

THE FIRST HEMINGWAY HERO

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The Nick Adams Stories. By Ernest Hemingway. Preface by Philip Young. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972; Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1972. Pp. 268. \$9.50.

Between 1925 and 1933, Ernest Hemingway published fifteen short stories involving Nick Adams, who is the first Hemingway "hero", one who bears an even closer resemblance to his creator than do the "heroes" of the novels. The stories describe telling incidents from the summers of Nick's childhood and adolescence in the woods of Michigan, his first encounters with the larger and crueller world away from home, and his wounding and subsequent mental collapse in Italy in the First World War. Two of the finest of these stories render important episodes from Nick's later life: the solitary fishing expedition in "Big Two-Hearted River", in which Nick—home from the war—attempts to regain his psychic stability and to find peace through immersing himself in the simple ritual of trout fishing; and the elegiac remembrance of things now irrevocably past by the thirty-eight year old Nicholas Adams, now a mature writer, in "Fathers and Sons", a story which is also noteworthy as Hemingway's first—extremely hesitant—fictional attempt to write about his father's suicide and his own obsession with it.

Unfortunately, these fifteen stories were originally parcelled out among Hemingway's three collections of short stories. The arrangement of the stories—because of the order in which they were written and consequently published—did not follow the chronology of Nick's development, and were in addition interspersed among stories not involving Nick. This situation was perpetuated in editions of Hemingway's collected stories. It is true that there are instances where a Nick Adams story gains something important through proximity to a story or stories not involving Nick. For instance, "Soldier's Home", from *In Our Time* (1925), tells the story of how a young man named Krebs came home to Kansas after the first war and lost everything worthwhile he had gained from his overseas experiences through talking too much about them, which had the inevitable effect of falsifying the truth and destroying the "cool, valuable" quality of the experiences. Certainly this story functioned as a most effective counterpoint to "Big Two-Hearted River", and Nick's desperate determination to be alone, and to feel and not to think. Krebs' story grimly illustrated the way Nick might have gone. And in the 1933 collection, *Winner Take Nothing*, the feeling that dominated "Fathers and Sons"—that things were growing small and the emptiness of death approaching—was surely placed in an enriching context by its presence in the same volume with the

Spanish waiter's nightly encounter with *nada* in the powerful "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", and the story of the slow psychological deterioration—through pain and overly long confinement in a hospital bed—of Mr. Fraser in "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio".

But on the whole, the arrangement did a great disservice to the Nick Adams stories; their cumulative power was largely dissipated, and their unity and cohesiveness obscured. For this reason, one welcomed news of the coming publication of *The Nick Adams Stories*. This book has now been published with a brief Preface by Philip Young, one of Hemingway's best critics. The two *raison d'être* of *The Nick Adams Stories* are: the publication for the first time of eight items—one complete and some unfinished stories, fragments, and deleted parts of published stories—concerning Nick, and the arrangement of this new material and of all the previously published Nick Adams stories according to their chronological place in the story of his development.

The new material I shall presently discuss, but I must say at once that the arrangement of the material has been senselessly and shockingly botched. "The Last Good Country", a previously unpublished piece, clearly belongs to Nick's Michigan adolescence, and should therefore be printed before and not—as is done—after "The Light of the World", "The Battler", and "The Killers", three stories which give us Nick on the road in late adolescence encountering for the first time—in a group of prostitutes, in the pathetic relationship of a broken and demented boxer and his loving negro attendant, in the casualness of two hired killers and the indifference of their victim—the reality of evil and the harsh actualities of the world and what it does to men. Even more incredulously, two other stories (both from *In Our Time*) clearly belonging to Nick's adolescence—"The End of Something" which describes the sudden cooling of a "teen-age" romance, and "The Three-Day Blow", in which Nick and Bill get drunk one afternoon in the latter's home and have an uproariously serious conversation about books, baseball, life, and love—are placed *after* the stories describing Nick's experiences in the war, and even after "Big Two-Hearted River" (the final story in *In Our Time*).

What could Philip Young have been thinking of? In the revised edition of his excellent critical study *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (1966) Young had used the word "adolescent" in describing both "The End of Something" and "The Three-Day Blow", and in his subsequent discussion of "Big Two-Hearted River" had correctly insisted that "to fail to see that the boy Nick is by now a man is to fail to see the development that has been taking place in his character, and how the stories are related to each other". Of *In Our Time* as a whole, Young had rightly said that it "cannot really be understood at all without the clear perception that the stories are arranged in the chronological order of his boyhood and young manhood". Has Young, in endorsing if not actually selecting the order of the stories for *The Nick Adams Stories*, forgotten what he had previously written?

