

Stalking Papa's Ghost

Long before his suicide in 1961, Ernest Miller Hemingway had become the subject of a sizable scholarly/journalistic enterprise. His death, however, gave the Hemingway "industry" new direction and added impetus: Why, biographers asked, had the great novelist taken his own life? Two of the more extensive explanations were offered by A. E. Hotchner (*Papa Hemingway*, 1966) and Carlos Baker (*Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, 1969). Curiosity about Hemingway waned during the 1970s, perhaps reflecting the younger Woodstock Generation's flight from machismo and stoic self-control. But a revival recently has been in the works. No fewer than five reputable biographies, including Peter Griffin's revealing study of Hemingway's formative years, have appeared during the past two years. Here, on the 25th anniversary of Hemingway's death, critic Frank McConnell considers Papa's lasting influence on some of America's foremost writers.

by Frank McConnell

Nineteen forty-four was not Ernest Hemingway's best year.

In Europe to cover the last stages of the Allied struggle against Hitler, the foremost American novelist of his time was lurching between bravery and silliness in a way that boded ill for the remainder of his career.

Carlos Baker records that by the middle of the year, "after nearly a week of sticking his neck out, said Ernest, his only present war aim was 'to get to Paris without being shot.'" It was a singularly unglorious ambition for a man who had made the profession of risk almost *the* distinctive American pose of the 1920s and '30s. Just as the First

World War made Hemingway a serious writer, so the Second World War marked the end of Hemingway's moment. Or at least appeared to do so.

While Hemingway was attempting to reach Paris without getting shot, a new talent in American letters, Saul Bellow, was publishing his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944). It is the fictionalized journal of Joseph, a Chicago-based intellectual and agonized draft resister, a sensitive man who cannot even decide if he should enter the war to which Hemingway gave himself so enthusiastically. And it begins with what is essentially a refutation of the entire Hemingway mystique:



Ernest Hemingway's first postwar passport photograph, taken before his departure for Paris with his first wife, Hadley Richardson, in 1921.

There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hard-boiledness. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy—an American inheritance, I believe, from the English

gentleman—that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace back to Alexander the Great—is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code.

In retrospect, there is something a little *too* severe about Bellow's sendup of the "tough boy." Much of our contemporary sense of Hemingway, after all, is precisely a sense of how far from tough he really was. Philip Young was probably the first critic to demonstrate what great self-doubt and vulnerability underlay that charade of macho.*

But now we do not even need Young. We have the suicide. With the knowledge of that act, we can see that Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan, and the whole Hemingway crew were always, in one way or another, weak men compensating desperately for their weakness.

Hemingway himself was a weak man—and sad because he knew that he was. His bluster, his bullying, his loud adventurism were a mask for a deep-seated insecurity. He was a *miles gloriosus*, a braggart soldier who could be taken as a figure of fun.

But, I would suggest, Hemingway managed to be all those absurd, laughable things and also to be something else, something permanently valuable for American letters.

He managed also to be a hero of consciousness, a writer and a stylist who made his cowardice, and his knowledge of his cowardice, the very stuff of his heroism and his endurance.

Bellow perceptively identifies the hard-boiled pose as "an American inheritance . . . from the English gentleman—that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor." It might have been even more perceptive to substitute "English dandy" for "English gentleman." Like Lord Byron, Hemingway

was a dandy—an ostentatious, elegantly vulgar man who made his insecure egotism the subject of his art. And like all valuable members of the sect (e.g., Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, T. E. Lawrence), Hemingway showed us something of the cost, as well as the value, of the dandy's pose.

For pose is precisely what the dandy does. The dandy values style above substance because he finds the world of substances empty, void, a sham. This is the Byronic abyss of cynicism, this is Lawrence's profound despair at politics, and this is Hemingway's celebrated *nada*. The dandy confuses the life and the work: He loves to show off, loves to be sketched or photographed in the various poses and costumes of his dandyism. See the portrait of Byron in Albanian garb or the photos of Hemingway, smiling over dead buffalo, in white-hunter slouch hat and khaki.

