

FATHER AND SON: COMMENTS ON HEMINGWAY'S PSYCHOLOGY

By WILLIAM WHITE

I

IN answer to a young man who asked what he meant by "good writing as opposed to bad writing," Ernest Hemingway said: "Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life he has and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up it is as it would truly be. If he doesn't know how many people work in their minds and actions his luck may save him for a while, or he may write fantasy. But if he continues to write about what he does not know about he will find himself faking. After he fakes a few times he cannot write honestly any more."

Using Hemingway's own yardstick, one need have no difficulty in seeing that when he himself "makes something up it is as it would truly be." For all during his literary career he has closely tied together his personal experiences and the subject matter of his writing. For example, *A Farewell to Arms* was written in 1928-29 out of his experience as a Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front in the first World War, although he was not actually present at the Caporetto retreat. *The Sun Also Rises* came out in 1926 and was so true of Hemingway's years as an expatriate in France and Spain during the early twenties that Malcolm Cowley (who was also there) says the conversation of this group of *avant-garde* writers "is reported with such complete accuracy that you can hear them talking in their different voices."

Similarly, *Death in the Afternoon* appeared in 1932 after he had spent nearly ten years studying and even participating in bullfighting; and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (*Esquire*, August 1936) followed upon big-game hunting in Africa. In 1937, *To Have and Have Not* became the next Hemingway remembrance of things just past. To quote his publishers: "The scenes of the book—the Florida Keys; the water front, tough and rowdy, of Key West; the blue waters of the Gulf Stream, and the sea between it and the mainland—are familiar ground to Mr. Hemingway who has lived in Key West for several years." The play, *The Fifth Column*, was written

in Madrid while Hemingway was reporting the Spanish civil war, out of which also grew *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in 1940. "It wasn't just the civil war I put into it," he explains. It was everything I learned about Spain for 18 years." Then ten years later, in 1950, after Hemingway had spent years abroad, much of it in first-hand reporting of World War II, *Across the River and Into the Trees* was published. It tells of the last days in Venice of a 51-year-old colonel (approximately Hemingway's age), reduced from the rank of brigadier after service in both world wars, and drinking and making love to a beautiful young girl (who could have been modelled on Hemingway's present wife).

Thus each of these major works is the result of a life that Hemingway knew best, because he has just lived that life. The autobiographical element in creative works is common knowledge. However, Hemingway goes much further than most novelists, as more than one critic has noticed. A recent writer, George Snell, in his *Shapers of American Fiction*, says: "All the principal Hemingway heroes, it has often been observed, are one and the same person, and they are modeled upon Hemingway himself." Many reviewers and critics commented on this in their remarks about *Across the River and Into the Trees*, which stirred up possibly more debate than any other of his novels. Richard R. Rovere's review in *Harper's* unhesitatingly identified the author and hero, for example; indeed, Ben Ray Redman in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (October 28, 1950), summing up the critics' views, found fault with many of them for too closely identifying Colonel Cantwell of *Across the River* with Hemingway: "Hemingway was damned for Cantwell's puerilities and ideas; Cantwell was damned for Hemingway's puerilities and ideas." Of course, one can be entirely too literal about such twinning; yet such thoughts as Cantwell's—"I have lost three battalions in my life and three women. And now I have a fourth. Where the hell does it end?"—leads one to ask if this is the Colonel thinking of Countess Reneta or Hemingway thinking of Mary Welsh.

II

The second point I wish to make—this too, well known to Hemingway readers—is his concern with blood, death, and violence. Even if we did not have his own word for it, a reading of the novels and books would show how Hemingway has made a "death-cult" the very basis of his work. From *A Farewell*

to Arms through *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Across the River and Into the Trees*, the stories are saturated with death. There is a terrifying profusion of dead and dying soldiers, horses gored in the bullring, mules crippled and drowning, bulls killed in the ring more for the sake of killing than for the sake of sport. Death is the overpowering mood in the Pamplona bullring, at Caporetto, in Madrid and the Spanish mountains, in Africa, and in Venice.

