

THE GREAT AND SMALL IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY



Everyone loves a literary battle, regardless of the weapons used, and few battles have aroused the imagination of the country as much as a well-publicized brawl that occurred in August of 1937. The combatants were Max Eastman (at left) and Ernest Hemingway, and the referee, in a manner of speaking, was the late Maxwell Perkins, of Scribners. Any run-of-the-mill boxing writer would have called it a corking good scrap. There have been countless versions of the fight, and here is Mr. Eastman's side of it. This is an excerpt taken from a longer essay in his forthcoming book, "Great Companions," copyright © 1942, 1959 by Max Eastman, used by permission of the publisher, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy.

By MAX EASTMAN

ERNEST HEMINGWAY will be surprised, I think, to find himself among the people I call great. Our acquaintance, though friendly and of long duration, was casual. But I was very fond of him, and moreover he gave me one of the great surprises of my life—two of them in fact: one when he turned out to be a magnificent writer, another when he hit me in the face with a book. There is not room in this excerpt for my account of our earlier friendship.

My present story begins with the publication of his "Death in the Afternoon" in 1932, a celebration of bullfights and the "religious ecstasy" of killing—of killing, moreover, as a protest against death. I happened in the same year to pay a visit to Spain, and took a try at watching a bullfight. Like other lovers of beautiful animals, I was angered by the spectacle. I was violently on the bull's side,

sharing with specific passion his desire to run a horn through the dressed-up smart-alecks who were tormenting him. In general, I think tormenting less witty animals for his enjoyment, or to show himself off a hero, is one of man's poorest employments. Therefore when Ernest's treatise in sentimental praise of bullfighting arrived in my hands I was aroused to express my own conception, both of bullfighting and of Ernest as the book revealed him. I called my essay "Bull in the Afternoon," and it was published in the *New Republic* in June 1933.

My thought about Ernest was that, being extremely sensitive as an artist has to be, sensitive enough to have been, as he told me, "scared to death" under fire, his reaction had been to overcorrect this trait—to turn himself into a blustering roughneck crying for more killing and largely dedicated to demonstrating his ability to take any quantity of carnage in his powerful stride.

This was a fairly simple and almost obvious inference from the facts I knew, but I did not know then that Ernest had been almost blown to pieces, had 237 fragments of shell removed from his body, and spent weeks in a hospital in such a mental state that he could not sleep in the dark. He had never said a word to me about his wounds or about this harrowing experience. Indeed I learned of it only recently when reading Philip Young's critical study, "Ernest Hemingway."

IN THAT studious book, however, I found my intuitive inference carefully reinforced, and my thesis applied, not only to "Death In The Afternoon," but to all of Hemingway's books, to everything he wrote between "In Our Time" and "The Old Man and The Sea." "It is a flight from violence and evil which . . . Hemingway's life and Hemingway's work eternally rehearse."

Such surprising things resulted from my anticipation of this thesis,

that I want to recall the gist of it in my own words.

"There are gorgeous pages in Ernest Hemingway's book about bullfights," it began, "—big humor and reckless straight talk of what things are, genuinely heavy ferocity against prattle of what they are not. Hemingway is a full-sized man hewing his way with flying strokes of the poet's broad axe which I greatly admire. Nevertheless, there is an unconscionable quantity of bull—to put it as decorously as possible—poured and plastered all over what he writes about bullfights. By bull I mean juvenile romantic gushing and sentimentalizing of simple facts."

That was my beginning, and I subsequently asked: "Why does our iron advocate of straight talk about what things are, our full-sized man, our ferocious realist, go blind and wrap himself in clouds of juvenile romanticism the moment he crosses the border of Spain on the way to a bullfight? It is of course a commonplace that Hemingway lacks the serene confidence that he is a full-sized man. Most of us too delicately organized babies who grow up to be artists suffer at times from that small inward doubt. But some circumstance seems to have laid upon Hemingway a continual sense of the obligation to put forth evidences of red-blooded masculinity. . . . This trait of his character has been strong enough to form the nucleus of a new flavor in English literature, and it has moreover begotten a veritable school of fiction writers—a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on the chest."

My conclusion, like my introduction, contained a hint of the reasons why, notwithstanding that monotonous twist in his nature, I hold Hemingway in such high esteem. Other poets, I observed, having gone through the "insensate butchery" of the First World War, had come out mourning the tragedy and horror of it. Their bitter words had been "the true aftermath in poetry of the Great War—not the priggish trivialities of the Cult of Unintelligibility, not the cheap moral of decorum (that shallow cult so admirably exterminated root and branch by Ernest Hemingway in a paragraph of this book), not the new Bohemianism of the synthetic gin period . . . but the confession in blood and tears of the horror unendurable to vividly living nerves of the combination of civilized life with barbaric slaughter."