Courting Nada

The dandy also loves war for the same reason that he loves stylized brutality: because war *is* stylized brutality, the absolute triumph of technique over value. But the dandy loves war as he loves everything else: ironically.

"Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." That is Frederic Henry in perhaps the most frequently quoted passage from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Byronic romantic that he was, Hemingway believed in this wounded emptiness before he ever saw it manifested in the war. But he welcomed the war—and became its

*In *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (1966).

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chief elegiac voice—just because it was the manifestation of the *nada* he carried inside himself. That gift of irony, that sublime hollowness, is his bequest to later American writers.

From Code-Hero to Hipster

Critic Harold Bloom has recently observed, in *Agon* (1982), that the chief genius of the American writer is for loneliness, for an isolation from his fellows and from the great tradition either imposed upon or earned by him. Bloom does not discuss Hemingway in this connection. Yet the observation seems nowhere more pointed than in Hemingway's case.

For if every artist, in good Freudian fashion, must kill or castrate his artistic father before he can begin to function on his own, then Hemingway is certainly the symbolic father of almost all him. The man who was called—and who liked to be called—"Papa" could certainly expect his share of literary-filial rebellion.

If the 1950s belonged to the rebellious sons of Hemingway, the two succeeding decades belonged largely to his more faithful inheritors. The dandy—the American dandy—may have gone temporarily out of favor. But give us an endless war; give us a real national moral vacuity; give us a mass-marketed *nada* adequate to express the full purposelessness of rational life—and watch dandyism once again rear its handsome, ironic, smiling head. So, at any rate, it proved to be with Hemingway, Vietnam, and the years just after mid-century.

The faithful son *par excellence*, the one who attempts to carry on Papa's ways, is of course Norman Mailer.

Here is Mailer in the early 1960s, reviewing Morley Callaghan's memoir of Hemingway, *That Summer in Paris* (1963). Callaghan relates how he once knocked down Hemingway in a box-

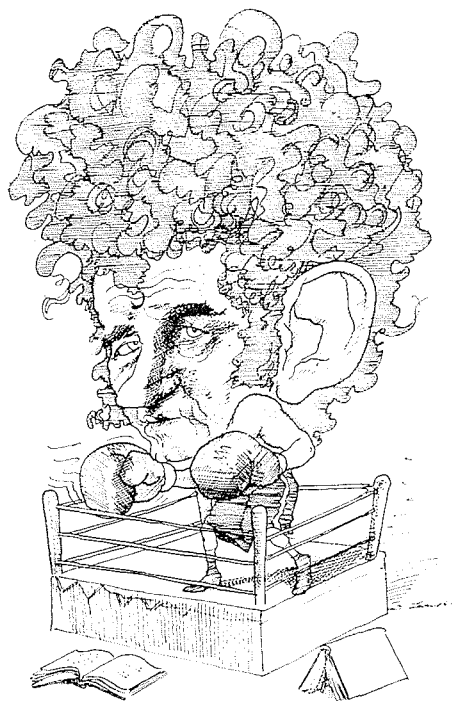
ing match refereed by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Mailer defends Hemingway's chagrin at the knockout, writing:

It is possible Hemingway lived every day of his life in the style of the suicide. What a great dread is that. It is the dread which sits in the silences of his short declarative sentences. At any instant, by any failure of magic, by a mean defeat, by a moment of cowardice, Hemingway could be thrust back again into the agonizing demands of his courage. For the life of his talent must have depended on living in a psychic terrain where one must either be brave beyond one's limit, or sicken deeper into a bad illness, or, indeed, by the ultimate logic of the suicide, must advance the hour in which one would make another reconnaissance into one's death.

