REVIEW ESSAY

Zbigniew Maszewski

"It Is Beautiful Country Jim": The Art of Ernest Hemingway's Letters

Sandra Spanier, Robert W. Trogdon, eds. *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway. Volume 1: 1907–1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 431 pages.
Sandra Spanier, Albert J. DeFazio III, Robert W. Trogdon, eds. *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway. Volume 2: 1923–1925*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 519 pages.

Long before Huck Finn writes to Miss Watson and, having put the letter in the book he is "making," decides not to send it, he and Jim find shelter from a summer storm in a cavern, a good, homelike place in the elevated part of the island. They build a fire, "spread the blankets inside for a carpet," eat their dinner, put their "things handy" at the back of the cavern and, distanced safely from the burdens of the past and the uncertainties of the future, witness a spectacle of sound and light unfolding outside. It begins "to thunder and lighten," to rain and to blow; and then it gets dark, "all blue-black outside, and lovely," and in the thickening rain the trees look "dim and spider-webby," and the blasts of the wind growing more and more furious "bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves" and "set the branches to tossing their arms as if they was just wild";

> and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest—*fst*! it was as bright as glory, and you'd have a little glimpse of treetops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm, hundreds of yards farther than you could see before, dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful

> crash, and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling, down the sky towards the underside of the world, like rolling empty barrels down-stairs—where it's long stairs and they bounce a good deal, you know.
> 'Jim, this is nice,' I says. 'I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here.' (Twain 48–49)

Huck's words are addressed as much to Jim, whose role in the scene is to provide the existential conditions for the actual experience to be interiorized and communicated ("Well, you wouldn't 'a' ben here 'f it hadn't 'a' ben for Jim"; 49) as to the readers of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* who find in these words confirmation of the pleasurable experience they get from following the patterns of the description condensed in the space of a single paragraph, all the literary "things handy," helping Huck make the scene come alive in the reader's imagination. "Here" and "now" we may appreciate sharing a sense of satisfaction with the author comfortably hidden behind the text, who by saying "Jim, this is nice" means also "Reader, this is good writing."

Ernest Hemingway enjoyed, studied, praised and occasionally followed Twain's strategies. In Chapter XII of *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, Jake and Bill pack their lunch, bottles of wine and fishing gear, and start on their long hike towards the Irati River. Unlike in Huck's account of the storm, the arrangement of descriptive elements in Jake's text traces movement through a serene, sun-shot, almost idyllic landscape, which lets the haunting shapes of earlier memories sink deep into the background in the same way that Nick's good places in "Big Two-Hearted River" do. Like Huck's, Jake's literary rendering of the scene depends for its effect of immediacy and intensity on evocative cumulative linearity, sequences of well-measured miniature pictorial revelations of specific weather and landscape features. The fields Jake and Bill walk across are "rolling and grassy and the grass [is] short from the sheep grazing;" from the elevation above Burguete they can see "white houses and red roofs, and the white road with the truck going along it and the dust rising," and then they enter a beech wood with "the thick trunks of old beeches and the sunlight [coming] through the leaves in light patches on the grass," and, back to the narrative-nourishing imagery from the beginning of the hike, it is "smooth grass, very green and fresh, and the big gray trees well spaced as though it were a park." We are not surprised to read: "'This is country,' Bill said" (116–117). Which is to say: to the extent that he succeeds in capturing the essence of the country he comes to know first-handedly, to the extent that he succeeds in getting the feeling of the country as he first experienced it (made "very green and fresh" in Hemingway's characteristic well spaced handwriting), the writer will know that the text he has written has its own life, independent of the writer, following the same natural laws that the country he writes about does. It then simply *is*, and there may be no simpler way of acknowledging it

than by saying "This is country," which also acknowledges the reader's readiness to identify with the text and appreciate its mastery, be its source dark or sun-lit.