One need only read Hemingway's description of the smell of death in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to see how obsessed he is with the theme: "Part of it is the smell that comes when, on a ship, there is a storm and the portholes are closed up. Put your nose against the brass handle of a screwed-tight porthole on a rolling ship that is swaying under you so that you are faint and hollow in the stomach and you have a part of the smell . . . After that of the ship you must go down the hill in Madrid to the Puente de Toledo early in the morning to the *matadero* and stand there on the wet paving when there is a fog from the Manzanares and wait for the old women who go before daylight to drink the blood of the beasts that are slaughtered. When such an old woman comes out of the *matadero*, holding her shawl around her, with her face gray and her eyes hollow, and the whiskers of age on her chin, and on her cheeks, set in the waxen white of her face as the sprouts grow from the seed of a bean, not bristles, but pale sprouts in the death of her face; put your arms tight around her, *Ingles*, and hold her to you and kiss her on the mouth and you will know the second part that odor is made of . . . Then, with this in thy nostrils, walk back up into the city and when thou seest a refuse pail with dead flowers in it plunge thy nose into it and inhale so that scent mixes with those thou hast already in thy nasal passages . . . Then it is important that the day be in autumn with rain, or at least some fog, or early winter even and now thou shouldst continue to walk through the city and down the Calle de Salud smelling where they are sweeping out the *casas de putas* and emptying the slop jars into the drains and, with this odor of love's labor lost mixed sweetly with soapy water and cigarette butts only faintly reaching thy nostrils, thou shouldst go to the Jardin Botanico where at night those girls who can no longer work in the houses do their work against the iron gates of the park and the iron picketed fences and upon the sidewalks. It is there . . . on a dead flower bed that has not yet been plucked out and replanted, and so serves to soften the earth that is so much softer than the side-

walk, thou wilt find an abandoned gunny sack with the odor of the wet earth, the dead flowers, and the doings of that night. In this sack will be contained the essence of it all, both the dead earth and the dead stalks of the flowers and their rotted blooms and the smell that is both the death and the birth of man. Thou wilt wrap this sack around thy head and try to breathe through it . . . and then, if thou hast not lost any of the previous odors, when thou inhaledst deeply, thou wilt smell the odor of death-to-come as we know it."

This is but one example of Hemingway's reacting to and rationalizing what must have been for him a profound revulsion. He treats other aspects at some length in *Death in the Afternoon*, where he says of the subject: "I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death." I do not wish to further labor the obvious, but one more quality ought to be pointed out; at the moment of death, the characters take on an heroic cloak and the very story itself an epic quality. As death closes in off Key West, Harry Morgan, the rum-runner hero of *To Have and Have Not*, finally says what had taken all his life to learn: "Man alone ain't got no bloody —— chance." As Robert Jordan waits for his death as a politically naive idealist in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he rises to a symbol of something much greater. And almost at the instant of his death Francis Macomber achieves a tremendous personal moral triumph in his *Short Happy Life*. Finally, in *Across the River and Into the Trees*, the unsuccessful Colonel Cantwell dies hoping that thus he can emulate Stonewall Jackson, a hero in death who said, "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees."

III

What is more important now, however, is not (1) that all the principal Hemingway heroes are really the same person, modelled upon Hemingway himself, or (2) that his themes are variations on the same chord: death is more meaningful than life and gives meaning to life. But the questions I should like to answer are: How did Hemingway get that way? What psychological forces shaped his character? Why does he write as he writes?

We have certain signposts to guide us. For Hemingway, although a living writer, has had considerable written about him in both the scholarly journals and more popular periodicals.

Yet these articles have said that it was the sensitive Hemingway's experiences during the war and the dislocation of society in the years following that caused him to become the spokesman for the "lost generation." Their story is told in Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*. But the conflicts in the minds of these disturbed personalities began much earlier. Hemingway's seeking for satisfaction through four marriages, his joining and dropping out of the Catholic church, and especially his over-emphasised masculinity (in both his writing and his personal life of big-game hunting, bull-fighting, boxing, drinking, and war activities)—all seem to indicate a certain emotional instability or better: a strong feeling of insecurity.

Because Hemingway has become virtually a legend in his lifetime, it seems necessary to separate the facts from the fantasy. At the risk of creating more fantasy, I should like, with the help of some biographical data, to show how many of his early short stories, mainly those of his first important book, *In Our Time*, indicate his psychological background. In most of these stories the central character is Nick Adams, whom Cowley calls "Hemingway's earliest and most personal hero." To give two examples: Nick goes hunting and fishing with his father in the Michigan woods and learns how to kill for sport. In *Indian Camp* he is present when, after his father performs a Caesarian, the squaw's husband cuts his own throat because he cannot stand the pain he believes his wife is suffering. These anecdotes undoubtedly come directly from Hemingway's own boyhood; even if the facts are not genuine, the feeling certainly is.