If Bellow is a little cruel in his parody of the tough boy, Mailer is surely too adulatory in his description of that physical and psychic vanity. But what is significant is the way both writers use Hemingway—the image of the man as well as the image of the books—to define their own stylistic identity. Bellow's suave disdain for the cult of the literary bully is virtually a précis of the wry, humane academicism that marks his best fiction. And Mailer's romanticism, his rhetorical pumping for Papa, is not just a defense but an *assumption* of the Hemingway voice.

"What a great dread is that," he writes. The sentence is clumsy, inelegant, until we realize that Mailer is writing *Hemingwayesque*. For it is just the sort of thing one of the peasants in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) might say. When in doubt, teaches the aesthetics of dandyism, write awkwardly.

Awkwardness is not just the earnest mark of sincerity; it is also the badge of the improviser. It is the shoestring catch, the nearly perfect veronica, the almost—but not quite—flawless jazz solo whose very failure of elegance is a



Norman Mailer

new kind of elegance. Byron may well have invented this transcendental clumsiness in the headlong improvisation of *Don Juan* (1821). But Hemingway turned it into the very basis of his style, and Mailer, his most faithful son, has made it a lingua franca in postwar American writing.

If Hemingway invented the "code-hero" whose measured hedonism was an island of sanity and control in a mad world, Mailer invents (or at least patents) the hipster as the logical extension of the code-hero. The difference—and it is a serious difference—is that the hipster chooses to live much closer to the ragged edge of neurosis, that very edge the code-hero spends so much of his time evading.

There is no equivalent, in recent

American fiction, to the bitter but lyrical pastoralism of Hemingway's "The Big Two-Hearted River" (1925) or even of his posthumously published *Islands in the Stream* (1970). But the closest approach to it is Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), where the narrator, D.J., a manic and scatological Nick Adams, tells us of his crazy hunting expedition before his enlistment in the Army. Here, however, the solaces of nature have all turned ugly, parodic: Mailer may trust the irony of the Hemingway voice, but he cannot bring himself to trust its capacity for limited joy.

A larger irony surfaces here. While Mailer assimilates the bluster, the toughness, the outrageousness, and the suicidal risk of the style, it is Bellow—Bellow the anti-tough boy—who seems to have assimilated most successfully the hopefulness that runs through Hemingway's work. When Herzog cries out, in the midst of the novel named after him, "We owe the void a human life," it is difficult not to hear echoes of *The Old Man and the Sea* (man may be destroyed, but never defeated) and any number of earlier, similar utterances against *nada*.

High Culture . . .

Hemingway, as writer and as presence, has had a powerful influence on writers who have come after him—not only on Bellow and Mailer, and not only on creators of High Culture. Like Byron in his own day, Hemingway has had, in our century, at least as important an influence on so-called popular culture as he has on so-called serious writing. His short story, "The Killers," from *In Our Time* (1925), has provided a title and at least the bare bones of a script for two excellent gangster films (one directed by Robert Siodmak, 1946; the other directed by Don Siegel, 1964).

But beyond this explicit influence, it

is also evident that both Hemingway and the Hemingway style have exercised a strong, probably determinative, effect on the whole course of the American detective story in both film and literature.

... And Pop Culture

Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are usually credited as the originators of the American or "hard-boiled" style of detective writing. But, as the term "hard-boiled" may indicate, both Hammett and Chandler—and their contemporary heirs, Ross Macdonald, John D. MacDonald, Lawrence Sanders, and Stuart Kaminsky—would not really be possible without Hemingway. Indeed, the Hemingway hero is, by and large, the classic American hard-boiled private eye; the prose style that goes along with that peculiar figure is, by and large, the prose style Hemingway developed for a very different kind of character: the wounded, disillusioned veteran of World War I.

"Doctors did things to you and then it was not your body any more," thinks Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*. "The head was mine, and the inside of the belly. It was very hungry in there. I could feel it turn over on itself. The head was mine, but not to use, not to think with, only to remember and not too much remember."

