The Hadley Years in Paris

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Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, described on the original cover as “sketches of his early life in Paris in the Twenties,” begins during the initial wintry weeks of January 1922, just after Hemingway and his recent bride, Hadley, had moved into their modest quarters at 74, rue du Cardinal Lemoine in Paris’s 5th arrondissement. The twenty-two-year-old journalist for the *Toronto Daily Star* and his thirty-year-old wife would quickly flee the damp chill of Paris in favor of several weeks of skiing at Chamby-sur-Montreux in Switzerland. Within the first month of their return to Paris, however, Hemingway would have already met his three most important Parisian allies—Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Sylvia Beach (he had, in fact, already found his way to the latter’s lending bookshop even before the Swiss escape)—all of whom had been recommended to him by his state-side friend and literary mentor, Sherwood Anderson, who had steered the Hemingways to Paris.

In the first letter of the volume under review, Hemingway summarizes for his mother all the travel—for journalistic purposes and for exploratory pleasure, the latter subsidized by Hadley’s inherited investment income—undertaken during the couple’s first year abroad, 1922: “Last year seems pretty full. In Paris, Switzerland, Paris, Genoa [to cover a European diplomatic conference], Switzerland, Italy again, The Black Forest, The Rhineland, down to the Vendée to see Clémenceau, the Balkans, Constantinople [to cover the Greco-Turkish War; Hadley had quarreled with Hemingway about his leaving her in Paris again for the trip and, in reaction, he may have been unfaithful while away] . . . home again to Paris, a trip through Burgundy for the wine sale, down to Lausanne [to cover the international peace talks being held there], and now here in the Alps where we were this time last year [i.e., back to Chamby-sur-Montreux where the letter in question is dated 10 January 1923].”

What Hemingway does not mention to his mother—but he does to his privileged correspondent Ezra Pound in the very next letter of the volume—is Hadley’s famous loss of the small suitcase carrying all of Hemingway’s literary writing to that date. Crestfallen, Hemingway bemoans the theft that had

taken place at Paris’s Gare de Lyon, where Hadley was boarding a train that would take her to Switzerland to reconnect with her husband for the holidays: “I suppose you have heard about the loss of my Juvenilia? ... I worked 3 years on the dam [sic, following the volume’s convention of respecting Hemingway’s orthography] stuff.” If that were not enough to frustrate his personal writing plans at the outset of the 1923–1925 period covered in this meticulously edited second volume of Hemingway’s correspondence (the jacket featuring, quite appropriately, the writer’s 1923 passport photo), he then receives the unwelcome news, some two months later, that Hadley is pregnant. This would eventually take the couple back across the Atlantic for four months for the birth of the baby in the city of Hemingway’s newspaper bureau, Toronto, “because,” he will write Pound from Canada, “that is the specialité de ville. They don’t do anything else.” In multiple updates to Pound, to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and to Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, Hemingway’s reports feature a most virulent Canadaphobic streak.

But, before leaving Paris for Toronto, Hemingway took quite possibly his most significant European trip while living abroad. In spite of Hadley’s being halfway through her pregnancy, she accompanied her husband to Spain in late May of 1923 to see the bullfights that Gertrude Stein had talked of and that Hemingway longed to see firsthand. The reality of the bullfights no doubt surpassed his already high expectations—and not just for the more obvious reasons linked to Hemingway’s well-known machismo, but also for reasons artistic, even literary. With no college degree nor any great literary baggage to bring to the writing table (even if he did attempt to catch up on important modernist reading through book loans from Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company, and though he was already working assiduously at crafting the unadorned journalistic style that would characterize his fiction), Hemingway would find in the stripped-down beauty of the bullring—with each bullfight being a stylized life-and-death drama—something emblematic of the kind of powerful, nonflowery, and in-the-moment experience that he hoped to capture in writing. During his return to Spain in 1924, Hemingway explained to Pound: “I take great and unintellectual pleasure in the immediate triumphs of the bull ring with their reward in ... general respect and the other things Literary Guys have to wait until they are 89 years old to get. The Plaza is the only remaining place where valor and art can combine for success.” As he later summarized in the no-holds-barred idiom reserved for Pound, “Thank God for bulls. To hell with delicate studies of the American scene. Fuck the American scene.” Hemingway was hungry for a breakthrough literary formula that would quickly bring success. With tongue perhaps just slightly in cheek, he would confess to Pound: “I’m limited. But I’m going to know about Fucking and fighting and eating and drinking [especially glorified in the letters of this volume] and begging and stealing and living and dying”—the real stuff of life for
Hemingway and for his desired literary portrayal of it, as opposed to such refined devices as the “Interior Monologue” that he heartily mocks during the summer of 1925. And Pound, forever promoting his Imagist and anti-precious Modernist ways, must indeed have encouraged Hemingway to follow his gut wherever it might have led (one dreams of perhaps one day reading some of Pound’s correspondence to Hemingway in direct counterpoint to these letters to Pound). Hemingway obviously felt that he enjoyed a fraternal epistolary relationship with Pound and that anything could be communicated, no matter how scandalous, bigoted, or racist it might have been. It was perhaps some of these very letters that made the Hemingway family want to respect the writer’s desire for his correspondence never to be published. But it was Hemingway’s only still-living son from his second marriage, Patrick, who would ultimately decide that it was no doubt better that there be public access to the most complete collection possible of his father’s letters than to secondhand biographical surmisings by others. And thus, most happily, the monumental work of the Hemingway Letters Project was sanctioned, with fifteen additional volumes projected for publication by Cambridge University Press in the years ahead. Returning to Pound—given Hemingway’s youthful adulation of him during the formative period in question, it had to have been hard, many years later, to team up with Archibald MacLeish and others who had known Pound abroad to lobby for his release from the psychiatric hospital where he’d been confined for his treasonous rants in Italy before and during World War II; but Hemingway would remain faithful, and Pound was eventually allowed to return to Italy, where he died some years later. Perhaps Hemingway’s conscience reminded him of his own less-than-patriotic rhetoric in trying to convince his confidant to soften the tone, as overheard in this 1925 letter to Pound: “Why get excited about U.S.A.? It means nothing to me. Why in hell should it mean anything to any intelligent person?” When Gertrude Stein reprised the phraseology of a Parisian garage owner berating one of his careless mechanics and his other young workers (“vous êtes tous une génération perdue”), she would famously transfer the lost generation label to such rolling-stone members of her expatriate cenacle as Ezra Pound and the young Hemingway.