"Will it be too much like a clinic if I point out that Ernest Hemingway is one of the most sensitive and vivid-living of these poets, one of the most passionately intolerant too, of priggery

and parlor triviality and old maid's morals, and empty skulls hiding in unintelligibility? I am not strong for literary psychoanalysis, but I must record a guess that 'Death In The Afternoon' belongs also among those expressions of horror."

The meaning seems clear enough, and I cannot imagine, as I read the essay over, how anyone could have inferred that I was talking about anything but prowess, and the need felt by most sensitive children to demonstrate this manly quality.

IMAGINE my astonishment, then, when Bruce Bliven, Sr., the *New Republic's* editor, called me up and asked whether I had intended to accuse Hemingway of sexual impotence! Archibald MacLeish, it appeared, had drawn this conclusion from my essay and had written a letter of outrage—full page, single space—demanding to defend his hero against this "great and irremediable injury." The crux of my crime—my "arch sentence" according to MacLeish's letter was this: "It is of course a commonplace that Hemingway lacks the serene confidence that he is a full-sized man." Since I had just reiterated my assertion that Hemingway is a full-sized man, I don't know how this could be construed—even supposing I had been talking about sex—as an imputation of impotence. (In republishing "Bull In The Afternoon" in a volume of essays, I changed the words *full-sized man*, in that "arch sentence," to *made out of iron*, hoping, at the expense of clear sequence, to avoid the least suspicion that I might be talking about sex.) But Archie managed to read it that way, and commented: "Of those more personal evidences of virility to which Mr. Eastman so daintily and indirectly refers I have no personal knowledge. I refer him however to the birth records of the cities of Paris and Kansas City where he can satisfy his curiosity in secret."

Bruce Bliven, who was as bewildered by the letter as I, begged me to say something to Archie that would head off his intention to defend Hemingway against a charge that had never been made. "That would really damage him," he said. So we each wrote a letter to MacLeish so contrived as to bring him back to his naturally cool judgment.

"I am both astonished and much distressed," Bruce wrote. "None of us in the office read into the Hemingway article the significance that you found in it. I have asked everyone I could about it, and I do not find anyone who interpreted it as you did. Among those I have consulted are Edmund Wilson, Robert Morse

Lovett, Robert Cantwell, George Soule and Slater Brown."

My letter read:

Dear Archibald MacLeish:

I was shocked and astounded by your letter to Bruce Bliven. Nothing could be more remote from my mind or nature than to sprinkle innuendos or peddle scandal in my writings. I have a genuine affection as well as a vast literary admiration for Ernest. . . .

You made me mad, but on reflection I realize that some particularly mean recent scandal-mongering must have put you in a mind to misread my article. I beg you to believe that I did not know there was such a rumor in the world.

To this MacLeish replied very courteously, accepting my assurance that I had not intended the injury, although adding: "Nothing I have read in print in my life has ever shocked and angered me as much as your article." By that time, however, he must have communicated his misconception to Ernest, for a letter now arrived from Havana addressed "To the Editors of the *New Republic*," and containing a couple of ironical jabs which those on the staff would understand:

Sirs:

Would it not be possible for you to have Mr. Max Eastman elaborate his nostalgic speculations on my sexual incapacity? Here they would be read (aloud) with much enjoyment (our amusements are simple) and I should be glad to furnish illustrations to brighten up Mr. Eastman's prose if you considered them advisable. Mr. Alexander Woollcott and the middle-aged Mr. Eastman having both published hopeful doubts as to my potency, is it too much to expect that we might hear soon from Mr. Stark Young?

Yours, etc. . . .

ERNEST HEMINGWAY.

After reading this, I wrote the following letter to Ernest, which he never answered:

Dear Ernest:

Your letter to the *New Republic* was all right, if you really thought I said or implied any such thing. But you might have remembered me better than that. I never heard the breath of a rumor that you were sexually or any other way impotent, although I have long been familiar with the news that I am—and gymnastic enough to be syphilitic at the same time. The idea strikes me as a joke. It is humanity's last tribute to those who do something.

I suppose it is fresh to psycho-

analyze a man by way of literary criticism, especially one whom you esteem as a friend, but I think there is plenty of cruelty in the world without your helping it along, and I am within my rights to say so with as much force as I can.

