

On the Early Letters of Ernest Hemingway

Teasing, Typewriting, Editing

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway has rarely seemed a reliable pen pal—not, in the main, through any fault of his own, but because the evidence for determining any such identity has been hard to assemble. In 2011, Sandra Spanier and Robert W. Trogdon published the first volume of Hemingway's collected letters, and in doing so prompted a reevaluation of his epistolary habit; one that requires careful editing and close textual scrutiny. Taking the first volume of the new Letters as a case study, this article offers an interpretative approach to matters of textuality, typographic expression, and mechanical accident that lie at the heart of Hemingway's early life-writing.

IN MARCH 1924 A COLLECTION OF PROSE VIGNETTES APPEARED among the spring offerings of Shakespeare and Company on the rue de l'Odéon in Paris. The slim, snappily dressed volume, *in our time*, bore the name of Ernest Hemingway, and it provided the final installment of “An Inquest into the State of Contemporary English Prose”, a series devised by the bookshop's resident handyman, Ezra Pound.¹ Part of Pound's sojourn in the 6th arrondissement was spent assembling furniture, as well as constructing literary careers, though it is hard to say exactly what hand *il miglior fab-*

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1. *in our time* was published by the Three Mountains Press. It is reprinted in HEMINGWAY 1995.

bro had in the making or mending of *in our time*.² Readers of the “Inquest” series could expect to hear “the truth about *moeurs contemporaines*”, Pound declared, “without fake, melodrama, conventional ending” (1923, 62).³ Editors, as Pound must have known, are obliged to lay down the law, but there appears in this decree a curious hint of honesty; almost, you might say, a touch of earnestness.

At the centre of *in our time* is a piece that lampoons precisely the faults of artifice and convention to which Pound refers in his brief. Chapter 10 tells the abbreviated love story of an injured (nameless) soldier and Ag, a nurse stationed in Milan. The romance flourishes, in keeping with Pound’s probing theme, under thorough examination:

When they operated on him she prepared him for the operating table, and they had a joke about friend or enema. He went under the anaesthetic holding tight on to himself so that he would not blab about anything during the silly, talky time. (1995, 24)

Uniquely among the longer pieces of *in our time*, chapter 10 is bereft of conversation. The closest we come to hearing the lovers express themselves are moments, like this one, of narratological slippage—brief sputters of free indirect style—as when the intimate joke (“friend or enema”) is snatched by the story’s third-party, or the soldier’s fear of the “silly, talky time” (an anxiety he hopes to hush up) quivers through the narrative voice. Such moments have been felt in Hemingway’s work to reveal an irony of consciousness, an impression that the observing mind has been tinged or, in one critic’s view, “flavour[ed]” by the speech events and innermost thoughts of the characters in question (LAMB 2010, 88). In chapter 10, this blending of voices also raises questions as to how, and at what cost to understanding, private acts of communication go awry:

2. The best attempt to do so remains COHEN 2005.
3. Pound’s *Indiscretions; or, Une Revue de Deux Mondes* had first appeared in *The New Age*, in twelve parts, from May to August 1920. It was published in book form in 1923 by the Three Mountains Press, and was intended as a foreword to the so-called “Inquest” series. In addition to *in our time*, the series comprised: Ford Madox Ford, *Women and Men*; B. C. Windeler, *Elimus*; William Carlos Williams, *The Great American Novel*; and B. M. G. Adams, *England*. Pound had applied the slogan “*moeurs contemporaines*” to a sequence of poems in *The Little Review* in May 1918 (POUND 1918).

