ANALYSIS

Islands in the Stream (1970)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

"The longest and most worked-over of the manuscripts [left at his death] was the one that Hemingway's friends, without having read it, used to call 'the sea novel' and that appeared in 1970 as *Islands in the Stream*. The manuscript had a complicated history. While following the American armies in France--and sometimes going before them--Hemingway had conceived of writing a trilogy about the war, with one volume each devoted to sea, air, and land. The sea novel was to come first, but it would seem--Ernest was secretive about what he was writing--that he didn't start work on it until late in 1947; then he continued it at intervals until 1952. Gradually his conception of the book changed: instead of his writing it as a continuous novel, it was to be a collection of three long stories--or perhaps four; there was a time when he thought that *The Old Man and the Sea,* written in January and February 1951, might serve as an epilogue. But wisely he decided to publish *The Old Man and the Sea* as a separate book, and then, after further revision of the other three stories, he declared that they were finished and put them into a bank vault in Havana…. Hemingway never went back to them…. His widow and his publisher, Mary Hemingway and Charles Scribner, undertook to prepare the book for the printer… One is grateful for having the book in its present form….

Islands in the Stream consists of three episodes in the life of Thomas Hudson, a famous, so one gathers, painter with three sons by two marriages, both of which have ended in divorce. In the first and longest episode, Hudson is living alone on the island of Bimini and looking forward to a visit from the sons, who are his closest tie with life. The visit is idyllic (and beautifully told), but soon after it ends, Hudson is notified by wireless that the two younger sons and their mother have been killed in a motor accident. The second episode takes place in Havana a little more than a year after Pearl Harbor. Hudson has armed his fishing cruiser as a Q-boat, a decoy for German submarines, but the northeast gales have forced him to spend a week ashore. Now he learns that his oldest son has also been killed, flying a Spitfire in England. He is briefly reconciled with his first wife, whom he still adores, but they quarrel again and soon Hudson is ordered back to sea. 'Get it straight,' he says to himself in Hemingway language. 'Your boy you lose. Love you lose. Honor has been gone for a long time. Duty you do.'

In the final episode, which takes place the following summer, Hudson and his nondescript crew are pursuing the well-armed survivors of a bombed German U-boat. The Germans have come ashore at an isolated fishing village, have slaughtered the inhabitants, and then have sailed westward along the coast in two harmless looking turtle boats. With a prescience that he shares with other Hemingway heroes, Hudson is sure that he will be the first to die when his crew catches up with them, but still he stands on the bridge, a fair target, and does his duty to the end.

One might speculate that *Islands in the Stream* made it still more difficult for Hemingway to undertake the other two novels he had planned to write about the war. It is longer than he had probably intended it to be, it took more time in the writing, and the hero's death on the last page would make it necessary to invent another hero before going on with the story. In itself the book is not one of his major novels, except in length, but the dialogue is lively, the landscapes are solid and palpable--as in his earlier work--and there are several admirable scenes. There is, for example, Hudson's colloquy with Mr. Bobby, the bartender on Bimini who tells him how to paint an immense picture of the Last Judgment. There is young David Hudson's daylong fight with a giant broadbill, a rite of initiation (and all the scenes with the three sons are handled in a tender fashion new to Hemingway). There is Hudson's cat Boise, lording over the big draughty house near Havana, and later there is Hudson drinking at the bar of the Florida with Honest Lil, the dean and deaconess of the Havana whores. The sea chase of the last episode should be the best sequence of all, and in fact it demands comparison with the bombing of the bridge in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but it loses by the demand.

Hudson's glum sense of duty seems a pallid emotion when set beside Robert Jordan's tangle of fierce desires. Eager for life and happy in love, the hero of the other novel is dying for a vision of man's future. 'If we win here we will win everywhere,' Jordan says to himself in his last moments. Hudson, with no such vision, is dying, the reader feels, essentially because he has lost the will to live. The author himself had lost the sense of commitment that sustained him during the Spanish Civil War… That was a loss shared by all the writers who had been deeply engaged in the political struggles of the 1930s, and some of the others--Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, and Steinbeck, to name only three--suffered as much from it in their work as Hemingway did….

Instead of becoming a hero of legend, Thomas Hudson is the hollow center of the sea novel. He seems to be based on Hemingway himself, as the other heroes had been--with the two exceptions of Santiago and the Harry Morgan of *To Have and Have Not*--but in most ways he represents only one aspect of the author. Brave, omni-competent, intensely male, a superb fisherman, a hunter of men, a captain adored by his crew of ruffians, and a heavy drinker able to hold his liquor, he stands mostly for the image that Hemingway projected to the public. Almost the only hint he gives of Hemingway's 'shadow side,' as Carl Jung would have called it, is a feeling of despair that he tries to overcome by not thinking about it. For this despair the author brings forward a simple explanation: it was caused, he gives us to understand, by the death of Hudson's three sons. Not every reader has accepted the explanation. Some have felt, as I confess to doing, that Hudson's despair is of longer standing, that it mirrors something deep in the author's psyche, and that the three sons have been offered up as a blood sacrifice to the exigencies of fiction.

All that is the weaker side of *Islands in the Stream.* One must add that it is a bold, sometimes tender, often funny and swashbuckling narrative that no one but Hemingway could have written. It has less depth and power than his earlier novels--so much is undeniable--but it also gives proof, sentence by sentence, of the skill he cultivated during his later years of disciplined effort."

Malcolm Cowley
"Hemingway: The Old Lion"
A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation
(1974; Penguin, 1980) 218-223

"An inevitable part of almost every review was devoted to the novel's impact on Hemingway's literary reputation to which very little of a literary nature had happened in ten years. Some reviewers thought *Islands* would add to his reputation and about the same number thought that it would not. Some were convinced that his reputation was solid enough to withstand anything, apparently even the mediocrity of *Islands.* However, throughout many of the reviews, regardless of whether they were optimistic or pessimistic about Hemingway's reputation, there was a hushed, almost reverent, tone, undoubtedly a consequence of the reviewers' realization that they were walking on the grave of a very great dead hero. John Updike expressed this tone with an almost 'lost leader' kind of despair, confessing even after an adverse review that 'few readers younger than myself could believe, from this sad broken testament, how we *did* love Hemingway and, after pity feels merely impudent, love him still'."

Frank L. Ryan
The Immediate Critical Reception of Ernest Hemingway
(U Press of America, 1980) 36

"Incomplete, rambling, and like *A Moveable Feast* extensively edited without explanation, *Islands* seemed to critics 'a very strange book full of pleasing and disastrous things,' and 'a gallant wreck of a novel.' The tortured and sometimes tortuous tale of painter Thomas Hudson, his betrayal of the women who loved him and final loss of his sons, his loneliness and violent death, all set against a Caribbean background that Edmund Wilson felt included 'the best of Hemingway's descriptions of nature,' gave the novel, in Paul Theroux's words, 'the tone of a suicide note.' *Islands in the Stream* has yet to be adequately explored by critics, but its appearance in 1970 helped keep Hemingway's reputation fresh, giving the public the impression that 'a great writer's ghost [was] handing down books from Heaven'."

Susan F. Beegel

“Conclusion: The Critical Reputation of Ernest Hemingway”
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
(Cambridge U, 1996) 284-85

Michael Hollister (2015)