

# Hemingway and the Biographical Heresy

by Thomas P. McDonnell

*"Vilify! Vilify! Some of it will always stick."*

—Beaumarchais

*Hemingway* by Kenneth S. Lynn, New York: Simon and Schuster; \$24.95.

When I learned some time ago that the critic Kenneth S. Lynn was bringing out a book on the late Ernest Hemingway, hard on the heels of the large biographical study by Jeffrey Myers, I anticipated a reasonably cogent analysis of the stories, the several novels, and the most important of the nonfiction as well. Instead, what we now have on hand is more of the same—the gossipers and the neo-Freudian biographers pecking away at a life that was already shattered long before the man, in a moment of agony, became his own executioner. With that one shot, the myth of the public persona of Ernest Hemingway should have been put to rest forever.

But it hasn't been put to rest at all. It was of course Hemingway himself who was largely responsible for the creation of the myth of the author as undisputed macho in American letters, just as the poet Robert Frost had early passed himself off as our resident bucolic poet. We know that Hemingway had a bitch of a mom in Grace Hall, who dressed him in his sister's clothes and called him her "summer girl," but how does this bear upon the writer's great achievement itself? Hemingway is our only major writer who, after his first two or three books, has been savaged for not producing a masterpiece every time. This is the ploy of the cream-puff critics who think that writing is like a good commercial flour—guaranteed to bake a perfect cake every time.

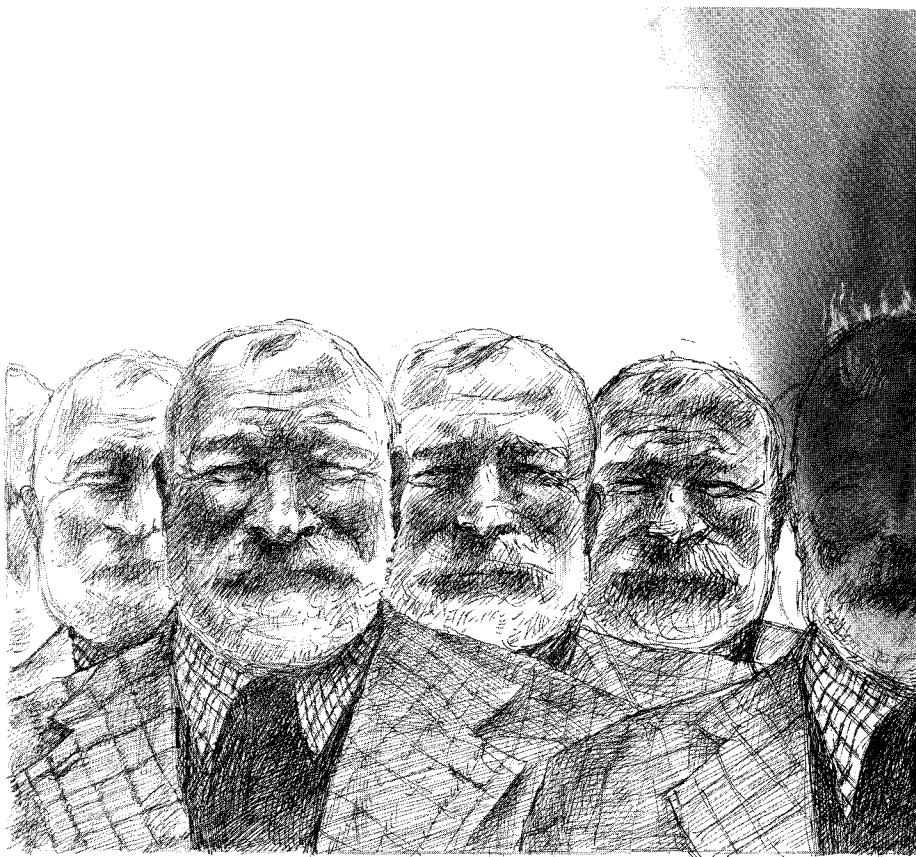
I mean insufferable little snobs like Wilfrid Sheed and a whole clutch of other mean-spirited nitpickers, not to mention the big snobs themselves, of course—those biographers of Hemingway who would presume to bludge-

on him down to size with overstuffed books. I think that we have had overmuch of judging the man instead of the works. There are infinite numbers of characteristics that we can serve up in order to make Hemingway look bad—but why should anyone want to do this, unless there are types among us who had long ago sharpened their claws for just such a job?