For the non-Parisian letters of these three years, the scenes are predictable and are structured around two temporal poles: the winter ski holidays of Christmas and January in Switzerland and in Austria (with the exception of December 1923/January 1924 when Ernest and Hadley were returning to Paris from Toronto with the new baby, “Bumby,” in tow) and the Hemingways’ annual summer escapes to Spain, principally for the bullfights, with a bit of fishing included as well. Hemingway reported such fishing excursions to his father, and he would mention Hadley’s piano playing to his mother who had a passion for music. But there are only about twenty-five rather prosaic letters in all to his family, suggestive perhaps of a restless expatriate trying to loosen the links of memory to a constrained Midwestern upbringing.
The majority of the correspondence in the volume is instead addressed to a select group of earlier friends—some of the longest letters are to his old Michigan pal Bill Smith, who would come to Paris for a visit in 1925, and similarly to Bill Horne, who was also in the Hemingways’ wedding party; to publishing and professional acquaintances—Toronto Star managing editors, John Bone and Harold Hindmarsh, throughout 1923. Jane Heap of the Little Review, the critic Edmund Wilson, Robert McAlmon whose Parisian press published Hemingway’s first book of writing in 1923, Edward O’Brien who chose Hemingway’s “My Old Man” for his Best Short Stories of 1923 volume, Bill Bird, whose Three Mountains Press of Paris published some vignettes by Hemingway in 1924 under the lowercase title of in our time, Harold Loeb with his connections to Boni & Liveright, and Horace Liveright himself, who published the stateside version of In Our Time before refusing to publish the acerbic Torrents of Spring that Max Perkins would eventually accept for Scribner’s; and to newer friends in Paris, when the Hemingways would leave the French capital for skiing, for Spain, or for the longer period of “detention” in Toronto.

Beyond Pound, Stein, and Sylvia Beach—and various writers and artists encountered through those allies—Hemingway would also connect with humorist Donald Ogden Stewart and Ford Madox Ford during 1923 (in spite of Ford’s immediate support, Hemingway would quickly become critical of him in his writings to Pound), Archibald and Ada MacLeish and old wartime acquaintance John Dos Passos in 1924, and Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald in spring of 1925. But this reader also enjoyed some of the more mundane letters in the epistolary mix, like the entreaty to a certain Madame Gelle for her help in smoothing over a misunderstanding with the landlord of their first Parisian apartment: Hemingway admits that his and Hadley’s French is not up to the task (even if Hadley apparently had more formal training than he did) and asks this neighborhood acquaintance to try to explain the confusion to their landlady, Madame Leperre. Also, from their new Parisian address in the Montparnasse district, after returning from Toronto, there is a flurry of frantic inquiry to Hadley’s broker and to a designated power of attorney back in her native St. Louis, where the Hemingways were suspicious of some mismanagement of Hadley’s portfolio, causing them to feel financially vulnerable—especially since Hemingway had cut his ties to the Toronto Star and was writing full-time—and contributing quite possibly to additional strain in their personal relationship. Such day-to-day glimpses into the Hemingways’ time in Paris offer true slices of life in real time that, as Patrick Hemingway rightly chose to acknowledge, biographers can only approach opaquely and from an ever-increasing historical distance.

