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Ernest Hemingway and the Geography of Memory

Mark Cirino
Mark P. Ott

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"With this essay collection, Mark Cirino and Mark P. Ott have opened another set of fruitful paths into Hemingway's work. History continues to show the richness of the Hemingway oeuvre; the editors' focus on both travel and memory is consistently dynamic. All readers will learn from this collection."

Linda Wagner-Martin, Frank Borden Hanes Professor of English, The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

"The wide-ranging essays in this impressive collection provide an important and convincing analysis of Hemingway's consciously crafted aesthetic—the fusion of past experience with artistic creation. Aptly titled, Hemingway and the Geography of Memory moves us further toward understanding this artist's practice of filtering experience through the scrim of fiction."

Gail D. Sinclair, coeditor of Key West Hemingway: A Reassessment

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Ernest Hemingway and the Geography of Memory

Edited by Mark Cirino and Mark P. Ott

Ernest Hemingway's work reverberates with a blend of memory, geography, and lessons of life revealed through the trauma of experience. Michigan, Italy, Spain, Paris, Africa, and the Gulf Stream are some of the most distinctive settings in Hemingway's short fiction, novels, articles, and correspondence. In his fiction, Hemingway revisited these sites, reimagining and transforming them. Travel was the engine of his creative life, as the recurrent contrast between spaces provided him with evidence of his emerging identity as a writer.

The contributors to Ernest Hemingway and the Geography of Memory employ an intriguing range of approaches to Hemingway's work, using the concept of memory as an interpretive tool to enhance understanding of Hemingway's creative process. The essays are divided into four sections—Memory and Composition, Memory and Allusion, Memory and Place, and Memory and Truth—and examine The Garden of Eden, In Our Time, The Old Man and the Sea, Green Hills of Africa, A Farewell to Arms, and Death in the Afternoon, as well as several of Hemingway's short stories.

Ernest Hemingway and the Geography of Memory is a fascinating volume that will appeal to the Hemingway scholar as well as the general reader.

Mark Cirino is assistant professor of English at the University of Evansville.
Ernest Hemingway

and the

Geography of Memory

Edited by

Mark Cirino

and

Mark P. Ott

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Introduction

Mark P. Ott and Mark Cirino

There are so many sorts of hunger. In the spring there are more.
But that’s gone now. Memory is hunger.

—Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast

There were some other places I wanted to see since we would be going through them; places I was sure I remembered incorrectly due to haste or stress or the distortions of vision that being under fire bring, but we would see them sooner or later and I could make my corrections of memory then. There were certain places that I liked to show to Bill for their incredibility; to show them as museum pieces of the impossible in war. But I had shown him the positions on the road above the village of Guadarrama on the way up to the pass on the high road to Avila and they had been so obviously preposterous to hold that I did not blame him for not believing me. When I saw them I could believe them myself although the original memory of them was sharper than any photograph.

—Ernest Hemingway, The Dangerous Summer

Ernest Hemingway had an uneasy relationship with the present; he seemed to believe it rarely made for the best fiction. Yet his mind was always attuned to the present, to the moment as he was immersed and absorbed within it, and that hypersensitivity to what he was experiencing would move into his memory, dwell there, and later become the fuel for his fiction. As every student of Hemingway’s biography knows, Michigan, Italy, Spain, Paris, East Africa, and the Gulf Stream are some of the most distinctive places in the Hemingway oeuvre; in short fiction, novels, journalism, and correspondence, Hemingway revisited these sites, reimagining and transforming them into texts.

“Memory,” to the surprise of no one, is a topic closely aligned with Hemingway’s work. Nearly all of Hemingway’s fiction exists as an extension,
dramatization, and condensation of his actual experience, yet it is not auto-
biography. Thus the ambiguity of the phrase “geography of memory” taken as
our title underscores its usefulness. Returning to a place inspires a celebration
of memory, providing a clarification of an essential truth of human existence,
a contrast between then and now. The Italy of the eighteen-year-old Heming-
way is returned to, again and again, as the writer evolves from an ambulance
driver into a journalist, finally becoming the artist who creates A Farewell to
Arms (1929) and Across the River and Into the Trees (1950). The immediacy and
urgency of the hunt is conveyed concisely in Green Hills of Africa in 1935. By
1955, when Hemingway is re-creating the events of his second safari in 1953,
that conciseness is replaced by a free-flowing, occasionally comic account of
the land and people in the manuscripts eventually published as True at First
Light (1999) and Under Kilimanjaro (2005). Just as A Moveable Feast (1964) is
a reinvention of the Paris depicted in The Sun Also Rises (1926), The Dange-
rous Summer (1960), chronicling the Spanish bullfight season of the summer
of 1959, tries to recapture the authority and the vivid atmosphere of the best
sections of Death in the Afternoon (1932).