Ag wrote him many letters that he never got until after the armistice. Fifteen came in a bunch and he sorted them by the dates and read them all straight through. They were about the hospital, and how much she loved him and how it was impossible to get along without him and how terrible it was missing him at night. (1995, 24)

The belated reception of Ag's *billets-doux* is the first sign that something is amiss. Here, again, the account is flecked with purple patches: the throb of "how . . . how . . . how", the "impossible" and "terrible" qualities of estrangement. In more ways than one, the nurse's letters blunder in the post, and in doing so seem to portend the conclusion of her last dispatch: the news that "theirs had been only a boy and girl affair", and that she is to marry an Italian (1995, 25). The consolations of this final, reported letter ("She loved him as always. . . She knew it was for the best") sound at once hollow and peculiarly embodied, as if wise to the paper-thin reality of something received in the post, an ephemeral comfort. In their partial reconstruction by the narrator, the letters of chapter 10 denote not stable written records, but a volatile kind of textuality, fragmentary and skewed. Little wonder, as we learn with the story's final jilt, that "Ag never got an answer to her letter".

There are many ways and places one could begin an assessment of Hemingway's early correspondence. Like the brief love affair of chapter 10, Hemingway's European novels witness a keen epistolary habit, with their leisurely letters and pithy telegrams. For Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), a laconic memo says it all ("*Vengo Jueves Cohn*" [2004, 111]), and yet Barnes remains a diligent correspondent, sensitive to the effect of a good letterhead: "They were not very good letters", he admits in chapter 6, reminded of a morning spent at the hotel writing desk, "but I hoped their being on Crillon stationery would help them" (36).⁴ Then there's Ralph Williams, a man in love and an "idealist" to boot, who spends one early tale beating out a letter on his office typewriter. For him, as for Barnes, corresponding is just another "means of talking" ("Portrait of the Idealist in Love" [1995, 766]). Such characters certainly belong in Hemingway's fiction to a dense network of exchange, in which banker's drafts, greetings cards, and *billets-doux* must compete for attention, crossing as they do in the mail, cluttering the fine interstice between work and pleasure. What I want to

4. Something of Barnes's epistolary routine is captured in Hannah Sullivan's recent *The Work of Revision*, which traces Barnes's "laconic" mood back to the novel's first draft (2013, 115–16). See also CIRINO 2012, 89.

consider in this essay, however, is the fragility of postal traffic; a fragility to which the narrator of *in our time* gives voice, and one that can be heard between the lines of Hemingway's collected letters. My broader purpose, then, is to characterize the textual condition of his correspondence as a mode of oblique historiography, which is underwritten and frequently disrupted by the clatter of typographic procedure. A mixture of ventriloquism and confession, Hemingway's early letters participate in the sort of vocal sport that requires careful editing and imaginative critical reading.

* * * *

For those familiar with the details of Hemingway's young adult life, the story of Ag and the soldier in chapter 10 signifies an important bit of baggage. In July 1918, a month after arriving in Europe as a Red Cross volunteer, Hemingway was wounded and taken to a hospital in Milan, where he met Agnes von Kurowsky. The following romance would crop up in various guises throughout his oeuvre, in fabular snapshots, character sketches, and in the extended form of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).⁵ Inasmuch as it sheds new light on the origins of the relationship, the inaugural volume of the collected letters (HEMINGWAY 2011) is an alluring prospect. No measure of solid, investigative editing can make amends for the disappearance of the writer's letters to Kurowsky, of course: hopes of locating the "whole bushel of letters" mentioned by the nurse in a surviving missive have long since been abandoned.⁶ And yet there are readers who will look on the *Letters* as a particularly transparent kind of life-writing, rich with opportunities for studying the defining episodes of Papa Hemingway's story. Reading another person's letters involves a certain "indiscretion", as Anne Stillman remarks (2010, 370), and such indiscretion has its risks for interpretation. Biographical studies incline to the superlatives of lived experience, and so the temptation in this case might be to rank the *Letters* according to the received truths of Hemingway's young adulthood—encouraged, for instance, by the notion that "[t]he most influential woman in Hemingway's life, apart from his mother, was Agnes von Kurowsky" (MEYERS 1986, 41).⁷ Those who

5. Chapter 10 became, in the New York edition (*In Our Time*), "A Very Short Story", and Ag's name was changed to Luz.
6. See VILLARD and NAGEL 1989, 162. Sandra Spanier, the General Editor of the *Letters*, follows Villard and Nagel in conjecturing that Kurowsky was forced to burn Hemingway's letters (HEMINGWAY 2011, xxiii).
7. WAGNER-MARTIN 2007 covers much of the same ground, though her discussion of Kurowsky and Grace Hall Hemingway is based in part on the psychiatric

hope to corroborate such claims are unlikely to feel disappointed by the crises and plot developments of the early correspondence.