In 1924 Hemingway sent a letter to Gertude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in which he wrote about his efforts "to do the country like Cezanne" in "Big Two-Hearted River:" "nothing happens and the country is swell, I made it all up, so I see it all and part of it comes out the way it ought to" (*The Letters*, *Vol. 2*, 141). In the same year he wrote to Edward J. O'Brien, who was among the first readers to recognize the quality of his writing: "It is much better than anything I've done. What I have been doing is trying to do country so you don't remember the words after you read it but actually have the country" (*Vol.* 2, 154); and in 1925, two months before the story was published in *This Quarter*, he wrote to his father, whose literary judgment he wanted to trust as much as he could trust his knowledge of hunting and fishing: "The river in it is really the Fox above Seney. It is a story I think you will like.... You see I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So than when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing" (*Vol. 2*, 285–286). Hemingway—the writer and the reader—always remained loyal to his early definition of a literary work's endurance; its echoes can be heard as late as in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in which the writer's pride and pleasure in receiving the Prize is hidden behind the representative mask of "each writer who knows the great writers who did not receive the Prize" (Baker 805) and who should act rather by writing than pretend to act by speaking about it.

Readers who take a somewhat nostalgic interest in trademark features of such declarative statements and who "never lose confidence in the firm" (Hotchner 205) would welcome the Hemingway Letters Project which, begun in 2002, has so far produced two volumes and already anticipates, in some 20 years' time, the need for "Additional Letters" to appear in the last volume of the series. Now that the ethical and legal complications resulting from Hemingway's clearly stated, bank deposited 1958 directive prohibiting the publications of any of his letters seem to have long been out of the way, the risk involved in this ambitious undertaking concerns the informative and the aesthetic value of the voluminous contents. There are many good reasons for Hemingway not wanting unauthorized readers to receive the letters he sent, not to mention those he wrote, kept copies of as his custom was, and did not send. The reasons the General Editor, Sandra Spanier, gives most emphatically for making the collective effort to get all of Hemingway's known surviving letters published are: spontaneity and urgency communicated by individual letters and "a running eyewitness history of his time" (*Vol. 2*, xxvi) communicated in the totality of the definitive collection. The Hemingway Letter Project is estimated to contain over 6000 letters addressed to over 1,900 recipients

and obtained from some 250 sources in and outside of the United States. In the two volumes already published, the annotations, the "wordage" of which often considerably exceeds the "wordage" of the letters themselves, provide detailed information about people, places, books, incidents, activities, directly or indirectly relating to Hemingway, [no longer?] a private man and a public man, a man of letters and a man of action, and they are mostly illuminating and necessary. On rare occasions, as for example when explaining the meanings of "Norman Blood," "The Nobel Prize," "*Auto da Fe*," or of "*Allemagne*," "*allez*," "*argent*" (Hemingway's "masterage" of the French language), they tend to appear naïve and redundant. *En masse*, the annotations constitute a most impressive component of the Hemingway Letters Project, and if, at times, they look overwhelmingly tedious and abundant on the page, one should not forget that Hemingway himself is painstakingly scrupulous in making sure his addressees know exactly what he means, whether he writes to Madame Gelle, explaining to her how to explain to the housekeeper of the 74 rue Cardinal Lemoine the fact that without her being notified Donald Ogden Steward can stay in their apartment while he and Hadley are away from Paris (*Vol. 2*, 17–19); or to Dorothy Connable, explaining how to play roulette and make money getting "satisfaction of knowing that you are playing it well" (*Vol. 1*, 223–225); or to William B. Smith, explaining how to live well in Paris and in Spain (bartending, bootblacking, bullfighting) (*Vol. 2*, 251–252); or to Ernest Walsh, explaining how to do the little magazine editorial work well (*Vol. 2*, 297–299); or to Horace Liveright, explaining how essential it is that no single alterations of any word as it is in the text Hemingway sends ("an organism") be made ("I'm sure you and Mr T. S. Smith understand this") (*Vol. 2,* 295). Hemingway likes to have exact numbers. He measures his claims for military glory in terms of his distance from the front line, the distance he covered carrying an Italian soldier, himself badly wounded, the number of the wounds he received ("227 little devils," the actual sizes and shapes of the two shell fragments drawn in the letter; *Vol. 1*; 131–132), the number of days he will spend in hospital recuperating; he measures his fishing expertise in terms of numbers, lengths and weights of fish he caught and he measures the solidity of his position as a writer, fortifying gradually, by keeping the word count of his writing and the record of the money ("seeds") he gets for the published texts. Numbers are provided and meant to be enjoyed in letters to other great writers whom in the early years Hemingway came to know and whose appreciation he sought: Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Francis Scott Fitzgerald.