It would seem that he has suffered a severe, perhaps unprecedented, case of critical amnesia. If there were good reasons—it is hard to imagine what they could possibly be—for him now to change his mind, and to arrange the stories in an order that violates both common sense and a minimally sensitive reading of the text, he ought to have clearly stated them in his Preface. One can only conclude that a major blunder has been committed, and lament that a book which could have demonstrated the cumulative power of the Nick Adams stories and their central place in the Hemingway canon is fundamentally misleading and will surely cause more harm than good.

Fortunately, I am able to speak more positively concerning the previously unpublished material, though I do not imagine that all readers and critics of Hemingway will be as positive in their response. It will be remembered that when the chunks of an ambitious long novel, unfinished in conception, let alone in execution, were published two years ago under the title *Islands in the Stream* by Hemingway's widow and his publisher, many reviewers complained that a disservice had been done to Hemingway's reputation, and contended that these unfinished and embarrassingly self-indulgent pages ought to have never been made public. (It was interesting to note that among the very few reviewers who approved of the publication of *Islands in the Stream* were Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, two most distinguished literary figures, both of whom had known Hemingway and had sympathetically observed and written about his career over several decades.)

Doubtless some reviewers will feel the same way about the new material in *The Nick Adams Stories*, which admittedly Hemingway, if he did not destroy, nevertheless chose never to publish. My own view is that it is as para-critical and seminally cultish to insist on reading only what a major author has chosen to publish, even to the point of excluding substantial material of some intrinsic and much extrinsic interest, as it is lovingly to collect and fondle every piece of minutia connected with an author. (I am thinking of the kind of trivia often found in the various "newsletters" devoted to individual authors.) Hemingway is a major literary figure and, I would insist, a major artist. In coming to understand better his artistic methods, the contours of his imagination, the psychological roots of his fiction, and the relationship of his life to his art, we should be glad to have anything that has survived, if it can help us. It is only the residual austerity of formalist dogma, I would suggest, that keeps some from seeing this. It is surely unreasonable and anachronistic to—in effect—wish that one knew as little about a modern author's life and unpublished manuscripts as we know about Shakespeare's. It may be a pity, and we shall certainly have to fight against the very real dangers of becoming reductive in our reading, but that is the way things are.

Some of the new pieces now published in *The Nick Adams Stories* are more interesting and important than others. Three of them—each for a different reason—are very interesting indeed, and especially valuable to have in print. There is

a section of three pages that was originally the beginning of "Indian Camp", the first of the Nick Adams stories. I am sure that Hemingway deleted these opening pages, which comprised about one third of the story, because of what may be called his "ice-berg" theory of writing. In his important comments at the end of Chapter 16 of *Death in the Afternoon* Hemingway writes: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water". This cardinal feature of Hemingway's esthetic, which bears close resemblance to T. S. Eliot's notorious notion of the "objective correlative", certainly is one basic ingredient of much of Hemingway's best writing.

But I would argue that "Indian Camp" is a better story with its original opening intact, and would go on to suggest that too great a price can be paid by Hemingway for his securing the peculiar kinds of resonance made possible by the deliberate suppression of narrative links and psychological background. I must briefly attempt to illustrate my point. The full version of "Indian Camp" opens at night with Nick alone in the tent while his father, a doctor, is out fishing. Nick is suddenly overcome with the terror of dying, a fear that first came upon him when "a few weeks before at home, in church, they had sung a hymn, 'Some day the silver cord will break'." Nick's fear makes him behave badly: he fires three shots, the signal that his father should immediately return to the tent because Nick is in danger. Later the same night, having been guided by Indians to their camp, Nick watches his father perform with a jack-knife a Caesarean on a screaming woman who has been painfully in labour for three days. Nick also watches the discovery that, in the bunk above his wife's, her husband has cut his throat from ear to ear, presumably because unable to tolerate his wife's suffering. In the boat returning from the Indian camp, Nick asks his father some questions about suicide and about how hard dying is. The story's last sentence is superb: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure he would never die".

