

EZRA AND HEM: A MOVEABLE FRIENDSHIP

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Reinforced with introductions by Sherwood Anderson to Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, 22-year-old Ernest Hemingway and his wife Hadley arrived in Paris in December 1921. He did not seek out Pound immediately, however, encountering him by accident in Sylvia Beach's bookshop in February. Pound invited the couple to tea, and the two men, despite the 14-year age differential, took to each other at once. Hemingway characteristically boasted of his pugilistic ability, and Pound responded by asking for lessons. His instructor wrote Anderson that Pound thought him a "swell poet" and was trying to get one of his stories published, whereas he was teaching him to box, "wit little success." He adds, however, "it's pretty sporting of him to risk his dignity and his critical reputation at something that he don't know nothing about. He's really a good guy, Pound, wit a fine bitter tongue onto him" (Hemingway 62). Reciprocally, the older man admired Hemingway's "genial debunking of received ideas" (Meyers 92), and was soon praising "the sensitivity of real writing like Hem's": it showed "the touch of the chisel" (Carpenter 425).

That they had quickly established a rapport is indicated by

a post card sent from Siena only a few weeks later. The complete message:

ole Cosmo de Medici,
an ornery son of a Russ wuz he,
In his hock shops the florentines
hocked their wives & lands & vines
They hocked their coats/ They hocked their shoes,
old Rus Cos roped in the jews.
He did the sheenies with consumate ease
as he did the Dutch & genoese, etc. ad. inf.

(10 Apr. 1922)

The thrust of the lines was to be reworked in canto 21, but at this point it sounds like a joke he is sharing with a kindred spirit. And there is a “joking” element to be discerned in almost every letter they wrote each other down through the 1920s, especially Pound’s. That such “sharing” was important to him is explicit in his remark at T.S. Eliot’s death, “Who is there now to share a joke with?” (Carpenter 888).

Pound had travelled to Italy that Spring to garner more information about Sigismondo Malatesta, which was to be used in cantos 8-11. He was sufficiently impressed by Hemingway’s doubtlessly exaggerated accounts of his war experience to urge him to tour the 15th-century battle sites with him and explain the military logistics involved; and he also drew on Hemingway’s reminiscences in canto 16.

As soon as they had met, the two began to spend a lot of time together, boxing, playing tennis, going to sporting matches, but essentially in conversation about writing, the younger man mostly listening. Well aware of Pound’s “critical reputation” – discounting the pretentiousness, he came to regard him as “a sort of a saint,” albeit an “irascible” one (Carpenter 424) – Hemingway had his own credentials as an established war correspondent. Moreover, eventually he was able to introduce his mentor to Bill Bird, who asked Pound to

supervise a series of prose booklets he was planning. The latter responded enthusiastically. Hemingway's contribution was to be *in our time*, and there ensued many conversations about "how to order the sketches so they would all 'hook up'" (Lynn 213). From the outset, their friendship had a solid personal and professional basis; and they could "joke" with each other.

In this connection, there is one specific instance of Pound's suggestion for "Chapter XV," the last of the interchapter sketches, which possibly Hemingway was recalling in his 1958 letter to Pound following his release from St. Elizabeths. As he was making final revisions he wrote Pound in response to a change Pound had wanted: He has decided to "do the hanging," repeating in closing, "I will commence hanging. Then I think she rides. Will try to drop in on you tomorrow a.m." (91-2), perhaps to discuss the "hanging."

Thus the remarkably close, multidimensional friendship of two of the most publicized figures on the 20th century literary scene began – and continued. It is remarkable, of course, that two writers of such eminence, with commensurate egos, remained friends, and even more remarkable considering the ensuing vicissitudes that over the years altered their roles in relation to each other. Beyond the merely personal, however, what cemented their relationship throughout was their shared understanding of and commitment to the task of the writer, Pound envisaging his role more widely, Hemingway more self-centeredly. Yet in the early years their efforts were in synchrony to a marked degree. Moreover, even as their paths diverged, the appreciation by each of the other's talent never flagged. When Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954, he said it should have gone to Pound.