Published in 2011, Volume 1 of *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway* covers the years 1907–1922, and it opens with the text of a postcard the 8 year-old Ernest sent his "papa" informing him that he "saw a mother duck with seven little babies" and inquiring "how big is my corn?" (*Vol. 1*, 3) Volume 2, which came out in

2013, covers the years 1923–1925 and closes with a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald including the news of Hemingway rewriting *The Sun Also Rises* and of the welcome opportunity to move to Scribner's on account of Liveright's rejection to publish *The Torrents of Spring*, the book which, as he lets Fitzgerald know at the end of the letter, "has 5.000 more words than Don [Ogden Steward's] Parody Outline of History" (*Vol. 2*, 461).

Because so many letters have been collected, over 80 per cent of them not published earlier, and because they are so richly annotated, the pleasure of reading Hemingway's correspondence may partly consist in there being no need to read them in conjunction with any of Hemingway's known biographies, or, as a matter of fact, with much prior knowledge of the developments in Hemingway's life and legend. The letters themselves create an exhaustive and colorful autobiography, "with some stretchers" as Twain's Huck would say, the first two volumes documenting, first-handedly and with unwavering enthusiasm, Hemingway's growth as a man and as a writer. Like a diary, letters are a medium privileged in making the lines of self-disclosure and the lines of self-mythologization converge, just as they benefit from making the actual experience in need of being spontaneously expressed and the literary expression in need of being properly controlled meet. Hemingway's letters, of the periods already covered in the two published volumes and of the periods to be covered in the future, provide an unstable mirror of "the way it was," but they are invariably of high intensity and of high interest because while living in proximity of the changing historical, political, cultural narratives they remain closely related to the unchanging standards of Hemingway's narrative art. In the letters collected Hemingway mentions many authors, both contemporary and "dead considerable long time," to use Huck's famous phrase again, as helpful in his apprenticeship. Among these the name of Mark Twain never appears, although, or because, the thematic and formal features of Twain's prose constitute such a significant undercurrent in Hemingway's early fictional texts and in his letters. One may be tempted to associate the "coming of age" motif emerging in Hemingway's letters with the change of perspective from that of the adventurous, always-fun-to-be-with romancer, Tom Sawyer, to a much more original, much more independent and serious writer you would like to shake hands with, Huck Finn. The regressive path, however, is always left wide open: "Jesus Christ some time I'd like to grow up," Hemingway writes to Fitzgerald in *Volume 2* (445). Some references to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are conventionally used in the role playing game of a young man half-heartedly refusing to accept family expectations and family responsibilities. A week before his seventeenth birthday Hemingway writes to his friend, Emily Goetzmann: "Just think how pleased My family would be if they would civilize me and inculcate a taste for Math and a distaste for Fishing" (*Vol. 1*, 34). Three months before Ernest and

Hadley Richardson get married in Horton Bay, he sends a photograph to Grace Quinlan, his high-school acquaintance, and writes: "Look civilizeder than you ever knew me? Huh? Been terrifically civilized for about twelve months now, and it's darned near ruined a man" (*Vol. 1*, 303). Eventually, things turn out not to be so bad, since, as Hemingway informs the Family, Hadley repeatedly demonstrates her fitness and passion for outdoor activities—"perfect coordination," "zest for things and a sense of style" (*Vol. 2*, 26), the very Huck-like qualities which may well be seen as the Hemingway collected letters' claim to their unity of effect. Hemingway seems actually to be enjoying Twain's language when he tells Grace to "pick [him] a prelate" as he himself could not "lay hold" of Bishop Tuttle from St. Louis (in Hemingway's letters frequently spelled as Sin Louis): "Remember when selecting this Priest that he's gotta be able to read and be dignified. Dignity's what we're going to pay this here prelate for, we don't want no evangelist that's liable to shout out, 'Praise be the Lord" and start rolling on the floor during a critical part of the ceremony" (*Vol. 1*, 303). In an earlier letter Hemingway writes Quinlan:

> Then Kate [Smith; since 1929 John Dos Passos's wife] and I went to the catholic church and burnt a candle and I prayed for all the things I want and I won't ever get and we came out in a very fine mood and very shortly after to reward me the Lord sent me Adventure with a touch of Romance.
> It was a very small adventure but it was unexpected and for a moment thrilling and I was glad that I had burned the candle. (*Vol. 1*, 244)

Such fragments read like an acknowledgment of the Hemingway-Twain [with a touch of Sherwood Anderson] familial relationships at its most entertaining.