The whole of "Indian Camp" is a powerful, understated, dramatization of the collision of a boy's adolescent but searing fear of death with the actuality of adult pain, violent death, and suicide. The shortened version of the story that Hemingway chose to publish is, however, a different matter. It begins with the arrival of father and son at the Indian camp, thereby omitting any above-the-surface reference to Nick's *timor mortis*. According to the "ice-berg" theory, one is meant to feel all the more strongly the implicit, unmentioned fear that has seized Nick. But I never did; I have read the shortened version of "Indian Camp" many times, always with the best will in the world, both with and without knowledge of the "ice-berg" theory, and the story had always seemed to me decidedly unfocused and

no more than shocking. With the restoration of its opening pages, I now find the whole of "Indian Camp" a powerful and affecting—if a less oblique and modernistic—story.

The second piece I want to mention is a nine-page meditation on writing that Hemingway rightly cut from "Big Two-Hearted River" where it clearly did not belong. These pages tie up some loose ends in connection with Nick's life; more interestingly, in them the always thin veil between Nick and Hemingway is completely rent: we find Nick thinking about his story "My Old Man" which Hemingway himself had written and published in *In Our Time*. Nick also desires to return to Gertrude Stein's Paris apartment so that he can again look at her Cezannes. Most interesting are Nick's remarks on the art of writing, in which he clearly speaks for his creator and which it is very good to have in print. (Even including the digressions in *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa* there are not that many statements by Hemingway concerning his vocation.) "The only writing that was any good", thinks Nick, "was what you made up, what you imagined. That made everything come true. . . . Everything good he'd ever written he'd made up. None of it had ever happened". This leads to one of those brilliantly acute judgements on other writers Hemingway occasionally made: "That was the weakness of Joyce. Daedalus in *Ulysses* was Joyce himself, so he was terrible. Joyce was so damn romantic and intellectual about him. He'd made Bloom up, Bloom was wonderful. He'd made Mrs. Bloom up. She was the greatest in the world". Shortly after this, Nick expresses his romantic ambition "to write like Cezanne painted":

Cezanne started with all the tricks. Then he broke the whole thing down and built the real thing. It was hell to do. He was the greatest. The greatest for always. It wasn't a cult. He, Nick, wanted to write about country so it would be there like Cezanne had done it in painting. You had to do it from inside yourself. There wasn't any trick. Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy. It was deadly serious. You could do it if you would fight it out. If you'd lived right with your eyes.

The last new piece I shall mention is "The Last Good Country", an extraordinary addition to the Hemingway canon, which will surely rekindle the fierce debate on the question of whether the love affairs that Hemingway's heroes have with their pliant women are masculine fantasy projections of an ultimately unhealthy and regressive nature, or whether they are genuine and moving representations of mature sexual and emotional relationships. The evidence of "The Last Good Country" will, I must reluctantly say, greatly strengthen the prosecution's case, and rattle the defense. In the sixty-two pages of this never-concluded novella, the adolescent Nick, aided and accompanied by his adoring younger sister, flees into the woods to escape the implausible pursuit of two particularly unattractive game wardens.

In a secret place of great natural beauty, known only to the Indians and to Nick, and reached only after a long hike over difficult and unattractive terrain, Nick and his sister set up camp. In a stream full of enormous trout he fishes for their supper, while she cuts off her long hair in the hope that it will change her into a boy and make her more like her brother. She has brought along some stolen whiskey so that Nick may enjoy it, and in other ways it is made clear that her sole desire is to be his loving attendant. As she sleeps next to him, Nick thinks lovingly of his sister's beauty, but—even though "he had already learned there was only one day at a time"—is troubled by a sense of the fragility of their pristine life together: out there are "them", powerful, inimical forces which may destroy the lovers' idyll.

Does this not, *mutatis mutandis*, sound extraordinarily like the relationship of Frederic Henry and Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*, of Robert Jordan and Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and of Colonel Cantwell and Renata in *Across the River and into the Trees*? (And this is not merely an embryonic version of these later love affairs, but the archetypal Hemingway male-female relationship already fully blown.) Must we think of these later relationships as being rooted in and unconsciously harking back to the incestuous intensities of boyhood? of their being manifestations of the desire to regress to the uncomplicated erotic joys of adolescence? Certainly we remember Nick in "Fathers and Sons" recollecting the simple sexual pleasures he enjoyed as a boy in the woods with an Indian girl. Nick's reverie ends with his pathetic lament: "Long time ago good. Now no good".

For making available previously unpublished material germane to an assessment of Hemingway's fiction, though not for its inexplicable mishandling of the ordering of Nick's adventures, we should be grateful for the publication of *The Nick Adams Stories*.