Hemingway has rarely seemed a reliable pen pal, not through any fault of his own, but because the evidence for determining any such identity has been hard to assemble. Fewer than half of the letters in the first volume of the new collected edition have appeared in print before, most of them in Carlos Baker's weighty *Selected Letters* (1981).⁸ A scholarly edition has long been needed, but the question now, as Anthony Burgess wondered of the *Selected Letters*, is whether the story encoded in the correspondence stands up to critical scrutiny, or whether we'd simply prefer "another, real book".⁹ There are various ways one could read Sandra Spanier and Robert W. Trogdon's edition—like an uncensored memoir, like a novel lost in the post—but the most illuminating efforts of reception, I think, will be those that seek, in keeping with the mixed messages of *in our time's* chapter 10, to dwell on the accidents and minor feats of epistolary sense-making. The opportunities for doing so bear interestingly upon the task of shadowing the apprentice Hemingway, who starts the volume as he means to go on, hooking fish, playing rough, and telling tales. These are the sorts of small, almost symbolic acts of recreation that pepper the *Letters*, though it is not always easy to tell apart social pursuits from professional assignments, as when angling trout helps to pay the bills, or boozing with the Chicago Cubs baseball team prompts a newspaper report. "Drinks purchased to get a story are by order of the boss called car fare", he advises his father in 1918 (2011, 90), as if alert, in Andrew O'Hagan's words, to the ways a vermouth or soda could fortify his early brand of "myth-making" (2012, 7).

Numerous letters do drip with a career-minded *eau de vie*, but there is more to this correspondence than hard liquor. The years 1907–1922 were marked by regular, often sobering upheaval. After a childhood of journeying between the suburbs of Chicago and Walloon Lake in Michigan, Hemingway settled in Kansas City in late 1917, having abandoned life on his family's farm for a job at the *Kansas City Star* as a cub reporter. Thoughts of enlisting soon began to distract the young journalist, and in May 1918 he was on his way to Bordeaux, looking "a million dollars" in

profiling undertaken by YALOM and YALOM 1971.

8. The other letters to have appeared before are scattered mostly between the following volumes: SANFORD 1999; GRIFFIN 1985; and VILLARD and NAGEL 1989.
9. "I have always said that I could do without Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More* or *Love's Labour's Found* if I could see one of his laundry lists, let alone a yearning epistle to Mistress Hathaway" (BURGESS 1981, 65).

his military finery, and primed for “a wonderful time” on the Italian Front (2011, 97–98). Despite a gap-yearish plan to “bum” around the continent, Hemingway spent little more than six months away from home, and he would only embark on peacetime Europe after a return to Chicago and marriage to his first wife, Hadley Richardson, with whom he sailed to Le Havre in the winter of 1921.

Grand romantic gestures come thick and fast in his early correspondence, but so too do pranks and tiny tricks of voice. Scores of letters in the second half of the volume swagger in borrowed tongues, puffed up with bits of French, Italian, Spanish, and German, which are frequently misspelt, and so come to rest in Hemingway’s vocabulary like slightly tacky souvenirs. Language switching and leaps of register often separate the hero from the pack, it’s true: think of Robert Jordan’s grasp of Spanish slang in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), or of Hemingway’s own cocktail of parlour and gutter French in *A Moveable Feast* (1964). But the distinctive thing about these letters is their indulgence in a type of self-taught language play, which denotes an urge to cloak the Midwestern twang in a new textual habit:

On pended gknees I peg your bardun vor the ladness of this legger. Bud a gombination of monthly examinachugs and Bad goldt are my eggscuse, or to quote “them immortal lines,” the brooks are ruggig—also my gnose. (2011, 26)