In the experience of the world Twain's Huck and young Hemingway share, there is a much appreciated mixture of intuition and clear-sightedness, romanticism and pragmatism which allows both to communicate the sense of a place so effectively because the same qualities allow them first to identify with that place, as it were naturally. In his boundless curiosity about new territories Hemingway is always ready "allez somewhere, I haven't any idea where. Perhaps Kansas City—perhaps Poland" (*Vol. 1*, 206), but most willingly "to flash out onto the streams" (*Vol. 1*, 295). With the exception of Canada and more and more clearly his family home in Oak Park, Illinois, when job and family duties keep him away from fishing or hunting places, wherever he goes and sends letters from, Hemingway feels at home and wanting "to be nowhere else but here." In a 1919 letter to James Gamble there is a description of "a great place to laze around and swim and fish when you want to." "It is beautiful country Jim," he writes of the rivers and the woods of Michigan (*Vol. 1*, 183). And after he leaves America, his letters from Europe are studded with exclamatory evocations of the only places "fit for a male to

live in" where you can enjoy fishing, climbing, walking in the country, walking in the good parts of cities, riding in mountain trains, bobsledding, skiing, bullfighting.

Before some of the letters begin to be touched with a sense of their losing touch with the recuperative, energy-giving powers of the country (prognostic of the disillusionments of "Soldier's Home"), the Great War is also the Great Adventure: "Having a wonderful time!!! Had a baptism of fire my first day here" (*Vol. 1*, 112). Even when the places young Hemingway wants to be part of become the places where he wants to see others and himself in combat and where, like many others, he gets wounded (the patterned, dreamy riverscapes turning chaotic, insomniac warscapes of the Piave), the war in his letters is associated with beneficial experience. As he explains later to Scott Fitzgerald, if it doesn't kill them, the war proves good for the writers' education since it "groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get" (*Vol. 2*, 446).

A sense of a good place is a pervasive motif in Hemingway's letters and so is, inseparable from it, his sense of good reading and good writing, including the art of making letters effective, condensed, fast-moving, vigorous. Every now and then we can hear Hemingway complaining about his tendency to put his own person in the foreground, his failure to omit, wherever it is not necessary in the letter, the self-intrusive "perpendicular pro-noun" (*Vol. 2*, 88) This is of particular interest from the point of view of Hemingway's judgment of his own fictional work, the judgment which he willingly offers to his recipients. As early as in 1919 in a letter to his sister Ursula, behind the many "I"s there is already an indication of Hemingway's awareness of the significance of his work, revealed to him with the clarity of his perception of good places: "You know sometimes I really do think that I will be a heller of a good writer some day. Every once in a while I knock off a yarn that is so bludy good I can't figure how I ever wrote it" (*Vol. 1*, 217). With time, as the numbers of letter recipients and of words written have considerably increased, one notices in Hemingway's letters a tendency for a shift of focus from "I"-Hemingway to Hemingway's "story," Hemingway's "book," the change which allows the text to stand in a much more distanced, more impersonal relationship, the text to be viewed like the good country and like the works of other good writers, with which it shares affinities while being fully self-contained and self-sufficient. There is a Romantic touch to such a view despite Hemingway's declaration that in trying to do the Cezanne country, one must see it "all complete all the time" without having "a romantic feeling about it" (*Vol. 2*, 385). But it is exactly this Romantic feeling about completion, perfection, autonomy in his art that protects from mere egotism Hemingway's statements about feeling good after having written "damned good" stories, having written a "swell" novel "with no autobiography and no complaints" (*Vol. 2*, 385), having

written “the funniest book I’ve read since Joseph Andrews” (*Vol. 2*, 422), having written a good letter without too many “I”s. Such instances of celebrating the work for its own sake, as if the writer was its first reader rather than its author, are numerous in Hemingway’s letters and they would keep good company with the statements of other modernist writers who expressed their interest in the Romantic tradition (William Faulkner and Thomas Mann, to mention only the two who did receive the Prize).

