Review of A Moveable Feast

by Stanley Kauffman,
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THE very first entry in Camus' Notebooks might serve as epigraph to Hemingway's posthumous memoirs: 'What I mean is this: that one can, with no romanticism, feel nostalgic for lost poverty.' It is the city of Paris, in memory and effect that is the moveable feast; to it, Hemingway sat again in these recollections, written between 1958 and 1960, of his Paris life in the early 20s. This book, highly affecting and invaluable, is an anomalous performance in literature. An author, who slipped in critical esteem during the second half of his writing life, reminds us after his death of his earlier claims to greatness.

'What a book,' Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson once agreed, 'would be the real story of Hemingway, not those he writes but the confessions of the real Ernest Hemingway. It would be for another audience than the audience Hemingway has now but it would be very wonderful.' By and large he now has a different audience from the one he had when that comment was made. This book is probably not the confession that Miss Stein and Anderson envisioned — it is only a collection of sketches — but their intuition was sound. The Hemingway who went back to himself found much of himself and made this book about his youth the best work of his later years.

There are 20 sections, most of them self-contained but each one a glimpse that adds to a prospect. One cannot learn from this book all of Hemingway's life in the period; it is not a chronicle. But these sketches give us, for the first time, an intimate view of him as he evolved his art, of his first marriage, of others around him. He provides (deliberately posthumously, one can assume) insight and information that, for all the publicity and public persona, he never afforded during his life.

To get the worst out of the way at once, the conversations between him and his wife — quoted after 35 years — will simply strengthen the hands of the satirists. If he and she really talked like that, then one wonders what the struggle was — noted elsewhere in the book — to work out his style. He needed only to set down his domestic chat, which was the Hemingway style already over-ripened.

'Let's walk down the rue de Seine [she says] and look in all the galleries and in the windows of the shops.'

'Sure. We can walk anywhere and we can stop at some new cafe where we don't know anyone and nobody knows us and have a drink.'

'We can have two drinks.'

't hen we can eat somewhere.'

‘No. Don’t forget we have to pay the library.’

‘We'll come home and eat here and we'll have a lovely meal and drink Beaune from the co-operative you can see right out of the window there with the price of the Beaune on the window. And afterwards we'll read and then go to bed and make love'.

If it were a novel, it would cry for a touch or two of E. B. White. In autobiography, it paralyzes even parody.

All the dialogue between the pair is in that vein. Eventually we get a clue as to why he has been sentimentalizing his marriage into the worst kind of ‘brave and true’ Hemingway-esque idyll. At the end of the book his marriage is breaking up and he is already sorry, but seems powerless to prevent it. (‘When I saw my wife standing by the tracks as the train came in by the piled logs at the station, I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her.’) His sugary treatment may be an attempt to ease his conscience and pay a deferred debt.

Little of the rest of the book is less than best Hemingway. There is some of his usual reverse provincialism: all Frenchmen, particularly those wounded in the war, are wonderful. There is the wine and food and ‘private’ cafe and quaint-character snobbism that later wrecked so many imitators. (Hemingway spent little of his adult life in America. Our Man in the Picturesque Old World became his principal role.) There is also his private caste system, with him and his wife at the top. He attempts to laugh at it, saying that in their poverty they looked down on the rich; but the dominant tone here, as in his whole life, is a belief in an aristocracy of the chivalrous, aswirl in a sea of cowards and cheap-jacks.

But after these lesser streaks in the book, we are left with a small diamond mine. The most easily describable treasures are the portraits of friends, acquaintances, enemies. Some are *passé* figures, interesting now only because they interested him then: Ernest Walsh, the poet who was ‘marked for death’ and made quite a good thing out of it; Evan Shipman, an American bohemian whom Hemingway liked and who said, ‘We need more true mystery in our lives, Hem. The completely un-ambitious writer and the really good unpublished poem are the things we lack most at this time. There is, of course, the problem of sustenance.’