In retrospect, one other dimension of their relationship may be suggested. Although there can be no question that they were open with each other to a considerable degree (the young Hemingway almost effusively so), as one reads between the

lines of their letters it is possible to discern an element of role-playing by two actors, each confident in his vocation as they enact their separate and “moveable” parts, this element especially apparent in the 1920s letters, with the older Pound perhaps more self-consciously utilizing various personae.

The first letter “Hem” wrote to “Ezra,” of the ten letters selected by Carlos Baker from this early period, is dated 23 January 1923. It refers to the Hemingways’ intention of joining the Pounds in Rapallo, if he can preserve his “incognito among your fascist pals.” (After his two interviews with Mussolini in Genoa and Lausanne the previous year he had called him “the biggest bluff in Europe”; and Mussolini, on the verge of obtaining power, had told him to stay out of Italy.) Another part of the letter is not a joking matter, but the tone is still intimate. He reports despairingly that Hadley had lost all of his “Juvenilia” – she had been bringing his manuscripts from Paris to join him in Lausanne and they had been stolen. He charges his mentor not to attempt to console him even as he knows he will (76-7). Pound responded to “Colonel Himin’way” from “Fascisti Headquarters,” but the levity is laced with concern for the young man’s reaction to the loss. He urges him to come to Rapallo immediately. It all may be “an act of Gawd – calamity.” He should rewrite from memory, Pound instructs, for if the story had the proper “FORM” it can be recaptured (27 Jan. 1923).

Hemingway’s response to “Carino” two days later is almost puppyish. He “yearns” to see the Pounds – if they are travelling, he wants to “shake along.” Gushingly he thanks Pound for his advice to “a young man” who has lost “his complete works. It is very sound. I thank you again. I repeat. I thank you. I will foller your advice” (76-7).

To the young man’s considerable disappointment the Pounds leave Rapallo three days after he arrives, but the Hemingways join them later on a walking tour of Orbetello and other sites connected with Malatesta, the “Colonel” – the

extent to which Pound was teasing the young veteran, the extent to which “Hem” recognized the teasing is difficult to assess – explaining on the basis of his supposed military knowledge “how and why Sigmundo Malatesta would have fought where and for what reasons” (Carpenter 429).

In September that year Hemingway unhappily went back to the *Toronto Star* – Hadley would soon give birth and they needed more money. He fires his complaints back, imploring his “amigo” to write: “You may save a human Life” (92-3), and there are others in which he almost pleads for emotional support. In three months Pound sends six communications, the first to “Col. Hmnwy,” at “Tomato Star, Tomato Can.” He is sympathetic with perhaps a hint that his young friend is not the first writer to experience frustration, pointing to his own early trouble in Indiana when he was much younger than Hemingway with none of his options open to him. In addition to sending all the Paris “news,” he goes on to discuss their mutual publication interests (21 Sept. 1923). The blending of personal concern with professional interests is characteristic of these early letters. In December he writes, “See here. ole Bungo: WHHHHHHHere’s your copy??” (for the *transatlantic review*); and he urges him to return and take over from “your pore ole grandpa Ford,” giving himself “a little leisure for composition” (3 Dec. 1923).

Returned to Paris, Hemingway begins a letter “Dear Prometheus” and continues in a most affectionate tone, “It’s no fun living on your street in your absence so come on home sometime” (110). A letter in March begins, “Dear Duce” – Mussolini apparently can still be a joke between them. He reports that he is “writing some damn good stories. I wish you were here to tell me so, so I would believe it or else what is the matter with them. You are the only guy who knows a god damn thing about writing. O Hell I wish you were here” (112-13).