Stylistically, Hemingway relied on a vocabulary of imagery to convey loss
and the passage of time, a contrast between a younger self and a wiser, expe-
rienced self. Composing A Moveable Feast in 1959, he uses horse chestnuts to
signal forms of change and loss, evoking the textures of life in Paris for the
young Hemingway in 1924. In the memoir he writes, “Do you remember when
the horse chestnuts were in bloom?” (54). Indeed, the roasted nuts are a cure
for hunger (11) and the trees are beautiful next to the Seine (43). As a young
man writing in Parisian cafés, he carries the horse chestnut in his pocket, along
with a rabbit foot for luck. Thus, to the aging memoirist, the horse chestnut
evokes this time in the idealized, youthful Hemingway’s life, when he was a
young father happily married to Hadley, when he was powerfully convinced
that he could shape his own artistic future.

How do we understand Hemingway’s use of “memory”? So much of his
movement through the world was a process of continual self-exile as he
sought new environments to bolster his identity as a writer and his essential
self. As Donald Pizer notes, self-exile, or expatriation, through the pursuit of
an alternative space is a condition in which “the world one has been bred in
is perceived to suffer from intolerable inadequacies and limitations; another
world seems to be free of these failings and to offer a more fruitful way of life.”
For Hemingway, travel was the engine of his creative life, as the continual
contrast between spaces provided him evidence of his emerging identity as a
writer, here and there, of what he once was and what he now has become. In the case of Hemingway’s Paris, J. Gerald Kennedy writes, “One cannot compare an ‘actual’ place with its literary representation, since there is literally no ‘place’ apart from an interpreting consciousness” (5). In many ways, the essays in this book are explorations of Hemingway’s “interpreting consciousness” as his identity as a writer evolves through his travels and across the texture of his constructed images of different spaces.

Hemingway’s use of memory is an element of a broader authorial strategy that allows him to separate himself from his narrative alter egos. In her groundbreaking study *Hemingway: The Postwar Years and the Posthumous Novels* (1996), Rose Marie Burwell explores how the two narratives published as *Islands in the Stream* and *The Garden of Eden* were composed as part of a “serial sequence,” as Hemingway was deliberately mining his memory to compose a work modeled on Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. Burwell’s work subsequently opened up the study of Hemingway’s work in light of the posthumous publications. In her 2002 article “A Lifetime of Flower Narratives: Letting the Silenced Voice Speak,” Miriam Mandel calls attention to how Hemingway “blurred the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction as much as he blurred those between life and art” (241). Mandel examined Hemingway’s “flower narratives”—journalism for the *Toronto Daily Star* (10 June 1922), *Green Hills of Africa* (composed 1934), the *African Journal* (composed 1954–56), and *A Moveable Feast* (composed 1957–61)—in which he employs the narcissus, the blooms of a horse chestnut tree, and a flowering wisteria vine in stories on the subject of fishing, drinking, love, and marriage, noting how “original happy connotations (innocence, virtue, and young marriage) are undercut with unease, denial and guilt ridden subversion” (241). In *The Bones of the Others: The Hemingway Text from the Lost Manuscripts to the Posthumous Novels* (2006), Hilary Justice notes that Hemingway distinguished between two kinds of stories, the “Personal” and “Authentic,” which allow him to distance himself from his subject and the roles he played in relation to it. Justice writes, “Personal refers to things he had done and experienced, in which he had played an actively participatory role, Authentic to things he had heard or witnessed, in which his role was that of the journalist, the observer, the voyeur . . . [in] his Personal writing, he would always represent his emotional response to his current situation by refracting it through his past, finding emotional points of contiguity between his present and his past, and using this doubled emotional intensity to make his readers ‘feel more than they understand’” (4–5).