"Only to remember and not too much remember"—that may be the distinctive definition of the Hemingway style. At its best, that style places a screen of words, a screen of short, ritualistically declarative sentences between the narrator-perceiver of the action and the terrible, tragic quality of the action itself. Jake Barnes *is* impotent; Frederic Henry *does* fail to make a "separate peace"; Robert Jordan *does* die needlessly.

It is a universe of defeat and disillusionment, and yet that telegraphic

style—what Mailer calls the "dread" sitting in his short declarative sentences—almost reconciles us to the horror, since it all but masks the horror within an ironic, primitive, unresembling articulation.

The Hemingway style is a direct equivalent of the celebrated "code" of the Hemingway hero. Both are deliberate reductions of the flux of life to the dimensions of an elaborate game—the one in the world of behavior, the other in the world of utterance. That is precisely the tone of the classic American detective story, whether in film or in literature. It is a deliberate unremembering: a recapitulation of the violent past that filters the horror of the past—the horror of betrayal, of failure, of psychic impotence—through obsessive, descriptive detail.

A Separate Peace

In American film this is the tradition of the *film noir*, from classics of the 1940s such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944) to recent attempts at recapturing that special tone in films such as *The Godfather* (1971), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Body Heat* (1981). All of these films celebrate a certain tender cynicism, a bullet-biting disengagement that enables one to survive the ravages of time with something like dignity.

That is the Hemingway tradition at its most popular—and perhaps at its most dangerous. The self-advertising "toughness" deliberately eschewed by a Bellow and self-consciously reassured by a Mailer can also be adopted at its most vulgar and arrogant pitch of machismo. No one, for example, could seriously argue that the popularity of the Hemingway hero is directly responsible for America's venture into Vietnam. But, on the other hand, one could argue that the Hemingway vision is symptomatic of a certain strain of ir-

THE DOCTOR'S SON

Morley Callaghan once recalled that his friend Ernest Hemingway "couldn't walk down the street and stub his toe without having a newsman who happened to be walking with him magnify the little accident into a near fatality." The remark, while apt, is not completely fair. If Hemingway had press appeal, it was because he so often did what most people only dream about doing.

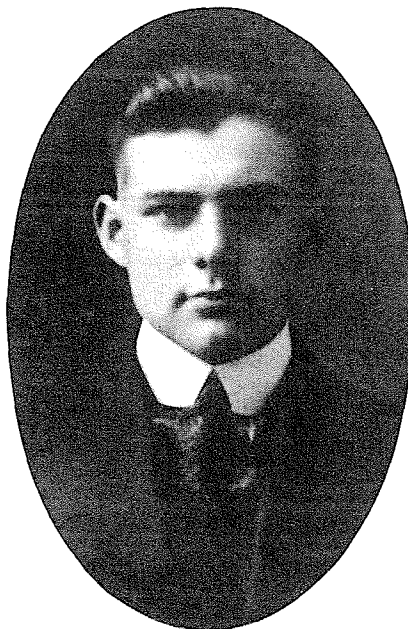
Yet that extraordinary life began in the most conventional of circumstances. Born in suburban Oak Park, Illinois, on July 21, 1899, the son of a doctor and a devout, musically gifted mother, he showed, even as a lanky youth, a keen interest in hunting and fishing, sports, and storytelling. Educated in the local public schools, Hemingway achieved local notoriety by writing sports stories and Ring Lardneresque pieces for his high school newspaper, the *Trapeze*. He did not go on to college.

Instead, in 1917 Hemingway went to the *Kansas City Star*, where, working as a police reporter, he saw another side of life—the world of bums and small-time gangsters. Although he learned a great deal during his six months at the *Star* ("Use short sentences," advised the paper's style manual), the lure of war in Europe was too great for the young man to stay put. From a friend, Hemingway heard about the volunteer Red Cross Ambulance Driving Corps, and in May 1918, he set off for Italy.

