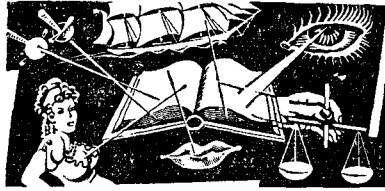

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ERNEST HEMINGWAY

by CHARLES ANGOFF

IT IS likely that the future literary historian will look upon Hemingway's latest book, *Across the River and into the Trees* [\$3.00. Scribner], as marking the end of an epoch in American literature. In it the father of the "tough" school of fiction writing has produced not merely a poor novel, but also a caricature of his method so offensive to good literary taste that it may put a stop to whatever remaining influence that method has enjoyed among young writers.

The Hemingway style and outlook on life have had, at the same time, a most powerful and a highly dubious effect upon the literary *mores* of our day. It is difficult to recall, at the moment, another author in the past fifty years who has been imitated so much as Hemingway. Howells, Crane, Norris, Dreiser, Wharton, Cather, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Steinbeck for a time greatly appealed to the general public but they did not start schools.

They were interested in the portrayal of character, in probing its roots in environment and heredity, and in following its struggles, triumphs and failures in the mysterious tangle of good and evil, beauty and despair, horror and ecstasy, that is life. That grand tradition of fiction writing appeared to have the sanction of natural law. Tolstoi, Flaubert, Maupassant, Hardy and the other great masters adhered to it closely. One of its assumptions was that the inner man was the real man, and that his outward attributes had significance only insofar as they revealed this inner man. Another assumption was that character was paramount in both life and art; that individuals varied as to their character; that it was one of the functions of creative writing to depict this difference as clearly, accurately, and completely as possible; and that character was somehow, in some mysterious fashion, related to that still more mysterious something known as the soul in former times. A third assumption

was that the physical aspects of human experience are most effectively related when merely suggested, that they had best not be stressed since they are only the means to non-physical ends, which alone are important.

The writers of popular fiction have, in effect, denied the validity of these assumptions. They are chiefly interested in the outer man, in dramatic exploits of love, in banditry, in violent passion, and they employ their talents in detailed analyses of the purely physical aspects of living. An outright murder is to them more real than a broken heart, and a sudden, violent act of sexual intercourse more revealing than a shy kiss in the evening.

Hemingway has never considered himself a popular writer, yet the fact is that his assault upon the assumptions of traditional fiction writing has had much in common with the views of writers of popular fiction. If he believes in the existence, not to mention the primacy, of the inner man, his writings have yet to prove it. From his very first book to his present one he has dealt chiefly with outward things; specifically, with horror in the Midwest woods and small towns, death in the bull ring, death on the battlefield, death in the mountains, forests and lakes, manslaughter in the prize ring, and mechanical love-

making between mechanical young men and women. Apparently he has looked upon violence as the supreme expression of life, and he also sees the highest moral worth in its virtues. Lieutenant Henry, obviously speaking for Hemingway, in *A Farewell to Arms*, says, "Nothing ever happens to the brave."

This preoccupation with violence has no significance in itself. It is a worthy theme for the writer, as witness *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Red Badge of Courage*. But Tolstoi, Melville and Stephen Crane treated it as an occasional attribute of human life, not as its only or most telling one.

Hemingway has nearly always been interested in killing and hurting as ends in themselves, as the chief themes of fiction, as, indeed, the glories of all life. The very highest compliment he can give Shakespeare is that, as Colonel Caldwell, the leading character in *Across the River*, says, "He writes like a soldier himself."

II

Hemingway's preoccupation with the impact of things upon the outward man has had its rewards. It has apparently been largely responsible for centering his attention upon the fascination of mere things; and it has probably tended to make him economical in his use of words. He can

describe sunrises with rare beauty, and he can report the bare motions of guns and animals and men hunting and skiing and boxing and bull-fighting with stark clarity. The battle sections in *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are truly striking in their over-all effect. Even his connective scenes are written with very considerable power, as can be seen from the following brief passage from *A Farewell to Arms*:

A new wide road was being finished that would go over the mountain and zigzag down to the bridge. When this road was finished the offensive would start. It came down through the forest in sharp turns. The system was to bring everything down the new road and take the empty trucks, carts, and loaded ambulances and all returning traffic up the old narrow road. The dressing station was on the Austrian side of the river under the edge of the hill and stretcher-bearers would bring the wounded back across the pontoon bridge. It would be the same when the offensive started. As far as I could make out the last mile or so of the new road where it started to level out would be able to be shelled steadily by the Austrians. It looked as though it might be a mess. But I found a place where the cars would be sheltered after they had passed that last bad-looking bit and could wait for the wounded to be brought across the pontoon bridge. I would have liked to drive over the

new road but it was not yet finished. It looked wide and well made with a good grade and the turns looked very impressive where you could see them through openings in the forest on the mountain side. The cars would be all right with their good metal-to-metal brakes and anyway, coming down, they would not be loaded. I drove back up the narrow road.