In such slices of life, however, the Parisophile reader of this volume will probably be a little disappointed not to find more of the City of Light evoked in the 450 pages of letters to the various addressees mentioned above. One gets a sense, through the content of the letters, to what extent the expatriate
community remained isolated from the French culture in which it found itself. Patrice Higonnet, Goelet professor of French history at Harvard, suggests that the lost generation was truly lost in Paris. “They did not speak French [very well, it should probably be qualified] and were uninterested in the art or culture of the French people around them,” one reads in a 1999 New York Times interview with Higonnet. “For Hemingway and most of his friends, Paris was one long binge [prohibition and stricter morality was in place back stateside], all the more enjoyable because it wasn’t very expensive.” Hemingway does indeed mention Parisian bars, cafés, restaurants, English-language bookshops and small presses, boxing gyms, swimming venues, horse tracks, and train stations for escaping to ski slopes and to bullrings, but rare is the letter like the one to Archibald MacLeish from an Austrian ski holiday in which Hemingway says that he misses the Luxembourg Gardens where Hadley would have taken Bumby to play and where Hemingway apparently enjoyed viewing the Impressionist paintings at the Luxembourg Palace Museum. As an aspiring writer of fiction, Hemingway did his best to keep up with English-language litterateurs (including translations of some of the great Russian novelists), but there was no time for the “shit in France” (he accused Ford Madox Ford of wasting valuable publishing space in his Transatlantic Review with submissions in French). A big fan of Spain (“Spain is the best country of all. . . . unbelievably tough”), Hemingway would report to Pound during the fall of 1925 that there “are some nice Yng. Spanish writers not near so full of shit as . . . French.” Surely Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier could have steered their young writer-friend to some English translations of André Gide, Marcel Proust, or François Mauriac—or of Apollinaire or Paul Valéry in poetry—had Hemingway been truly curious. He hesitatingly queries Pound about some classic French authors: “DeManpassant [sic], Balzac, the Chartreuse de Parme guy [Stendhal], they all made the war, or didn’t they?” In sum, as a writer, Hemingway obviously did not care very much for the long literary tradition of his chosen country—he just happened to live there.

In the last letters of the volume, when the Hemingways would be back in Schruns, Austria, for the end-of-the-year holidays of 1925, Hemingway writes to Fitzgerald on Christmas eve that “Pauline Pfeiffer gets here tomorrow to stay for Xmas and New Years.” And a month earlier, he had written his longtime friend Bill Smith to confide that Pauline “is a swell girl. . . . She and I have done some A1 drinking.” These holidays would mark, then, the beginning of the end of Hemingway’s marriage to Hadley as well as the debut of his new alliance with Pauline, even if he and Hadley would not separate until August of 1926 nor divorce until several months later, with Hadley’s accepting as a settlement Hemingway’s royalties for his first celebrated novel just beginning to circulate, The Sun Also Rises (published by Scribner’s in October of 1926). Conrad Aiken would immediately offer his kudos of the novel in the New York Herald Tribune: “If there is better
dialogue to be written today I do not know where to find it.” Hemingway’s apprentice years in Paris had served him well, and his literary career was very much on the rise at this point.

Returning to A Moveable Feast, with which we began this review—during his fourth marriage and in the final years of his life, Hemingway would wistfully conclude his nostalgic account of the “Hadley years” as follows: “That was the end of the first part of Paris. Paris was never to be the same again.” And in perfect parallel, this invaluable second volume of the Hemingway Letters Project ends at the very same juncture, though—unlike even Hemingway’s own Moveable Feast reconstruction—in epistolary real time, with Hemingway’s offering Scott Fitzgerald a 1926 “New Years Morning” greeting.

MAN OF LETTERS

STUART WRIGHT

“Remember, even though you know,” Robert Penn Warren wrote his poet daughter, Rosanna, on 26 November 1984, “that poetry is not a profession—it is a way of life.” Six months later, not long after his eightieth birthday, he added a remarkable and uncharacteristically revealing apologia pro poemate meo. “It’s always a groping forward for me, hunting for possibilities, with the range of possibility getting narrower and narrower,” he wrote her on 31 May 1985, suggesting that “this may come from my long addiction to rhyme, in which every new need is focused by rhyme possibilities. . . . But that is just one thing about my groping into a poem. . . . “Of course,” he continued, “there’s always something else for a starter, object, emotion, event—or blunder.”

By the time Warren had written these words, however, the poetic muse had virtually abandoned him. He complained to James Olney on 27 June 1986 that “I haven’t written a decent line of verse in 18 months, God damn it!” And to Floyd Watkins on 20 December he wrote that “I have done some ten, I guess, since April 1985. . . . and don’t like any of them. Too much self-imitation. . . . a chief vice to guard against.” Warning to his theme, Warren wrote to Andrew Lytle the same day as Watkins that he had submitted only one poem for publication since April 1985. The unnamed editor, “whose