Indeed, the pervasive feature of memory in Hemingway’s work belies a
critical view that equates it with merely romanticizing the past. In a 1980 call to arms previewing the future of Hemingway studies, Michael Reynolds implored, “Let us here declare a moratorium on nostalgia” (201). Describing one of his most maliciously created female characters, Hemingway’s preface to his play The Fifth Column (1937) explains, “There is a girl in it named Dorothy but her name might also have been Nostalgia” (vi). The moniker is not meant as a compliment. In Islands in the Stream (1970) Thomas Hudson observes, “Nostalgia hecha hombre, he thought in Spanish. People did not know that you died of it” (233). The notion that nostalgia “makes a man” is further evidence of the danger of allowing the past to interfere with the urgent necessities of the present. As Stephen Tanner puts it, “Nostalgia can be a pleasant balm for Hemingway’s wounded characters and a way of restoring their balance and confidence, but it must not distract from the task at hand” (“Hemingway’s Islands” 83). At the time nostalgia was almost a disease to be avoided, while memory provides a clarification of the present, enhancing existence. Hudson enjoys the pleasant balm of nostalgia while indulging in a gin and tonic with lime and Angostura, a drink that provides a “pleasantly bitter” taste much like the memory it induces: “It reminded him of Tanga, Mombasa, and Lamu and all that coast and he had a sudden nostalgia for Africa. Here he was, settled on the island, when he could as well be in Africa. Hell, he thought, I can always go there. You have to make it inside of yourself wherever you are. You are doing all right at that here” (21). As in Proust, food and drink have the power to conjure up the past, making it accessible in a way that is dangerous for a writer; overindulgence in memory becomes nostalgia, a form of corruption.

Accompanying the indisputably nostalgic tone of A Moveable Feast is a more complex, instructive attitude toward the functioning of memory. Although much of A Moveable Feast casts a surface innocence to Hemingway’s Paris years, the workings of memory also transcend simple nostalgia. In the vignette “A False Spring,” for example, Hemingway’s first wife tells him, “Memory is hunger” (57). If as an aphorism that statement does not mean a great deal, the rest of the volume pursues “hunger” as a significant theme in Hemingway’s life during the 1920s. Hunger implies a lack, and memory also indicates the pursuit of something lost—be it time past, abandoned love, stolen manuscripts, broken relationships, the death of innocence, or the extinction of an old way of life. Later, Hemingway coaches himself on avoiding “hunger-thinking,” harebrained thoughts emanating from a hysterical, food-deprived mind. The equating of “memory” and “hunger” also reveals the inherent inadequacy of recollection. Hemingway’s memory of Paris may be a moveable feast, but Wil-
liam James explains that all a man’s memory can provide is “a few of the crumbs that fall from the feast” (276). Just as Death in the Afternoon acknowledges the unavoidable falsity of memory, James says that memory takes an object or an emotion from the past and “either makes too little or too much of it” (276).

Hemingway was always concerned with the utilization of memory, trying to understand how it can be used as an aesthetically satisfying component of his fiction. It inspired his experimentation with narrative strategies attempting to create and uncover the most authentic, the most truthful depiction of human experience. Thus, in the foreword to Green Hills of Africa he famously wrote, “The writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month’s action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination” (i). The artful selection of detail in narration was not, to Hemingway, a distortion of reality; rather, it heightened authenticity, making the subjectivity of his perspective ultimately—aesthetically—more objective.