Better-known figures are sketched: Ford Madox Ford ‘breathing heavily through a heavy, stained moustache and holding himself as upright as an ambulatory, well clothed, up-ended hogshead’; Wyndham Lewis (‘Some people show evil as a great race horse shows breeding . . . Lewis did not show evil; he just looked nasty’). Pre-eminently, of course, there is the great trinity of this period in his life: Stein, Pound, Fitzgerald.

The story of Gertrude Stein’s influence on Hemingway is familiar, but here it is seen with a special gratitude, appraisal, and egotism. Hemingway knows what she did

for him, but he also wants to make clear that he performed several services for her, particularly in helping to prepare and publish The Making Of Americans.

He never refers to Alice Toklas by name, only as 'her companion' — possibly as retaliation for the comments in the Autobiography. Throughout the book there are anecdotes that seem almost accidentally permissive, like cracks in the facade of literary history. One of these is his account of why he ceased to be a good friend of Miss Stein's. He inadvertently overheard a conversation between her and, presumably. Miss Toklas. He and Miss Stein had evidently felt no qualms about discussing homosexuality; he quotes her comparison of the male and female sorts. But he overheard her pleading with her friend in such an abject and painful way that he could never look at her again without remembering it and it changed the entire color of his relationship with her. Obviously he never told her about it.

Ezra Pound was always a good friend and he was always doing things for people. Hemingway does not here explore the poet's subsequent behavior and fate, but he is afraid to assert what is no secret: that, in addition to his own achievements. Pound was an extraordinary friend of writers he admired. The extent of Pound's editorial advice on The Waste Land, for instance, is generally known; less known is the fact that he started a fund in Paris to free Eliot of his duties in a London bank, an effort happily made superfluous by an award and a subsidy that soon came Eliot's way. Hemingway published Homage To Ezra in This Quarter in 1925. His own political feelings were subsequently well manifested, but his loyalty to Pound — on the Forsterian plane, above politics and patriotism — remained constant.

Among these portraits and reminiscences, certainly the most fascinating are those of Fitzgerald, the golden unfortunate, the prince of pathos, who seemed in his very lifetime to be consciously discharging his role as a man with an unfulfilled life. Because his name and Hemingway's have so long been linked in comparison and contrast, it is now forgotten that, when they first met, Fitzgerald was successful, Hemingway quite poor and (as fiction writer) known only to a few readers of small magazines. In 1924, the year before their meeting, Fitzgerald had already written to Maxwell Perkins drawing attention to Hemingway's stories. When Fitzgerald looked him up in Paris, there were polarities of resistance-attraction on Hemingway's part to this 'older and successful' writer. (This is Hemingway in 1960. Fitzgerald was all of three years older.)

Because of these polarities, Hemingway saw Fitzgerald steadily and saw him less than whole. But it is notable that the only chapter in this book with an epigraph is the first one on Fitzgerald, in which Hemingway makes a comparison with a butterfly, a statement whose sentimentality diminishes on re-reading. (Curiously, Andrew Turnbull, in a biography of Fitzgerald published after Hemingway's death, uses the same figure in a different way, saying that a comparison between the two men at that time 'would be

like comparing a butterfly and a bull'.) His physical descriptions of Fitzgerald are the most vivid I have ever read.

He knew none of Fitzgerald's serious work when they met, but was aware of the 'older' man's success and was perhaps flattered by his attention. He accepted Fitzgerald's invitation to go by train with him to Lyon to pick up a car the Fitzgeralds had left there, then drive back to Paris. The story of the trip (among other things, there was no top on the car because Zelda hated tops, so the two men had to stop every time it rained) is possibly the funniest story about two famous writers since Tolstoy fell asleep while Turgenev read Fathers and Sons to him. What with Fitzgerald's sudden, stark drunkenness, his hypochondria and dramatics, Hemingway was well weary of him by the time they reached Paris. Then Fitzgerald gave him a copy of The Great Gatsby, which had just been published.

