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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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Book Review by Mark Bauerlein

## EXTRAORDINARY ACTUALITY

*Ernest Hemingway: A Biography*, by Mary V. Dearborn.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 752 pages, \$35



ON A FEBRUARY NIGHT IN KEY WEST, 1936, Ernest Hemingway marched over to friend and novelist John Dos Passos's house to confront the distinguished poet Wallace Stevens. Stevens, a Harvard man and vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co., didn't think much of the boss-adventurer persona Hemingway played up in Florida. He'd said so earlier that evening to Hemingway's sister, calling him a "sap." She hurried home to tell her brother, who jumped at the challenge and headed out the door. As he arrived and walked up the steps, there was Stevens, who turned, recognized him, and swung. Hemingway dodged and countered, knocking the poet to the ground.

Stevens's friend Judge Powell intervened. Stevens was loaded, after all, and 20 years older than the novelist. But Powell didn't step in and say, "Gentlemen, please, let's not fight—we can sit down, have a drink, and talk it out." Instead, he told them to make it a fair contest and asked Hemingway to remove his glasses. Stevens caught him with a right to

the jaw, but all that did was break two bones in his hand. Hemingway, a talented amateur boxer, put Stevens down again and again until he couldn't get up. As he and his friend stumbled away, Hemingway turned for home elated. A few days later, Stevens showed up at Hemingway's door and apologized, begging him to keep silent about it. Our only account of the battle comes from Hemingway's private correspondence, a buoyant letter to Sara Murphy (the model for Nicole Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*), but his boasting has the air of truth. Stevens appeared afterwards with blackened eyes and a cast on his hand.

IN HER BIOGRAPHY OF THE MOST FAMOUS writer of the 20th century, Mary Dearborn makes little of this scrap, which might otherwise be presented as two giants of American literary history in Homeric (or Rabelaisian) combat. The version above comes from another biography, Paul Mariani's *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (2016), which reads into it a

personal dispute over literary style, Stevens's lyrical sublime versus Hemingway's "anti-poetry." The fight has the added feature of another Great American Writer, Dos Passos, who Hemingway once said "is the only writer I know who isn't more or less full of shit," and whose 1961 novel *Mid-Century* is one of the sharpest portraits of labor agitation and corruption ever composed. (Dos Passos is neglected by academics because he renounced his leftist views after seeing firsthand the conduct of Stalinists in Spain; he later became a passionate Cold Warrior and contributor to *National Review*.)

But in Dearborn's hefty account, the Stevens skirmish is one of dozens of fist fights and sparring contests with (among others) Ezra Pound, ex-champ Gene Tunney, and dockworkers in Key West, not to mention yelling matches with editors and ex-friends and wives, plus close calls in World War I, Spain, and World War II, where Hemingway was officially a journalist but carried a weapon and sought out roving German detachments with reckless glee. We could include



in this roster of bloodlust a passion for bullfighting and approval of cockfighting, along with the times he drew out a submachine gun on his fishing boat to blow apart sharks that threatened his hooked marlin. Dearborn, an admired biographer of Peggy Guggenheim and Norman Mailer, delivers one violent episode after another in mundane detail. There are so many hunting expeditions in Africa; ski trips in the Alps; drinking binges in Paris, New York, and Havana; mental breakdowns at various points (near the end he underwent shock treatments in the Mayo Clinic); stormy marriages (four) and boyish infatuations with Marlene Dietrich, Ava Gardner, Ingrid Bergman, and others, that you wonder where the energy came from. What mania drove him from place to place, woman to woman, and war to war? Only injury could stop him—concussions and broken bones that put him in the hospital, most famously in 1918 on the Italian front when an explosion led to a long convalescence and sad love affair with a nurse that became the basis for *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). The conflicts and perils didn't end until the July morning in 1961 when Hemingway, now in Ketchum, Idaho, slipped downstairs, grabbed a shotgun out of the storeroom, lay the butt on the floor, set his forehead on the barrels, and pulled the trigger.

**I**N THIS NEW ACCOUNT OF THE LEGEND, Dearborn doesn't probe deeply into the writing. We have some entertaining passages on Pound, who advised Hemingway after reading an early story, "I wish you wd. Keep your eye on the objek MORE and be less licherary"; Fitzgerald, who convinced him to cut the first 16 draft pages of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), which contain, he said, "about 24 sneers, superiorities, and nose-thumbings-at-nothing that mar the whole narrative"; and editors and critics who tracked Hemingway's progress through the highs of the early stories to the lows of *To Have and Have Not* (1937). But there is nothing in the discussion that will alter critical interpretation of the fiction. Dearborn is more interested in Hemingway's odd hair fetish and androgynous sexuality than in what he meant when he wrote in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place": "what did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well." She makes much of the fact that Hemingway's mother dressed him in girl's clothes well into toddler years and that she seems for a time to have maintained a lesbian relationship that disgusted her husband and son, but Hemingway's conversion to Catholicism and how it figured in his writing

gets scant attention. At one point, she declares, "He was writing about a new, amoral world and he was using language in such a way as to be revolutionary," a line calling for elaboration, but the very next sentence veers away from stylistics: "He also began to become a legend, already with an element of machismo in the mix."