In Hemingway’s memory, an event, whether traumatic, painful, frightening, or tragic, could be revived and reinvented. Yet the passage of time was just as important as the artful selection of detail to the success of this method. Experience, gestating in the mind over a period of time, became more truthful as the knowledge of the essential elements of a moment were enhanced in the writer’s memory. The composition of The Old Man and the Sea illustrates how the passage of time was essential to Hemingway’s method of composition. In 1932 Hemingway heard the core of the story from Carlos Gutierrez, a Cuban fisherman, and transcribed it in a fishing log. In April 1936, in an essay for Esquire magazine, he wrote down the barest bones of a story of an old man, alone on his skiff and lost at sea, who had lost a great fish to the sharks (“On the Blue Water” 239). Yet Hemingway waited until January 1951 to write the story that would be published in Life magazine in September 1952 as The Old Man and the Sea. What Hemingway left out of the sea novella—all of Cuba, he asserted—were fishing stories not revealed in the tale and the depth of Santiago’s knowledge of the craft of fishing. For the characterization of Santiago and the dramatization of the struggle with the fish, Hemingway chose to reduce his story to the essential elements of man’s struggle with the natural world. And as Hemingway ruminated from 1932 to 1951 over the essence of the story—a valiant fisherman and an enormous marlin—his memory reshaped, reduced, and clarified the thematic tension that is so compelling to the reader. As he stated in his famous declaration of his “iceberg theory” of fiction, knowledge was essential to his method: “There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. . . . The Old Man and the Sea could have been over a thousand
pages long and had every character in the village in it and all the process of
how they made their living, were born, educated, bore children, etc.” (Bruccoli
125). During the nineteen-year gestation, he was learning what to omit from
the story so as to not create “hollow places” in his writing.

Hemingway’s work reverberates with a continual blend of memory, geography,
and lessons of life revealed through the trauma of experience. As we selected
these essays, we were acutely aware that this volume would not be exhaustive
and could not be “the final word” on the subject as it stands in 2010. This book
originally emerged from a panel Mark Ott organized on behalf of the Ernest
Hemingway Society for the annual conference of the American Literature
Association in Boston in 2005. After the original broad call for papers, there
was an enthralling variety of responses. What was exciting was the range of
approaches to Hemingway’s work that could use the concept of memory as an
interpretative tool to enhance our understanding of his creative process.

We have divided the essays into four broad sections. The first, Memory and
Composition, begins with Marc Hewson’s exploration of notions of gender
through the theme of memory. Hewson’s reading of The Garden of Eden ana-
lyzes the protagonist David Bourne’s negotiation with his own “recollected
masculine self” and how David’s writing within the novel might teach us about
Hemingway’s own fictionalizing of his experiences. Marc Seals also discusses
The Garden of Eden in addition to other posthumous fiction as he unfolds the
legend behind Hemingway’s lost manuscripts of 1922. Seals treats Hemingway’s
memory of these manuscripts as emblematic of the author’s enactment of
traumatic memory in his texts and in his life. Seals shows that an analysis of
Hemingway’s fixation on this incident and his various attempts to write about
it tell us much about the writer’s own memory and his understanding of the
way it works.

Memory and Allusion collects views of Hemingway texts spanning his entire
career, critical work that suggests possible implications of Hemingway’s use
of memory and place. The first examination of memory and allusion is Mark
Cirino’s translation of Sergio Perosa’s international perspective on Heming-
way’s entire body of work. Perosa’s remarks evidence Hemingway’s career-
long strategy to invent from reality. In this way, he pinpoints the distinction
between the memory of an event and then the fictionalization of it. Perosa
draws from Hemingway’s own comments in letters and writing to extract an
ethic of writing that serves as a valuable guide for approaching Hemingway’s
work and his treatment of memory. Focusing on In Our Time, Matthew J.
Bolton writes a perceptive comparison of T. S. Eliot and Hemingway, giving fresh and expert perspective to these two writers whose intertextuality has never been satisfactorily mined. Bolton examines Hemingway’s knowledge of Eliot as part of his Paris education, received under Ezra Pound’s tutelage. The memory and desire that Bolton’s essay discusses cover his poetry and early stories as well as his two important novels of the decade. Physical and mental geography figure in Larry Grimes’s look at *The Old Man and the Sea*, which uses Santiago’s final image of dreams of lions to conjure up a distant place, recalled through the lens of memory. The constant image of the lions resides in the “territory of dream,” itself a phrase that joins the African terrain and world of the mind.