When I had finished the book I knew that no matter what Scott did, nor how he behaved, I must know it was like a sickness and be of any help I could to him and try to be a good friend . . . If he could write a book as fine as The Great Gatsby I was sure he could write an even better one. I did not know Zelda yet, and so I did not know the terrible odds that were against him.

He soon got to know Zelda, and soon thought her insane. His view of her is the key to his view of Fitzgerald. His portrait of Fitzgerald emphasizes three elements: the drinking, the relation with Zelda, the sexual beliefs and status. As for the first, he makes clear that Fitzgerald was not, in the usual sense, a really heavy drinker but did not need to be. A relatively small amount not only made him drunk and irresponsible, it acted like a terrible poison on him, transforming his face into a death mask, making him sweat, grow rigid and strange. Eight years later Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins that he had gone on the wagon, 'but don't tell Ernest because he has long convinced himself that I am an incurable alcoholic, due to the fact that we almost always meet on parties. I am his alcoholic just like Ring [Lardner] is mine and do not want to disillusion him . . .' The illusion of course was Fitzgerald's, because the parallel with Lardner was unfortunately apt. Still, there seemed at times to be some conviviality in Lardner's drinking; Fitzgerald's usually seemed like the sickness of a little boy who has been dared to overeat, is miserable, but will take the dare again tomorrow.

The dare came from Zelda, in Hemingway's opinion; she was jealous of her husband's writing and did what she could to interfere. When he seemed to be settling down to work, she either started a flirtation with another man to distract him or else taunted him into partying with her. Saner women than Zelda have loved their husbands at the same time that they wanted to compete with them, or were furious at being unable to compete and used the husband's love against him.

And Zelda was also responsible, says Hemingway, for a fear of physical incompetence on Fitzgerald's part. In sexual matters he was obviously a Victorian — in

naivete and prudishness — transported into the Jazz Age. The first question he asked Hemingway after he knew him well enough to call him Ernest was whether he had slept with his wife before marriage. It was a patent effort to compare notes: which failed. One day Fitzgerald confided to him at lunch that Zelda had told him he was too small. Hemingway was direct enough; he asked Fitzgerald to accompany him to l*e water*. (The vision of these two Olympians engaged in measurement in the men's room must have given the Muses a bit of a turn.) When they returned to their table Hemingway tried to assure him that everything was all right, that Zelda wanted to destroy him, and he added some technical advice. 'But,' says Hemingway, 'he was still doubtful."

The story is irresistibly amusing and in fact has a distinct serious value towards illuminating a certain mistiness, substitution, evasion about sexual matters in Fitzgerald's writing. The first really sexual scene in his work is in his last, unfinished novel. Yet Hemingway's retailing of this story has an inescapable tinge of smoking-room masculine superiority. Despite his declaration quoted above, he had and always retained an edge of dislike for Fitzgerald. In later Paris years he did not even want the other man to know his address (says Morley Callaghan) for fear he would come barging in at any hour; but it was probably more than a wish for privacy. One may conjecture that this dislike was compounded of reaction to Fitzgerald's somewhat pretty good looks, Fitzgerald's liking for the tinselly life that he himself despised, Fitzgerald's willingness to compromise his writing for money which Hemingway, once he was on his own, never did. His own latter-day works were inferior, not compromised. There may also have been some residual resentment because the 'older' man had been successful first, had helped him to Scribner's — a favor hard to forget and therefore hard to forgive. In any events in 1936, when Fitzgerald was small threat to him, he took the notorious crack at him in The Snows of Kilimanjaro.

There was unquestionably a mean streak in Hemingway. He admits to a very bad, quick temper 'in those days'; it persisted. His mockery of Gertrude Stein in Green Hills Of Africa and For Whom The Bell Tolls can conceivably be justified as revenge for the remarks about him in the Autobiography Of Alice B. Toklas, particularly the use of the one word that could never be forgivable to him: yellow. But, similar to his rough treatment of his benefactor Sherwood Anderson in the short-novel parody, The Torrents Of Spring, his blow at the drunken, sick, bankrupt, discouraged Fitzgerald can only be explained as deeply impelled abscission from those to whom he was indebted — like Thomas Wolfe's (more gentle) abandonment of Maxwell Perkins.