Whether Hemingway is writing fiction or facts about his youth, the emotions, the attitudes, and also the experiences are often the same: *The Three-Day Blow* is written as fiction with Nick Adams as the principal character, and in *Remembering Shooting-Flying: A Key West Letter* (*Esquire*, February 1935), Hemingway recalls his similar events of youth in his own name. There is no doubt of it: Hemingway is Nick Adams.

A boy's passionate attachment for his father has seldom been told with more beauty and poignancy than in *My Old Man*, a tale told through the mind of an adoring kid. The father is a dishonest jockey who throws races, and not until he is killed in a spill does the son understand his old man's meanness. Even when the boy hears his father referred to as a crook who had "it coming to him on the stuff he's pulled," he must add, "But I don't know. Seems like when they get started they don't leave a guy nothing."

In the short story, *Fathers and Sons*, Hemingway betrays a good deal of what the parent-child relationship meant to him. Nick is the son, and the father is a doctor who advises the boy on matters of sex and of fishing and shooting. The father, Hemingway writes, "was as sound on those (latter) two things as he was unsound on sex . . . and he was very grateful to his father for bringing him to know" how to fish and to shoot. Of the unsound advice on sex he recalls two pieces of misinformation, and then says: "On the other hand his father had the finest pair of eyes he had ever seen and Nick had loved him very much and for a long time. Now, knowing how it had all been, even remembering the earliest times before things had gone badly was not good remembering. If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them. But it was still too early for that. There were still too many people. So he decided to think of something else. There was nothing to do about his father and he had thought it all through many times. The handsome job the undertaker had done on his father's face had not blurred in his mind and all the rest of it was quite clear, including the responsibilities. He had complimented the undertaker. The undertaker had been both proud and smugly pleased. But it was not the undertaker that had given him that last face. The undertaker had only made certain dashingly executed repairs of doubtful artistic merit. The face had been making itself and being made for a long time. It had modelled fast in the last three years. It was a good story but there were still too many people alive for him to write it."

There are several significant remarks in this quotation as well as in one more passage from the same story: "Nick loved his father but hated the smell of him and once when he had to wear a suit of his father's underwear that had gotten too small for his father it made him feel sick (though it had been freshly washed) and he took it off and put it under two stones in the creek and said that he had lost it." Nick was whipped for lying; and brooding afterwards in the woodshed, holding the shotgun his father had given him, Nick thought, "I can blow him to hell. I can kill him."

Recalling what Hemingway said of the smell of death in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as we read the above, we note that not only death but love affects his sense of smell. We know this from Hemingway's stories, as in *A Natural History of the Dead*, where the smell of death and love are joined in an im-

portant paragraph: "The smell of the battlefield in hot weather one cannot recall. You can remember that there was such a smell, but nothing ever happens to you to bring it back. It is unlike the smell of a regiment, which may come to you suddenly while riding in the street car and you will look across and see the man who has brought it to you. But the other thing is gone as completely as when you have been in love; you remember things that happened, but the sensation cannot be recalled." And Hemingway himself, says Cowley, "doesn't smoke, partly to preserve his extremely keen sense of smell; sometimes he sniffs the wind like an apprehensive bear."

To go back to the quotation on his father, and Hemingway's reasons for writing, and what the undertaker did. In an introduction dated June 30, 1948, to a new edition of *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway states: "While I was rewriting (the novel) my father killed himself in Oak Park, Illinois. I was not quite thirty years old when I finished the book and the day it was published the stock market crashed. I always thought my father might have waited for this event, but, perhaps, he was hurried then, too. I do not like to make judgments since I loved my father very much." Inasmuch as *Fathers and Sons* was written after Dr. Clarence Edmonds Hemingway's suicide, it seems reasonable that, as with *In Our Time*, Nick's father is again Dr. Hemingway. As for the desire to get rid of bad things by writing about them, in contrast is this remark from *Death in the Afternoon*: "I had seen certain things, certain simple things of this sort that I remembered, but through taking part in them, or, in other cases, having to write about them immediately after and consequently noticing the things I needed for instant recording, I had never been able to study them as a man might, for instance, study *the death of his father* or the hanging of someone, say, that he did not know and would not have to write of immediately for the first edition of an afternoon paper." (The italics are mine.)