While this is not poetry — Hemingway does not seem to be very fond of poetry and considers prose “more difficult” — it is very effective and a great relief from the doily-anti-macassar type of prose written by Cabell and Hergesheimer in the Twenties and admired so much at the time. Hemingway pretty much put an end to it, and for that deserves credit. He also lifted some fictional conversation to a new level. He has a sharp ear not only for the words but for the nuances of the less complicated types of humanity — prize fighters, bull fighters, women without taste, boulevardiers, and professional huntsmen. It is the conversation in *The Sun Also Rises* that makes it so memorable a book, and it is the conversation that makes such stories as “The Killers” and “Fifty Grand” so exciting to read even the third and fourth time. Hitherto the people in such stories had been dealt with a bit condescendingly even by so conscientious an artist as Ring Lardner.

Hemingway, through his deep and genuine love for them, and for their occupations, transformed their lives into viable art. For that, too, he merits commendation.

His great mistake, however, was in assuming that life is basically a pulp story and most of the people therein composed of the same material. The validity of this philosophy is gravely to be doubted. It runs counter to the findings of the greatest writers of the human race, including Shakespeare, whom Hemingway, in his big he-man manner, calls "the winner and still the undisputed champion." But valid or not, it certainly does not offer a vantage point from which to write genuine literature about a very large portion of the human race. While Hemingway confined himself to his pulp characters, he wrote admirably about them, as he wrote admirably about things — for pulp people, to a considerable extent, may properly be viewed as things. Even such folk are on occasion filled with an obsessive bewilderment concerning the inscrutable order of things, as Rodin revealed in his sculpture *The Thinker*; but it is true that sizeable segments of their lives can be treated as if they were soul-less objects.

Men and women of a more complex nature, however, are ruled by psychological, moral and spiritual forces that are almost as mysterious now as they

were at the dawn of history. No aspect of mature personality can be measured or definitively catalogued. It can be apprehended only intuitively, and the quality of the apprehension is the measure of the artist.

On this score Hemingway has failed catastrophically. Not once has he apprehended with true maturity. The people in *The Sun Also Rises*, perhaps his most successful book, despite all the dazzling conversation, seldom rise above just that — conversation objects, things talked about, without independent existence. The men and women in *A Farewell to Arms* have no more reality than their counterparts in the fiction of periodicals with mass circulations. They have courage, according to Hemingway, they love, they lie, they swindle, they talk and talk and talk, but they never come to life. They have no development. One knows as much about them after reading ten pages as after reading 200 pages. They reveal no inner conflicts, no adult doubts or yearnings, no lasting regrets. The men can largely be interchanged, as can the women. Catherine is an English Maria, and Maria is a Spanish Catherine. Similarly with Jordan and Henry.

III

The more intricate the character and the more complex and refined the inter-personal relationship the greater

is Hemingway's failure. Thus he is at his most lamentable in his writings about women and about love. His women are seldom more than womanly moods; most often they are only posters.

They have breasts but no hearts; they have curves but no inner softnesses; they are coöperative but not comforting in the immemorial womanly manner. They are females with nothing to distinguish them from females of other animal species save their powers of speech.

According to Hemingway, what takes place when a man and a woman are in love can all be described very briefly in simple words. They gabble a bit, then have their will of each other, and that is all. Hemingway is probably the only respectable author in all world literature who does not think that civilized people need poetry for authentic love-making. He fails to distinguish between the means and the end. He considers the means as the end. No wonder so many women readers find him revolting, and no wonder so many men readers look upon him as the perennial adolescent.

Hemingway seems to have no concept of the wonderful tenderness and the attendant ineffable silences that can come between man and woman. He sees them in terms of juvenile tediousness, as witness this passage from *A Farewell to Arms*:

"What would you like me to do now. . . ?" [asked Catherine]

"Come to bed again."

"All right. I'll come."

"Oh, darling, darling, darling," I said.

"You see," she said. "I do anything you want."

"You're so lovely."

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at it yet."

"You're lovely."

"I want what you want. There isn't any me any more. Just what you want."

"You sweet."

"I'm good. Aren't I good? You don't want any other girls, do you?"

"No."

"You see? I'm good. I do what you want."

IV

Hemingway's emphasis upon the outer attributes of men and women has driven him and his followers to seek "meaning" in realms that have hitherto been considered poor literary soil. Authors who adhere to the assumptions of the grand tradition of fiction writing have never been tempted thus, for the inner man is limitless in his dazzling mystery. Since the outer man is very limited in material, the desire on the part of Hemingway and his imitators to be more and more "realistic" has been very great. Otherwise, they would have little to write about. Which is why

one group has gone to the honky-tonks and to the human automatons who inhabit them in search of copy. And that is why another group has gone to the bedrooms of nymphomaniacs and their cretin lovers for plots for their "terrific" books.