The last letter in this early period selected by Baker is in

July 1924 from Pamplona. Exulting that he was in the bull ring on 5 mornings and was “cogida 3 times,” he extols the bull fighter Maera as a better artist than Joyce, “by a mile.” He still wants comfort from Pound, however: “Now we haven’t got any money any more I am going to have to quit writing and I never will have a book published. I feel cheerful as hell” (118-19). As usual, Pound responded humorously about Hemingway’s passion “for bulls”; and in more than one letter he worries about his protégé’s “atrabilious” nature – expressing hope that he will be able to control it for his art.

There are no 1925 letters from Pound to Hemingway in the Kennedy Library, the correspondence there resuming in July 1926. He has read *The Torrents of Spring* with “relief and amusement.” Has Hemingway been awarded the “*oreja*” (ear) yet? And when will he make his “pip squeak again heard on the Bullyyards” of Paris? (31 July 1926). The levity continues in a spate of some thirty letters beginning in October, the addressee’s name often embellished by a joking military or religious title, perhaps reaffirming the bond established earlier, but there is an increasing note of Pound’s apprehensiveness that Hemingway’s looming commercial success has its perils for his craft as well as for Pound’s projects. The main topic of these letters, however, is a journal that he is planning that was to be *The Exile* in 1927-28. Clearly he is hoping for Hemingway’s support in terms of copy – anything that is “unsaleable” to Scribner’s (28 Oct. 1926). He asks for lists of possible contributors, for assistance in eliciting Archibald MacLeish’s support, primarily financial, as neither respects his work. Pound is gratified by the “Reverend Colonel’s” response: he had feared that “you-d prob. say; gjheesus Hell, wot, another ov these gol-darn reveews” (3 Nov. 1926). Later in the month, MacLeish having agreed to “stand by the munitions chest,” Pound writes to Hemingway as “Honoured Sir, Sublime Epigastrum, Mighty Chief” in thanks for his efforts

to that end, even as he admonishes him for being dilatory in sending “copy,” as in all the letters to him at this point (20 Nov. 1926). Even as he was imploring for contributions, as their roles began to reverse, in several letters he humorously yet bluntly continued to try to direct Hemingway’s interest away from “the bathos of the bull” (“8 or 9” Nov.).

When Hemingway eventually sends “An Alpine Idyll,” however, Pound is once again the uncompromising critic. The story is too “licherary” and he advised Hemingway on how to revise it (21 Dec. 1926). In subsequent letters he repeats his objections, even offering to edit it himself if Hem is “too lazy” (27 Jan. 1927). Two days later, having learned that the story has been placed in *Caravan* he storms that it is “wasted” there “but yr. manipulation of the external woild is so much superior to mine, that I hezzytate to comment. I don’t so much care a damn where it is printed as that you JACK it into shape BEFORE it is printed.” Then perhaps feeling he has gone too far, he remarks “Thus doth the elderly hen give instruktions fer swimming and fer qualities of ritink likely to be detrimental to sales” – a semi-apology to his friend that also pulls rank and jibes at Hemingway’s commercialization of his art (29 Jan. 1927). The letters continue in this vein, however. The next day he writes sternly to “mong cher ami” that he is wrong to plan to turn to short stories next as the way to build his career. “Wotter yer think yer are, a bloomink DILLYtanty?????????” (30 Jan. 1927).

A persistent note beginning in December had been his eagerness to see a copy of Hemingway’s just published novel – when is he going to see the sun rise in Rapallo? Then, on February 11 he begins a letter with “IHEHSUS GOTT, mein lieber, et mon tousjour vieuXXX Co-KKo.” Blending expostulation with half-ironic congratulation, he writes “I haff just a HALF PAGE of the Times seen . . . mit your fotograft . . . in the adv. Section . . . if you have ’em eatin out of your ’and to that extent it wd. be a bloody crime

to hide anything in a hip-pocket tabloid magazine (*The Exile*)” But he still wants enough text to disprove an assertion he has just heard that “H. is just another great american author”; and he is still waiting for the sun to rise in Rapallo (11 Feb. 1927).