**N**ONETHELESS, THE SHEER BOUNTY of incidents and personalities makes for an astonishing read. In only 14 pages well into the book, we learn that Hemingway wrote to Senator Joe McCarthy that he "would knock you on your ass the best day you ever lived"; that he entered a lion cage with a professional tamer, rubbing his body with lion lard in advance; that, as he lay in a hospital in Padua in 1949 suffering from blood poisoning, the *New York Times* reported that he had "only a short time to live"; and that the title *Across the*

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*River and into the Trees* (1950) came from the last words of Stonewall Jackson. You can't be sure whether the adventures spring from an adolescent male bluster or a frightening attraction to death. Dearborn's eight-page tale of anti-U-boat excursions off the coast of Cuba in 1942 sounds like overdone college antics. Promising U.S. officials that he would hunt German subs prowling nearby, Hemingway outfitted his boat with rebuilt engines, steel plating around the hull, twin .50-caliber machine guns, grenades, and a primed bomb ready to be launched by jai alai players he hired as crew, all of it paid for by the U.S. government. They trained intensely and set out at nightfall, but never found any targets. Hemingway's (third) wife thought the whole thing "rot and rubbish."

But nobody could laugh two years later when Hemingway watched from beyond the swells the landings at Omaha Beach; or when he hitched rides on bomber missions; or when "he and his French partisans located mines, roadblocks, and any artillery lurking between the village and Paris." At one point,

he commandeered a vacant hotel and helped the Free French grill German captives, organize patrols, and cache weapons. He loved every minute—in this case not out of an instinct for hijinks, but because of the promise of righteous violence. Politics didn't mean much to him, save for a hatred of fascists that was more visceral than ideological. He loathed the FBI and, for a time, fraternized with the Soviet secret police, but without any serious thought about capitalism and Communism. All that mattered was how a person behaved, and you could discover that best in moments of danger.

**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." Hemingway wrote that in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), his study of bullfighting, and Dearborn quotes it in acknowledgment of Hemingway's pared down art. She finds the association of violence and writing "strange," though, and doesn't pursue it. But this is precisely the basis of his appeal. I have often taught Hemingway's first published book, the story collection *In Our Time* (1925), particularly the final entry "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I and II." It is a masterpiece, one of those rare instances when a superb writer reaches a level reserved only for those extraordinary talents with a nose for what is fundamental but not entirely clear and rational in human existence. There is no violence in the story. Nothing much happens. A young man goes to the woods, makes camp, goes fishing, goes to sleep. But in Hemingway's simple declarative prose, the banal habits are transformed into a tense psychic journey into what is most real and true. Early on, the protagonist—Hemingway's recurrent character Nick Adams—pauses on a bridge between the burnt over town of Seney (a landscape reminiscent of a battlefield in France) and the woods that await him.

The river was there. It swirled against the log spiles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

You expect Nick to move on, and Hemingway, too, but the next paragraph begins with a



repetition: “He watched them holding themselves....” And in the next paragraph: “It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout.” When you ask why Nick fixates on the fish or visualize him staring downward for five or ten minutes, you realize that something is wrong with him. Hemingway never says so, though, only recounting Nick’s studious selection of a campsite, his emotionless description of sliding grasshoppers onto a fishing hook, and his movement through the trees, the impact of which is temporary release from “the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs.”

Deep thoughts and strong experiences are to be avoided, as we see when Nick reacts to a large fish that has broken his leader.

Nick’s hand was shaky. He reeled in slowly. The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.

He steps out of the water, sits on a log so that he doesn’t “rush his sensations any,” and lights a cigarette as “slowly the feeling of disappointment left him.”

We know that Nick has seen combat. One of the modernist innovations of *In Our Time*

is the vignettes of violence Hemingway inserts between the stories, one of which has Nick propped against a wall with a bullet in his spine. Before Part I of “Big Two-Hearted River” begins, he describes a catastrophe in the bullring (“Once the horn went all the way through him and he felt it go into the sand”), and before Part II an execution (“When they came toward him with the cap to go over his head Sam Cardinella lost control of his sphincter muscle”). Hemingway’s plodding description of Nick’s careful handling of minutiae unfolds in this context of death and violence. The more objective and simplistic is Nick’s attention to things, the more we sense a submerged trauma. Hemingway includes just enough oddity to suggest it, for example, when Nick cooks some spaghetti and says out loud, “I’ve got a right to eat this kind of stuff, if I’m willing to carry it,” but finds that “His voice sounded strange in the darkening woods. He did not speak again.” Something is wrong, yes, violence has happened, and the answer is to focus on the fundamentals of life and being.

**T**HAT INSTRUCTION EXCEEDS THE outlook of *Ernest Hemingway: A Life*, which gives “Big Two-Hearted River” but a paragraph. Nick’s tale fits better

the concerns of 20th-century existentialist thinkers and critics such as William Barrett who, in *Irrational Man* (1958), paired Hemingway with Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre in their absorption in being and nothingness. We don’t talk much any more about meaning and purpose, faith and disillusionment. When we emphasize human dignity, we think less about Man’s place in the universe than about accepting people as whatever gender identity they claim. The Big Questions today come from social constructionism, not ontology. In Dearborn’s hands, it makes for a fascinating and profuse chronicle of a renowned writer’s social and sexual life. But the core of Ernest Hemingway’s significance, the reason why we still read him, lies elsewhere—in the pain sensitive souls suffer “in our time” and face without fakery and phoniness. It is for us to appreciate, despite the melodrama and his occasional descent into self-caricature, what Wallace Stevens himself recognized six years after their fight, calling him “the most significant of living poets, so far as the subject of EXTRAORDINARY ACTUALITY.”

Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University and a senior editor of *First Things*.

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