Action came quickly. On the night of July 8, 1918, while he was handing out supplies to Italian troops in the trenches of the Piave front, an Austrian artillery shell landed close by. Stunned by the explosion and peppered by shrapnel, Hemingway hoisted one of the wounded soldiers onto his shoulders and headed for the nearest command post. On the way, he was caught in machine gun fire and was shot in the knee, but he still managed to hobble to safety.

The word quickly got out: The first American had been wounded in Italy. Upon his return to the States on January 21, 1919, Hemingway was besieged by reporters. The *Chicago American* came out with a story declaring that he was "the worst shot-up man in the U.S."

Back in Oak Park, the young veteran felt at loose ends. He may have been a victim of what is today called the post-traumatic stress syndrome, but he was also brooding about the work that he wanted to accomplish. For a time he withdrew, fishing in northern Michigan, perhaps sketching drafts of the



stories that would later constitute his first book. He also began to pester the *Toronto Star* for assignments and soon ended up writing for a weekly section of the newspaper.

In 1921, after marrying Hadley Richardson, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, Hemingway returned to Europe. "Paris," as Sherwood Anderson put it, "was the place for a serious writer." Hemingway quickly fell in with fellow expatriates such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, supporting himself with journalistic pieces for the *Toronto Star*. But the publication of his first book, *In Our Time* in 1925, revealed that Hemingway was no hack. The creative outpouring of the next five years confirmed his literary standing: *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Torrents of Spring* appeared in 1926, *Men without Women* in 1927, and *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, mostly to rave reviews. *Time* magazine said that *The Sun Also Rises* "fulfills the prophecies that his most excited admirers have made."

The Hemingway mystique grew apace. Here was a writer who had seen combat, a skilled outdoorsman who went after marlin in the Gulf Stream and big game in the highlands of Africa. Here also was a decent amateur boxer, an aficionado of bullfighting (*Death in the Afternoon* appeared in 1932), and a carouser who could out-drink and out-talk all comers. Maintaining the image had its cost, of course. Hemingway divorced Hadley in 1927 and married a *Vogue* editor, Pauline Pfeiffer, the following year. And by the middle of the 1930s, some critics complained that the celebrity was overtaking the artist. Reviewing *To Have and Have Not* (1937), one critic drubbed its "shocking lapses from professional skill."

But war was always a kind of tonic for Hemingway, and he eagerly went to Spain in 1937 to cover that country's brutal civil conflict. The two-year experience bore fruit. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) was a critical and popular success. But the literary comeback did not bring domestic tranquility. "Papa" changed mates again in 1940. This time he married Martha Gellhorn, a novelist and reporter for *Collier's* whom he had met in Key West, Florida, and after whom he modeled the character Dorothy Bridges in his Spanish Civil War play, *The Fifth Column* (1938).

The last two decades of Hemingway's life were years of renown. His face, according to the *International Celebrity Register*, was as well known as "the countenance of Clark Gable or Ted Williams." He continued to score literary triumphs (the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea* in *Life* magazine in 1952; the Nobel Prize in 1954) and to enjoy the outdoor life in Cuba and the American West. Mostly from afar, he watched his three children grow up. Yet several things boded ill, including his antics while covering the last year of World War II in Europe. *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) was universally panned. And he went through yet another divorce and remarriage (to *Time's* Mary Welsh, in 1946). Little is known about his private torment. Papa was a stoic to the end. All that is known is that on July 2, 1961, in Ketchum, Idaho, he put a double-barreled shotgun to his temple and pulled both triggers.

Eulogies came from every corner of the globe, from statesmen as well as from fellow writers. But his generation's sense of loss was perhaps best summed up in a tribute from the Louisville *Courier-Journal*. "It is almost as though the Twentieth Century itself has come to an end."

responsibility, of cruelty, of dangerously arrested adolescence that is a permanent flaw in human character and a fatal flaw of empires.