Above all the engrossing biographical details, items of portraiture and revealing anecdotes in the book, there tower two elements. The first of these, despite the marital chat quoted earlier, is the sad, lovely, moving warmth with which it is written. The second is his account (in some measure) of how he acquired the abilities with which to write it.

'When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest.' Youth, strength, joy of love, pride of poverty, delight in the city where he lived with his wife and child — all these fused into happiness, sheer happiness: rare in any good 20th-century author — rarer still in Hemingway. Memory may have gilded matters, but the facts as they were have less relevance than the memory.

But it is not gauzy Arcadian happiness; it is related closely to his work: to the sense that he was free of newspaper work and was settling firmly to his true vocation, that he had made the rock-deep right decision and was growing. To appreciate this fully, we must understand that he had been no mere cub reporter. He had been a responsible correspondent entrusted by a large newspaper and a syndicate with important assignments. For example, he covered the Genoa Economic Conference in April, 1922, the Greco-Turkish war later that year; he interviewed Clemenceau and Mussolini. (His comments on the latter, which he wrote when he was 23, were, as Charles Fenton points out, remarkably prescient.) He had given up a potentially big career, he had the responsibility of a wife and infant, and he had now cut himself loose even from occasional journalism. Influenced most immediately by Lardner and Anderson and Stein, and positively enjoined by the last to quit reporting, he had set out to find himself, and he knew, in his blood and bones, that he was succeeding.

In this book, then, we are in some degree present at one of the epochal moments in 20th-century literature: Hemingway's forging of his prose. What makes the joy in the book specially poignant is not only that we know now it was the high period of his life; the author himself, looking back after 35 years to the time when he was happiest, seems to know that he knew then that he would never be happier, stronger in his work, more imperial. Speaking of why he did not include the old man's suicide, which is implied, in his story 'Out of Season': 'It his was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.'

The evolution of understatement in his style — in his concept of art — connects with, among other matters, what he was learning from painters. (All his life painting was of prime importance to him.) 'I was learning something from the painting of Cezanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them.'

His increasingly rigorous and effective reticence, his insistent lucidity, his rejection of the formalities and flourishes of pre-war literature with an accompanying implicit rejection of pre-war social falsities and pomposities — these touched quick nerves in his contemporaries around the world. Before he was thirty he was an immense literary power, one of the two or three most influential living writers of English. Faulkner took longer to become an influence. Joyce's influence, though more profound, was not so wide. For instance, Hemingway was the obvious stylistic father of Dashiell Hammett, as

Hammett was of Chandler and of much lesser writers in the genre. Hemingway also had a strong influence outside of literature. It is impossible to conceive of Humphrey Bogart's film image without benefit of Hammett and Chandler and also without the direct influence of Hemingway abroad. As recent a film as The Hustler is virtually unimaginable — not only in story but in cinematic method — without the prior existence of Hemingway. I do not cite these examples as major art but only as evidence of his staggeringly large pervasive influence.

To younger readers, those who came to Hemingway after World War II, he could not possibly look the same as to previous generations because the later group saw him in a different context. (The different audience that Gertrude Stein said he needed?) Those who began to read him in the mid-20s, or soon after, experienced a small epiphany, saw a powerful and incredibly timely writer appear, almost as a savior bringing curt truth to a windy and shaken society. Change ensued. The first newly published book of Hemingway's that I read was Death In The Afternoon (1932), and I can remember the quiet shock it caused among my friends, a shock allayed by Winner Take Nothing, then amplified by Green Hills of Africa. By the time we all reached For Whom the Bell Tolls, Hemingway was just another writer, in the sense that he now wrote good books and bad books, or books with good and bad components in them. Even when he was better than good, he was not a god any more. The savior was gone, replaced by Papa who, it seemed, could not function — as a novelist, at least — without a war to stimulate him. Of his two novels unconnected with war. To Have And Have Not prepared us long ago for the vacuities of The Old Man And The Sea. Across The River and Into the Trees is almost an allegory of the author longing for past wars. His short stories, which contain his finest work, are much less dependent on war; but they dwindled away in the late 30s, and he published no story of consequence after 1940.

