

## CHAPTER 4

### *Letters*

*Sandra Spanier*

On September 18, 1918, Ernest Hemingway's father wrote from Oak Park, Illinois to his nineteen-year-old son, a volunteer Red Cross ambulance driver then convalescing from war wounds in Italy: "Your wonderfull and long letter of description dated Milan Aug 18th received yesterday. It gives us a great picture of your tragic experiences and marvelous deliverance."<sup>1</sup> The same day, Hemingway's uncle wrote from Kansas City that his own family had "been more than glad to see some of the letters which you wrote to your people in Oak Park" and urged, "please write us one of your best and most original letters as we should be happy to learn all about what you are going through and how you are coming along" (JFK). This provoked the young Hemingway to complain to his parents, "Uncle Ty writes and asks me to write a 'nice original letter,' to him. Wonder who the devil he thinks I crib my stuff from" (*Letters* I 160).

Even as a young man, Hemingway was known as a colorful correspondent, his letters eagerly anticipated and circulated among family and friends. They were deemed worthy not only of preservation in the multiple scrapbooks that his mother compiled for each of her six children, but worthy of publication as early as 1918. His August 18 letter home from the American Red Cross Hospital in Milan, a vivid account of his wounding during a mortar shelling on the Piave front, appeared in his hometown newspaper, *Oak Leaves*, on October 5, 1918 ("Wounded 227 Times") and again in the October 23 *Chicago Evening Post*. Nor was that the first of Hemingway's missives to see print. The July 14, 1918 *Kansas City Star* ran excerpts from two postcards Hemingway had sent from Milan in June to his former newsroom colleagues, reporting that he was heading to the front the next day (*Letters* I 112). The postcards arrived at the *Star* on the same day as the news of his wounding.

Although Hemingway had multitudes of correspondents during his lifetime, he was, according to his son Patrick Hemingway, "always conscious of the person he was writing to, and he kept a sort of going dialog

with them about the things they had in common.”<sup>22</sup> Hemingway was a natural rhetorician, ever attentive to his audience, and his letters capture the unique flavor of each of his many and varied relationships. His correspondents included key figures of his times – writers, painters, musicians, critics, publishers, editors, movie stars, and the occasional political figure. Among them were Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish, Sara and Gerald Murphy, William Faulkner, George Antheil, Malcolm Cowley, Maxwell Perkins, the Charles Scribners, Marlene Dietrich, and President John F. Kennedy. Hemingway corresponded prolifically, too, with a vast array of other friends and with family members, as well as responding to letters that arrived unsolicited. Hemingway’s some six thousand letters located to date are directed to more than nineteen hundred correspondents. Doubtless he wrote to many more whose letters no longer survive or have yet to be discovered.

Hemingway relished the contact of letters and solicited them eagerly. In October 1923, marooned in Toronto after having lived nearly two years in Europe amid the expatriate avant-garde, he beseeched Pound, “For Gawd sake keep on writing me. Yr. letters are life preservers” (*SL* 96). He also loved exchanging confidences and was always hungry for gossip. “Well Kid let me slip you an ear full,” he began a letter to his sister Marcelline in 1918 (*Letters* I 88). “Give me all the dope on whats going on – Huh?” he wrote in 1921 to Grace Quinlan, a teenaged friend in Petoskey, Michigan (*Letters* I 291). “Write to me and tell me all the dirt,” he urged Fitzgerald in 1926 (*SL* 232).

Letters provided the comfort of conversation, even if one-sided, with those Hemingway loved and missed. During his marriage to Martha Gellhorn, when she was away on assignment for *Collier’s* magazine, he wrote long, chatty letters from their Cuban home about the cats, the servants, the state of the property, the state of his own writing, and what he, his friends, and his visiting sons were doing in her absence. “Thinks this about washes up the local news. I love you very much Pickly,” he wrote on September 1, 1942, while she was cruising the Caribbean in a thirty-foot potato boat for a series of articles on German activities in the area. “For long long time had never liked to write letters but like to write them to you” (JFK).