In his letters, Hemingway’s zest for words, rooted in his capacity for observing and listening, the zest matching Huckleberry Finn’s, allows him to shift his narrative moods, ingeniously attune various forms of his typical speech writing to the demands of the situation and the expectations of the reader, assume different masks, play with the language for the sake of playing with it, developing his own slang and using phonetic spelling, or for the sake of manipulating it in his favor, even if only to win some admiration for his Tom Sawyer-like skill of “throw[ing] in some style.” For Hemingway language is an adventure, controlled but “genuwind.” From the elevation of the Alps, for example, Hemingway directs an enthusiastic call to William B. Smith: “Jo Esus boid what country” (*Vol. 2,* 215), and he modulates his voice in a letter to Katherine Smith which makes us remember the last nostalgic pages of *A Moveable Feast*: “It is so beautiful here that it hurts in a numb sort of way all the time, only when you are wit somebody you are lovers wit the beauty gets to be jost sort of tremendous happiness” (*Vol. 1*, 325). Different narrative styles are used in letting friends know about misadventures a “male” may have at such altitudes: Hemingway tells the co-editor of the *Little Review*, Jane Heap, of having suffered from a frostbite where “he could least afford to freeze” and he begins a letter to “Boid” with: “Ever had the penis froze Smith?” (*Vol. 2*, 271, 256).

There are passages in the letters which are evidently stylized in accordance with Hemingway’s knowledge of the literary standards and mannerisms of his pen-friends and which also provide illuminating examples of Hemingway practicing his métier, seeking anecdotal themes to be developed in his yarns and calculating the methods of giving them literary multi-dimensions. Hemingway is not just rehearsing but truly practicing his art when he writes to different readers of the avalanche that killed four skiers and the priest not letting the church bells be rung, of Sam Cardinella being hanged in a chair and not knowing what was happening, of the girl telephoning in a booth, talking cheerfully and weeping at the same time, of the sounds, the smells and the movement in the bullring, of the Piave after the war, clear and blue with a cement barge drawn by horses, of traveling in a night train compartment, watching the moonlit countryside and opening the window as fast as the French keep closing it. In the letters to Ezra Pound from that early period, behind the gossip-indulging, language-showing off

extravaganza of telling the "dirt," giving the "dope," one finds a source of information about imagistic techniques and the impact these had on Hemingway yarn patterns. Hemingway is learning, with gratitude and with ironic distance, from the older masters: Sherwood Anderson, when he writes that "There is a deathly, tired silence you can't get anywhere else except in a railway compartment at the end of a long drive" (*Vol. 1*, 314), and from Gertrude Stein, when he describes to her a mountain trek with Hadley and Chink, at the end of the trip the party drinking, sleeping on the grass, then walking home "in the cool of the evening with our feet feeling very far off and unrelated and yet moving at terrific speed" (*Vol. 1*, 345–346).

It feels good and a little uncanny to have the two volumes of *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway* and to wait for the others to come, eventually in such a long time from the "here" and the "now" they celebrate. Sandra Spanier calls the letters "the last great unexplored frontier of Hemingway studies" (*Vol. 1*, xii). The attractiveness of the first two volumes lies in the possibility that the last frontier may actually be the point of departure for getting to know Hemingway's work, that the project has the freshness and greenness of landscapes which an aged writer will one day conjure up with the magic of "The Last Good Country."

Knowing of the above, and knowing how different were the origins, the shapes and the qualities of the paper Hemingway used to write his letters on and how sensitive he was to the nuances of editorial art, one may only wish there was something less mechanical about the way the text is laid out on the page, the paper itself not so contrastively white but rather retaining some of the warm afternoon sunlight texture of Scribner's early editions of Hemingway's work.

Works Cited

Baker, Carlos. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970. Print.

Hotchner, A. E. *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1957. Print.