Four days later he writes that he will be delighted to receive him and Guy Hickok – Hemingway was coming to Italy to seek “verification” that he was a Catholic in order to marry Pauline (15 Feb. 1927). Surely at this time he would have received a copy of *The Sun Also Rises*, but there is no further mention of it in his letters to the author that have been published or that are at the Kennedy Library. The friendly letters continue, however; he still asks for material for *The Exile* and a year later he is profanely solicitous about Hemingway’s freak accident: “Haow the hellsufferin tomcats did you get drunk enough to fall upwards thru the blithering skylights?” (11 March 1928). As to the novel, in 1930 in a letter to Louis Zukofsky he praises *A Farewell to Arms*, but “I had nothing to say about *The Sun Also Rises*” (Ahearn 33). It is safe to assume that he disapproved of the novel, perhaps the main reason being, as he had written before the “sun” had risen in Rapallo, “my feeling about bulls is that they have a limited application” (18 Nov. 1926). Whether they exchanged views on this matter or whether Pound simply withheld comment – and Hemingway’s reaction, if any – it is impossible to ascertain at this point.

As time passed and Hemingway’s commercial success became greater there continued to be considerable correspondence between them; but in the evidence available there are more reservations each has about the actions of the other. In January 1929 Pound wrote James Vogel that Hemingway was “doing the dollar a word or something like that” (Paige 300). Even in changed circumstances the bond between them remained strong, although Pound’s irony can be cutting, as evident in the “shared joke” about Piggott, Arkansas, the

home of Pauline's parents, where, as a consequence of marriage Hemingway spent some time on visits in the late 1920s, a strongly evangelical "Bible-belt" community. The atmosphere there must have been much like that in bordering Tennessee where the Scopes "monkey trial" had taken place in 1925 and which Hemingway had so derisively treated in *The Sun Also Rises*. Pound sent an undated note, probably in 1929, with, unusual in his letters, a carefully inscribed "verse":

Wots the
 Pig got?

 Wott gott
 has the

 Pig gott.

 Piggott mit uns!
 we aint got
 no monkeys.

Alongside, Dorothy added, "Ez says he hopes you are doing a perfectly BEOOTTFUL novel on the passing of the monkey" (undated).

In the 1930s they remained friendly, Hemingway often expressing publicly his regard for Pound as a writer, the latter acutely aware of the other's fame and several times seeking some assistance for his personal and professional projects on that basis, although never financial aid. In early 1933 he responded to one such offer, "Me earnin capacity still remarkably low, but credit still good at the eat-house. Thanks all the same" (Stock 306). Pound's political views, however, began to have a greater impact on their relationship. When Hemingway commented disparagingly on Fascism, Pound retorted that he was "all wet" (Stock 306). The two friends were last together in Paris in 1934. Joyce,

who was to have dinner with Pound, asked Hemingway to join them because he was convinced their friend was “mad” and he was “genuinely frightened” of him. Hemingway reported that Pound spoke “very erratically” throughout the evening, talking of nothing except politics. Even so, he continued to communicate with his old friend, Pound asking, “erratically” enough, for Hemingway’s aid in getting a hearing in Washington as a member of President Roosevelt’s Brain Trust (Stock 321). In the face of this and other wild notions, Hemingway seems to have maintained a caring if reserved equanimity.

With the War, however, and Pound’s broadcasts from Rome, Hemingway more acutely than most came to realize his friend’s peril. In 1943 he wrote MacLeish that he had been thinking about “our old pal” and asked that copies of the broadcasts be sent to him in Cuba. Since they might eventually be called to testify, they should know what they are talking about (544). Then, and later, he maintained that the only way to protect him was on a “pathological” basis. MacLeish could count on him “for anything an honest man might do.” Although Pound “deserves punishment and disgrace He should not be hanged. . . .” (548). Whether this was the only way to keep him from being “hanged” there is no way of knowing. What is certain, however, is his continuing support for him not only as an old friend but as a great American poet.