Younger readers missed this transition of attitude towards Hemingway. For them he was, from the start, a mixed blessing. To them especially, then, this latest book may be a happy surprise. It is like getting a clear view back through the thick forest of his own self-imitation and the imitations of others, of the big-game gamesmanship and the worship of the bull. And he achieved it thirty-five years later, even at the same time (according to a prefatory note) that he was writing the stale, tired Dangerous Summer for Life. It is rumored that there will be more posthumous books, probably fiction. Whatever their quality, it is unlikely that they will strike more touchingly this strong note of rejuvenation.

Rejuvenation from what? The quintessence of Hemingway is that he wrote realistically, even naturalistically, about romantic situations and characters. Jake Barnes, the mutilated hero of The Sun Also Rises, is in effect Cyrano de Bergerac in the 20th-century. His physical affliction is one of removal instead of enlargement, but it serves the same purpose as Cyrano's nose: to make him a lover who cannot love,

attendant all his life (we feel) on his lady's wishes. Lieutenant Henry and his nurse enact a delicate little love poem — with the pathetic, not tragic, end of death in childbirth — its delicacy heightened by being set in the midst of a war that is sparingly perceived and is under-described with magnificent ruthlessness.

This basic romanticism was not a flaw in the young writer, as these two still potent novels prove. The flaw was in concentrating on this essentially youthful outlook as he grew older, his insistence that true and interesting life meant risk of death, large physical gesture, gallantry, and the rest of the doctrine of action as saving grace in a world grown morally as well as literally sedentary. This view clogged his development; and as, in the last twenty years, he struggled to write or did not write, he seemed to acquire an almost savage aloofness, combined with a capitalization of that aloofness, that aggravated this lack of growth. Edmund Wilson reminds us that 'it is a mistake to accuse [Hemingway] of an indifference to society. His whole work is a criticism of society'. But it is significant that of the many gifted Americans who went to Paris in the 20s because they felt that only there could they become writers, Hemingway alone never really returned to America (notwithstanding his Key West residence for some of the 30s). To provide himself with a life that was more than that of a conventional expatriate, a floating observer, he plunged even more heavily into the synthetic life of strenuous sports — which also served him as little wars. After Paris, excepting the two real wars, he lived in abstraction; in the formal rules of deep-sea fishing, rhino hunting, bull fighting, anywhere except where life as men were actually living it could touch and possibly enlarge him. Certainly he had little part in contemporary American life.

His style, which he had simplified to deal simply with genuinely great events, became pseudo-simple and self-conscious when, in later years, he dealt with lesser events on which he tried to enforce great stature. After For Whom The Bell Tolls his writing continued to have a quality about it of translation, as from Spanish, possibly in the hope that formality would lend quality. The old fisherman had to be Cuban, of course, to talk about the Tigers of Detroit and to call the fish 'thou'; an old American fisherman would have destroyed the grandiosity. Hemingway was always trying to make everything return to the time when he was young and strong as a writer, when his experience was fitted to his style.

In this book he accomplishes the return. Dealing with the high days (for him) when it was created, the simple style, for the most part, seems at home again: is relatively free of sludge, runs clean and clear and refreshing.

His career, at its height, was very short — less than 15 years. By taking us back to its birth, this book helps to explain its sudden and enormous impact, and raises again, after a considerable silence on the matter, the question of his greatness. A novelist once said to me: 'We all know what it takes to be a great writer, even if you have the talent. You have to give your life.' Hemingway gave his life; then, by circumscribing his growth, he

took it back again. This book suggests that he came to realize it and that, at the last, he wanted to say so.