Our third section, Memory and Place, investigates not only the geography of memory but also the memory of geography. Laura Gruber Godfrey’s elegant examination of the story “The End of Something” illustrates Hemingway’s tendency to link geography with realities of cultural change and human condition. Godfrey stresses that the subjective memory of a setting contributes to its meaning at least as much as objective actualities. Godfrey equates Hemingway’s narration in “The End of Something” to the tone of an oral history, contributing to its effect of recalling a place in time. To Godfrey, geography, far from a static fact, is seen in Hemingway to be “multilayered, kinetic, and constructed.” Allyson Nadia Field then provides an authoritative look at 1920s travelogues and the way we can use the geography of Paris to understand *The Sun Also Rises* and read Jake Barnes as a de facto tour guide. Larry Martin discusses one of Hemingway’s nonfiction texts of the 1930s, *Green Hills of Africa*, emphasizing its romantic lyric element, surveying the critical landscape and contemporary reception of the book, and making important deductions about distinctions between Hemingway’s memory of his experiences and the textual representation of these events. Next, *Under Kilimanjaro* is the subject of a characteristically thoughtful, complex reading by Erik Nakjavani, who offers a new model for reading the narrative. What he terms an “alchemy” of “lived experience and memory” leads him to draw from Jung, phenomenology, and the tradition of fairy tale to show the various meanings of Hemingway’s posthumous African text. We next include Verna Kale’s valuable parallel reading of Kay Boyle’s memoir with the 1920s and Paris, which not only provides a gloss on apprenticeship but also illuminates the city at the heart of *The Sun Also Rises*.

In the section treating Memory and Truth, we are mindful that Hemingway once asserted that “memory, of course, is never true” (DIA 100), he also demonstrated that in its inaccuracies it can yield greater truths than any emotionless
fact. Reading Hemingway’s other great novel of the 1920s, *A Farewell to Arms*, Mark Cirino uses Frederic Henry’s combative relationship with memory to explicate important scenes of the novel and employs theorists such as William James, Henri Bergson, Freud, and St. Augustine to discern Hemingway’s understanding of the complex modernist theme of memory and its function in creating depth and tension within Frederic’s character and narration.

Since geography and memory are two foundational elements of “Big Two-Hearted River,” the story is an essential inclusion in this volume. Robert Paul Lamb traces the vast critical history of the story and also explicates “On Writing,” an excised fragment from the story. Ultimately, Lamb explores the self-reflexivity of the story, demonstrating how the concrete details of the fishing trip allow us to explore Nick Adams’s consciousness and his past. Lamb also convincingly demonstrates Cézanne’s status as Nick’s exemplar, both in the way he lived and the art he created. The “nostalgia strategy” in *Death in the Afternoon* figures in Emily Wittman’s essay, which contextualizes Hemingway’s bullfighting disquisition and shows how the text demonstrates his uneven relationship with the past and his varying efforts to portray it in literary forms. Not surprisingly, Hemingway’s posthumous works—which often look backward—are also given significant attention in this volume. Our collection concludes with Barbara Lounsberry’s close reading of memory’s function in *The Garden of Eden*, offering up another piece of criticism that uses Hemingway’s retrospective glance to shed light on the work that preceded it.

We are proud that these essays treat so many different Hemingway texts in so many different ways. In his writing—such as his preface to *A Moveable Feast* as well as his framing of *Green Hills of Africa*—Hemingway is cagey in blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction, effectively positing the subjectivity of memoir and the actuality of imagination. As vast and various as this topic is, we hope this collection of essays takes a step toward illuminating Hemingway’s lifelong negotiation with this theme.
Works Cited


It is well-known that Hemingway’s ideal of life, and his favorite theme, is “grace under pressure.” But his best fiction originates in “emotion recollected in tranquility,” as William Wordsworth defined it in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—in the remembrance and in the memory of experience more than in experience itself (as tends to be the common belief).

In Hemingway’s oft-quoted “The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water” (DIA 192), the part that remains below water, the submerged seven-eighths, is the assimilated experience of the writer, that which he can leave out precisely because he has assimilated it, because it becomes his second nature. It is through his remembrance, or his memory, that he “makes up” or invents his stories, according to the double meaning of the quasi-Poundian term “to make it up” that Hemingway repeatedly applied to fiction and to the process of writing.

Throughout his life and his career, Hemingway seemed to waver between the exigencies (for the writer) of experience and of imagination or invention, which only memory, that submerged seven-eighths, can reconcile for narrative purposes. It is useless to focus on the many passages in which Hemingway insisted on the absolute necessity of direct experience (of *A Farewell to Arms* he writes of having mainly listened to convalescing men in hospitals until other people’s experiences “get to be more vivid than your own. You invent from your own and from all of theirs” [SL 800]). More significant are the moments in which he reasserts that one invents from the experience that one has of the
world (“How much more the writer learns from experience than one can truly imagine”) and that only through invention and imagination, through “making it up,” that experience can transform itself into narrative material. “That is what we are supposed to do when we are at our best—make it all up—but make it up so truly that later it will happen that way” (SL 407).

