they run 7, 14, 5, 6, 9 1/2, 6, 11, 9, 8, 9, 4 1/2, 3 1/2, 8, 10 1/2, 14 1/2, 38 1/2, 10, 3, 3: 177 pages + 5 1/2 pages + 1 1/4 pages.

I recall listening, some years ago at a dinner party in Berkeley, to a professor of English present 'The Last Tycoon' as irrefutable proof that F. Scott Fitzgerald was a bad writer. The assurance with which this judgment was offered so stunned me that I had let it slip into the donnée of the evening before I managed to object. 'The Last Tycoon,' I said, was an unfinished book, one we had no way of judging because we had no way of knowing how Fitzgerald might have finished it. But of course we did, another guest said, and others joined in: We had Fitzgerald's 'notes,' we had Fitzgerald's 'outline,' the thing was 'entirely laid out.' Only one of us at the table that evening, in other words, saw a substantive difference between writing a book and making notes for it, or 'outlining it,' or 'laying it out.'

The most chilling scene ever filmed must be, for a writer, that moment in 'The Shining' when Shelley Duvall looks at the manuscript on which her husband has been working and sees, typed over and over again on each of the hundreds of pages, only the single line: 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' The manuscript for what became 'True at First Light' was, as Hemingway left it, some eight hundred and fifty pages long. The manuscript as edited for publication is half that. This editing was done by Hemingway's son Patrick, who has said that he limited his editing to condensing (which inevitably works to alter what the author may have intended, as anyone who has been condensed knows), changing only some of the place names, which may or may not have seemed a logical response to the work of the man who wrote 'There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.'

This question of what should be done with what a writer leaves unfinished goes back to, and is conventionally answered by, citing works we might have lost had the dying wishes of their authors been honored. Virgil's Aeneid is mentioned. Franz Kafka's 'The Trial' and 'The Castle' are mentioned. In 1951, clearly shadowed by mortality, Hemingway judged that certain parts of a long four-part novel on which he had been working for a number of years were sufficiently 'finished' to be published after his death, and specified his terms, which did not include the intrusion of any editorial hand and specifically excluded the publication of the unfinished first section. 'The last two parts need no cutting at all,' he wrote to Charles Scribner in 1951. 'The third part needs quite a lot but it is very careful scalpel work and would need no cutting if I were dead. . . . The reason that I wrote you that you could always publish the last three parts separately is because I know you can in case through accidental death or any sort of death I should not be able to get the first part in proper shape to publish.'

Hemingway himself, the following year, published the fourth part of this manuscript separately, as 'The Old Man and the Sea.' The 'first part' of the manuscript, the part not yet 'in proper shape to publish,' was, after his death, nonetheless published, as part of 'Islands in the Stream.' In the case of the 'African novel,' or 'True at First Light,' eight hundred and fifty pages reduced by half by someone other than their author can go nowhere the author intended them to go, but they can provide the occasion for a chat-show hook, a faux controversy over whether the part of the manuscript in which the writer on safari takes a Wakamba bride does or does not reflect a 'real' event. The increasing inability of many readers to construe fiction as anything other than roman à clef, or the raw material of biography, is both indulged and encouraged. The New York Times, in its announcement of the publication of the manuscript, quoted Patrick Hemingway to this spurious point: ' 'Did Ernest Hemingway have such an experience?' he said from his home in Bozeman, Mont. 'I can tell you from all I know — and I don't know everything — he did not.' '

This is a denial of the idea of fiction, just as the publication of unfinished work is a denial of the idea that the role of the writer in his or her work is to make it. Those excerpts from 'True at First Light' already published can be read only as something not yet made, notes, scenes in the process of being set down, words set down but not yet written. There are arresting glimpses here and there, fragments shored against what the writer must have seen as his ruin, and a sympathetic reader might well believe it possible that had the writer lived (which is to say had the writer found the will and energy and memory and concentration) he might have shaped the material, written it into being, made it work as the story the glimpses suggest, that of a man returning to a place he loved and finding himself at three in the morning confronting the knowledge that he is no longer the person who loved it and will never now be the person he had meant to be. But of course such a possibility would have been in the end closed to this particular writer, for he had already written that story, in 1936, and called it 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro.' 'Now he would never write the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well,' the writer in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' thought as he lay dying of gangrene in Africa. And then, this afterthought, the saddest story: 'Well, he would not have to fail at trying to write them either.'