

A Brief Note on Earnest Hemingway

Hemingway has come up in a few recent conversations, at least some prompted by the Ken Burns documentary. B_____ sent me a link (he does that) to an Eric Asimov piece you may have seen: [NYT on Books to Inspire Hunger and Thirst](#). In the same key, in my boyhood and again recently, my father said that Hemingway's writing about a drink made one want the drink. Like Asimov, I too loved *A Moveable Feast*, not because it's a great novel, but because of the fragments of Paris, which were "true" for me long before I went to Paris, and maybe still more true than many of my actual recollections of the City – which make it a great book, whatever else it is or isn't.

I'm mulling over the proposition that Hemingway has often been mistakenly read as a thinker rather than a painter. Surely there are plenty of big ideas in his oeuvre, so the misreading is understandable. All the talk of manhood, of war, of authenticity shading into existentialism in the postwar failure of culture, or ability only to generate an inauthentic mass culture, the same mass culture that mass produces death . . . I can keep riffing on this stuff indefinitely. No less a mind than William Barret used "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" as an entry into a discussion of existentialism. And to this day lots of people say they don't like Hemingway because [familiar ideological arguments follow]. Ho-hum.

I think, however, it is the visual, and one might even say lyrical, qualities of the writing that endure, and should. I can't recall a serious idea I got from Hemingway, but now, even 30+ years on, I can remember any number of images, and the sound of their expression. All that talk of being "tough" with the language, the blunt descriptions, the removal of adverbs, qualifiers, and most adjectives (the sentences were often longer than claimed, I think *Moveable Feast* opens with a single very long sentence but memory may fail me) did NOT mean the writing wasn't descriptive, even musical. Working with silence – what is not said – is hard work indeed, but can be very moving.

When Hemingway was given the Nobel Prize for Literature, nominally for *Old Man and the Sea*, it was easy to say that it wasn't his best book, the Prize was for the body of work, and so forth. But I'm not so sure the Committee didn't get it right, perhaps by accident. The imagery – dreams of lions on the beach; the magnificent fish, reduced to a pathetic if huge skeleton by the old man, a failing and sorrowful killer, and by sharks; the fondness for the boy and the town; the talking to oneself about baseball at night, "the rich have radios"; loneliness on the ocean with the glow of Havana in the sky – this is great writing, even though – no, because – only hinting at big ideas that are not articulated directly.