Hemingway’s letters are unguarded and unpolished, written only for the day and the hour and the person addressed. “Remember Ford Madox Hueffer telling me one time that a writer should write every letter with a view to it being published for posterity,” he wrote to Harvey Breit on January 17, 1951, “and I asked him if it wouldn’t be simpler if we wrote

letters just as a straight means of communication and kept no carbons.”<sup>3</sup> Patrick Hemingway likened a writer to a pope, who does a lot of talking in ordinary life, but when he speaks *ex cathedra* – “from the chair” – becomes godlike and his words regarded as infallible. It is in his father’s letters, he said, that “you see more of him and less of the Great Writer. You get a little more insight into what he was as a person, and that’s always interesting to people because they don’t really want to deal with gods. They respect good work, but they also want to know how they felt about ham and eggs and the French or whatever, you know.”

Hemingway always drew a clear distinction between writing letters and writing for keeps. He liked to write letters, he told Fitzgerald in 1925, “because it’s such a swell way to keep from working and yet feel you’ve done something” (*SL* 166). Of Gertrude Stein’s voluminous outpourings that she wished to see published unrevised, he remarked to Bernard Berenson on May 4, 1953, “She wrote every day as we sometimes write letters to avoid biting on the nail and working.”<sup>4</sup> A letter dated October 11, 1955 to Scribner’s editor Wallace Meyer even reveals Hemingway’s wariness that letter writing could jinx his literary output: “Am sorry not to handle this typewriter better but do not want to write letters on my lucky typewriter when it is going good.”<sup>5</sup>

Apologies for the quality and quantity of his letters are a frequent refrain. But Hemingway’s writing priorities were clear. During his early artistic apprenticeship in Paris, while earning a living at journalism, he apologized to his mother for his “dull letters,” but explained, “I get such full expression in my articles and the other work I am doing that I am quite pumped out and exhausted from a writing stand point and so my letters are very commonplace. If I wrote nothing but letters all of that would go into them” (*Letters* I 329). In 1936 he struck the same chord in his final letter to a young writer with whom he had corresponded generously over several months. “I dont write letters,” he declared (inaccurately): “When I finish my work, if I have worked well, I am too pooped.”<sup>6</sup>

Receiving the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) brought a deluge of correspondence that he called “wholly destructive and damaging to work,” and he grouched to Princeton scholar Carlos Baker on June 11, 1953, “it is rough when people expect you to answer letters promptly or else be considered a son of a bitch” (Stanford). Winning the Nobel Prize in 1954 only exacerbated the problem for one trained early and well by his Oak Park parents in the habit and etiquette of correspondence. In a letter dated October 11, 1955, he half facetiously asked Meyer at Scribner’s for help in handling the letters he received from “hundreds of kids who

in English have to choose an author and write about him in a theme.” Perhaps, Hemingway suggested, Scribner’s could have a polite form letter to send in response to such inquiries, along with a piece of metal extracted from his skull as a small token of his appreciation of their interest, and a proof sheet or brochure of “some nonsense” written about him by someone else, “and I would not have the un-answered letter on my conscience” (PUL).

Hemingway’s letters were commodities as early as 1930, when a group of them written to *This Quarter* editor Ernest Walsh was offered for sale by a London bookshop. Scribner’s bought them to get them off the market. What galled Hemingway was not only the violation of privacy, but also that others could reap profits from the words he had set to paper. He would like to keep his letters to Walsh, he told Max Perkins, “and will publish them and his sometime when we’re all broke” (SL 321).

As Hemingway’s renown and influence continued to expand, biographers and literary scholars were eager to draw upon the contents of Hemingway letters for the benefit of their own work. He permitted Arthur Mizener to quote from his letters to Fitzgerald in *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951), the first biography of his old friend, but in hindsight he grew resentful. In an October 30, 1951 letter to Dos Passos, he disparaged “the thesis writers and the ghouls like Mizener” and others who wanted to “play buzzards on me while I’m still alive.”<sup>7</sup> The next year, to Charles A. Fenton, then writing a Yale dissertation that would culminate in the first published Hemingway biography, *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years* (1954), he expressed frustration at the drain of their correspondence on his time and energy. “Any man’s autobiography is his own property. He should have the choice of deciding whether he chooses to write it or not. But he should certainly not feed it piece-meal into letters for another man to use” (SL 777).