Elsewhere Hemingway seems to privilege pure invention. He praises Stephen Crane’s writing of The Red Badge of Courage before he had ever seen any war. But he had read the contemporary accounts, had heard the old soldiers, they were not so old then, talk, and above all he had seen Matthew Brady’s wonderful photographs. Creating his story out of this material he wrote that great boy’s dream of war that was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see. It is one of the finest books of our literature” (MAW xvi). A Farewell to Arms is based on the same principle: “I invented every word and every incident of A Farewell To Arms except possibly 3 or 4 incidents. All the best part is invented—95 per cent of The Sun Also was pure imagination. I took real people in that one and I controlled what they did—I made it all up” (qtd. in Bruccoli 203).

Hemingway was perfectly aware of the substantial difference between journalistic reportage and fictional transposition: the first depending on direct experience, the second on the emotional yield and inventive rendering of facts, on the transformation of real experience into fictional truth. As we read in Death in the Afternoon: “In writing for a newspaper you told what happened and, with one trick and another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day; but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard to get it” (2). “The real thing” has a typical Jamesian sound and tone; “the real thing” is what one imagines beyond lived reality.

What mediates between experience and invention, or what allows the passage from one to the other for narrative purposes, is the operation and the distancing of memory working as filter and cushion, removing and softening the direct contact or relationship with immediate reality. “I try always to do the thing by three cushion shots rather than by words or direct statement,” Hemingway wrote in a letter in 1929. “But maybe we must have the direct statement too” (SL 301). Direct enunciation in Hemingway functions mainly on a stylistic level, in pure writing; narrative construction and inspiration are
based instead on the principle of distancing and of memory, of the submerged “assimilated experience” that would allow for the emergent tip of the iceberg to move with the elegance and grace conveyed by its weight and its tension.

Examples of this are clearest in Hemingway’s fiction and in his narrative development, proving convincing above all in his novels (while the exigencies and forms of direct enunciation function mainly in the celebrated short stories). *The Nick Adams Stories*, as we read them today, re-presented in sequence, are an exercise in nostalgia; they play their best game on youthful recollections and suspended re-evocations of childhood; events are removed into a far-away atmosphere outside time. They are a search for lost time, a remembrance of things past. *The Sun Also Rises* is strictly connected to the real happenings that inspired it—the experiences of Paris and Pamplona, the circle of Hemingway’s friends, and so forth—but is written at a notable distance, 1925, from the years immediately after the war that Hemingway intended to re-create and re-present. We are, one might say, halfway between direct experience and memory. But his corresponding memoir, *A Moveable Feast* (published posthumously), is clearly a work of memory and of remembrance, of re-created experience and memorializing in the other sense of the term. Memory returns to the assimilated experience that, for good or bad, becomes second nature.

The most obvious case of Hemingway’s use of re-created experience is *A Farewell to Arms*, the writing of which took place in the ten years after the end of World War I. The novel centers on a traumatic and dramatic experience, the battle at Caporetto, at which Hemingway was not present. The book is clearly constructed by memory of impressions, sounds, and senses experienced in a relatively distant past and for which Hemingway availed himself of journalistic reports, photographs, books, and other people’s testimony. Hemingway had participated in war and was wounded, and he had observed the horrors; and his experience with Agnes von Kurowsky was based on “reality.” But in the novel he dealt with experience assimilated, re-created through the filter of memory and of remembrance, widely different from the “reality” of facts imagined and invented for specific purposes of narrative construction—“made up” in the best sense of the term, as Michael Reynolds unequivocally demonstrated.