Biographers have noted Hemingway’s susceptibility to head colds and tonsillitis, though few have sensed, as this letter seems to, the chatty possibilities of the sickbed. Bunged up and teasingly forlorn, Hemingway’s note to a childhood friend asks to be pardoned, even as it makes light of its infirmities. Having commenced on “pended gknees”, the “legger” rises to do its legwork, and snuffles from apology into performance, clearing its head just enough to think of “Strawberries”, a poem by Dora Read Goodale.¹⁰ Streaming nose and running brook congeal into a joke, and yet the impression here, as in other, more ordinary letters, is one of barely suppressed excitement; a feeling that the boy Hemingway (stricken by “ladness”) has something serious to say about the health of textual discourse.

10. “When the brooks are running over, / And the days are bright with song, / Then, from every nook and bower, / Peeps the dainty strawberry flower” (GOODALE 1878, 155).

Written in March 1916, Hemingway's sick note is one of the 150 or so pieces that appear in the *Letters* for the first time. Many of them have quite plain things to impart, and so their substance consists partly in the way casual reportage is punctured by affectation ("really quite melior"), or lightened by colloquialism ("But seriously [John] Masefield is a whangdinger") (2011, 26). Hemingway often treads a fine line between usage and abuse, content to dawdle somewhere between the schoolroom and the street; but if in 1916 his letters seem too much taken by the wish to charm, then there are moments in his postwar communications of quieter intent, when linguistic precocity dissolves into simple understanding. "There is so much of this world we haven't seen and it is just a little while that we're here anyway", he tells a dejected friend in August 1919, before fixing on just the right word ("We are Simpatico Bill") to bolster the thought (2011, 201). Sometimes, as Hemingway knew, there were other ways besides those of *machismo* braggery to seal a deal.

It is tempting in this respect to see a shift of consciousness in Hemingway's correspondence; a maturation of style brought on by his departure for Europe, and one that was marked indelibly by a conflict he could not bear to pass up. The comings and goings of war appear to transmute smoothly into the experiential benchmarks of his early writing career, but to acknowledge them as such is to overlook subtler occasions for innovation, and to submit too easily to the idea that letter writing is merely about getting information across. Often it is, of course, but that should not discourage us from wanting to question how the stuff of nondescript living finds its way into lettered form. Hemingway was the first to confess his shortcomings as a correspondent—"my letters", he owns, "are very commonplace" (2011, 329)—but in that confession there resides a less than bashful sensitivity to the matter of what "commonplace" could possibly mean, or in what sense a hurried note might accommodate the quotidian. What I want to consider now is not so much what finds expression in Hemingway's correspondence as the *way* quite ordinary things take shape. It may be that there is another style of historiography at work in these letters, a style principally concerned with the legibility of personal history, with the form and character of its day-to-day transmission.

In the autumn of 1917, shortly after starting work at the *Kansas City Star*, Hemingway took to composing most of his letters on a typewriter. He would work his way through several models on the road to literary recognition—a Royal Quiet Deluxe, an Underwood Noiseless Portable, the Halda Portable—though one gets the sense in his early correspondence that nothing ever compared to his first "chattering Corona", a gift from

Hadley in July 1921. Hemingway wrote to his sister the following month, tickled by the machine, and alive, despite the Corona's compact proportions, to its "marvelous melody" (2011, 301). So taken was he with his new, dinky companion that he thought it fit for a poem:

MITRAILLIATRICE

The mills of the gods grind slowly;
 But this mill
 Chatters in mechanical staccato.
 Ugly short infantry of the mind,
 Advancing over difficult terrain,
 Make this Corona
 Their mitrailleuse.