There are clear dangers to incarnating the myth too well. Hemingway's irony ensured that his own books never became the cartoons of toughness they might have been; they also ensured that writers like Hammett and Chandler would retain, under his influence, that saving irony. But here is Mickey Spillane, another heir to the hard-boiled tradition, describing the final shoot-out in *One Lonely Night* (1951):

There was only the guy in the pork-pie hat who made a crazy try for a gun in his pocket. I aimed the tommy gun for the first time and took his arm off at the shoulder. It dropped on the floor next to him and I let him have a good look at it. He couldn't believe it happened. I proved it by shooting him in the belly. They were all so damned clever!

It could almost be a satire of Hemingway, the prose is so unmistakable in its provenance. And the very great moral ugliness of the passage is an indication of one of the risks of the style. For here, to remember and not too much remember means to be, effectively, an ethical moron. The "dread" has departed from the silences between the sentences, that dread that indicates the tension of irretrievable loss. What remains in its place is human emptiness. The style devised as a shield against *nada* has become the voice of *nada*.

Fearing History

What are we to make, then, of Hemingway's continuing presence in our writing? I have called him a hero of consciousness and have said that his measured, ironic despair shines—or darkles—through all his major successes. I have also said that the cruder

aspects of his vision have become components of a childish mythography of moral irresponsibility. Where is the final shape of the man then?

According to critic Leslie Fiedler, writing during the early 1960s, the final shape of the man was precisely the shape of that contradiction. Fiedler's *Waiting for the End* (1964) is a dazzlingly intelligent survey of American fiction of the 1950s and early '60s, and over all the survey broods the shadow of Hemingway as both prophet and fool. Fiedler is not only one of the most perceptive of American critics but probably also the American critic closest in tone, spirit, and style to Papa. Writing of the suicide, he can be even more romantic than Mailer:

One quarry was left him only, the single beast he had always had it in his power to destroy, the single beast worthy of him: himself. . . . With a single shot he redeemed his best work from his worst, his art from himself, his vision of truth from the lies of his adulators.

Eloquent, one thinks. But is not this kind of prose itself the prose of "one of his adulators"? A glance back at 1944, and Bellow's sardonic comments on the cult of the hunter-dandy, can remind us how contagious and how misleading the hard-boiled style of perception can be. No suicide, to speak bluntly, ever "redeems" anything.

Nevertheless, Fiedler is right about Hemingway's importance for the generation of "apocalyptic" young writers who were beginning to emerge during the early 1960s. If Mailer was the godfather of such sensibilities as Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon, then Hemingway was their great-godfather. These then-young men were all, in one way or another, influenced not just by the American literary tradition but by the American adventure in Vietnam, that nightmare of

misguided honor and misdirected heroics that may prove to be the single most important psychic event of American life in the 20th century. Fiedler, writing in 1963—before he could have known what Vietnam would ultimately mean—described its meaning, and its relevance to the Hemingway vision, perfectly:

We inhabit for the first time a world in which men begin wars knowing that their avowed ends will not be accomplished, a world in which it is more and more difficult to believe that the conflicts we cannot avert are in any sense justified. And in such a world . . . all who make what Hemingway was the first to call 'a separate peace' . . . become a new kind of anti-heroic hero.

Well, not particularly a "new" kind of anti-heroic hero, but certainly an important kind. What Fiedler suggests here is of some importance: that the callow, frightened, diffidently revolutionary members of the youth movement of the Vietnam years may have been, one and all, the spiritual heirs of Frederic Henry and Jake Barnes. They, too, discovered that public expediency and private morality might be in contradiction.

"Only to remember and not too much remember": Of course public expediency and private morality have never been necessarily congruent, at least since the dilemma of Achilles in the *Iliad*, and that is one of the things the Hemingway vision does not remember—or conveniently forgets. But there is something more significant in that observation than mere historical ignorance. There is historical ignorance *by choice*. It is not too much to say of Hemingway that he invented a whole new way of, a whole new justification for, hating and fearing history.