Hemingway claimed he never wanted his letters to be published and in 1958 typed out a directive to his executors to be opened upon his death, saying, “It is my wish that none of the letters written by me during my lifetime shall be published. Accordingly, I hereby request and direct you not to publish, or consent to the publication by others, of any such letters.”<sup>8</sup> However, during his lifetime he had consented to the publication of a handful of his letters, in part or in full, including to Stein, Edmund Wilson, his Italian and German publishers, and the Oak Park Public Library on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary.<sup>9</sup> And he wrote others expressly for publication – among them letters to the editor, book jacket blurbs, a 1939 public letter on behalf of the American Committee for

the Protection of the Foreign Born, a 1954 cabled statement for the *Life* magazine obituary of his friend Robert Capa, and occasional commercial endorsements, including for Parker Pens, Ballantine's Ale, and Pan American Airlines.<sup>10</sup>

After Hemingway's death, a trickle of additional letters saw print, and a number of scholars began to call for a volume of collected letters. In 1978, E. R. Hagemann counted approximately eighty-three thousand words "in the public print" and urged that the painstaking work continue, not for the sake of "a demand for literary gossip or prurience," but for the "demand for literary history."<sup>11</sup> Finally, in May 1979, in consultation with her attorney, Alfred Rice, and Hemingway's publisher, Charles Scribner, Jr., Mary Hemingway determined that posterity's needs should prevail and tapped Baker, who had written the authorized 1969 biography of Hemingway, to edit a volume of the author's letters. The 1981 publication of *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917–1961* was a landmark literary event.

The next two decades each saw the publication of a book-length collection representing both sides of Hemingway's correspondence with one person. *The Only Thing That Counts: The Ernest Hemingway/Maxwell Perkins Correspondence, 1925–1947* (1996), edited by Matthew Bruccoli with Robert W. Trogdon, includes 130 letters by Hemingway, some abridged. *Dear Papa, Dear Hotch: The Correspondence of Ernest Hemingway and A.E. Hotchner* (2005), edited by Albert J. DeFazio III, includes eighty letters by Hemingway. Additional clusters have appeared in a few other books, including *Hemingway in Cuba* by Norberto Fuentes (1984), *Along with Youth: Hemingway: The Early Years* by Peter Griffin (1985), *Hemingway in Love and War*, edited by Henry S. Villard and James Nagel (1989), *My Brother, Ernest Hemingway* by Leicester Hemingway (1961; rpt. 1996), *At the Hemingways* by his sister Marcelline Hemingway Sanford (1962; rpt. 1999), and *Letters from the Lost Generation: Gerald and Sara Murphy and Friends*, edited by Linda Patterson Miller (1991; rpt. 2002). Hemingway's correspondences with Jane Mason, Lillian Ross, and Ezra Pound have been the subject of magazine pieces, and extracts and facsimile reproductions of letters have continued to appear in auction catalogs and dealer listings over the years.<sup>12</sup> Still, of Hemingway's located surviving letters, about eighty-five percent remained unpublished.

Early in the twenty-first century, the Ernest Hemingway Foundation and Society and the Hemingway Foreign Rights Trust, holders, respectively, of U.S. and international copyrights to the letters, authorized publication of a comprehensive scholarly edition. In 2002, I was honored

to be selected as general editor of the Hemingway Letters Project. The edition was formally approved for publication by the Syndicate of the Cambridge University Press in October 2004, and the complex contractual arrangements were finalized in November 2006. The Project has proceeded in close consultation with a distinguished editorial advisory committee headed by Linda Patterson Miller and including Jackson R. Bryer, Scott Donaldson, James L. W. West III, James H. Meredith, and Linda Wagner-Martin. A vital component is the involvement of an international team of scholars who serve in a variety of roles, including as expert consultants on particular places or periods in Hemingway's life, as language consultants, and as editors of individual volumes.

The Cambridge Edition of *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway* was launched in September 2011 with the publication of the first of a projected sixteen volumes. Volume I, spanning 1907–22, was edited by Sandra Spanier and Robert W. Trogdon, with associate volume editors Albert J. DeFazio III, Miriam B. Mandel, and Kenneth B. Panda, and volume advisory editor J. Gerald Kennedy. Linda Patterson Miller contributed a foreword. In addition to the institutional support of Pennsylvania State University, the Project has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the Heinz Endowments. All royalties from sales are directed to the Project to sustain this long-term effort.