(HEMINGWAY 1979, 37)¹¹

As lightweight as the Corona is portable, this poem sounds less hefty than it should, given the gear it carries; a sense conveyed by its appropriation of a French machine gun—"mitrailleuse"—which somehow softens its parting shot. The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Hemingway with the first application of "shot" as a figurative term for the ruin of a feeling or the destruction of a thing: the impression that all is "shot to hell" originates towards the end of *The Sun Also Rises* (2004, 209), as Barnes hastens from San Sebastian to Madrid, turning from one lost cause to another.¹² Barnes's is not a new thought, of course, and to read Hemingway's early verse is to see by the same token a mind beaten in action. The action of "Mitrailliatrice" is twofold, as the bullet-sputter of the poem's title finds an analogue in the action of the Corona; no longer a fount of melody, but one of curt, articulatory force—something like the snare drumming of Carl Nielsen's Fifth

11. "Mitrailliatrice" first appeared in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 2.4 (1923): 193. The title of the poem was changed, in keeping with the Italian, to "Mitraigliatrice" when it was collected in *Three Stories & Ten Poems* (1923). The version printed here is taken from *88 Poems* © 1979. Printed with the permission of the Ernest Hemingway Foundation.
12. *OED*: 4c. "In fig. phr. *shot through* (also *shot to hell* or *pieces*), in a state of ruin or collapse. *colloq.* (chiefly U.S.)." [Accessed 5 December 2013.] In fact, it's probable that Hemingway borrowed the idiom from Hadley, who used it—"I was shot to pieces myself"—in a letter to him in December 1920, for which see DILIBERTO 1992, 46.

Symphony—which “[c]hatters in mechanical staccato”.¹³ Hemingway had noted as early as 1918 the mingling of artillery and mechanized typography—the flight of bullets through “bulletins” (HEMINGWAY 1970, 91), and the “steady typewriter clatter” of machine gun fire (43). But it was not until 1922, perhaps, with a Corona to hand, that Hemingway felt equipped to reproduce something that had, for so many, become run of the mill.

Literary production often seemed a vicious pursuit in the golden days of standardized typewriting. “That machine was a wonder”, recalls Jack London in *John Barleycorn* (1913), nostalgic for his “infernal” Blickensderfer: “I could weep now as I recollect my wrestlings with it” (2009, 134).¹⁴ Pitted against a machine that “never does the same thing in the same way twice”, the typist in *John Barleycorn* finds himself “blistered” and “a-weary” (135), at war with the proverbial loose cannon. For Martin Heidegger, pondering his handicraft some years later, the typewriter would strike a blow at ontology itself:

The essential correlation of the hand and the word as the essential distinguishing mark of man is revealed in the fact that the hand indicates and by indicating discloses what was concealed, and thereby marks off, and while marking off forms the indicating marks into formations. (1992, 84)

Handwriting, it seems, has to do with feeling inscribed—it indicates, in essence, “a decision about the comportment of man to beings”—and so to withdraw the hand from the act of writing in favour of operating a typewriter is to transform, or rupture, the question of Being. Heidegger goes about his argument playfully, alive to the possibility of proceeding “in good hands”, and conscious, in ways that anticipate his late work on machine culture, of the typewriter as a mechanism of clouding “obtrusiveness” (84–85). Put simply, “[t]he typewriter makes everyone look the same”, and this is the idea one tends to find reiterated in more recent media histories; the thought, further impressed by the example of Friedrich Nietzsche, that somewhere along the line “the grace of a human subject” must bear the brunt of typographic replication (KITTLER 1999, 203–04).

13. Premiered in early 1922, the first movement of Nielsen’s Symphony No. 5 (op. 50, FS 97) features what to many ears smacks of gunfire—an effect achieved on the snare drum.
14. For more on typewriting as a mode of hand-to-hand combat, see BODDY 2008, 145, 217.