And here again Hemingway's archetypal Americanness is evident. Hating

and fearing history has always been an American disease. Alexis de Tocqueville isolated and identified the strain virtually before there was an American literature, and American literature and American foreign policy since Tocqueville have, by and large, supported his diagnosis. For all of Hemingway's major characters, history is the arena of defeat, and their styles of being and their forms of self-expression are ways of escaping its central horror.

But if this studied forgetfulness, this fear of history, has its debilitating and cynical consequences, it also has its peculiar spiritual rewards. Hemingway forgot history, escaped from history, to make "a separate peace," which is the separate peace of his vision and most specially of his ironic style.



Saul Bellow

His great countertype in early 20th-century American literature, William Faulkner, contemplated no such escape. Obsessed as he was by history and by the inescapability of guilt, Faulkner's mythic Southern landscape and narrative style are so perfectly the opposite of Hemingway's that it is difficult not to regard the two writers as manifestations of some deep-seated dichotomy in the human mind.

Vonnegut's Parables

Yet for all the power of his best work, Faulkner has not been the perennial presence in later writing that Hemingway has. One might have expected that the 1960s and '70s, from Vietnam and Watergate on, would have had the effect of a newly historicized sensibility for our best storytellers. But it has not been so. The Frederic Henry vision of the separate peace, the code-aesthetics of the dropout and the deserter, the dandy's solution of style as a counterpoint to the horror of history—these have been, in one way or another, the shape of the best American fiction of those years.

Kurt Vonnegut, the most accessible and the most "popular" of the young novelists to emerge in the 1960s, is also the most recognizably Hemingwayesque. His best books—*The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and *Jailbird* (1979)—are bitter little parables about the brutality of human beings, the impermanence of love, and the impossibility of any metaphysical solution to the ultimate *nada*.

But against that gloomy prognosis Vonnegut poses the solace of an often childishly simple style, and childishly simple pity for the human condition, that is not without its grace and its effect. Vonnegut is fond of inserting himself, as narrator, into his fictions: commenting on his own reactions to the

plot in what at first looks like the manner of William Thackeray or the early Charles Dickens.

Desperate Dandyism

After a while we realize that this technique owes less to the Victorians than it does to the urge to remember, but not too much remember. For Vonnegut has really transformed *himself* into the sensibility of Nick Adams in Hemingway's "The Big Two-Hearted River." That is, wounded and saddened by the chaos of his age, Vonnegut retreats to *fiction* the way Nick retreats to the pastoral of nature. His simplicities are disingenuous simplicities, and all the more affecting for that, since they are chosen and held *precisely* to make a separate peace with his times.

Slaughterhouse Five, perhaps his finest novel, is not only an exceptionally original war novel but an extraordinary recreation of the *spirit* of Hemingway's response to war. As Vonnegut tells us in the introduction (which is, of course, an essential part of the fiction itself), the novel is written to allow him to come to terms with his own personal experience of apocalypse, his witnessing, as a prisoner of war, the Allied firebombing of Dresden at the end of the Second World War. He frankly admits that he feels incapable of any adequate response to the horror he witnessed. And then he invents an elaborate, absurdist science-fiction plot to encompass that horror.

Many critics have faulted *Slaughterhouse Five*—and Vonnegut in general—for "frivolity" in his tales. But, as this and his other novels make clear, the frivolity is precisely the strong moral point of the work. It is a frivolity *chosen*, as the reductiveness of the Hemingway style is chosen, because any attempt to confront the unspeakable in terms of conventional "moral seriousness" is foredoomed to trivialize the



Kurt Vonnegut

enormity of horror by its very pretense to "explaining." It is, in other words, dandyism—dandyism of the most desperate sort.