Of his decision to publish the selected letters in the face of Hemingway's directive, Charles Scribner, Jr. explained:

Hemingway left strict instructions that his letters should not be published. But, with Mary's approval, I published them – and I think I did the right thing. To begin with, he had kidded my father about publishing his letters, so he had thought of such a thing. Second, I believe his letters show a side of him that nothing else in his work does, and it is a very nice side. I considered that I was justified. It is well known that Virgil left instructions for the *Aeneid* to be burned after his death. Fortunately, not all literary executors obey such requests.<sup>13</sup>

Patrick Hemingway was more blunt. When asked what had motivated his father's 1958 directive, he responded that he did not know, that it did not make sense: "If you don't want your letters published, burn them. It's simple." He wishes for the Cambridge Edition to be as complete as possible. "I think that selection is a deadly process," he said. "I felt that if they were going to publish his letters at all, there shouldn't be any picking and choosing – that you either got the whole picture of him as a correspondent, as a letter writer, or nothing at all."

The Cambridge Edition includes all extant Hemingway letters that we can locate, presented complete and unabridged, arranged in chronological

order of their composition. It includes letters previously published as well as thousands new to print. While incoming letters that Hemingway received are not included, they inform editorial comment on the outgoing letters. We define “letters” broadly to include postcards, cables, identifiable drafts and fragments, the letters he wrote for publication, and letters he put away unsent. Volume I even includes notes to friends passed back and forth during class in high school. For Hemingway’s packrat tendencies – as well as his mother’s efforts to document her children’s young lives in the scrapbooks she compiled, history can be grateful. To date we have gathered copies of letters from some 250 sources in the United States and abroad: more than seventy libraries and institutional archives (including the world’s largest repository of Hemingway papers, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston), and scores of dealers, private collectors, Hemingway correspondents, and their descendants. The final volume will feature a section of “Additional Letters” for those that come to light after publication of the volumes in which they would have appeared chronologically.

As a result of much detective work, aided by publicity surrounding the effort, hundreds of previously unknown or inaccessible letters have been added to the Project’s master archive. These include more than 150 family letters kept by Hemingway’s sisters Madelaine (“Sunny”) and Ursula, letters he wrote in the 1950s to a college student who had tucked them away in a safe deposit box, transcriptions of letters he dictated on a wire recorder to a part-time secretary in Cuba, and letters that Mary Hemingway left behind at Finca Vigía when she received special dispensation from both the U.S. and Cuban governments to return there in August 1961 to retrieve papers and belongings. Thanks to an historic 2002 cooperative agreement, those letters, now in the collection of the Museo Hemingway, have been preserved and scanned, with original documents remaining in Cuba and microfilm copies deposited at the Kennedy Library in 2009.

Some letters Hemingway is known to have written do not survive. Sadly, among them are multitudes that he wrote to the great loves of his life: Agnes von Kurowsky, the Red Cross nurse who inspired the character of Catherine Barkley; Hadley, his first wife; and Pauline Pfeiffer, his second. Under differing circumstances, his letters to each were deliberately destroyed. Untold numbers of letters to others fell victim to tidiness during cleanings of basements or attics. Some people simply do not keep their mail.

It is difficult to overstate the interest and value of Hemingway’s letters for scholars and aficionados. They narrate the arc of an epic life story in



real time. They capture his devastation upon receiving a “Dear Ernie” letter from von Kurowsky in 1919 and his exhilaration at seeing his first bullfights in the summer of 1923. They document the making and marketing of his books and detail the plans for the doomed 1954 air journey in Africa that resulted in two plane crashes in two days and, arguably, precipitated an irreversible decline in his physical and mental health. They illuminate his relationships and complicate the commonplaces – that he had always hated his mother, for example, or that his relationship with fellow writer Martha Gellhorn was a perpetual battle of titanic egos locked in bitter rivalry until their marriage imploded.