But Hemingway has taken the ultimate step, in the pursuit of his own method, in *Across the River*. With it he has reached the dead end of his brand of realism. *Across the River* is the story of the 50-year-old Colonel Richard Cantwell, U.S.A., and his week-end assignation with his nineteen-year-old Italian mistress, Countess Renata. The colonel, in the words of his orderly, is a "mean son of a bitch, and he can be so God-damn nice." He calls people he doesn't like, including d'Annunzio, "jerks," and his other frequent comment on things and people is *merde*, or its English equivalent. He "only loved people . . . who had fought or been mutilated":

Other people were fine and you liked them and were good friends; but you only felt true tenderness and love for those who had been there and had received the castigation that everyone receives who goes there long enough.

So I'm a sucker for crips, he thought. . . . And any son of a bitch who has been hit solidly, as every man will be if he stays, then I love him.

The colonel would "rather not love any one." He'd "rather have fun. And fun, his good side said to him, you have no fun when you do not love." He loves "more than any son of the great bitch alive." The object of his love comes upon the scene "shining in her youth and tall, striding beauty, and the carelessness the wind had made of her hair. She had pale, almost olive colored skin, a profile that could break your, or any one else's heart, and her dark hair, of an alive texture, hung down over her shoulders."

This motion-picture creature is greeted with these words by her gruff, bluff lover: "Hello, my great beauty."

And she replies, as befits a celluloid lady, "Oh, oh hello. I thought I would miss you. I am so sorry to be late."

Her voice, of course, "was low and delicate."

Then they consume mountains of drinks and every few pages they reveal their innermost selves to each other with these illuminating words:

"Say once again that you love me."

"I love you and I love you and I love you."

They have a violent and prolonged love scene that Hemingway describes in great physiological detail. It is probably the "frankest" such scene in all American literature, and also one

of the most boring. What Catherine refers to in *A Farewell to Arms* as "doing our things" is here spelled out across dozens of pages. The pointless vulgarity of it all is impossible to put into words. Occasionally, like many Hemingway women, Renata becomes girlishly philosophical, branding love as "whatever that means," but most of the time she whips the colonel on to "love me true" at the same time pleading with him, "Please attack gently and with the same attack as before," a virile language that her soldier lover of 50 has taught her.

The colonel thinks he is being really kind to her, so much so, indeed, that he is disgusted. He says, "I'm so kind I stink." Another time he looks at Renata's picture and explodes, "You are so Goddamned beautiful you stink." Time and time again she kisses him "kind, and hard, and desperately." He ponders, like every Hemingway boy philosopher, "Very rough trade, . . . loving and

leaving. People can get hurt at it." He feels a piercing constriction in the region of his weak heart. He knows he is going to die. A bully to the end, he thinks:

What the hell do you have to worry about, boy? I hope you're not the type of jerk who worries about what happens to him when there's nothing to be done. Let's certainly hope not.

Then he collapses in death.

In short, Hemingway has written another pulp story about a man who is no more than a bag of mechanical impulses, and a woman who has no more reality than a talking doll. But this time he has dramatized his failure as he had never done before. He has revealed the shabbiness of his fictional philosophy by showing to what abysmally vulgar depths it inevitably pushes one. It seems incredible that the school he founded will be able to outlive the disgrace of *Across the River*.



THE CHECK LIST



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VERDICT OF THREE DECADES, edited by Julien Steinberg. \$5.00. *Duell, Sloan & Pearce*. More than thirty men and women here present "the indictment of the democratic world against Soviet Communism," which shares "with Nazi totalitarianism the distinction of being the most reactionary system ever known to mankind." Among the contributors are Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Bertrand Russell, Emma Goldman, Max Eastman, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, David J. Dallin, Louis Budenz and Sidney Hook. Mr. Steinberg contributes an intelligent introduction. Altogether a very useful volume.

THE WORLD WE SAW, by Mary Bell Decker. \$3.00. *Richard R. Smith*. Mrs. Decker accompanied her husband, Dr. Clarence R. Decker, president of the University of Kansas City, on the Round the World tour of the first World Town Hall Seminar in 1949. Here, in the form of a diary, she records the numberless people, both big and little, whom she encountered. Her observations are shrewd, well-informed, and reveal a

mind of universal breadth and a heart that can sympathize with the trials of the great as well as with the agonies of the hopelessly downtrodden. There is not a trace of fluff or space-consuming chitchat in the entire volume. Indeed, the book is one of the most intelligent surveys of the contemporary world published this year, and it is written with vivacity, clarity and grace. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt contributes a brief introduction, and George V. Denny, Jr., director of Town Hall of the Air, contributes a foreword.

THE LONELY CROWD, *A Study of the Changing American Character*, by David Riesman, in collaboration with Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer. \$4.00. *Yale*. Here is an especially brilliant analysis of modern society, written by three social-psychologists who believe that today's citizen is becoming largely "other-directed" — he tunes in, as if by radar, on his social peers, to gain cues for "approval," and he no longer relies on inner morality or long-standing tradition. The authors carefully trace the "other-directed" citizen through work, politics, education, sex, leisure and consumption,