Hemingway was wise to the threat of mechanical writing, and he was quick to blame his tools. “[P]ardon the rotten typer”, he implored his mother one January evening in 1921, “— it’s a new one and stiff as a frozen whisker” (2011, 264). While swift to turn a gaffe into a gag, Hemingway frequently draws attention to his poor typing, to the “thousands of errata” triggered by the “all-finger” touch system (2011, 286). Usually the errors are small, but the fact that we have the opportunity to evaluate them at all is one of the distinctions of the new collected letters. Compare, for example, the following passages (the first from Baker’s edition, the second from Spanier and Trogdon’s):

Somewhere on les briny
Dear Folks:

Well we are approaching our port of debarkation and are entering the widely known submarine zone so I will get this epistle off so you will be sure and get one any way. Very cheerful thought what aint it? This is the rottenest tub in the world and so it may be revealing a military secret to tell you. But it is absolutely. Now think what the rottenest ship in the world is and you know what I am on. We had two days of glorious weather, warm and calm, just a pleasant breeze! regular waloon lake days. Then we ran into a storm that cleared the dining rooms with great regularity. (1981, 9)

So[mew]here on les briny.
Dear Folks

Well we wre approcahing our port of deebarkation and are entering the widely known submarine zone so I will get this epistle off so you will besure and get one any way. Very cheerful thought what aint it? This is the rottenst tubin the world and so it may be revealing a military secret to tell you. But it is absolutely. Now think what the rottenest ship in the world is and you know what I am on. Wehad two days of glorious weather ! warm and calm, just a pleasant breeze ! regular waloon lake days. 5hen we ran into a storm that cleared the dining rooms with grea regularity. (2011, 107)

“[L]ike all live writing”, Hugh Kenner has said of modernist textuality, “it ingests what’s around it” (1987, 14), and there is something of that assimilative quality here. The drift of the second snippet is easily caught—its discursive meaning is not at issue—but its typos and ellipses indicate a wobbliness of self we may well expect of someone bunked up at sea, his

crack at calm articulation left almost grainy by the sense that words have begun to fragment. It may be the storm Hemingway records, or its after-effects, that play havoc with his spelling; or perhaps it's the threat of entering dangerous water that throws words together ("tubin"), as if the urgency of dispatching the epistle precludes any pause for thought. There's no time or room for doubt, it seems, since he wants his family to "besure".

Some mistakes are simply explained, as when a *w* usurps an *a*, or a finger strays onto the 5 instead of the *t*. The provenance of Christopher Latham Sholes's QWERTY keyboard design remains to this day a matter shrouded in mystery, but its logic and subtle rhythms have not changed all that much since Hemingway got the measure of his machine, and it's easy to forgive the insertions and slipups which characterize his hurried correspondence.¹⁵ Yet there are irregularities of a different kind in Hemingway's letters, like the placement of exclamation marks, which suggest a more deliberate performance. Raising a voice or sounding surprised were tricky gestures to achieve on typewriters of this period, when most machines lacked the requisite key. It is likely that the best option available to Hemingway in 1918, as one contemporary manual explains, was a three-stroke combination:¹⁶

If required, quite a number of signs not on the keyboard can be made by the combination of two particular characters —

EXCLAMATION MARK (!): Strike the single quotation mark; by means of the back-spacer return the carriage one space and strike the full-stop.

(SYLVESTER 1916, 39)

No sense of the writer's exertions is preserved in Baker's edition; no sense, indeed, that the valediction required any extra effort at all, either of mind or of dexterity, when we suspect (as Baker does himself) that letters do have something more "tangible" to offer by way of vocal presence (HEMINGWAY 1981, xx–xxi). It is the spaces which border the exclamation marks in the revised version that confirm the typist's graft. Having slipped so much already, it may be that Hemingway resolved to get his punctuation right,

15. Darren Wershler-Henry provides the best recent account of the keyboard's dynamic history in *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (2005).
16. We do not know for sure which model of typewriter accompanied Hemingway on his trip to Europe in 1918. It's possible that he took the advice of a colleague at the *Kansas City Star* and borrowed or purchased a "Baby Corona" (see MADSEN 2013, 110). As with most portable models at this time, the "Baby Corona" did not have an exclamation mark built in.

inserting an extra space (“glorious weather ! warm and calm”) so as to allow the three-stroke combination its proper force. Whatever the reason for such idiosyncrasies, a comparison of these typewritten voices reveals a loose end in Heidegger’s disquisition. Typewriters do *not* make everyone look the same, and nor, as Hemingway discovered on the *SS Chicago*, do they guarantee “grea regularity”. In the pressures it brings to bear on letter writing, the stowaway typewriter reveals Hemingway in one of his most idiosyncratic tempers.

