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The Cambridge Introduction to Ernest Hemingway by Michael
Thurston (review)

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REVIEWS

***The Cambridge Introduction to Ernest Hemingway.* By Michael Thurston. Cambridge UP, 2025. 214 pp. Paperback \$30.00.**

A single question has long overshadowed Hemingway studies: What to do with *The Wound*? Many critics take Hemingway's determining trauma to be his physical wounding at Fossalta in July of 1918. Others locate it in his father's depression and suicide, or in heavy drinking during repeated concussions, or his being dressed like a girl in his early years. Genetic accounts of Hemingway's genius typically assume the shaping power of a wound.

In his new book, Michael Thurston argues that what matters about a wound is how one takes it and centers his inquiry around a brilliant reevaluation of the dynamic between Brett and Jake.

"Of all the ways to be wounded" (*LOA* 395), Jake thinks, as he looks at himself in Chapter Four of *The Sun Also Rises*. Yet the nature of that wound is never specified. Commentary sometimes describes Jake as "impotent," but, in a number of published statements and in his written comments on *The Sun Also Rises* screenplay, Hemingway insisted that the term did not apply. Yet, something has happened to Jake and Brett is thereby convinced that they can have no future together. How might things be different, Thurston asks, if she understood him "as *disabled*"? (62):

In the case of Jake Barnes, the disability is physical: His wound precludes sexual intercourse. It is, at least in the intimacy of his bedroom, visible (Jake sees it in the armoire mirror when he is undressing). But, as disability studies insists, its meaning is *socially* produced. Hemingway makes clear that the specific value and significance of the wound is socially constructed, is the product not (or not only) of the acts that Jake is no longer capable of but, instead, of the cultural interpretation of that incapacity, when Jake recalls an Italian officer's reaction: "*Che mala fortuna!*" (What bad luck!) Brett makes this cultural interpretation clearer and more concrete. When she and Jake talk of their situation, she conflates the inability to engage in penetrative sex with the impossibility of love. Jake wonders whether they could love each other and be together without sex, but Brett replies that, as if she had no control over her actions, she would only *tromper* (betray) Jake.

Her infidelity, that is, would be a socially constructed consequence of his injury and disability (62).

Jake's is a profoundly sad but not an isolated case. "In all of this work," Thurston argues, "Hemingway explores the peculiarities of disability as an identifying feature" (10). And, "as a person who lived . . . with both visible and invisible disabilities, Hemingway explored, often without seeming to realize that he was doing so, the ways of being in the world specifically available to people who are disabled" (2).

Despite the "oceans of critical ink" (62) that have been spent on Jake's wound, Hemingway insisted that in the novel, at least, its nature was to remain obscure. In seeking to track it down, critics can find themselves engaging in an act of projection similar to Brett's as they diagnose Jake as a hopeless case. Having adopted the "lens" (62) afforded by disability studies—and in his 2022 edition of *The Sun Also Rises* Thurston included a pathbreaking essay on disability by Dana Fore—Thurston proceeds to focus on the ways in which a felt disability can lead Hemingway's characters to achieve a unique and distinguishing *ability*. It is as if, having been marked by "the pernicious ideal of the normate" (19) these men and women choose to adopt "the careful control of attention" (11) that enables them "to live within the world of compromise and to make choices" (63) about how they will find value in their experiences in that world.

Thurston takes a chronological approach to registering these acts of attention. The style and structure of "Big Two-Hearted River" offers a signal early instance. Here, "Hemingway describes in detail both how Nick pays attention and what he attends to" (43). The "what" is perhaps easily remembered: the trout holding steady in the current, the careful pitching of the tent, the pouring of pancake batter onto a skillet. The "how," however, often goes overlooked, although all of Nick's acts of seeing are themselves perceptions carefully selected—by both Nick and by Hemingway—and therefore expressive of a certain kind of mind. "When Nick notices himself noticing, focusing, choosing all suggest that the means of healing and finding meaning in the world are right there in the ways we attend to the world, seeing and naming and moving purposively through it" (46). For Hemingway, the line between perceiving and thinking can never be clearly drawn, and, as Thurston moves ever more deeply into the career, "acts of the mind" (71) come to command as much of his attention as do acts of the eyes.

A bullfight demands "careful attention" (59) both from the matador and

from a spectator watching his performance. Jake is careful as well in his attempts to instruct Brett “so that she saw what it was all about, so that it became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less a spectacle with unexplained horrors (*LOA* 504). Thurston characterizes Jake’s adopted point-of-view, in the ring and elsewhere, as “broadly aesthetic.” (58) But the aesthetic becomes “moral”—it is one of Thurston’s favorite words—by dint of prolonged and dedicated practice. Jake may not fight bulls, but he does fish, and “the pleasures of fishing and the easy and harmonious community both emerge from attention focused not on the satisfaction of individual desires but, instead, on the work itself and on ‘the common good’ that Bill jokes about, even in a setting otherwise characterized by the transactional” (60).