The next chapter of this narrative opens four years later, in August, 1937, when I was calling on Maxwell Perkins, editor and vice president of Charles Scribner's Sons. Max was a shy and sensitive soul, so shy that his lips would tremble sometimes when he talked. To offset this, and perhaps also in protest against the genteel traditions of his office, he liked to keep a well-worn felt hat on the back of his head while sitting at his desk. He was an astute and yet generously—even tenderly—sympathetic editor-publisher as many have testified. He had suggested that I make an anthology to be sold in conjunction with a new edition of my "Enjoyment of Poetry," a book which Scribners had brought out in 1913, the year he joined the firm, and which he had watched over with affection ever since.

He was sitting behind his desk facing the door, and I was on his right facing the same way. Our mood was mellow, and it was more than a surprise when a big, burly, and also very peppy, Ernest Hemingway strode in and greeted me with:

"Hello, you great big son-of-a-bitch!"

He smiled when he said that, or I chose to think he did, and I answered:

"Hello, Ernest! Big? Why you're twice as big as you used to be!" And I felt his arm to see if it was still hard, notwithstanding his increased bulk.

"What are you doing here? Where are you going?" I asked.

"Over to Spain," he said, "to see what your P.O.U.M. [a group of Spanish revolutionists who, disillusioned with Stalin's dictatorship, were inclined to do justice to Trotsky's position] is doing. Is that your outfit, the P.O.U.M.?"

"I haven't any outfit, Ernest," I said. "I merely try to tell the truth."

"Uh-huh," he said.

"You aren't really running with that Stalin gang, are you?" I asked, and he said very emphatically:

"NO!"

"I'm mighty glad to hear it," I said.

"I was sorry I missed you last winter in Key West. I enjoyed meeting your wife and seeing your house and children."

He answered with pleasing sincerity: "Yes, I was very sorry too."

But then suddenly, as though he

had forgotten an errand, he came closer and said: "I want to show you something."

He opened a button of his shirt and laid bare some rather coarse and surprisingly dark hair on his chest.

"Is that false hair?" he asked, and he brushed his fingers through it. Then he opened a button of my shirt—we were all three laughing, or at least I still thought we were—and I said: "I guess you've got me there!"

His laugh died and he said:

"Look here, what did you say I was sexually impotent for?"

"Ernest, you know damn well I didn't say that or anything like it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. We've been friends long enough for you to know I don't deal in dirty innuendoes."

"Yes, you did, and you played right into the hands of the gang that were saying it."

"I never heard it said. I never

said or insinuated that you are impotent."

He took the book and leafed the essay through.

"You've taken it out," he muttered. ". . . Then: 'Here it is. I'll show you.'"

"Show it to Max," I said.

"No, I won't, I'll show it to you," he said. "Listen to this," and he read aloud the passage beginning:

But some circumstance seems to have laid upon Hemingway a continual sense of the obligation to put forth evidences of red-blooded masculinity.

and ending:

This trait of his character has been strong enough to form the nucleus of a new flavor in English literature, and it has moreover begotten a veritable school of fiction-writers—a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on the chest."



—Wide World.

Hemingway meets the press in 1937 to give his side of the story concerning the fight.

dreamed anybody ever said it. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Yes, and I thought that was nasty too. Moreover, you tried to kiss my wife in a taxicab in Paris."

"I never was in a taxicab with your wife, and never had an impulse to kiss her."

"Yes, you did, and you go around saying things behind my back. If I had your essay here, I'd show you what you said."

"Here it is," I said, picking up "Art and the Life of Action," my volume of essays, which happened to be lying on Perkins's desk. "Show me—show Max, and let him judge whether I

"What does that mean," he said,— "some circumstance?"

"It means I haven't an idea what the circumstance is," I said. "That it does not mean sexual impotence is shown by what I say in my very first paragraph: 'Hemingway is a full-sized man whom I greatly admire.'"

"Never mind that," he said, "I'm talking about this right here."

He had been growing more and more truculent, and I was not entirely surprised when he burst out, "You know damn well what you meant," and pushed the open book

(Continued on page 50)



Dreiser the Puzzle

By Granville Hicks

IN "Letters of Theodore Dreiser" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 3 vols., \$18), edited by Robert H. Elias, there are more letters to H. L. Mencken than to any other one person. The earliest was written in 1907, and in it Dreiser, as editor of the *Delineator*, offers advice on some articles on baby care that Mencken was revising for a Baltimore doctor. The correspondence, begun in this curious fashion, soon became lively, and for the next eight or ten years, while Mencken was vigorously campaigning for Dreiser as a novelist, the letters were frequent. Thereafter the correspondence was more casual, but it continued almost as long as Dreiser lived.

The last letter to Mencken included in Mr. Elias's selection is dated March 27, 1943. Mencken had written Dreiser on March 19, asking, "What, precisely, are your ideas about the current crusade to save humanity?" In the First World War, he went on to say, he and Dreiser had agreed, and he wondered why Dreiser had changed. He noted with approval that Dreiser no longer seemed to be so closely associated with the Communists, adding, "I continue of the opinion, as always, that they are a gang of frauds."