The fact is that Hemingway, despite the hairy chest and he-man facade, was what we should now call vulnerable. He was vengeful, a falsifier, a womanizer, a poseur, and accident-prone to a disturbing degree. But he was also a good companion, in many ways heroic and selfless, someone to count on when the going got tough. Though admittedly difficult, he was himself often abandoned by others when he most needed their help. He

had that instinctive curiosity which the young writer must have, and he was among the first of the postwar Americans to recognize the relationship of modern art to the formation of a new prose style. In the current biographical assault, Hemingway has not been gauged, he has been gouged.

The gouging has been particularly noticeable when focused on the two Hemingway books that the critics seem most disposed to attack: one at possibly the low-point of his career, in *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), and the other at a brief but recoverable high-point in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), each amazingly enclosed within a two-year period of publication. On the first of these titles, the vultures would descend at once. The curiously hesitant Wilfrid Sheed, however, waited until 1977 to announce to the world that Hemingway had "made a complete ass of himself" in *Across the River*. As for the latest big biographical assessments of the matter,



Thomas McDonnell is a free-lance writer living near Boston.

Kenneth Lynn proves to be fairer than Jeffrey Myers, whose discussion distorted the contemporary critical response to the novel. Myers fails to point out that Northrop Frye, for example, had correctly observed that, like many attempts by Hemingway in the form of the novel, this one "might have been a long short story of overwhelming power." Myers also failed to cite Evelyn Waugh's perhaps single most effective refutation of the vultures feasting on *Across the River*. In the 30 September 1950 issue of *The Tablet* (London), Waugh asked why they all hated Hemingway so:

I believe the truth is that they have detected in him something they find quite unforgivable—Decent Feeling. Behind all the bluster and cursing and fisticuffs he has an elementary sense of chivalry—respect for women, pity of the weak, love of honor—which keeps breaking in. There is a form of high, supercilious caddishness which is all the rage nowadays in literary circles. That is what

the critics seek in vain in this book, and that is why their complaints are so loud and confident.

Hemingway had already distressed the effeminate poets and Marxist partisans of the Spanish Civil War. He had clearly double-crossed the Stalinists in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). An attack on Hemingway was not only easy but required, a decade later.

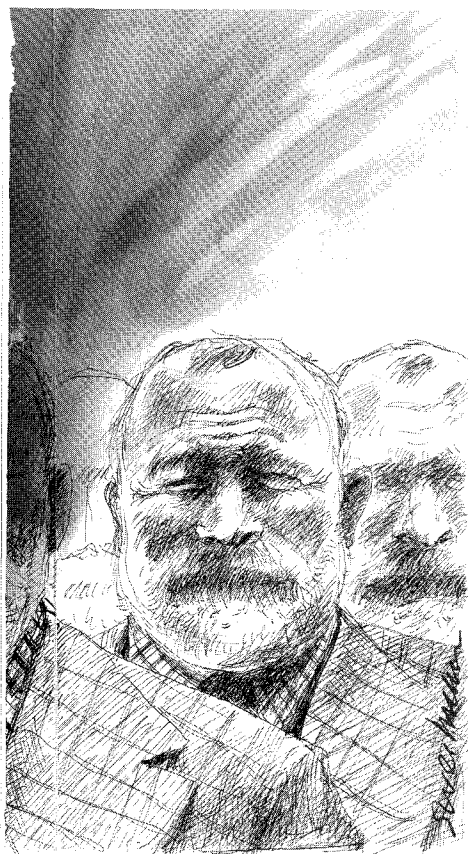
Professor Lynn is as misleading on *The Old Man and the Sea* as Professor Myers had been on *Across the River and Into the Trees*. The 1952 book is a miracle of American writing, a thing of incandescent strength and clarity, but its virtues, no less than its continuing popularity, fail to win over the academic critic. Professor Lynn wonders how a book could be so highly praised "that lapses repeatedly into lachrymose sentimentality and is relentlessly pseudo-Biblical, that mixes cute talk about baseball ('I fear both the Tigers of Detroit and the Indians of Cleveland') with the crucifixion symbolism of the most appalling crudity ('he slept face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up')," and so on.