The collected letters also serve as correctives to the conclusions of biographers who did not have access to letters previously unavailable or unknown. For instance, his letter of February 14–15, 1922, reporting to his mother that Stein “was here to dinner last night and stayed till mid-night,” places Hemingway and Stein’s first meeting a month earlier than generally assumed (*Letters* I 328). This shifts the ground under suggestions by Baker and others that Hemingway had put off meeting Stein out of intimidation.<sup>14</sup> It also requires re-examination of Michael S. Reynolds’s interpretation of another Hemingway letter as calculating and presumptuous. Believing that Hemingway had first made Stein’s acquaintance on March 8, Reynolds writes, “On March 9, the day after his first visit to Stein’s apartment, Hemingway wrote Sherwood Anderson: ‘Gertrude Stein and me are just like brothers and we see a lot of her.’ One meeting does not make a brotherhood, but knowing how enthusiastic Anderson was about Gertrude, Ernest exaggerated without a blush” (Reynolds 36).

The letters are valuable, too, for Hemingway’s comments on his own writing – what he was aiming for, how he did it, what he thought he had achieved. As a cub reporter at the *Kansas City Star* he breathlessly reported to his father in April 1918 the pressures of “Having to write a half column story with every name, address and initial verified and remembering to use good style, perfect style in fact, an get all the facts and in the correct order, make it have snap and wallop and write it in fifteen minutes, five sentences at a time to catch an edition as it goes to press” (*Letters* I 93). In later letters he expresses the aims of his early experiments in modernist minimalism, his irritation when his language was censored by what he considered cowardly publishers, his satisfaction when he knew he had written well. They testify to his discipline and determination to keep putting down words through illnesses and injuries as well as to his feelings about significant events, such as the suicide of his father, the collapse of marriages, and the deaths of friends. Above all, they testify to how



integral his writing was to his being. As he told Cowley in 1945: “Suffer like a bastard when don’t write, or just before, and feel empty and fucked out afterwards. But never feel as good as while writing” (SL 604–5).

Journalism has been described as the rough draft of history. Letters share with journalism the immediacy of the account, unshaped and unfiltered by the long view. With his reporter’s eye and ear, Hemingway was ever keenly attuned to his world and his times. Using Royal Air Force slang for “intelligence,” Hemingway’s sons would ask him, “Papa what is the *true* gen on so and so or such and such” (SL 603). What we get in the letters is the “true gen” as Hemingway perceived it on any given day. Taken together, his collected letters constitute his truest life story, unself-conscious and unabridged – his autobiography by aggregation, and a chronicle of the twentieth century.

## NOTES

1. The Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA; subsequently cited in the text as JFK. Quotations are transcribed exactly as they appear in the letters with no editorial corrections.
2. Interview with Sandra Spanier, Bozeman, MT, June 8, 2011. Subsequent quotations from Patrick Hemingway are from this interview.
3. Archives and Special Collections, Harvard University Library.
4. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Renaissance Studies, Florence, Italy.
5. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library; Princeton, NJ; subsequently cited as PUL.
6. To Joseph H. Hopkins, March 31, 1936, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA; subsequently cited as Stanford.
7. Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
8. Hemingway to “my Executors,” typescript of statement, May 20, 1958 (JFK).
9. These appear, respectively, in D. Gallup, *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein* (New York: Knopf, 1953); E. Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952); *Il Cinquantennio Editoriale di Arnaldo Mondadori, 1907–1957* (Verona, Italy: Mondadori, 1957); *Rowohlts Rotblonder Roman* (Hamburg, Germany: Rohwohlt, 1947); and *Library Journal* 79 (December 1954), 292.
10. Collected in M. J. Bruccoli and J. S. Baughman (eds.), *Hemingway and the Mechanism of Fame* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).
11. E. R. Hagemann, “Preliminary Report on the State of Ernest Hemingway’s Correspondence,” *Literary Research Newsletter* 3.4 (1978), 163–72; 165.
12. A. S. Mason, “To Love and Love Not,” *Vanity Fair* (July 1999), 108–18ff.; L. Ross, “Hemingway Told Me Things,” *New Yorker* (May 24, 1999), 70–3;

- M. J. Bruccoli (ed.), “‘Yr Letters Are Life Preservers’: The Correspondence of Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound,” *Paris Review* 163 (Fall 2003), 96–129.
13. C. Scribner, Jr., *In the Company of Writers: A Life in Publishing* (New York: Scribner’s, 1990), 85.
  14. See C. Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Scribner’s, 1969), 86; J. Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 71; and M. S. Reynolds, *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 34. Reynolds’s work is cited subsequently in the text.