Mencken's tone was flippant, as it almost invariably was, no matter how serious his intentions. Often in the past Dreiser had tried, in his elephantine way, to match his correspondent's flippancy, but now he was completely earnest. Not directly answering Mencken's question about the war, he said that he was interested in saving humanity if its lot could be improved, as he believed it could. "I know that you have no use for the common man," he wrote, "since he cannot distinguish himself. But I have." He went on: "You see, Mencken, unlike yourself, I am biased. I was born poor." For the American Communists, he explained, he had no great regard, but "as for the Communist System—as I saw it in Russia in 1927 and '28—I am for it—hide and hoof." After defending his views, with a characteristic lack of cogency, he abruptly changed his tone, to conclude with a warm expression of gratitude and affection.

What a puzzle Dreiser is! Much of the time in these letters he seems

coarse, egotistical, and cantankerous, and the reader grows more and more exasperated; but then suddenly, as in this letter to Mencken, one feels a tortured intensity that one has to respect. Often, as here, he is wrong-headed in these moments of strong emotion, but one cannot doubt the depth of his compassion.

Mr. Elias has selected some 600 letters, apparently from a much larger number available to him, and has edited them with scrupulous care. Dreiser was not a great letter writer nor even, most of the time, a very good one, and no one will read these volumes for the pleasure of reading them, but they are interesting because Dreiser is interesting, and they tell us a great deal about certain aspects of his career.

As a writer he was incurably unprofessional. Every novel he wrote, at least after "Sister Carrie," was put in shape by other hands—the hands of editors, of the devoted women who surrounded him, of literary friends from Mencken to James T. Farrell. ("I am always behindhand with my work," he candidly wrote an inquirer in 1921, "and the scope and intricacies of the matter in hand have, at times, made it impossible for me to give due attention to all of the details of the book—a task which most often I have been compelled to leave to others.") He was a prodigious worker, and in a great creative outburst after he lost his job on the *Delineator* in 1910 he finished "Jennie Gerhardt" and wrote "The Genius," "The Financier," and "The Titan." On the other hand, "The Bulwark" and "The Stoic" were in the works for thirty years or so, and many projects that remained unfinished are mentioned in his correspondence.

The letters also contain an appalling record of Dreiser's difficulties with publishers. His troubles began, of course, with the efforts of Doubleday, Page, fully documented here, to persuade him to withdraw "Sister Carrie," and they continued virtually all his life. Again and again he turned hopefully to a new publisher, and again and again the relationship ended for him in bitterness—if not, as once, in violence. Most writers have their publishing problems, but Dreiser must have set a record for wearing out publishers.

Next to his own books, the subject Dreiser most frequently wrote about was politics. Politics, so far as the letters show, had little importance for him in his early years, but by the late Twenties his interest was acute. We know that his visit to Russia in 1927 made a strong impression upon him, but, unfortunately, there are few letters about it. As for the domestic scene, in 1928 he began working for the freedom of Tom Mooney, and soon after that he became active in a variety of causes, chiefly those supported by the Communist Party. In the middle Thirties he drew away from the Communists, and for a time tried to form an alliance of non-Communist radicals, but his loyalty to the Soviet Union remained strong. After the outbreak of World War II, that loyalty became fanatical, and so it remained until his death in 1945. In 1941 he sent an autographed copy of "America Is Worth Saving" to Joseph Stalin, and three years later he wrote Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, "It is my opinion, and that of many students of Communist Russia, that Stalin can be trusted. He is a great thinker and a great leader."

His fanaticism about Russia, his strange streak of mysticism, his gullibility in many matters, his oafish anti-Semitism, his ferocious and abiding hatred of England and the Catholic Church—all these were as much a part of the man as his sympathy for the underdog or his struggle to be honest with himself. The muddiness of his mind is often reflected in his writing, and the more serious he is, the worse his sentence structure is likely to be.

He was not, by and large, an attractive figure, and the letters present his unattractive qualities more relentlessly than the books that have been written about him have done. One notes, for instance, his dependence on other persons, particularly women, and his offhand acceptance of their services to him. One notes his arrogance and his greed. But at the same time one feels in the letters, as in the novels, that this was a man who was utterly faithful to his own vision of life.

As he wrote Mencken, he was born with a bias, a bias not so much in favor of the common man as a bias in favor of men and women as victims—of the economic system, of their own impulses, of life itself. This bias led him into ridiculous contradictions, but it also gave him insights that have made his novels, with all their many faults, a permanent part of our literature.