God forbid that any fiction in the age of Joyce Carol Oates should evoke the order of genuine feeling that Lynn calls "lachrymose sentimentality." Here is a long short story which moves on several levels at once, mainly of a resolute old age in relationship to the youth of the boy who loves the old man more than his own parents, and based of course on the wisdom of experience they have shared. The talk about baseball is not cute by any means; it is essential and savors of the great (and by the way continuing) Cuban love of baseball itself, and it deepens the bond between the old man and the boy. And, for God's sake, indeed, the old man slept at the end with palms upward because they were stripped bloody raw from the friction of the fishing lines. Lynn may never have gone fishing or, to judge from his writing, have ever done any work with his hands. *The Old Man* is one of the most remarkable examples we have in the genre of nature-writing on the sea itself. It is a story in which Hemingway gave to manly behavior the very delicacy of a feminine presence.

Lynn shares with Myers an appreciation for one of the finest brief memoirs in the annals of American literature, *A Moveable Feast* (1964), which, though slightly soured by Hemingway's own denigrations of some of his contemporaries, remains a superb piece of writing on the art of writing. It was Edmund Wilson who early recognized that when "Hemingway begins speaking in the first person, he seems to lose his bearings, not merely as a critic of life, but even as a craftsman." This is generally the case, no doubt, but it is also an insight which Wilson had recorded, in his outstanding essay on Hemingway in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), long before the appearance of *A Moveable Feast*. For those who want to confront the central fact about Hemingway, this almost fictionalized memoir forces us to ask what kind of a writer he happened to be.

Ernest Hemingway happened to be a short story writer. Above or aside from everything else he wrote—the novels, the journalism, and the nonfiction—it is in the short story form that Hemingway excels and still maintains a high place in world literature. This is not simply to acknowledge familiar masterpieces like "Big Two-Hearted River," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," or "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," etc., for it is also to recognize the short stories that are essentially contained in the several major novels themselves. *The Sun Also Rises* is several short stories, while the posthumous *The Garden of Eden* (1986) is several more. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* may be the only authentic novel that Hemingway wrote, and yet even that is diffuse and ill-constructed. Maxwell Perkins to the contrary, it is too bad that an editor more devoted to art than the marketplace (novels are more marketable than short stories) did not hold Hemingway to the form he was born to write.

The startling conclusion to all this is that with three major biographies of Hemingway already on the shelf—including, of course, Carlos Baker's groundbreaking volume in 1969—plus Peter Griffin's *Along With Youth* (1985), the first volume in a proposed trilogy, I repeat the startling conclusion persists that we do not have readily at hand a study of the author that is





either critically autonomous or biographically satisfying. One can at least accept, I think, the *Hemingway* of Jeffrey Myers as the best of the crop so far; whereas it is most difficult, if not impossible, to accept Kenneth Lynn's *Hemingway* on any level, if only because, in both principle and practice, it so severely offends what C.S. Lewis has called "the personal heresy"—or, as we may call it here, the biographical heresy. The great Christian apologist and literary critic opposed any method of criticism which attempts to interpret imaginative works as autobiography. He disdained biographical criticism, as such, and said that in his opinion "all criticism should be of books, not of authors." Although Lewis applied this dictum chiefly to classical poetry, it may usefully be applied as well to the 20th-century prose of Ernest Hemingway.