The short story “Now I Lay Me” affords Thurston with a transition from early work focused largely on looking out at the world to fictions in which Hemingway becomes increasingly willing to represent the inner life. The wounded Nick’s attempts at “remembering back” (*LOA* 123) mark the first attempt by a Hemingway character to engage memory as an answer to his predicament. “Here as in ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’” Thurston writes, “that answer is not the specific kind of activity narrated, whether fishing or prayer, but is instead the deliberate focus of the mind on and through that activity, the particular and intensive attention manifested in this focus” (70). It is therefore a short step to *A Farewell to Arms*, where “the movements of Frederic’s mind” (73) receive such loving attention. But it is Catherine Barkley who receives more of Thurston’s attention, as he attempts to liberate her from the many reductive readings depicting her as a character without heft or agency. She, too, has been disabled by loss, “and we might also read her as the figure whose post-traumatic disability conditions her possibilities” (85).

Thurston reads *Death in the Afternoon* as a meditation “at length on writing itself” (94) and as a study of how to see and appreciate an aesthetic performance. He then pivots toward a dark conclusion: Hemingway’s “writerly wisdom calls for something like the extractive approach to phenomena common to capitalism and colonizing” (97). “An inescapable element of both bullfighting and hunting is the ephemerality of the experience, and this ephemerality is related to the inescapable exploitation enacted by the aficionado or the hunter” (96). *Green Hills of Africa* provides an even more dramatic example of “an enactment of an alienated modern economy of extraction in which natural resources simply serve human desires” (107).

The novel *To Have and Have Not* proves something of a missed opportunity

because the treatment of a character like Henry Morgan, so visibly disabled by the loss of an arm, proves “one-dimensional” (115). Instead of putting its “readers into the mind that experiences the world through the body’s difference from an ideological norm of able-bodiedness,” Hemingway “is content to name Harry’s condition but then quickly to turn from it to his heroic capacities to compensate” (115). At the same time, and this despite some incoherence, Hemingway brings “into the novel a wider and more explicit political vision than he had allowed himself in previous work” (112).

Given that Robert Jordan displays no serious disability—not, at least, until he is wounded at the end—*For Whom the Bells Tolls* resists inclusion into Thurston’s explanatory scheme. While Robert does engage in prolonged and complex acts of the mind, he also proves the most conventionally healthy of Hemingway’s protagonists. He confronts the memory of his father’s suicide directly instead of sublimating it into neurotic behavior, and his way of paying attention does not seem strongly conditioned by any “traumatic experience” (87). At the end of the novel we do witness the supreme example in Hemingway’s work of the “control of the self through control of attention” (131). It takes place in five pages of the kind of “mental conversation” (*Letters vol. 2*, 170) Hemingway wrote and then cut from the end of “Big Two-Hearted River.” As the now wounded Robert addresses himself in both the first and the second person, we watch a man looking back at his life as well as out on what still lies before him. Robert affirms that he has tried to do good with the talent he has “had.” Then he corrects himself: “*Have, you mean. All right, have*” (467).

In *Across the River and into the Trees*, focused acts of attention give way to “interior monologue” by way of which Hemingway chooses to “show the entire submerged mass” (140) of a character’s mind. This decision not only completes Hemingway’s disentanglement from the ice-berg theory but can be productively read as an attempt at “purgatorial narrative” (142). By bringing to the surface—purging—the kind of ugly thoughts that Hemingway suppressed in his early work, the Colonel comes to terms with his angers and may even manage “a gracious leave-taking from life” (144).

“Increasingly disabled” after his second safari, Thurston argues, “Hemingway fell into ever deeper depression, unable, as he had when younger, to explore with sympathy the specific ways of being in the world available as a consequence of disability” (18). Given this take on Hemingway’s final years, Thurston chooses to give limited attention to the posthumously published work. Because Hemingway was so dedicated to the practice of “revision” (151)

and because he was unable to preside over the final revision of any of this work himself, Thurston questions whether these editions “should really be considered works ‘by Hemingway’” (145). “For the most part,” he argues “the best work that these texts might do would be to interest readers in returning to the work over which Hemingway had more complete control” (168).

But the problem with sidelining the posthumous work is this: It was the publication of *The Garden of Eden* in 1986 that provoked “the turn toward gender issues in Hemingway studies” and that “made the author exciting and pressingly urgent once more” (318). These claims can be found in an essay by Greg Forter first published in 2001 and reprinted in Thurston’s edition of *The Sun Also Rises*. It then became possible, Forter continues, to “become attuned to the cracks in Hemingway’s masculine armor” (318)—to become attuned to the very imagination of disability Thurston celebrates as fundamental to Hemingway’s achievement. And *Eden* was itself an act of revision: The sex scene at the end of Chapter One can be read as an adaptive response to the very bodily predicament from which Brett and Jake cannot imagine an escape.

One hundred years after the publication of *The Sun Also Rises*, we are still trying to come to grips with Brett and Jake and with all the Hemingway couples that come after them. No single “lens” can bring into focus the full range of Hemingway’s achievement, and disability studies, like any number of other critical approaches, may pass and be forgotten with the rest. In the meantime, Thurston has his own distinctive story to tell. It is his sympathetic application of his chosen lens that allows him to orchestrate new and even liberating readings of works that, despite our best efforts, “must defeat the intelligence almost successfully” (*OP* 171). This is what poetry *must* do, as Wallace Stevens reminds us, and, as Thurston shows us, Hemingway’s prose does this too.

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***A Norton Critical Edition: Ernest Hemingway A Farewell to Arms.* Edited by Marc K. Dudley. W.W. Norton & Company, 2026. 453 pp. Paperback. \$18.00.**

As Ernest Hemingway’s fiction begins to emerge from copyright, students, literature teachers, scholars, and general readers are welcoming editions of his works that include ancillary materials that provide background and analysis