Other important writers of the same period reflect the same escape into style, and the same deep sense of style as a last resort against chaos. I have mentioned Robert Coover; but Donald Barthelme, John Barth, John Gardner, and even the poet John Ashbery could be added to that list of literary dandies. It is unusual, of course, to regard something such as the immense, self-conscious fictions of Barth or the tantalizingly gnomish riddles of Ashbery as Hemingwayesque. But in the context we have been describing, I think it is possible to see how that is, indeed, the case. Other "influences"—18th-century English fiction, studies in comparative mythology, continental theories of the "new novel"—are surely more

evident than the Hemingway influence in works such as Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), or Ashbery's *Houseboat Days* (1970), than the Hemingway influence. But, as with Vonnegut and as with the later work of Mailer, the Hemingway presence here goes beyond considerations of literary influence.

All these writers have assimilated the *writerly* persona of Hemingway; that is, the ironist, the dandified stylist of chaos, the storyteller as survivor of history. And none—excepting, of course, Mailer—has approached the public persona; that is, these writers are remarkably anonymous except in their books, remarkably shy about the sort of high visibility Hemingway made so much a part of his career.

Keeping Cool

If indeed there are two Hemingways, the self-aggrandizing man and the writer who was a hero of consciousness, it may be fair to say that his heirs have learned an important lesson that he never learned: how to keep the two separate. And they have learned it, of course, from his example.

The work of Thomas Pynchon is the best and richest place to track Hemingway's ghost. (Pynchon is also one of the most "invisible" of contemporary novelists.) His two massive novels, *V* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and his novella, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), may be among the most important works of fiction produced in America after the Second World War. They are certainly the most apocalyptic.

Pynchon's vision is paranoid. His is a world presided over by giant cartels and international war machines whose grand design is to turn human beings into mere mechanisms. It is a vision of entropy that closely resembles Joseph Heller's vision of the war in *Catch-22* (1961), except that its grimness is more unrelenting and its comedy even

blackier. And it is a vision that is directly inherited from Hemingway. In the same paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms* where Frederic Henry reflects on not too much remembering, he meditates on the surgery that has been performed on his knee:

Valentini had done a fine job. . . . It was his knee all right. The other knee was mine. Doctors did things to you and then it was not your body any more. The head was mine, and the inside of the belly. It was very hungry in there.

This very famous Hemingway passage could serve as an epigraph for all of Pynchon's fiction and for all of the recent fiction we have been examining. Life is increasingly encroached upon by the technologies of war and healing, both of which have the effect of robbing life of its vitality; the only escape from that warfare is into the neutral Switzerland of "the head and the inside of the belly."

Pynchon's heroes, more than any we have examined, are the contemporary reincarnations of this mode. Benny Profane in *V*, Oedipa Maas in *Lot 49*, Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*—all are weaklings, wounded and put-upon losers who are shocked into rebellion and a separate peace by the discovery that they are being turned

into *someone else's* creation.

Their retreat is into style, into canniness—what Mailer would have called "hip"—and into the kind of bitter, end-of-the-world charity that also characterizes the best of Hemingway throughout his career. In *V*, the jazz musician McClintic Sphere articulates, in a brief scene, what may be the summary statement of the dandy's ironic humanism: "Keep cool, but care." And in the toughness and tenderness of that short line one hears echoes of all the sensibilities we have been examining, all with Papa at the center.

No final assessment of the Hemingway presence can really be made, of course. This has been a century of the triumph of partial visions, all of which have left their mark on what comes after. But Hemingway more than any other American novelist of the age represented and lived the vocation of art as *risk*, as a deliberate gamble with one's chances for sanity in a mad world. And in that he became something much larger and subtler than an influence for the most serious American writers of the postwar years. His ghost, the ghost of his finest perceptions and strongest acts of literary courage, is a very unquiet ghost indeed. Its rumblings are an inescapable part of the splendid dissonance that is contemporary American fiction.