Here we have, then, the incredible demand of biographers like Myers—and especially the pusillanimous Lynn—who lay down the law that the fictionist shall be disallowed to recreate his raw materials in anything other than strict biographical terms. Lynn's critical method is to *expose* Hemingway for not conforming to this ridiculous dictum. It was also typical of the *New York Review of Books* (August 13, 1987) to bless Lynn's practice of this curiously illiberal doctrine in its extended commentary, by Frederick Crews, of the Lynn biography. One might have guessed, however, that something was amiss when NYRB chose to draw attention to the article with the cover-title "Kinky Hemingway." Kinky he may have been, but surely not more so than some of the rest of us. In any case, so much for the scholarly approach.

Hemingway was a writer. In our century, he left us with a new way of storytelling. And yet here is a presumed biographer, Lynn, who seems incapable of dealing with his subject's most important works (*The Old Man*, for one) and who makes no attempt at all to put his subject's failures into perspective or to see in them any redeeming value whatsoever. It is hard to say this, but Kenneth Lynn has joined the faction of pimp-critics whose preferred aim is the depreciation of Hemingway's works through the continuing and undaunted prac-

tice of the biographical heresy: Expose the man; demean the works. A great deal has been made of Lynn's critique of "Big Two-Hearted River," which up to now has been regarded as an allegory for the healing of the hero's wounds sustained in war, partly supported by Hemingway himself. But the point is, who cares? Not even the remarks aside of Ernest Hemingway can destroy a good story or harm a superlative piece of American writing. The incredible paradox is that while the biographical critics have discovered that Hemingway was, after all, a terribly complex individual, they continue to treat him as an irreducible buffoon and to pervert the interpretation of literary works that have already earned their place as autonomous works of art. When Lynn or Myers can write a single paragraph as good as the opening sentences of virtually any Hemingway novel, when either can teach us as much of the human heart as the shortest of his short stories, and when they have learned even the rudiments of constructive literary criticism, then and only then we might be interested in anything they have to say on the subject of modern literature.

## An American Prometheus

by Bryce J. Christensen

*Rabi: Scientist and Citizen* by John S. Rigden, New York: Basic Books; \$21.95.

Sprawled on the sands of the New Mexico desert, Isador Isaac Rabi was witness on July 16, 1945, to a demonstration of scientific power so spectacular that neither his welder's glasses nor his analytical training could fully shield him from its awe-inspiring effects:

Suddenly, there was an enormous flash of light, the brightest light I have ever seen or that I think anyone else has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way into you. It was a vision which was seen with more than the eye. . . . Finally it was over . . . and we looked

toward the place where the bomb had been; there was an enormous ball of fire which grew and grew and rolled as it grew; it went up into the air, in yellow flashes and into scarlet and green. It looked menacing.

More than two years before this first test of an atomic bomb, I.I. Rabi had refused J. Robert Oppenheimer's invitation to serve as associate director of the Manhattan Project. Still, no one questioned his place among the leading American scientists who gathered on that summer night to observe the fireball that rose above Alamogordo. Though his services to the Project as a consultant were modest, everyone involved recognized Rabi as one of the pioneers who had pushed America into the forefront of modern physics.

In this wonderfully accessible new biography, John Rigden paints an intriguing portrait of this remarkable man. Though himself a physicist, Rigden writes an engaging narrative that allows the intelligent layman to feel something of the romance and adventure of Rabi's pioneering work. Extensive interviews permit the reader to hear Rabi in his own voice.

Trained in an outmoded classical physics at Columbia University, Rabi traveled to Europe in 1927 to learn the "new physics" he had been reading about in the professional journals. During the next two years, he worked in the world's leading research laboratories with some of the brightest minds in Europe—Neils Bohr, Wolfgang Pauli, Werner Heisenberg, Otto Stern, and Paul Dirac. As Rabi explained it, he needed his European experience not to learn the subject of subatomic physics but to acquire "the taste for it, the style, the quality, the tradition. We [Americans] knew the libretto, but we had to learn the music."

When he returned to take a position at Columbia University, Rabi knew "the music," and he was able to share the melody with other inquiring minds. Together, he and a handful of other American physicists propelled the United States into the leadership of the exciting new field. Rabi's breakthroughs in nuclear magnetic resonance during the 1930's won him the Nobel Prize in 1944, after receiving