A good deal has happened since Baker’s publication of the *Selected Letters* to change the way we think about editorial practice in general, and how the positivist instinct, in particular, sits with us when we alight on casual or private modes of writing. For the exacting reader, the question is, which of the “les briny” epistles is more watertight? The wish to present Hemingway’s letters “exactly as he wrote them” comes in Baker’s edition with the familiar caveat that “[o]bvious errors in typed letters and slips of the pen in longhand have been silently corrected” (1981, xxiii, xxv). As the new editors advise, however, Hemingway was frequently “erratic” about punctuation, “forceful” on the subject of corrections, and inclined to “improvise” as the mood or situation took him, such that any urge to amend “obvious” errors in the correspondence must be considered a dubious pursuit (2011, xli–xliii). And although Spanier and Trogdon go in for some amendments of their own—the improvised exclamation mark is noted rather than reproduced—the guiding principle of their edition is to register the author’s “carelessness or breathlessness”, and so to steer clear of the sorts of “arbitrary logic or false clarity” we find imposed in less meticulous editions.

Editing is complex and complicating, an act of interpretation that has to feel at ease with the idea that its findings may prove provisional—the odd conviction that things could have been different. “Editing then is not for the faint of heart” (SCHULZE 2007, 124), and yet a good edition reads, as this one does, like an open love letter, as much to the process of editorial tending as to the readers who are inclined to consider that process a means of access to the life beyond the script. The condition so often implied by Spanier and Trogdon’s edition is that script and life are conterminous, that the two would be difficult to separate, as if the moments Hemingway felt most alive in even his early years were those in which the shapes of words seemed most to matter. Fan mail or business note, longhand or typeface—Hemingway’s writing practices warrant, like any handicraft, a special kind of scrutiny. “How feelings get done in language”, as Simon Jarvis has said, “travels right through to the very serifs, uprights and swashes

of its written, printed, drawn or carved or painted letter forms” (2011, 234); and if we believe this, then the real dope of a book like the *Letters* is to be found between its headline stories, in the mishaps and kicks of smaller textual events. This is not to ignore, in Hemingway’s words, “the making of large gobs of history” (2011, 120), but rather to apportion time and energy to the material aspects of historiography, to the glyphic feel of life-writing.

The implications of this proposition should and do extend beyond the borders of Hemingway’s writing. Playing with *Pale Fire*, Andrew Ferguson has shown in the pages of this journal the value of reading Vladimir Nabokov with an eye for the erroneous, and of taking his bumpy textures seriously. As Ferguson remarks, intrigued by what it might mean to seek out Nabokov’s “glitches”: “The greatest revelations may come not from any personal vision or sage counsel, but through errors: a typo here, a misreading there leading to wild flights of imaginative and critical play” (2013, 114). The hermeneutic stakes are rather different for an experimental novel, of course, but this should not deter us from exercising the same sort of playfulness—imaginative but strictly refereed—when confronted with a bunch of letters. Determined, no doubt, to avoid the critical reaction which greeted the poor transcription of Robert Frost’s *Notebooks* in 2007, the present editors of Frost’s new collected *Letters* sound confident about their chosen occupation.¹⁷ With Frost’s prose and jottings already in the public domain, the editors advise, “the *Letters of Robert Frost* advances significantly the process of bringing all Frost primary material into accessible print” (2014, vii). What is meant, one wonders, by that strange conjunction, “accessible print”? Easy to lay your hands on, certainly, and presented in a way that will not trouble the scholarly reader unduly as she comes “to know Robert Frost anew” (xi). But consider the following passage, included in the volume’s “Editorial Principles”:

the disposition of the text on the pages of Frost’s manuscript and type-script letters is never a significant feature of their meaning. In view of this, we have produced not type facsimiles but clean transcripts of the letters. We concentrate entirely on the *intended* content of the original. When Frost makes a correction in a letter, he typically does so by striking out a word and continuing, or by striking out a word or phrase and inserting a correction interlinearly. Our practice (unless special circum-