In 1951 with Pound imprisoned for so many years already, some supporters began to push for him to be released. Hemingway wrote to D. D. Paige in opposition, citing the American political attitudes that would still place him in jeopardy. “Please do not think my heart is cold toward Ezra when I try to make my brain as cold as possible in considering his situation.” On the same day he wrote warmly to Dorothy Pound, enclosing his letter to Paige. “It is exactly what I think of the situation today.” And he asks

her to congratulate “Ezra” on the Bollingen Prize as well as to tell him “how much I admire what he has written since he has been in trouble” (739-42).

As noted, when Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954 he said publicly that it should have gone to Pound. In July 1956 he wrote to Pound saying as much and that he was forwarding his Nobel medal to him because “you are our greatest living poet; a small distinction but your own.” He enclosed a check for \$1,000, but Pound replied that he didn’t need the money; he would encase it in plexiglass for a paperweight (Hemingway 864-65; Stock 450).

In June 1957 Hemingway was in contact with both MacLeish and Robert Frost in connection with what was now a joint effort to secure the release, an effort which Frost had joined belatedly and with some reluctance, although he was given most of the credit at the time; and he was helpful with the Republican Party powerbrokers of the era. But there is convincing evidence that Hemingway played a major role in marshalling forces in Pound’s behalf. After the April release in 1958 Hemingway wrote “Muy Querido Maestro Ex Lunacy,” saying that he was sending a check as he had guaranteed the Attorney General. Again, Pound said he didn’t need it. More significantly, the letter repeats a pledge made in a letter to Allen Tate in the 1940s, that if it came to “any question of your being hanged I would get up on the gallows and make clear that I should be hanged with you.” It evokes a rather macabre scene, yet there is a suggestion of the outlandish that is almost humorous, as Hemingway wryly acknowledges: “it was not a practical project anyway due to logistics.” But for Hemingway to dig up the proposal from his memory and repeat it to his friend some 15 years later indicates its significance for him – and for Pound as well, he must have thought. Pound surely would have gotten the “joke,” given his thorough knowledge of and hand in Hem’s early stories,

particularly his insistence on the “hanging” in Chapter XV of *in our time* as noted above. Hemingway is deftly offering a tribute to his friend, who is also a great poet, in his time of “troubles,” an instance of what has been called Hemingway’s non-religious use of religious symbolism. In his 1926 playlet “Today is Friday,” a Roman soldier is discussing the Crucifixion in a bar afterwards, saying that Christ “was pretty good in there today,” that it hadn’t been his role to avoid his sentence, even if he had had the power. The soldier continues, “Anytime you show me one that doesn’t want to get down off the cross when the time comes – when the time comes I mean – I’ll climb right up with him.” If Pound’s “time” had come to that, Hemingway wanted him to know that his belief in his friend had remained firm. More directly, Hemingway adds, “I stayed with you to the limits of my ability and intelligence . . . always” (883). It is intriguing in this connection that Hemingway might have known and remembered, perhaps through Dorothy with whom he had an affectionate friendship, that in the London years Pound as the young poet was thought to have had a Christ-like – a “cynical Christ” – aspect (Carpenter 130).

Almost immediately Pound, now living at Brunnenburg with his daughter, responded, asking the Hemingways “to drop in fer a week or two” (Stock 450-51); but Hemingway was on another course that would soon involve his own “pathology,” as his suicide three years later may suggest. Pound’s nurse, thinking he knew of the death, mentioned it, and Pound always an American, always an expatriate, implacably set against what he considered the inimical forces confronting the artist in his native land, went into a terrible tantrum, shouting that “American writers are all doomed and the USA destroys them all, especially the best of them” (Carpenter 875), his fulmination a final testimony to the depth of the regard with which he held his friend, “the

finest prose stylist in the world,” “climbing up,” in the phrase from “Today is Friday,” to stand with another great artist when his “time” had ultimately come.

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