Again and again in more than a dozen stories—in those featuring Nick Adams and in others—one cannot miss the both delicate and strong feeling of a son for a father who had taught him how to fish and to shoot. At the same time, there is a strange ambivalence: where there is love there is also hate, such as in the underwear episode, and Ernest Hemingway's was no happy childhood, Malcolm Cowley shows. *The End of Something* is not the tale of a happy boy; many of Nick Adam's fishing trips are really escapes. Also, in answering the question, What is the

best early training for a writer? Hemingway replied, "An unhappy childhood."

The Cowley article in *Life* (January 10, 1949) tells us that Hemingway was not happy in high school and that twice he ran away from home; despite his wide activity in school affairs, he was said to be a lonely boy, sometimes the butt of jokes. His mother, devoted to singing, bought him a 'cello and wanted him to become a musician. His father gave him a fishing rod before he was three and his first shotgun at ten; he wanted the boy to study medicine. Hemingway actually did neither: turned down at seventeen for army enlistment (World War I had just begun), he ran away to Kansas City and got a job on *The Star*. The following spring he was on the Italian front as an ambulance driver.

IV

The critics are wrong to imply that the violence of the war and the nihilism of the Ezra Pound-Gertrude Stein expatriate group in Paris shaped Hemingway's psychology. All these influences did no more than intensify his own feeling of insecurity, an anxiety that came from boyhood—an accepted psychological principle. So, as the central figure of the stories is really Hemingway himself, it is the father who, more than anyone else, molded his psychology. This is in line with modern thought on such problems. Dr. Hemingway, with his heavy beard and his very small striking black eyes, introduced the boy to fishing, to shooting, to boxing, and also to suffering, to pain, to illness, and to death. Death is no stranger to a physician, but to Hemingway's father it was something else: a death-wish, which finally drove the doctor to suicide and which must assuredly have had a great influence on the young boy who loved the father so.

"Sometimes," to cite Cowley once more, Hemingway's "friends describe him as having a papa complex, which, they explain, is exactly the opposite of a father complex. Instead of seeking for a substitute father to support and protect him, he keeps trying to protect and lay plans for others. Younger men and women come to him for advice about their literary problems and their love affairs while he talks to them as if he were ninety years wise instead of only forty-nine."

Modern psychology would see in this an excellent example of a son in competition with his father. Too, in such a hypersensitive person as Hemingway, it would take the form for an over-statement, an over-insistence, of masculinity, as I briefly

noted earlier. Few serious writers on Hemingway have missed this strong emphasis on being a man—overstressed masculinity to Max Eastman, and strutting individualism to Carl Van Doren, while to Wyndham Lewis, Hemingway is “the man things are done to” and for John Peale Bishop Hemingway suffers a “perpetual annihilation.” To such a person, the worst thing that could happen to him would be the loss of his manhood. Plagued by his anxiety and driven by his fears, he gets “rid of many things by writing them” (to use Hemingway’s own words). So we see him create Jake Barnes, for instance in *The Sun Also Rises*, as a newspaperman who had been injured in the war in such a way that he is incapable of making love to any woman. Jake, of course, is really Hemingway, not only because we know of Hemingway’s habit of making himself the central character, but also because Jake talks to himself and his feelings in the identical phrases that Hemingway uses in *Death in the Afternoon* in his own person.

Hemingway further over-reacts to this fear in a more explicit manner in the short story, *God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen*. This is about a neurotic boy of sixteen who begs a stupid doctor to castrate him because he considers his lustful thoughts a constant sin against purity. The doctor refuses and the boy mutilates himself with a razor. Because this story has in it sex, doctors, a confused and unhappy boy, death, suicide, blood and violence, it could easily be interpreted as a strangely revealing index to Hemingway’s unconscious.

In sum, Ernest Hemingway’s important experiences, if we are to read them in the light of contemporary psychology, stem from his very earliest youth—the time spent with his father at Hortons’s Bay, up in Michigan, and elsewhere. He has drawn his stories from subjective occurrences soon after these events have commanded his passionate interest. It is his own insistence that he “attempt to write truly of things as one felt about them, not as one was supposed to feel.” And these “things”—which he wrote in order that he might rid himself of them—have become his dominating obsessions and a legacy from his father: death, blood, violence.