17. James Sitar (2007) was among the first to notice the high frequency of transcription errors in the Belknap edition of Frost’s *Notebooks*.

stances apply) is to produce the single text that any corrections present in the document plainly require. (xviii–xix: italics in original)

The editors may be right to say that the “meaning” of Frost’s letters is never bound up substantively with the “disposition of the text”—his *mise en page* is “traditional”, we’re told—but who’s to say what Frost “intended”, or in what ways the process of self-correction may (or may not) have influenced the mind at work? In order to answer such questions, it is necessary that the very dregs of written practice—the insertions and repetitions, the strikeouts, the unconscious but telling glitches—are allowed to speak for themselves, untouched by well-meaning editorial hands. Some “inconsistencies” of Frost’s spelling and punctuation have been “respected”, it must be said, although this is only likely to heighten one’s sense that other curiosities have been wiped out in the name of “silent correction” (xix). There are good practical and economic grounds for producing an edition of this sort, but it’s difficult not to feel suspicious about that familiar sleight of hand—“(unless special circumstances apply)” —when you feel sure that the job of establishing what’s “special” and what’s not is interpretative territory, and a matter of vital importance to those who consider the subtlest rewording or slippage a reason to sit up and take notice. Regrettable though it may be to receive a “cramped and cryptic” postcard, as Frost did one day in April 1919, there’s always something to say about “messy” correspondence (668).

My purpose in this essay has been to show what a difference a letter can make. The importance to Hemingway studies of the new collected Letters is hard to overstate, its revelations and bigger personalities unlikely to pass without comment and explanation. That we find ourselves now with fresh information about Hemingway’s association with Gertrude Stein is the sort of red-letter news critics are eager to receive.¹⁸ But some of the rewards of this first volume, in the end, arrive like unexpected gifts:

Your box came in the nick of time. Those sox that Grandmother sent me were great. I will write her right away and thank her for them. I woke up to hear the telephone ring and it was the boss telling me that their was a big fire at 18th and Holmes street and that on my way down to the office to go over there and get a story on it. Well I went and got tge yarn

18. A letter dated 14 February 1922 (2011, 327–29) indicates that Hemingway had begun to visit and consult Stein at least a month earlier than biographers have hitherto supposed.

and telephoned for a photographer and got soaked all through my shoes in the icy water and then came into the office and there were my warm wool sox that I had put in my locker the night before. (2011, 78)

On the evidence of his box of cookies and winter sox, Hemingway had good cause to stay in touch, though it is perhaps the inattentions of this letter—happily preserved, most of them innocent—which speak for his gratitude. Did he notice, in his hurry to reply, the infelicity of “their” or the slip of “tge”? And what of those mistaken woollies? Hemingway would refer a few months later to his government-issued “woolen socks” (2011, 97), but here he opts for the sporty variety, the implication being that these “sox” have something of his home team about them, the Chicago White Sox, who had just won the World Series that winter.¹⁹ Clearly Hemingway has sox on the brain, from the moment of his hotfooting it into the cold January night, to the chance of gathering “yarn” for another story. The letter has its snags, of form and thought, but it is because (and not in spite) of them that the message seems to carry. In his barely punctuated haste, the typist gets his feelings “done” in language, and in doing so finds his feet:

Well I beat it into the room where such things are done and changed my soaked, froze cotton ones into the warm wool jazzy ones and was ready to step forth among them.

Love
Ernie.

University of Cambridge

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19. After a couple of shaky mid-series games against the New York Giants, the White Sox clinched the World Championship on 15 October 1917, with a final series score of 6–4.

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