The novels named so far are, by almost unanimous consensus Hemingway’s best efforts, which would descend more and more often into the constant mimicry of himself and of his own surface style. One explanation of his relative deterioration over time can perhaps be found in the principle that the closer Hemingway works with immediate experience, the weaker his artistic results are liable to be. In the work after 1930, Hemingway seems to cancel
out or restrict that distinction, the gap between reportage and narrative that earlier he felt to be essential to the success of the story (the “real thing” is indeed quite different from experienced reality): he removes the intervention of memory between lived life and narrated truth. “Mac worked too closely to life. You had to digest life and then create your own people,” he wrote in *The Nick Adams Stories* (238). After 1930, he tends to forget this lesson, to work too closely to his life, and this accounts for the inferior quality, as compared to his earlier achievements, of such novels as *To Have and Have Not, For Whom the Bell Tolls,* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* (not to overlook those books unimaginatively assembled and published posthumously, as for example *The Dangerous Summer,* that clearly eradicated every distance between reportage and narrative, compromising both).

At the halfway point between direct chronicle and distant narration, between direct enunciation and symbolic overtones, between raw experience and memory perhaps rests Hemingway’s late masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea,* which, more than any other book, helped secure him the Nobel Prize. A triumph of simplicity—that simplicity sought and asserted as a vehicle of truth and as a poetic mode almost for his whole career, in which everything comes down to the bone, like the great fish captured after an epic fight only to be picked out, before protagonist Santiago’s eyes, by the sharks.

Hemingway had the story, taken from a real event, already in mind in 1936 and wrote a brief sketch of it in *Esquire* (“On the Blue Water”). But only fifteen years later was he ready to transpose it narratively. The story is so simple and linear that immediately one wonders if it is a trick: Will it not be a *Moby-Dick* deliberately deprived of its ideological and problematic, symbolic and philosophical apparatus, as Hemingway was shown to desire when writing about Melville’s book: “this knowledge is wrapped in the rhetoric like plums in a pudding” (GHOA 20)? And won’t the extreme simplicity and linearity of plot and structure, of characterization and style be the most easy means, or a price rather high to pay, to attaining the immediacy of response, the instant contact with the reader?

Among other things, the narration is strewn with pointers, clues, traces, references, and allusions that legitimately make us think of a Hemingway who plays hide and seek with his declared mortal enemy, symbolism—but a symbolism even too easy and decipherable, the submerged seven-eighths that too forcefully rocks the simple one-eighth that emerges. The old fisherman who for two days and two nights clings to his capture, in which he recognizes a brother with whom he fights, converses, and identifies, a brother who brings
a stigmata on his hands and crucifies him on the wood of the boat, can legiti-
mately suggest an allegory of Christ. Another lesson of the book might also be
that of Christian forbearance, of the moral role of man who wins not because
of some conquest but simply because of the fight and loss of everything. Oth-
erwise, Nature, at first subjugated, snatches back its prey, reasserts possession
of its own, and reestablishes itself at the end of the violated order, with the
fish returned to the mastery of the sea and man defeated but still triumphant,
having asserted his dignity and force of spirit. One finds oneself between the
archetypal man-nature relationship or between will and the attraction of the
depths or even in the triptych of violation-punishment-expiation that can
make one think of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

So, these are the aspects of this book in the middle of which we critics are
thrown like so many sharks. And here snaps another, intriguing interpreta-
tive spring. Might the book not also be an allegory of the writer who pursues
his vision and narrative prey, who suffers the punishment of hell in capturing
and holding it, in literally fastening it to his boat only to have it taken away
from him, stripped of its flesh, and nullified by the critics? We then, the critics,
would be the sharks, while yet again Hemingway would be talking of himself,
of his “grace under pressure,” of his exhaustion and contrasted triumph. Yet,
just as he denied any symbolic intention, so did he deny, in a letter to Edmund
Wilson, this rather appealing possibility: “You know I was thinking about
actual sharks when I wrote the book and had nothing to do with the theory
that they represented critics. I don’t know who thought that up” (SL 793).

It is true, however, that in repeated statements Hemingway subscribed to
the idea that art arises from suffering and from solitude, from the fight with the
ghosts that are inside us as much as outside us. In this sense, the writer tears
his prey away from the ghosts of the visible and invisible and better enjoys the
narrative fruits of victory through the ring of memory and in the distance of
time, where it is allowed and possible to reinvent what has been experienced,
to join, as T. S. Eliot said, memory and desire. But how not to suspect that
around him readers and critics—above all critics—will be ready to skin and
pillage his prey? That which memory invents and creates from experience the
shark destroys. Are we really, then, not the sharks?
Works Cited


———. The Sun Also Rises. New York: Scribner's, 1926.
